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## Queering Undergraduate Admission: A Framework To Evaluate And Address Bias Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans\*, And Queer Students In Undergraduate Admission Practices

Ann Marie Bigley  
*Hamline University*

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QUEERING UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSION:  
A FRAMEWORK TO EVALUATE AND ADDRESS BIAS  
AGAINST LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANS\*, AND QUEER  
STUDENTS IN UNDERGRADUATE ADMISSION PRACTICES

By

Ann Marie T. Bigley

A capstone submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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Primary Advisor: Susan Manikowski  
Content Area Reviewer: t. aaron hans

To my family and friends for your continuous encouragement and support. To my partner in life, Jacob, for continuing to reassure, support, and cheer me on throughout this journey. Finally, to the students who inspire me to be the best professional I can be. I have learned a great deal from all of you.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **Introduction**

#### **Introduction to the Chapter**

The focus of my research will be designed to help admission professionals to serve the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) students that they counsel through the admission process. This paper will answer the question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) community?

As a college admission officer, my role is to serve prospective college students through admission counseling as well as recruit and enroll an academically strong and diverse class for my institution. I am passionate about finding opportunities to improve upon best practices in admissions to better serve the prospective students and increase access to my institution for underrepresented populations.

This chapter will place my research question in the context of diversity and inclusion efforts in admission offices nationwide. I will also outline key events from my professional life that have inspired me to further consider how LGBTQ students fit into the current admissions model. Finally, I will provide my rationale for how this research fits within current goals and work happening in the college admission field.

#### **Research Question**

Diversity and inclusion are topics being addressed in admission offices and universities across the country. Admission offices are utilizing data to track and evaluate how their practices and policies impact enrollment of students from most marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds including, racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, low socioeconomic status, and first-generation Americans. Left out of this definition of marginalized populations are the LGBTQ students. Without data on the LGBTQ student population, we are not able to assess and evaluate the admission process for accessibility to that population. Given the lack of data and assessments in admission offices regarding LGBTQ students, I will be researching the following question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) community? In answering this question I hope to improve the admission process to increase access for transgender students to four-year colleges. To do this I will develop a framework for reviewing admissions practices to address hidden bias and recommend best practices on asking gender and sexual orientation on an application for freshmen admission to a private four-year liberal arts college.

### **Personal and Professional Interest**

Over the last ten years in my admissions professional roles, I have had two very specific encounters with trans\* students in the admission process that highlighted the need to reevaluate admission practices to reflect the needs of LGBTQ students.

While working a private liberal arts college as an Assistant Director of Admission, I met a prospective student from Thailand who identified as a transgender

woman. The application for admission did not ask any questions relating to identifying with the LGBTQ community and only asked for gender of the applicant and only offered male or female as possible answers. As an international student, this applicant had numerous questions regarding how to answer required gender-based questions and how the collected information would be used. As we moved through the admission process we encountered numerous hurdles with the visa process due to inconsistencies with gender markers on various forms of ID. As we worked with different offices around the campus to clear the barriers to a visa, staff members would continually change the name, gendered pronouns, and overall identity that they used to refer to her. Some staff would use her legal name and male pronouns while others would mix and match gendered pronouns throughout emails and conversations. Over the months of working together through the admission process, this particular student confided in me multiple times how challenging it was for her and I frequently wondered how welcome she felt by the campus community.

In my current role as an Associate Director of Admission, I worked with a transgender woman who was denied admission with their first application to our program. I met her through a faculty member who was hoping to help her gain admission for the following fall. She is a bright student with plenty of potential for success in our programs but had struggled to put herself through her undergraduate program. She was open and candid about her struggles with homelessness as a young trans\* woman, medical issues around hormones and surgeries that had led to a drug addiction. I learned about the hurdles she faced in obtaining a bachelor's degree and how negatively that was perceived by admission committees in graduate education through reviewing her



admission file from the previous application. I saw firsthand how intersectionality can play such an important role in limiting the educational opportunities of trans\* and many LGBTQ students.

We met together many times to work on strengthening her application. I advocated throughout the admission process for her and worked closely with her through the enrollment process for the fall. Her second application resulted in an offer of admission and coincided with the implementation of a new rubric used to make admission decisions. This rubric breaks down into categories that included previous academic success, potential for success in the program, and diversity of views and experiences. This second application process also involved personal outreach and counseling from admissions with mentorship from a faculty member that was not part of her original admission process. My role behind the scenes included framing the application and advocating on her behalf throughout the process while providing support and encouragement to her. These changes to the processes and practices of the admission office directly resulted in a student who was previously denied admission based on criteria that did not change over the course of a year, being offered admission and a substantial funding package. This experience made it clear to me that the practices and policies of an admission office can directly impact access to education and the opportunity for enrollment for LGBTQ students.

### **Relevance to the Field**

The role of an admission office at a university is complex and essential to the mission of the institution. Admission counselors' roles will include counseling and recruiting prospective students, making admission and scholarship decisions, and

enrolling an entire class of new students with each start to an academic session.

Increasingly, admission offices are utilizing admission counselors to provide outreach and educate communities on college admission and financial aid processes as well as to assist families through those processes. As a representative of the university and as the first point of contact, admissions offices are also setting the expectations of how students are meant to interact with the institution and serve as a reflection of how the university community will interact and treat the student.

Throughout my career as an admission professional, I have worked at institutions that clearly state access to education, specifically for students from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds, as a priority of the institution and the admission office. This has meant assessing and evolving the approach to the various roles that admission counselors play throughout the admission cycle to increase enrollment of students from underrepresented and marginalized backgrounds.

In working to achieve an increase in student enrollment from underrepresented backgrounds, my colleagues and I would spend many hours developing data-based recruitment plans, seek opportunities to develop my cultural competency, and evaluate progress by going back over data regularly throughout the recruitment and enrollment cycle. As an office, we tracked and measured our efforts in reaching students from racial minority groups, first generation, and students who spoke a language other than English at home. We discussed geographic diversity and closely tracked where our applicants and enrolled students were coming from. We have time-tested and proven strategies as well as continuing to develop and test new approaches in reaching our goal of diversifying our

institution of higher education. However, all of these methods require that we are able to track and measure our success rates throughout the admission and enrollment process. While we are able to do this for students from most marginalized and underrepresented populations, we are not collecting data in the admission process on students identifying with the LGBTQ community and are therefore unable to utilize the field's established best practices for reaching and measuring success with students who identify with this marginalized community. This is a population of students who are largely under-considered and underrepresented in the admission process because they are not tracked in the data collected by the office.

LGBTQ students are often invisible in the college admission process for numerous reasons. The applications for admission as well as other data collection opportunities within the admission process, typically do not provide an opportunity for LGBTQ students to identify themselves as such. There are also numerous personal factors such as family relationships, social norms and fear of negative consequences that many prospective transgender students have during the admission process that make them invisible throughout the process.

College admission practices try to balance the conflicting recruitment goals of an increasingly diverse campus with maintaining or increasing the traditional view of academic quality and standards for incoming students. Traditional models of admission and recruitment typically further marginalize specific populations to favor students from the dominant culture in the name of academic quality. Because of the invisibility of trans\* and GLBQ students in the admission process, many admission professionals have never taken the time to consider best practices for admission counseling for LGBTQ

students. This research aims to assist college admission offices in increasing the effectiveness with which they work with LGBTQ students and lead to great enrollment of this marginalized population on their college campuses.

### **Conclusion**

Most universities seek to increase the diversity of their institution through their admission offices. This diversity includes ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, geographical, gender, and sexual orientation. While many schools are capable of tracking and assessing their success rates of attracting and enrolling students from diverse backgrounds, they are not equipped to assess their efforts with LGBTQ students. Having personally worked with multiple trans\* students who had significant challenges not faced by their CIS peers in the process, I am passionate about advancing research and developing models to improve the admission process for LGBTQ students.

Chapter 2 examines scholarly literature relevant to the research question: How can admission offices at four-year private liberal arts colleges uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify with the LGBTQ community? The chapter provides an overview of the literature on this topic to frame and guide my research and development of a framework for reviewing admissions practices to address hidden bias and recommend best practices on asking gender and sexual orientation on an application for freshmen admission to a private four-year liberal arts college. Chapter two is broken down into five primary areas: Terms and Framing; Demographics; Diversity and Inclusion in Undergraduate Admissions; LGBTQ Specific Challenges; and Frameworks for Analysis. The first section provides an explanation of terms and acronyms commonly associated with the LGBTQ community and discusses the social

contexts these terms are commonly situated in throughout society. The second section examines the demographic makeup of the LGBTQ community as well as the high level of intersectionality with other marginalized identities. The third section will explore the role of diversity and inclusion in the undergraduate admission process followed by a section examining the specific challenges for LGBTQ students in the undergraduate admission process. The final section will provide an overview of existing frameworks, theories, and best practices used for analysis of admission practices related to diversity efforts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### **Literature Review**

#### **Introduction to the Chapter**

This chapter analyzes scholarly literature relevant to the research question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) community? This inquiry is broken down into five primary areas: Terms and Framing; Demographics; Diversity and Inclusion in Undergraduate Admissions; LGBTQ Specific Challenges; and Frameworks for Analysis. The first section provides an explanation of terms and acronyms commonly associated with the LGBTQ community and discusses the social contexts these terms are commonly situated in throughout society. The second section examines the demographic makeup of the LGBTQ community as well as the high level of intersectionality with other marginalized identities. The third section will explore the role of diversity and inclusion in the undergraduate admission process followed by a section examining the specific challenges for LGBTQ students in the undergraduate admission process. The final section will provide an overview of existing frameworks, theories, and best practices used for analysis of admission practices related to diversity efforts.

#### **Terms and Framing**

Exploration LGBTQ identities and experiences includes numerous terms that allow for the specificity of gender and sexual identities beyond the broader categories

associated with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. In addition, the unique experiences of individuals identifying with the LGBTQ community utilize specific terms associated with those experiences. Understanding the definitions, intended use, and experiences associated with these terms is essential in examining LGBTQ students in the undergraduate admission process. For an extensive list of relevant terms and definitions see Appendix A.

### **Terms**

**LGBTQ.** The acronym LGBTQ, as well as variations including LGBT, GLBT, and LGBQ, broadly refers to the identities and experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. These identities are frequently tied together under this umbrella acronym due to their common roots in breaking with heteronormative sexual and gender identities (Iverson, 2012).

**Trans\*.** Trans\* is an umbrella term used to describe a number of different gender identifiers that include but are not limited to transgender, transsexual, transitioning, intersex, genderqueer, a-gender, gender-fluid, non-binary, and two-spirit (Schindel, 2008).

### **Challenges with LGBTQ as a category**

The LGBTQ community is broad and encompasses multiple identities and experiences but is tied together by historically deviant gender identities and sexual orientation. One issue with grouping LGBTQ identities together is that it serves as a heteronormative classification based on difference from cisgender and heterosexual identities. Rather than acknowledging the diverse and complex experiences and identities

of LGBTQ people, the classification is based solely on difference from a perceived norm in society (Iverson, 2012).

For example, the terms lesbian, gay, and bisexual explicitly refer to sexual orientation. The term transgender historically refers to gender identity, a separate and independent identity from sexual orientation. Grouping these identities together can give the perception that all individuals within this group face the same challenges despite evidence that sexual orientation and gender identity can present different challenges and barriers for individuals. This is a particularly important distinction to note when considering higher education policies and practices (Iverson, 2012).

Assuming that broad policies can fully address the challenges and barriers of the LGBTQ community would be a mistake. There is a required level of nuance when comparing the needs and challenges of students identifying with the LGBTQ community. Each population will have unique challenges and barriers that will not impact the other group. For example, a lesbian student will likely face issues and challenges that will differ from those faced by a bisexual student who may face ostracism and discrimination from both heterosexual and homosexual communities (Dugan & Yurman, 2011). Also, the experiences and challenges of a trans\* student are not going to be the same as a gay cisgender student. Issues of preferred names and pronouns as well as restroom access will be of importance to the trans\* students but are unlikely to impact a cisgender gay student (DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009).

The inclusion of the trans\* community with the lesbian, gay, bisexual and queer (LGBQ) communities does present a layer of complexity and challenges. Trans\* serves as an umbrella term to encompass a range of gender identities that are likely to share



common challenges and barriers similarly how to lesbian, gay, and bisexual identifying individuals are likely to share similar challenges based on their sexual orientation. It can be helpful to group all LGBTQ identities together when searching for patterns of experiences but it also presents complications and has the potential to be harmful through reinforcing existing inequities. Researchers have argued that it can be valuable to distinguish between groups based on gender identity, such as the trans\* community, and those based in sexual orientation, such as the lesbian, gay, and bisexual community, when exploring challenges and experiences as well as creating policies. (Schindel, 2008).

### **Intersectionality**

Members of the LGBTQ community are unique and complex individuals who carry multiple identities. Much like their cisgender and heterosexual contemporaries, the LGBTQ community represents a diversity of identities including race, ethnicity, education, religion, and socioeconomic status. LGBTQ individuals may also identify with the trans\* community as well as the gay or bisexual community (Poynter & Washington, 2005; Longerbeam, et al., 2012).

### **Rationale for LGBTQ classification**

While there are several issues associated with classifying LGBTQ identities together based on the unique experiences of gender identity and sexual orientation, the community is also tied together through shared experiences. Historically the LGBTQ community has experienced significant stigmatization that has significant impacts still today. Many members of the LGBTQ community may not publically identify as LGBTQ and share the experience of coming out to friends, family, and communities. Gender identity and sexual orientation are different from race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status in

that they are not always shared by a family unit, are individually identified internally rather than externally, and face similar challenges and barriers tied to having to come out. (Schindel, 2008).

### **Summary**

The LGBTQ community is a complex classification that presents challenges for researchers and policymakers. There are arguments for further distinguishing between gender identity and sexual orientation when approaching research or policy based on the different experiences. However, there are clear shared challenges across the LGBTQ community. Given the range of identities and level of intersectionality present in the LGBTQ community and the shared broader experiences, this paper will focus on the entire LGBTQ community rather than separate out gender identity and sexual orientation. For the purposes of establishing best practices and policies, it is essential to explore the complex identities that make up both groups and consider the intersectionality of the trans\* and LGBQ communities in addition to other social categories.

### **Demographics**

An understanding of the complexity and intersectionality of the LGBTQ population is important in understanding the challenges faced by these students as well as in designing solutions. This section will identify challenges with collecting data regarding the LGBTQ community, provide an overview of the existing data on the LGBTQ community, explore intersectionality with other social identities and marginalized populations, and provide an overview of the LGBTQ population as it relates to education in the United States.

### **Invisibility of LGBTQ in data and research**

There are unique challenges presented by the LGBTQ community for researchers and scholars. The first is that LGBTQ populations are difficult to study because many individuals do not publically identify as a member. This is particularly true of LGBTQ students in high school or early in their college experience. Teenage students are largely dependent on support structures such as families, religious communities, or other communities in which they live. Forces such as religious opposition or homophobia can serve as a deterrent for students to openly identify with the LGBTQ community. This is also an age where students are still in various stages of psychological development and are becoming aware of the sexual orientation and gender identity at different rates. This creates challenges for scholars pursuing research of LGBTQ individuals during high school and the early college years by leaving much of the population undocumented (Schindel, 2008; Young, 2011).

There are multiple approaches to measuring and collecting data regarding sexual orientation and gender identity. Self-reporting data which measures the individuals openly identifying as a member is one approach commonly used. Another is the direct assessment of same-sex sexual behavior or attraction. These approaches have yielded different results with the direct assessment often yielding much larger population estimates than the self-identification method (Gallup Poll, 2016). It is thought that the closet effect, the phenomenon where LGBTQ individuals chose not to identify as such due to social stigma and fear of discrimination, skews the poll numbers lower than reality. There are conflicting opinions and reports on the percentage of the United States population that identifies with the LGBTQ community that range from 3% to 10% (Mufioz-Plaza, Crouse Quinn, & Rounds, 2002).

## **LGBTQ population**

The Gallup Poll (2016) is one of the most recent and largest collections of data regarding the LGBTQ community in the United States. However, it only reports on individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) and does not include individuals identifying as queer as part of its dataset.

According to a 2016 Gallup poll 4.1% of the United States population identifies as a member of the LGBT community and is up from 3.5% in 2012. LGBT millennials increased from 5.8% to 7.3% in contrast to the older, traditionalist generation which reported only 1.4% identify as LGBT. Millennials are considered to be one of the first generations to come of age while social acceptance of LGBTQ individuals had significantly increased and the risks of self-identifying are potentially perceived as less for this generation. These factors could be part of their willingness to self-identify at a higher rate than older generations (Gallup Poll, 2016).

The proportion of individuals identifying as LGBT decreases with income. Individuals from households earning less than \$36,000 per year having the largest reported population of LGBT individuals. This is in contrast with education levels among the LGBT population. Levels of education saw very little discrepancy with postgraduate education levels reporting 3.9% identifying as LGBT and 4.1% of all other educational categories identifying as LGBT (Gallup Poll, 2016).

## **Intersectionality within LGBTQ identities**

The Gallup Poll also found examples and patterns of the LGBT population intersection with other identities. Of the LGBT self-identified population a significant percentage also belong to a racial or ethnic minority. Racial and ethnic minorities make

up 40% of the LGBT population while only comprising 33% of the general population in the United States. Women comprise a larger percentage of the LGBT population than men. It is important to note that the survey does not offer an opportunity for individuals to identify outside of the male/female binary such as genderqueer or gender-fluid (Gallup Poll, 2016).

LGBTQ youth are also more likely to experience homelessness than their cisgender and heterosexual peers. Despite making up an estimated 7-10% of the population, LGBTQ youth comprise 40% of homeless youth in the United States (America's shame: 40% of homeless youth are LGBT kids. 2012). LGBTQ youth are at an increased risk of suicide, depression as well as threats and experiences of violence than their heterosexual peers. Negative attitudes, beliefs, and perceptions of the LGBTQ community are commonly cited as sources of these negative experiences (CDC, 2017). While the LGBTQ population spans social identities across society, the LGBTQ community has an increased presence of marginalized and at-risk populations.

### **LGBTQ in education**

While the LGBTQ community is disproportionately from marginalized backgrounds that include race as well as low-income levels, there is a relatively even distribution of education level. With the exception of a "postgraduate" level, 3.9%, all of the levels ranging from "some high school" to "graduate" have an equal distribution of 4.1% (Gallup Poll, 2016). There are scholarly studies that indicate that LGBTQ-identified individuals are actually more likely to be more highly educated than their peers. One example is from Black, et al. (2007) who utilized U.S. census data of individuals in a same-sex relationship to demonstrate a higher level of education among LGB-identified

individuals. However, this data is problematic because it relies on self-identified information that is likely to be unreliable based on the closet effect and is gathered from individuals identifying as in a relationship or partnership. This approach to data collection assumes a binary approach to sexuality and leaves out the trans\*, queer, and bisexual population (Sorquist, 2014).

There is minimal data surrounding LGBTQ youth and high school achievement which is unsurprising given the steep challenges facing scholars studying the LGBTQ community. However, it has been estimated that as many as a third of LGBTQ students drop out of high school which is more than triple the national average. A survey from 2008 found that LGBTQ youth have a tendency to perform worse on markers of academic achievement when compared to the cisgender and heterosexual peers. Issues of bullying, harassment, and violence are cited as factors in students missing school on a regular basis and impacting academic achievement (Schlanger, 2017).

There is minimal data surrounding national college graduation rates for LGBTQ students. The federal reporting structure does not collect data regarding students' identification as part of the LGBTQ community. However, much of the literature supports the idea that factors of support and safety for the LGBTQ community on campuses can lead to an increased graduation rate just as issues of violence and harassment will decrease a student's ability to persist to graduation.

## **Summary**

This data provides a rich and complex picture of the LGBTQ community and experience. The LGBTQ community is a diverse population with experiences and identities intersection with many marginalized populations. The LGBTQ community also

has unique challenges that include issues of violence, homelessness, and harassment that can impact their education at a high school and college level. Having a full picture of the identities and challenges facing the LGBTQ population as well as subpopulations is important for policymakers in higher education.

### **LGBTQ Specific Challenges**

#### **Barriers in the high school experience**

Admission offices, while centered in higher education, bridge the divide between high school and an undergraduate education. The challenges in high school that impact academic achievement and college readiness are essential issues in addressing access to college. Admissions professionals seeking to establish best practices and effective policies to increase access to LGBTQ students must explore the obstacles and challenges faced by LGBTQ youth in high school.

LGBTQ youth experience higher levels of physical and sexual assault as well as verbal harassment in high schools than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. They are also at an increased risk for substance abuse, sexually transmitted infections, homelessness, and prostitution. It is also noted in the research that these students experience increased rates of depression, self-harm, and loneliness. LGBTQ students have a reported lower academic performance and lag behind many of their peers in academic achievement. The data was compared to national averages but has also been drilled down to compare among like similar racial, geographic, and age to show similar results (Schlanger, 2017; Mufioz-Plaza, Crouse, Quinn, & Rounds, 2002).

Research has linked the increased occurrence of mental health, physical health, and academic achievement issues among LGBTQ youth to a lack of social support both

in schools and outside of the classroom. Historically, formal support systems in schools are limited and offer little prevention in regard to harassment and violence within the school. LGBTQ youth have reported reluctance in coming out to their families, for fear of rejection or harm. Studies have also shown that LGBTQ individuals are less likely to participate in religious communities with some research citing similar fears and the occurrence of rejection and harm. This leaves LGBTQ youth with limited support networks throughout high school and an increased presence of mental health and physical health challenges that impact their educational achievement (Schlanger, 2017; DePaul, Walsh, & Dam, 2009; Gallup Poll, 2016.).

There is a growing amount of support for the LGBTQ community nationally which can be seen in the increasing number of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA). These groups serve as a formal support group of peers with the possibility of staff and faculty members. The research has demonstrated the positive impact of GSAs on LGBTQ youth by showing a decrease in suicide rates and creating a more positive social climate in schools with a GSA (Russel, et. al., 2009).

### **Barriers in the college experience**

For the LGBTQ students who are able to navigate the numerous challenges and barriers in their high school experience and ultimately enroll in college, they will be confronted with another set of barriers and challenges as they pursue an undergraduate degree. Similarly to the high school experience, LGBTQ students are likely to face an educational setting that lacks formal and social support systems. These are complicated by the unique challenges associated with higher education, such as the financial aid process and on-campus housing.



Students who identify as a member of the LGBTQ community, similar to other minority populations, are less likely to persist to graduation in a postsecondary setting (Aaron, Mabe, & Wilks, 2011). Loneliness and isolation have been cited as major problems for LGBTQ youth on college campuses. LGBTQ students in college report higher levels of mental health and substance abuse problems than their cisgender and heterosexual peers. (Longerbeam, et al.,2007).

In addition to the challenges faced by all LGBTQ students, trans\* and gender nonconforming students will face unique challenges based on their gender identity. These challenges include adequate access to restrooms, single stall or gender neutral, housing policies based on a gender binary approach, and official recognition of a preferred name or pronoun. These practices have an impact on a student's willingness to enroll and persist to graduation (Adams, 2015).

As was seen in high school environments, the addition of formal and social support networks on college campuses has shown to have a positive impact on the campus climate as well as on the health and academic achievements of enrolled LGBTQ students. These supports often take the form of women and LGBTQ resource centers and the structuring of campus activities around issues facing and support of LGBTQ students (Fine, 2012).

### **Visibility challenge in the admission process**

Despite a clear presence on college campuses and the growing need for support for enrolled LGBTQ students, there is little information available regarding this particular population on college campuses. The culturally sensitive nature and prevalence of stigma associated with the LGBTQ community have historically led to data on these populations

often being incomplete and hard to nail down. Until recently, the Common Application, used by over 400 schools across the nation, only accommodates for the male/female binary in their data collection (Aaron, Mabe, & Wilks, 2011).

In addition to the challenges facing scholars attempting to collect data regarding LGBTQ individuals and experiences that have been previously mentioned, institutions of higher education have often cited ethical concerns related to data collection. Some schools have cited concerns of students falsely identifying as LGBTQ in an effort to be reviewed more favorably by an admission committee although these fears are unsubstantiated in the research. Other schools have noted concerns of inadvertently outing a student.

Currently, there are numerous recruitment strategies that ignore, hesitate to acknowledge or even present outright hostility towards the LGBTQ community. Cegler (2012) has called into question if schools are sincerely committed to fostering diverse and inclusive campuses. Admission professionals being mindful of their actions and intentions throughout the admission process is a necessary step to creating an inclusive and diverse school, according to Cegler (2012).

In spite of the potential for negative consequences, there is a need for admission offices to collect data on LGBTQ identified students in the recruitment process. Johnson (2013) notes that schools asking students to self-identify as LGBTQ should evaluate the reason for asking and allow the justification to determine how and where students are asked. This should be done while considering the potential negative consequences to make data collection decisions that will best serve and least hurt the prospective students.

## **Summary**

This section explored the specific challenges facing LGBTQ youth in accessing higher education and obtaining a college degree. Facing stigma and fears of rejection and harm, many high school students remain in the closet throughout high school and are at an increased risk of mental health disorders. LGBTQ identified students are shown to be at an increased risk of mental and physical health issues that have been seen to directly impact their academic achievements. While the introduction of formal support systems can have a positive impact, these challenges are still present for LGBTQ youth.

The undergraduate admission process is also inherently problematic for LGBTQ students as they are largely not unseen in the data collected throughout the admission process. This stems from a history of stigma and current ethical concerns surrounding documentation of LGBTQ identities but has a negative impact on LGBTQ students enrolling in college. The next section will explore the role of undergraduate admission, diversity recruitment, and best practices for incorporating LGBTQ experiences and identities in the admission process.

### **Undergraduate Admissions**

The role of colleges and universities has traditionally been to provide academic credentials, but over the years this purpose has broadened to include social purposes that include replicating and disseminating ideological stances on topics that range from religion to gender and gender roles to economics. In the context of this larger mission, most universities seek to increase the diversity of their institution through their admission offices. This diversity may include ethnic, racial, socioeconomic, geographical, gender, and sexual orientation. While universities strive for increased diversity, their admission

officer and strategies remain based in assumptions of the dominant culture that ultimately hinder their efforts (Hicks & Shere, 2006).

Admission officers aim to build diverse learning environments that reflect the larger populations of society but frequently struggle to balance this task with the expectations of quality and academic reputation that are also heavily sought by universities. Admission officers act as agents of the university examining academic credentials in order to make admission decisions which are consistent with the institution's values. They use their judgment, which is directly influenced by personal experience, predominantly from within the dominant culture, to form admission and recruitment decisions. Their concepts of what is just, fair and quality and motivation are all shaped by their own experiences and then projected into the admission process and tend to favor students in the dominant population (Hicks & Shere, 2006).

Many colleges and universities will use data collected from marginalized groups, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic backgrounds, in the admission decision process. With limited data, it is not possible for admission offices to take gender identity and sexual orientation into account in the same way. Increasing holistic data collection in the admission process will provide LGBTQ students with a presence and a voice in the undergraduate admission process (Aaron, Mabe, & Wilks, 2011).

In addition to data collection, solutions to these challenges will have to address the admission process and the admission officers. It is important for admission officers being knowledgeable about resources for LGBTQ students on campus and accurately relaying that to prospective LGBTQ students. However, for that step to occur, admission

officers need to know more about the LGBTQ students they work with (Newhouse, 2013).

### **Summary**

Admission offices are charged with recruiting and enrolling diverse classes and have developed best practices for recruitment and enrollment. These practices often involve admission officers utilizing their best judgments in recruitment and marketing as well as in making admission decisions. These practices, by their very nature, are prone to bias and prejudice. To balance the subjective nature of admissions, offices make use of data but there is limited data available on LGBTQ students in the admission process. Given this reality, it is essential to develop explore frameworks and other models of diversity recruitment to address these challenges in the undergraduate admission process.

### **Models and Framework for Analysis**

Specific approaches to recruitment of underrepresented and marginalized populations vary from school to school and program to program. Research on the topic is equally as varied with some scholars placing emphasis on specific outreach initiatives and others examining the visibility of underrepresented populations in recruitment material. This section will explore queer theory, which can serve as a framework for the analysis of admission practices; the impact of a reflective practice on addressing admission biases; and an existing model for diversity recruitment.

### **Queer Theory**

Queer theory can be used as a conceptual framework to develop a method of assessing admission and recruitment policies and practices to increase inclusion for LGBTQ students. The foundation of queer theory is the acknowledgment of sexual and

gender identity is defined through the social construction of beliefs, values, and language that positions some people in power while disenfranchising others. Social systems develop and sustain the values, language and rules as well as the deliberate inclusion and exclusion of knowledge to create regulatory practices. These regulatory practices, as they persist and sustain over time, shape the thoughts, beliefs, and actions of individuals. Heteronormativity is cited as an example of a regulatory practice that impacts social systems and self-sustains through that impact. It positions cisgender and heterosexual individuals in a position of power while disenfranchising LGBTQ individuals. Queer theory has been instrumental in shifting conversations related to diversity away from the study of individuals and groups to examining regulatory practices of privilege (Watson, 2005; Foucault, 1984).

Queer theorists systematically challenge binary assumptions and the social systems built on sustaining those assumptions. Queer theorist, Renn (2010), utilizes a framework in her research to analyze LGBTQ topics and trends in higher education. Renn (2010) categorizes existing research into three branches consisting of visibility of LGBTQ people, campus climate for LGBTQ people, and challenging the constructions of LGBTQ identities and experiences. The three branches are not distinct categories and many of the studies, qualitative in nature, will bridge between two or all three. While exploring biases and barriers in the admission process does touch on the visibility of LGBTQ students as well as issues of campus climate, the third category is the most relevant to higher education and admission professionals producing policy recommendations. Changing constructions of LGBTQ identities and experiences includes

analysis of existing models and practices via queer theory to challenge the existing systems that disenfranchise LGBTQ students.

### **Framework for diversity recruitment**

There is no one model or standard of best practice when it comes to undergraduate admission efforts in diversity recruitment. Programs, schools, and entire academic fields approach the work in different ways and many schools are unwilling to fully disclose their recruitment and enrollment plans. However, there does exist a framework for developing and accessing diversity recruitment strategies. Developed from a call in the medical school field to increase diversity, Young et al. (2017) proposed a six-point, evidence-based framework for diversity recruitment and evaluation that can be adapted and implemented in undergraduate admission offices as well as medical schools.

Young et al. (2017) details six focal points in the recruitment and evaluation process: data-driven identification of underrepresented groups, pipeline development and targeted recruitment, ensuring an inclusive process, ensuring inclusive assessment, ensuring inclusive selection, and finally the iterative use of diversity-related data.

Data-driven identification of underrepresented groups. This focal point denotes that the first step in diversity recruitment is to identify current practices and the practice gaps that currently exist in a recruitment model. Young et al. (2017) notes that tools for tracking diversity markers and identifiers in the recruitment process are an essential step and that the tools must be developed when absent. The second focal point builds from the data collected in the first. The development of pipelines and targeted recruitment is possible once sufficient data has been collected to be used for analysis into structural and system-based barriers in the process.

The next three focal points focus on ensuring inclusion. The third point, ensuring an inclusive process, calls for a developing supportive and welcoming environments and creating institutional measures to broaden access to the school and admission office. The fourth focal point is to ensure inclusive assessment. This is the stage where admission policies and practices of application evaluation must be evaluated to uncover and eliminate bias against underrepresented populations. The fifth focal point is to ensure inclusive selection which requires the investigation into underrepresentation of applications from marginalized backgrounds so as to identify and remove barriers.

The final focal point is the iterative use of diversity-related data. It is critical to continue to collect and assess the data collected and to continue to reassess the practices and policies based on longitudinal data. This is an ongoing process of evaluation and adjustment to admission practices. With continued use of data and improvement of best practices and policies, there will need to be an on-going evaluation to identify new or changing barriers and ensure inclusivity throughout the process (Young, et al., 2017).

**Summary.** In their research (2017), Young et al. found that utilizing a six-point evaluative framework throughout the recruitment and admission process provides opportunities to identify and eliminate biases and barriers to diverse and marginalized populations. This framework concludes with the continued use of data to reevaluate the process continuously as policies and practices change there are opportunities for new barriers and biases to appear which will need to be addressed. This framework for evaluation and assessment will highlight barriers and biases but will require additional models and tools to address these biases.

### **Measuring and standardizing**



In a recent study, Posselt (2016) observed faculty, who were serving as admission officers for doctoral programs around the country. Throughout her study, she found numerous incidents of personal biases that impacted students from marginalized and underrepresented backgrounds negatively in the admission process. While these particular biases are potentially more specific to graduate and doctoral admission, the implications of personal bias, conscious and unconscious, impacting admission is relevant across admission offices, including undergraduate admission.

Posselt (2016) concludes her study with recommendations for the field. She calls for making the processes and practices explicit and, as Young et al. (2017) call for as well, to revisit practices to evaluate for bias. Specifically, she notes reconsidering the recruitment and better aligning it with admission practices and goals. She notes that schools with explicit efforts in early in the admission to process to attract and admit a more diverse student body were more successful than schools that did not take that approach. Making explicit efforts to recruit and admit students from diverse backgrounds, including statements of numeric goals, in percentage or enrollment numbers, can provide an office with specific and measurable outcomes that lead to increased enrollment of underrepresented students.

In addition to recruitment, Posselt (2016) recommends the use of a rubric in evaluating applications to standardize the practice and the opportunity level the playing field for applicants from diverse backgrounds. While personal bias can still play a central role in evaluating merit and ability, a rubric is a tool that can assist in standardizing how applicants are reviewed for admission and limit bias in the process. See Appendix A for

an example of an admission rubric that can be easily adapted to the needs of individual schools.

While Posselt (2016) recommends strategic and standardizing tools and practices to balance many of the personal biases found throughout the admission process, none of them will inherently address the biases themselves. Admission officers come from a variety of backgrounds and bring their own biases and varying levels of knowledge of LGBTQ issues to their work. It is essential to not only offer standardizing practices but to also find a way to directly impact bias among admission officers.

### **Reflection practice to address personal bias**

Traditionally, admission officers work in a fast-paced, action-oriented setting that does not naturally lend itself to reflective practices beyond the numbers. This creates a setting and culture that is resistant to change. However, challenging their preconceived notions of equity, fairness, and quality through reflective practice can lead to the recruitment of a more diverse student population, including marginalized LGBTQ students (Hicks & Shere, 2006).

Hicks and Shere (2006), partnered with Fordham University in New York City, found that the addition of an intentional reflective practice for the admission staff was able to alter how they reviewed applications, made admission decisions, and recruited diverse student populations. They began by creating dedicated time for seminars with focused topics around issues of diversity and acknowledging their own biases. These seminars were held on a regular basis and took place over the course of a year. Hicks and Shere (2006) noted that it took time for the admission staff to build enough trust with one another to openly discuss their own ideas, beliefs, and biases about race and diversity in

the admission process. Taking the time to build trust did eventually lead to productive and meaningful reflective discussions about their roles as individuals and as a team (Hicks & Shere, 2006).

Continued reflective conversations in the seminars did develop into meaningful action for the admission office. Based on their new perceptions of quality, motivation, and fairness the admission officer now sought to learn more about applicants as a complete person. Questions on the application were rewritten to include more inclusive language, student interview questions were added with the intention of getting to know more about the student as a person rather than as a list of statistics and facts (Hicks and Shere, 2006).

Having admission officers create a dedicated time and space for reflecting on their dominant views of gender identity in the admission process would likely lead to changes in how admission questions about the topic are asked and how data is collected. Hicks and Shere (2006) noted that reflective practice has led to challenging the ideas, structures and the value systems that are fundamental in the admission process and the decisions of admission officers. The resulting restructuring of admission questions to provide a more holistic picture of marginalized racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic students would also greatly serve LGBTQ students in the admission process. Aaron, Mabe, and Wilks (2011) state that college applications present not only academic qualifications but the individual experiences and identities of applicants and that inclusive questions provide students a more “representative voice” in the college admission process. Hicks and Shere (2006) have described a process of active reflection in admission settings which can help

individual offices build a more gender-diverse campus community and the welcoming process for transgender students that is prescribed by Aaron, Mabe, and Wilks (2011).

### **Summary**

There are numerous methods and frameworks to evaluate admission practices related to diversity recruitment and enrollment. Queer theory and the medical school framework for diversity recruitment presented by Young et al. (2017) provide opportunities for admission officers to assess and address the barriers, biases, and challenges facing LGBTQ students in the undergraduate admission process. The tools offered by Posselt (2016) and integration of a reflective practice into the admission process, as demonstrated by Hicks and Shere (2006), provide tested methods to address the biases and barriers in the admission process.

### **Rationale**

Examination of existing literature and current research points to a need for undergraduate admission offices to examine their practices to eliminate barriers that exist for LGBTQ students. While the data on LGBTQ populations is still limited, it does point to a need for admission officers, who hope to increase admission and enrollment of diverse populations, to assess and evaluate their existing practices that are likely in place. LGBTQ students share similar challenges and barriers in the admission process but also bring many different marginalized and oppressed identities to their admission experience. It is essential for admission professionals examining their policies and practices to fully understand the complexity of experiences and identities associated with the LGBTQ community.

Utilizing theoretical frameworks within Queer theory can provide the context and a lens that accommodates and sheds light on the complexity of LGBTQ issues in the admission process. The structure for evaluation can be found in an evidence-based model, such as Young et al. (2017) provides for medical pipeline and admission programs. The integration of queer theory into an evidence-based model will provide the framework that admission offices can utilize in assessing and identifying barriers in their practices.

Once barriers have been identified the next step is in removing them from the process. The use of measurable and standardized tools, such as rubrics and goal setting, can be implemented under the new framework for assessment in response to barriers and challenges. While the method has been developed to address biases in the doctoral admission process, it can be transitioned into a framework based in queer theory to address similar issues of bias in the undergraduate admission process. The other noted tool in the literature is the use of reflective practice to minimize the bias of admission officers and similarly be integrated into a queer theory-based framework to address the challenges faced by LGBTQ students in undergraduate admission.

A handbook of educational material, a framework for evaluating and assessing admission practices, and tools for addressing change will be produced in answer to the research question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community? This chapter provides the educational components related to LGBTQ students as well as the foundation for developing a framework and the tools suggested for addressing bias for LGBTQ students in admission.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter analyzed scholarly literature related to the research question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) community? It addressed five primary areas: Framing; Demographics; Diversity and Inclusion in Undergraduate Admissions; LGBTQ Specific Challenges; and Frameworks for Analysis. This review of the literature and existing research will be used to design a resource for admission offices and admission policy-makers to use in identifying and removing barriers for LGBTQ students in the admission process. The next chapter will provide a detailed overview of the resource being developed including a detailed description, the intended audience, an explanation of methods chosen, and a timeline.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Project Description**

#### **Introduction**

Chapter three provides a detailed explanation of the handbook I created based on my research to answer to the question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) community? The handbook outlines a framework that utilizes queer theory and models for diversity recruitment to evaluate undergraduate admission practices to identify and eliminate barriers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) students.

This chapter provides an overview of the handbook that was developed from the research outlined in chapter two. First is a discussion of the structure of the handbook and the rationale for utilizing a handbook model for this particular project. Next, an outline of the research, frameworks, and theories that form the foundation of the handbook. This includes the rationale for using the Young et.al. (2017) recruitment and evaluation model, Queer theory, and the suggested practices. Finally, an explanation of the intended audience and an outline of the timeline used in developing and constructing the handbook.

#### **Overview of the Project**

##### **Handbook**

In answering the research question, I developed a handbook for undergraduate admission directors and those impacting admission policies at liberal arts colleges. It includes background information and educational data on the LGBTQ community and the complexity of identities and challenges faced by this population. It has been well noted throughout the literature that there is limited data on LGBTQ individuals and that there are complex intersections of identities. Admission professionals work in fast-paced environments and are likely not have time to do the initial individual research on the topic and the handbook should serve as a resource and starting point.

It also includes a detailed framework for the evaluation of practices and policies for a full admission cycle. This framework is based on the model for diversity practices presented by Young et al. (2017) through the lens of Queer theory to produce a framework specifically evaluating bias and barriers experienced by LGBTQ students in an admission process. This is intended to be used as general guidelines that can be implemented regardless of the existing practices in an individual office.

Finally, the handbook provides suggested tools and resources for addressing barriers for LGBTQ students. This includes suggested workshops, trainings, customizable rubrics, and an outline for introducing reflective practice into the work of an admissions team. These, like the framework, are customizable to different offices and practices that currently exist in undergraduate admission offices.

This resource is a starting point for admission offices hoping to address issues of access for LGBTQ students. It provides practical guidelines and a range of resources for schools to select from. It includes opportunities for schools to implement at a rate that is both effective and efficient for their offices. Admission offices are regularly limited in



time and resources which means that an effective tool, such as a handbook of guidelines and best practices, needs to offer a variety of implementation options. If implementation is overly complex or takes too long, an office may not take the steps to address bias in their practices or may decide that their processes do not warrant continued evaluation.

Utilizing existing diversity recruitment frameworks and best practices provided a foundation that is likely to be already in place in many admission offices. The additional analysis utilizing Queer theory provides an opportunity for admission offices to reconsider some of their existing practices in a way that can likely be accommodated within an admission cycle.

### **Context and Information**

The handbook begins with an overview of the value of utilizing the Queer evaluation framework to increase access to LGBTQ students as well as listing multiple potential benefits of implementing the evaluation. Listed are the merits of a flexible framework that can be individualized and are likely to result in a positive impact on enrollment of marginalized populations.

In the following sections there are short statements that make clear the limitations and scope of the handbook as well as a brief overview of background data. It is stated in multiple places that the data presented is limited and not a comprehensive overview. The decision to provide the limited background information was based on two factors. The first factor is the incomplete and unreliable nature of data pertaining to LGBTQ populations. The second factor is related to timeliness. The framework presented in the handbook is one that can be used over multiple admission cycles and is not dependent on current data and findings. It was important that this handbook not be viewed as tied to the

dated background information outlined. The intent is for the handbook and the framework to remain relevant year after year with minimal annual updates.

## **Research Framework and Theories**

### **Framework**

Young et al. (2017) details six focal points in the recruitment and evaluation process that includes: data-driven identification of underrepresented groups, pipeline development and targeted recruitment, ensuring an inclusive process, ensuring inclusive assessment, ensuring inclusive selection, and finally the iterative use of diversity-related data. They utilized case studies of medical schools to demonstrate the effectiveness of their model and with limited current literature addressing evidence-based models for diversity recruitment in undergraduate admission, this is a leading model for diversity recruitment.

This particular model also addresses areas for bias throughout an admission cycle, rather than focusing solely on recruitment or the application process, and has continued evaluation year after year built into the model to accommodate for new data and changing landscapes around LGBTQ issues. The Gallup Poll (2016) noted that knowledge of issues related to the LGBTQ population is continuously changing as we experience a cultural shift that places less stigma on identifying as an LGBTQ member. It will be important for a framework of evaluation to be adaptable as more data becomes available and the culture and subsequent challenges for LGBTQ students change.

### **Queer Theory**

Queer theory, as a conceptual framework, can be used to develop a method of assessing admission and recruitment policies and practices to increase

inclusion for LGBTQ students. The model presented by Young et al. (2017) provides a base for diversity recruitment but lacks a systematic way to specifically challenge heteronormative and binary assumptions and the social systems built on sustaining those assumption about gender and sexual identities found in the admissions process. Queer theory, in particular the work of Foucault (1984) and Watson (2005), provides the framework to challenge constructions of LGBTQ identities and experiences within the admission process so as to bring light to those biases and barriers. This was used to provide an analysis of existing models and practices to ensure inclusion of LGBTQ students throughout the admission process.

### **Queer Evaluation Framework**

The proposed Queer evaluation framework outlined in the handbook is based in a conceptual framework developed by Young et. al. (2017) which is founded in the Knowledge Translation framework. This means that it is centered in data collection and the subsequent use of data. The framework outlines six points or steps in the evaluation and recruitment process. The six points are 1) data-driven identification of underrepresented groups, 2) targeted recruitment, ensuring an inclusive process, 4) ensuring inclusive assessment, 5) ensuring inclusive selection, 6) iterative use of diversity-related data.

This model was adapted for undergraduate admission offices and incorporated a seventh point, ensuring inclusive enrollment. The addition of inclusive enrollment is intended to provide a holistic look at the admission cycle and encourage yield practices to be evaluated along with recruitment and admission practices.

Next, I applied a Queer theory lens was layered in to the seven point framework. This meant the seven point queer evaluation framework incorporates the specific examination of heteronormative and gender binary assumptions within an office's admission practices as well address the regulatory policies and practices that disenfranchise LGBTQ students. This is accomplished through specific acknowledgment and evaluation of the knowledge, in the form of data, which is included or excluded throughout the cycle; the language that is used in printed material, data collection, and among staff; and the rules or policies that guide admission practices at different stages of the admission cycle.

Each of the seven points includes a list of questions to guide the evaluator through an evaluation of their policies and practices. It also includes suggested resources for addressing identified biases and barriers.

### **Suggested Practices**

In addition to models and frameworks for diversity recruitment, this handbook suggests resources and methods to address the biases and barriers found through the evaluation process embedded in the frameworks. The existing model presented by Young et al (2017) does not drill down to specific tools and recommendations on addressing the biases and barriers once identified. I pulled suggested practices from the literature that include the use of a reflective practice that Hicks and Shere (2006) demonstrated to be effective in reducing the impact of personal bias in the admission process as well as adapting the tools suggested by Posselt (2016) in reducing bias in doctoral admission. Reframing existing tools that have been demonstrated to be effective in eliminating or

minimizing bias in admission to address issues related to LGBTQ students both provides an evidence-based toolkit that is more likely garner buy-in from admission professionals.

## **Audience**

### **Liberal Arts Colleges in the Midwest**

While it would be ideal to develop a handbook that can be easily utilized nationally and across all admission offices, I have limited my intended scope to liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. I have done this for two reasons, the first is my personal familiarity with undergraduate admission offices and their practices in liberal arts colleges. The second reason is that liberal arts colleges in the Midwest tend to be smaller institutions that are able to implement new policies and practices more nimbly than large university offices with many more layers of bureaucracy.

### **Admission Directors and Admission Policymakers**

This handbook was most specifically designed for directors of admission and those in roles who either make or influence admission policies. While much of the handbook includes materials that are relevant for admission officers, it is designed to provide those who supervise both admission staff as well set the strategic plan for recruitment, admission, and enrollment. This provides training suggestions and tools that supervisors can implement with their staff as part of a larger strategic plan to increase access to LGBTQ students. This resource was designed to inform strategic planning at all levels and the tools or workshops implemented would only be truly effective as part of an overall and larger reaching strategy.

## **Timeline**

It took six weeks to complete the assembly of the handbook. The first stage was to compile the educational materials and background information. The second step was to develop the comprehensive framework for the evaluation of policies and practices utilizing the existing Young et al. (2017) model and analyzing it through the use of queer theory.

The final step was to develop and format existing resources to fit in the handbook. This includes resources for suggested trainings, an outline of approaches and steps to implement a reflective practice, and suggested rubrics. This took six weeks to complete. Much of the initial research and collecting of materials was accomplished while writing chapter two over a two month time period.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the project addressing the question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the LGBTQ community? The project consists of a handbook containing educational materials, a framework for the evaluation of practices based in queer theory and utilizing a model designed by Young et al. (2017). It ended with resources and tools for implementation to address the biases and barriers found in the evaluation process. This was designed for use by admission directors and admission policymakers at liberal arts colleges in the Midwest. It took an estimated eight to nine weeks to complete.

The next chapter is a reflection on the process of designing and creating the handbook. It revisits the literature review from chapter two and provides new insights into the material. A discussion of the implications and limitations of the project and the

new learnings gained through the process of completing the project are outlined. Finally, it concludes with an outline next steps and details final thoughts from the author.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **Reflection and Conclusions**

#### **Introduction to the Chapter**

I have created a handbook for undergraduate admission directors and undergraduate admission policy makers to address the question: How can admission offices uncover and address biases in the admission process that impact students who identify as a member of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) community? I was initially drawn to this topic based on my years working in admission offices and the experiences I had counseling LGBTQ students. I continued to find that the admission processes, both the practices and policies, were not only inadequately serving some of students but actually posed as barriers for some qualified applicants. This capstone project was intended to serve as a guide and a resource for other admission professionals seeking to address similar issues within their offices.

The handbook provides a framework for thinking about evaluation as a relevant and useful tool in admission and enrollment planning with regard to LGBTQ students. It was written primarily for admission directors and admission policymakers and other stakeholders who are directly responsible for strategic recruitment and enrollment planning for undergraduate admission offices at small liberal arts colleges. The handbook consists of background information, a detailed overview of the Queer evaluation framework that I developed, and resources to assist admission offices in addressing identified biases in their practices and policies.



In this chapter I reflect on the process of researching and creating the Queer evaluation framework and handbook. First, I revisit the literature review set forth in chapter two and provide new insights into the material. In the second section I speak to the implications and limitations of the project. Next, I reflect on new learnings gained through the process of completing the project and will include both personal learnings as well as professional. In the fourth section I provide a discussion of next steps. Finally, the chapter concludes with final thoughts from the author.

### **Literature Review Revisited**

The research presented and discussed in chapter two was the primary source of the content presented throughout the handbook. In chapter two, I reviewed research that addressed the inadequate and problematic data regarding the LGBTQ populations within the United States. I presented what information is currently thought to be known about LGBTQ communities including the challenges faced by LGBTQ high school and college students. Potential barriers in the admission process as well as potential solutions were discussed and evaluated.

In this section the most important pieces of the literature- the Gallop Poll from 2016, the exploration of Queer theory, and the Young et.al. Framework- and their impact on the project will be discussed. The section will close with a discussion of new understandings I have made from the literature review while executing the handbook project.

### **Critical Literature**

When I began this project, I was concerned about finding relevant data or sources on my topic. Early in my chapter two research I met with the Acting Director of Diversity

Initiatives at Hamline University, t. aaron hans, who encouraged me to expand my topic from trans\* students in the admission process to looking at the barriers faced by LGBTQ students. t. aaron pointed out that much of the research and existing admission models do not separate out issues of gender identity and sexual orientation. In this meeting it was also encouraged for me to a explore project based in Queer theory that utilizes the research of others to establish best practices. We agreed this would also be helpful to the admission profession in assessing and breaking down barriers for LGBTQ students.

**Existing Data** Working from t. aaron's advice, this project afforded me the opportunity to dive deeper into the literature pertaining to data regarding the LGBTQ population, research-based diversity recruitment models for college and university admission offices, and Queer theory. The Gallop Poll (2016) challenged my perceptions of how we track and think about LGBTQ populations. In addition to providing recent data from a national poll, the survey provided explanations on why there are so many inconsistencies in LGBTQ data as well as context for many of the trends seen within the data presented in the poll and found among other sources. The Gallop Poll (2016) was the primary source I used for recent data on the LGBTQ community, however the language used in the poll was more limited than the scope of my project. The Gallop Poll (2016) only collected data regarding those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. This leaves out individuals who may identify as trans\* versus the more limited scope of transgender as well as individuals who identify as queer. As I dove into readings on Queer theory, this omission proved to be just as important as the data that was presented.

**Queer Theory** The foundation of queer theory is the acknowledgment that sexual and gender identity is defined through the social construction of beliefs, values, and language that positions some people in power while disenfranchising others. Queer theorist, such as

Foucault (1984) and Watson (2005), systematically challenge binary assumptions and the social systems built on sustaining those assumptions. Foucault (1984) discusses how the explicit inclusion and exclusion of types of knowledge, the language used, and the enforced rules of a social system will sustain that system of oppression. This approach has resulted in a shift in conversations related to diversity away from the study of individuals and groups to the examination regulatory practices of privilege. This shift inspired me to consider the specific examination of the full range of admission processes and shift away from placing the focus on the individual students within the system. I adopted the idea of examining knowledge in the form of data, language, and the rules of social systems and applied it specifically to admission practices. Understanding admission policies and practices as a social system that upholds dominant cultural values while simultaneously disenfranchise LGBTQ students, allows for a full examination of bias within that system.

**Diversity Framework** Evaluating an entire social system, even one as specific as undergraduate admission practices, felt both liberating and overwhelming. It was essential to find an existing and proven model for evaluating admission practices that could be adapted to incorporate a Queer theory lens. Young et. al. (2017) provided a holistic approach to the use data in effective multicultural and diversity recruitment. This framework provided a data-centered structure to the development of an evaluation framework for admission offices. It was developed as a conceptual framework to be utilized in the development and evaluation of diversity-related pipeline and admission programs for Canadian Medical Schools. It is based in the Knowledge Translation framework and is centered in data collection and the subsequent use of data. It outlines six points or steps in the evaluation and recruitment process. This provided a base

framework that I adapted to a format that could be implemented in undergraduate admission offices while incorporating a Queer theory lens.

### **New Understandings**

When I first began this project I held a number of assumptions that shaped the topic and approach of my research question. I assumed that I would be in search of non-data related approaches to identifying barriers in the admission process. My understanding of the limited data that exists combined with my personal experience with LGBTQ applicants led me to believe the answers would need to be more qualitative than quantitative in approach. However, what I found was that the lack of representation in the admission data was the first barrier for LGBTQ students. Without data collection, it is not possible for admission offices to fully understand and address the barriers for LGBTQ applicants that are embedded within the admission process.

The Gallop Poll (2016) provided both an estimated view of the LGBTQ population in the United States and a stark view of the inconsistencies and missing data regarding the LGBTQ population. My initial instinct was that this survey provided a strong example of how difficult it is to collect data on the LGBTQ population. However, as I dove deeper into Queer theory I realized that the lack of solid data reflected social and cultural systems that did not value the identities and experiences of LGBTQ communities.

Applying the Queer theory lens from Foucault (1984) and Watson (2005) to the Gallop Poll (2016) allowed me to see the data and the holes in the data as a symptom of LGBTQ populations being marginalized while simultaneously upholding and maintaining the marginalized status. It quickly became clear that data collection was going to be a

central and fundamental aspect of identifying and addressing barriers in an admission process for LGBTQ students.

Reading through the Young et. al. (2017) framework for multicultural and diversity related recruitment to medical schools I knew I had a foundation for my project. The framework they presented was rooted in the notion that data collection throughout a process is essential to success. The framework was broad and, while data-centered throughout, did not specifically challenge admission policies and practices in a way that addresses how LGBTQ populations are disenfranchised. This required utilizing a Queer theory approach that challenged knowledge, language, and rules.

### **Summary**

Bringing an understanding of Queer theory to the literature review allowed me the opportunity to see beyond existing data to actually seeing where the data is lacking. This understanding of the role that the lack of data plays in disenfranchising LGBTQ communities shifted my perspective on how to approach the evaluation of admission practices and policies. It became clear that any framework used in my project would need to address data collection and the continued use of the data. I found that in the Young et. al. (2017) framework that served as a foundation to the development of Queer Framework for evaluating admission policies and practices to address barriers for LGBTQ students.

### **Implications and Limitations**

The handbook and Queer evaluation framework have the potential to impact how admission offices think about and approach their work throughout the admission cycle. The handbook encourages critical evaluation of practices and policies that disenfranchise

LGBTQ students and opportunities to address or minimize those barriers. However, it does have a specific and limited scope. In this section I will discuss the relevance of this project and research to the professional field of undergraduate admission and the limitations in the scope of the project.

### **Implications**

Diversity and inclusion are priorities in undergraduate admission offices across the country. In response, offices are utilizing data to track and evaluate how their practices and policies impact the enrollment of students from the most marginalized and traditionally underrepresented backgrounds. These typically include racial and ethnic minorities, first-generation college students, students from a low socioeconomic background, and first-generation Americans. Left out of this definition of marginalized populations are the LGBTQ students.

The queer evaluation framework presented in the handbook offers an evidence-based approach to identifying and addressing the barriers embedded in traditional admission practices for LGBTQ students. The framework, as opposed to a set of prescribed practices, allows for flexibility in implementation. This allows individual admission offices the opportunity to address the concerns and needs of the internal and external stakeholders involved in admission policy. Offices are able to evaluate the practices unique to them and implement changes appropriate for individual institutions. It also provides continued opportunities for admission offices to re-evaluate policies and practices as new information surrounding marginalized and traditionally underrepresented populations arise.

In addition to assisting individual offices, it could result in the evaluation of best practices on a larger scale. While the handbook and framework are designed for undergraduate admission offices to continually evaluate their own process, it could be used to examine best practices in the profession. Admissions is a profession with strong professional organizations and a platform for sharing successful approaches and policies for working with students. These organizations also develop best practices and guidelines for ethical behavior for member institutions that aim to serve a diverse student body. These best practices and guidelines follow the seven points of the framework and could easily be evaluated and updated based on the Queer evaluation framework.

### **Limitations**

The Queer evaluation framework is designed only to identify and address barriers for LGBTQ students within the undergraduate admission process. Admission offices are the bridge between high school experiences and the opportunity for a post-secondary education. The biases and barriers that impact LGBTQ students in both high school and college directly impact admission offices and their efforts to increase access for LGBTQ students. And while these are important issues impacting LGBTQ students, this particular handbook and framework are created to serve admission directors only within the scope of their work and responsibilities.

This handbook is not meant to serve as a comprehensive guide to LGBTQ -related issues or information. It provides a flexible evaluative framework that is couched in limited amounts of background information that is intended as a starting point. All admission professionals utilizing this handbook are encouraged to explore more

information related to LGBTQ students, the specific challenges faced by them, and seek innovative solutions to addressing barriers within the admission process.

### **Summary**

The handbook and the Queer evaluation framework provide admission professionals a tool to begin identifying the barriers for the LGBTQ population embedded in their practices. This framework could be a catalyst for changing the way individual offices engage in their work and has the potential to impact national best practices. However, these are limited to the work that happens within the scope of admissions. It does not address the barriers or challenges that LGBTQ students face in high school or on campus. While these are important issues they will be left for future researchers to explore.

### **Learnings**

The process of researching and developing this handbook has been an incredible learning experience. When I began this process I held a number of assumptions that had me started down a different path. My initial plan was an attempt to find non-data centered approaches to identifying and addressing barriers in the admission process. I believed that admissions was too tied to data and this project would provide alternative methods that better served LGBTQ students. What I learned in my research was that the continued lack of substantial data regarding the LGBTQ population is at the heart of their marginalization in society and in college admissions.

This project afforded me an opportunity to reconsider how I understand my own profession and how I approach my work. In designing the Queer evaluation framework, I was forced to reconsider many aspects of my day to day work and how they embody



heteronormative and binary assumptions. I had to shift my paradigm to one that challenges and questions the processes and the policies that form my work from one that works from firmly within those practices. This shift allowed me to think more creatively about reaching a wider population of students.

My number one takeaway from this project is the importance of taking the time to evaluate our processes for the ways in which they are further marginalizing traditionally underrepresented populations. Many admission offices discuss the ways to recruit more underrepresented students but only from within the admission practices and policies that are already in place. There are very few conversations about the ways to reimagine the process as one that is inherently more inclusive. In other words, rather than finding systems that work for all students most offices look to find ways to fit all students into to a process designed to only fit a few. As a profession we need to challenge our practices and policies in order to overcome the inequities of college access.

### **Next Steps**

With the project complete, I am considering the best options for distributing the handbook and building interest in implementing the use of the evaluative framework. Implementation and use of the Queer evaluation framework is also an opportunity for future research. This section will outline my personal plan for next steps as well as a discussion on potential for future research.

### **Personal Plan**

The decision to create a handbook as the platform for distributing the Queer evaluation framework was a strategic choice. While it may appear more limited in terms of accessibility as compared to a website, it does lend itself to distribution at professional

conferences and events. Given the potentially sensitive nature of the framework and the limited understanding of LGBTQ issues within the profession, I believe that having the handbook as a handout as part of a professional presentation will have the most impact on admission directors and stakeholders.

My next step is to begin applying to present at local, regional, and national conferences. I am submitting an application to present at the University of Minnesota at a symposium for research related to issues of Equity and Inclusion. I am also planning to apply to present at the 2019 National Association of College Admission Counselor (NACAC) Annual conference. These will provide a wide audience of higher education and admission professionals who are interested in learning about improving their processes and becoming accessible to more students.

### **Future Research**

Following the distribution of the handbook and encouraging offices to implement the Queer evaluation framework provides an opportunity to study the outcomes from implementation. While the initial framework from Young et. al. (2017) was evidence-based, it was not specifically designed for LGBTQ students. It would be both interesting and important to study the impact this framework has on the access to college for LGBTQ students and potentially other marginalized populations. Even though the framework is specifically designed with LGBTQ students in mind it, it could subsequently impact access for other disenfranchised student population.

If the framework is shown to have a positive impact for LGBTQ and other marginalized students, it would be beneficial to explore how it could be designed or implemented in other offices. A future researcher could explore adapting it to Student

Affairs or Student Life offices on a college campus. It could potentially be adapted to be used in a high school setting but I would think that may be a more challenging stretch than keeping it within a higher education setting. Whether this framework is adapted beyond the scope of the handbook or not, I do hope that future scholars continue to explore ways to identify and address barriers and challenges facing LGBTQ students across the country.

### **Conclusion**

This project provides a single tool of admission directors and admission policy makers to evaluate and address biases in their processes and policies that serve as barriers for LGBTQ students. It is evidence-based and holistic in its approach to the admission cycle but it is only one tool. As scholars and professionals continue to move ahead with exploring how to increase access to college, it is essential that they take LGBTQ students into account. My greatest hope from this project is that the LGBTQ population will not be lost in conversations around equity, inclusion, and access in the admissions profession. While the lack of clear data regarding the LGBTQ community can make them seem irrelevant or too complicated to address, I hope that work such as this will breakdown those assumptions. I believe the best way to do this is to continue the conversations in public spaces such as academic research and professional conferences. This project did not begin the conversation and it will not be the final answer but I look forward to continuing this conversation with the scholars and professionals that pick up where I left off.

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## APPENDIX A

### Definition of Relevant Terms

- Gender identity. One's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither—how individuals express themselves and what they call themselves. One's gender identity can be the same or different from their sex assigned at birth.
- Cisgender. A term used to describe a person whose gender identity aligns with those typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth.
- Queer. A term people often use to express fluid identities and orientations. Often used interchangeably with "LGBTQ."
- Gender-fluid. A person who does not identify with a single fixed gender; of or relating to a person having or expressing a fluid or unfixed gender identity.
- Genderqueer. Genderqueer people typically reject notions of static categories of gender and embrace a fluidity of gender identity. They may see themselves as both male and female, neither male nor female or as falling completely outside these categories.
- Gender transition. The process by which some people strive to more closely align their initial knowledge of gender with its outward appearance.

- Gender non-conforming. A broad term referring to people who do not behave in a way that conforms to the traditional expectations of their gender, or whose gender expression does not fit into a category.
- Outing. Exposing someone's lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender identity to others without their permission. Outing someone can have serious repercussions on employment, economic stability, personal safety or religious or family situations.
- Sexual orientation. An inherent or immutable enduring emotion, romantic or sexual attraction to other people.

Human Rights Campaign (2017)