

WE'RE HERE AND WE'RE QUEER: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF THE QUEER  
COMMUNITY AT WASHINGTON COLLEGE

BY

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## INTRODUCTION

Growing up in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania — a rural and, overall, very conservative and traditional area — under the guidance of very liberal and open-minded parents made for an interesting upbringing. Though I did not notice it at the time, looking back I realize that the discussion of queerness within my public-school system was severely lacking. I was going into my senior year of high school when gay marriage was legalized in the U.S, and it was not brought up in classrooms at all. I was paying attention to current events, so I was fully aware of queer existence. But no one spoke of LGBTQ issues in my town, and there was certainly never any education surrounding identification or sexuality. It was not until I moved to college and reconsidered the climate of my hometown that I realized how worrisome this lack of queer visibility really is.

Many of my friends from back home moved to college in larger cities like Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. Many of them, after moving out of Lancaster County, came to realize that they identified within the LGBTQ community. It was such an interesting phenomenon, and it really caught my attention. I moved to Washington College, a small private school in rural Maryland. After moving out of Lancaster County, I too eventually came to the realization that I identify as bisexual. I was only able to come to this self-identification after having discussions with other queer-identifying students and learning about sexuality in Communications and Media Studies as well as Sociology courses.

Although finally being able to self-identify was relieving and put my mind at ease, I was still curious as to the timeline of my identification. Why had I not been able to come out as a queer individual back home in Lancaster? What's more, why did I have no idea of my sexuality until arriving at Washington College? Why did my other friends have to wait until moving to

college to be able to identify as queer? Why is queerness so overlooked in rural areas? These questions stuck with me, and they served as the inspiration for the construction of my Senior Capstone Experience. When starting my project, I identified two goals: 1) to analyze geography's impact on queer activism and identity formation, and 2) to examine the campus climate at Washington College and learn about other queer students' experiences on this rural campus.

Over the past few decades there was a migration within the queer community from rural to urban areas, resulting in the separation of queer youth from their families under the premise that they will live happier and more successful lives in urban spaces. Western society and media reinforce these metronormative values on LGBTQ youth rather than making any efforts to challenge these hegemonic ideals. I begin this project with two sets of research questions. First, what is metronormativity, how have Western society and media reinforced metronormative values, and how does this impact queer rural youth? Second, do metronormative values exist in the community at Washington College, are prejudice and discrimination prevalent on campus, and does this have an impact on academic success and mental health?

The main text serving as the background for my thesis is Mary Gray's *Out in the Country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America*. Her ethnographic study of queer rural youth provides valuable insight into the impact that metronormative ideologies have on queer students and their well-being. She follows them in their endeavors to establish queer community and acceptance while identifying the restrictions holding them back. I am also conducting my own study on the campus atmosphere of Washington College, and will thus be pulling from the school's online resources. This will be accompanied by interview and survey data collected from the self-reports and other-reports of queer students on campus. Scholars like

Mary Gray and Jonathan Pryor, who have already done studies on the experiences of queer rural youth, provide me with a jumping off point from which I can construct my own roadmap of research and argumentation.

This project will begin by examining and analyzing the history of metronormativity, how it was constructed, and how it has become a reoccurring narrative within Western culture. The background of metronormativity will then be used to look at Mary Gray's *Out in the Country* and how she found such ideologies to be negatively impactful to rural queer youth. From there I will look at how the lack of discussion surrounding sexuality as a whole has made identifying as queer difficult for students, as well as how misconceptions surrounding the terms "sex" and "gender" have worked against students' self-constructions of gender. I will then examine the ways in which embedded heteronormative and binarized values are prevalent within systems of higher education. And finally, I will analyze the data I gathered from Washington College students to determine if metronormative ideologies exist on Washington College's campus.

## **SECTION 1. THEORY AND METHODS**

As a queer and youth media studies scholar I am analyzing the impact which geography has on activism and identity formation. There are several theories that I am using as the guiding forces for my project. The first, and most prominent component, is queer theory. Queer theory developed as "a reaction to a series of binary distinctions it has questioned, challenged, or outright denied, including male versus female, sex versus gender, nature versus nurture, and heterosexual versus homosexual" (Baker, 2019, p. 1). For this I am pulling from a multitude of queer theorists, such as Judith Butler, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Gayle Rubin, and more.

Additionally, my project is utilizing other paradigms of communication and media studies, including hegemony, interactionism, cultural theory, and youth theory. In order to best

understand the theories which are supporting my project, I will start with the earliest foundational concept before digging into the specifics of the queer paradigm. Thus, while keeping queer theory in mind, I begin by looking at some of the earliest theorists to see how their ideas lend themselves to queer theory today.

### *Hegemony*

To understand how prejudices are developed and formed, it is important to understand one key idea within the paradigm of structuration: that of hegemony. Hegemony is defined as “the relationship of civil society to the state, and the role of ideology in developing and maintaining the dominant position of the ruling classes” (Morton, 2007, 87-88). The concept of hegemony was first discussed in detail in the 1930s within a series of Antonio Gramsci’s prison notebooks (Morton, 2007). Whilst Gramsci never developed a single conscious definition of such a topic, themes and subjects of hegemony can be found littered throughout his writing (Morton, 2007).

Today, scholars like Laughey define hegemony as “a process of ‘give and take’ power struggle between ruling elites...and the masses, in which the rulers offer certain benefits and concessions to their ‘subjects’ in order to win their consent and maintain the political status quo” (Laughey, 2007, 201). It is that idea of maintaining the status quo which so strongly lends itself to queer theory. Applying the concept of hegemony to today’s political context highlights the existence of an elite group made up of individuals with specific identifications, these most commonly being old, white, Christian, heterosexual, cisgendered men. It is those who are considered the most “common” and “normal” who take on the most powerful societal roles. On the other hand, “lives lived beyond confines of normal have been marked as illegitimate and targeted for surveillance, control, correction, confinement, and even elimination” (McRuer,

2014, p. 1). With Gramsci's ideas of hegemony as a theoretical foundation, queer theory recognizes the power struggle between straight-identifying and queer individuals, and how the power elite of heterosexuals subordinates homosexuals and other queer identifying people in order to maintain the status quo of power retainment in American society. The side of effects of such oppression are numerous, but the most notable for the topic at hand is the impact which hegemonic imbalances have on the self-identification and esteem of queer identifying people.

### *Interactionism*

What happens to people, especially queer people, who find themselves being "othered" and marginalized by societal elites? In reference to hegemony and queer existence, "otherized" will be a term used to describe those labelled as outsiders, as abnormal, and as not conforming to cultural standards based on their identities and sexualities. According to Goffman (1963), those who fall outside of the confines of normal begin to analyze their self-presentation and how they interact with people face-to-face. After all, if they are not "normal," then how are others going to see and interpret them? And more importantly, how are they going to be treated by others who are considered by ideological standards to be normal?

Goffman's dramaturgical theory of interactionism grants agency to individuals by providing them with a means of controlling and facilitating impressions (Laughey, 2007). While scholars have agreed that Goffman's theories do not completely represent the experiences of queer people, his work can be used as a basis for examining the impact of hostile social environments on queer rural youth. Those who feel that it is unsafe to outwardly express their sexuality or gender may internalize their real identities and present to others a version of themselves which is more in line with culturally constructed norms. What is the impact on the health and well-being of youth who feel that it is necessary to conceal their true gender

identities? Goffman's theories indicate that such a stressful experience in the process of self-identification can be harmful to young queer individuals, which reinforces why such metronormative standards need to be halted and deconstructed.

### *Cultural Theory*

Not only do interactions influence sense of self and identification, but so does the culture by which we are surrounded. Mills and Barlow's *Reading Media Theory* (2012) explains that, according to cultural theory, people learn what to think of themselves in accordance with a social process, a phenomenon sparked by our direct interaction with culture. Mills and Barlow (2012) explain that culture is a "way in which power is expressed and maintained in society" (p. 428), and it is not only pertinent on an individual level but works on a mass scale to influence the behavior and identity of whole groups.

The question then becomes: how is the identification of queer individuals impacted by their surrounding cultures? And, as it is applicable to my project, how does the location of individuals lend itself to the understanding of their surrounding culture? I am examining the differences between the portrayals of rural and urban living as they relate to the identification of queer individuals. This dichotomy between the rural and the urban was recognized long ago by Raymond Williams in his work *The Country and the City* (1973). Within the first chapter he recognizes how differently interpreted the country and the city are:

On the country has gathered the idea of a natural way of life: of peace, innocence, and simple virtue. On the city has gathered the idea of an achieved centre: of learning, communication, light. Powerful hostile associations have also developed: on the city as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition; on the country as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation. (Williams, 1973, p. 1)

The idea that the city is ambitious and worldly while the country is ignorant and limited is highly applicable to my project, and Williams's ideas will serve as foundational work for recognizing

the stigmatization towards queer life in urban and rural areas. As will be discussed in the next chapter, the dichotomous relationship between the country and the city holds root in the industrial revolution and the expansion of literature and philosophical ideals. Centuries worth of embedded values regarding the country and the city result in the oppressive structure of metronormativity seen today.

### *Queer Theory*

It is important to recognize these theories seeing as, while they are all applicable to queer theory, they have not always been examined through a queer lens. Queer theory gives merit and depth to these theories by showing how they are applicable to a specific population of people. Hegemony, interactionism, and cultural theory give queer theory a basis that it can build from, by providing research that can be expanded upon and used in supportive of queer analysis. These varying fields become stronger when used in tandem, making it imperative to recognize them all in my research. By challenging heteronormative values queer theory, “demands repeated, nearly infinite, reevaluation of the standard that is established or assumed by texts both literary and cultural” (Baker, 2019, p. 1). This paradigm challenges identities which have been for so long considered “normal” and advocates for the acceptance of non-straight sexualities and non-cis gender identifications (McRuer, 2014). Researchers within queer theory have explored a multitude of topics, but few have looked specifically at the impact of geography on activism and identity formation. I will be using the research already conducted in the queer paradigm to give legitimacy to my data and claims, while also looking at how the already developed theories operate when paralleled with geographic impact.

Judith Butler’s text *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity* begins to unravel society’s notions of sex and gender. While often mistakenly used synonymously, these

terms are entirely different when it comes to identification. Sex refers to biological assignment while gender refers to identification with either masculine or feminine ideals (Butler 2006). Butler (2006) argues that “masculine” and “feminine” are not biologically determined but are qualities forced on us by society. There is no “essential” ideal of femininity and neither is there for sex or gender (Butler, 2006). Her work not only challenges society’s definitions of sex and gender but also what is perceived to be “normal.” Thus, Butler lends herself to the deconstruction of the heteronormative society, and her research is used to show how miseducation regarding sex and gender has been detrimental to American culture’s understanding of queer identification.

Gayle Rubin is an influential scholar, and it is critical to examine her work when it comes to understanding the roots of embedded societal fear surrounding sexuality. Our society is trapped in a heterosexual lens of thinking, which is ironic, as according to Rubin we are far too scared to talk about any type of sexuality in the first place. In her article “Thinking Sex: Notes for a radical theory of the politics of sexuality,” Rubin (1992) recognizes that our American society is extremely hesitant when it comes to even talking about heteronormative sex. What happens when a substantial amount of education is not provided on sexuality both as it relates to heterosexual and homosexual identification? How will students begin to understand themselves and self-identify without the proper education to do so? Rubin’s theories and ideas can begin to provide evidence as to where elements of discrimination and prejudice towards queer sex are rooted. With heteronormative sexuality being discouraged and queer sexuality being criminalized, queer youth are left to their own devices to understand their identifications, making their critical periods of self-actualization stressful and painful.

Finally, a theorist whose ideas will be very influential to my project is Jack Halberstam. In his writing, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender bodies, subcultural lives* (2005), he begins to examine the implications and stereotypes associated with rural and urban queer life. Halberstam (2005) coined the term metronormativity, which he defines as a term that “reveals the conflation of ‘urban’ and ‘visible’ in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities...The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative” (36). His work identifies the societal trend Raymond Williams described so long ago: that country life is associated with isolation and ignorance while the city is seen as being liberal and full of opportunity. This idea has wound its way into queer theory by detailing the appeal for queer migration from rural to urban settings. The key, however, will be to not only identify why and how this narrative is occurring, but how to disrupt it and offer interventions for societal reform.

Throughout my paper I will be frequently using the term queer to describe those whose sexualities and gender identifications defy what has been deemed “normal.” The reason why myself and many other theorists choose to use the word “queer” is because there is a multitude of sexualities and gender identifications that are not included in the label of LGBT (Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender). This term does not give recognition to pansexuality, asexuality, gender-fluidity, non-binary identification, and numerous other identifications that are also marginalized and discriminated against by hegemonic values. To use the term LGBT would be to ignore the vast amount of people who have been suppressed by instilled cultural values on the basis of their gender and sexuality. Therefore, the term “queer” will be used throughout this research as an umbrella term to describe any and all genders and sexualities that fall outside of the gender binary and heteronormativity.

As queer theory advances other paradigms have begun to take notice and apply queer themes in their conversations. There is much research being done examining the lives of queer youth and students to prove the prejudice and discrimination they face and how this impacts their well-being. Queer and youth media studies scholar Mary Gray discusses this exact subject in her book *Out in the Country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America* (2009). It is due to her ethnographic study on queer youth in rural America that Mary Gray is the foundational scholar of my project. After advocating for queer equality and visibility in urban landscapes, Gray (2009) realized that queer rural youth face dilemmas when they, “rely on similar strategies of visibility and assertions of difference deployed by their urban peers” (3). The strategies employed for queer activism in urban landscapes do not work in rural spaces. Thus, Gray offers theories and ideas of how such change can be constructed. These ideas combining youth and queer theory operate as the main paradigm of my project.

### *Theoretical Combination*

The importance of these theories must be understood as connecting and branching between one another in order to be most beneficial to the foundations of my project. When used in tandem they develop the following premise for the basis of my research: As a result of hegemonic values, the marginalization of queer sexualities and genders results in the oppression of queer individuals by those in positions of authority. Knowing that their identifications are not widely accepted by cultural values, queer people struggle in their self-identification and are forced to alter the ways in which they present themselves to others. The cultures embedded within geographic areas dictate urban centers as more welcoming environments and rural areas as more oppressive and ignorant, meaning that queer people in rural landscapes struggle more than their urban counterparts to outwardly identify. The miseducation of sex and gender, the lack

of discussion regarding sexuality, and the instilled beliefs of rural areas make queer identification difficult and stressful — especially for queer rural youth, for whom critical periods of self-understanding and actualization are so important to their well-being and success.

### *Methodology*

With the goals of my project in mind, it is crucial to analyze the methods which will be applied to my research. To start, given that my research is based in the critical paradigm, I will be utilizing inductive reasoning in my process of making claims. To give validity to my argument I need to start with the observation that there was a surge in queer migration from rural to urban areas. We must begin by understanding that there are clear implications for the queer community that are dependent upon their geographical location in the United States. Mary Gray defines this phenomenon in her explanation of metronormativity, seeing it as, “the peculiar tendency to conflate the urban with visibility and sexual enlightenment that ‘reveals the rural to be the devalued term in the urban/rural binary governing the spatialization of modern U.S sexual identities’” (2009, 10). This phenomenon must first be recognized in order to accurately criticize this societal mindset and begin to deconstruct it. It is for this reason that inductive reasoning will serve my project best, as it will allow me to make “claims or general interpretations about the communication [I] have observed (Merrigan & Huston, 2015, 53). Stigmatization of queer identification — without a doubt — exists, and my research will find its foothold from this sociological observation.

As my project is grounded in the critical paradigm and seeks to not only identify but to propose interventions for societal injustices, I will be putting forth reformist claims in defining the purpose of my study. This kind of claim “provides a framework for understanding power inequalities as the means of promoting social change” (Merrigan & Huston, 2015, 57). The first

component of a reformist claim is to identify a flaw in the existing social system, and I have carefully selected my sources knowing that they will provide me with the data and evidence needed to identify cultural flaws. The second component to a reformist claim is recognizing that there are negative consequences resulting from the currently standing societal structure. I am certainly taking this approach to my project, as I am examining how geographical location impacts students' identities, success, and mental health. These components will work as the undercurrent for answering: Does Washington College provide a safe space for its queer students? By not only evaluating societal injustices but also recognizing the potential for harmful consequences, reformist claims will serve best as the foundations for my work.

I am, however, also using interpretive claims as part of my research. These claims will surface when I begin to examine Washington College's community through ethnographic means. Merrigan & Huston (2015), explain that when it comes to this type of claim, "(the) goal is not only to explain how members of a culture share their interpretations of reality, but to give voice to and represent members of marginalized cultures" (57). I will be looking at the opinions and experiences of queer students on campus to identify how safe this location is for LGBTQ students. How do the views which these students have about Washington College correlate to signify that changes need to be made? And of course, my goal in all of this is to give voice to a suppressed culture. With this in mind, ethnographically interpretive claims will also be a part of my study.

When it comes to data, I am taking advantage of multiple types of data collection. The first is textual data. First, I am collecting research done by other academic scholars engaging in queer theory and examining our societal structure. These articles and sources come from a multitude of time frames, seeing as research was needed to theorize how methodology has come

to exist, as well as research identifying how it is impactful to queer rural youth today. Sources discussing geographical impact on queer identification were collected mostly from within the 2000s or 1990s. I am also examining the Washington College's website to see how the school presents itself and how opportunities for engagement with queer organizations and clubs are presented to any interested students.

The next type of data collection that I will be using will be in the form of self-reports, and this will largely be accomplished with the use of surveys and interviews. Surveys are going to be extremely valuable in reaching out to the campus population to gather data on a macro-level (Merrigan & Huston, 2015). This secured anonymity will also allow me to gather information from students who are not publicly "out" as members of the queer community. They can safely answer questions and provide their views on the school without having to disclose their identity. Interviews will be beneficial because, for those who are interested in sharing their experiences, I can go more in-depth and talk about critical moments which students have gone through that have influenced their time on this campus.

In these surveys and interviews I will also engage in data collection through other-reports. This type of data is collected "by asking people to report their perceptions of another person's behavior, beliefs, or characteristics" (Merrigan & Huston, 2015, 68). How have the behaviors and comments made by professors on this campus impacted the success and well-being of queer students? How do the attitudes and beliefs of peers impact the safety of queer students on this campus? By engaging in other-reports I will be able to analyze how such communicative acts influence queer students, the receivers of those behaviors.

Several data collection settings are being employed to gather such evidence. First, I have used the Washington College library, catalogue, and databases in order to gather academic

articles, therefore engaging in archival research. Such data will allow me to see what other scholars have said and researched on the subject so that I may engage with their texts and use them as supporting evidence for my own argument. The Washington College website itself also serves as an archive for me, as that is where I will find most of my information on EROS and SAGE, Washington College's two student-run queer organizations.

Finally, conducting interviews will take place in what Merrigan and Huston (2015) define as laboratory settings; although, rather than being in an actual laboratory, we will make use of the library. This will allow me as the researcher to have control over the setting and to better facilitate the conversation in order to gather critical data. When it comes to interviews, audio recordings will be most beneficial, as I can then transcribe the conversations, so I know exactly what was said. In addition to this, notes regarding body language and facial expressions will also be helpful in examining the attitudes of the students. Once again, such information will be safely stored and available only to me.

When it comes to conducting surveys and interviews, the strategies that I am using for data collection will be slightly different. For my surveys I will use stratified random sampling to gather information from the campus-wide population. When it comes to interviews, I want to talk with students who specifically define themselves as part of the queer community on campus. For this reason, purposive sampling will be employed so that I can reach my target demographic.

Given that I want to analyze the current climate at Washington College and how it impacts the success of queer-identifying students, a cross-sectional study will be the most useful to my research. This kind of study is "a sample of data collected at one point in time...used to draw inferences about the research questions" (Merrigan & Huston, 2015, 75). This kind of study will allow me to select data from this single point in time to analyze the current atmosphere

which queer students are living in. It provides focus to my project and makes it influential to our current social culture. In addition, by utilizing different data sources and settings for collection, I am implementing the concept of triangulation. Merrigan and Huston (2015) define this as a form of mixed methods research in which the use of “multiple sources, settings, data collection strategies, and so on will compensate for the inherent weaknesses of each individual method” (76). This type of approach will ensure vibrancy in my data and research so that if there are points which are lacking in one area, they may be further supported and reinforced in another. Triangulation will make my research richer and stronger so that it is more persuasive to readers and harder to debate by other scholars.

The implementation of such methods will allow me to construct an impactful project that will hopefully lead to societal change and aid in the deconstruction of our heteronormative society. By pulling from many different strategies and research approaches, my hope is to add more validity and concreteness to my research findings, so that they can be understood and built upon by others.

## **SECTION II. METRONORMATIVITY AND ITS IMPACTS**

In her book *Out in the Country: Youth, media, and queer visibility*, Mary Gray uses the term metronormativity. According to Halberstam (2005), metronormativity “reveals the conflation of “urban” and “visible” in many normalizing narratives of gay/lesbian subjectivities...The metronormative narrative maps a story of migration onto the coming-out narrative” (p. 36). In other words, over the past few centuries the narrative of a “queer migration” has been constructed, detailing the journey of misunderstood and oppressed queer people in rural areas moving to urban spaces where they are immediately successful and accepted. In her studies, Gray found that this phenomenon is one of the most prominent factors

contributing to hostile social environments for queer rural youth. It is not enough to only understand what metronormativity is and why it is impactful. Seeing as the goal of this study is to deconstruct metronormativity, we must conduct an in-depth examination of its historical roots. Only then can its effects be recognized and disrupted. This starts by looking at the development of the term “Normal.”

McRuer (2014) explains that “normal” came into being during the 1840s to describe attributes “constituting or conforming to a type of standard; regular, usual, typical; ordinary, (or) conventional” (p. 1). It was a valuable term at the time, as philosophers and scientists were dedicated to categorizing not only objects and animals, but people (McRuer, 2014). “Over the course of the nineteenth century, statistical measurement became an imperative: not only *could* human characteristics be overserved and plotted on graphs and charts, but they *should* be, in order to identify (and potentially correct) that which was abnormal (McRuer, 2014, p.1). The attributes which were determined to be “normal,” when combined, made up what can be considered the hegemonic ideal. To refer to a term mentioned in the introduction, hegemony is defined as “the relationship of civil society to the state, and the role of ideology in developing and maintaining the dominant position of the ruling classes” (Morton, 2007, p. 87-88). Thus, hegemony and philosophers’ ideas of “normal” worked together to dictate that the dominant class of society’s categorical hierarchy are white, cis, straight, Christian, upper-class males. Otherwise known as the “mythological norm” (McRuer, 2014, p. 3).

Thus began normalization, the “widespread production of knowledge and discourse about those who were ‘abnormal’” (McRuer, 2014, p. 1). With the industrial revolution came advanced technologies and the ability to quickly print and spread literature. Philosophers took advantage of the ease of printing to easily spread false ideologies dictating who qualified as normal. Such

pieces of literature were used in defense of terrible atrocities, like colonization and slavery, and operated as the basis of prejudice and discrimination against “others.” As for queer people, “the relocation of homoeroticism into...quasi-ethnic, nucleated, sexually constituted communities is a consequence of the transfers of population brought by industrialization. As labourers migrated to work in cities, there were increased opportunities for voluntary communities to form” (Rubin, 1992, p. 156). Homosexuality was becoming more visible in urban centers, setting the foundation for metronormativity. Urban centers were becoming recognized as diverse spaces in which “abnormal” attributes could pass undetected beneath the demands of industrialization.

Rural sociology, a field which blossomed shortly after the modernization of the industrial revolution, served as a means of studying “the social organization and social processes that are characteristic of geographical localities where population size is relatively small and density is low” (Summers & Buttel, 2001, p. 1). Two points of view emerged from such a practice. First, the glorification of small “village life” and the virtue of its pastoral people (Summers & Buttel, 2001). Rural communities were beginning to be viewed as set apart and pure from the otherwise industrially corrupted cities. The second viewpoint was the superiority of urban centers as technological and organizational phenomenon, which made the values of rural communities seem backwards in comparison (Summers & Buttel, 2001). These ideologies persisted for centuries, dictating assumptions surrounding urban and rural life. As for queer identifying individuals, “Capitalism’s mobilizing forces reorganized same-sex desire into a visible and viable social identity. Masses of young, single individuals discovered new erotic and economic opportunities as they migrated from farms to cities at the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, crescendoing in the post-World War II era” (Gray, 2009, p. 6).

As sociological practices came into being, this bias towards urban centers persisted and dictated geographical areas of study. Stone (2018) recognizes that when studies of queer people began, the emphasis was immediately placed on urban spaces. The term “Bicostality” summarizes this phenomenon, explaining that in queer studies, “attention is placed on cities like New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and...Chicago” (Stone, 2018, p. 3). These locations became “imaginary homelands” for queer people, and it was established as almost common sense that in order to thrive as a queer person, one must live in these urban spaces (Stone, 2018, p. 3). Even outside of sociological studies, scholars believe that the innovations and cultural phenomenon of metropolitan areas make them the prime location for study. Seeing as queer theory is such a young discipline and is working from the historical practices of other fields, it is no wonder that queerness in rural locations is vastly underrepresented in theory and practice.

Stone (2018) recognizes that another factor contributing to urban bias in sociological and queer studies is the “convenience, familiarity, and pre-existing social networks” that are available in urban spaces” (p. 10). For scholars, it is so much easier to analyze and explore communities that clearly already exist, rather than to go into rural areas and search for communities to study. Thus, queer theory and rural studies have become marginalized practices within sociological and communications disciplines. To an up and coming scholar interested in pursuing queer theory, what is the benefit of studying rural areas when there is so much to be found in urban settings? Unfortunately, this geographical bias in academic research has set a precedent in Western societal values. If scholars are not discussing the existence of queer individuals in rural spaces, then how can those people be recognized by the American public?

This urban bias is seen expansively in research studies. When looking into the mental health of queer identifying men, Rubin (1992) found that hardly any research had been done on

queer men living in rural areas. A study done on the relation between population density and mental health among queer men supports this sentiment, saying, “far less is known about GBM (gay/bisexual men) living outside of urban centers. One of the primary reasons for this is that it is logistically challenging to study non-urban GBM due to geographic dispersion across rural areas and relative invisibility of sexual minority individuals outside of urban settings” (Cain et al., 2017, p. 353). In “Farm Boys and Wild Men,” Bell (2000) recognizes how symbols and values have been used to contextualize rural communities. Throughout queer literature, urban sites have been the main focus for sexual identity and community formation. Queer invisibility starts when scholars refuse to explore geographical areas that are not immediately beneficial to them. In turn, without any academic literature to support them, queer individuals go unrecognized in rural spaces, and ignorance towards LGBTQ populations is sparked in areas where there is a clear lack of queer discussion.

Urban bias alone cannot be considered the driving force of metronormativity. Naturally, such an ideology is grounded in deeply hegemonic values of heteronormativity that have set precedents within American values. As tensions between the United States and Russia began to rise post-World War II, so did the idea of national heterosexuality (Berlant & Warner, 1998). Berlant and Warner (1998, p. 549) explain national heterosexuality as the, “mechanism by which a core national culture can be imaged as a sanitized space of sentimental feeling and immaculate behavior, a space of pure citizenship.” In a time when alliances were being tested and Communists were being hunted amongst the American population, the possibility of being perceived as “un-American” threatened social standing and acceptance amongst other Americans. There was an overall societal pressure to conform to standards of citizenship, which included long-standing heteronormative values. To identify as anything other than heterosexual

or to go against the gender binary meant, in the nation's eyes, identifying with the enemy. The anti-gay fight and the anti-Communist fight were combined and reinforced. For example, "In 1977, Norman Podhoretz wrote an essay blaming homosexuals for the alleged inability of the United States to stand up to the Russians. He thus neatly linked the anti-gay fight in the domestic arena and the anti-communist battles in foreign policy" (Rubin, 1992, p. 147).

With the tensions surrounding identification and the push to be model U.S citizens in rural spaces, metropolitan spaces became areas where queer undergrounds could thrive. Spaces such as bars and clubs were established with the intent of hosting homosexuals (Stone, 2018). This culture was the result of new forms of capitalism, wage labor, and urbanization which came to fruition after World War II "which facilitated the emergence of gay and lesbian social life" (Stone, 2018, p. 2). While urban spaces became locations where queer individuals could pass under the radar of capitalism, queerness was being condemned in rural areas. Such locations clung to the hegemonic ideals of national heteronormativity that were so embedded into them (Smith & Mancoske, 1997). The desire to be upstanding traditional citizens of the United States permeated the mindsets of those within rural communities and resulted in low tolerance towards any qualities that went against the norm.

The size and population scale of urban populations allowed for queer individuals to live almost undetected. On the other hand, one of the most common traits of rural communities are the small-town atmospheres where everyone knows one another. People in these small towns are closely monitored, and any deviant behavior is condemned (Rubin, 1992). Most towns were found to have largely conservative political climates which place an emphasis on "traditional and moral" standards of living (Smith & Mancoske, 1997). For individuals who identify as queer, this can mean living in an environment in which it is not entirely safe to openly identify with

queer sexualities or genders. “Southern religiosity, surveillance, and Southern conventions against speaking about disreputable behavior may produce a toxic-closet condition of inarticulation” (Stone, 2018, p. 8). Stone recognizes that even beyond simply identifying as queer, these hegemonically reinforced communities make it difficult to even begin having discussions regarding identification. Rural spaces seem to be far more hesitant to break away from traditional ideologies and the concept of heteronormative sexuality, whereas urban spaces have allowed for the formation of communities in which queerness is accepted and less closely monitored. From this brief history, it is clear that metronormative ideals were established based on centuries worth of scholarship based in hegemonic and heteronormative values.

The question remains: why is metronormativity reinforced? If such a mindset can be so damaging to queer identification in rural areas, then why does it seem like nothing is being done to combat such a stereotype? The “hegemonic norm,” which dictates what human qualities are abnormal, also determines what kind of people are kept in power. One of the major reasons for the continuation of metronormative ideas is the solidification of power dynamics. McRuer (2014) recognizes that power is at work almost everywhere, and the attainment of power dictates who are the oppressed and who are the oppressors. “Power is at work everywhere, constructing — literally materializing — normal and abnormal subjects” (McRuer, 2014, p. 2). When it comes to queer theory, those in influential positions with “normal” identifications aim to suppress LGBTQ populations so that they may remain in power. Heteronormative ideology is reinforced to subordinate those who do not identify with the social norm, and heterosexuality is made to seem like the only option for identification. “Heterosexuality may not be a ‘preference at all, but something that has had to be imposed, managed, organized, propagandized, and maintained by force” (Cole & Cate, 2008, p. 30). For so long Western culture has led people to

believe that heterosexuality is the only “normal” option when that is certainly not the case. It is simply that those with sexualities that are not heteronormative have been suppressed and silenced to the point of being almost unrecognizable, especially in small rural communities where hegemonic norms are already so heavily reinforced.

Metronormativity has become so heavily embedded in Western culture that it’s visible in many media outlets and entertainment platforms. While often well meaning, media which aim to celebrate queer identification often only further otherize the LGBTQ experience. The celebration of urban and rejection of rural in queer media further reinforce the queer migration and make it seem like the solution to queer discrimination. Bell (2000) identifies the labels often placed on queer figures in media, such as the “rustic sodomite,” the “idyllic Eden,” and the “radical fairies” (p. 1). “According to the mainstream media and popular prejudice, the marginal sexual worlds are bleak and dangerous. They are portrayed as impoverished, ugly, and inhabited by psychopaths and criminals...Attempts to counter negative propaganda with more realistic information generally meet with censorship, and there are continuous ideological struggles over which representations of sexual communities make it into popular media” (Rubin 162). This is the mindset which centuries of prejudice and discrimination have embedded into Western Culture.

Overall, metronormativity has made urban spaces seem far more appealing for queer existence than rural areas, resulting in an increase in queer migration over the past few decades. Rubin (1992) claims that the lesbian and gay territories established in urban spaces mean that sexually motivated migration has become a sociological phenomenon. Jerke (2011) agrees, saying, “It is popularly believed that queer culture and identity can only be situated in an urban geography — hence the concept of ‘queer metronormativity’” (p. 268). What does this mean for

queer rural youth? The promise of successfully moving to an urban space is almost impossible. “Migration is expensive. Transportation costs, moving expenses, and the necessity of finding new jobs and housing are economic difficulties that sexual migrants must overcome. These are especially imposing barrier to the young, who are often the most desperate to move” (Rubin, 1992, p. 162). The migration narrative paints a scene in which queer youth move from rural to urban areas and are immediately successful in their new lives, a promise which is very intriguing to students and young adults. But the reality is much harsher than that, and queer students are misled by these metronormative promises, as they do not have the financial independence to feasibly make such a transition in their lives.

Queer rural youth who do not have the means of moving to an urban area where their sexuality and gender identification can go unnoticed are forced to conceal their identities in rural areas where hegemonic ideals persist. Thus, queer identifying people become invisible in rural communities. Smith and Mancoske (1997) found that because of the geographical isolation of rural areas, many community members who so heartily believe in hegemonic principles attempt to deny the existence of queer people at all. “Sociologist D’Lane Compton (2018) recalls that responses to LGBTQ life in Texas often include disbelief that many queer people live in Texas or in the South; yet the Williams Institute (2016) estimates that over 600,000 LGBTQ people live in Texas” (Stone, 2018, p. 632). This ignorance towards queer populations in southern states shows how sexualities and gender identities are invalidated, forced into hiding, and go largely unrecognized.

Indeed, I’ve witnessed and felt queer invisibility in my own life. For example, over the summer when my aunt asked me about the topic of my thesis, and I explained it to her, she looked at me with disbelief, saying, “Are there really... ‘those people’ there?” What she doesn’t

know is that there are populations of queer identifying people in Lancaster County, but they are unable to openly identify and express their sexualities because of people like her who live under the guise of queer invisibility. What results is the following: “From society’s refusal to acknowledge homosexuality as a valid part of the human experience stems the most destructive aspect of oppression, the fact that it becomes internalized and affects the self-image of the oppressed” (Altman, 1993, p. 71). It is Altman’s revelation here that has me so concerned. How is this constraint on the construction of self-image impacting our queer youth? This is the background of metronormativity that must be accepted and understood before moving forward. To see how metronormativity has been proven to impact queer youth, I will next look into Mary Gray’s work *Out in the Country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America* to examine the main consequences which such restricting biases have on identity formation.

### **SECTION 3. MARY GRAY’S *OUT IN THE COUNTRY*: WHAT WE KNOW OF THE RURAL QUEER YOUTH EXPERIENCE**

From the start of my study, Mary Gray’s *Out in the Country: Youth, media, and queer visibility in rural America* has served as a guiding force for my research. Gray (2009) grew up in a small, rural area of California and then moving to college in a large urban center; such a life gave her a unique perspective of queer identity formation. She theorizes that living in simple and isolated places could show how mediated rural identities are, and she believes that such a lifestyle has thus far been vastly underrepresented and deserves study. “Such communities produce far more complex, dynamic experiences and expressions of sexuality and gender than characterizations about rural America lobbed from the Left or the Right” (Gray, 2009, xi). Gray’s words support the idea that simply studying urban spaces is not enough to fully

understand queer existence. Sociologists and Communications scholars need to begin examining rural communities if they are to fully understand the formations of sexuality and gender in queer youth.

Her writing points out the flaws within the centuries worth of ideology and biases towards rural centers, and she identifies the specific variables which make queer existence difficult for young people living in normal areas. Her writing sees through the metronormative standards that have been constructed and defies the belief that queerness is nonexistent in rural areas. She condemns metronormativity, saying, “keeping cities as the unquestioned center of our inquiries belies the reality that we have barely scratched the surface of the social terrains that warrant our intellectual and political attention” (Gray, 2009, xiv). In her writing, Gray (2009) outlines the following goal: “As a media scholar, I set out to gather the details of rural young people’s everyday negotiations of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender identities and engagements with mass and new media, through informal conversations, extensive interviews, and tagging along to see what I might see out in the country” (xiv). Her introduction follows with a bit of background and information regarding the specific aspects of her research, while the following chapters detail anecdotes and events which took place in her ethnographic research. All points which she presents work together to show the prejudices and false beliefs that have been constructed as a result of metronormative standards.

One very important aspect of rural life that Mary Gray addresses is queer visibility in rural areas. She explains that in a meeting with several students from Berea College, she asked them about their experiences with political lobbying. They laughed, and one boy explained a past experience they had with their representative. The student explained that when he and several others visited Representative Napier’s office, “He let me and a couple other guys into his office

and then started throwing Bible quotes at us, saying we'd been badly influenced by TV and the Internet... Then, he tells us he doesn't have to be educated about LGBT issues because there aren't any gays living in Berea" (Gray, 2009, p. 2). Such an instance is a prime example of queer invisibility among rural communities. People in positions of authority and governmental stature such as Napier live under the ignorant guise that queer people simply do not live in rural communities, as has been dictated by long-standing urban bias in culture and media.

In this instance, the students' LGBT Lobby Day is an example of how politics of visibility are used as a force for change. Students gathered on the steps of the State Capitol Building to combat Representative Napier's discriminatory language (Gray, 2009). However, the number of students participating wasn't very large, and Representative Napier employed combative and negative language against the students in front of news crews (Gray, 2009). Such an event in a larger urban area may have proved effective, as urban queer students have the ability to mobilize in large numbers. But living in such small isolated towns means that there are a small number of queer identifying individuals, and what's more, a smaller number of queer individuals who are willing to declare their identity on the steps of the capitol building, knowing that they will most likely be met with oppression and prejudice. This is where queer students in rural areas are left at a disadvantage. Their efforts and mobilization are extremely important and valuable, but if rural queer invisibility is maintained and biases are left unchecked, then their efforts will not be enough to combat the suppressive language of authoritative figures. Metronormative standards are to blame for such deeply engrained biases and ignorance towards queer existence in smaller and more isolated parts of the country.

The creation of queer invisibility in rural areas is the result of the privileging of queer identities. Gray recognizes Eve Sedgwick's work on queer identification, saying, "Visibility

operates as a binary: in order for someone to be visible, to ‘come out,’ there must always be a closet *someplace* where others clamor or struggle to get out” (Gray, 2009, p. 4). Whether purposefully or unknowingly, by praising urban centers for their industrialization and organization rural areas have been made the narrative closet of the American experience. Urban centers cannot exist as supposed queer safe havens without an opposing place from which to escape. Thus, at the misfortune of queer identifying youth who grow up in such areas, the self-fulfilling prophecy of queer intolerance has been thrust upon rural landscapes for the benefit of large urban centers. The more this false narrative is reinforced, the more rural mindsets are solidified in their conservative and biased ways, condemning queer individuals who defy the societal norms that have long been established. However, examining these biases, “opens the door to critique the privileging of some queer identities over others that the politics of gay visibility can produce” (Gray, 2009, p. 4). Once we can begin to recognize the foundations for such internalized intolerance, we can begin to combat it, but we must first recognize that such biases do in fact exist.

In addition to queer invisibility, ignorance towards queer experience and the incompleteness of critical identity theories lead to miscommunication regarding queer identity formation. While done in good faith and with efforts to explain the formation of identities, most theories previously developed do not account for the unique living situations that queer youth find themselves in. Erik Erikson’s work, for example, overly simplifies the process which adolescents go through and how sexuality plays a role in their identity formation. “The premise of Erikson’s work is that adolescence is a socially sanctioned life stage of “normative crisis” in which individuals explore and, eventually, integrate facets of their identities, including sexual desires, into a coherent sense of self” (Gray, 2009, p.18). Under this model, the coming out

process is composed of simple linear stages that culminate in a queer individual who is confident in themselves and who is respected and accepted by their community. While his theories may be a good start, Erikson's ideas surrounding the identity formation process for youth are not complete enough and do not take into account the necessary factors for summarizing queer identity formation.

Gray (2009) argues that a way to complete these theories on identity formation is to include and consider the impact which adults have on adolescent identity formation. "Studying rural queer-youth identities requires critical scholars of youth culture to complicate youth-centered research models to account for adult's active participation in the construction of rural queer-youth identity and community" (Gray, 2009, p.21). Growing up, queer youth interact with a number of different adults and figures of authority such as parents, teachers, principals, coaches, religious figures, and youth group leaders. The attitudes and values held by these adults, when forced upon youth, can have a major impact in how comfortable and safe they feel in not only identifying their gender or sexuality but in making their self-construction publicly known.

Gray (2009) goes on to recognize that queer-youth identities operate more strongly along the premises comprising Erving Goffman's dramaturgical process; she says that queer-youth identities are performative, and that adolescents take in socially measured and mediated experiences as influential aspects of the identity construction process. This puts a new perspective on queer identity formation, and it separates self-construction from the conceptions people have of queer identity construction in urban centers. "I work against privileging youth experience in ways that could inadvertently essentialize queerness as a stable state of being that some youth possess. Instead, I legitimize rural young people's claims to queer identities as, by definition, always more than "just a phase" or "experimentation" while questioning the

presumption that identities ever start with or settle down to rest in the hands of individuals” (Gray, 2009, p. 21). This new way of thinking about identity formation removes it from the linear process which Erik Erikson previously constructed. While his process is straight forward and unquestioning of the environment in which people are living, Mary Gray takes into account that geographical location, culture, and socialization are influential to how identities, including sexuality and gender, are informed.

The problem is not that queer rural youth are unwilling to attempt to challenge societal mindsets and promote activism and community amongst their rural communities. In fact, the students with which Mary Gray interacted were all very motivated to make strides in queer acceptance and were willing to hold their ground against otherwise intimidating and power-holding authoritative figures. “LGBT-identifying youth, contrary to popular narrative of escape to urban oases, stand their ground to name their desire and flesh out their local meaning” (Gray, 2009, p. 3). The problem is that American culture has constructed a metronormative narrative and societal mindset that encourage the belief that queer people simply don’t exist in rural areas, and if they do, they are meant to migrate to urban centers. Queer youth are already making strides in efforts to organize and educate in regard to queer experience and identity formation. For example, Mary Gray (2009) recalls an instance in which students from Boyd County High School in Ashland, Kentucky submitted a petition for the formation of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) organization. When they were not permitted for the formation of such an organization, they met outside of school grounds, and they persisted in their efforts, appealing time and again for a GSA at their school (Gray, 2009).

The next step is to challenge and refute the cultural hegemonies that have been built under centuries worth of biases. To see how identity formation has been made complicated and

restrictive for queer identifying students, we will next examine how sexuality has been so misconstrued by adults and by American systems of education.

#### **SECTION 4. PROTECT THE CHILDREN! WESTERN CULTURE'S AVOIDANCE OF SEXUALITY**

The neglect of queer identifications begins when we avoid discussing even heteronormative sex, which follows the social “norm.” By making sex such a taboo topic, schools are preventing students from beginning their self-identification. How can queer students begin to understand their sexuality if heterosexuality, which is more culturally accepted based on hegemonic ideologies, is hardly ever discussed? First, we must consider the heteronormative structure that we live in. Thanks to the “mythological norms” designed centuries ago, we believe people experience what can be understood as compulsory heterosexual identification. In Rich’s (1980) celebration of lesbian existence, she explains that “the assumption... (is) that women are ‘innately sexually oriented’ toward men... that the lesbian choice is simply an acting-out of bitterness toward men” (p. 632). It can be assumed based on contingencies of American culture that compulsory heterosexuality is influential to men as well, and that they can only be attracted to women. Such a bias towards homosexual experience operates as the basis for heteronormativity.

McRuer (2014) explains, “Feminist and queer theory more generally began to rename ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ as heteronormativity in order to convey the ways in which technologies of normalization operate not simply through logics of repression or compulsion but through forms of power that privilege, naturalize, and institutionalize heterosexuality” (p. 3). As mentioned in the Introduction, normalization is based on the achievement of power; populations are suppressed and discriminated against so those whose qualities are considered “normal” may

have control over American culture and politics. Berlant and Warner (1998) argue that it is because of these cultural mindsets that queer theory must take a step out of sociology, as the field of study has operated far too long under the premise of heteronormative ideologies. Based on the history of sociological practices, “the heterosexual couple is...the reference or the privileged example of sexual culture” (Berlant & Warner, 1998, p. 548). The nuclear family, comprised of a man as the husband and a woman as a wife, has been taught as the social norm in the construction of family units. Additionally, this formation of family units has long been taught in schools, and students have been raised under the premise that families can only be comprised under this heteronormative standard.

Rubin (1992) recognizes that it is the long-standing paroxysms that have left a large impact on our attitudes and beliefs regarding sex and sexuality. Much of nineteenth-century thought left us with deeply engrained ideas regarding topics such as medical practice, child-rearing, and sex law (Rubin, 1992). The idea that interest in sex “prematurely” is extremely unhealthy and inappropriate to discuss still lingers amongst the American population. “The notion that sex *per se* is harmful to the young has been chiseled into the extensive social and legal structures designed to insulate minors from sexual knowledge and experience” (Rubin, 1992, p. 144). Smaller communities that are traditionally more conservative in values and beliefs can make discussing sexuality even more shameful. “Most Christian tradition, following Paul, holds that sex is inherently sinful” (Rubin, 1992, p. 150). Therefore, sexuality, even heteronormative sexuality, is vastly underdiscussed both by parents with their children and by health educators with their students.

In the family units of small rural communities, the topic of sexuality is found to be a taboo one. Berlant and Warner (1998) claim that lasting “nostalgic family values” dominate the

American social structure (p. 550). The topic of sexuality is quickly shushed and suppressed in an effort to “think of the children.” Parents are desperate to shield their youth from such topics in an attempt to discourage sexual behavior. While such beliefs are well intended, the resistance to discuss sexuality results not only in the censorship of heteronormative sex, but of queer themes and outlets. Queer youth are then left to their own devices to figure out who they are and how they identify, and to question why their feelings seem to go against societal norms. Such questions can be extremely damaging to the construction of the self for queer youth, and without guidance, the process of growing up for queer students may be a challenging and emotionally painful one.

And in the moments when sexuality is discussed, it is discussed under heteronormative frameworks that condemn any other types of sexual attraction to be wrong and sinful. Historically, American popular culture has condemned sexual variety as unhealthy and dangerous. As a result, “hierarchies of sexual value — religious, psychiatric, and popular — function in much the same ways as do ideological systems of racism, ethnocentrism, and religious chauvinism” (Rubin, 1992, p. 152). Heteronormative relationships are privileged and accepted, while anyone who strays from the societal norm of sexual attraction is condemned and shamed. So, how can queer youth begin to identify their sexuality and feel comfortable with who they are if they live in a society that discriminates against any attraction that is not heterosexual?

From here we must ask: why is sexuality being suppressed? The answer, once again, is to maintain power structures. Remember, “Lives lived beyond the confines of the normal have been marked as illegitimate and targeted for surveillance, control, correction, confinement, and even elimination” (McRuer, 2014, p. 1). Foucault argues that even those with the power to repress sexuality generate discourse about it to silence it, not by denying its existence but by enfolding it

within its own linguistic structures of confession and inquiry” (Baker, 2019, p. 4). Baker claims that while sexuality may be discussed in pieces of literature, it is often made a subject of discrimination and ridicule, and that it is embedded in language meant to criticize and shame rather than educate and inform. These ideologies have bled into the sex education system amongst public academic institutions, and what Rubin considers to be “sex negativity” has been reinforced: the idea that sex is a “dangerous, destructive, negative force” (Rubin, 1992, p. 150). Rubin explains claims that such oppressive ideologies are embedded in Western religious traditions. Given that many small rural areas exist amongst Christian values, as dictated by hegemonic norms, it is no wonder that such condemnations of sexuality are existent in public school systems.

If the suppression of sexuality is being used to support power dynamics, why must children be involved? Why are they being used as a tool for the reinforcement of queer prejudice and discrimination? According to Rubin (1992), “for the past century no tactic for stirring up erotic hysteria has been as reliable as the appeal to protect children” (p. 146). For example, “The motto of the Dade County repeal campaign was ‘Save Our Children’ from alleged homosexual recruitment” (Rubin, 1992, p. 146). Children have thus far been used as a pawn in the attempt to suppress queer existence. Parents have been frightened so much by the prospect of their children ‘being turned’ queer that they shield them from any subject matter regarding or relating to sexuality. Thus, any children who do identify as queer are left to discover and learn what it means all on their own and are at risk of being exposed to shame and ridicule by heteronormative communities.

Some may argue that children are too young to understand the complexities of sexuality, and that they should not be exposed to such subject matter too early. It may be true that learning

about sex and sexuality may be intimidating or slightly uncomfortable for children to discuss. But in the end, it is far better for them to learn about sexuality earlier in their lives so that they are not confused by their orientation later. If they identify as queer but have never been taught that queerness is natural and normal, then what are they going to think of themselves?

This lack of queer discussion may be detrimental to the self-perception and mental health of queer youth. Altman (1993) recognizes that sex education, or lack thereof, impacts the process of self-identification. First, any sexual education that is given to children is mostly only presented by a heteronormative framework. “Insofar as society teaches its children about sex, and most of this teaching is indirect...it presents a model that is totally heterosexual in orientation” (Altman, 1993, p. 71). These internalized American values cause a great sense of guilt and shame amongst queer youth, and it makes self-identification a truly painful process, especially for rural youth who live in areas where heteronormativity is so strongly reinforced. “From society’s refusal to acknowledge homosexuality as a valid part of the human experience stems the most destructive aspect of oppression, the fact that it becomes internalized and affects the self-image of the oppressed” (Altman, 1993, p. 71). People who argue that sexuality should not be discussed for the sake of protecting children fail to see what detrimental consequences arise when children grow up without proper, all-encompassing sexual education.

These ideologies have bled into the public-school system and make education and life amongst other students difficult for queer identifying youth. Butler-Wall, Cosier, and Harper’s book, *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality*, identifies how difficult the school environment can be for queer youth when all children grow up amidst such heteronormative standards. They explain, “Despite the recent advances in LGBTQ rights, most schools aren’t safe for queer students. In a recent survey, six out of ten LGBTQ teens said they felt unsafe at school and 82%

had been verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation” (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 23). Some people like to argue that the queer liberation is over. That we’re living in a post-homophobic era of queer existence and acceptance. This survey was done only four years ago, and with such high numbers of children being discriminated against based on their sexuality, we certainly still have a long way to go in combatting embedded heteronormativity. For public school systems, this may mean not only including queer discussions in health classrooms, but queer narratives in other facets of childhood education. “In elementary school, for example, does the literature read in the classroom reflect children with gay and lesbian parents, as well as a broad range of other family structures? What is the approach to activities like Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, and ‘family tree’ assignment” (Butler-Wall et al., 2016, p. 25). Such formative activities solidify in the mindset of children what constitutes a “normal” relationship.

Stephanie Anne Shelton, a teacher in the rural south and a teaching assistant at the University of Georgia, realized the need for queer narratives in her curriculum after an incident amongst two of her students. A rumor was spread that two best friends, Joseph and Marcus, were actually boyfriends. This caused Marcus to get upset with Joseph, thinking that he told people they were a couple. The two resolved their problem, clarified the misunderstanding, and soon became friends again. But Shelton wasn’t satisfied. “Several days later, it seemed clear that Joseph and Marcus had resolved their problem, but I wasn’t OK with me. I had fallen into a common trap for LGBTQ-supportive teachers: I professed my support while offering little or none in the curriculum” (Shelton, 2016, p. 112).

She brought into her classroom Shakespeare’s *Merchant of Venice* with a bit of hesitation, not exactly sure how the students would respond to it or if they would even recognize the queer subtexts embedded in the play. But the students took to the discussion of sexuality

right away, debating how attraction may impact the relationship between Antonio and Bassanio. Shelton says, “By the end of the play, after many discussions and several essays, some students were sure that Antonio loved Bassanio, some thought the two men loved one another, and others decided they were just close friends. Regardless, the conversation normalized the topic of sexual orientation, allowing discussions then and later” (Shelton, 2016, p. 114). The events which took place in Shelton’s classroom and the literature discussed show that students are willing and often comfortable discussing sexual orientation, but teachers are not often giving them the opportunity to do so, whether that be of their own choice or in response to the curriculum that they must instruct. Exposure to queer existence in narratives can help to normalize the coming-out experience for queer rural youth and support them in identification and self-expression. America desperately needs to reconstruct the ways in which we approach sex education and how we include queer narratives in our curriculum. This includes talking about sexualities in health classes and discussing queer literature in English classes. Avoiding discussions of sexuality and queer existence is only doing more harm than good for queer youth.

Thus, the two main ways we can begin amending the suppression of queer orientation is to attack sexuality at the source. Parents and American school systems must reexamine how we approach sexual education. It can no longer be approached as a taboo subject of shame and ridicule, but rather as a subject matter which young people need to be well-educated in. Sexual education courses in schools must also include discussions of sexualities which go against heteronormative ideologies. Sex must be discussed beyond heterosexual standards, including information regarding same-sex relations, relations with gender non-conforming individuals, and what it means to identify on the spectrum of asexuality.

It is also important that sexualities deviating from heteronormative ideologies be included in curriculum topics, especially in History and English courses where queer narratives should be given representation. Inclusion of queer sexualities will prove to be extremely valuable to young students as they begin to better understand themselves and the ways in which they identify. Without these guiding forces in health and academic curriculum, queer youth are at risk of negative self-impression should they be surrounded by heteronormative standards that declare the ways in which they are feeling as abnormal.

On a larger, mass scale, American culture needs to examine the writings and arguments of Foucault if we are to develop new ways of interpreting and explaining sexuality. Michel Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* disputes what have thus far been traditional understandings of sexuality. Previously, sexuality has been thought of as pre-existing biological entities. Foucault argues that sexuality is in fact based in specific social practices. "He emphasizes the generative aspects of the social organization of sex rather than its repressive elements by pointing out that new sexualities are constantly produced" (Rubin, 1992, p. 149). This approach towards sexuality completely removes it from what otherwise has been an extremely heterogendered institution. Foucault's theories support the valid existence of sexualities outside of attraction towards the opposite gender. If Foucault's arguments are to be adopted by American culture, then sexuality must be removed as a supposed biological process. "It is impossible to think with any clarity about the politics of race or gender as long as these are thought of as biological entities rather than as social constructs" (Rubin, 1992, p. 149). Sexuality is socially reinforced, not biologically constructed. If we can begin to incorporate this mindset into how we approach and educate sexuality, then we can begin to make queer identification accessible to youth during their process of self-identification.

Queer suppression cannot be summarized with merely misconceptions of sexuality. American culture's miseducation surrounding gender is also to blame. Looking deeper into the impacts that metronormativity has on queer youth and the American education system, it is easy to see that not only has sexuality been vastly underrepresented, but so have gender identifications. Growing up, students are often faced with choosing between the gender binary for their identification. This inaccuracy all starts when our American culture and systems of education misinterpret the terms "gender" and "sex," using them synonymously when they actually refer to two entirely different descriptions of human identification.

## **SECTION 5. SEX VERSUS GENDER**

For far too long the terms "sex" and "gender" have been used synonymously. The confusion between sex and gender and the miseducation around what they actually mean is largely contributing to the discrimination queer individuals face. If we can initiate a cultural understanding that these two terms are entirely different, we can begin to unravel and disprove the arguments surrounding queer gender identifications. It is through Michelle Baker's historical exploration of queer theory and Judith Butler's literature that we can begin to examine how these false ideologies surrounding gender were constructed as well as develop strategies for combating such oppressive social constructions.

First, in order for gender to be understood, it must be completely separated from biology, contrary to the construction of the vast American culture. "Butler raises several questions about the social construction of gender, but rather than counter these questions with biological arguments, she asserts that the social constructions are radically uncertain, almost to the point of unintelligibility" (Baker, 2019, p. 6). Similar to the process of reexamining sexuality, Baker

claims that gender constructions are not built upon biological phenomenon but are rather formed socially. “[The] claim that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ summarizes for many early feminists the distinction between the biological factors commonly used to identify a person’s sex and the social pressures that form a person’s gender” (Baker,2019, p. 2). Social constructions, which are constantly shifting and varying, influence whether someone identifies as more masculine or feminine.

It is under this premise that we can begin to separate culture’s definitions of sex and gender. Sex refers to the biological foundations of human existence: human attributes which are associated with male or female being. Gender, on the other hand, refers to the social constructions which determine what it means to be masculine or feminine/man or woman. The terms male and female, then, are attributed to biological sex, while the identifications of man and woman are attributed to gender. “Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of ‘men’ will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that ‘women’ will interpret only female bodies” (Butler, 2006, p. 9). Under this premise, a person can be born with the biological constructions of a male but identify with a feminine, womanly gender, and vice versa. It is also possible that a person, despite whatever sex they are born as, does not define with either gender or their socially constructed attributes. Butler (2006) explains, “Originally intended to dispute the biology-is-destiny formulation, the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is nether the causal result of sex nor seemingly fixed as sex” (p. 8).

Perhaps the reason behind such a misunderstanding can be traced back to culture’s prioritizing of the biological and sexual body of humans. “In queer renderings of postmodern

geography, the notion of a body-centered identity gives way to a model that locates sexual subjectivities within and between embodiment, place, and practice” (Halberstam, 2005, p. 5). Much of psychological and philosophical theory is based around the biological sex of people. For example, Freud makes a great deal of supposition surrounding sex and gender in his work regarding the Ego, Super-ego, and the ID (Butler, 2006). In discussing “Mourning and Melancholia,” Freud claims that “[the] process of internalizing lost loves becomes pertinent to gender formation when we realize the at the incest taboo, among other functions, initiates a loss of a love-object for the ego and that this ego recuperates from this loss through the internalization of the tabooed object of desire” (Butler, 2006, p. 79). Freud’s Oedipal complex carries on these theories based on the biological sex of humans, making claims regarding sexual attraction as it relates to the sex of family members (Butler, 2006). With such a vast archive of theory expanding beyond even that of Freud, it is no wonder that sex and gender have so long been intertwined and miscommunicated. It is the text of such psychologists and theories that have promoted these false ideologies regarding gender and its relation to sex.

Butler challenges society’s preconceived notions of sex and gender. She argues that “masculine” and “feminine” are not biologically determined but are rather qualities forced on us by embedded cultural ideals (Butler, 2004). In reality, there is no “essential” ideal of femininity and neither is there for sex or gender (Butler, 2004). To say that gender is a solidified structure of identification or that it is some type of cultural norm completely ignores the changeability and versatility of femininity and masculinity (Butler, 2004). The binary conceptions of gender and their assigned attributes have changed vastly over centuries worth of evolving society and culture. What we consider to be masculine today is not the same as what may have been considered masculine one hundred years ago or five hundred years ago. Rather, Butler’s

definition explains that, “Gender is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes” (Butler, 2004, p. 42). What Americans consider to be gender norms are actually binary constructions influenced by societal evolvment, expectations, and power.

For young children who are growing up in institutions where the gender binary and its assigned attributes are so strongly encouraged, identifying with a gender which is outside of the socially conceived norm can be difficult and frightening. Pacey, Okrey-Anderson, and Heumann (2016) found that “transgender youth, in particular, are at risk of bullying and victimization in their schools from teachers and peers” (p. 822). The victimization of students who defy binary standards results in many physical and mental health problems for gender-queer youth (Pacey et al., 2017). In fact, research has shown that transgender and gender-queer youth experience more hostility and insensitivity than do other sexual minority youth. Unfortunately, “transgender youth report lacking access to competent mental and physical health services, safe environments, and a caring community,” meaning that there is little to no support for students whose gender identity does not fall along the socially constructed gender binary (Pacey et al., 2016, p. 824).

The book *Rethinking Sexism, Gender, and Sexuality* once again provides excellent examples of how gender-queer themes have become prevalent in classrooms and how culture’s construction of the gender binary has been impactful to gender-queer students. Melissa Bollow Tempel, an elementary school teacher, recalls the moment she realized it was necessary for her to address gender identifications in her classroom. One of her students, who was named Allison, preferred to go by Allie, and typically wore clothes more associated with boys (Tempel, 2008).

She felt more comfortable wearing baggy jeans and sweatshirts and wearing her hair in braids. When she entered Kindergarten, students who hadn't previously met Allie assumed, based on her clothing and hair choices, that she was a boy (Tempel, 2008). When Tempel informed the class that Allie was in fact a girl, the students responded that she shouldn't be wearing clothes that were meant for a boy (Tempel, 2008). "They asked her a lot of questions that she wasn't prepared for: 'Why do you look like a boy?' 'If you're a girl, why do you always wear boys' clothes?'" (Tempel, 2008, 58). This, and Tempel's experience as a mother of a child who identified as gender independent, inspired her to begin discussions surrounding gender stereotypes in the classroom, as she realized how important of a subject it was to address with children.

Tempel conducted an excellent exercise with her students, first reading them a book about a boy who enjoys playing with a baby doll before setting up two large sheets of paper on the board (Tempel, 2008). Together, Tempel and the students listed types of toys that children like to play with based on their gender: the girls' list had items like nail polish, dolls, and makeup, while the boys' list had items like Legos, skateboards, and hot wheels (Tempel, 2008). Then, they began to examine the lists to see what kinds of toys could be used by children of either gender. Girls liked to play with Legos, for example, and they had just read a story about a boy who likes to play with dolls (Tempel, 2008). Slowly, the students started to understand. "Soon many students were eager to share examples of how people pushed the limits on gender. Our school engineer, Ms. Joan, drove a motorcycle. Jeremy liked to dance. I could see the gears turning in their brains as the gender lines started to blur" (Tempel, 2008, p. 59).

This exercise was simple and easy for the children to understand, and such an activity serves as a great way to introduce children to the idea of deconstructing the gender binary. It is

perfectly acceptable for boys to like toys typically associated with girls and vice versa. Some may argue that topics of gender are a difficult and inappropriate topic to discuss with children, but when presented to them in language they understand and with subject matter that they are familiar with then they will likely be willing to listen and comprehend.

The gender binary can be very alienating to students who do not see themselves as identifying with either gender. Ericka Sokolower-Shain (2016) recalls an experience she had on her first day of high school in which her struggle with gender was spotlighted. At the start of her Identity and Ethnic Studies class, her teacher had the students play a game called Stand and Declare in which “The teacher reads a statement and students who feel the statement is true about themselves are instructed to stand silently” (Sokolower-Shain, 2016, p. 97). The first question that the teacher asked, which was clearly being asked as an ice breaker question, was to stand if the student was a girl. Sokolower-Shain (2016) felt panicked; “With what ease that teacher, herself a lesbian feminist, asked me to completely define my identity, something much more complex than standing for five seconds could ever express, something that I had been struggling with for years and continue to struggle with to this day” (p. 98). Such is the result of an institution that has reinforced a binary gender on students. The event which Sokolower-Shain details is primary evidence of how gender is taught and viewed throughout the American education system, and it shows how quickly and easily students who do not identify with the gender binary can be alienated and discomforted by what other people see as an unquestionable category of identification.

While growing up, children are consistently taught that there are only two gender identifications, and that they must coincide with our assigned biological sex. If one is born a male, he must identify as “he” and only be interested in such things that reinforce his

masculinity, such as sports, cars, hunting, and all other things which promote the idea of a “rugged man.” If one is born a female, she must identify as a “she” and only be interested in such things that reinforce her femininity, such as makeup, clothes, dainty activities and other such interests that represent society’s idea of a “girly girl.” If a child who is born female aligns more with masculine interests, it may put that child in endangerment of ridicule and shame, as her interests are more traditional or typical for boys. This is not the fault of the child, however, as there is no biological encoding which claims that boys must like the color blue and girls must like the color pink; it is the fault of a society which has continuously perpetuated a dichotomous gender binary that assigns anyone who falls along the extremes or in-betweens as abnormal or incorrect in their identifications.

Thus far the gender binary has been something from which children are unable to escape. It surrounds them in their everyday lives, dictating which bathrooms and locker rooms they can use and which sports teams they are able to play on, among a host of other divisive ideologies. It is necessary for the comfort, safety, and mental well-being of gender-queer students that American culture begins to adopt the ideologies outlined by Butler: the idea that sex and gender are separate, and that while sex may refer to biological human constructions, gender is entirely based on societal ideologies of masculine and feminine, and is based on a constantly changing, sociological constructed, performance-based ways of living. For queer youth living in rural areas, openly defying the gender binary may be risky and threaten their mental health and wellbeing. With transgender youth being the highest population of queer children reporting bullying and harassment, it is necessary that we begin to deconstruct the gender binary and promote new ways of thinking in classrooms not just by the teachers but by queer students’ peers as well.

The gender binary, as well as heteronormative constructions of sexuality, follow students all the way into systems of higher education. As students inhabit college campuses, live on their own, and begin to better understand themselves and their identities, heteronormativity and the gender binary become influential factors for their college experience. The following chapters will begin to examine the shapes and forms that hegemonically constructed norms take on college campuses, and how they may negatively impact students and young adults.

## **SECTION 6. EXAMINING COLLEGE CAMPUSES AND QUEER EXISTENCE**

These heteronormative influences on queer identity formation have consequently found their way onto college campus, impacting queer students as they pursue higher education and begin their adult lives. As a result of these heteronormative and gender binary frameworks, queer students do not always feel comfortable at their schools and do not always have the ability to freely express their gender and/or sexuality. Jonathan Pryor (2018) explored the impacts of such embedded ideologies in his article, “Visualizing queer spaces: LGBTQ students and the traditionally heterogendered institution.” While many people would like to believe that college campuses are more liberal institutions that allow for queer freedom and expression, some institutions are still deeply embedded in traditional ideologies that can make life difficult and uncomfortable for queer identifying students. In fact, “Despite an increase in LGBTQ campus climate inquiries over the past 20-years, research continues to find that colleges and universities are unwelcoming environments for LGBTQ students, many of whom often perceive campus as less inviting when compared to their peers” (Pryor, 2018, p. 33).

Many times, in attempts to help queer students and provide them with support, college institutions ultimately end up alienating queer students. This is often caused by a disconnect

between queer students and the adults in positions of authority who are attempting to offer them systems of support (Pryor, 2018). “For example, campus ally trainings or other similar programs intended to support LGBTQ students position them as individuals who need to be saved” (Pryor, 2018, p. 35). These meetings present queer students as “at-risk” students and present a really narrowed focus on what it means to “belong” (Pryor, 2018). In trying to create safe spaces for queer students, some college’s make the mistake of promoting queerness as being abnormal and separate from other sexualities and genders. Pryor (2018) explains, “Preston and Hoffman (2015) illustrate how institutions discursively frame LGBTQ students as vulnerable and reliant on the institution to find success” (Pryor, 2018, p. 39). This only serves to potentially promote even more discrimination and prejudice towards queer students on college campuses.

Pryor also found in his studies that institutions are rigid in their standards of genderism. “Institutional structures and policies conform to rigid binaristic views of gender, limiting the ways for gender diverse students to experience campus life” (Pryor, 2018, p.35). This is visible across college institutions in how campuses offer restroom facilities, athletics, and residential living (Pryor, 2018). Cisgender identities are privileged over otherwise queer identities. Often, such organizations that operate under the gender binary do not address gender-queer individuals in their rules or policies, which further reinforces queer invisibility on campuses. Perhaps the biggest pressure to identify with either gender comes from Greek Life organizations on campuses. “These systems are historically situated along the gender binary, rooted in masculinist traditions, and perpetuated in residential life facilities, campus locker room facilities that limit choices to men/women only options, or through Greek organizations that provide narrow definitions of gender membership requirements” (Pryor, 2018, p. 40). Students who do not identify with either gender or who identify as transgender are left to carve their own places into

the foundations of their institution, and they may endure the pressure to conform to the gender binary.

Within athletic activities and teams, Pryor (2018) found that heteronormativity was being strongly reinforced, and that boys were being pressured to conform to rigid standards of masculinity. In athletic environments the student with whom Pryor (2018) spoke reported that they felt immense pressure to conform to cisgender and heterosexual expectations. One student explained, “Locker rooms represent a space dominated by straight cisgender men, where masculinity is rewarded, heterosexuality is supported by sexist and homophobic comments, and athleticism is attributed to a specific body and masculinist nature” (Pryor, 2018, p. 41). Thus, queer identifying students who are interested in sports and other athletic activities may feel unwelcome and unsafe in such environments and avoid participating in sports or socializing with athletic students at all. For queer students who may have grown up playing sports, such ideologies may be very disruptive to their success and happiness on college campuses.

Systems of higher education are operating largely under the heteronormative frameworks that Western culture has built around them. Pryor (2018) found that across campuses there are many opportunities for student involvement in a variety of areas and interests, but that LGBTQ programs and organizations are severely lacking. “The lack of representation for LGBTQ programs perpetuates a heterogendered discourse and frames the campus LGBTQ programs as othered and separate from other areas of campus life” (40). Not only is queer representation lacking in campus organizations, but it is also lacking in class curriculum. Just as Shelton (2016) found in her classroom, many college courses are excluding queer narratives from their curriculum material. Mitchell’s (2008) article provides an anecdote on how such underrepresentation has been present in institutions of higher education: “When it comes to

diversity, teachers are often master of theory who need pragmatic strategies to create change, strategies that can create social pressures, relationships, and activities that engender diversity” (Mitchell, 2008, p. 44). Inclusion and diversity on campuses should be reinforced with the support of professors and the inclusion of queer discussions in college campuses, so that students who do identify as queer will be able to study subjects that deviate from heterogendered norms, and students who do not define as queer can learn more about queer experiences and issues.

All of this leads to the final goal of my project: to conduct a study of Washington College to see if this small school in rural Maryland is influenced by gender expectations and heteronormative values. Washington College is a liberal arts institution located in Chestertown on Maryland’s Eastern shore. The website explains that the campus houses around 1,400 students and has a student-to-faculty ratio of 10:1 (About Us). The average class size is twelve, and the small size of the campus is one of the school’s selling points, as it allows for the formation of valuable connections amongst students, faculty, and staff as well as individualized learning opportunities. As a liberal arts college, the school encourages students to form their own unique path and to work with faculty and administration to construct an educational experience that works best for them. Coined by the Admissions Department is a phrase that appears on the schools’ website, “Do you. Do it all. Do it here” (About Us). But, as was recognized in earlier chapters, it is the smallness of rural areas that makes outward queer identification difficult. It is hard for one’s identification to pass under the radar when everyone in the community knows each other and when information spreads very quickly. On Washington College’s online homepage, the school introduces itself as such:

Founded in 1782, Washington College was the first college chartered in the sovereign United States of America. General George Washington lent us his name, donated 50 guineas to our founding, and served on our first Board of Visitors and Governors. Our

goal back then was to cultivate responsible citizen-leaders. Nowadays, we're committed to giving our students the chance to succeed on their own terms (About Us).

At its forefront, the Washington College website gives an air of pride in its historical foundations and cultural lineage. Can a college embedded in American values and traditions serve as a welcoming space to liberal ideologies and queer existence? The following is Washington College's diversity statement as outlined by the Office of Intercultural Affairs:

We, the students, faculty, staff, and Board of Visitors and Governors of Washington College, welcome, invite, value, and support a diverse community of individuals. We strive to create a place where all can study, work, and thrive. We believe in the worth, dignity, and safety of human beings of all races, ethnicities, nationalities, gender identities, and/or expressions, sexual orientations, socioeconomic statuses, cultural backgrounds, cognitive or physical abilities, emotional and behavioral characteristics, ages, and educational levels. In the pursuit of academic excellence, we endeavor to be a community made up of people from a variety of backgrounds with differing perspectives, life experiences, religious, philosophical and political beliefs, lifestyles, and ideologies. We pledge to create a respectful and supportive environment for collaboration, empathy, and the building of meaningful relationships among members of Washington College. We commit to fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and engaged community that embraces all the complexity that each person brings to campus.

This diversity statement declares for Washington College that it is a welcoming and accepting campus for all different types of backgrounds and identifications. But just because it is written on the Intercultural Affairs website does not guarantee that such values are being upheld. Is Washington College actively encouraging such values and making an effort to establish their campus as safe and inclusive for all students?

On its list of student organizations, the Office of Intercultural Affairs page includes descriptions of Washington College's two queer organizations. The first is Encouraging Respect of Sexuality (EROS). Its descriptions reads: "We are an LGBTQA (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Ally) alliance where passionate people of all sexualities and gender work together towards increasing awareness of LGBTQA issues and providing a safe space for everyone and anyone to support" (Student Organizations). However, the information is slightly

outdated, as it provides contact information for the club's old president rather than the current one. The other organization, Supporting All Gender Experiences (SAGE) is still listed underneath its old name: TaNGO (Trans and Nonconforming Gender Organization). Its description reads: "TaNGO aims to create a safe space and provide resources for trans and other gender non-conforming students on campus" (Student Organizations). Unlike the description for EROS, SAGE's description does not include any mention of a president or how to contact them. For students interested in queer organizations on campus, the Office of Intercultural Affairs' page appears to be slightly misleading.

In its discussion of discrimination, the site also explains that the locations in which bias incidents most often occur are in residence halls, on social media, in off-campus locations, and in classrooms (Identifying and Reporting). As I conducted my data collection at Washington College, I made it a goal to ask students where they felt most uncomfortable and where they felt they experienced the most bias to see if it aligned with what was stated on the Office of Intercultural Affairs' website.

In his study, Pryor found that much of queer discrimination on college campuses comes from athletics where the gender binary and heteronormative ideologies are reinforced and encouraged. I was curious to see what Washington College's athletics had to say regarding queer representation. The Washington College athletics page does in fact include a "Commitment to Diversity, Tolerance, and Inclusiveness" (Diversity and Inclusion in Athletics). It reads:

The Washington College Athletic Department practices and believes in the College's commitment to diversity, tolerance, and inclusiveness... The College believes that the diversity of its community is its greatest strength and that difference of race, color, national origin, sexual orientation, gender expression, and religious belief are to be respected by all members of the community. While the College imposes no specific moral standard upon its students, each student is expected to uphold standards of civility and tolerance and engage in constructive and reasoned discourse to express differences in opinion. (Diversity and Inclusion in Athletics)

Such a statement on the Athletics page should indicate that Washington College student athletes are being encouraged to adhere to standards of respect and acceptance of all different identifications. But are the values outlined in the diversity statement being upheld by the athletes? Is Washington College's main diversity statement being upheld by the larger student body? Are administration, faculty, and staff actively recognizing these statements of diversity as well? With these questions in mind, I began my research into the experiences of Washington College students to see how the rural landscape and small campus environment are truly impactful to queer students.

## **SECTION 7. QUEER LIFE AT WASHINGTON COLLEGE**

When I began my project, I honestly had no expectations as to what type of responses I would get from Washington College students. If previous studies had shown anything it was that rural landscapes are spaces where heteronormativity and the gender binaries are reinforced, so I was not sure if I would get much of a response or if students would be interested in participating. Perhaps I too was a bit blindsided by queer invisibility and was unable to estimate the number of queer-identifying students at Washington College. Within the survey I sent out to the campus, I provided a filter question which would determine the rest of the questions asked in the survey for the students. This question was: "I will be using 'queer' as a broad umbrella term to refer to students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community. With this in mind, would you say that you identify as a queer student?" I was pleasantly surprised to find that with 209 responses, 104 (50%) of students selected that they identify as queer.

In addition to sending a survey out to the campus, I also decided to conduct interviews with students that were willing to discuss their experiences with me. I sent emails to the

executive members of EROS and SAGE, so they could communicate with members of their clubs that there was an opportunity to participate in my project. I also posted to my own Instagram page, inviting students to contact me if they were interested in being interviewed. I was pleasantly surprised by the number of positive responses I got from my post. As I was walking around campus the next day, numerous people approached me expressing how fascinating and important they thought my topic was. In addition, over the next few weeks, seven students who identify as queer reached out to me with interest in being interviewed for my project. Those students, as well as their years and identities, are listed below. All of the names used have been pulled from a bank of pseudonyms to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Pseudonym	Class Year	Self-Identified Gender	Self-Identified Sexual Orientation
Val	Sophomore	non-binary	bisexual, asexual spectrum
Natasha	Senior	woman	bisexual
Tandy	Junior	woman	pan, demisexual, demiromantic
Monica	Junior	Woman	lesbian
Peter	Junior	man	queer
James	Junior	non-binary	pansexual, demisexual
Scott	Junior	man	bisexual

Following Pryor’s example, in my survey and interview questions I wanted to identify specific aspects of college life that were influential to queer students. All of my interview participants were willing and even very excited to discuss their experiences with me at Washington College. The majority of the interviewed students expressed comfort, pride, and happiness in their identities. Tandy joked that she was a “double demi disco queen,” and Monica

recalled with a laugh instances in which she had shouted “I’m gay!” at her friends down the Cater walk, a brick pathway which runs down the very center of campus. James explained with fondness the inclusivity of their friends in the music and theatre departments, and Val glowed with pride when they talked about the queer friends they had made while in their residence hall. The conversations I had with these students were filled with positivity and smiles, but the students also had some less than ideal experiences to share with me. I left these interviews feeling like I always learned something new and valuable about queerness at Washington College.

Despite what many people may believe about small rural campuses, something which seemed certain from survey and interview responses is that there is a prevalent amount of queer existence at Washington College. The catch, however, is that it is not always being recognized. Many students expressed their gratitude and appreciation for EROS and SAGE, groups which they felt allowed them to freely express their gender and sexuality and gave them the opportunity to socialize with other queer students. Tandy explained the importance of having groups like EROS and SAGE to create events with other organizations on campus. She recalled the “nonconformal” that SAGE and Musician’s Union worked together to create. “I feel like that’s a really positive experience for me and other people. And as a cis person, I’m really excited for people who can just express themselves however they want. And that’s all I want; I want people to be safe and happy regardless of gender expression and regardless of orientation” (Tandy, personal communication, January 29, 2020).

One question which I asked students within my campus-wide survey was if they had identified as queer before arriving at Washington College. Keeping in mind that the total number of queer students that participated in my survey was 104, 25% of respondents said that they had

not identified as queer before arriving at school. The existence of a queer population, however, is not always evident when students arrive at Washington College. I asked survey students what their thoughts were regarding queer representation when they first applied to Washington College. 42% of queer students reported that they felt neutral about how queerness was represented at WAC, and most of them explained that queer organizations had not even been mentioned by Admissions while applying. Those who felt really positive about queer representation at Washington College had met a student tour guide or did an overnight stay with a queer student who informed them of the opportunities for activism and organization. Upon arriving at Washington College, Scott felt that it was a campus where he could begin to really explore his sexuality. Having been questioning his identity all throughout high school, he was able to finally identify as bisexual after arriving at college. “It wasn’t really until I got here that I was actually more comfortable expressing what I was. I guess, officially speaking, it was here that I actually started to come out to people” (Scott, personal communication, February 21, 2020).

When it comes to residential life, the consensus from students seems to be that residential buildings for freshman are far too binarized. Upper-class students have the option to room in suite style living, buildings in which gender boundaries are not reinforced. Most of the other dorm buildings are co-ed with men and women separated by floor. One freshman building, Reid, is for all women. West, Middle, and East halls are the dorms which have gender neutral bathrooms and floors. Val explained, “[The residence hall I live in] has all gender floors and all gender bathrooms, which is really wonderful. I loved having that option” (Val, personal communication, 2020). Student responses in the survey, however, expressed uncertainty as to whether these buildings were gender neutral, or what the options were for non-binary and

transgender students. This confusion came from both queer-identifying and non-queer students. The efforts which residential life is making for queer students is good, but it needs to be discussed and promoted more for incoming students so that they know it is an option. Knowing that there is gender neutral housing could mean preventing a student from spending an academic year in an uncomfortable living situation.

Along with discussing residential life came sentiments surrounding gender neutral bathrooms in other buildings at Washington College. Many survey responses from both queer and non-queer students expressed the desire to have more gender-neutral bathrooms around campus. Currently there are a few scattered here and there, such as in Gibson Center for the Arts and the Johnson Fitness Center, but overall there was an expressed need for more gender-neutral bathrooms across campus. Several of my interviewees shared this sentiment, and James commented, “The question of gender-neutral bathrooms is brought up a lot in particularly trans spaces, in SAGE, and in some panels we’ve had with professors. And I think that’s one of the biggest issues. There is a large group of students that are made very uncomfortable by the lack of those on campus, and I feel that I would be made more comfortable by a greater presence of those as well” (James, personal communication, February 14, 2020).

Val also discussed the need for gender neutral bathrooms, and why, perhaps, there may not be many established on campus yet. They explained that, because of their activism for the queer community on campus, they were added to an email thread with the Office of Intercultural Affairs. They were surprised to find that the discussion of gender-neutral bathrooms was being brought up amongst members of the Washington College administration, but that questions and uncertainties administrative members had were not being communicated with the students who most need the gender neutral bathrooms. Val explained, “It turns out all gender bathrooms in all

buildings on campus have been in their ‘five-year plan’ for a while now. And (SAGE) didn’t know about it, which is strange to me because...really we’re the ones that are going to be directly benefitting” (Val, personal communication, January 22, 2020). This instance hints at an overall disconnect between queer students and the administration that is trying to support them, which is the very thing which Pryor explains ultimately ends up alienating queer students. Val continued, “It is sort of frustrating to see the faculty sort of operating in their own ‘modus operandi’ and not thinking, ‘Oh, we are here to make the school better for minority students on campus. Maybe we could talk to these minority-driven clubs we have to figure out from a student perspective the things that we can fix?’” (Val, personal communication, January 22, 2020).

Another area of college life which I asked students about was experiences with athletics and club sports. This was one area in which queer students seemed to be the especially negatively affected. 14% of queer students reported that they had negative or extremely negative experiences with sports and 20% of non-queer students reported that they perceived WAC sports to be unaccepting of queer students. One queer student reported, “Multiple members of men’s sports teams have made homophobic comments to quite a few of my LGBTQ+ friends on multiple occasions.” Students who were not queer reported that, “there seems to be a pressure to be straight among male sports teams,” and that “sports organizations generally seem unaccepting of the queer community.” As Pryor explained before, athletic institutions are deeply embedded in gender stereotypes and encourage heteronormativity. Unfortunately, it seems that, to some degree, this is also a case for the athletics at Washington College.

In fact, several of the students that I interviewed reported having negative experiences with sports and with athletes. Natasha explained that, while she is not involved with sports at all,

she tends to try to stay away from athletes in public spaces like the dining hall, saying that she is afraid of athletes and the athlete mentality after hearing horror stories of homophobic athletes at other institutions. Scott shared with me the experiences he has had with athletes while in

Washington College's Safe Ride vans:

I live off campus, and I rely on Safe Ride for grocery shopping, so my main experience with the athletes is in the Safe Ride van where I am completely sober and they are...less than. They use the phrase "that's gay" or anti-queer slurs in a kind of derogatory way towards each other, and they use them as substitutes for "stupid," "annoying," or "bad." And while they are pleasant and cheery, still hearing that sort of language and that attitude does create in my mind at least this undertone of insecurity. If you're not willing to kinda change your own vocabulary, can you really say that you care or that you're accepting? (Scott, personal communication, February 21, 2020)

With such embedded ideologies of heteronormativity in athletics, it is difficult for queer students to feel that there is space available for them in sports. In fact, in my discussion with Peter, he reported avoiding playing sports entirely because of what he deemed to be "deeply coded heteronormativity." Peter enjoyed playing sports for about ten years prior to college and had even been recruited by one of Washington College's varsity teams. But when he arrived at school, he found the atmosphere to be less than appealing from a queer perspective and ended up leaving the team.

A large reason for that was just not feeling comfortable in the varsity athletics structure. It just felt a little bit suppressive and not generally accepting as a whole. I'm hesitant to call it discrimination. But that testosterone fueled... 'we're all athletes and we're gonna go hook up with people, and party, and drink...' that just doesn't really work for queer students, and it was something I felt like I needed to distance myself from. (Peter, personal communication, February 5, 2020)

As Pryor explained, another extremely heterogendered and binarized aspect of college life is Greek Life. In my survey, 28% of queer students reported having negative or extremely negative experiences with Greek Life, and 15% of non-queer students reported that they perceived Greek Life as being unaccepting of queer students. One queer student reported that, "I was told as a queer student that only one frat would consider accepting me. This proved true

during rush. I was attentive and answered all questions and remained engaged, but because of how I was perceived, I was only asked to rush for one.” Another queer student said, “I wouldn’t feel comfortable choosing to join one gender over the other and there are no ‘gender queer’ Greek life options. Overall, the consensus seemed to be that some Greek Life organization are more inclusive than others. 20% of the survey responses from queer students reported having positive or extremely positive experience with Greek life, with most of these students reporting that they were involved in Greek life or friends with Greek life students. Others had very negative experiences with the gender binaries being so heavily reinforced and the masculinity or femininity being strongly imposed on students.

There also seemed to be an overall mentality that the sororities were far more accepting and “queer-friendly” than the fraternities. Students reported feeling extremely uncomfortable when walking through the Greek Life quad or even past the Greek Life organizations when they have tables in Hodson. One student said that they felt extremely unwelcomed by the fraternities when one of the houses had a MAGA flag hanging in their window. One non-queer student explained, “Greek Life tends to be very traditional of its recruitment, surely. The history of Trans acceptance tends to be very scattered/small. That tends to be the grayest area for it. There is full acceptance for brothers/sisters that identify as gay, bi, etc. otherwise. The Trans question is one still being discussed today.”

Whether or not Greek Life organizations are accepting of non-heterosexual orientations does not mean that students with queer sexual identities are so quick to want to join Greek Life. Natasha explained that her hesitation to join Greek Life is similar to her hesitation to associate with athletes. “I have a fear of a large group of people of the same gender that...if they find out that there’s someone who’s attracted to their gender, they will immediately have a fear or a

distaste about me. It just makes me not want to be super open around those kinds of people” (Natasha, personal communication, January 23, 2020). It is because of this fear of heteronormative conformity that Natasha has decided to not join a sorority, and her fear has led to some pretty uncomfortable experiences in Hodson when sororities have tables up during recruiting season. “They’ll ask why I won’t join a sorority or something, and it’s kind of uncomfortable because I don’t want to explain that I don’t want to because I’m worried about a group of women accepting that I’m attracted to women” (Natasha, personal communication, January 23, 2020).

After the studies discussed previously regarding queer subject material taught in classrooms, I was curious to see whether such material was being taught in classrooms in Washington College. Overall, it seems that, yes, queer themes are being discussed in classrooms, but whether they are being discussed appropriately and empathetically is another matter. In regard to academic curriculum, 70% of queer students reported that they had positive or extremely positive experiences. One queer student explained, “My FYS (First-Year Seminar) was on queer pop culture which helped me feel included in the curriculum.” Another queer student said, “I think there are so many courses offered in such diverse interests that there is something for everyone regardless of identity.”

On a surface level the surveys convey very positive experiences with the academic curriculum, and while that may be the larger assumption, some of my interviewees still reported heteronormativity and the gender binary influencing their class discussions. Natasha expressed frustration with how, in most of her literature and history courses, people and characters are often approached from a heteronormative lens, and the potentiality for queerness is brushed

aside. Others detailed specific instances in which students have felt uncomfortable in classrooms.

Tandy explained:

My roommate took human sexuality freshman year, and it was not very queer-friendly from what I heard. Apparently, the professor said something like asexuals are an interesting topic of study and treated asexuals like we're some 'other,' and that makes me uncomfortable. I think they briefly talked about homosexuality, but I don't think they talked about how everything's a spectrum. In a class on human sexuality, you would think that has to be at least a decent chunk of it. (Tandy, personal communication, January 29, 2020)

Scott recalled an experience he had in which a professor discussed gender from an extremely social scientific view and in a way that was very sterilized. Scott could tell that the gender-neutral students in the class felt extremely uncomfortable with the professor's language and how he approached it from a non-humanistic perspective.

However, aside from these isolated incidents and occasionally forgetting pronouns, students reported having overwhelmingly positive experiences with Washington College professors. 83% of queer identifying students reported in my survey that they had positive or extremely positive experiences with professors, and 86% of non-queer students said that they felt Washington College professors were accepting or very accepting of queer students. One queer student reported that:

There are so many professors on campus who offer safe spaces for the queer community and who are advocates for queer rights/inclusivity. It is really great to see professors on campus not all fit the same mold, there are so many unique personalities and identities which helps to make the students feel more welcome with their own identities.

The negative experiences which queer students have had with professors have seemed to be some faculty members either forgetting to or refusing to use pronouns, or professors not knowing how to discuss queer themes in their classrooms. James recalled a situation they experienced in which they were looked to as the voice of education in a classroom.

One of the more personal things I've experienced in terms of a sort of discrimination is just having a classroom environment in which a professor had a responsibility to handle a

queer dialogue more tactfully than they did, and it felt very unsettling. And feeling like, as a queer individual, an unnecessary responsibility to be the educational voice in that conversation, the voice with perspective, but that's an environment in which you're the student and there's a professor who you wish would have that perspective and be able to handle those things tactfully. (James, personal communication, February 14, 2020)

I asked students in my survey to report whether or not they had felt discriminated against by professors, staff, and peers at Washington College. 5% of queer students reported that they had been discriminated against by WAC professors. 6% reported that they had been discriminated against by staff members. When it came to fellow Washington College students, however, 30% of queer students reported that they had been discriminated against by their peers. This varied from being called names and slurs, being asked inappropriate and offensive questions regarding their sexuality and/or gender orientation, and feeling unwelcome in student organizations or on floors of their residential building. When it comes to discussing diversity at Washington College, Monica made her thoughts known:

This campus does have a huge problem with addressing diversity, period. I'm in a diversity and inclusion class, and I'm the only black person, and as far as I know the only person who is not straight. And I find that a lot of times when diversity comes up on this campus, people get real quiet, and they will wait for diverse students to say their piece. I feel like people are scared to address diversity. (Monica, personal communication, January 30, 2020)

If the campus is scared to address diversity and the presence of queer students, then what is keeping Washington College students from aiming biased and discriminatory language towards queer students? Apparently, not much.

When I asked students in my survey to identify whether or not they were queer, they were then directed to surveys based on their choice. All questions towards queer students asked them about their personal experiences. As for non-queer students, their questions asked them to identify how accepting they thought aspects of Washington College are of queer students. For all students, space was provided for explanations should they decide to add details. I was slightly

disappointed to see that I didn't get that many written responses and explanations from non-queer students. In fact, many of them wrote sentiments such as, "I'm not queer so I don't know," "I haven't heard anything bad," "I don't know enough about the queer climate to respond." The grand majority of responses I got from non-queer students were of this nature. I was disappointed with the lack of data, until I realized: The large prevalence of these similar answers points to the existence of queer invisibility at Washington College. Queer students are here, but their experiences are going unrecognized by the overall campus population.

The solution? Tandy provided her thoughts. When I asked her what she thought Washington College could do to benefit and support queer students she said:

I feel like, and I don't want to sound boring, but I feel like there are some educational things that can happen...I think there's educational things that need to be done so we all can be on an even plane. Just like something as simple as an event with snacks, with a presentation...I really appreciated the safe space training last year, I would like to have another one of those, but maybe one that's aimed more at the general population: An educational program about LGBTQ terms and things that are okay to say and things that are not okay to say and why. Just so that I don't have to explain to people why certain terms are outdated and inappropriate. I would like to see more of an emphasis on education of queer existence. (Tandy, personal communication, January 29, 2020)

As part of my survey I also provided a section in which students could select which locations they perceived to be safe spaces and which places on campus were unsafe or unaccepting of queer identifications. There was no restriction to the number of locations that students could select. The following chart details the top five answers to each question from both queer students and non-queer students, as well as the number of votes that the locations received.

<b>Safe Spaces according to queer students</b>	<b>Safe spaces according to non-queer students</b>	<b>Unsafe spaces according to queer students</b>	<b>Unsafe spaces according to non-queer students</b>
Library- 63	Library- 74	The Greek Life quad- 28	Athletic buildings and spaces- 30
Residential buildings- 60	Gibson (center for arts)- 72	Athletic buildings and spaces- 17	The Greek Life quad- 23

Gibson (center for arts)- 55	Health and Counseling Services- 70	Hodson (dining hall)- 16	Residential buildings- 13
Academic buildings- 53	Hodson (dining hall)- 67	Residential buildings- 16	Academic buildings- 7
Hodson (dining hall)- 53	The Literary House- 67	Health and Counseling Services- 13	Health and Counseling Services- 6

Overwhelmingly by both queer and non-queer students the library came in as the top vote for being a safe space on campus. Gibson was also voted as a safe space, coming in third for queer students and second for non-queer students. Interestingly, residential buildings, academic buildings, and the dining hall were voted as both safe and unsafe spaces by both groups of students, showing the wide range in experiences that students have. At times they serve as safe spaces, but there are clearly instances in which queer students feel uncomfortable in these locations. Athletic buildings and spaces as well as the Greek life quad were voted unsafe by both queer and non-queer students, reflecting the biases by athletes and Greek students that were previously reported in the surveys and interviews. Perhaps one of the biggest discrepancies in these votes is the differing opinions regarding the Health and Counseling Services on campus. This location received the third largest number of votes by non-queer students as being a safe space, but queer students identified this location as fifth on their list for unsafe spaces. This may reflect the queer invisibility prevalent on campus, showing that the Health and Counseling Services may be perceived as a safe and supportive space, when clearly queer students are having negative interactions in this location. It may also show an additional lack in communication between administration and queer students where, in attempting to be a location of support, queer students only feel further otherized upon entering the space.

As for the main question of my thesis: Do queer students feel safe on Washington College’s campus? From my survey responses, 30% of queer students reported that there have

been instances in which they have felt unsafe on campus, and 32% said that they have felt the need to conceal their gender identification and/or sexuality. 75% of non-queer students, however, reported that they felt Washington College was overall an accepting or very accepting institution. Such numbers reinforce to me the existence of queer invisibility at Washington College; from the responses of non-queer students it seems that they overwhelmingly do not know the difficulties regarding queer identification at WAC. As for my seven interviewees, all of them reported that they feel safe at Washington College, and that they feel safe to freely express their gender and/or sexuality. However, they also all reported that there had been many instances in which they felt extremely uncomfortable as queer students.

If I was to do this project again, or if someone was to do a similar project in the future, I would recommend offering two different survey questions regarding queer experience at WAC. (1) Do you feel safe as a queer student at Washington College? (2) Do you feel comfortable as a queer student at Washington College. After conducting my interviews, I learned that there is a large discrepancy between those two questions, and that they yield very different responses. Overall, it does not seem like queer students feel as if harm will come to them, but they are put in numerous amounts of uncomfortable situations. With the data provided and the answers given, it seems that most of this discomfort comes from the miseducation of other Washington College students, professors, and administration as to what it means to be queer, as well as the embedded hegemonic ideologies that still plague the grand majority of education systems.

## **CONCLUSION**

It is clear given the studies done and the history recorded that over the past few decades there has been a migration within the queer community from rural to urban areas. Society and media have reinforced metronormative values on LGBTQ youth and encouraging the idea that

queer students must leave their rural communities to thrive in more urban areas, rather than making any efforts to challenge these hegemonic ideologies. Normative standards have been preserved by centuries worth of misinformation and prejudice, and heteronormative values and the ideological gender binary have been used to dictate what is “normal.” Mary Gray took these findings and used them as a lens in examining the impact of metronormativity on queer high school students.

Rather than trying to prevent the reiteration of such suppressive values, many rural communities — in an effort to protect their youth — often make their process of identification an extremely difficult and painful one. When parents and figures of authority refuse to talk about sexuality, students are forced to discover what it means to be queer on their own, leading to a world of confusion and uncertainty. Schools have also been found to strongly reinforce the gender binary, leaving students with the embedded mindset that there are only two genders with strict expectations of masculinity and femininity. Gender-nonconforming students and transgender students are left feeling abnormal and are often shamed for deviating from societal expectations.

I thus demand the following calls to action in the hopes that American culture can begin to erase the constricting standards set up by centuries-old philosophers: Genuine research and study needs to be done by scholars in rural communities so that queer people in smaller areas of the United States are represented, and in result, normalized. Americans need to recognize that the “backwardness” of rural areas and the “liberalness” of urban spaces have only become that way as has been dictated by centuries worth of literature and philosophy. The metronormative narrative is a self-fulfilling prophecy that, if disrupted, can be dismantled. American parents and educators need to end the stigma around discussing sexuality, despite whatever may be laid

down by religious scriptures. While clearly their goal is to protect their children, queer youth are only more inhibited from understanding their identities when even heteronormative sex is made a taboo subject. The overall American culture needs to understand that there is a difference between the terms sex and gender and begin to employ the words correctly. American classrooms should also teach the correct terminology so that children understand the differences between sex and gender and will hopefully have an easier time in understanding their identifications. Such responses seem so simple, but if they are to be taken seriously by everyone then real cultural change can be made and metronormative standards can begin to be deconstructed.

My overall intention was to find out if Washington College is a safe space for queer students based on what we know to be the negative impacts of metronormativity. Do embedded cultural ideologies of sexuality and gender influence the queer culture at Washington College (a small, private school in a rural area)? After conducting surveys and interviews, the response from queer students seems to be that while they generally feel safe on campus, they are often put in very uncomfortable and emotionally taxing situations. The following are my calls to action for Washington College, and the ways in which I think the school can improve in supporting its queer students:

More education needs to be given regarding queer diversity, for everyone. Queer students should not feel like they are invisible or otherized on campus. Perhaps a part of orientation for students can be discussing diversity and inclusion. This would not have to be just for sexuality and gender, but for race, class, religion, and more. Professors should be trained on how they approach discussions of queerness in classrooms. Queer students should not be relied on as the voice of education in such settings. Administration should be trained on how to approach

instances of queer discrimination. In addition, several of my interviewees reported experiencing sexual assault from students of the same gender, and they were extremely disappointed with the response from the Title IX response team and the campus administration. Such cases should be taken as seriously and investigated as thoroughly as any other case of discrimination and/or harassment.

Though there is a diversity statement included on their homepage, athletic staff and student athletes should be educated on queer diversity and inclusion of queer students. There were numerous accounts provided of harassment from student athletes, resulting in queer students feeling unsafe in athletic spaces and buildings around campus. Also, faculty, staff, and administration should begin to normalize asking for pronouns. Many gender-queer students reported feeling that their gender was over-looked by their professors. Students who said professors asked for pronouns on the first day of classes made them immediately feel welcomed and appreciated in the academic setting. This is something very simple that professors can incorporate in their housekeeping when they meet a group of new students.

There are options for transgender and gender-queer students to change their names in the Washington College system so that they do not have to be addressed by their dead names. However, not all gender-queer students know about this option or how to go about changing their name. This option should be made much more prevalent so that queer students know it is available to them. Some students also reported complications which required them to go to the Help Desk to get their deadname removed from their email or other aspects of their online academic profile. While the Help Desk was reported to be a kind and helpful resource, students felt uncomfortable to have to ask about changing their dead name to their preferred name, and

this process, if possible, should be simplified and made available for students to change on their end.

Residential life should consider making one or two of the floors in their other residential buildings gender neutral, so that freshman who are just beginning to understand their gender identities have more options and don't feel pressured to live on a floor with students of all the same gender. This would also mean that West, Middle, and East hall are not the only gender-neutral residential buildings on campus. Additionally, the Office of Intercultural Affairs needs to improve their communication with organizations such as EROS and SAGE. When it comes to establishing gender-neutral bathrooms on campus, this conversation should be had with SAGE, so that students who would benefit from such a change can provide their thoughts and advice, and Washington College administration will best know how to support them. The Intercultural Affairs office should also keep the information regarding queer organizations up-to-date on their site, so that in-coming students who are looking for opportunities to engage with other queer students know who to contact.

When it comes to gender identifications on campus, disclosing gender should be an option, not a requirement. Students reported that they felt that they were being forced to identify with a gender, even in instances where faculty and staff felt like they were doing what was best for the students. In their interview Val recalled an uncomfortable experience with the Department of Theatre and Dance during Drama Draft. On the sheets, students are asked to disclose their gender, whatever it may be. But one student did not feel comfortable in detailing their gender at all. Reportedly, rather than accepting the rest of the information, the present faculty forced this particular student to disclose their gender identity, which disrupted the flow of auditions and brought unwanted attention upon this student. This is one isolated instance, but it

surely is applicable to all areas of college life. Disclosing gender should be an option for students and should allow for answers beyond the confines of the gender binary, but if a student does not want to provide such information they should not have to be forced to do so.

While there are certainly aspects on which Washington College can improve, the good thing is that many students reported having positive experiences, and there are certainly things which the school is doing well. The presence of EROS and SAGE seems to overall be extremely beneficial for queer students. The few gender-neutral bathrooms that do exist are appreciated and having more would be even more beneficial for queer students. The few gender-neutral buildings that exist have reportedly been safe spaces for queer students and should be promoted as gender-neutral options for incoming students. Spaces like the library, Literary House, and the Gibson Center for the Arts were reported by students as being largely supportive of queer identifications.

Many other small rural campuses cannot say the same. Washington College has already begun to break away from the bonds of metronormative ideologies. If my calls to action are taken seriously and queer students continue to push for inclusion and change, then Washington College can serve as an example of a small rural institution that has defied metronormative expectations. When heteronormative values are torn down and the gender binary is set aside, queer existence can be allowed to flourish, and rural areas can be free from queer invisibility. It will take time, as these values are embedded in centuries worth of coded beliefs, but it is possible. If the administration, students, faculty, and staff of Washington College make the effort, then this school can be a prominent example of diversity and inclusion in a rural landscape.

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