

Overview:

We studied the differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students in their feelings of academic success, mental health, and sense of belonging on campus. We further related these three factors to tangible outcomes desirable for universities, such as the confidence students have in finishing their degrees. Our analysis accounts for a multitude of genders and sexual orientations to understand the diverse experiences of the queer student community more fully, which then informs recommendations for the most impactful resources and initiatives.

Stakeholders: US Colleges and universities

Data: Survey data from the Healthy Minds Study (HMS) for the year 2019-2020: respondents are approximately 90,000 students from 69 colleges and universities in the US

Approach

We built a set of dynamic dashboards in Tableau to analyze trends in the data; when relevant, dashboards include a parameter that switches between grouping by sexual orientation or by gender. In this way, we identified questions in the survey which reveal key disparities and highlight student experiences. Of particular interest is the granularity with which our method allowed us to study subgroups of the queer community

Conclusions and Recommendations

We found that students who have a stronger sense of group and campus belonging are more likely to choose their school again, and students at schools that prioritize mental health are more likely to finish their degree. Thus, to reduce student risk on campus, improve academic performance, and increase retention rates, we recommend that colleges and universities invest in mental health services, create spaces for belonging, and cultivate a culture of inclusivity.

Moreover, our results show that LGBTQ+ students have different experiences than their non-queer classmates: queer students are more likely to experience personal struggles which affect their academic performance, they witness more trauma on campus, and they have lower senses of belonging and community at school. As such, effective policy must – at minimum – create queer-friendly social and support spaces, ideally housed in a devoted LGBTQ+ resource center.

Lastly, the granularity of our analysis reveals that experiences vary dramatically even within the LGBTQ+ community, both when grouped by sexual orientation and especially by gender identity. We therefore recommend that – when institutions allocate resources for queer social/support spaces – they ensure that policies address the unique needs of some of most vulnerable queer students: lesbian, bi/pan, transfem, and genderqueer students.

Future work

Future work will analyze additional survey years (the HMS has run annually since 2005) and will include an even more granular analysis by demographic group (level of education, ethnicity, disability status, etc.). Because survey questions vary by year, we will first write additional data cleaning/transformation algorithms. That the 2021-2022 HMS survey allows respondents to select multiple gender identities and sexualities – which more accurately captures the lived experiences of queer people – necessitates especially nuanced data cleaning. At the same time, the greater granularity will allow for more precise conclusions which will inform optimal institutional policy and resource allocation.