

**Space, Place, and Queer Experiences on a College Campus**

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## Abstract

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### Space, Place, and Queer Experiences on a College Campus

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It is vital for LGBTQIA+ people to have safe spaces where they can explore or express their queer identity. Since college is often the first place where people can explore their identity away from previous influences, it is important to promote a positive campus experience for LGBTQIA+ individuals. The goal of this study is to answer the question: How does space and place influence queer experiences on a college campus?

While most research focuses on the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ students, there is scant research investigating the experiences of LGBTQIA+ faculty and staff. Given campus is their workplace and a place where they should be able to comfortably express their queer identity, this line of investigation is important to understand. Through focus groups, I found themes which all fit into queer geography and the importance of inclusivity on campus. This project expands queer geography's original purpose to examine how space and place influence the queer experiences of faculty, staff, and students to create a more inclusive college campus. Findings show that college campuses need to be viewed as their own institution, with external factors, such as the political climate of their specific location, to effectively create an inclusive college campus for LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff. They further indicate the need for LGBTQIA+ inclusive college campuses to create positive queer experiences on college campuses.

## **Dedication**

*To my parents, whose love and support has never wavered, no matter my identity.*

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

A college campus can be an important place for LGBTQIA+ students, staff, and faculty to explore and express their identity. It is vital that this be a safe space for LGBTQIA+ individuals, as they experience more discrimination, harassment, and mental health issues than their cisgender, heterosexual peers (Conron et al., 2022). Creating an inclusive, safe environment for LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff has been shown to increase their success, recruitment, and retention (Ceron, 2022; Leung et. al, 2022). Understanding how space and place shape influence queer experience helps us better understand how to create a better sense of belonging on campus. Students, faculty, and staff have diverse needs, and it is important for the university as a school and a workplace to have resources and policies in place that encompass these needs. The purpose of this research study is to analyze how space and place influence queer experiences of faculty, staff, and students at USI to create a more inclusive campus. The results of the study were used to make policy and resource recommendations to the university to create a better sense of belonging.

As a queer, trans staff member of the university, this research topic is important to me because I want the university to be inclusive of everyone, but especially LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff. I was inspired to conduct this study after attending an Ally training on campus and seeing the need for additional resources for faculty and staff to be more inclusive of their LGBTQIA+ coworkers. As an alumna of USI, this study is important for me to see how far we have come in terms of LGBTQIA+ inclusive events and resources, but likewise seeing how much work is still left. I hope that the resource and policy recommendations I make to the university can make it a safer, more inclusive space for all LGBTQIA+ individuals who may work, take classes, or visit the university.



It can be difficult for queer individuals to develop their identity when it is not represented or considered normal. Fricke (2010) notes that identity can be viewed as a social construct because it is evaluated in the terms of a specific social context. Yoshino (2006) notes that homosexuality was first defined as a mental disorder in the American Psychological Association *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* in 1952. Eventually in the 1970s, we saw a shift in perspective and homosexuality started to be viewed as an identity rather than a lifestyle (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The AIDS crisis in the 1980s caused panic over gay sex and it was viewed as something to police in the queer community. In the 1990s, the U.S (United States) military devised the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy to allow homosexual individuals to serve but they were not allowed to discuss their identity. These shifts in society show a gradual acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community, but they additionally show that queer identities have needed to be concealed and kept quiet, which could explain the increased length of time between private realization and public disclosure.

The research question is: How does space and place influence queer experiences on a college campus?

This research question will be analyzed through a queer geography lens and using focus groups and Lindlof and Taylor’s thematic analysis to provide policy and resource recommendations that create a more inclusive campus experience for LGBTQIA+-identifying students, faculty, and staff. Queer and trans theory allow for the research question to be analyzed outside of the cisheteronormative structures of society and allow queer and trans identities to be seen as normal. These theories allow for organizations and structures to be reimagined with the queer and trans community in mind. By utilizing a focus group methodology, this allows the researcher to obtain new insights or spark conversations that may not otherwise occur during the

interview process. The thematic analysis allows for a more manageable way to spot similarities and differences in participant answers within the data set. Queer geographies take an approach to queer theory and combines it with spatial analytics to analyze the social constitution of sexuality and space (Gorman-Murray & McKinnon, 2015). Through applying queer geography to college campuses, these spaces can be reexamined to be more inclusive of queer identities.

Queer geography, according to Sember (2003) is concerned with place and space in the production of sexual identities, practices, and communities; where individuals can be themselves and become known to others. Historically, examples of queer spaces include bars, nightclubs, and bathhouses: places where queer individuals can be themselves. These spaces allow queer people to come out of the closet and experience queer joy through connecting with other queer individuals. However, it is important for queer individuals to be accepted in public spaces as well as private ones.

In this thesis, I will be using some key terms and concepts such as queer geography, cisnormativity, heteronormativity, cisheteronormativity, and queer,. Sember (2003) defines queer geography as examining the role of space and place in the production of sexual identities, practices, and communities. In this thesis, I am operationalizing queer geography to examine how the location of USI's campus affects LGBTQIA+ individuals' experiences on a college campus and how this impacts the policy and resource recommendations to create a more inclusive campus experience for these individuals.

Cisnormativity is defined as the assumption that cisgender identities are the norm and society privileges cisgender over other gender identities (Cambridge English Dictionary).

Heteronormativity is defined as the assumption that heterosexual sexual orientation is the norm and society privileges it over other sexual orientations (APA Dictionary of Psychology).

Cisheteronormativity is defined as an intersectionality of cisnormativity and heteronormativity, where cisgender and heterosexual identities are viewed as the norm and privileged over other sexual orientations or gender identities in society (Michigan State University). Microaggressions are defined as everyday slights, insults, putdowns, or offensive behaviors that people experience in daily interactions with well-intentioned individuals who are unaware they have engaged in demeaning ways (UNC School of Medicine, n.d.). In this thesis, the word ‘queer’ is utilized as a blanket term to describe anyone who identifies as LGBTQIA+. The word ‘queer’ is likewise used by scholars to describe queer theory and queer geography.

This research study can be used to evaluate college campuses, especially ones of the same size and geo-political location, in a way that will aid in making them more inclusive of LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff. It is important to examine all experiences of faculty, staff, and students to create spaces that are inclusive of the entire campus community and their diverse needs.

In the upcoming chapters, I will discuss previous literature and how it applies to the research question; the methodology used to analyze the research question; the findings of the research; and the discussion of the research to create resource and policy recommendations. In chapter two, I will discuss previous literature and how it supports the research question. In chapter three, I will discuss the methodological approach to my research question, which includes the theoretical approach, setting, data collection and analysis, positionality, and excellence in qualitative research. In chapter four, I will discuss the findings from the focus group sessions and data analysis. In chapter five, I will discuss the findings of the study and offer policy and resource recommendations to create a more inclusive campus experience for LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff at the University of Southern Indiana (USI). Chapter five

will discuss queer geography as a whole and how it can be applied to college campuses as spaces and how to make them inclusive for LGBTQIA+ individuals. This discussion will include the difference between urban and rural spaces, how “safe” spaces are not always safe for LGBTQIA+ individuals, and the difference between public and private spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *Disrupting cisnormativity and heteronormativity in Higher Education*

Heteronormativity can be described as the societal assumption that everyone is heterosexual, and in its most extreme definition, that homosexuality is deviant (Johnson, 2023). Heteronormativity is embedded in norms and institutions, including universities and teaching curricula. According to Kaldis (2009), a university can be viewed as a microcosm of society, containing most aspects of society. This assumption can be harmful to the learning experience of queer students who may not feel seen or safe in the classroom. Cisnormative and heteronormative curricula can make queer students feel excluded from the classroom. Faculty may assume that all their students are cisgender and heterosexual, which can create an uncomfortable learning environment for LGBTQIA+ students. Faculty may use reading lists or examples in the classroom that only feature heterosexual or cisgender authors or people. This can make queer students feel othered in class and unsafe. By incorporating trans and queer authors or examples in the classroom, faculty can make students feel welcomed and increase their well-being. This may likewise help with recruitment and retention of queer students.

Around seventeen percent of college students self-identify as LGBTQIA+ (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, n.d.). It is important for universities to recruit and retain all populations of students, but especially students in marginalized communities that may drop out more easily than others. Queer students may drop out of college due to higher rates of mental health issues from facing discrimination, harassment, or bullying; feeling unsafe in their dorm rooms, restrooms, locker rooms, or classrooms; or financial issues due to being disowned by their family (Conron et al., 2022). Universities can recruit queer students by offering resources for mental

health, gender-neutral facilities, anti-bullying and non-discrimination policies, and emergency housing for displaced students.

Descriptive representation is important because cisheteronormativity is embedded in the institute of higher education. It is important to recruit and retain underrepresented populations such as queer faculty and staff. Messinger (2009) found that queer faculty, staff, and students were the ones most likely to initiate change in the university. One queer staff member pushed for the equality of same-sex partners in their university's health benefits policy. Equitable policies are important for the recruitment and retention of queer staff.

Cisnormativity refers to the gendered practices and policies that reproduce gender binaries and exclude transgender identities (Johnson, 2023). Cisnormativity can negatively impact trans individuals in many facets of their college experience. Trans individuals may face undue stress trying to navigate facilities in college such as restrooms, locker rooms, and showers in gyms or dorm rooms that are inherently sexed. Trans individuals may face discrimination or harassment in these spaces if they do not use the one that matches their sex assigned at birth. Trans individuals may additionally cause undue harm to themselves by avoiding using a public restroom for fear of harassment. Goldberg, Beemyn, and Smith (2018) argue there is a need for greater attention on the trans-exclusionary culture of college and how having more trans-inclusive settings can be beneficial for the physical and mental well-being of trans students. Cisnormativity likewise permeates greetings and conversations. A professor may greet the classroom by stating the phrase "Ladies and Gentlemen" which can make non-binary and trans students feel uncomfortable, othered, and unsafe. Using gender-neutral language in the classroom make trans students feel more welcome in the classroom.

Safe spaces are defined by the Oxford Dictionary as “a place where a category of people can feel confident they won’t be exposed to discrimination, criticism, harassment, or any other emotional or physical harm.” Safe spaces can provide an individual with a private place to be themselves. However, safe spaces are not always safe for everyone, which is why an intersectional approach to safe spaces is important. Fox (2007) argues that *Safe Space* stickers, intended to show support for LGBTQIA+ students, can provide a false sense of security for some students if they do not feel safe in the classroom. Dialogue in the classroom that shows support of LGBTQIA+ students can provide them with a better sense of security than a sticker.

Queer faculty and staff may feel an obligation to be a LGBTQIA+ student’s safe space, which puts an undue burden on them and can leave them feeling overwhelmed and burnt out (Nadal, 2019). While faculty and staff retention is important, they could be a hindrance to LGBTQIA+ students of color feeling accepted on campus if they do not create an environment that is welcoming and accepting. By disrupting these inequities that queer faculty, staff, and students face in universities, it can provide them with a sense of belonging and a positive outlook on their campus experience.

### ***Sense of Belonging***

Queer individuals may feel as if they do not belong in higher education because of the cisheteronormative structure of the university. Since queer students are more likely to drop out because they experience more harassment, discrimination, and mental health issues than their cisgender, heterosexual counterparts (McClellan, 2022), it is important that they feel like they belong in higher education. Garvey et. al (2019) findings show a positive correlation between campus climate and year of graduation, academic success, and outness. These studies show that when students feel more comfortable being themselves in spaces on campus, and the campus

climate is rated positively, their sense of belonging is more positive. In the same study, trans students viewed campus climate as being more hostile and reported a lower sense of belonging than cisgender heterosexual and lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Trans students likewise have concerns about their gender presentation on campus and discrimination or harassment for presenting in a noncisnormative way. It is recommended to have trans-centered services and resources to build a sense of belonging.

Sense of belonging is important for recruiting and retaining students, faculty, and staff. If individuals do not feel that they belong at the university, they will leave higher education altogether, or find a new university to attend. Inclusive policies, safe spaces for queer students, queer-led or queer-friendly student organizations, and LGBTQIA+ resources can provide a sense of belonging and safety for queer individuals on campus. Pattisapu (2019) argues for the necessity of intentionally closed spaces for LGBTQIA+ people. Creating these intentional spaces for queer people can give them the space they need to be authentically themselves and create a sense of belonging that will retain them on campus.

### ***Identity Formation***

College can often be the first place where people are away from their previous influences, such as family, friends, school, and church, providing them with the freedom to explore and form their own identity. This can be related to sexuality, gender expression, or religious and political views. College can either reinforce homophobic and transphobic experiences LGBTQIA+ people have faced in school and society, or it can empower them in their identity formation journey. Renn (2017) argues that higher education is a positive space for a student's identity development because they can explore their gender and sexuality in privacy, and it offers them a place to learn



more about LGBTQIA+ topics in curriculum. However, students can additionally face discrimination and harassment for developing their identity and coming out.

A large part of identity formation for queer individuals is the coming out process. There are two steps to the coming out process, private realization that one is queer and publicly disclosing that one is queer. According to Haltom and Ratcliff (2020), queer individuals with some college education were more likely to come out during their time at college. This can be attributed to the amount of LGBTQIA+ resources a college campus can offer students, such as LGBTQIA+ topics in the curriculum, LGBTQIA+ student organizations, and LGBTQIA+ friendly events like Pride fests. Jones (2020) found that almost all participants in their study grew up in a culture that caused them to internalize homophobia. Internalized homophobia can delay the realization of one's queer identity through the instillment that being gay is wrong and should be feared.

### ***Campus Experience***

Experiencing microaggressions on campus can lead queer students to have poorer academic performance and mental health than heterosexual students (Woodford et. al, 2015). Microaggressions can include assuming everyone is heterosexual, assuming one's gender pronouns, acting surprised when someone comes out, and being told which restroom one should and should not go into. When queer students experience these microaggressions, they can experience more anxiety and depression, as well as a negative campus experience. Queer employees can additionally experience these microaggressions and it can lead to worsened productivity, lower pay, threatened job security, and tokenism (Resnick & Galupo, 2019). Conron et al. (2022) found that seventy-two percent of queer students reported a sense of belonging on campus, while eighty-five percent of heterosexual students reported a sense of

belonging on campus. Having negative experiences while on campus can lead to a lesser sense of belonging and lead to lower retention rates of queer students and employees.

Renn (2017) stated that the core of college students' experiences on campus is related to curriculum. To increase inclusion and a sense of belonging in the classroom, it is important that faculty include LGBTQIA+ topics in the classroom. This can likewise increase the motivation of LGBTQIA+ students to learn and perform higher academically. Previous literature falls short on recommendations for LGBTQIA+ resources on college campuses. Providing LGBTQIA+ specific resources on campus can increase students' well-being and sense of belonging on campus. Some campuses offer gender-neutral restrooms, LGBTQIA+ student organizations, gender-inclusive housing, lavender graduations, and counseling services. A lavender graduation can increase a student's sense of belonging on campus because this graduation is specifically for LGBTQIA+ students. Gender-neutral restrooms and gender-inclusive housing can make trans and non-binary students feel a sense of belonging on campus because they can comfortably access public spaces that are typically cisgendered. LGBTQIA+ student organizations can provide queer students with a sense of community on campus and allow them to get involved in creating events and providing more resources for other LGBTQIA+ students.

### ***Diverse Needs***

The LGBTQIA+ community encompasses a population with diverse sexual orientations and gender identities, and it is important that these differences be taken into consideration when creating resources to accommodate them. LGBTQIA+ students are more likely to suffer from mental health disorders and have an increased risk of suicidality (Conron et al., 2022), so it is important that there are psychological and counseling resources for them on campus. Lastly, LGBTQIA+ student organizations are important to provide a way for students to voice their

concerns and need for additional resources that administration and centers may not have previously considered.

Dawson and Leong (2020) argue that LGBTQIA+ people need comprehensive sexual and health care but are often met with discrimination, harassment, insurance issues, and more. When LGBTQIA+ people are met with these obstacles to receiving healthcare, they may resist or even avoid receiving treatment. People with the capacity for pregnancy may face discrimination in healthcare because they may not identify as a cisgender woman, which is why it is important that healthcare professionals are inclusive of all patients. College-age students may be experimenting with their sexuality and may not have the necessary sexual education necessary for participating in sexual activity. This is why it is important for healthcare professionals to educate themselves and their patients about safe sexual practices. Having a healthcare center on campus that provides supportive healthcare and safe sex resources is important to the health and well-being of all, but especially, queer students.

### ***Campus/Government Policies***

To create an inclusive campus environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals, it is important for LGBTQIA+ inclusive policies to be implemented. This also applies to governmental policies, which can exclude the LGBTQIA+ population. Goldberg, Beemyn, and Smith (2018) found that twenty-six percent of students surveyed voiced a desire for a name change on their campus records. Some students knew the university had this process but voiced that it was not publicized efficiently, and others mentioned the process was inefficient by leaving their legal name on documents that were not legal. The preferred name, gender identity, and pronoun use process should be a simple, easy to use, process that allows students to change their name on documents that do not require their legal name and efficient so that misgendering and deadnaming are

avoided. Trans students can experience more anxiety, depression, harassment, and discrimination if they are outed or deadnamed in a public setting. Some students in the same study expressed the anxiety they felt going to class knowing the class roster would inevitably have their deadname on it and this would out them in front of the class. This same anxiety can arise for pronoun use when having to correct faculty, staff, and other students. By including pronouns on class rosters or on university forms, queer individuals can feel less anxiety about being outed or misgendered, decreasing levels of discrimination and harassment. The preferred name, gender identity, and pronoun change at USI is a straightforward process for all individuals and only requires a form to be filled out. On the website, a chart is provided listing which university records will use the individual's preferred name, gender identity, and pronoun and which university records will not, offering the individual clear information.

Messinger (2009) found that to create LGBTQIA+ friendly campuses, universities should create policies that include same-sex domestic partnerships in their healthcare and time-off policies. One participant mentioned that the university switched healthcare insurers and domestic partner benefits would not be covered. Without the same benefits that would be given to heterosexual couples, this can cause a burden to those individual couples who must find another insurance provider. Domestic partnership health benefits have decreased for both same-sex and opposite-sex couples in universities since the 2015 Supreme Court decision to allow same-sex marriage (Lederman, 2019). This is inequitable for queer individuals and universities need to ensure that their queer employees are included in all policies. In the state of Indiana, trans individuals may face more obstacles to receiving healthcare because there is no specific Medicaid policy that provides coverage for transgender healthcare. For trans employees of universities to have equitable healthcare coverage like their cisgender counterparts, universities

need to provide healthcare coverage for them or pay for them to be able to travel to another state to receive healthcare.

While *Bostock v. Clayton County, Georgia* makes gender identity and sexual orientation federally protected under sex-based employment, it is vital that state and local laws likewise protect employees. In the state of Indiana, the statewide LGBTQIA+ friendly policy includes sexual orientation and gender identity in its nondiscrimination policies for colleges and universities (State Equality Index, n.d.). At USI, this applies to all university community members, including students, faculty, and staff. This nondiscrimination policy can offer LGBTQIA+ individuals protection and safety on campus, which can lead to a more positive campus experience, a greater sense of belonging, and higher retention rates.

### ***Why Inclusive Policies Matter***

The world is a diverse place, which means the people in it are likewise diverse and policies need to be diverse so that they are applicable to everyone. The LGBTQIA+ community is additionally diverse, and policies need to be made to include trans and non-binary individuals. In universities, which are also workplaces, policies need to be inclusive of LGBTQIA+ students, employees, alumni, vendors, and the community who visits. A LGBTQIA+ friendly workplace would include nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity, benefits that include healthcare benefits for same-sex partners and time-off for same-sex partners, trainings on how to be an ally for students and employees, and resource groups for LGBTQIA+ employees. Universities would benefit from creating a taskforce specifically for creating and implementing policies that are inclusive of LGBTQIA+ employees, according to Megathlin (2007). This would allow queer employees to help provide ideas on improving current

LGBTQIA+ inclusive policies and it would allow others the opportunity to support LGBTQIA+ employees and lift the burden from them.

### ***Queer Geography***

An important factor in creating a more inclusive campus environment is understanding how people's gender and sexual identities influence their role in space. Queer geography allows us to examine how LGBTQIA+ individuals interact with the spaces they inhabit and how people exist within college campuses as a workplace or a place of learning. An intersectional approach is necessary to make these spaces safe for trans and non-binary individuals.

One aspect of queer geography is creating intentionally queer spaces. It is important to note that intentionally queer spaces are not always "safe spaces." As Kumamoto (2022) writes, "An attack like this says, 'not even here.' Behind closed doors isn't good enough for them. It's not that they want us to exist out of sight. They don't want us to exist at all." Kumamoto is referring to the 2022 mass shooting at the nightclub Club Q, a gay bar in Colorado Springs. Mims (2022) writes about the history of queer spaces and how they were born out of necessity and built to avoid the raids of police in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s saw disco, leather, and ballroom queer subculture fortify spaces. In the 1990s, community centers, bathhouses, bars, and cafes were the only safe spaces for queer people to congregate during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Pride fests have become more pronounced since same-sex marriage was legalized in 2015, being one of the only public events for LGBTQIA+ people. Reed (2023) notes that LGBTQIA+ people and their allies celebrated during Pride month by attending Pride parades and fests even when they were being threatened and under attack by conservative groups. This shows the resilience of LGBTQIA+ individuals and how their identities have always been under attack, but queer spaces were built out of defiance and courage.

Another aspect of queer geography is public versus private spaces. Most queer spaces have had to be private, such as bathhouses and nightclubs because public spaces can be hostile for people who are LGBTQIA+. Catterall and Azzouz (2021) attempt to “queer” public spaces by rethinking how they can be transformed into spaces that are more inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people. Many LGBTQIA+ people modify how they appear in public spaces to avoid harassment or discrimination. As previously mentioned, one of the biggest public events for the LGBTQIA+ community are Pride fests. While Pride fests can be a great way for the LGBTQIA+ community to be more visible and for the straight community to learn more about them, it can likewise be a place that invites violence from groups that wish to harm the community.

A large subset of queer geography is queer urbanism. Greiner (2023) discusses that queer urbanism is needed because LGBTQIA+ people have been systemically excluded from urban planning. This is most needed in public spaces. Free spaces such as libraries and parks cater to people with children and can exclude queer people who may not have children due to the additional burdens of trying to adopt, find a surrogate, or try IVF treatment. It is likewise important for public spaces to be built with queer people in mind because they are often only centered in private spaces.

However, one of the issues with queer geography is that it focuses heavily on queer urbanism and neglects queer rurality. Baker (2012) argues that queer rurality is an often ignored, yet pervasive thread of identity. Scholars, like Halberstam (2005), have compared the process of building gay community and the coming out process to processes of urbanization. This can be seen through the physical movement from rural to urban spaces and the psychological journey of coming out. Much of queer urbanization argues that LGBTQIA+ individuals want to move from rural spaces to urban spaces because they are moving from being closeted about their identity to

being open about their identity. Some LGBTQIA+ individuals experience a connection to their hometown roots or cannot afford to move to an urban area. LGBTQIA+ individuals who do not move away from their rural spaces may live in harmony with their heterosexual counterparts or be accepted in their community, so they see no reason to leave. Gray (2009) finds rural queers need to work through the structures of class, gender, race, and location to foster belonging in rural spaces. Location is an important factor in inclusivity of the LGBTQIA+ community and queer geography often focuses on urban spaces as being accepting and rural spaces as being rejecting. However, this may not always be the case. Rural spaces may be accepting of LGBTQIA+ individuals, but they may not be as loud about their identity in these spaces as they would be in urban spaces. LGBTQIA+ individuals who stay in rural spaces and feel a connection to their town may be more likely to organize grassroots campaigns and events that support their community.

How do LGBTQIA+ people spread out over the regions of the U.S.? Flores and Conron (2023) find that almost thirty-six percent of the nation's LGBTQIA+ population reside in the South. The West houses twenty-four-point nine percent, the Northeast houses eighteen-point five percent, and the Midwest houses twenty-one-point one percent. One reason for a majority of the LGBTQIA+ population to live in the South is because it contains three of the top ten states by largest overall population including Florida, Texas, and Georgia. Another reason for a majority of the LGBTQIA+ population living in the south is because they may be fleeing rural areas for more accepting urban areas, but still wanting to live in the South. Some of the most LGBTQIA+-friendly cities in the south include Austin, Texas; Atlanta, Georgia; Charleston, South Carolina; Nashville, Tennessee; Houston, Texas; and Dallas, Texas (Gay Travel, 2017). However, another reason for more LGBTQIA+ people residing in the South could be their resilience and making



changes to policies to better their daily aspects of life. Sells (2020) describes how LGBTQIA+ southerners have experienced more discrimination and harassment in their daily lives, so they are more innovative and address community needs without waiting on state legislature. Since most Southern states are red states and have anti-LGBTQIA+ policies, LGBTQIA+ southerners must make changes to their cities and communities on their own because no one else is going to do it for them. Since LGBTQIA+ people in the South face discrimination and harassment so often that they get used to it, and choosing to stay in the South is an act of resistance and resilience. The same can be said for LGBTQIA+ people in the Midwest.

The most common portrayal of LGBTQIA+ life is centered in an urban, coastal location, but that is the opposite experience of life in the Midwest. Monteil (2023) discusses the documentary *We Live Here: The Midwest*, as it features queer and trans families in the Midwest and what it means for them to live in communities where they may be shunned or bullied. This documentary allows for LGBTQIA+ identities to be seen by others who may not be familiar with them and can help the community to not feel othered. It allows for diverse examples of families to be portrayed and the LGBTQIA+ community to be viewed as normal. The Midwest and the South have similar political and religious majorities, so the Midwest is often a place where LGBTQIA+ people feel unsafe or abnormal. It is important for LGBTQIA+ people to feel included in their location. This can include their home, their workplace, the city, or state they reside in, or the college they attend. Since USI is located in the Midwest, it is important to understand how the location of the university shapes how its faculty, staff, and students interact with the spaces within the university.

This research study attempts to apply queer geography to college campuses in order to understand how space and place influence queer experiences. Previous research has not

examined the connection between queer geography and college campuses to make them safer and more inclusive. Understanding how queer individuals move through spaces, like college campuses, that have historically excluded their identity will influence the types of policies and resources recommended. Queering college campuses will not only involve creating intentionally queer spaces, but making public spaces safe and welcoming for queer individuals to navigate.

Since college can often be the first place where queer individuals start to explore their identity, it is important to understand the external factors that influence their experiences on a college campus. Experiencing microaggressions on campus and cisheteronormative curricula in the classroom can negatively impact the campus experience of queer individuals. Queer geography shows us that intentionally queer spaces are important for queer individuals, urban and rural spaces have different meanings for queer individuals, and the political climate of their location can influence their degree of outness. This research study focuses on queer experience on a college campus located in the Midwest with conservative political views to showcase how these impact the campus experience. Through analyzing the research question: How does space and place influence queer experiences on a college campus?, the connection between queer experience and queer geography can be examined on a college campus to create a more inclusive campus experience.

## **Chapter 3: Methods**

### **Purpose**

This study analyzes how space and place influence the queer experiences of USI faculty, staff, and students. The following question guides this study: How does space and place influence queer experiences on a college campus? This research question will help fill the gap in research studying queer experiences on a college campus using queer geography to analyze the data. It will further help determine how space and place affect their experiences on a college campus and aid in making policy and resource recommendations for these individuals. The findings of this research study will be given to individuals who participated in the study and used to make policy and resource recommendations that the University could implement to help create a more inclusive campus experience for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

### **Method**

#### ***Positionality***

As a queer and trans scholar in both my identity and utilization of research practices, I must acknowledge my unique position in the research study and how this may influence the research study. I utilize queer theory in this research study to subvert the traditional methodological approach to qualitative research in hopes that queer and trans identities can be seen as normal in society. A way in which my study circumvents this traditional methodological approach is using all data collected to show differences in responses of participants. This method of collecting data is inspired by Ferguson's (2013) issue with how LGBTQIA+ participants are often marginalized in areas of representation, and queer responses are undermined and tossed out when they do not align with the majority of responses.

As a queer, trans staff member at USI, it is important for me to acknowledge my position and how it may impact this study. First, I experience the university's spaces as an out, queer, non-binary staff member and graduate student. This influences how I view the campus and its resources for LGBTQIA+ students and employees. Since I fall into both categories, I can see both sides and how policies may impact one group more than another. Since coming out as non-binary, I am more aware of gendered policies, language, and spaces on campus than before. This was one reason for creating this study and seeing if LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff felt "othered" on campus.

Second, as a staff member, I work closely with several employees and students on campus. Due to the nature of my role, I have had conversations with LGBTQIA+ employees and students and their dissatisfaction with the lack of resources available to them or frustration with policies and procedures the university has in place, making it more difficult to be a queer person on campus. I likewise learned that when the university conducted a campus climate survey, no queer individuals showed up to participate in that focus group. Learning this information instilled confidence in my decision to conduct focus groups with students and employees to discuss their experiences and how they navigate spaces and places to create a more inclusive environment for them.

While I am aware of my identity and how it may influence my experiences on campus, I did not let this influence the way that I conducted my research study or analyzed the research data. Having conversations with LGBTQIA+ employees and students about their experiences on campus allowed me to see that this was a worthwhile area of research. Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) find that reflexivity is important in qualitative research because it allows the researcher to evaluate how their subjectivity may impact their research process. When I analyzed my data

from the focus group sessions, I additionally practiced reflexivity to make sure that my position as a staff member or graduate student did not influence the way that I interpreted the data.

### ***Methodological approach***

This was a qualitative research study using focus groups to analyze how space and place shape the queer experiences of faculty, staff, and students at USI through thematic analysis. By utilizing this methodological approach, the queer experiences of staff, faculty, and students, which are often marginalized in cisheteronormative institutions such as college campuses, can be utilized to question the predominate narratives and assumed experiences of LGBTQIA+ folks, and promote institutional change within the University to create a more inclusive campus experience for its most vulnerable population.

Focus groups allow participants to interact with one another and this can spark conversation and answers that may not be considered when being in an interview setting. Some advantages to focus groups include obtaining information more quickly than in an interview, the moderator interacting with participants, presenting the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, and providing rich data through the group dynamic (John Hopkins University, n.d.). Participant interaction during the focus group sessions led to follow-up questions and this allowed the researcher to examine the location of the University in a greater discussion about queer geography and how it relates to college campuses. Some disadvantages to focus groups can include the lack of confidentiality or anonymity, data that is difficult to analyze, and a sample that may not be representative of the population (John Hopkins University, n.d.). Focus groups were chosen as the methodology due to interactive quality of the group setting.

### *Participants*

This qualitative study analyzed how space and place shape the queer experiences of faculty, staff, and students at USI to foster a greater sense of belonging on campus. This method allowed for an in-depth exploration of the topic and an interactive discussion that resulted in rich data that could be compared between the focus group answers. The interview protocol aimed to understand LGBTQIA+-identifying faculty, staff, and students (a) experiences with discrimination and harassment on campus from outside and within the queer community, (b) whether working or being on a college campus has allowed them to be open with their queer identity, (c) cisheteronormativity in curriculum, (d) identity formation in a collegiate setting, (e) whether the University made them feel supported, and (f) the availability and quality of resources for queer people.

Participants ranged in age from nineteen to sixty-three, with a mean age of thirty-four and a median age of thirty-two point five (See Appendix A). Seven participants identified as White, and one identified as biracial (Korean/White). Based on this study's nuances, it was important to collect data on how my participants identified themselves regarding gender and sexuality. Regarding gender, four participants identified as female, one identified as male, one identified as non-binary, one identified as demiflux, and one identified as cisgender and female. Regarding sexual orientation, two identified as bisexual, three identified as lesbian, one identified as bisexual/pansexual, one identified as gay/demisexual, and one identified as gay.

### *Setting*

This research study occurred at a medium-sized, primarily commuter, university in an urban city in southwest Indiana. The state of Indiana has religious exemption laws that allow LGBTQIA+ people to be refused services such as medical care, child welfare, wedding

ceremonies, and marriage licenses, which makes it difficult for LGBTQIA+ people to be their authentic selves in the state and they can feel othered and isolated (Movement Advancement Project, n.d.).

### ***Data collection***

Two focus groups were conducted as part of this pilot study: one focus group had current LGBTQIA+-identifying students at USI, and the other focus group had current LGBTQIA+-identifying USI employees (faculty and staff). Focus group data was analyzed through thematic analysis to find overarching themes from the data. This study was approved by USI's Institutional Review Board.

Participants were recruited through their USI email addresses to take a Qualtrics survey the researcher created, including informed consent. Participants covered a wide array of ages, sexual orientations, and gender identities. The student focus group and the employee focus group contained four participants each.

Focus groups took place in a meeting room on USI's campus. The student focus group session lasted sixty minutes, while the employee focus group session lasted ninety minutes. These focus group sessions were digitally audio recorded and transcribed through a transcription service and verified for accuracy by the researcher. The questions asked to the participants were based on previous literature and research studies conducted about the experiences of LGBTQIA+-identifying individuals and campus climate. Seventy-one pages of data were collected. This data includes the two transcripts from the focus groups and the researcher's pages of coding data. Topics included cisheteronormativity in higher education, identity formation, knowledge of resources on campus, retention and recruitment of faculty and staff, campus support of queer individuals, and experiences of discrimination and harassment on campus and in

the Evansville community. To maintain participant confidentiality and anonymity, participants have been assigned a letter of the alphabet to be referred to in the findings section.

### ***Data analysis***

The focus group session data was analyzed using Lindlof and Taylor's (2017) thematic analysis method. The thematic analysis method involves three stages of coding. Open coding is the first stage, where data is broken down into small units. A code is then added by the researcher to each unit, with "unit" being defined as a phrase that the participant uses to answer the research question. During the process of open coding, the categories are named and given attributes. Some examples of the open codes found are: "small town upbringing," "do not feel queer enough," "isolation," and "internalized homophobia." Axial coding makes up the second stage, with codes grouped into categories. These categories were generated by writing out all the open codes and finding commonalities between them to put them into categories and generate an axial code. Examples of axial codes generated included "timing of identity exploration," "degree of outness," and "political reference point." For "timing of identity exploration," examples of open codes that created the category included "small town upbringing," "could not explore identity at home," and "religious upbringing prevented exploration." Examples of open codes that made up the axial code category "degree of outness" included "open," "safe," and "visible." Lastly, examples of open codes that made up the axial code category "political reference point" included "isolating," "insular," and "pronouns have a negative connotation." Selective coding is the third and final stage during which the researcher develops one or more themes to encompass the categories developed in second stage. By analyzing the data through queer theory, societal assumptions that cisgender, heterosexual identities are the norm are challenged.



The thematic analysis method allowed me to analyze the intersectional identities of the participants to better understand how space and place influences their queer experience on a college campus. In my research study, I analyzed the data of each research question through thematic analysis, starting with examples of participants' words and finding open codes from those. The open codes generated from both focus groups were then used to create axial codes and a selective code. The common theme of both focus groups was the importance of inclusivity for LGBTQIA+ individuals on USI's campus. This theme can be analyzed through queer geography and applied to college campuses to create more inclusive communities with intentionally queer spaces in mind.

### ***Excellence in Qualitative Research***

In order for the research study to achieve trustworthiness in qualitative research, dependability, credibility, confirmability, and transferability need to be demonstrated in the findings. Dependability in qualitative research can be ensured through rigorous data collection techniques, procedures, and analysis that are well documented (National University, n.d.). Dependability was achieved through the method of recruiting participants for the study. Participants were recruited through their USI email and picked for the research study based on their answer to which day and time they could meet to attend a focus group session. Participants filled out the informed consent document through the Qualtrics survey and were told in all correspondence that their participation was anonymous, confidential, and voluntary.

Credibility in qualitative research means that data collected is accurate of the phenomenon under study (National University, n.d.). Credibility was demonstrated through the analysis of the focus group session data. The focus group session data was analyzed using Lindlof and Taylor's thematic analysis, which allowed for rigorous and prolonged involvement

with the data by the researcher. The data went through the coding process multiple times to ensure all data was being analyzed thoroughly and connections were being made within and across the focus groups. All focus group session data was utilized, even when a participant had a different answer than the majority, to display differences in queer experiences and to avoid marginalization of queer experiences. The researcher had peer debriefing sessions with the three thesis committee members to discuss the focus group sessions.

Confirmability in qualitative research is assured when data is checked and rechecked through data collection and analysis to ensure findings can be repeated by others (National University, n.d.). Confirmability was demonstrated through the coding of the data. To complete the first step of analysis, open coding, the researcher used direct quotes from participants, which allows the data to speak for itself and avoid interpretation from the researcher. This method of analysis allows the researcher to remain neutral and unbiased when creating codes. It likewise allows the researcher to accurately portray the participants' responses. It is vital for the first step of analysis to use direct quotes from the participants so that the rest of the analysis remains unbiased.

Transferability addresses the applicability of the findings to similar contexts or individuals and can be achieved from multiple data collection methods (National University, n.d.). Transferability was demonstrated through the thorough details of the methodology used to collect data. Although interviews are typically used in Lindlof and Taylor's thematic analysis, focus group data can additionally be used (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2007). By utilizing focus group sessions as the mode for analysis, rich data can be found that would not otherwise be found in interviews because participants can interact with one another and think of answers to questions that they may not have considered by themselves. Focus group sessions can likewise

be beneficial to the researcher because the participants may go in a different direction with a question than was previously considered but is still relevant to the research study. Future studies on how space and place influence queer experiences on a college campus can utilize conducting focus group sessions and analyzing the data through Lindlof and Taylor's thematic analysis. These future studies could be transferred to other marginalized groups such as women, Indigenous people, and people with disabilities. The importance of creating an inclusive campus would additionally apply to these individuals and it would be worthwhile to study.

It is also important that researchers who conduct qualitative interviews with LGBTQIA+ individuals and other marginalized communities ensure trustworthiness by reflecting community realities through their analysis and interpretation to avoid further marginalization of LGBTQIA+ people (RHO, 2012). This research study demonstrates this using direct quotes and phrases from participants. It is important for researchers who are not a part of the LGBTQIA+ community to understand and use LGBTQIA+ terminology correctly. The researcher uses the phrase "LGBTQIA+" when referring to participants in the research study because there are generational differences among the participants, and some expressed their dislike of being referred to as "queer" and its historical use as a slur.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The goal of this research study was to analyze how space and place influence queer experiences of faculty, staff, and students on a college campus. The analysis will be used to make policy and resource recommendations for the USI campus, with the goal of creating a stronger sense of belonging for LGBTQIA+-identifying individuals on campus. The overarching theme from both focus groups was the importance of inclusivity on college campuses for LGBTQIA+-identifying individuals. Queer geography encompasses inclusivity and applies it to college campuses to create intentionally queer spaces and make college campuses more inclusive.

There were eight main themes that encompassed the data of the participants' experiences, including: (1) timing of identity exploration, (2) degree of outness, (3) institutional support of LGBTQIA+ community is not visible, (4) political reference point (location), (5) inexperience with LGBTQIA+ people, (6) LGBTQIA+ generation gap, (7) disrupting cisheteronormativity in the classroom, and (8) feeling "othered" in the LGBTQIA+ community.

### *Timing of identity exploration*

Naymon (2014) says that college is a wonderful time for students to explore their career interests and aspects of their personal identity, such as their sexual orientation and gender identity.

**Student participants** described the following: (1) an inability to explore their identity at home, (2) religious influences from their upbringing preventing them from exploring their identity, (3) growing up in a small town preventing identity exploration, and (4) the ability to explore their identity in college. This is because they were away from past influences and they

saw more queer people in college, so they felt like they could explore their identity more.

Participant A in the student focus group said:

I'm bisexual. I think I kind of knew I was in high school, but I was in a very small town and our high school was very... You couldn't really be yourself in high school. And the people that were themselves, those kinds of people were just kind of trashed on, I guess. So, whenever I got to school, I kind of just started to explore my sexuality more. I think, yeah, being on a campus setting and having other people around you that are also queer, it allows you to be yourself more. And especially once I got out of that town and came to Evansville and was outside of my family, I guess, I was able to become more myself.

Key themes from Participant A's description of their identity formation includes growing up in a small town, people who were themselves (implied to be LGBTQIA+) were trashed on and "othered," being on a college campus where you get to meet other queer people allowed them to be themselves, and being away from the small town and family allowed for more exploration.

Participants B and C affirmed Participant A's experience of their identity formation, but Participant D had a different experience from the other participants. Participant D described their experience of exploring their identity as:

So, this is actually my second go around of college. I guess I kind of always knew I was some flavor of queer, but I didn't really know what. I guess I probably just needed a long time to cook, to be honest. So going through school and all that the first time, I had an idea, but I didn't really explore it very well. And honestly, I think the catalyst was COVID where I had to sit with my thoughts and be like, "Okay, there's something going on here." But I think college has really helped, because there's people, I can surround

myself with and open up to, and I don't think... If I hadn't had that, it would've taken me even longer to get to where I am now.

Participant D is about ten years older than the other participants and is an adult learner. They have a different experience of exploring their identity later in life when they came back to college. They note COVID as a catalyst for their exploration of their identity. Quathamer and Joy (2022) find that COVID was a time for LGBTQIA+ individuals to explore their body image because of social isolation, time to reflect, and time to work on oneself without the everyday societal pressures of cisheteronormativity influencing their decisions and this seems to correlate with Participant D's experience. They additionally agree with the other participants that they had other people in college that they could surround themselves with and open up to about their identity.

**Employee participants** felt safe to be open about their identity on campus and did not feel like they had to hide their identity since the university as a work setting was described as “fairly liberal.” These participants reflected more about being open about their identity at the University as it is their workplace as opposed to their identity formation process. Participant E is a USI alumnus and details the timing of their identity exploration and how that impacted their degree of outness on campus:

Yeah. I would say I have a similar experience to everyone else. Here, it's been very safe.

There hasn't been an issue about me being out, but I likewise was a former student and I've known I was gay since I was 12. I've been out since I was 13, so I never was closeted in college classes. And I was an English major, so all my professors additionally knew I was gay. And so, it wasn't really a thing I needed to worry about it. Definitely, the students have changed a lot, different. But if they [students] had a problem with me, it

would be very... They would know because my cork board has safe zone training all over it and little pride flags everywhere. And so, it's definitely not a thing I hide at all. I don't feel the need to hide where I have in past employment situations.

So, for this participant, they explored their identity early in life and this influenced their degree of outness at the university as their workplace. Some of the participants mentioned they thought students would come to them seeking advice about their identity exploration, but that students seemed to know who they are when they come to college.

I have noticed that I was expecting to get more questions or more seeking of advice from students, and I found out there's very little of that. It seems like they know their identity when they come here. And that surprised me. Maybe because I'm thinking back to when I was a college student which is some many years ago. So, when it would've been rare to have a gay faculty member, and of course, there wasn't all the information on the internet then, so there were very few sources of information, but I was expecting a lot more, "Oh, I might be gay." There's like none of that. They're way more advanced than I was, maybe is. So that part, I find interesting and different.

The fellow employee participants in the focus group agreed with this sentiment. Pappy (2024) notes that nearly thirty percent of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQIA+. This difference between generational lines indicates that younger generations feel more comfortable exploring their identities earlier in life, as opposed to older generations who may not have felt as comfortable or safe exploring their identities at an early age. Another factor for this could be younger generations having more LGBTQIA+ representation available to them and they may see themselves in these individuals. The timing of identity exploration can additionally influence LGBTQIA+ individuals' degree of outness.

### *Degree of outness*

Rentería et al. (2023) finds that a higher degree of outness for LGBTQIA+ individuals is a significant factor in lower levels of depression and higher levels of self-esteem. Most student participants described that they can be open discussing their identity on campus and that people are pretty accepting of LGBTQIA+ individuals. However, some students may be open about their identity on campus but be closeted when they go home. This ties into timing of identity exploration because students described being able to explore while in college because they were away from previous familial influences, religious influences, and their small towns where identifying as LGBTQIA+ may not be accepted.

Student participants noted that faculty and staff were accepting of LGBTQIA+ identifying individuals on campus, but they also noted that they felt “othered” and worried about being outed in class. Participant A discusses how people in their major and department are accepting:

So, the people I have surrounded myself with in the major and whatnot, everybody's incredibly accepting, everybody's very vocal. I've never really had any barriers as well.

Most people like to talk about it and like to have conversations about how you figured out your own identity and whatnot. Everybody in that building, even if they're not queer, they're incredibly accepting. Well, not everybody, I mean, most people. I don't want to assume, but most people there are very accepting.

Participants B and D agreed with Participant A, but Participant C had a different experience in the classroom. Participant C describes feeling othered in the classroom and a fear of being outed when roll is taken:



Being a [redacted] major, it's very accepting, because that's one of the things we focus on in some of the classes. But you get a lot of different opinions, not all the time are they outright spoken, just blatantly, but there's undertones a lot of times with certain people. But my main thing is when they call roll, and then I have to be like, "Actually, this [is my] name," then I get stared at. And I noticed in one of my classes this semester, I sit next to two of the guys, the only two guys in that class, I sit next to them. All the girls are all the way across the classroom, and I'm over here like, "Okay." And I noticed this recently, every time I walk in the classroom, they'll look at me. Just a side eye glance, just look at me, and then I sit down, and I'm like, "Okay, time to be quiet."

Participant C's experience in the classroom can be a common experience for trans and non-binary students who may use a different name than their given name. This can cause any student discomfort in the classroom, but especially trans and non-binary students because it can lead to them being outed in front of the class. Although USI's Preferred or Chosen Name, Gender Identity, and Pronoun Policy states that these will be listed on the student's official email and roster, most students do not know that they need to fill out a form to make this change effective. Students can go onto their personal information page and change this information themselves, but if the form is not submitted, the official changes will not occur. However, a student's email address will only be changed if they can change their legal name, which can take months and a fee must be paid.

A common experience for trans and non-binary students can be feeling othered in the classroom. Participant C notes that they don't fit in with the male or female students in the classroom, making them feel othered. Cisnormativity can also permeate the classroom and

curricula. Everyday greetings like “Ladies and Gentlemen” can make trans and non-binary students feel othered if the professor uses it to address the class.

Participant C additionally mentions their degree of outness in the classroom:

And then you're kind of scared to say that to professors, because everyone, I feel like, especially trans people have a less extensive history of being accepted now. I feel like we've had to... Especially in more recent times, TikTok, TikTok has ruined everything, I swear. Because you have everyone, suddenly, it's a giant boom of everyone coming out. And you have the older generations aren't taking too kindly to that. But with that fear in mind, I don't tell my teachers my pronouns ever. I'll tell them my name because I have a generically feminine name. I won't tell them my pronouns, because of the looks I get when I tell them. I'm like, "Okay."

Participant D has the opposite experience in the classroom:

I'll say on the opposite side of that, I usually tell my professors my name is [redacted], which is my middle name, because if I say my name's [redacted], they'll be like, "Okay, what? Girl, boy, what?" So, it's just easier to use a traditional masculine name, I guess, to get the point across.

Both participants have a different experience with their degree of outness in the classroom. Some of this social acceptance comes from being accepting of individuals sexual orientation but gender identity is a more historically recent topic that people may not be familiar with. Twenge (2023) notes that Gen Z is more likely to identify as trans or non-binary than other generations before them. This generation is more likely to answer that there are two or more genders, and that gender is a spectrum like sexuality. This may account for these participants degrees of outness in the classroom and fears that the professor won't understand.

All employee participants noted that they were not worried about being out on campus and felt safe on campus as a workplace setting. One faculty member noted that the courses they teach are opportunities for their identity to be present in the classroom:

And for me teaching at USI, the courses that I teach are opportunities to have my identity be present in the classroom. I tell stories about myself. I'm very open. And so, one of the things I've noticed over the years is that students in course evals, I have many students who are like, "Thank you for being present and visible in the classroom," or giving examples in class that have queer representation or things like that. So, I think for me, for the most part, I feel very safe on campus or I'm very open. I think students do gravitate towards me. And so, I have had students who are struggling because they feel comfortable being themselves on campus with friends, but then it's like, "Oh my gosh, I have to go back home and on break I have to be closeted." Or "I grew up really religious and I don't understand how to deal with my faith identity, with my gender identity or my sexual orientation."

The experiences of students that the professor describes highlight the degrees of outness while they are at college versus going back home. LGBTQIA+ faculty sharing their identity with students can make LGBTQIA+ students more comfortable in the classroom, but it may make them a target for homophobic students. Keener (2024) finds that LGBTQIA+ representation of faculty and staff at the university can be beneficial for LGBTQIA+ students including better academic engagement, performance, and academic success.

Another reason that students may have a lower degree of outness at home is because they fear being disowned, displaced, or losing financial support from their family if they come out. The safety and well-being of LGBTQIA+ students can be threatened when they lose these things,

including being unhoused and experiencing worsened mental health. These things can be made worse if the students do not have resources available to them through their university or if these resources are not visible to them.

***Invisible institutional support of LGBTQIA+ community***

Only one student participant in the focus group knew of some LGBTQIA+ resources on campus and this was because they are involved in the LGBTQIA+ student organization on campus. Participant C said this about the LGBTQIA+ resources on campus:

But when I got here, I had no idea that there was an LGBT group. I had no idea of any of the resources. I didn't find out about those until I think one of the involvement fairs that went on here. And then I passed by the table, saw a rainbow, walked back, and went, "Wait a second." So, I don't think they make it blatantly obvious here a lot of times.

Participants A and B both said they couldn't name one resource on campus for LGBTQIA+ students. Participant D said they are involved in the LGBTQIA+ student organization and they have a hard time finding resources. One resource mentioned was the chosen name, gender identity, and pronoun change form. However, only Participant D knew of this form because they asked around for it. Participant B mentioned that even though they don't know any of the resources available to them, to USI's credit, they felt comfortable enough to go to any staff or faculty member and ask about them.

Employee participants expressed they felt the University is neutral in their institutional support of the LGBTQIA+ community. Participant H said this about the University: "Yeah, it seems very neutral to me. Neither particularly supportive or not supportive." Participant G agreed and added on to Participant H's comment:

I think you're right; USI is neutral. We don't want to be too "political," but we don't want... And so, for me sometimes, I get maybe a little frustrated that we could do more for our students, we could do more for our queer identified faculty. We could do more, but we really don't. And then it depends on, sometimes it ends up being a few folks, and if they leave, then those programs disappear. And so, there's no maybe structural things or policies. So, for example, I think about at other institutions, there's a gender and sexuality resource office. So, if you're talking about diversity, having specifically a space for students who are queer identified, being able to have, I don't know, access to even just things like books or faculty. I think that that would be something that would be really wonderful because then that's a presence rather than trying to find people like me on campus almost haphazardly.

Participant E agreed with both Participant G and H, and added this:

And I would agree with everyone. It's very neutral. It's very clear that USI doesn't like to ruffle any feathers or be seen to be ruffling any feathers. And sometimes, that's understandable. That's what you have to do. But it can be disheartening, I think, for some people.

These employees agree that USI is neutral in their support of LGBTQIA+ individuals on campus. While tolerance and acceptance of identities are a great start to showing support, tolerance only requires nonchalance, whereas understanding requires dedication (Davis, 2018). The way that neutrality was being described by the employees felt like USI was being a passive participant in their support of the LGBTQIA+ community on campus. While the university offers some resources for the LGBTQIA+ community, such as the LGBTQIA+ student organization,

lavender graduation, Pride fest, gender inclusive housing, and ally training for employees, they are scattered throughout multiple offices around campus.

For faculty and staff, the only resource is ally training, and these sessions started being offered in 2010. Employees mention the need for a LGBTQIA+ employee resource group, which would be beneficial for members within and allies of the LGBTQIA+ community to foster a supportive environment and work on solving issues related to equity and inclusion. The employee participants also mentioned they thought the university would have a gender and sexuality office on campus by now. A specific gender and sexuality office would help resources on campus to be more consolidated, as they are currently spread across campus in the Multicultural Center and the Center for Campus Life. This office could also be responsible for overseeing the creation of an LGBTQIA+ employee resource group.

***Political reference point***

An issue both students and faculty mentioned in the focus group sessions was location and the political climate. Location referred to the university being in the Midwest of the United States. Indiana is a Republican majority state. Rakich (2021) found that Indiana was twenty percentage points more Republican leaning than the nation as a whole. In this study, ten out of the twelve Midwestern states are more Republican leaning than the nation as a whole. Feinberg et. al (2017) find that people who share the same political identity and are in “bluer” locations are more likely to support left-leaning policies than those in “redder” locations. This finding shows that the political climate of one’s location can influence how one votes and views policies.

During the student focus group, they mention location and political climate during their discussion of identity exploration and cisheteronormativity in the classroom and curricula. Participants A, B, and C all mentioned growing up in a small town where “everyone knows

everyone” and how they didn’t explore their identity much while still living there. However, once they went away for college, they felt like they could start exploring their identities more because they were away from home and the small town. For these participants, they grew up in rural areas and described most political views as conservative. Borelli (2022) finds that fifty-five percent of Republicans or people who are Republican-leaning view the legalization of same-sex marriage negatively. When the discussion of cisheteronormativity in the classroom comes up, Participant C mentions the location of the University and how this could impact why people are heteronormative:

I think that's because of the location we're at too. We're very much so bordering... We're in the Midwest. You cross that bridge, you're in the south. So, we're very much so in that area where it is normative, which sucks. But I don't think they're being intentional. Some of them might, but you can't tell if they're being intentional, or if it's just how their mindset is.

Since most of the participants grew up somewhere in the Midwest or South, location is a factor on how they were raised or grew up and what political ideology they were influenced by. The same could be said of their classmates or professors and the way they think about families or relationships. This could lead to LGBTQIA+ students feeling othered in the classroom.

During the employee focus group, they mention location and the political climate of Evansville during all question discussions. Participant H mentions how they lived in New York before moving to Evansville for work and how they were surprised by the campus and the Evansville community. They mention this about the differences they see in identity exploration in Evansville versus New York:

And I feel like it doesn't feel like there's a lot of gay people, but I know they're there, both in Evansville and on campus. And that obviously, coming from a city where it's very obvious or more obvious that people tend to be more demonstrative about their identities I guess, in some ways. So, I feel like that's less noticeable here.

As Participant H mentions, people in the Midwest may be less demonstrative of their sexuality because they are closeted, fear rejection or harassment, or are only out in their designated safe spaces. There may be several reasons why this is the case, but it is important to look at the population size differences between larger urban cities and smaller ones. While most college towns in Indiana are urban due to their population density, their population sizes are small compared to larger urban cities, like New York city. Evansville is the third largest city in Indiana, but it is surrounded by less populated cities, such as Mt. Vernon and Booneville which have populations under 7,000. This decrease in population size of the surrounding cities means that it is more likely for people in town to know each other, and if being LGBTQIA+ is not welcomed, it will be known.

Participant H discusses how Evansville, in general, is not a good place for single people: I think Evansville in general, it's not a good place for single people, probably. So, in fact, I have a faculty member who's leaving because of that. And I think that that's part of it in a way. But whenever I've talked about having a partner or anything, everyone's really interested, curious, nothing negative.

Participants E, F, and G all agreed with this statement and discussed how Evansville can be isolating and insular, especially for LGBTQIA+ people. They discussed how it is common that once you meet one LGBTQIA+ person, you will meet many more. This conversation continued



and Participant F discussed how an employee resource group may help LGBTQIA+ employees find community on campus and in the area:

I personally don't need it, but I think it would be cool if we had a faculty and staff group just as a social group, as a support group or something like that. Because I think especially if we get a lot of faculty and staff from other states that might've been like a blue state or something, they come here and they feel very alone, that would be nice to have for them. Something like that, because Evansville can be very isolated if you're not from here. I'm not from here. And I moved here for my partner at the time, and I managed to find 50,000 lesbians to have a group with, a friend group. But that was just pure luck. And they've all moved away now because that's what happens too. So having a built-in support group just for faculty staff, I think would help with retention, would help with a lot of things like transitioning into living in Evansville because it's rough if you're not from here.

Although Evansville is considered an urban area due to its density population, many who move here or are from here would say it is has a smaller town feeling because a lot of people stay in the city for their entire lives. As Participant F discusses, this can be difficult and isolating for individuals who are new to town.

Participant F also describes some microaggressions they have experienced while working on campus:

Otherwise, it's just been very minor things that I can't even really have beef with people for because they're getting used to me and getting used to these things. We're in southern Indiana. I take what I get, and it's like if someone... When they find out I'm a lesbian,

they might act a little bit overly nice or weird because they don't know what to do with it anymore.

This type of experience is common and often happens when people are inexperienced with the LGBTQIA+ community. Evansville is part of the Midwest but is likewise very close to the South, as it borders Kentucky. Given its location, and the fact that many students who come to USI are from the Midwest and South, people's interactions with the LGBTQIA+ community can be limited. Participant G mentions that in the larger Evansville community, we have seen backlash to LGBTQIA+ events: "Again, I'm just trying to think of the larger Evansville community. I don't know how many years ago we had protests against drag queen reading hour."

March (2019) covered the Drag Queen Story Hour in a local newspaper and mentioned that there was a protest to having the story hour, but the crowd was split fifty-fifty between outrage and support of the event. This is not an uncommon occurrence. In 2022, there were 141 protests to Drag Queen Story Hour in the United States (Kaleem, 2023). People who were outraged about the events said that these events appeal to pedophiles. People who are trans-identifying, especially trans women, often face this type of harassment and it can be harmful to their personhood and the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole.

Participant F shared they find it harder to gauge whether Evansville is a good place for the LGBTQIA+ community to live because of their experience where they grew up:

Yeah. It's hard for me to gauge because I grew up in East Tennessee and I moved here in 2016. And just since I've been here, it's improved, but also compared to where I'm from, Evansville is a liberal paradise. I'm just like, "Wow, look at this." And where I'm from, it's like Tennessee is on another level.

This experience was different for each participant. Three of the four participants grew up in the Midwest and one grew up in the South. Some experienced more acceptance from their community than others, or others had to move away from home to find acceptance. The participants then discussed how they had experienced discrimination from other LGBTQIA+ people in Evansville. Participant E discussed how they had experienced discrimination from other members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Evansville:

In the Evansville community, yeah, sure. I've had older gay men be super, super misogynistic. A lot of them, in Evansville specifically. There's a lot of, because we're in southern Indiana, just because you're gay doesn't mean you're not racist. Then I've additionally noticed, at least here in Evansville, they hate the word queer. They don't want it to be used within the community. And I am sympathetic to it, and I get the reason why, but it's also, you have to realize it's changed what that means, what that word is used for and how the community uses it sometimes. And then you have the standard people being transphobic, stuff that happens. So yeah, I feel like those are problems within the community at large and it's not a difference in Evansville.

Participant F expressed that they had experienced lesbophobia:

I've seen lots of lesbophobia in general. Lesbians are just the ones because we're at the intersection of homophobia and misogyny. But queer is not a word I like. Plus, it's a slur to me, growing up how I did in the South, that was not a fun word.

Participant G mentions that harassment and discrimination the participants in the group have faced come back to Evansville in general:

But I feel like it comes back to Evansville in general. It's like it's very insular. So, it's like people who know people, and it's almost like, oh, if you get the one other couple, then

you're able to find other people. But if you don't, then you feel isolated. It's Evansville in general.

While discrimination can occur anytime for LGBTQIA+ individuals, it seems that intercommunity discrimination is due to location and generational differences. Location is a reason for discrimination because racial demographics are not varied (United States Census Bureau, 2023). Generational differences seem to be a large issue because of the differences in language and age. Intergenerational communication is important for understanding one another and less discrimination and harassment are perpetuated.

Location likewise came up during the discussion of faculty and staff recruitment and retention efforts, Participant E mentions that it would be important for the university to collaborate more closely with the Evansville community:

And I think maybe the collaboration with the local LGBTQIA+ groups and even U of E would go along great to just be more integrated in the community, I think, than... Because we have two big colleges in town, and if one of them is a presence and that's the technically private religious school, and then you have the public university not showing a presence, it sends a message whether they want it to or not.

Part of this conversation likewise included Evansville's annual Pride fest in June and how USI did not have a presence at that event. During the discussion of higher education reinforcing societal structures, such as cisheteronormativity, curriculum was mentioned. Participant E mentions taking an education diversity class while attending USI:

If you think Evansville could sometimes be insular and isolated, they [other students in the class] were from tiny, tiny towns all over Indiana, Kentucky, and Illinois. And a good half of the students had never met a black person in real life until they came to campus.

They had never seen a black person. And it was wild to think about because I was like, how could you just live in the world? And Evansville is not a beacon of diversity.

At the end of the employee focus group session, Participant F discussed the importance of having USI be a safe space for LGBTQIA+ students:

In terms of USI itself, I want my students to be safe, especially knowing that a lot of them come from very isolated rural communities and the people said, this is the one place they can be themselves. Maybe they're not at home, but maybe they are here. If I have gay or trans students, I want them to not feel afraid of stuff and feel like, at least if I can't do this at home, I can do this here. But just knowing they have this little home here, that's what's important to me, and I don't want them to lose that.

### ***Inexperience with LGBTQIA+ people***

One of the reasons why microaggressions can occur is a lack of experience with a marginalized group. Sue (2021) defines microaggressions as everyday slights, insults, or put-downs, that people in marginalized groups experience in daily interactions with people who may not be aware of their impact. Depending on where someone grew up or how they were raised can influence their daily interactions. As mentioned in the previous section, some students had never seen a Black person in real life before moving away to college. This could be the case for LGBTQIA+ individuals. In both the student and employee focus groups, it was mentioned that participants had experienced microaggressions and sexuality-related phobias from others on and off campus.

In the student focus group, they mention experiencing microaggressions such as stares or looks from others when something related to the LGBTQIA+ community is brought up.

Participant B mentions:

I feel like one that I see a lot, but I don't personally experience, but even when anything at all queer is brought up and then the person goes, "Oh," and do the head turn. And it's like - I feel like I see that the most in classes whenever someone does share their pronouns and it's different from what they appear to be possibly, and then somebody would make a face or say, "Oh," or just something like that. It's obvious how they feel about it, but I feel like they just don't say anything because they don't want to get in trouble. But they want everybody to know they hate what's happening.

All participants collectively agreed that they have seen people do a head turn when something is brought up related to the LGBTQIA+ community. The participants had a discussion that surrounded the negative connotation of pronouns and when they get brought up people give dirty looks. This could be due to people's inexperience with the LGBTQIA+ community and the head turn is because the discussion has moved on to something that they are not familiar with and do not understand. However, once they become more familiar with the topic, the head turn may stop. The employees had other experiences of discrimination and harassment that may stem from people's inexperience with LGBTQIA+ people.

In the employee focus group, Participant F discusses an instance they had as a student at USI where their advisor made a homophobic comment:

I've had literally, one instance, I can think of a blatant homophobia on campus, and that was when I was a student here because I was a transfer student and I had actually another advisor. I was going to do my graduation paperwork. And they were asking me, "Well, what are you going to do? What's your career? What are your plans?" And I'm like, "Well, I'm going to do English teaching," which I didn't do that. And they were asking, "Oh, how'd you come to Evansville? Why are you here?" I'm like, "Well, my partner

lives here." And they were like, "Well, you better not tell anyone when you're teaching that you're a lesbian or they'll think you're a pedophile." And I was just like, "What?"

And I was so confused about that one. That was really the only real homophobic.

Participant E experienced some harassment from members of the Evansville community on campus:

Yeah. I've had instances when I was 18 and first on campus as a student, but as an employee, the only thing I can think of is at times, campus can be very lackadaisical with their free speech zones and who they allow onto campus and where they permit them to go. For the most part, they're ignored unless they're causing what public safety deems like a safety issue. And it was, I don't even know, evangelizing, I guess, would be the most correct term of what they were doing, but mostly, yelling at people and harassing people for all kinds of things. And I had an instance where they said something because they saw a pride lanyard thing that I had, and so they commented about it.

Indeed, Block (2022) discusses how the rise in anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric in legislation and the media has spread to make people who are LGBTQIA+ look like they are groomers or pedophiles. Accusations of recruiting and grooming children into becoming gay or transgender has been a long-standing trope based on homophobia and fear of the unknown. If more people were to become knowledgeable about the LGBTQIA+ community, some of this rhetoric would dispel.

### ***LGBTQIA+ generation gap***

A large discussion within the employee focus group was the generational gap between older and younger members of the LGBTQIA+ community and how to bridge the gap that separates them.

Participant F discusses how they wish there could be a mixer for younger and older LGBTQIA+ folks so they could learn from each other:

I would love to see USI get their name out there and be actually involved. And I would love to see a mixing of older faculty staff with younger people so people can learn from each other. So, I think that's an issue, is a lot of younger people get stuck in a weird loop online of just feedback with themselves, but they don't listen to older people and what they've been through and all those things. So, they're missing those lessons. And I think we're likewise not interacting with the younger kids beyond just getting irritated at them. And we need to actually listen to them too. And having that would be very valuable for everyone.

Participant G added to this discussion:

I also want to go back to intergenerational communication. You're absolutely right. Every time I teach the [redacted] class, I have queer identified students who have no history. But oftentimes, our students don't know that history. I have to explain to them, students just... Even, for example, they didn't even really know anything about the AIDS epidemic. But they didn't realize that it wasn't just everyone. It was very clearly, it started out as young gay men dying. They have no knowledge of that. And it's of course not. They don't teach any of that. But additionally, wouldn't it be nice to have some of those intergenerational conversations?

Welch (2020) discusses how these intergenerational conversations are continuing through Pride fest events where LGBTQIA+ people of all ages come to celebrate. These events are for everyone and generations within the LGBTQIA+ community are discussing what is important to gay youth versus the older generations who remember the Stonewall riots and lived through the



AIDS crisis. I could see generational differences between the employee focus group and the student focus group. I asked each focus group before the session started if anyone was uncomfortable with the use of the word “queer” and no participants had an issue with the word in the student group but a couple of participants in the employee group had an issue with the word being used. The word has a different connotation for older LGBTQIA+ generations than younger generations. Clarke (2021) describes the history of the word and how a reclamation movement began in the 1980s, and now the word is used to describe one’s sexuality. While some are not comfortable with the use of the word because of its negative connotation or its use as a slur, there needs to be understanding from both sides on why the word is used and not to forget the history behind it.

### ***Disrupting cisheteronormativity in the classroom***

Both focus groups discussed how cisheteronormativity is perpetuated in the classroom and how professors can disrupt it. In the student focus group, Participant B mentions how inclusivity in the curriculum in the classroom should come from the highest level of the University:

I think that starts with the university, at the highest level, having an expectation. And not even just an expectation, but a priority of inclusivity, because I really don't think the professors are like, "Oh, I hate these types of people. I'm not going to talk about them."

But I think they genuinely don't think about it.

This would allow LGBTQIA+ students to feel more included in the classroom and not feel othered. The participants likewise discuss how cisheteronormativity is perpetuated through examples taught in the classroom and in textbooks. Participant B additionally mentions how

textbooks do not include a large section for LGBTQIA+ individuals or othered marginalized groups:

And what's funny though additionally is that a lot of textbooks, especially in this one social work class I'm thinking of particularly, they'll have the tiny section, and in the tiny section, it's like racial identities and then also the queer identities. And they're in one little baby section together, and it's like, there's no explanation about it. It's just numbers.

Being in classes with cisheteronormative examples in textbooks and in the curriculum can lead to LGBTQIA+ individuals feeling othered and invisible. Making it a priority to find classroom examples or textbooks that are inclusive of marginalized groups would be beneficial to these individuals feeling included and seen. The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) (2020) found that students that had inclusive curricula were less likely to hear slurs, lower levels of victimization, felt safer, and had a higher GPA than students who did not have LGBTQIA+ inclusive curricula.

In the employee focus group, most of the discussion surrounding cisheteronormativity included the importance of learning about diversity in healthcare and bringing up more diverse examples in the classroom. Participant F mentioned this during the discussion:

And I think you can tell as a student or anyone, when you're in that class, you can tell when the diversity quota is happening, because they lump everyone into one paragraph and it's like, okay, here, race, here's gender and sexuality. Here's your fun. Buy a book. And it would be so much better... Because I've had professors who have done this, who've integrated into situations like, okay, what if you had this situation with a student? What if they were a gay student? What if they're a trans student? What if they were a black student? How would these impact the situation more and get you to actually think

about it? Versus, here's the diversity paragraph for everyone who was not white, not straight, they're right here. Because that gives the impression too to here's the weirdos and here's all the normal stuff. I think it would be more beneficial if it could just be integrated into different situations, different things in there, which again, lots of professors I had here did.

Participant E mentions that there are humanities classes that some students going into the healthcare field may take:

Yeah. We have a business humanities class now and a medical humanities class. And the goals of those classes are basically to be like, these aren't drones. These aren't just patients you stick a needle in. These are people. This is how you interact with people. Maybe think about the fact that these people would be dealing with, they're trans, so that should inform how you present healthcare situations to them. Or this person is from the African American community that has had historically, not good interactions with the healthcare providers and community. What does that mean? And that's the goal of those courses.

While this discussion surrounded healthcare curricula only, it does provide an example of what types of curricula are necessary for students to feel included, but additionally learn to treat individuals who are diverse. This curriculum can allow students to learn about diverse populations and people with different backgrounds to interact with and treat them more effectively. This will additionally help their patients feel less othered and more included, which is important since LGBTQIA+ individuals have had a historically harried experience in the healthcare system.

### *Feeling “othered” in the LGBTQIA+ community*

Even within a marginalized community, individuals can experience discrimination or harassment from others within the community. This can be seen through misogyny, biphobia, transphobia, lesbophobia, and racism within the LGBTQIA+ community. Individuals with intersectional identities may feel othered in their groups. For example, someone who identifies as biracial and bisexual may feel othered in the LGBTQIA+ community and in their racial groups since they fit into more than one group. York (2021) discusses biphobia and how it is ironic that within the accepting LGBTQIA+ community, bisexual individuals are made to feel “not gay enough” or “too straight” to fit in the community.

One of the participants in the student focus group mentions experiencing biphobia. In the student focus group, Participant A mentions experiencing biphobia from a friend who identifies as a lesbian:

I think I have, but it was from somebody I was friends with. She's like... She's a full-on lesbian. So, I was telling her about how I was going on a date with a man, and it was just kind of calling me fake gay or something. It is just not taking bisexuality as seriously as other things. So, I think that wasn't great. It made me feel bad. I was like, "Wait, I can't go on a date with a man now?"

Friedman (2014) finds that negative attitudes from both the LGBTQIA+ community and the straight community allow bisexual-identifying individuals to experience double discrimination, which can lead to worsened mental health outcomes. This participant's experience is common, and many bisexual individuals say they feel “too gay” for the straight community and “too straight” for the LGBTQIA+ community. Participant C has experienced harassment on campus for their identity as non-binary:

But a lot of times, when people look at me, they automatically assume female. And I can't change that. Because I chopped all my hair off, I wore baggy clothes. It worked a little bit until people started assuming I was a man, and then I was like, "Okay, let's go back a little to the middle here." But I feel like a lot of times because I change my style a lot. So, I feel like a lot of people look at me, and if they find out that I go by they/them or that I'm non-binary, they look at me and they're like, "No, you're not." And I'm kind of like, "What do you mean?" They're like, "Well, you're wearing a dress." And I'm like, "Okay. And? That guy's wearing a crop top."

Xiao (2022) discusses how non-binary individuals often feel the rage of “Nonbinary people don’t owe you androgyny,” however, they likewise point out that non-binary individuals must be androgynous to survive. In society, male and female gender roles are explicitly defined and the identities of non-binary or gender-diverse individuals do not conform to these societal expectations. This additionally expands into pronouns, where many individuals do not support or understand using singular gender-neutral pronouns such as they/them.

Participant D mentions even LGBTQIA+ people do not understand trans identities well: So, I wouldn't say it's harassment or discrimination necessarily, but I've had a lot of queer people struggle to understand how you could be trans and gay at the same time. Like, "Oh, well, if you're trans, then you must like women, right?" No, not really. But yeah, that's, I guess, a hard thing for some people to wrap their heads around.

This feeling of otherness can stem from trans issues not being as well-known or discussed in the LGBTQIA+ community. Even people within the LGBTQIA+ community can face difficulties understanding gender identities and the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity. Graves (2018) discusses the issues with transphobia within the LGBTQIA+ community

and how trans individuals experience more discrimination, harassment, and prejudice than their White counterparts, but the LGBTQIA+ community wants to exclude them. LGBTQIA+ people can experience phobias related to other LGBTQIA+ identities that are different from their own. As mentioned earlier, Participant F experienced lesbophobia within the community and said it was because lesbians were “at the intersection of misogyny and homophobia.” This may likewise be related to the generational gap between older and younger LGBTQIA+ individuals. Participant F mentions experiencing lesbophobia from the younger generation:

So, I think I've seen just lots of lesbophobia in general from people who just don't understand my hard lines of this is my sexuality and it's a brick and it's not moving. And I think with the more fluid stuff we've got going on with the kids, they don't understand that.

This correlates with Lavietes's (2024) study that shows nearly thirty percent of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQIA+ and about half of those adults identify as bisexual. Since more LGBTQIA+ adults identify as bisexual, around fifty-seven percent, their sexualities are seen as more fluid than identifying as gay or lesbian (Jones, 2024). However, this issue of lesbophobia may stem from a lack of knowledge of LGBTQIA+ history from the younger generations, as discussed earlier, and may be solved by having these conversations with older LGBTQIA+ generations. Lesbophobia encompasses misogyny, sexism, and stigma on non-conforming sexual orientation (ELC, 2021). Since we live in a patriarchal society, lesbians do not conform to the societal expectations of female and male gender roles, which can lead to violence against them.

In the employee focus group, Participant E mentions how they have seen older gay men in Evansville be misogynistic and racist. Dayal (2022) interviews LGBTQIA+ people of color and they share their experiences of being called the “n” word, fetishized, and excluded from the

community. Participant G's words are very poignant "... if we're talking about do not assume, just because you are part of one minority group does not mean that you are going to be supportive of a different minority group either." There could be many reasons why individuals are misogynistic or racist to others within the community. It may be how they were raised, inexperience with others with different backgrounds, or the societal influences we experience on a day-to-day basis. However, this can be an important learning process for all individuals, and it would be beneficial to have people with intersectional identities have conversations to learn more about their differences and how they can be more inclusive of one another.

These findings indicate that LGBTQIA+ students on campus do not come out while they are at home and tend to come out or explore their queer identity once they are away from home and at college. These findings indicate LGBTQIA+ students can feel othered within the classroom and within the LGBTQIA+ community. LGBTQIA+ employees additionally mentioned feeling othered within the LGBTQIA+ community. Both groups felt the need for a closer relationship between the university and LGBTQIA+ community partners. Location was a large factor for both groups in their timing of identity exploration, feeling othered, and degree of outness. In the upcoming chapter, queer geography will be used to explain this factor and how it can be adapted to understand college campuses as their own institutions and what policy and resource recommendations would be beneficial for a more inclusive campus environment.

## Chapter 5: Discussion

A quote that encompasses this study comes from one of the employees on campus: “I think for me, I've been here since 2009, and so I see things that are like, oh, we're moving forward in certain ways to show that our campus is very inclusive and supportive. And there are other things where I was like, why haven't we done this yet? Why hasn't this changed?” This quote shows how the university can be progressive in its support of the LGBTQIA+ community but in other ways falls behind the curve.

The findings of this research project demonstrate: (1) students explored their identities once they got to college, (2) students' degree of outness is higher on campus and lower at home, (3) the political reference point affected students' timing of identity exploration, (4) students feel othered within the LGBTQIA+ community and in the classroom due to cisheteronormativity (5) employees think USI is neutral in its support of the LGBTQIA+ community, (6) employees' degree of outness is unchanged on campus, (7) the political reference point prevents USI from supporting the LGBTQIA+ community, (8) employees want students to feel safe on campus. Both groups experienced mild forms of discrimination and harassment on campus including microaggressions. LGBTQIA+ students found the campus climate to be generally positive, but noted areas of improvement, such as visibility in campus resources and curriculum, having a LGBTQIA+ resource center so that resources are easy to find and LGBTQIA+ students have a safe space to go on campus, and connecting more with the community. LGBTQIA+ employees found the campus climate to be neutral and noted areas of improvement, such as an LGBTQIA+ resource center, involvement with the community, an LGBTQIA+ employee resource group, and more visibility of LGBTQIA+ events on campus.



### *Queer Geography and college campuses*

How does queer geography and location relate to college campuses? It is important to first understand the location of the city of Evansville and the political climate of the region where USI resides. While USI is in Evansville, Indiana, which is considered an urban area due to its population density, the city is surrounded by rural cities that make the city feel smaller. The Republican party presides over the state of Indiana, but in 2024, Evansville elected a democratic mayor, the first in twelve years. In this election, Democrats likewise won eight to one for the City Council seats, with the one Republican seat running unopposed. This shows that while Evansville is in a state that supports anti-LGBTQIA+ legislation, the city of Evansville may be more open to supporting LGBTQIA+ events and businesses.

In the case of USI, we can see that geographical location matters when creating a college campus that is inclusive of LGBTQIA+ people. Student and employee participants mentioned location being a factor in how they navigate the campus. Students mentioned they started to explore their queer identity once they moved away from their small hometowns and came to college. This can be seen as moving from a rural area to an urban area where there is a larger population of LGBTQIA+ people and students can find community with other LGBTQIA+ students. Given that almost one-third of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQIA+, college students may have a better chance of connecting with other queer people in college than ever before. Employees mentioned people are not as demonstrative in expressing their queer identities as they may be in larger cities where there may be a larger queer community. All the LGBTQIA+ employees in the focus group seemed to be comfortable being out on campus and being in a university setting allowed them to be more open about their queer identities than in previous workplaces they have had. Although the Midwest and the Evansville area may have more

religious, strongly conservative politics, the university setting provides its own location as a safer space for LGBTQIA+-identified faculty and staff because of its commitment to providing higher education for people of all cultures and identities.

Both focus groups mention location when they discuss cisheteronormativity in the classroom and in curricula. They felt that part of the reason why cisheteronormativity was so pervasive in the classroom was because of the location of the university. They additionally mentioned USI was not involved in LGBTQIA+ events around Evansville and it would be nice for the university to show its support of the community and to be involved with the Evansville community. Employees additionally discussed how Evansville in general can be isolating for folks who are new to town, especially the LGBTQIA+ community. Evansville can be isolating because there aren't many LGBTQIA+ spaces to go around town, the primary one being a bar. Participants mentioned if that wasn't your thing, you may have trouble finding the LGBTQIA+ community. Participants additionally mentioned how Evansville can be insular because once you have met some of the LGBTQIA+ community, you become more connected to the rest of the queer community in town, and it can cause a limited dating pool. Employee participants additionally mentioned how they faced harassment on campus and off-campus in Evansville. By understanding the location, political climate, and population density of the city of Evansville, we can better understand the external factors that influence USI and its inclusivity of the LGBTQIA+ community.

It is additionally important to view USI and college campuses as independent locations so that they can be designed to be inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community. This process would be known as queering college campuses. Participants mentioned there wasn't a place on USI's campus where LGBTQIA+ people could safely congregate. Students mentioned it would be nice

to have a space, like an LGBTQIA+ resource center, where they could go to hang out with other LGBTQIA+ peers and have a space where they could be themselves. While intentionally queer spaces are important for queer folks to have a safe space to congregate in (Hingston, 2023), it begs the question: Why can't all public spaces be queer-friendly? Following the discussion of private versus public queer spaces, we can see why private queer spaces are still needed for LGBTQIA+ people's safety. However, queer people have always historically been relegated to private spaces because public spaces have not been safe, but what if this could change on college campuses? Having an LGBTQIA+ inclusive campus would mean all spaces on campus were safe spaces for queer individuals to be themselves, and this starts with the university displaying their support of the community and putting policies and programs in place foster a more inclusive environment.

Participants mentioned the need to have less cisheteronormative curricula in the classroom. This would allow classrooms to be safe spaces for LGBTQIA+ students. Attending college is often the first time students are away from their home and previous influences, and they start to develop their own worldviews. This is when their identity starts to form, and they are exposed to different types of people and beliefs. It is vital that students and faculty alike are open minded and create an inclusive space in the classroom for LGBTQIA+ people to be themselves and learn from curriculum that is not cisheteronormative. Creating LGBTQIA+-friendly curriculum in the classroom would include providing examples that include LGBTQIA+ people or creating reading lists that feature queer authors or artists. As some students noted, they did not feel comfortable being out in the classroom due to fear of faculty not understanding their queer identity or feeling othered in the classroom by peers. Fostering a classroom setting that is comfortable for all students to express their identities starts at the beginning of the semester.

Faculty can ask students before the beginning of the semester what their chosen name is and what their pronouns are to establish an inclusive environment early and express that there will be no tolerance of harassment or discrimination of others in the classroom.

Employee participants mention that USI is neutral in their support of the LGBTQIA+ community and student participants noted that USI's LGBTQIA+ resources are not visible enough. This may be due to the location of the university and the political climate. The university is in a conservative and religious area of the country and in a state that has a Republican majority. Up until this year, the mayor and city council office of Evansville held a Republican majority as well. The university may be worried that if they are too public with their support of the LGBTQIA+ community, they may lose donors or support from the community. On the other hand, if they are visible about their support of the LGBTQIA+ community, they may receive new donor support, as well as recruit new students and employees to the university if this is a priority for them when looking at schools to attend or places of employment.

An issue that could impact the university's visible inclusivity of the LGBTQIA+ community is the current political climate in the state and SB (senate bill) 202. This bill goes into effect July 1, 2024. It diminishes faculty tenure and promotion and diversity, equity, and inclusion programs (Quinn, 2024). The bill will reprimand faculty who speak out against diversity and racism in the classroom. This will severely impact the topics that faculty can teach and how they teach in the classroom, including LGBTQIA+ topics. This will impact how LGBTQIA+ individuals feel in the classroom and may make them feel more excluded. Eyes on Education is a portal that was launched by Indiana Attorney General Todd Rokita's office and is a platform that students, parents, and educators can use to submit and view objectionable

curricula, policies, or programs affecting children. Purdue University and Indiana University are listed on the website for issues related to LGBTQIA+ “agendas.”

Given that one-third of Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQIA+, this is a large pool of people who may be attending college, and it is important to show support for them. As one participant noted, neutrality can be disheartening for some individuals, and it may cause them to look elsewhere for more supportive workplaces or schools. Being an LGBTQIA+ inclusive college campus can help with recruitment and retention efforts of the university. It can likewise help the university gain more visibility and be more closely involved with the Evansville community.

Off campus, USI needs to be more closely involved with the Evansville community and support the LGBTQIA+ community at local events and support local queer businesses. Participants in the study noted that USI was not involved in community events centered around the LGBTQIA+ community, such as Evansville’s annual Pride fest. Participants also thought it was important for USI to partner with local LGBTQIA+ supporting businesses to create better community partnerships between USI and these businesses. This would also give USI opportunities to be more visible in their support of the LGBTQIA+ community on and off campus, provide LGBTQIA+ students, faculty, and staff with more resources, and create new community partnerships that could lead to more events, publicity, and donors.

### ***Microaggressions***

Participants noted experiencing microaggressions from coworkers, professors, and from people in the larger Evansville community. They experienced interactions with people who have sexuality-related phobias such as homophobia, or specific types like lesbophobia, biphobia, or transphobia. This can be contributed to people’s inexperience with the LGBTQIA+ community.

This can be due to the way that the person was raised, the location they were raised, or a lack of visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community. When people are not experienced with a group of individuals, especially a marginalized community, they can often say harmful things or conduct harmful actions that they may not realize are harming someone else. One participant experienced someone equating their lesbian identity with pedophilia. This comment is one that LGBTQIA+ individuals have received frequently, especially gay men and trans women. While this comment may have been made because the person does not have much experience with LGBTQIA+ people and may not have realized the significant harm in perpetuating a false narrative, it may have additionally come from a place of more malicious intent. One participant experienced microaggressions from a coworker who asked personal questions that they may not have asked straight coworkers. This could be because the person does not have a lot of experience with LGBTQIA+ individuals and may not know what is or is not okay to inquire about. More visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community can help increase people's understanding of them and can lead to them feeling more included. More visibility and awareness of LGBTQIA+ issues can additionally take the burden off LGBTQIA+ people from having to be the ones in charge of explaining issues.

Some participants experienced fear to tell their professors their chosen name or pronouns for fear that they wouldn't understand or would reject their identity. This could be contributed to inexperience with LGBTQIA+ people and perhaps a generational difference. Ally training for faculty and staff can help increase their understanding of the LGBTQIA+ community without placing the burden on the student to explain their identity or pronouns to the professor. Additionally, it allows the professor to modify the way they handle asking for names or pronouns in the classroom in the future.

Some participants experienced microaggressions from community members visiting USI. These microaggressions came from religious community members who hand out pamphlets in the free speech zones on campus. This kind of harassment may come from inexperience in interacting with LGBTQIA+ people, but it may additionally come from religious teachings the people have heard. This type of harassment can make students feel unsafe on campus and make them weary of religious organizations. It would be helpful to have people come on campus who will not harass people for their sexuality or gender identity. It would likewise be helpful to bring religious organizations from the community on campus that are LGBTQIA+ friendly so students know which religious organizations would be safe for them to attend.

Employee participants likewise mention having issues with communication and understanding between LGBTQIA+ generations. This creates a gap between LGBTQIA+ generations and this can cause frustration and misunderstanding within the community. For older LGBTQIA+ generations, it is important that they understand younger generations and the issues they might be facing, such as non-acceptance of their gender identity. For younger generations, it is important that they understand the history of the LGBTQIA+ community and all the acceptance the older generations fought for to get to where we are today. This can help strengthen the LGBTQIA+ community and avoid some of the phobias within the community.

Participants in both focus groups noted experiences with harassment or phobias from others within the LGBTQIA+ community, leading to them feeling othered. Some employee participants noted that they had experienced misogyny and racism within the LGBTQIA+ community. One reason for this is location. Being in the Midwest, gender roles are more strictly adhered to, and this can even permeate the queer community. Participants noted experiencing more misogyny in the Midwest than other places they have lived. Another reason for this could

be generational differences. Participants noted experiencing misogyny or racism from older, gay men. Older LGBTQIA+ generations may have a different experience with gender roles or racial differences than younger generations. This is why it is important to have this intergenerational communication in the community so that they can learn from one another.

Participants noted they had seen transphobia in the Evansville area but had not experienced that themselves. A couple reasons for this could be inexperience with trans individuals or people who invalidate trans identities. Twenge (2023) discusses how in 2021, Gen Z was the only generation in which a majority believe there are more than two genders. Factors such as increasing acceptance of trans identities, rural vs. urban location, and age of transition have all been studied but there wasn't any positive correlation between the factors and the increase in younger trans populations. Twenge (2023) found there were twenty times more trans-identifying individuals in Gen Z than older generations. This would account for the transphobia people have experienced in Evansville. Trans identities may not be as visible in the Midwest or rural areas which surround the Evansville community. It is likewise a common occurrence, especially for people who identify as feminists, to be exclusionary of trans identities. These individuals are known as TERFs (Trans-Exclusionary Radical Feminists) who believe that sex is biological and oppose gender identities that are not female or male. Having more visibility of trans individuals and their experiences may make people feel differently about validating their identities.

Student participants experienced biphobia, not feeling "queer" enough, and lack of understanding trans identities within the LGBTQIA+ community. One participant said their friend who identifies as a lesbian made a biphobic comment to them about their identity and dating men. This experience can be common for bisexual individuals who may feel othered in



both the straight community and the LGBTQIA+ community. Common comments made to bisexual people are that they are greedy, need to choose, aren't actually bisexual if they have only dated one gender, and it's just a phase (Kassel, 2022). These comments can be damaging to the mental health of bisexual people and can force them to stay in the closet. Participants said that they do not feel "queer" enough within the community, especially if they don't have a certain appearance or have pride flags showing. This experience could be due to location. If the LGBTQIA+ community is not visible on campus or in the greater Evansville community, people may not feel comfortable being out and showing their queer identity. There may likewise be fear of harassment or discrimination for one's identity and they may not outwardly show that they are queer for their own safety. One participant mentioned how people within the LGBTQIA+ community didn't understand how they could be trans and gay. This could be due to inexperience with people who are trans-identifying. Having more visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community through additional resources and events on campus can make individuals feel more comfortable with their identity, included in the community, and safe to express their identity.

### **Policy and Resource Recommendations**

Based on the findings of the study, the following resource and policy recommendations will be made to USI to create a more inclusive campus climate for LGBTQIA+ individuals: implement gender-neutral restrooms in every building on campus; create a LGBTQIA+ resource center; creating an LGBTQIA+ resources webpage; have emergency housing for any displaced LGBTQIA+ students, make the Chosen Name, Gender Identity, and Pronoun Change form more visible; hire therapists in the counseling center that specialize in LGBTQIA+ identities or have familiarity with LGBTQIA+ identities; provide resources for faculty to create queer pedagogy; train administrators to be advocates of the LGBTQIA+ community; implement an anti-bullying

policy that covers all individuals on campus; create an LGBTQIA+ employee resource group; become more involved with the Evansville community and create LGBTQIA+ community partnerships; and create more visibility of LGBTQIA+ events on and off campus.

### ***Gender-Neutral Restrooms***

The first resource recommendation is implementing gender-neutral restrooms in every building on campus. Currently, the only gender-neutral restrooms at USI are in the Recreation, Fitness and Wellness Center. There are two on the third floor and an individual shower/restroom on the lower level. While this is a great resource for trans and gender-diverse individuals who may use the center, it may be inconvenient for students, faculty, and staff who need to use those specific restrooms and it may disrupt their schedule having to go across campus to use them. These restrooms would additionally be inconvenient for trans and gender-diverse visitors on campus who would need to be accompanied to the center by someone with a USI ID card to use the restroom. By implementing gender-neutral restrooms in every building on campus, this can make trans and gender-diverse individuals feel more comfortable and safer while using the restroom.

Trans individuals often experience harassment when trying to use the restroom that aligns with their gender identity as opposed to using the one aligned with the sex they were assigned at birth. Brady (2016) discusses how trans people would like to use the restroom privately with as little hassle as possible. Trans and gender-diverse individuals can additionally experience gender dysphoria when using a restroom that aligns with their sex assigned at birth. To avoid this, gender-neutral restrooms can be an easy solution. Barr (2023) notes there are some additional costs and considerations when implementing this design, including the need for extra privacy, more space, and additional costs associated with signage and training. The need for extra privacy

is important to consider since most individuals are used to single-gender restrooms. The need for extra space can come from needing extra privacy in the restroom and the layout of the restroom to accommodate multiple users at once.

Additional costs can be associated with redesigning the current restrooms or building new ones that have a better layout. Additional costs can be associated with new signage for the restrooms and training for staff, faculty, and students on the importance of gender-neutral restrooms and the purpose of them. At USI, the current restrooms could be renovated to remove the wall in between the existing men's and women's restrooms to create one large gender-neutral restroom. This is important because gender-neutral restrooms should include both stalls and urinals to accommodate people of all gender identities. Signage could be updated as well. While there would be costs associated with the renovations to the restrooms in all buildings across campus, these costs are outweighed by creating an inclusive and safe environment for all users. With more than one-third of Gen Z adults identifying as LGBTQIA+, it is important to rethink inclusivity of spaces and reimagine what these will look like moving forward.

### ***LGBTQIA+ Resource Center***

The second resource recommendation would be to implement a LGBTQIA+ resource center on campus. Student participants mentioned they did not know many, if any, LGBTQIA+ resources on campus and employee participants mentioned they did not think resources were visible enough for students. The university has a Multicultural center, which was established in 1994, provides students with programming, events, resources, and diversity training to make them well-rounded citizens capable of interacting with culturally diverse individuals. While this center is incredibly important for students and does offer some LGBTQIA+ resources for students, it does not encompass all the resources that LGBTQIA+ students may need on campus.

Another reason for creating an LGBTQIA+ resource center is to have resources centrally located in one center. Currently, LGBTQIA+ resources can be found on the Multicultural Center's website and the Center for Campus Life's website, and the resources listed are not the same. This can be confusing and frustrating for people to navigate. Having a LGBTQIA+ resource center would consolidate these resources into one place and make it easier for individuals needing resources to find them easily. Another reason for creating an LGBTQIA+ resource center is for students to have a safe space to congregate. Having a LGBTQIA+ resource center would allow anyone with a queer identity to have a safe space to hang out in without fear of judgement or worrying about being harassed or stared at. It could also help individuals who may be questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation explore it safely and find community.

An example that USI could replicate on their campus is Indiana University's LGBTQ+ Cultural Center at the Bloomington campus (IU LGBTQIA+ Cultural Center, n.d.). This center offers resources, such as student groups, a process for transitioning at IU, housing resources, health and wellness resources, and all-gender restrooms on campus. The center also provides students with information on LGBTQIA+ scholarships, a mentor program, training programs, a gender affirming closet, a LGBTQIA+ library, and a list of partner services. The center has its own administrative team and hosts events year-round. This would be a great way for USI to support all individuals on campus who identify as LGBTQIA+, make resources more visible to students, and create community partnerships. It would be important for the resource center to include temporary housing options for LGBTQIA+ students who are displaced from their homes if they are disowned. This would help LGBTQIA+ students keep secure housing and continue their studies while trying to find their own housing.

### ***LGBTQIA+ resources webpage***

The university has LGBTQIA+ resources for students listed on their website under multiple pages, including the Center for Campus Life and the Multicultural Center. However, these pages of the website do not contain the same resources for students, and they are hard to find. The Multicultural Center's website offers a list of religious centers that are LGBTQIA+ friendly and the Center for Campus Life's website offers a list of resources such as Lavender Graduation, Ally training for employees, gender inclusive housing, and a link to the Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) office. Lavender graduation is a ceremony that recognizes any student graduating that identifies as LGBTQIA+.

As indicated in the focus group session with students, they are unaware of the LGBTQIA+ resources the campus and the community have to offer. Since these webpages are hard for students to find, it would be beneficial for there to be a student resources webpage that was visible from the University's main webpage with a webpage for LGBTQIA+ resources listed. This page could be the central page that students use to find campus and community resources, such as the ones listed on the Multicultural Center and Center for Campus Life webpages.

### ***Emergency housing for displaced LGBTQIA+ students***

Previous research has shown LGBTQIA+ individuals may not come out while they are still being financially supported by their family due to fear of rejection and being kicked out. Will (2015) notes that at Indiana University, the GLBT Alumni Association administers an emergency scholarship for undergraduates who may lose their parents' financial support after coming out. While this scholarship can only be used for tuition and educational expenses, there are other scholarships available to students to assist them with life expenses. IU offers

emergency housing for displaced LGBTQIA+ students until a permanent solution can be found. USI could support LGBTQIA+ students who may be displaced due to coming out to their family by offering these scholarships and emergency housing until they could find housing on their own.

While there is a homeless shelter in Evansville where students could go, this may not be the best option for them if they do not have a reliable mode of transportation to get to and from campus, which may lead to them dropping out for the semester or altogether. Displaced students could occupy unused rooms in USI's on-campus housing, which would allow them to continue their studies uninterrupted. This would also allow the students to feel social support from their university and campus community during a stressful time in their lives, which could improve their retention and overall well-being.

### ***Preferred or Chosen Name, Gender Identity, and Pronoun Change Form***

The University provides a preferred or chosen name, gender identity, and pronoun change form for students and employees to be able to change this information except where it is required by law to use their legal name. However, this form is hard to find for students and they do not know it exists, as evident from the student focus group data. Faculty and staff may not know where this form is or how to help a student who may need it. This would be an important form to include in faculty members' syllabus so that students know it is available. It would additionally be important to mention when students attend orientation or register for their classes when they are a freshman. While some LGBTQIA+ students are comfortable saying their name and pronouns in front of the class, some students from the focus group expressed experiencing discomfort when they would need to tell their professors their chosen name or pronouns.

Knowing about this form when they attend orientation would be beneficial because their correct name would be on the class roster and the professor wouldn't be deadnaming the student.

### ***LGBTQIA+ specializing therapists***

With the need for mental health professionals increasing for college students since the pandemic, it is important to have mental health professionals available on college campuses to meet this need. However, LGBTQIA+ students may need these services more than other non-marginalized groups because they struggle with more anxiety, depression, and gender dysphoria than their cisgender counterparts. Sanchez (2022) finds when working with LGBTQIA+ students, it isn't just working through their anxiety, it requires working through their full background and identity to understand themselves as individuals. Most LGBTQIA+ students start to explore their identities while on campus and this can be a stressful time for them as they come to terms with their identity. Since more than one-third of LGBTQIA+ Gen Z adults identify as LGBTQIA+, it is important to meet the growing needs of this community. This is why it is important to hire therapists on campus that specialize in LGBTQIA+ issues such as coming out, transitioning, and disownment.

While USI's Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) office has a statement that it is a SAFE ZONE for LGBTQIA+ students, it would be helpful to identify the counselors who specialize in LGBTQIA+ issues and could help the students during this transition. The University of Berkeley offers a webpage on their counseling services website to note LGBTQIA+ counseling services, including a list of therapists that identify as queer, a transgender care team, and support groups. This would be a beneficial addition to USI's CAPS website so that students knew who they could go to and that would understand what they are going through on a more personal level.

### ***Queer Pedagogy***

As student participants noted, they wished curriculum in classes was less heteronormative. Queer pedagogy can be helpful in teaching students about different identities and help students understand queer issues (Khediguian, 2022). This can help LGBTQIA+ students in the classroom feel included, but it can also teach other students in the classroom about queer issues if they are unfamiliar with them. However, if professors have not had training in queer pedagogy, they may not know how to incorporate it into their curriculum. That is why it is important to provide faculty with queer pedagogical tools to implement into their curriculum. GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, & Straight Education Network) has several LGBTQIA+ inclusive classroom resource developing tools that professors can use to make their current curriculum more inclusive of their LGBTQIA+ students.

On USI's campus, there may be a few professors who specialize in queer pedagogy and could provide trainings to other faculty members, but it would be important to set up the trainings through the LGBTQIA+ resource center so that the trainings could occur even if these faculty leave the university. These trainings could be shared in the weekly newsletter sent out by the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) office to faculty. This office likewise handles the scheduling of new faculty orientation, and other LGBTQIA+ resources could be mentioned, such as ally training and the chosen name, gender identity, and pronoun change form.

### ***Administrative Advocates***

It is important for the administrators in a university to be advocates for the LGBTQIA+ community on campus. Given that seventeen percent of college students identify as LGBTQIA+ and more may be discovering their identity or may be closeted, it is important for administrators to be advocates for a large, marginalized community. As one participant mentioned, the need for



inclusion in curriculum in the classroom needs to come from administrators first. While individuals can be advocates for the community, if inclusivity doesn't come from administrators and the highest level of the university, discrimination, and harassment of LGBTQIA+ people can be left to fester.

It is also important for administrators to be advocates for LGBTQIA+ employees and nurture them as leaders. This advocacy and the expansion of mentoring for LGBTQIA+ employees could increase the number of LGBTQIA+ leaders in higher education (Lenoard, 2023). Since there are a small number of LGBTQIA+ leaders on campuses, this can lead employees and students to feel excluded and marginalized. Creating mentorship programs for LGBTQIA+ employees will help them become effective leaders and provide them with someone like them who has been through the process before. Part of USI's mission is to provide higher education for underrepresented populations and it is important to provide resources for LGBTQIA+ students and employees to have representation at the administrative level to create a more inclusive environment.

### ***Anti-Bullying Policy***

While USI has an Equal Opportunity and Non-Discrimination Policy in place for employees and it explicitly states gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation as being covered, the university does not have an anti-bullying policy in place. Wajngurt (2013) discusses the importance of having an anti-bullying policy in the university's handbook and how it can keep students, faculty, and staff safe on campus and ensure that they are not experiencing bullying that could lead to the person experiencing mental health issues or quitting or leaving the university. Conron et. al (2022) finds that nearly one-third of LGBTQIA+ students were bullied, harassed, or assaulted compared to one-fifth of their cisgender, heterosexual peers. Since

bullying impacts LGBTQIA+ students more than their cisgender, heterosexual peers, it is important to have an anti-bullying policy that covers students, faculty, and staff in the university and the policy needs to specify that bullying of people will not be tolerated. Writing policy with specific language will not only protect the university but will also protect individuals because there will not be loopholes that people could go through to say that it wasn't specified in the policy.

An example that USI could follow is Western Michigan University. Western Michigan University (n.d.) has two anti-bullying policies, one for employees and one for students. While the bullying policy does not address harassment based on a protected class membership, the anti-discrimination policy within the university addresses this. Creating a policy for both students and staff can be helpful because it will send individuals to the correct offices in charge of handling these cases. In terms of employees experiencing bullying, the employees would direct their complaints to the Human Resources office. In terms of students, they would report any instances of bullying to the Dean of Students office to handle. The policy would need to specify the purpose of the policy, key definitions of bullying and protected speech, and full policy details including what counts as bullying and what the investigation process looks like, accountability, related policies, and frequently asked questions. Since bullying is not covered in any policy on campus, this policy implementation would help protect vulnerable individuals from having this experience and no action being taken. It would also help cover cyberbullying, which is becoming more common with the rise of social media.

### ***LGBTQIA+ Employee Resource Group***

All employees in the focus group agreed there is a need for an LGBTQIA+ employee resource group. This group could help support new faculty and staff who may be new to the area,

which was a concern for all employees in the focus group, and it can help coordinate events and resources that are specific to employees. Having an LGBTQIA+ employee resource group can be a helpful retention and recruitment tool for the university, and it can ensure that the university is an inclusive work environment for LGBTQIA+ employees. The group can additionally provide LGBTQIA+ employees with resources for recruitment, networking, and career development opportunities.

USI could use Harvard University's (n.d.) LGBTQIA+ employee resource group (QERG) as an example to follow. The employee group has its own mission and goals, an executive committee, events, and resources. The employee resource group holds events like coffee hours, after-work social hours, and queer book club meetings. The resources page could offer links to the Ally training courses we host on campus, the anti-discrimination policies, and opportunities to be a club advisor. It would be helpful for the resource group to offer resources available to employees in the community, such as free STI/HIV testing, The Rainbow Jacket Project, which is a free clothing resource in Evansville for trans and gender-diverse individuals, River City Pride, and more. This would help new LGBTQIA+ employees integrate into the Evansville community better.

### ***Community Involvement***

Student and employee participants from the focus groups mentioned that USI should be involved with community partners in Evansville to create events and build a reputation for having a presence at LGBTQIA+ community events in Evansville. While USI has held a Pride fest on campus in October for two years, USI has not had a presence at Evansville's pride fest, hosted by River City Pride for three years. It could be an excellent opportunity for USI to show its support of the LGBTQIA+ community at an event for people in Evansville and the tri-state

area and get our university more familiar with the community. At USI's pride fest held on campus, community partners are invited to have tables set up with free swag and resources for individuals walking by.

The university's marketing department could make it a priority to publicize the event, as many individuals did not know it was occurring until they saw the event on campus. Marketing the events will not only improve social support for LGBTQIA+ students, but it can likewise make the community aware of events happening on campus. This makes the LGBTQIA+ community more visible on campus which provides passersby with an opportunity to stop and learn more about the resources available to them and makes LGBTQIA+ individuals feel safer and more included on campus. If USI creates an LGBTQIA+ employee resource group, they could go out into the community and find resources that are available to individuals in the community that may be helpful for their transition to Evansville. The LGBTQIA+ student club could likewise make community connections and be more involved in the community and other college campuses in town. This would allow USI to have more recognition in the community and allow community partners to know that they are open to collaboration.

### **Limitations**

This research study does have some limitations. First, the researcher utilized convenience sampling to recruit participants through their USI email due to their position within the University as an employee. Potential participants in the student focus group had to be students who had a major or minor within the College of Liberal Arts, as emails were pulled from a listserv of those individuals, which means that LGBTQIA+ identifying students who did not have a major or minor declared within the college did not have the opportunity to participate in the study. Potential participants likewise had to identify as LGBTQIA+ and this could have

limited the participant pool if participants were not open about their identity on campus or felt they were not “queer” enough to participate. Potential student participants likewise needed to be current students, so this research study did not apply to alumni, and they could have a different outlook on their experiences on a college campus over time. Potential participants in the employee focus group could be an employee from any department on campus, so this participant pool was less limited, although the researcher did specify that the employees needed to be full-time, so part-time and seasonal employees could not participate.

Another limitation to the study is a low response rate from employees. The researcher believes that this limitation could be influenced by SB (Senate Bill) 202, which passed the state’s senate on February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2024, the state’s house on February 29<sup>th</sup>, 2024, and the Governor on March 13<sup>th</sup>, 2024. The bill will go into effect on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2024, and it prohibits faculty members from being promoted or receiving tenure if they have not supported free expression and intellectual diversity, or if they have taught students political beliefs unrelated to their field of study. Due to SB 202 passing around the time that the researcher sent out the recruitment email to employees, they may have been reluctant to participate in the focus group for fear that their identity could be found out or that their comments could be used against them in the future when going up for promotion or tenure. All topics that deal with diversity, equity, and inclusion, like this research study, are under attack in the classroom now that SB 202 has passed. Skiba (2024) notes that the bill makes it illegal for educators to discuss historical or current discrimination in the classroom. Since some of the research questions in the study ask participants to discuss their experiences with discrimination and harassment on campus, employees, especially faculty, may not have felt comfortable joining the focus group session and this is why there was a low response rate from employees.

### **Directions for future research**

Future studies on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ faculty, staff, and students on a college campus could take a mixed methods approach to include a quantitative component to the study to see how participants rate their experiences on USI's campus. A mixed methods approach could be helpful to give the university a rating and compare it to other campuses of similar size and location. While hearing participants' experiences on campus is important, providing quantitative data alongside qualitative data can provide the study with more validity and help dispel ambiguity in language.

Another approach could be conducting a longitudinal study, following participants throughout their journey on campus and seeing if their experiences on USI's campus change over time. It would likewise be interesting to interview any employees who were likewise students at USI to see if their experiences on USI's campus have changed over time or in their transition from student to employee. These approaches would offer a thorough examination of USI's campus and whether their experiences on USI's campus have improved, stayed the same, or worsened over time.

Other future studies could include interviews with participants to get a more extensive personal history and expand on their experiences of discrimination and harassment in general for their identity. This could provide more helpful information on how they perceive campus climate, as opposed to just inquiring about their experiences on campus. This information will also expand on their queer local histories to see how this affects their experiences in Evansville and on USI's campus. Interviews could additionally allow for more diverse participants to be included in the study, which is important for making inclusive recommendations to the university for all LGBTQIA+ people.

Indiana's SB 202 may affect future research on queer experiences and college campuses. Not only will the bill possibly prevent this research from being conducted in the future, but it will also greatly impact the curriculum that is being taught in classrooms, and it may lessen the visibility of LGBTQIA+ resources and programs on campus. As seen in the findings of the focus group sessions, LGBTQIA+ students find that it is important to feel represented in the classroom and in their textbooks. The University may decide not to promote resources and programs related to DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) issues. This will not only affect LGBTQIA+ individuals' learning experience, but it will affect the type of research they conduct.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research study is to analyze how space and place influence queer experiences of faculty, staff, and students at USI to make policy and resource recommendations to the university to create a more inclusive campus environment. It is vital to listen to the experiences of LGBTQIA+ people to inform recommendations that will make their future experiences safer, and they will feel more included. These participants shared their experiences, and an overall theme emerged that USI needs to create a more inclusive environment for its LGBTQIA+ faculty, staff, and students. Through applying queer geography theory to college campuses, this data set can be used as an example for similar universities and making policy and resource changes to make their campuses more inclusive of the LGBTQIA+ community.

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## Appendix A

### Open Codes for Focus Group 1

	Open Code	Examples of participants' words
Research Question 1	Couldn't explore identity at home	Grew up in a small town
		Queer people trashed on in high school
	Religious family/upbringing prevented exploration	You couldn't be yourself in high school
		When I got to college, I started exploring my identity
	Explore in college	Having other queer people around you, it allows you to be yourself more
		Getting out of hometown and away from family, I was able to become more myself
	Small town upbringing	Not exploring much in high school
		Explored queer identity more in college
		Getting away from family and developing who you are and who your own person is
		Grew up in a small, conservative, rural town
		In the closet
		Pushed on the back burner
		Explored in ninth grade
		Being in a small town, if anyone catches on to you being any form of gay, it spreads like wildfire
		Outed to the entire high school
		Tossed into the group of people who were obviously out there
		Religious family
		Keep identity in the closet

		Keep identity at school (only being out in one area)
		Didn't explore much in high school because I would almost get outed
		Coming to campus was a relief from that
		Family doesn't know what goes on here
		I don't have to hide as much
		I can wear a rainbow ring; I can wear whatever I want, and I don't have to be judged.
		Always knew I was some flavor of queer
		I didn't explore it the first time in college
		College has really helped because there's people who I can surround myself with and open up to and if I hadn't had that it would have taken me longer to get to where I am now
		Moving out of that place where you grew up
		You know the people and they know you, so you want to keep that in when you are there
		Once you are away you are freer to be yourself
		You don't have that fear as well
		Moving out was a big relief
		Judging stares from family
		Forced to come out to family
		When you move to college there aren't added assumptions that you are straight like you have at home
		Allowed to explore in college
		Not allowed to change identity at home
		Internalized homophobia from religious upbringing

		I didn't think I had the choice to be queer
		As soon as I was out of that environment it was like a breath of fresh air
		I started having differing opinions from my parents, I was able to get out of that mindset
		Moving out of parents' house allowed me to become myself and tell others who I am
		More open, the University setting is liberal, so people feel more comfortable being open
		No issues encountered when being open on campus
		Allows me to have my identity be visible and present in the classroom
		Very accepting and feel safe on campus to be open
		Very safe and I can show my queer identity and not hide
Research Question 2	Faculty and staff are accepting	Appearance isn't "queer" where people would create barriers for me if I didn't tell them I was queer (people wouldn't assume I am queer)
		Faculty and staff in major foster an open-minded and accepting culture
	Feeling "othered"	People in major are accepting and vocal about being accepting
		Most people in my major want to talk about identity formation
	Being outed	Some people may feel uncomfortable vocalizing that they do not support queer identities because of the major they are in where there are a lot of queer people



		My major is very accepting, and we focus on the topic of queer identities in the classroom
		People may not be outspoken about their dislike for queer people but there are undertones
		Outing yourself by using a different name than what is on the class roster
		Feeling “othered” in class
		I don’t get to meet other queer people on campus much
Research Question 3	Resources for queer individuals are not visible	Wasn’t sure what resources were out there on campus for queer people
		Faculty in major were accepting and helped me get things changed quickly (trans)
		Resources are not obvious to students
		Couldn't name you one resource we have on campus for queer students
		You would have to go through five different people to find resources
		You can be active in the LGBT student organization on campus, and it is still hard to find resources
Research Question 4	Heteronormative curriculum	Heteronormative curriculum
		Textbooks used only have one section for LGBT people and it is a statistic.
	Bringing up pronouns has a negative connotation	Excluding certain types of queer people. May include gay or lesbian couples but not anyone else.

		Racial and sexual minorities are thrown together into one section in the textbook. Curriculum being taught is very white, straight, and cisgender.
		All gender non-conforming, non-binary, trans feminine and trans masculine individuals are grouped together as trans. It would be nice to be given options.
		I don't tell professors my pronouns because of the fear of their reaction.
		I tell my professors my middle name because it is more masculine and there won't be any confusion on my identity.
		Talk to professors about literature that mentions queer people.
		In some classes the first question they ask are "what are your pronouns?"
		Asking pronouns in class may make some queer individuals uncomfortable because they are outing themselves.
		I don't tell my pronouns unless I am asked because people will assume things about you and your identity.
		Bringing up pronouns has a negative connotation.
Research Question 5	Microaggressions	No outright discrimination or harassment
		Microaggressions- anything queer is brought up and people look at you differently
	Being othered in the classroom	Being excluded in the classroom in curriculum (gender identity and sexual orientation)

		Weird looks from people when meeting with someone of the same gender
Research Question 6	Feel othered within the queer community	Friend made me feel like a “fake gay” because I am bisexual and not a lesbian
		Clothes are gendered and people assume I am female and not non-binary or question my identity when I say I am non-binary
	Biphobia	Don't feel queer enough in the community
		Don't feel queer enough to join clubs on campus for queer students
	Lack of understanding about trans and non-binary identities within the queer community	If you don't show you are queer outwardly you feel excluded from the group
		Struggle to understand trans people being gay
	Don't feel queer enough	

## Open Codes for Focus Group 2

Open codes for focus group 2	Open Code	Examples of participants' words
Research Question 1	Open	University setting is liberal, so people feel more comfortable being open
	Safe	No issues encountered while being open on campus
	Visible	Allows me to have my identity visible in the classroom
	Accepting	Feel safe to be open on campus
	Not Hiding	Don't have to hide my identity
Research Question 2	Neutral	Nothing blatantly homophobic
	Lackadaisical	Microaggressions from fellow employees
	Afraid to be too political	
		USI is neutral in support
	Consequences not considered	
		USI is lackadaisical in support
	Afraid to lose support if seen to be too inclusive	
		USI doesn't want to ruffle any feathers
		USI doesn't want to be "too political"
		1 step forward, 2 steps backward
		Inclusivity isn't considered fully when providing support (outing)
		Invisible line USI cannot cross when providing support
		Do not want to piss people off with inclusivity
Research Question 3	Isolating	Nothing specific for employees

	Insular	Employee resource group would be nice
	No resources for employees	Evansville can feel isolating
	No advertisements on campus for queer events	Evansville can be insular
	USI does not want to display support of queer events because they may be seen as “too political”	USI doesn’t have a presence in community activities
		Pride chalkings on campus sidewalks have been defaced and no action was taken by USI
		No advertisements for queer events
		USI has no ads about events, and this creates no waves
		USI has made no neutrality statement about SB 202
		Students may fear retaliation or that nothing will happen if they report discrimination or harassment because they see USI doesn’t act
Research Question 4	Sexuality-related phobias	I was told I shouldn’t tell people I was a lesbian because they would think I was a pedophile
	Microaggressions from employees and community	I have experienced uncomfortable stares and looks from others
		I have experienced microaggressions from coworkers at work who may ask uncomfortable questions about my sexuality
Research Question 5	Internalized homophobia	Religious people from the community can harass LGBT people and be homophobic
	Religious influences	People can be uncomfortable with gay people
	Prejudice	People have protested drag shows at the library in Evansville

	Feeling othered	People can yell at you or harass you during Pride events
	Harassment	
	Discrimination	
	Violence against LGBT people	
	Degree of outness	
	Hate Crime	
Research Question 6	Lesphobia	Older gay men can be misogynistic, racist, transphobic
	Transphobia	Older LGBT generations do not like the word "queer"
	Biphobia	"Queer" is viewed as a slur
	Misogyny	Lesphobia, lesbians are at the intersection of homophobia and misogyny
	Queer is a slur and shouldn't be used	Younger LGBT generation is more fluid with their sexuality and older LGBT generation tends to be more solid with their sexuality
	Difference between younger and older LGBT generation	Most LGBT events and organizations don't have support lesbians, it is very gender focused
	Isolation	Just because you are part of one minority doesn't mean you are in support of every minority
	Insular location	The queer community in Evansville is very insular and isolating because once you know one person you know everyone
Research Question 7	Lack of support from University for queer individuals	Need a social support group for LGBT faculty and staff on campus
	Lack of collaboration with queer community	Need to collaborate with local LGBT groups in the community
Research Question 8	Safe in classroom	Need diversity in the classroom to deal with queer community and because queer students feel included

	Importance of diverse curriculum	Want students to feel safe in the classroom
	Inclusivity	

### Selective Coding of Open Codes 1

Open code	Axial Code	Selective Coding
Couldn't explore identity at home	Timing of identity exploration	Queer Geography: Inclusivity on College Campuses
Religious family/upbringing prevented exploration		
Explore in college		
Small town upbringing		
Open	Degree of outness	
Safe		
Visible		
Accepting		
Not Hiding		
Faculty and staff are accepting		
Feeling "othered"		
Being outed		
Neutral	Institutional support of queer community is not visible	
Lackadaisical		
Afraid to be too political		
Consequences not considered		
Afraid to lose support if seen to be too inclusive		
Lack of support from University for queer individuals		
Lack of collaboration with queer community		
Resources for queer individuals are not visible		
Isolating	Political reference point (location)	
Insular		
No resources for employees		
No advertisements on campus for queer events		
USI does not want to display support of queer events because they may be seen as "too political"		
Bringing up pronouns has a negative connotation		



Sexuality-related phobias	Inexperience with queer people	
Microaggressions		
Queer is a slur and shouldn't be used	LGBT generation gap	
Difference between younger and older LGBT generation		
Biphobia		
Transphobia		
Lesphobia		
Misogyny		
Professors want students to feel safe in classroom	Disrupting cisheteronormativity in classroom	
Importance of diverse curriculum		
Inclusivity		
Heteronormative curriculum		
Feeling "othered" in the classroom		
Feel othered within the queer community	Otherness within LGBT community	
Biphobia		
Transphobia		
Lesphobia		
Lack of understanding about trans and non-binary identities within the queer community		
Don't feel queer enough		