

Queering Campus: What Can UNCA Faculty and Staff Do To Improve LGBT+ Student Experiences?

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Abstract

Although the University of North Carolina Asheville (UNCA) has a proven track record of being a welcoming school for LGBT+ identified students, there are still improvements that should be made for this university to maintain its reputation as an LGBT-friendly campus and meet the ever-evolving needs of LGBT+ students. With enrollment down by 25%, it is more important than ever for UNCA administrators to make changes on campus that will improve student experiences and satisfaction, particularly for LGBT+ students as they make up a relatively large portion of the campus population. This study presents recommendations for improvements to campus climate regarding LGBT+ diversity, inclusion, and comfort drawn from semi-structured focus groups and in-depth, individual interviews with 23 UNCA students. Student experiences revealed four main areas of concern for which changes are recommended, these included, housing, health & counseling, class environment, and community support. This project works to fill the gap of research and solutions for LGBT+ students by presenting solutions that are accessible and, most importantly, are based on the input and experiences of LGBT+ students themselves.

Introduction

For many students, college is the first opportunity to explore their values and goals away from the influences of home and family. This is especially true for LGBT+ students, who often don't have the space or knowledge to explore their gender and sexual identities earlier. Yet, these students are also less likely than their cisgender, heterosexual (cis het) peers to apply for and attend any college or postsecondary institution (Sansone). Non-heterosexual students are 7% less likely to attend college than their heterosexual peers (Sansone). For transgender people, the chances are even lower with them being 9% less likely to attend than cisgender students (Sansone).

Why do LGBT+ students have such difficulty imagining themselves in higher education? Queer people are often forced to live in isolation from themselves and those around them due to their identities, which effectively isolates them from the kind of social and societal support that cis het students can access without thought. Multiple studies have shown that LGBT+ students are heavily aware that their cis het peers have far more access to support and resources than they do (Graham). "Once they entered the university setting, respondents expressed recognizing that heteronormative students often had representation or support from the university in ways that they did not" (Graham). LGBT+ students aren't truly given space in higher education, so they often must choose between moving into an environment that they know was not created with them in mind or not furthering their education. No one should have to decide between education and safety. Universities need to acknowledge and examine the unique challenges that LGBT+ students face in order to break down as many barriers as possible for these students.

Due to the large number of LGBT+ students that UNCA already attracts, improving LGBT+ experiences could have a positive effect on future university enrollment rates and funding. Improving LGBT+ campus climate is not only beneficial for the health of the university, but it is also vital for improving the quality of life for LGBT+ students. 35% of LGBT+ people have said that their mental health was not good all or most of the time they were in college, an alarming number only made more so when compared to the 11% of non-LGBT people who responded the same (Conron). Poor mental health leads to lower educational outcomes, motivation, and school engagement for LGBT+ students (Sansone) For many of these students, concerns related to their sexuality and gender identities are a matter of life and death. 86.3% of LGBT+ students have experienced some kind of physical assault or harassment due to their identity (Sarna). This number is staggeringly high and something that nearly every LGBT+ student is aware of. We move through our college careers with the knowledge that we are in danger, which deeply affects school performance and social adjustment. It is necessary for change to start at the university level, we cannot wait for larger society to catch up to the needs of marginalized populations. The university campus functions as a microcosm of our societies at large. Tackling difficult and complex issues like LGBT+ inclusion on campus provides a new perspective on how to enact progress across society. Crafting an inclusive campus doesn't only benefit marginalized students, it creates a map for change and growth in the campus community as a whole, the

surrounding Asheville community, and any other space UNCA students occupy outside of school. To grow overall enrollment, retention rates, and student satisfaction, UNCA must take a serious look at what can be done to improve LGBT+ student experiences. This demographic of students is a key factor in the health and longevity of the university. Currently, UNCA is ranked #9 in the Princeton Review's list of LGBTQ-Friendly Colleges. While this is an impressive feat and speaks volumes about what the university has already accomplished for the LGBT+ community, students still feel like there are necessary improvements to be made. Investing in LGBT+ students at UNCA is an investment in the university's core values of diversity and inclusion, innovation, and sustainability.

Literature Review

Very little research has been done on LGBT+ student life or even their presence on campuses and the research that has been done shows mixed opinions on LGBT+ student satisfaction. What is clear is that LGBT+ students have poorer educational outcomes than non-LGBT students even if they don't perform worse than their peers on standardized tests, have lower GPAs, and earn fewer credits while in school (Sansone). The causes of these disparities are complex and vary student by student, making it even more difficult to find solutions. LGBT+ students experience significantly more barriers and stressors than their cisnet peers which deeply affects their academic performance, social life, and health outcomes (Sarna). In recent years, the intersection of the Black Lives Matter movement, attacks on reproductive and trans health rights, and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which has disproportionately affected LGBT+ individuals has compounded the barriers, additional stress, and overall difficulties that LGBT+ students face (Sarna).

Additionally, the majority of existing research focuses on the impact of sexuality on LGBT+ student experiences. Data and knowledge of the unique challenges that transgender and gender non-conforming students face is incredibly limited. With all these factors in mind, it is not surprising that LGBT+ students need extra support from university administrators and faculty to reach their highest potential. When met with a lack of support, the effects can follow students throughout the rest of their lives and careers. Perceptions of discrimination and insufficient social support negatively impact indecision about career development, future earning potential, and overall adjustment to college and professional life (Sarna).

Researchers have found three significant predictors for LGBT academic success. These crucial elements are comfort with campus climate, perceptions of institutional action, and positive perceptions of campus climate (Kilgo). When universities can meet these predictors consistently, LGBT+ students are able to commit greater focus to their academic and professional success. It has been shown that one way to meet these goals is through 10 high-impact educational practices named by the Association of American Colleges and Universities. These practices reported to have a high positive impact on all students' learning and development outcomes include first-year seminars, academic learning communities, collaborative and service learning, and undergraduate

research opportunities. Like most things, the impact of these experiences on LGBT+ students specifically is understudied. However, it is known that students who are least prepared for college or part of historically marginalized populations have greater personal and academic gains from participation in high-impact practices (Kilgo). Studies have also shown that LGBT+ students' likelihood to participate in these practices is directly related to their comfort level on campus as related to their sexual identities (Kilgo). Therefore, the aforementioned predictors of success, which include comfort with campus climate, become even more important when considering how beneficial high-impact practices can be for marginalized students. UNCA has already implemented many of these programs and they are viewed positively by LGBT+ students, signaling a portion of the inclusivity and acceptance that is already present on our campus.

Sample and Methods

To better understand how UNCA students view the campus climate concerning LGBT+ diversity, inclusion, and comfort, 23 students were interviewed in both semi-structured focus groups and in-depth, individual interviews. The interview and data collection process was monitored and guided by my second advisor, Dr. Fabrice Julien of the UNCA Health and Wellness Department. Participants in individual interviews needed to identify as LGBT+, be a current student at UNCA or have graduated from the university in the last 3 years, and be 18 years or older. Demographic information of participants was obtained through written surveys completed prior to interviews. Of the 23 participants, 26% were transgender and/or gender non-conforming, and 52% identified as non-LGBT. Participants represented all class years, GPA levels, and an array of majors. Racial and ethnic diversity among participants was low, this is likely due to the overall racial and ethnic makeup of the UNCA community. Participants reported an array of gender identities, however, the study lacks transfeminine perspectives as no participants identified themselves as a transgender female/woman. Recruitment flyers were posted around campus and shared on both personal and the UNCA Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department social media accounts. Focus group participants were students enrolled in a *Research Methods in Health and Wellness Promotion* class at UNCA and took part in the study as part of an experiential learning activity. Questions asked in interviews assessed students' overall experiences, feelings of comfort on campus, views of the campus climate, and experiences accessing support from the university and its employees. Guiding questions included; *'How, if at all, have your gender/sexual identities affected your college experience?'*, *'Are there settings on campus where you feel less accepted or comfortable presenting as yourself?'*, *'What has the university done to make you feel welcome and comfortable on campus as an LGBT+ student?'*, and *'What do you think the university could do to improve LGBT+ student experience?'*. These were the guiding questions in both individual interviews and focus groups, but additional questions for clarification and elaboration of concepts were asked when needed. Individual interviews were done with one researcher and one participant and lasted 30-60 minutes depending on the participants' length of answers. Focus groups included 8-12 students, with one researcher in the room moderating the discussion and asking questions and another researcher observing from outside of the

room and taking notes. All focus groups lasted 45-60 minutes. Participant answers were transcribed and analyzed using *NVivo* software, allowing for the identification of themes across interviews and secure storage of recordings.

Recommendations for Improvement

Knowing what we know about the immense difficulties that LGBT+ students face throughout their academic and professional lives and the repairable nature of these challenges, it is crucial for UNCA administrators and faculty to take action and set an example for the creation of systems that uplift and celebrate all LGBT+ students. Additionally, as a member of the University of North Carolina system, implementing positive changes puts UNCA in a unique position of affecting change in 15 other universities across North Carolina.

At the root of creating true change within the university is ending campus policies and practices that are based on binary gender principles and employing LGBT+ affirming language across campus. UNCA as a whole is already ahead of many universities in these aspects. Overall, LGBT+ students feel comfortable and safe on our campus in a social and personal sense. However, there are still institutional barriers that are holding us back. Many students have to go out of their way and put immense effort into being respected by their peers and professors. If this exhausting work doesn't happen at the beginning of the semester or their academic career, students often face a semester (or longer) of being misgendered, deadnamed, and invalidated. Additionally, outside of classes covering LGBT+ specific topics, it is rare to hear about LGBT+ issues related to the course. This leads to students feeling disconnected from their classmates and coursework.

Using insight from interviews with UNCA students and existing literature related to LGBT+ campus climate and best practices, recommendations for the improvement of UNCA's campus for LGBT+ students are proposed. These recommendations are split into 4 categories including; housing, health & counseling, class environment, and community support through mentorship.

Housing and Residence Life

In interviews with LGBT+ students, the complaints were most often based on UNCA's housing policies and practices. Current policies fail LGBT+ students, particularly transgender students, because of their binary, exclusionary nature. In August 2013, the University of North Carolina system explicitly banned its colleges from offering gender-inclusive housing. This means that students are required to room with people who were assigned the same sex at birth. There is support across all 16 UNC system schools to overturn this ruling, as it places trans and gender non-conforming students in danger. All gender-queer people that I interviewed reported feeling extreme anxiety over the binary-gendered roommate policy all year, but especially during the housing selection process and move-in time.

Another large complaint among interviewees was the limited access to year-round housing on UNCA's campus. This lack of access often puts students in dangerous situations, as it requires many of them to choose between returning to an unaccepting and potentially unsafe home or being unhoused during school breaks. All LGBT+ students that I interviewed reported feeling deep anxiety, fear, and sadness when they thought about having to leave the college environment during semester and summer breaks. Residence halls, and the experiences that students have within them, possess immense power to both negatively and positively impact overall college experiences and satisfaction. One participant who had lived on campus for 4 years and was in their senior year explained their feelings about having to return home during semester breaks:

"It just feels like a bunch of rocks in my stomach as opposed to butterflies. It's almost like dreading, I just dread it. Like when you know there's an exam coming that you didn't study for."

For transgender students specifically, inclusion in residence halls is not only a matter of comfort and happiness, it comes down to the safety and health of this population. Additionally, UNCA students don't feel like they have the space to challenge or adapt to these exclusionary policies. Students interviewed reported feeling a lack of support, awareness, and empathy from the housing office when trying to resolve gender and sexuality-related housing issues. These issues are only compounded by the fact that it is extremely difficult to find any information about housing policies for LGBT+ students on both the UNCA website and the published housing policy documents. The effects of exclusionary housing policies on LGBT+ students are understudied. However, the studies that have been done make it clear that unsafe and uncomfortable housing situations can be detrimental to the health and success of LGBT+ students. Transgender students often have to settle for unsatisfactory and damaging housing situations because of the lack of options available to them. This decision frequently leads to transgender students having to conceal their identity and feelings of unease and discomfort which contributes to poor mental health and academic outcomes (Pryor). To avoid these feelings and ensure safety, trans students often choose to live in a single dorm or live alone. Meaning they must sacrifice social connection for feelings of safety and security. This difficult decision is only made harder by the fact that LGBT+ are already at a financial disadvantage. Of the students I interviewed, 66% of LGBT+ interviewees were financially independent (paid for over 50% of their living expenses), while only 15% of non-LGBT+ participants were. LGBT+ students simply don't have the resources to pay for their safety and comfort and must put themselves into potentially uncomfortable or unsafe situations. The importance of crafting inclusive living environments for LGBT+ students is only made more clear by the fact that LGBT+ students are more likely than their cisgender peers to live in campus housing, with 59.5% of LGBT+ students having ever lived on campus versus 46.4% of non-LGBT students (Conron).

Although housing policies at UNCA are largely dictated by UNC system policies and politics, there are still actions that UNCA can and should take to improve housing experiences for LGBT+ students. Housing policies tend to align with what society and

cultural norms deem appropriate, with an immense focus on liability concerns rather than what would be best for students. This lack of focus on student needs often leaves transgender and LGB students feeling disenfranchised by the institution's lack of protection and advocacy for them, effectively making students less likely to remain in college. UNCA administrators have the power to combat these feelings of disenfranchisement and craft a housing environment that LGBT+ students feel truly safe and comfortable in.

Increase access to year-round housing options

Having to leave the college environment for semester and summer breaks is a large source of stress and anxiety for LGBT+ students. Currently, there is only one apartment-style residence hall dedicated to year-round housing. This makes it difficult for students to get into and because the only option is apartment-style housing there is a significant financial barrier. UNCA administrators can decrease students' anxiety and make them feel safer outside of the school year by providing more options and greater access to year-round housing. LGBT+ students need greater access to year-round housing because of the fact that many of these students come from unaccepting and potentially unsafe homes. Being forced to return to these homes for breaks halts important identity formation, damages the sense of self, and can be detrimental to both physical and mental health.

Implement LGBT+ living-learning communities

For many LGBT+ students, having a strong sense of community can be the difference between a positive and negative college experience. Providing a space for LGBT+ students to get to know each other and build constructive relationships with people who have similar identities can improve mental health, academic performance, and student likelihood to stay in school. A living-learning community could also help mitigate issues with the university system's binary-gendered roommate policy. Knowing that you are rooming with other LGBT+ students relieves much of the anxiety that comes with having to room with people based on one's sex assigned at birth, while still staying within policy.

Work to remove binary gendered roommate policies

In order to achieve true inclusion for LGBT+ students at UNCA, exclusionary policies like the binary-gendered roommate policy must be overturned. The last time this was attempted was in 2013. The implementation of gender-neutral housing was first denied by then-Chancellor, Holden Thorp, and later supported by UNC trustees before being unanimously denied by the UNC system Board of Governors in August 2013. No attempts to overturn the policy since then could be found. Seeing that the last decision on this issue was made 10 years ago, it is time to reattempt overturning the policy. There now exists more research and knowledge now on the detrimental effects of policies like this for LGBT+ students and the benefits of gender-neutral housing. As of April 1st, 2023, 448 colleges across the country have gender-inclusive housing

(Beemyn), showing ample proof that gender-neutral housing can be beneficial and work for students and universities.

Because the process of overturning a policy like this takes lots of time and work, UNCA should still take some form of action until that happens. It is also recommended that a section about openness to rooming with gender and sexuality minority students be included in the housing preferences survey that students fill out prior to choosing roommates. Making this information visible would ease anxiety for LGBT+ students and allow them to feel safer in campus housing while still adhering to UNC system policies.

Health and Counseling Center

In a 2016 study done at UCLA, only 30% of respondents said that their schools had LGBT+ informed health services (Conron). This number is staggeringly low, but it is not only associated with students at UCLA. In my interviews with UNCA students, the majority of them reported grievances with the university's Health & Counseling Center. The main complaints were that it is understaffed, hard to get appointments at with long wait times once they do get appointments, high turnover with counseling staff which makes it difficult to develop truly therapeutic relationships, and an overall lack of knowledge from providers on LGBT health and issues. One UNCA student who said they went to Health & Counseling 4-6 times a semester reported being misgendered and deadnamed each time they went, despite having their chosen name and pronouns listed on their chart. This deeply affected their likelihood of getting the treatment they need. The student shared, "I want to start taking hormones and I know that they offer that, but I don't feel comfortable talking about it because it doesn't seem like they respect my gender identity."

This feeling of a lack of respect and visibility in Health & Counseling was a common one shared, whether it be in relation to gender-affirming care or general medical care. Another student shared with me that in her first year on campus, she experienced a miscarriage. When she went to Health & Counseling afterward for care she reported "feeling a lot of judgment" from the staff there. I have also experienced microaggressions and judgment from the staff at Health & Counseling that ultimately led to me choosing to find care outside of the university. I was repeatedly misgendered and deadnamed, even after correcting staff and I often had to educate my providers on the issues related to my gender and sexuality that I came to them to treat. These adverse experiences at Health & Counseling were all too common in my interviews with students and go directly against the stated values of Health & Counseling which include, "Staff are health care professionals and educators who listen without judgment and assist students in pursuit physical, psychological, spiritual, and social well-being."

Lack of access to gender-affirming and supportive care has been proven to make students' mental and physical health worse (Dunbar). When left untreated, mental health concerns affect student functioning, including but not limited to, attentional problems, avoidance and skipping of classes and assignments, and decreased grades and academic performance (Dunbar). These concerns are even greater for LGBT+

students who experience higher levels of stress, greater levels of perceived discrimination, and were 8% more than their cishet peers to report current severe psychological distress (Dunbar). Although LGBT+ students more often endorse barriers to on-campus service use, they are also 7% more likely than cishet students to use on-campus health services (Dunbar). Knowing this, the Health and Counseling Center should be the most affirming and accepting place for LGBT+ students on campus.

As a population, LGBT students are more willing to engage in getting mental health care than their cishet peers, they just need to be given access to truly affirmative care (Dunbar). In my interviews, multiple students said that they wished they could use UNCA health services, because of the convenience and reduced cost, but they just didn't feel comfortable doing so. With all of this being said, there are steps that can be taken to make LGBT+ students feel more comfortable and willing to use campus Health & Counseling services.

Increase provider access by outsourcing health programs

Partnerships with third-party providers in the Asheville community could help solve the issue of students having to wait excessive amounts of time for appointments and prevent the breakdown of therapeutic relationships that happens when there is a high turnover rate among staff. In 2019, the American College Health Association released a document of guidelines and discussion points for colleges considering outsourcing their health programs. This document provides a framework of questions that universities should ask themselves and stakeholders in order to expand their healthcare options. Following the guidelines on this document could help UNCA administrators create a more accessible Health & Counseling environment.

Outsourcing college health programs would also provide space and resources for my second recommendation related to UNCA's health and counseling center, the hiring of providers trained specifically in LGBT+ health. The needs of LGBT+ students are unique and complex and meeting those needs requires training and knowledge that general providers simply don't have. When LGBT+ students receive care from someone who works with the student body at large, they often have to educate their providers and come to appointments prepared to advocate for themselves in ways that cishet students do not. Having access to specifically trained, LGBT-affirming providers takes an immense amount of pressure and anxiety off of LGBT+ students, making them more likely to want to use the university Health & Counseling Center and address health concerns before they become crises or major issues.

Require gender and sexuality education courses for all staff

Possibly the most influential improvement that can be made at the UNCA Health & Counseling Center is to require that all staff and faculty take sexuality and gender education courses regularly. UNCA already has an existing sexuality and gender education program, this curriculum could easily be adapted to include LGBT+ health issues and instruction specific to people in healthcare settings. The 2015 National

Transgender Discrimination Survey found that 50% of transgender people have reported having to educate their providers on transgender care (James). This experience is also common among LGBT+ students at the UNCA Health & Counseling Center. Further educating all staff and faculty would take an immense burden and anxiety off of LGBT+ students who access health services on campus, in turn, improving health outcomes and student satisfaction.

Class environment

When asked about their experiences within classrooms at UNCA, overall, students reported feeling accepted in their classes. Students liked that professors often asked for pronouns in class introductions and felt comfortable presenting their opinions and identities in most classes. However, multiple students also reported feeling unwelcome in certain classes and programs on campus, the majority of these programs being STEM related. Students mentioned being spoken over by their white, cisgender, male classmates and professors favoring these students in discussions and assignments. Another common complaint was that many class curriculums were not inclusive of LGBT+ issues and students. LGBT+ student expressed feeling excluded from curriculum in humanities and general education courses. One student, who identifies as asexual, reported feeling “like an incorrect human” in their humanities 124 class when the professor facilitated discussions that implied sex is a fundamental part of being human. All LGBT+ students expressed wishing that more LGBT+ content was included in all classes, not just those whose topics are explicitly related to LGBT+ identities and studies.

Require gender and sexuality education courses for all teaching staff

Professors and faculty play a large role in shaping campus climate and student experiences. Positive or negative experiences with professors can be the deciding factor for many students when they choose to transfer or stay at a college. Because of their scope of influence, professors and faculty have a responsibility to be informed on LGBT+ issues in the classroom and incorporate LGBT+ content into their course content. In order to make this process easier for already overextended professors and faculty, I recommend that UNCA require all employees and instructors to take gender and sexuality education courses that include information on how to incorporate LGBT+ content and make classrooms a more inclusive environment for these students.

Incorporate LGBT+ issues and education into all course content

Including positive representation of LGBT+ people, history, and events in all classes, regardless of department or topic is an essential step in making LGBT+ students feel more included and represented in their education. This also benefits all students, regardless of identity by exposing students to more inclusive and accurate accounts of history, encouraging the questioning of stereotypes about LGBT+ people, and providing space in academia for multiple voices.

LGBT+ Mentorship Program

When UNCA students were asked what they believe the university does well in regard to LGBT+ student experiences, many students mentioned the sense of community that exists on campus. This strong sense of community helps students feel comfortable and welcome on campus and contributes to higher student satisfaction. This also means that LGBT+ students often engage in peer-to-peer mentorship. While this form of mentorship can be extremely beneficial in forming constructive relationships with peers and building a sense of belonging on campus, it also places pressure on students to perform emotional labor that many do not have the capacity for. Much more effective and impactful mentorship relationships can be formed between students and older adults.

Study after study has shown that LGBT+ students can reap incredible benefits from mentorship relationships with adults in their lives. A 2016 study found that LGB students were 2.51 times more likely to graduate college if they had a mentor (Sarna). In a 2019 study done with future LGBT+ health professionals in college, 72% of participants said that having an LGBT+ mentor was important for their own personal development, and 59% reported that it was good for their professional development (Sarna). It is clear that having an adult mentor and role model can be an important factor in promoting success and resiliency in LGBT+ students. Yet, students with marginalized identities are less likely to have mentoring relationships in higher education (Graham). Because of the lack of resources available to and the additional needs of LGBT+ students, they must rely on mentorships to attain access to and navigate institutions of higher education more than their cishet peers must. The social capital and networks required to make educational and professional connections are built on race and class inequalities that function to hold marginalized communities like LGBT+ people out of higher education and professional networks. Mentorship relationships among marginalized individuals work to break down these oppressive structures that hold LGBT+ students back. When a mentorship program is paired with supportive university policies and practices, LGBT+ students are given the most potential for success.

Implementing an LGBT+ mentorship program at UNCA could help improve student satisfaction, mental health, and academic outcomes with relatively low financial cost and effort. With work already being done to reopen the Hyannis House to students, it is the perfect time to establish a mentorship program based in the house. Pairing LGBT+ students with mentors who have similar identities and experiences allows students to have someone with whom they can discuss personal, academic, and professional concerns who understands their perspective and struggles at a deeper level than non-LGBT mentors. "Having a mentor from the LGB community increased perceptions of support among students in learning how to be a functioning member of the community, as well as assisting students with overcoming issues in their lives, increasing well-being, and pathways to success as a college student (Sarna)." One key factor to consider when pairing mentors and mentees is the intersecting oppressions that the two individuals share. Mentoring relationships are most successful when the mentee feels as though the mentor can truly understand what they've been through and

what actions can be most helpful in dealing with adversity. Mentorship programs make LGBT+ student feel more empowered to accept their identities because of the space that they provide for personal exploration and development (Sarna).

On campus LGBT+ mentorship programs have proven successful at multiple colleges. The University of California Los Angeles saw immense success related to their mentorship program and found that participation in the program led to improvements in mental and emotional well-being and increased students' self esteem (Sarna). The health and well-being improvements seen from participation in mentorship programs could also lead to improvements in issues students have with housing and health and counseling. However, for a program to be successful it should be created using input from LGBT+ students and be updated and revised consistently to keep up with the constantly changing issues and needs of LGBT+ students. When asked what topics students wanted to be addressed in mentorship programs, the most common themes were topics related to overall identity and well-being, and managing relationships (Sarna). More specifically, students wanted mentors to address mental health, activism, and intersectional identities within programming and relationships (Sarna).

In order to be most beneficial to LGBT+ students, mentorship should not only focus on LGBT+ issues and identity formation, but also the development and growth of these students as whole people. Along with the additional barriers they face, LGBT+ students also deal with many of the same issues as their cisnet peers. LGBT+ student support should not only focus on supporting their queerness, but also the everyday issues that all college students deal with such as time management, professional development, and mental health.

Additional Recommendations

Conduct a self-study of campus resources and LGBT+ students

A large issue for LGBT+ students at UNCA is the lack of knowledge we have about each other. In order to fully understand the needs of LGBT+ students, administrators must be knowledgeable about their prevalence on campus and perceptions of campus climate. This study has started to investigate that, but in order to get a truly representative sample, surveys should come from the university itself.

Protect students who use a name other than their legal name

Currently, it is relatively easy for students to put a preferred name on their student profile and have that be visible to people across campus. However, student emails are still based on students' legal name at the time they started at UNCA, and even after adding a preferred name, students' legal name is still visible to many staff and faculty. To combat the possibility of microaggressions and discomfort caused by this, the university should institute a process for students to change their email address to align with their true name and to limit the number of people who can see students' legal names when students choose to hide them.

Put additional focus on LGBT+ events and issues on campus

In order to support LGBT+ students in all aspects of their academic and personal lives, UNCA should allocate additional funding to improve and grow LGBT+ organizations and include more LGBT+ programming on campus. In interviews with UNCA students, many mentioned how welcome the campus' LGBT+ friendly programming made them feel. One student interviewed mentioned the pride flag that hung from the front of Ramsey Library, saying "The first time I saw it, I cried". Another student gushed about the drag brunch hosted by Asheville Campus Entertainment at the beginning of the 2023-24 school year. Putting emphasis on LGBT+ identities in campus programming, environment, and overall climate can grow and maintain the sense of community and acceptance that LGBT+ students already report feeling on UNCA's campus.

Conclusions

If LGBT+ student issues are not addressed promptly, it will negatively affect student satisfaction, leading to a further decline in university enrollment and retention rates. Not only, this but LGBT+ students' health and academic outcomes will continue to be negatively affected by the increased stress and barriers that they face daily. UNCA has already worked hard to craft a campus environment that is, overall, an accepting and inclusive space for LGBT+ students. Making additional improvements will only further increase the satisfaction and retention of LGBT+ students and attract even more students to the university. Administrators are in a unique position to cater to these students' needs, and in turn influence change across UNCA's campus, the UNC university system, and any other space that UNCA alums occupy outside of school.

Although creating a campus that is truly and wholly inclusive of LGBT students takes effort and time, it is worth it. Small steps to improve areas such as housing, health and counseling, and class environments and the implementation of an LGBT+ mentorship program are the start of UNCA ensuring its significance for and prioritizing the safety of its current and future queer students. Faculty and administration have the power to shape and change LGBT lives and futures. All it comes down to is the question, 'Are LGBT students worth the money and time it takes to help them succeed and create a world they can thrive in?' The answer to that question will always be a resounding yes. Queer students represent our future, an investment in this population is an investment in the longevity of UNCA as a university and a community.

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations of this study include a lack of diversity among study participants. All individual interviewees were white, assigned female at-birth individuals. Future research should make an effort to get perspectives from LGBT+ students of color to understand how race affects LGBT+ student experiences. It is also important to learn more from trans-feminine UNCA students considering the additional barriers and difficulties they face compared to trans-masculine people due to societal misogyny. Additionally, this

drew from a relatively small sample of students, future research should work to reach more students to get a more comprehensive understanding of experiences.

It is important for UNCA to conduct a study of LGBT+ student experiences and perceptions to fully understand the implications of being a queer person on our campus. By going directly to LGBT+ students for their opinions, UNCA administration can craft solutions that truly and fully address LGBT+ student concerns.

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