

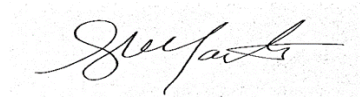
AN ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION OF

Caitlyn R. Veenstra for the degree of Doctor of Education

Presented on August 29, 2024

Title: Exploring the Impact of Identity-Based Student Organizations on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Spectrum Minority Students' Integration, Belonging, and Academic Persistence in Higher Education

Abstract approved:



Scott Mantie, PhD, Dissertation Committee Chair

This exploratory, mixed-method study examines the role of identity-based student organizations in supporting sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) spectrum minority students in higher education. Through convenience sampling, 44 participants were surveyed. Open coding revealed four key themes influencing student engagement: community building, advocacy and leadership, personal and professional growth, and inclusivity and resources. Descriptive analysis showed a significant 1.38-point increase in students' sense of belonging after joining these organizations, suggesting a positive impact on respondents' overall post-secondary experience. Notably, 76.9% of respondents intended to continue their involvement, with graduation being the primary reason for discontinuation. Identity-based student organizations were found to be vital pillars for fostering a sense of belonging, advocating for inclusivity, and promoting personal and professional growth for SOGI spectrum minority students.

Keywords: SOGI spectrum minority students, identity-based student organizations, student persistence, campus climate, LGBTQIA+, LGBT student belonging

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Exploring the Impact of Identity-Based Student Organizations on Sexual Orientation and
Gender Identity (SOGI) Spectrum Minority Students' Integration, Belonging, and
Academic Persistence in Higher Education

By

Caitlyn R. Veenstra

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to

Plymouth State University

In partial fulfillment of

the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education in Learning, Leadership, and Community

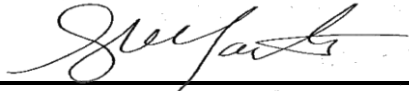
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Dissertation of Caitlyn Veenstra

Presented on August 29, 2024

APPROVED:



Scott Mantie, Ph. D., Dissertation Committee Chair



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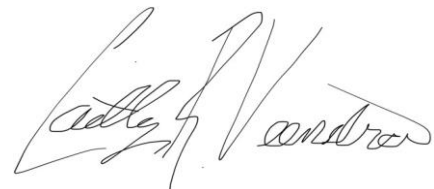


Carina Self, Ph. D., Dissertation Committee



Nathaniel Bowditch, Ph.D., Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

I understand that my dissertation will become part of the permanent collection of
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Caitlyn R. Veenstra, Author

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to ReyDel and Kenna Veenstra.

Rey – Thank you for signing on from the first moment I mentioned my pipe dream of completing a doctorate. You made me laugh, asked what I needed, encouraged me, sent chocolate, and reminded me that I could do this. Thank you for taking all the missed holidays (especially the Fourth of July, your favorite), events, and countless nights spent writing in stride. Your understanding, support, and occasional reminders that I would reach the ‘finish line’ one day kept me motivated to achieve my goal.

Kenna – I can’t believe our tiny baby, who was just two and a half when this academic journey began, started kindergarten two weeks before my defense. Thank you for your understanding as Mommy spent countless hours and weekends typing away in the office. Despite the challenges, I will always fondly look back on our Saturday mornings with pillow forts and snacks in the corner of the office while I attended Zoom classes. Never forget that you can achieve every and any goal you set your mind to. Mommy and Mama are right behind you, cheering for you every step of the way.

You both deserve honorary doctorates for taking this journey with me. We did it

together!

I love you.

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A doctoral journey is the sum of the energy, knowledge, expertise, support and guidance of a collective group. This dissertation is no exception. I extend my heartfelt appreciation and gratitude to my extended community who each played a role in this success.

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To the seven Doctors who moved through this program with me in the 13aker's Dozen cohort – We did it! Thank you for the memories. We started this program as a group of eight strangers who were socially distanced, wearing masks, and getting weekly COVID-19 testing at the gym. I look back on our three years as classmates and remember moving into the residence halls, celebrating Erika's birthdays, claiming the study room for collaborative groupthinks, meals shared on Main Street, and Andrea walking in with a twenty-pound bags of ice.

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and how consuming it can feel. I am grateful to have had the chance to lean on our community throughout this process.

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Doctor of Education: Learning, Leadership, and Community

Exploring the Impact of Identity-Based Student Organizations on Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) Spectrum Minority Students' Integration, Belonging, and Academic Persistence in Higher Education

Caitlyn R. Veenstra, Plymouth State University

Dissertation Defense: August 29, 2024

Executive Summary: September 16, 2024

Introduction: This study explored the role of identity-based student organizations in addressing challenges faced by SOGI spectrum minority students, specifically their role in fostering a sense of belonging, promoting integration into the learning community, and supporting academic persistence.

Problem of Practice: Despite inclusive policies and welcoming campus environments, a need remains for research to determine whether these changes and supports have effectively impacted the academic persistence of SOGI spectrum minority students.

Research Method: This exploratory mixed-method study aimed to provide insight into the complex lived experiences of participants. A confidential online survey allowed respondents to participate comfortably. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze data from 44 responses and identify patterns and emergent themes.

Summary of Findings: Survey respondents emphasized that participating in identity-based student organizations fostered a sense of belonging, which in turn boosted their motivation to persist toward their academic goals. This suggests identity-based student organizations are valuable institutional resources for SOGI spectrum students.

Limitations of Study: This study did not distinguish between the experiences of different identities within the SOGI umbrella. The use of convenience sampling and the distribution of the survey on social media resulted in findings that are not generalizable to all SOGI spectrum students within post-secondary institutions.

Implications/Significance of Study: Findings from this study can encourage data-informed discussions. They provide insights that can foster collaboration between administrators, leadership, shareholders, and minority-identity students. Additionally, the study contributes to a better understanding of how SOGI spectrum minority students perceive and benefit from identity-based student organizations.

Chapter One

Introduction to the Problem

When choosing a college, students often base their decision on whether they can envision living authentically in that environment (Squire & Mobley Jr., 2015). This includes finding a sense of belonging (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Tinto, 2016). Beyond academic programs and facilities, they assess campus culture; seeking institutions where their identities, values, and backgrounds will be respected (Bourke, 2016; Brooms & Davis, 2017). Diversity initiatives, identity-based support services, and relevant student organizations play a key role in their decision (Simmons, 2013). A belief in thriving within an inclusive community strongly influences college choice (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015), emphasizing the importance of fostering a positive campus culture for recruitment and retention (Woodford et al., 2018). Institutions of higher education that are successful in presenting an inclusive learning environment are likely to attract students who are interested in connecting with others they perceive to be like themselves.

Post-secondary learning environments are made up of diverse student bodies, including individuals who identify as sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) spectrum minorities. This group includes those who identify outside the dominant heterosexual and/or cisgender binaries (Suen et al., 2020) and may benefit from specialized institutional support.

Individuals who self-identify as SOGI spectrum minorities face unique challenges and experiences within institutions of higher education (Rankin, 2003; Rankin et al., 2010; Rankin et al., 2019). Research shows these students often experience pervasive discrimination within their learning communities (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Duran &

Nicolazzo, 2017; Garvey et al., 2019; Woodford et al., 2018). This population balances the risk of victimization due to their minority identities (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014) with a desire to be accepted (Kosciw et al., 2015). Literature throughout the past four decades has found that a number of SOGI spectrum minority students have taken a leave or dropped out altogether due to the harassment, exclusion, and isolation they've faced (Hunter & Schaecher, 1990; Legg et al., 2020; Lucozzi, 1998; Rankin, 2003; Sherrill & Hardesty, 1994). The challenges and discrimination aimed at this minoritized student population have created barriers and negatively impacted these students' academic goals.

Despite facing well-documented harassment and hostility, SOGI spectrum minority students often remain invisible in institutional data (Garvey, 2014; Garvey et al., 2019; Legg et al., 2020; Stage, 2007). While some colleges and universities have developed resources to support this marginalized population, there is limited data on how students perceive these resources and their effectiveness in meeting their needs (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Rankin et al., 2019). This lack of data hinders institutions' ability to fully address the challenges faced by SOGI spectrum minority students and improve their post-secondary experiences.

Institutions of higher education frequently prioritize resource allocation and funding for a range of initiatives and programs. Identity-based student organizations stand out as a cost-effective way to promote a positive campus culture. These organizations are student groups or clubs formed within educational institutions that center around specific aspects of students' identities or experiences. Research shows that involvement in these organizations significantly contributes to student persistence (Chang et al., 2014; Holzweiss et al., 2007).

Originally, identity-based student organizations emerged in response to the student movements of the 1960s to support racially and ethnically diverse students (Bowman et al., 2015). Today, they are typically established to provide a supportive and inclusive peer network for individuals who share a common characteristic, such as ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, gender identity or another defining characteristic (Means & Pyne, 2017; Baker, 2008). Although each organization may develop its own specific mission, their primary purpose is usually to provide a safe space for students to connect, share experiences, advocate for their needs, and engage in activities related to their shared identity or cause (Bowman et al., 2015; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Means & Pyne, 2017). The organizations often organize events and outreach efforts aimed at promoting awareness, inclusion, belonging, and social change within the campus community and beyond.

Supporters of identity-based student organizations argue that these groups play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging, which in turn enhances their academic persistence (Simmons, 2013). By providing students with a space where they can connect with peers who share similar identities and experiences, these organizations help create a supportive community that contributes to student success. On the other hand, critics contend that such groups may promote division and segregation, isolating students based on their identities rather than encouraging broader campus integration (Bowman et al., 2015). This spectrum of perspective highlights the balance between fostering inclusivity for marginalized students and promoting a unified campus culture.

Existing research on SOGI students often emphasizes their resilience, commending their ability to overcome barriers in the American educational system,

which has existed since the 1630s (Geiger, 2015). This research elevates the success of the college or university in retaining its students (Steele, n.d.). In contrast, creating research that focuses on persistence emphasizes how individuals achieve goals despite institutional obstacles (Tinto, 2016). This focus shifts the burden of effecting positive change away from the minoritized community and instead highlights the collaborative effort between the campus culture and the individual. Elevating student voices with a focus on understanding how students' experiences shape their motivation to persist holds institutions of higher education and their decision-makers accountable for fostering an enduring culture that minimizes discrimination.

Throughout the past three decades, the United States has experienced a shift in national culture regarding SOGI spectrum minority individuals. Some research highlights increasing acceptance of this community, representing a significant change in the nation's historical attitudes (Rankin et al., 2019). In contrast, other studies reveal an overall negative shift in the national culture. Examples permeate all levels of our communities. One example was in 2023 when scholars from the Manhattan and Goldwater Institutes proposed legislation that would ban institutions of higher education from appointing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) officers and limit the use of preferred pronouns (Kelderman, 2023). Additionally, it would prohibit public or land-grant institutions of higher education from expending funds toward the establishment, sustainment, or support of any DEI office or position (Rufo et al., 2023). On an institutional level, incidents of discrimination, harassment, violence, and marginalization continue to persist across institutions of higher education (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017).

Institutions of higher education consist of microclimates that form the larger campus climate and shape the experience of SOGI spectrum minority students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). Within these microclimates, students face a restrictive binary structure within on-campus housing (Kortegast, 2017), negative experiences and unfair treatment in academic or classroom environments (Billimoria & Stewart, 2009; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Sevecke et al., 2015), a lack of representation in curriculum (Gortmaker & Browen, 2006; Linley & Nguyen, 2015; Partridge et al., 2014) and spontaneous incidents of prejudice, harassment, and hate within the broader campus community (Greathouse et al., 2018; Legg et al., 2020).

Institutions of higher education are businesses that recognize the potential for negative impacts on their bottom line from persistent, adverse student experiences (Schwieger & Ladwig, 2018; Soika, 2020). In response, many colleges and universities have joined the call to action in creating change within their learning communities. Leadership teams have implemented policies and created programs aimed at supporting SOGI spectrum minority students (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Woodford et al., 2018). Increased efforts are aimed at strengthening the relationship between a supportive, welcoming community and student engagement, retention, and persistence. Pendakur et al. (2020) asserts that “students are placed at risk for dropping out of college when educators are negligent in customizing engagement efforts that connect them to the campus.” Additionally, Love (2019) emphasizes that higher education faculty and staff should be skilled at assessing student needs and creating population-specific environments that allow students to thrive. Institutions of higher

education benefit financially from applying their resources toward programming aimed at retaining SOGI spectrum students (Schwieger, 2018).

Despite the implementation of inclusive policies and welcoming campuses (Marine, 2011), the need remains for research on whether the changes implemented within institutions of higher education have resulted in more positive outcomes for SOGI spectrum minority students (Rankin et al., 2019). Greathouse et al. (2018) found that queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' (individuals who are SOGI spectrum minorities) experiences continue to be disparate to those of their heterosexual and cisgender peers. This research suggests there is a need for improvement in the current institutional support available to this population.

Understanding the SOGI spectrum minority student experience remains challenging due to an absence of higher education institutional demographic data (Rankin and Garvey, 2015) and the insufficient exploration of sexual orientation and gender identity from higher education survey instruments in national student data collection (Garvey, 2014). SOGI spectrum students are largely omitted from data specific to institutions of higher education as well as national census. This omission effectively erases their experience (Rankin & Garvey, 2015) and silences their voice in providing feedback on which institutional supports and resources are directly attributable to their educational persistence (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Woodford et al., 2018). To provide the most effective support, colleges and universities need to understand the existence and experience of their minoritized student populations. As Rankin and Garvey (2015) summarized in their observation, "as a scholarly community, we find ourselves in a catch-22, whereby certain social identities are under-researched, yet survey developers do

not include these demographic questions because of a lack of empirical research on these populations (p.78).”

The absence of standardized and consistent data collection (Garvey, 2014; Rankin & Garvey, 2015), along with the omission of historical and national data, jeopardizes the gains achieved by this minoritized community. It creates institutional barriers for this community, endangering the gains made and leaving them vulnerable to regression. The omittance is significant, as federal funding for programming and support is often determined by statistical data and an understanding of the community in need (Rankin & Garvey, 2015). A lack of consistent SOGI spectrum minority representation hinders the steady availability of resources and support.

Despite the lack of standardized data collection, and the often-limited resources within institutions of higher education, institutional research continues. Focusing on the current gaps in SOGI spectrum data, the research team of Duran et al. (2020) recommended that institutions of higher education aim to survey their enrolled population directly. This first-hand perspective may allow institutional stakeholders to better understand what is needed to promote educational persistence (Duran et al., 2020) and the achievement of educational goals. Collecting SOGI spectrum minority student perspective, those whom these institutional resources are created to support, may provide a focused understanding and advocacy to use those resources identified as most effective and meaningful to students throughout their educational experience.

Global Perspectives

Students who are located or choose to spend a semester abroad are often advised to not only research countries friendly to SOGI spectrum minorities, with legal

protections and laws supporting them, but also to explore student organizations available to them (Harris, 2023). One prominent organization is the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI) Youth & Student Organization (IGLYO), established in Brussels in 1984. IGLYO boasts the world's largest member-based network, comprising over 100 member organizations in more than 40 European countries and globally (IGLYO, 2023). Their primary mission is to connect, advocate for, and empower individuals aged 18-30 who identify as SOGI spectrum minorities.

An extensive survey of over 17,000 young people across 49 European countries, detailed in IGLYO's 2022 annual report, revealed that half of SOGI spectrum minority individuals have encountered bullying based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or variations of sex characteristics (IGLYO, 2023). This data highlights the widespread prevalence of discrimination faced by SOGI youth across Europe.

In the forward to the 2022 report, IGLYO's Executive Director, Bella FitzPatrick, expressed concern over the growing trend of legislation against inclusive education. This includes six European countries that have introduced anti-propaganda laws, which ban the inclusion of SOGI spectrum content in schools (IGLYO, 2023). FitzPatrick further notes that many of the advancements for SOGI spectrum minorities in the past decade have primarily benefited adults, while the backlash against this marginalized community is targeting its youth.

A significant section of IGLYO's annual report examines school environment and the critical role that a safe and supportive community plays in the development of SOGI spectrum minority youth. The 2022 report reflects that five of their Member States

(countries within the European Union) restrict extracurricular activities and students' groups that address SOGI spectrum minority issues (IGLYO, 2023). In contrast, only 12 European Union countries provide resources and implement inclusive extracurricular activities (IGLYO, 2023). These findings emphasize the continued need for recognition and cultural change worldwide.

Local Contexts

Questions about how the USNH system supports minority students across the SOGI spectrum have been raised episodically throughout the past half a century. In 1973, the University of New Hampshire (UNH) made news after a dance hosted by the Gay Students Organization (GSO) came to the attention of the state government. Despite the GSO being an officially recognized student group, New Hampshire Governor Meldrim Thomson wrote a letter to the UNH Board of Trustees complaining about the impropriety of the event. A series of correspondence between the state government and UNH leadership ensued, including a subsequent letter from the Governor which stated, "indecent and moral filth will no longer be allowed on our campuses ... rid our campuses of socially abhorrent activities or I, as Governor, will stand solidly against the expenditure of one more cent of taxpayers' money for your institutions" (Gay Students Org v. Bonner, 1974). A federal complaint was filed by the GSO against Thomas Bonner, the then President of UNH. The claim stated that the GSO's constitutional rights had been denied by not allowing the group to hold social functions. In response, the District Court found the ban against GSO's social activities to be an unconstitutional restriction of the group's right as a university-recognized club (Gay Students Org. v. Bonner, 1974).

The ruling on this court case brought the plight of SOGI spectrum minority students to the attention of the media.

Today, the USNH system encompasses UNH – Durham, The UNH School of Law, UNH at Manchester, Plymouth State University, and Keene State College. There are approximately 32,000 USNH students enrolled annually, making USNH the largest provider of public postsecondary education in New Hampshire (About USNH, n.d.). The 2021 USNH annual report highlights several initiatives and actions taken by USNH as they embrace their “responsibility to provide a supportive, safe, enriching community that reflects the values of students, faculty and staff, by building a culture of respect, trust, mutual understanding, and healthy relationships” (2021 Annual Report, p.12).

Within the USNH (2021) annual report, each institution is highlighted for various grants, awards, and recognitions. Keene State College (KSC) is recognized as being awarded a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) grant to provide scholarships for academically talented and financially eligible students. Similarly, UNH is awarded a \$3.2 million grant to support college preparedness in low-income and first-generation middle and high school students. Plymouth State University (PSU), celebrating their 150th anniversary, has been awarded a \$1.92 million federal grant to expand mental health support, specifically focused on treatment for at-risk children, adolescents, and transitional-age youth. Additional notes include the work the USNH system is doing to further COVID-19 research and enhancing the PSU food pantry services for the population of food insecure people which was reported in a 2017 survey to be at 15-20% of PSUs student body (USNH, 2021). The annual report serves as a snapshot of some of the identified groups being served by broader USNH and

institutional initiatives as the system navigates in a post-COVID 19 learning space.

Within that snapshot, the current state of the USNH system provides no identifiable representation or resources of SOGI spectrum minority individuals.

Social, Cultural, and Historical Perspectives

Institutions of post-secondary education have existed in the United States for over 380 years, characterized by a longstanding history of purposeful and conscious privilege. On October 28, 1636, the Great and General Court of Massachusetts Bay in British North America agreed to provide money toward a scholarship or college (Geiger, 2015). A year later, in 1637, the decision was made that the college be in Newton and, henceforth, the General Court called the town Cambridge (Geiger, 2015). The institution, Harvard College, was to set a precedent for the rest of the colonies. The intention was established by the Puritan leaders of the time to create an educational experience comparable to the universities of Oxford and Cambridge back in England (Shriver, 1972). This was a system the colonial leadership was familiar with, and many were educated within. The governors of the colony, those who sat on the General Court, were responsible for ensuring the college upheld orthodox Puritanism. This was ensured by recruiting institutional leaders from the clergy both in the colonies and England (Geiger, 2015). These formative years clearly established that the British gentry's education would play a pivotal role in shaping this national institution, reflecting their expectations of privilege. The first commencement ceremony was a collective of speeches conducted in both Greek and Latin (Greiger, 2015). Examining those initial years reveals an important influence on the eventual establishment of our nationwide educational framework.

While the colonial colleges opened and slowly started to succeed, there were noticeable absences in the student population. Opposition to the education of African Americans and women led to a lack of opportunity for diverse student populations. The Institution for Colored Youth was founded in 1837, 201 years after Harvard. It was the first program built to educate African Americans using the same model of education designed for White students (Demaris & Kritsonis, 2006). The education available to African American students was the product of European American communities making philanthropic decisions about the foundation and establishment of the experience. Black students were barred from the nine colonial colleges and segregated to their independent institutions. Known as historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), in 2020 there were 101 HBCUs throughout 19 states, the District of Columbia, and the U.S. Virgin Islands that served 279,000 students (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). HBCUs today have cultivated a distinctive academic culture separate from their origins as alternatives to integrated higher education, but differing student satisfaction levels between HBCUs and predominantly White institutions reveal persistent challenges in addressing the needs of Black students in majority non-Black colleges and universities (Karkouti, 2016; Leath & Chavous, 2018).

The permitted student population for colleges in the colonial United States was not limited to racially exclusionary practices. Keeping in mind that the popular terminology to describe SOGI spectrum individuals has evolved throughout our nation's existence (Renn, 2010), members of the SOGI spectrum community have experienced an unwelcoming campus climate throughout the existence of American higher education (Rankin et al., 2019). Members of the SOGI spectrum community developed an

underground or secret existence within higher education (Graves, 2018), due in large part to the hostile campus climate.

In 1920, Harvard College established a secret disciplinary court of five administrators whose job it was to investigate allegations of homosexual activity among its enrolled students (Wright, 2005). During the 1940s, at least three public universities (frequency, patterns, and extent of action are unknown due to the lack of documentation), pursued and removed individuals presumed to be homosexual from their respective learning communities (Nash & Silverman, 2015). This purge included the dismissal of University of Texas President Homer P. Rainey in 1944. When leadership of that time was required to justify the firing of President Rainey, they cited his “lack of toughness in ousting homosexuals” (Nash & Silverman, 2015, p.445). This dismissal, and the media attention following the subsequent Texas State Senate hearing (Nash & Silverman, 2015) undoubtedly served as a warning to other institutional presidents during this time and in years to follow. The climate of institutional fear was established.

It was not until 1966 that the first institutionally recognized gay student organization was founded at Columbia University (Beemyn, 2003). According to their archival collection, this group was called the Student Homophile League (SHL) and its purpose was to assist in connecting self-identified homosexuals with other homosexuals (Columbia University Archives, 2013). The group was founded by student Robert Martin (using the pseudonym Stephen Donaldson) after Martin was forced by school leadership to move out of his residence hall due to his suitemates complaining about living with an openly bisexual man (Beemyn, 2003). Intending to meet and connect with other homosexual students, the SHL faced immediate challenges. During the 1960s, Columbia

University would not give university recognition to any student organization without a membership list. Fearing retribution, many actively enrolled students refused to provide their names. Donaldson was able to recruit prominent students who were not members of SHL, and the charter was officially awarded on April 19, 1967 (Beemyn, 2003). Societal outrage was immediate, leading to the Dean of Columbia calling the student group “quite unnecessary” (Beemyn, 2003, p. 207). The university chaplain’s support helped SHL maintain its charter, but the organization was prohibited from hosting social functions due to concerns about violating New York State’s sodomy laws (Schumach, 1967). Despite the many barriers, this group still exists under the name Columbia Queer Alliance (CQA) and its founding location, Earl Hall, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Dolkart, 2017). The challenges both within individual institutions and in the broader media landscape have highlighted the persistence, determination, and grit of SOGI spectrum communities within higher education.

Focused Problem of Practice

The purpose of this research study is to examine the role of identity-based student organizations as an institutional resource for engaging minority students within institutions of higher education. The study aims to investigate how these organizations can influence SOGI spectrum minority students’ sense of integration into their learning community, enhance their sense of belonging, and ultimately contribute to their academic persistence within their institutions.

The mixed-methods study sought to collect survey responses that offer a combination of quantitative data and qualitative narratives, aiming to capture a comprehensive understanding of SOGI spectrum minority student experiences. Data was

analyzed to assist in the identification of common themes and experiences among SOGI spectrum minority post-secondary students across the United States. Ultimately, the study's primary goal was to illuminate the effectiveness of student-run resources in fostering a sense of belonging and supporting the educational persistence of minority students within higher education institutions. The insights derived from this research hold the potential to inform the development of strategies geared toward enhancing the educational experiences of a diverse range of student groups and fostering greater inclusivity within campus environments.

Central Research Questions

This study was driven by the following research questions:

1. What factors influence SOGI spectrum minority students in seeking membership in identity-based student organizations?
2. In what ways do identity-based student organizations contribute to a sense of belonging among SOGI spectrum minority students?
3. What benefits do SOGI spectrum minority students perceive from their participation in identity-based student organizations?

Chapter Two

Review of Knowledge for Action

This chapter contains a historic review of American higher education, its infrastructure, and the space created for identity-based student organizations as a supportive resource. The chapter offers a review of the theories and empirical research which provides context and support for exploring the potential relationship between identity-based student organizations and the educational persistence of sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) spectrum minority students. This chapter concludes with opportunities to improve the current state and bolster institutional support to facilitate academic persistence.

American Higher Education Infrastructure

Higher education in the United States began in the 1600s and was modelled after the English system (Shriver, 1972). The nine colonial colleges (each chartered prior to the United States gaining independence, and each still open today) set the American standard in education, serving to educate privileged Puritan men (Geiger, 2015). The founders selected students based on their socioeconomic background and charged them to offset the monetary investment required to open the educational institutions (McAneer, 1952). In the subsequent 387 years, prospective students with minority or underprivileged identities including (but not limited to) those in the SOGI spectrum (Blumenfeld et al., 2016), women (Parker, 2015), and people of color (Harper et al., 2009), have continued to fight for their place within the academy (Reay et al., 2001).

Institutions of higher education are businesses that need to recruit, enroll, and retain students. Educators, policymakers, and individual institutions have worked for

decades to increase rates of college graduation (Wolff et al., 2017). Despite these efforts, recent data shows institutions of higher education across the United States experience a 40% dropout rate annually (ThinkImpact, 2021). In addition, graduation rates show only 14.7% of bachelor's degree enrollees and 37.5% of those seeking associate degrees finish their programs within six years (Bouchrika, 2023). Students who leave their program of study before completing it contribute to the attrition rate among students. In the most recent national data available, New Hampshire was ranked 35th based on the number of college students (31,194) graduating annually (Bouchrika, 2023). High student attrition has negative consequences for this business model.

In recent years, colleges and universities have implemented policies, practices, and supportive infrastructure that is intended to decrease student attrition by supporting the diverse makeup of their learning communities (Blumenfeld et al., 2016; Rankin & Reason, 2008; Wolff et al., 2017; Worthington et al., 2008). Despite these efforts, SOGI spectrum minority students continue to experience intolerance and harassment leading to higher attrition rates (Legg et al., 2020). Literature throughout the past 40 years has documented the unique challenges faced by this population (Renn, 2010; Renn, 2015; Schumach, 1967; Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001; Woodford & Kulick, 2014; Woodford et al., 2018; Wright, 2005). Students report the challenge of maintaining positive self-esteem while they cope with being different, establishing romantic and personal relationships, and grappling with the decision on whether to disclose their orientation to family and friends all while facing harassment, violence, and discrimination (Baker, 1991; D'Augelli, 1992; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Rankin, 2003).

Most of the information available about SOGI spectrum minority student experience comes from personal reporting. Historically, federal, and higher education surveys have excluded the SOGI spectrum student experience (Garvey, 2014). Although many colleges and universities acknowledge the presence of SOGI spectrum minority students on their respective campuses, few gather and maintain data on the enrollment numbers or identified needs of these students (Garvey, 2014; Legg et al., 2020; Stage, 2007). The absence of representation in data reporting results in students often remaining unnoticed, with their experiences and personal narratives primarily known to researchers through anecdotal means (Legg et al., 2020). Subsequently, higher education administrators are unable to provide definitive data on whether the implemented changes within their respective institutions have contributed to SOGI spectrum minority persistence (Rankin et al., 2019).

Student Organizations Creating Community

Historically, research has predominantly centered on evaluating the success of higher education by examining retention rates among the overall student population in institutions of higher education. The literature shows that students have a higher rate of persistence when they experience a sense of belonging within their learning communities (Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012; Wolf et al., 2017). Student organizations are one space within institutions of higher education that may allow minoritized students to share lived experiences and build connections with peers who have similar experiences.

Student organizations are run by enrolled students and require little institutional infrastructure to maintain. Due to the SOGI spectrum minority's struggle with institutional visibility, there is an identified need to critically study the potential impact of

resources aimed at social belonging, and whether those programs influence student persistence (Wolf et al., 2017). This research project aims to explore the role of identity-based student organizations on the educational experience of SOGI spectrum minority students, and the perceived benefits of these spaces from the perspective of individual students.

Identity-based student organizations are varied (Kodama & Laylo, 2017). They can focus on bringing together individuals who identify with a specific ethnic group (e.g., Korean Student Association), a broad race or gender (e.g., Gender and Sexuality Alliance), or be intersectional (e.g., women of color groups). Even still, some identity-based student organizations focus on professional affiliations (e.g., Student Occupational Therapy Association) or hobbies (e.g., Anime club). These organizations include identity-based Greek organizations and religious groups as well (Kodama & Laylo, 2017). Despite the different missions and foci, research has shown students engage in their campus identity-based student organizations out of a desire to connect with peers and create a community of shared social identity (Kodama et al., 2017; Museus, 2008; Renn & Ozaki, 2010).

In the following section, three theories highlight, and may explain, the SOGI spectrum minority experience. The theory of student involvement addresses belonging through community. Intersectionality highlights the importance of understanding the complexity of an individual's identity. Queer theory identifies the importance of recognizing societal influence on the formation of heteronormativity, and the oppressive nature of a binary system. The integration of these three theories offers a comprehensive framework to explore the complex factors influencing the persistence of SOGI spectrum

minority students in higher educational settings. By considering how these theories intersect, this research study can delve into the multifaceted experiences and identities of individuals in this student population, recognizing the unique challenges they face while also examining how their involvement in identity-based student organizations may impact persistence and success in their educational goals.

Theoretical Analysis

The fusion of the theory of student involvement, intersectionality, and queer theory formed a robust umbrella framework for this study that aimed to examine the impact of participation in identity-based student organizations on community building, inclusivity, and student persistence. Student involvement theory provided insight into the ways in which engagement in these student organizations influences students' academic and social integration. Intersectionality theory enriches this framework by recognizing the diverse and intersecting identities of students within the learning communities, highlighting the varying challenges and opportunities they encounter. Queer theory supports the critical examination of power dynamics, norms, and heteronormative structures that may affect student experiences. It deepened the researchers' understanding of the unique experiences and dynamics within identity-based student organizations; shedding light on the intricacies of identity expression and the creation of supportive, affirming spaces. Together, these three theories created a comprehensive framework that allows the researcher to explore how these student organizations foster community, promote inclusivity, and ultimately contribute to the persistence and success of students from various SOGI spectrum minority backgrounds.

Theory of Student Involvement

Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement serves as a foundational framework in this study. Astin (1984) developed this theory to assist educational researchers in exploring student development. Administrators and faculty in institutions of higher education can use this framework to enhance the creation of more effective learning environments. Researchers (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1987) utilizing this theory have indicated that the interaction and the level of involvement students have with their respective learning institutions vary. Furthermore, Astin (1993) found student involvement with peer groups has influence over student growth. According to Astin (1984),

A highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends a lot of time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, an uninvolved student may neglect studies, spend little time on campus, abstain from extracurricular activities, and have little contact with faculty members or other students. (pp. 297-298)

The theory of student involvement implies the more energy, time, and interaction students devote toward engagement with their undergraduate student experience, the higher the likelihood that they will experience belonging and persist in their academic goals (Astin, 1984). The implication is specific to the actions of the individual student.

Critics of Astin's theory (Outcalt & Skewes-Cox, 2002) highlighted the lack of exploration of the relationship between student involvement within their learning community and their level of satisfaction. Additionally, Outcalt and Skewes-Cox (2002) contended that the student involvement framework primarily focuses on the student's

ability to become involved on their learning campus while excluding how the campus embraces individual student uniqueness and diversity. When exploring minoritized students specifically, both Outcalt and Skewes-Cox and Rendón et al. (2000) asserted the importance of recognizing systemic problems and the role of institutional support for diverse populations. To address the identified challenges, the combined theoretical framework will combine Astin's (1984) theory of student involvement with minority-centered theories.

Intersectionality

In 1989, Crenshaw introduced the term “intersectionality” to illuminate the ways structures within the United States and discourses of resistance often frame identities as isolated and mutually exclusive, resulting in the erasure of various other minoritized identities (Carbado et al., 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Harris & Patton, 2017). The use of intersectionality as a framework (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) has a strong foothold in higher education scholarship and practice (Harris & Patton, 2019). The concept is applicable to many studies of individuals because of its “presumption of a holistic and inclusive perspective on the complexities of identities” (Duran et al., 2020, p. 3). It is the recognition that within every individual are multiple constructs, often a mix of minority and dominant, that experience both privilege and oppression in social locations (Kendall & Wijeyesinghe, 2017). A person is not one single label, but rather the culmination of many identities and labels for the various aspects of themselves. In addition, intersectionality supports the notion that identities are fluid and can change over time (Shields, 2008). Historically and in the present day, the way in which humans label and define facets of themselves has evolved.

The theory of intersectionality emerged from activist and scholarly communities focused on the realities of life and oppressive structures for Black women (Dill & Zambrana, 2009; Hancock, 2016). Scholars today have applied the core themes of intersectionality--racism, sexism, power, oppressive structures, and inequities--and applied it in a way that considers how domains of power interact and influence minoritized communities (Duran et al., 2020; Duran, 2021). Applying intersectionality to the experience of SOGI spectrum minority students illuminates the need to address and remove social inequalities that are shaped by sociohistorical contexts (Duran, 2021), such as the invisibility and discrimination faced by this student population.

Higher education scholars have increasingly utilized intersectional analysis within their research (Duran & Jones, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2014; Museus & Griffin, 2011; Torres et al., 2009). There has been some criticism on whether the use of intersectionality is referring to multiple identities rather than scrutinizing structures of domination (Harris & Patton, 2019; Jones & Abes, 2013; Nuñez, 2014; Tillapaugh & Nicolazzo, 2014; Duran & Jones, 2019). Those offering critiques question whether researchers interested in student development can adequately honor both the individual and the systems of power (Duran & Jones, 2019). In response, student development theorists such as Jones and Stewart (2016) have argued that intersectionality offers an opportunity to understand the roles of both privilege and marginality in the contexts of how they inform individual identity development within their environments.

Queer Theory

Queer theory has been influenced by Foucault's (1990) first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (Denton, 2019). Foucault (1990) attributed societal categories of self

to the advancement of social institutions (e.g., government, education, etc.) and the need to categorize human attributes (Denton, 2019). As part of the drive to categorize, the term *homosexual* first appeared in English in 1892 (Johnson, 2015) and allowed for stigma and oppression while simultaneously creating opportunities for individuals to organize and form like-minded communities around the categorization (Denton, 2019). The need for society to label and categorize was both an opportunity to diminish a community while at the same time acting as a beacon of like-mindedness.

Queer theory “critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender” (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 620). The emphasis of queer theorists’ work is on the social influence on gender and sexual expression. Queer theorists “often focus on the cultural, national, and societal context in which queer people live” (Denton, 2019, p. 58). It is a critique of heteronormativity as a dominant social construction in which any individual falling outside the binary is labeled as abnormal (Abes & Kasch, 2007).

Queer theorists focus on the cultural, national, and societal context in which queer people reside (Denton, 2019) and resist the heteronormative culture of the space (Cohen et al., 2023; Warner, 1991). Berlant and Warner (1998) examined the ways in which public spaces have been taken away or denied to queer people to protect heteronormative values (Denton, 2019). Extending this analysis, queer theory plays a crucial role in this research by emphasizing the exploration of SOGI spectrum minority student experiences within a historically heteronormative and gender-binary environment.

In recent years, scholars have advocated for a more extensive application of queer theory in researching institutions of higher education and student affairs (Rankin & Garvey, 2015; Renn, 2010). Specifically, research designers need to allow for individual sexual and gender identity that represents fluidity and nuance. Specifically, “using critical queer ideals in quantitative research adds to the depth of higher education and student affairs scholarship, as well as advances the methods and ideals for research on queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students” (Rankin & Garvey, 2015, p. 80). The call for researchers to move beyond the traditional qualitative research methodology and design surveys that capture fluidity and intersecting social identities (Rankin & Garvey, 2015) may move queer research literature forward.

Summary of the Theoretical Framework

Theories described in this section, the theories of student involvement, intersectionality, and queer theory, are central to this research study because they identify the role of society in creating categories and organizing individuals within those binaries. Additionally, they center the unique perspective of minority student experience. These theories, along with sub-theories or related theories, help to illuminate the current structures within institutions of higher education that are aimed at promoting student persistence. Because post-secondary students interact with many systems and structures throughout their higher educational experience, the American university system has an opportunity to understand the influence of the current structures to strengthen the support with empirical data related to this problem of practice.

Review of the Educational Research Literature

Relevant literature informs the current study and provides an understanding of how student organizations may potentially influence the persistence of SOGI spectrum minority students within American institutions of higher education. The review focuses on the published work of several prominent researchers: Duran (2019, 2021), Duran and Nicolazzo (2017), Garvey (2014, 2020), Garvey et al. (2014, 2017, 2018a, 2018b, 2019a, 2019b), Garvey and Rankin (2015), Nicolazzo and Jourian (2020), Rankin (2003, 2005), Rankin and Reason (2008), Rankin et al. (2010), and Renn (2010, 2015). It was important to survey the current literature relevant to the three frameworks that were most pertinent to the research questions as they reflect a gap in the current knowledge. The four key themes explored in-depth throughout the next section are institutional invisibility, campus climate, sense of belonging, and student organizations.

These four themes together draw the collective picture of what the SOGI spectrum minority post-secondary student experience is like within American institutions of higher education. The key terms in this search and literature review included the following: *SOGI spectrum minority students*, *student persistence*, *identity-based student organizations*, *campus climate*, *LGBTQIA+*, and *LGBT student belonging*. Searching the key terms within Google Scholar and the Plymouth State University library assisted in identifying the gap in current knowledge and subsequent development of this research study.

This researcher reviewed the existing literature on the current state of institutional research and data collection, the expansive information on the role that perceived campus climate plays on student success, and how belonging influences students' experiences

within their broader learning communities. It was important to understand both the historical experience of SOGI spectrum minority students as well as their current experiences. Specifically related to current practice, the commitment that institutions and higher education and their leadership have shown toward supporting and furthering the retention of enrolled students played a role in the review of current literature.

Institutional Invisibility

Institutional invisibility refers to the systemic lack of recognition and support for the unique experiences and needs of SOGI spectrum minority students, often resulting in their marginalized status within institutions of higher education (Lange et al., 2019; Wolff et al., 2017). Although SOGI spectrum minority students are likely to be on most college and university campuses throughout the United States, and many institutional leaders have acknowledged their presumed presence (Sanlo, 2004), there remains an absence of consistent data on their existence, lived experiences, and persistence to graduation (Legg et al., 2020; Rankin et al., 2019). Most available data is anecdotal, as only a limited number of individual institutions collect and maintain comprehensive information regarding both the total number of students within this populations and their specific needs (Legg et al., 2020; Rankin & Garvey, 2015). They are a minoritized community that is presumed but not proven to exist within the academy.

The lack of SOGI spectrum minority representation is not isolated to post-secondary educational data. Historically, this population has faced exclusion in federal and state government data collection (Garvey, 2020; Rankin et al., 2019; Rankin & Garvey, 2015). This is significant because the lack of representation can perpetuate the

discriminatory and binary system that naturalizes cisgender and heterosexual identities (Garvey, 2020).

Inconsistent or inaccurate surveys used to collect data on post-secondary students represent a perpetual challenge that may potentially impact policies, practices and supports for SOGI spectrum minority students on campus (Garvey et al., 2019). While the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA, 2001, 2010, 2023) has provided scholarly definitions for the terms *gender* and *sex*, the inconsistency in their usage within research poses a potential threat to their practicality and the resulting outcomes (Garvey et al., 2019). To explore this phenomenon, Garvey (2019) and Garvey et al. (2019) conducted studies on the representation and operationalization of sexual and gender identity on large-scale survey instruments. In one study (Garvey et al., 2019), researchers found that of the six U.S. federal government surveys most frequently used in higher educational research, none included questions or items for individuals who self-identify beyond the male and female binary. Within those six surveys, only one was found to correctly ask about gender and provide response options aligned with gender. The other five were found to interchange sex and gender identities (Garvey et al., 2019). The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), one of the most prevalent federal surveys, asked participating institutions to provide the percentages of individuals across two gender categories: men and women. Their website adds instructions for how institutions can account for “students for which gender is unknown.” It reads,

These individuals are still to be reported to IPEDS. It is up to the institution to decide how best to handle reporting individuals whose gender does not align with ‘Men’ and ‘Women’ categories. However, a common method used is to allocate

these students based on the known proportion of men to women. In 2022-23, NCES has added a question in Part A to capture the total number of students for whom gender is unknown and the total number of students for who gender does not align with 'Men' and 'Women' categories. However, these students should still be allocated into the 'Men' and 'Women' categories in all other screens of Part A (IPEDS, 2023).

This statement holds significant implications for institutions responsible for reporting data to IPEDS. It highlights the evolving landscape of gender identification and recognition within educational institutions. Specifically, it addresses the challenge of accurately reporting individuals whose gender identity falls outside of the traditional binary categories of 'men' and 'women' and acknowledges the need for a more inclusive, person-centered approach to data collection. The introduction of a question in the 2022-2023 academic year to capture data on students with unknown or non-binary gender identities (IPEDS, 2023) reflects a growing awareness of the importance of accurately representing the diversity of the student population. However, the directive that these students should still be allocated into binary categories in certain screens of Part A (IPEDS, 2023) underscores the ongoing challenges of implementing these changes while adhering to federal reporting structures.

The lack of consistent representational data has hindered the ability of researchers to study SOGI spectrum minority students. In one study, Garvey (2014) studied highly used survey instruments within higher education from 2010-2012. Garvey found that of the 10 most widely used, only four included questions about sexual identity and two included transgender identity (as cited in Rankin et al., 2019).

In 2004, Sanlo published an article that called for studies that examine the lived experience of sexual minorities (who were at the time of publication identified as “LGB” or lesbian, gay, and bisexual) students. After the article was published, it took eight years before the first college application asked applicants about their sexual orientation and gender identity (Legg et al., 2020). In 2014, a group of 25 civil rights organizations contacted the chief executive officer and chairpersons of the Common Application requesting the addition of optional questions related to sexual orientation and gender identity. The Common Application is a standardized undergraduate admission application accepted at over 600 American colleges and universities (McPhate, 2016). After repeated denials by officers of the Common Application, it was not until the 2021-2022 application season that they added the requested demographic questions (Legg et al., 2020). Additional changes, such as the addition of “legal” to the first/given name question were added in the 2022-2023 application season followed by the addition of “X” or “another legal sex” as an option in addition to the current “male” and “female” legal sex indicators (Steele, 2022). Although there is acknowledgement of positive momentum toward accessibility, such as the example with the Common Application above, the inertia of change within institutions of higher education can be perceived as slow moving.

Despite the ongoing need for consistent inclusion, there have been some notable advancements in the reporting of SOGI spectrum minority students. The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) launched a college survey instrument in 1999, which has since evolved into an annual survey encompassing participation from nearly 1,700 four-year colleges and universities with 252,336 individual student respondents in 2022 (NSSE, 2023). This annual report furnishes insights into the involvement of first year and

senior undergraduate students in programs and activities offered by institutions of higher education for their learning and professional growth (NSSE, 2023).

In 2017, the NSSE incorporated questions regarding gender identity and sexual orientation into their survey, subsequently refining these questions to gather data for comparative analysis with their heterosexual and cisgender peers. The NSSE data revealed that gender-variant students, those who identify outside the male/female binary, demonstrated higher engagement in certain activities, such as faculty-led research (BrckaLorenz, 2018). Moreover, this group reported feeling less supported by staff members with potential influence over their sense of well-being beyond the classroom (BrckaLorenz, 2018). Questions regarding sexual orientation revealed that heterosexual students perceived greater support from their higher education institutions compared to their minority identity counterparts (BrckaLorenz, 2018). The NSSE data supports the ongoing need for SOGI spectrum minority inclusion within institutional data. Legg et al. (2020) noted the challenges of inconsistent, unstandardized language as well as no historical data analysis on the information that has been collected. Both factors contribute to the continued dearth of institutional data and perpetuate the invisibility of one of the most vulnerable populations on a college campus (Cobian & Stolzenber, 2018; McLennan & Jacobo, 2018). With the exclusion of this population from data, researchers focused on the higher education experience have had difficulty examining the influence of institutional environments on SOGI spectrum minority students (Rankin et al., 2019). The barriers to research have produced dire consequences in the advancement of institutional advocacy, policy, and resource allocation (Rankin & Garvey, 2015), which may affect student persistence.

Campus Climate

Campus climate has been studied extensively with its connection to diverse student persistence. Rankin (2005) defined campus climate as “the current attitudes, behaviors and standards of faculty, staff, administrators and students concerning the level of respect for individual needs, abilities and potential” (p. 17). The definition is as broad as the ways in which campus climate may influence the student experience within various institutions of higher education.

For the SOGI spectrum minority community, issues of institutional campus climate are varied but may include heterosexist environments (Blumenfeld et al., 2016; Woodford & Kulick, 2014), physical and sexual assault (Oswalt & Wyatt, 2011), faculty or staff support for diverse sexuality and gender identity (Garvey et al., 2017), representation in curriculum (Renn, 2022; Snapp et al., 2015), and the presence or absence of resources for the sexual orientation and/or gender identity spectrum community, e.g. student organizations and resource centers (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). The broad range of interactions and experiences that help form personal perceptions of campus climate are fluid and individualized.

Researchers have recognized campus climate is a fundamental component of the undergraduate student experience because of its relationship with student persistence (Garvey, 2020; Mayhew et al., 2016). Within the available research, sexual orientation and gender identity spectrum minority students have perceived their respective campus climates to be more welcoming and accepting when the institution has demonstrated a commitment to and provided resources promoting an inclusive, equitable learning space (Garvey, 2020). This may be in the form of student support services or infrastructure

(Pitcher et al., 2018), nondiscrimination policies explicitly including sexual orientation and/or gender identity minority students (Garvey et al., 2017), representation in or academic programs focused on sexual orientation and/or gender identities (Wolff et al., 2017), and positive faculty interaction (Cress, 2008). Every interaction and experience within a learning community can influence one's perception of that campus' climate for SOGI spectrum minority individuals.

Sense of Belonging

Creating a positive campus climate for all students is not just about implementing inclusive policies and programs; it hinges on the ability to foster meaningful interpersonal relationships (Garvey, 2020) and a true sense of belonging. Research has shown that integration into a campus community and a sense of belonging are two important pillars of student persistence within institutions of higher education (Hoffman et al., 2002; Palmer et al., 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). Studies in social psychology have shown that the desire to belong is a universally strong motivator of human behavior (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, as cited in Edwards et al., 2022). Additionally, Walton and Cohen (2011) described social belonging as a central human need to have positive relationships with other individuals.

Positive interpersonal relationships provide a supportive network, enabling individuals to share their experiences, struggles, and triumphs. This can be particularly crucial for student populations facing unique challenges (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Maloy et al., 2022; Pitcher et al., 2018; Woodford & Kulick, 2014). A sense of belonging, born from the opportunity to build interpersonal relationships, is cultivated in an atmosphere of acceptance and validation, providing minoritized students with an

integral role within their campus community (Wolf et al., 2017). In return, when students feel accepted and connected, they can focus on their personal growth and academic achievement to enrich their learning community and persist toward their academic goals (Boyd et al., 2022; Garvey, 2020; Wolf et al., 2017). By nurturing a sense of inclusion and belonging among SOGI spectrum minority students, higher education institutions can enhance their own success as well as cultivate positive student experiences and personal growth.

Institutions of higher education are comprised of microclimates that may independently provide environments where a sense of belonging is experienced. Johnson et al. (2007) found that residence halls can provide socially supportive environments across various racial and ethnic groups. Studying residential life in a broad sense, Hurtado and Ponjuan (2005) found that living on campus positively affected Latino students' sense of belonging. Interested in the role of residential learning communities, Schussler and Fierros (2008) asserted the importance of peer networks in promoting students' sense of belonging in residence halls.

Another body of literature has shown that student experiences associated with diversity and campus climate can inform belongingness (Duran et al., 2020). The study by Shook and Clay (2012) represents a significant finding in the realm of diversity and inclusion within the context of higher education. Their study illuminated the significant impact of diverse roommate pairings on a sense of belonging among students with minoritized identities. Specifically, they discovered that when individuals from underrepresented backgrounds cohabitated and interacted with roommates who identified with a majority identity, an increase in the individuals' sense of belonging was observed.

The findings of Shook and Clay (2012) carry profound implications for colleges and universities aiming to create inclusive and supportive learning environments. It underscores the importance of fostering belonging throughout the learning community by supporting diverse living arrangements and encouraging meaningful interactions between students of different identities. This research not only underscores the significance of diversity but also offers practical insights for institutions seeking to strengthen their commitment to equity and inclusion.

Beyond residential life, a broader examination of campus climate studies reveals an essential link between the campus environment and students' sense of belonging. Duran et al. (2020) have highlighted that students who perceive their campus climate as unwelcoming or toxic are considerably less likely to experience a genuine sense of belonging within their academic community. This finding has potential implications for the broader educational landscape. Students who do not feel valued or included may find it challenging to engage with their studies, connect with peers, or access the resources that are crucial to their success (Masika & Jones, 2016; Meehan & Howells, 2019).

Educational researchers have consistently emphasized the role of students' sense of belonging, and its connection to academic persistence in higher education (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Museus et al., 2017; Wolf et al., 2017). They have researched belongingness for students of color (Museus et al., 2017) and sexual minorities (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). More recently, researchers have started to explore the experience of SOGI spectrum students with a sense of belonging (Duran, 2019; Evans et al., 2017; Longerbeam et al., 2007; Strayhorn, 2018). Specifically, studies have emphasized the role of campus resources and connections (Evans et al., 2017; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017) in

influencing belonging for this population. There is also an identified need to further evaluate the potential relationship between social-belonging programs on student persistence within higher education, especially for stigmatized and minoritized students (Wolf et al., 2017). This research aims to understand that relationship for SOGI spectrum minority students within institutions of higher education across the United States.

Identity-Based Student Organizations

A key indicator of a supportive campus climate for SOGI spectrum minority students is the presence of an identity-based student organization (Kane, 2013). The first lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) student groups appeared on college and university campuses in the late 1960s (Beemyn, 2003). Historically, they served an important role in not only supporting SOGI spectrum minority students but also in creating alliances with other minoritized groups (Kane, 2013). Today, these student resources provide social support to their learning communities as well as serving as a platform for activism (Pitcher et al., 2018; Walls et al., 2010).

A recent study by Coley (2020) found that 62% of the 1,953 four-year, not-for-profit American colleges and universities have at least one officially recognized student group aimed at supporting SOGI spectrum (LGBTQIA+) students. Drawing on social movement theory, the researchers identified four factors that may predict the presence of these student groups: political opportunities, educational opportunities, human resources, and organizational resources. The study found that 80% of the 10 states with the highest proportion of colleges and universities with SOGI spectrum student groups – Colorado, Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Washington, and Wyoming – voted for the Democratic presidential candidate in

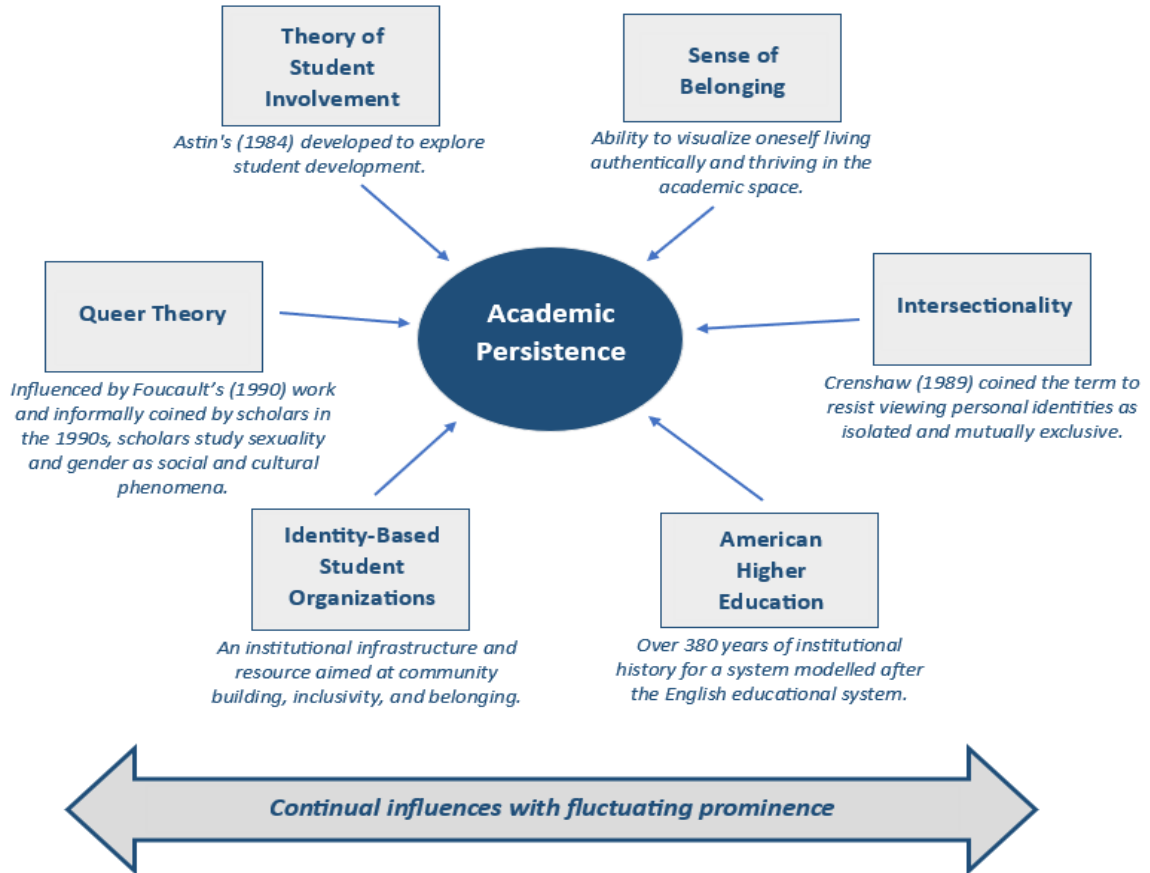
the 2016 election, with Pennsylvania and Wyoming being the exceptions. All these states are outside the Southern United States. In contrast, 80% of the 10 states with the lowest proportion of SOGI spectrum student groups – Alabama, Alaska, Delaware, Hawaii, Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, Montana, Oklahoma, and Tennessee – voted for the Republican presidential candidate in 2016 (Coley, 2020). The lowest percentage was Hawai'i, with only 22% of Hawaiian colleges and universities having recognized SOGI spectrum student groups (Coley, 2020). This study highlights the relationship between political climate and the post-secondary experience of minoritized SOGI spectrum students.

Student organizations are one example of an institutional resource which allows students to experience membership and devote their time and energy toward a productive and meaningful experience (Kuh, 2009). Although the current literature is limited, some qualitative research suggests SOGI minority student organizations can offer various benefits including emotional peer support, community, and a sense of belonging on campus (Duran et al., 2020; Pitcher et al., 2018). The connection between membership in an organization and belonging on campus may further influence student persistence, due to the parallels drawn previously.

Student organizations vary greatly in their fundamental structure including organizational name, mission, goals, and identified target population (Kodama & Laylo, 2017; Woodford et al., 2018). A recent study designed to understand the predictive factors of prevalence among SOGI spectrum student groups determined that 62 percent of four-year, not-for-profit colleges and universities across the United States have lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) student groups (Coley & Das, 2020). In

their study, Woodford and Kulick (2014) found that a high rate of LGBTQ student organizations on a campus relative to the overall student population was associated with decreased levels of experiential heterosexism.

A search of current literature focused on social identity-based student organizations found a dearth of research on the influence of these spaces on SOGI spectrum student persistence. Researchers have explored the role of student involvement in organizations based on ethnic, gender, or racial minorities (Nadal et al., 2014) including Latino/a students (Banda & Flowers, 2016; Hernandez, 2019; Salinas & Lozano, 2019), Asian-American students (Wang, 1992), African American students (Guiffrida, 2003), and international students (Wu et al., 2015). Within the literature, student involvement with peers and in organizations with matching ethnic identities have been found to be a source of support (Banda & Flowers, 2016) that positively influences a sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2018) and academic persistence (Banda, 2012; Banda & Flowers, 2016). Some studies identified the role of student organizations in facilitating connections with faculty (Guiffrida, 2003), which is another predictive factor of student persistence. The findings of these studies suggest the potential for SOGI spectrum student organizations to influence SOGI student persistence within the USNH educational system.

Figure 2.1*Conceptual Framework Incorporating Theories and Literature Review Themes**Summary of the Educational Research Literature*

The studies presented in this section relate to the problem of practice by connecting theoretical bases to the student experience of SOGI spectrum minority students, contributing background information, and identifying themes and subthemes which will inform the present research. Identity-based student organizations are institutional supports that promote a positive campus climate and positive intrapersonal

relationships. Their ability to facilitate a sense of belonging may influence the ability of SOGI spectrum minority students to persist in their educational goals.

The empirical evidence indicates there are several factors that entwine and influence, either positively or negatively, a student's ability to experience a sense of belonging and persist in their academic goals. In addition to an institutional commitment to highlighting both the presence of SOGI spectrum minority students, there needs to be recognition of the unique experiences of this population within institutions of higher education and resources to facilitate student persistence. SOGI spectrum minority students may find intrapersonal relationships and support through engagement with identity-based student organizations on their respective campuses. It is possible that the opportunity to engage in experiences that promote belonging will alleviate or minimize societal and institutional barriers to academic persistence.

Interested Parties and Organizational Data

To illustrate the current state of institutions of higher education and the institutional resources that are created to support SOGI spectrum minority student academic persistence, this section provides a review of existing data and relevant communities. The evidence is based on existing data that informs and justifies the identified problem of practice. Interested parties include individuals and groups with a vested interest in the outcomes and implications of the study.

Actively enrolled students within institutions of higher education in the United States who self-identify as a SOGI spectrum minority are the primary focus of this research. The overarching objective of this study was to explore how student organizations may influence the academic experience, sense of belonging, and academic

persistence of SOGI spectrum minority students. It is important to note, however, that the implications of these findings may extend beyond this specific student group and could have relevance for all students engaged with student organizations.

Institutions of higher education may benefit from this research and the subsequent understanding of how student organizations influence success for SOGI spectrum minority students and the larger enrolled student population. Institutions of higher education commit resources that impact both their learning communities and campus climate when they support the establishment of student organizations. They can utilize the research findings to inform their respective policies, programs, and resources aimed at fostering a more inclusive campus environment.

Administrators and staff with an interest in advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion within educational institutions may find the data from this study particularly compelling. The findings have the potential to inform and enhance institutional policies and practices aimed at creating more inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students, irrespective of their identity. By understanding how student organizations may influence these critical aspects of student life, administrators and staff may be empowered to foster a more equitable and diverse campus culture. The implications could extend beyond the context of SOGI spectrum minorities to benefit a broader learning environment.

Student organizations, especially those created as a targeted space for SOGI spectrum minority studies, may have a vested interest in understanding how their organizations influence student retention. The research may help build understanding of best practices, areas for improvement, and ways to collaborate with other campus

resources and entities. Additionally, the data may help inform advocacy for the future of student organizations.

This research may provide a platform for future research in fields such as education, sociology, psychology, and business. These individuals and research teams may have a vested interest in the advancement of knowledge in this area. The research can contribute to academic literature and inform future studies. Ultimately, it will fill gaps in the current literature and help identify the remaining areas to be explored and studied.

Summary of Literature Review

Within this review of literature is evidence that suggests institutions of higher education have made great strides in recognizing and supporting their SOGI spectrum minority students within their respective learning communities. Although there is progress, there remains a plethora of opportunity to truly support and encourage student persistence toward their academic goals. Institutions of higher education promote positive campus climates through the dedication of resources, time, and energy toward supporting students in their academic endeavors. Recognizing that SOGI spectrum minority students experience unique challenges during their higher education experience, institutions' creation and maintenance of student organizations may be positioned to influence their students' persistence.

The theory of student involvement, intersectionality theory, and queer theory each highlight various ways of understanding the college, undergraduate student experience. These theories are used as lenses to review the current literature revealed various themes, including institutional invisibility, campus climate, sense of belonging, and the

significance of identity-based student organizations. The current literature, theories, and themes provided the background for this research and offered possibilities for areas of future investigation. Collectively, the literature provided a view of the current state that assisted in the identification of this problem of practice. Through examining current knowledge, the possibility of exploring how identity-based student organizations influence SOGI minority spectrum persistence emerged.

Detailed theories and current literature suggest minoritized students may have a stronger likelihood of persisting if they perceive their campus climate as supportive, can develop intrapersonal relationships, and can experience a sense of belonging. Essentially, integration into their chosen learning communities may support the opportunity for SOGI spectrum minority students to persist in their academic goals. Students who feel supported by their learning communities and who have access to opportunities for self-exploration and acceptance are more likely to experience positive outcomes that may include persistence toward academic goals.

While the currently available research added to the current literature, it stopped short of addressing this problem of practice directly. The next step may be in understanding the interaction between a positive campus climate, students' sense of belonging, and the opportunity to engage with identity-based student organizations. This research study will provide additional avenues of exploration to understand more holistically the ways in which identity-based student organizations support student persistence within American institutions of higher education. The subsequent data produced by the research will uncover possible ways that involvement in identity-based

student organizations influences academic persistence. The next chapter identifies and describes the methods of inquiry that will be used to examine the problem of practice.

Chapter Three

Methods and Design for Action

Students who are sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) spectrum minorities face unique challenges in these environments. Although there has been nationwide progress toward understanding and supporting this population as they pursue their academic goals, there remains a need for additional knowledge and information. Gaps in the available literature include data on the presence of SOGI spectrum minorities (Yadava & Bhattacharjee, 2023) and an understanding of how institutional resources influence belonging and promote student persistence (Tinto, 2017). This study provided data for researchers and higher educational professionals to understand the lived experiences of SOGI spectrum minority students within American post-secondary institutions and advocate for improvements in the current system.

This study utilized a mixed methodology. The purpose of this research study is to examine the role of identity-based student organizations as an institutional resource for engaging minority students within institutions of higher education. The study aims to investigate how these organizations can influence SOGI spectrum minority students' sense of integration into their learning community, enhance their sense of belonging, and ultimately contribute to their academic persistence within their institutions.

Chapters 1 and 2 provided the background for this study. Based on the framework, and the current state of knowledge, this study posed the following research questions:

1. What factors influence SOGI spectrum minority students in seeking membership in identity-based student organizations?

2. In what ways do identity-based student organizations contribute to a sense of belonging among SOGI spectrum minority students?
3. What benefits do SOGI spectrum minority students perceive from their participation in identity-based student organizations?

This chapter provides a rationale for the selection of the research design, participant selection, data collection, data analysis, as well as limitations and trustworthiness of the study.

Study Design

A mixed-methods research study that analyzed data from a survey of both closed and open-ended research questions was uniquely suited to comprehensively address the identified research questions (Cohen et al., 2018). The use of closed questions allowed for quantitative analysis and enabled the researcher to quantify the prevalence of identity-based student organization participation among SOGI spectrum minority students, and to identify statistical relationships. The demographic questions provided essential personal and background information, which aided in the classification and characterization of the survey respondents as a population. The data will contribute to understanding a small portion of the actively enrolled, self-identified SOGI spectrum minority students within institutions of higher education across the United States. This data contributed to filling the deficit identified in the current SOGI spectrum minority student data.

The open-ended survey questions were crucial for delving into the nuanced and multifaceted aspects of the research questions. Open-ended questions allowed survey respondents to share their personal experiences, perspectives, and motivations in their own words. This qualitative data highlighted the intricate factors that influence SOGI

spectrum minority students' decision regarding participation in their respective identity-based student organizations and shed light on the role these organizations play in their post-secondary student experience. Through thematic analysis of the open-ended responses, the researcher identified patterns, themes, and contextual information that would not have been captured by quantitative data alone.

In essence, the combination of closed and open-ended questions within the survey offered a balanced, holistic approach to data collection. It not only provided statistical insights into the prevalence of identity-based student organization involvement but offered a deeper understanding of the factors driving participation and the perceived personal benefits. By capturing and analyzing these different types of data, the study data may contribute to a more holistic understanding of the role and impact of these organizations on SOGI spectrum minority students.

Participants

Convenience sampling was used to identify participants for this study. Survey Respondents were individuals who self-identified as being actively enrolled within an institution of higher education in the United States who were at least 18 years old and self-identified as a SOGI spectrum minority person.

The original research design included survey respondents who were actively enrolled within the University System of New Hampshire (USNH) residential campuses, which include Keene State College (KSC), Plymouth State University (PSU), and the University of New Hampshire (UNH). This inclusion demographic was outlined in the original research application that was submitted to the Plymouth State University (PSU)

Institutional Review Board (IRB). The goal sample was 40 students from across the USNH residential campuses. This IRB was approved on January 29, 2024.

After a period of five weeks wherein the researcher was unable to establish connections with professionals within the USNH campuses, the decision was made to expand the geographic scope and include all actively enrolled students in the United State within institutions of higher education. The expanded inclusion data was submitted to the PSU IRB and approved in two subsequent protocol amendments. The approved amendments included the research survey link and digital flyers (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3) to be disseminated on both Facebook (on March 11th, 2024) and LinkedIn (on April 11th, 2024). The expanded demographic allowed the researcher to identify commonalities and differences among campus communities across the country.

Data Collection

Data collection began upon receiving PSU IRB approval. The survey was disseminated on both Facebook and LinkedIn through digital flyers and the Qualtrics survey link (see Appendix 2 and Appendix 3). The survey included fixed-option questions (e.g., yes/no, multiple choice, select all that apply, ranking, and Likert-type responses) and several open-ended questions designed to encourage qualitative narratives. Each question was structured for survey respondents to reflect upon and provide data on their post-secondary educational experience. The Qualtrics survey, including the informed consent form and the screening questions, can be found in Appendix 1.

Each survey respondent was provided a Qualtrics survey with the same set of survey questions. The continuity allowed the researcher to discern themes throughout the

responses. Respondents were told to anticipate approximately 10-15 minutes to respond to the 32 questions to complete the survey. The survey comprised questions pertaining to demographic details, personal identity, and inquiries related to on-campus experiences and student organizations.

The survey was divided into three sections, for ease of navigation. *Part I: Demographic Information* provided data specific to the individual student's experience. The questions included the name of the college or university in which the survey respondent is enrolled, asked the individual to select their academic identity (i.e. online learner, residential student, living in off-campus housing, living in fraternity or sorority housing, commuter, or self-describe). Additional questions included length of enrollment within their current institution of higher education, and self-described gender/gender identity and sexual orientation. These questions allowed for multiple responses for survey respondents to fully define their identities.

The second section, *Part II: Identity-Based Student Organization Engagement*, had six questions related to identity-based student organizations and the survey respondents' engagement with their respective college or university organizations. This section began with a definition of identity-based student organizations to ensure a shared understanding of the research topic and subsequent questions. Respondents were asked if they had ever been involved with one or more identity-based student organizations, to provide the name of those student organizations, to indicate how long they have been actively participating in student organizations at their college or university, to indicate how many hours per week, on average, are spent involved with the organization, to describe the main reasons why they chose to engage with the organization, and finally to

indicate whether they plan to continue involvement in their institution's identity-based student organizations and why.

The third section, *Part III: Belonging*, is the largest section. It asked students to indicate in what ways participation in identity-based student organizations influence their sense of connection to their college or university; to indicate how important it is for them to participate in a student organization that provides them with a sense of belonging, and to reflect on their experience with identity-based student organizations based on a Likert-scale measuring agreement with seven statements. The next Likert-scale asked the respondent to reflect on their experience both before and after joining their college or university's student organization. This section included 8 statements and asked respondents to rate their level of agreement. The final question provided survey respondents with the opportunity to give additional comments, questions, or thoughts pertaining to the topic and focus of the research. That concluded the survey and the research participation.

Student privacy and confidentiality were important considerations with the data collection methodology and practices. The survey respondent's right to privacy and confidentiality were protected using anonymity settings in the Qualtrics software. No IP data was collected from survey respondents. Survey questions were drafted carefully to support the anonymity of the participant. The researcher, although employed within the University of New Hampshire, did not have direct access to actively enrolled students on any of the campuses. The online dissemination of the survey enhanced respondent anonymity. The researcher's name and credentials, along with IRB approval, were provided in the informed consent.

All raw survey data was stored on a password protected flash drive and kept in the researcher's home office. Unless requested by the PSU Institutional Review Board (IRB), officials at PSU, or government regulations, access to the study data was limited to the researcher and their faculty dissertation chair or advisor. This data was safeguarded in accordance with applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations and kept for three years, as required by institutional policy.

Data Analysis and Evaluation

Data for this study was collected through websites and institutional public-facing information, and through anonymous Qualtrics survey responses. The survey data was studied within the Qualtrics system in report format and exported to Excel. Careful review of the data ensured that details were fully understood, and that the written-in responses were recorded verbatim. The exploration of the data on both platforms, Qualtrics and Excel, allowed for themes and differences to be identified and analyzed.

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize the characteristics of the datasets, with attention paid to frequency and variability of the values and relationships amongst the variables. Patterns emerged and were analyzed. An example of the qualitative open coding evaluation is in Appendix 4.

The overall knowledge gained from the review and analysis of the Qualtrics survey data helped inform the research discussion and recommendations for institutional improvements to current practice. Recommendations were made based on the quantitative and qualitative data sets and the identified themes collected through the Qualtrics survey responses.

Targets and Timelines

This research study began to take shape in the summer of 2021 when the researcher enrolled in her first semester as a Doctor of Education (EdD) student in the Learning, Leadership, and Community program at Plymouth State University (PSU). The researcher's initial interest was in creating a study that would highlight the experience of SOGI spectrum minority students in USNH. Participation in a qualitative research course allowed the researcher to interview and learn from currently employed Chief Diversity Officers within the USNH system. From there, a review of the current literature highlighted a gap in the knowledge. The broadened inclusion data was incorporated in response to the challenge of confirming survey dissemination throughout the USNH community.

After a thorough review of the literature, the researcher identified a problem of practice. Numerous discussions with PSU faculty and higher education professionals within the USNH system allowed for the creation of a more detailed and nuanced research proposal. Upon review by the researcher's PSU faculty chair and dissertation committee, an application was submitted to the PSU Institutional Review Board in early 2024. Upon approval by the PSU IRB, the researcher defended her research proposal with her dissertation committee, while simultaneously working toward dissemination of the Qualtrics research survey.

Actively enrolled students within institutions of higher education were invited to participate in the research by consenting to complete the anonymous, online Qualtrics survey. Individuals clicked on the survey link and were directed to an online informed consent form. All participants were required to acknowledge and confirm their informed

consent, and voluntary participation in the survey, by checking a question at the end of the consent form. Submitting consent to be a participant was the only way prospective participants were able to access the survey. If consent was not submitted, the survey ended with a message thanking the individual for considering the research participation. At the end of the survey, participants had the opportunity to download or print a copy of both/either their informed consent form and/or their survey responses.

The survey was open from January 29, 2024, through May 11, 2024 (103 days) with 91 recorded responses. This researcher re-posted the digital flyer and Qualtrics survey link weekly on both Facebook and LinkedIn. Once the survey was closed, the researcher began the task of determining who met the inclusion data, and subsequently began data analysis.

Limitations

The key limitations of this study were the sample size and broad demographic leading to limited generalizability. Although the study was aimed at understanding the SOGI spectrum minority student experience, the diverse infrastructure amongst institutions of American higher education may have created challenges in generalizability. Some prospective respondents may not have had access to an identity-based student organization. Additionally, the structure and activity of the organization may have varied considerably amongst survey respondents, which would impact the influence engagement had on the students' academic experience.

The problem of practice for this study was chosen based on the researcher's decade of experience working within institutions of higher education and her lived experience as a self-identified SOGI spectrum minority. The interest in making a positive

impact on the SOGI spectrum student experience mandated the collection of student data from individuals with lived experience. The researcher recognized the opportunity for diverse student experiences within various regions and institutional settings across the United States. This research may serve as a first step in understanding the SOGI spectrum minority student experience, and it was by no means conclusive.

An anonymous Qualtrics survey was chosen to protect the identity of SOGI spectrum minority students. This researcher acknowledged the process of “coming out” and disclosing personal identity as a journey, and one that is very personal. The survey responses were limited to those individuals who were willing to discuss their minoritized identity. The respondents trusted the researcher, a virtual stranger, to maintain processes for confidentiality and take all precautions to mitigate the risk of identifiable information being released. As a result, some actively enrolled students may have been unwilling to participate, and thus limited the available data.

Furthermore, it was crucial to recognize that disseminating the survey on social media may limit prospective respondents to those who accessed LinkedIn and Facebook during the time the survey was open. It was also impossible to know how many prospective applicants opened the survey and chose not to complete it. A more targeted dissemination of the survey through professionals employed within the institutions of higher education would have helped ensure both students who chose to engage with their identity-based student organizations and those who chose not to participate would be given an equal opportunity to complete the survey and contribute to the data.

Lastly, this researcher recognized the individuality of experiences both within and outside the SOGI spectrum minority experience. By including all SOGI spectrum

minority identities in the survey, the range of personal experiences represented a broad spectrum. These experiences, rooted in personal identities, were not generalizable and should be viewed as one person's experience within their respective institution of higher education.

While it was determined to be the most appropriate method of data collection, the structure and length of the informed consent and Qualtrics survey may have limited participant engagement for some prospective respondents. Survey participants needed to be willing and able to acknowledge and accept the consent form prior to engaging with the survey. Additionally, participants needed to commit the time to responding to the questions on the survey.

During the creation of the research survey, the researcher invited several higher education professionals, colleagues, and persons with SOGI spectrum minority identities to test both the consent and the survey. The individuals who tested the survey provided feedback on the timing, clarity, comprehension, and language choice used in the survey. The feedback received, along with the average response time, were considered when drafting the final survey for prospective participants. This testing process helped to ensure the survey was accessible and clear for prospective participants.

Summary of Methods and Design

The purpose of this research study was to examine the role of identity-based student organizations as an institutional resource designed to engage minority students within institutions of higher education. The study aimed to investigate how student organizations can influence SOGI spectrum minority students' sense of integration into

their learning community, enhance a sense of belonging, and ultimately contribute toward their academic persistence within their institutions of higher education.

Participation in identity-based student organizations was voluntary for each enrolled student, and the motivation and perceived outcomes of that engagement vary among individuals. Actively enrolled post-secondary students were asked to participate in this study by responding to an anonymous Qualtrics survey. The survey questions were carefully designed to understand students' experiences with identity-based student organizations. Both qualitative and quantitative data highlighted common themes and deviations in survey responses, revealing individual student perceptions of their academic experience.

Chapter Four

Description of Findings and Recommended Actions

The review of available literature revealed that a student's SOGI spectrum minority identity can impact their post-secondary educational experience, exposing them to discrimination and other barriers in the pursuit of their academic goals (BrckaLorenz et al., 2021; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Rankin et al., 2019). Research questions for this study, and the subsequent survey questions, were formatted in a way to understand the prospective relationship between students' sexual orientation and gender identities, their decision to engage or not engage with a college or university's identity-based student organization, and the perceived benefits of the existence of and participation in the organization. This mixed methods research study examined how involvement in identity-based student organizations can influence sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) spectrum minority students' sense of integration into their campus community (Garvey, 2020), enhancing their sense of belonging (Hoffman et al., 2002; Palmer et al., 2014; Wolf et al., 2017) and ultimately supporting their academic persistence (Boyd et al., 2022; Garvey, 2020). Research of this topic was guided by the following three research questions:

1. What factors influence SOGI spectrum minority students in seeking membership in identity-based student organizations?
2. In what ways do identity-based student organizations contribute to a sense of belonging among SOGI spectrum minority students?
3. What benefits do SOGI spectrum minority students perceive from their participation in identity-based student organizations?

Survey

The research survey consisted of 32 questions, categorized into four sections: screening questions (N = 3), demographic information (N = 5), identity-based student organization engagement (N = 6), and belonging (N = 18). These sections were informed by the literature review and guided by the three research questions. The survey included multiple-choice, Likert-scale, and open-ended formats. On average, respondents took 19.5 minutes to complete the survey. The full survey is listed as Appendix 1.

Data Collection

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) application for research involving human subjects was submitted on December 11, 2023, and approved on January 29, 2024. This IRB application outlined a recruitment procedure in which the researcher would establish contact with leadership at the individual institutions within the University System of New Hampshire (USNH), including the University of New Hampshire (UNH), Plymouth State University (PSU), and Keene State College (KSC). The anticipated research participants were identified as actively enrolled USNH students.

The research protocol relied on convenience sampling of self-identified SOGI spectrum minority students within the USNH campuses. Upon approval, the researcher sent an e-mail communication to the identified student affairs leadership on each campus. These administrators recommended additional individuals from offices of institutional research, diversity offices, student leaders, and members of senior leadership with whom the researcher communicated via e-mail. Multiple contacts were made between various members of the three residential USNH campuses (KSC, UNH, and PSU) over the next five weeks. During that time, there was no confirmation that the survey was distributed.

Additionally, the survey was not completed and there was no confirmed receipt of students interacting with the research survey.

Due to the challenge of establishing connections and engaging the intended audience for the survey, the researcher made the decision to extend the original survey beyond the scope of the USNH. A protocol amendment was submitted to the PSU IRB on March 5, 2024. The protocol amendment requested permission to disseminate the research survey link along with a digital flyer (see Appendix 2) within targeted Facebook groups. The identified groups included the LGBTQIA+ Affinity Higher Education Professionals and the LGBTQ Research and Researchers in Higher Education and Student Affairs. The groups were identified due to their targeted audience of professionals with access to SOGI spectrum minority students enrolled within institutions of higher education across the United States. This amendment broadened the prospective participant inclusion criteria and allowed for all actively enrolled students to participate. The PSU IRB approved the amended protocol on March 11th, 2024, and the survey was released in the Facebook groups on that date. The first survey response was recorded in Qualtrics at 3:14pm that afternoon. After the initial Facebook post, weekly posts with the survey link and digital flyer were published.

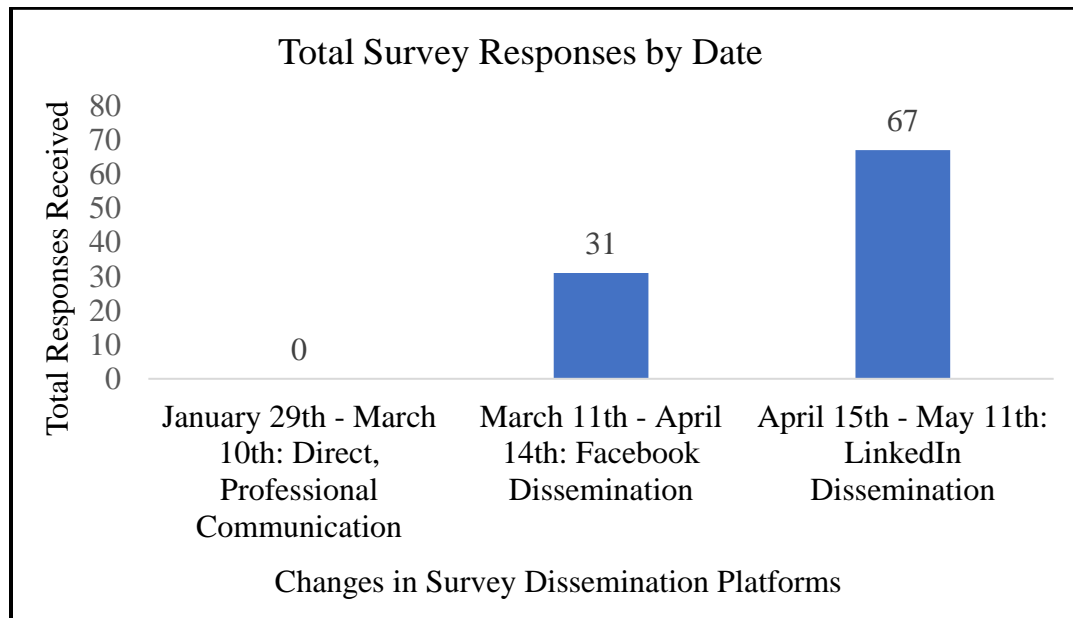
Five and a half weeks after the amendment was approved and the survey was released on Facebook, a total of 31 responses were received. Recognizing the goal of 40 research survey responses, the researcher chose to submit a second protocol amendment to the PSU IRB on April 11th, 2024. This amendment requested permission for the researcher to create a post with a second digital flyer (see Appendix 3) on the LinkedIn platform. This platform was identified for its population of higher education professionals

and actively enrolled students. The second amendment was approved by the PSU IRB on April 15, 2024. The same protocol with weekly posts containing the survey link and digital flyer were published. Following the final protocol amendment, from April 15th through May 11th, 36 additional surveys were completed.

In total, the survey was open from January 29, 2024, through May 11, 2024 (103 days) with 67 recorded responses. Although simultaneous data collection makes it impossible to determine with certainty which platform respondents used to learn about the survey, the data of when their responses were collected is meaningful (see Figure 4.1). The Qualtrics platform also provides the knowledge that in total, 11 surveys were finished using the QR code (displayed on the digital flyers) and 56 surveys were finished through the anonymous link directly to the survey.

Figure 4.1

Response Rate to the Participant Survey by Date



Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Once the research survey was closed, an initial review of the 67 survey responses was conducted. From this review, the researcher determined 44 responses met the screening criteria. These individuals were at least 18 years old, enrolled in an institution of post-secondary education, and self-identified as a SOGI spectrum minority. Additionally, these 44 responses provided information about their higher educational experience. This group met the original research goal of at least 40 respondents. They represented a diverse group of individuals enrolled in 33 different colleges or universities.

Following the initial review, twenty-three respondents (34.3% of the total survey responses) were excluded from the analysis for the following reasons:

- One respondent did not complete the screening questions.
- Sixteen respondents did not advance past the screening questions.
- Four respondents indicated they do not self-identify as a sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) minority person.
- One respondent provided their gender/gender identity data but no confirmation of their school and student-organization information.
- One respondent indicated they are a recent PhD graduate.

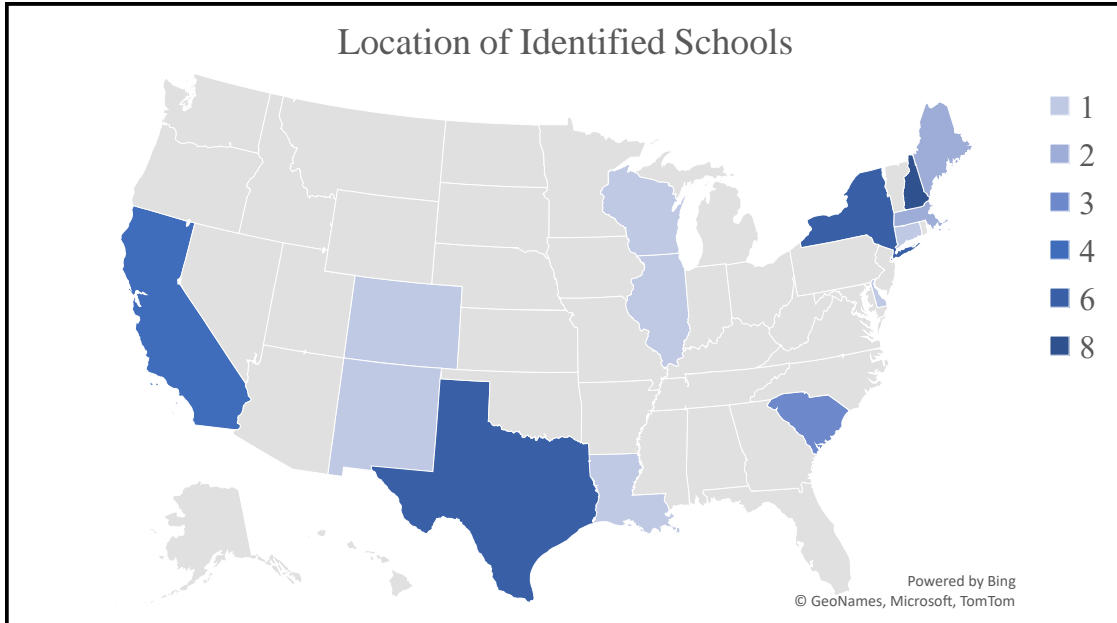
A second review of the 44 included survey responses revealed a spurious data set. There were six respondents (9.0% of the total surveys) indicated they were enrolled within institutions of higher education located outside of the United States. Their geographic placement included Australia (n=1), Canada (n=3), and the United Kingdom (n=2). Of these six respondents, two indicated they have engaged with their college or

university's identity-based student organizations. One international student indicated they founded a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at their previous University because they identified it as a need within their learning community. Another international student responded that they engage with their identity-based student organization to meet people and build their community. Although this subset was not included in the final data analysis, it is noteworthy that the international respondents likely have variances in their institutional structure but comprehended the questions in the survey enough to provide their perspective. Their participation indicates the opportunity for international study and understanding on how engagement with student organizations may influence the SOGI spectrum minority student experience and could inform future research.

Spurious data was removed due to the likely differences in infrastructure and accessibility within international post-secondary institutions. With these individuals removed, the final data set included 38 survey responses (56.7% of the total survey responses) from students enrolled in colleges or universities across 14 states in the United States. Figure 4.2 shows the primary geographic location of the identified colleges and universities from the 38 survey responses. The legend and color variation indicates the number (n) of survey responses in each state.

Figure 4.2

Participant College and Universities in the United States, Shown Geographically.



Participants represented 14 out of the 50 United States (28%), with the highest representation from New Hampshire (18%), New York (13.6%), and Texas (13.6%). These participants represent a small fraction of the estimated SOGI spectrum minority, actively enrolled student population in the United States today. In 2020, the Association of American Universities surveyed 180,000 undergraduate and graduate students in the United States and found nearly 17% (30,600 individuals) identified as a sexual orientation minority, and 1.7% (3,060 individuals) identified as a minority gender identity (Gallagher, 2023). This data demonstrates the diversity of the SOGI spectrum minority student population across the country.

Participant Demographics and Background Information

Due to the personal and sometimes sensitive nature of demographics and SOGI spectrum minority identity (Pachankis et al., 2020), the survey allowed participants to

select multiple answers for questions on sexual orientation and gender/gender identity, and all questions were optional. Consequently, several participants chose not to answer every question. As a result, the total number of responses (n) varies depending on the specific question and the answers provided.

The flexibility of responses resulted in 49 sexual orientation responses and 52 gender identities from the 38 participants. Of these, the two most frequent sexual orientations were gay (n = 12), queer (n = 9), and bisexual (n = 9). Most respondents (n = 30) identified one sexual orientation. The two most frequent gender identities were man (n = 16) and woman (n = 14). Most respondents (n = 27) identified one gender/gender identity. The age of participants ranged from 18 to 46 years with a mean age of 28.89 and a median of 25.5 years. Table 1 shows the demographics of the participant population, based on their confidential survey responses.

Table 1*Participant Demographic Characteristics (N = 38)*

	Total n (%)
Sexual Orientation	n = 49 (100%)
Gay	12 (24.5%)
Queer	9 (18.4%)
Bisexual	9 (18.4%)
Lesbian	8 (14.5%)
Asexual	5 (9.1%)
Heterosexual	2 (3.6%)
Pansexual	1 (1.8%)
Biromantic	1 (1.8%)
Gynoflexible	1 (1.8%)
Number of Identified Sexual Orientations	
One	30 (61.2%)
Two	7 (14.3%)
Three or more	1 (1.8%)
Gender/Gender Identity	n = 52 (100%)
Man	16 (30.8%)
Woman	14 (26.9%)
Gender non-conforming	9 (17.3%)
Transgender	7 (13.5%)
Nonbinary	2 (3.8%)
Agender	1 (1.9%)
Two-spirit	1 (1.9%)
Genderqueer	1 (1.9%)
Genderfluid	1 (1.9%)
Number of Identified Gender/Gender Identities	
One	27 (51.9%)
Two	8 (15.4%)
Three or more	3 (5.8%)
Age (years)	
Mean (SD)	28.89 (8.67)
Median	25.5
Mode	21, 23
Range	18-46

In addition to demographic information, participants were asked to identify how long they had been enrolled at their identified college or university and what their academic identity was. These questions were geared at understanding the potential exposure and perhaps the motivation students have that motivates them to engage with their respective institutional student organizations. From the 38 survey responses, the two highest academic identities were commuter (living off campus) and online learners. Both were 28.9% of the respondents (n = 11). Other academic identities included residential students (living on campus; 18.4%), living in off-campus housing (21.10%), and hybrid (2.6%). The most prominent length of enrollment was 19-27 months, three academic years, representing 34.2% of respondents (n = 13) followed by an equal representation of 0-9 months (first academic year), 28-36 months (fourth academic year) and 37+ months (fifth academic year and beyond), each with 1.3% (n = 5) of survey respondents.

Identity-Based Student Organization Engagement

In total, 37 survey respondents answered questions about their engagement with identity-based student organizations within their respective institutions of higher education. Of those, 51.4% (n = 19) indicated they do actively engage with at least one identity-based student organization.

Thirteen survey respondents answered open-ended and multiple-choice questions specific to their engagement with identity-based student organizations. These questions sought to understand the students' decision to engage or not engage in their respective institution's identity-based student organization, the length of their total involvement with the organization, how many hours are spent weekly on tasks or engagement related to the student organization, the main factors considered by the respondent when choosing

to engage with the student organization, and their plan to continue or discontinue involvement with their student organization.

Of those 13 responses, 76.9% (n = 10) reported their length of participation with the organizations was over 1 year but less than 3 years. The average weekly hours spent on student organization activities (meetings, social media, networking, communications, etc.) ranged from 1 hour or less (n = 1) to 20 hours (n = 1). The most prominent responses were 3 hours (n = 2) and 4 hours (n = 2). Most survey respondents listed 1-2 student organizations they participated in.

To answer research Question 2, one open-ended survey question asked respondents to describe the main reasons they chose to engage with their institution's identity-based student organization(s). Thirteen respondents answered this question with varying input. Open coding was used to describe and categorize the data (Cohen et al., 2018). The process of open coding responses for this question identified categories and patterns across the 13 responses (n = 13). Appendix 4 outlines the open coding process, which resulted in the identification of four emergent themes.

1. Community Building – Survey respondents identify a need for fostering communities that promote acceptance, safety, and peer support.
2. Advocacy and Leadership – Survey respondents are driven by a desire to advocate for change, and to lead change initiatives.
3. Personal and Professional Growth – Programs and opportunities that support personal and professional growth are valued among survey respondents.

4. Inlusivity and Resources – Survey respondents identify that inclusivity, particularly for marginalized identity groups, along with access to resources and education are crucial.

In response to the question of whether the respondent planned to continue involvement with their institution's identity-based student organization(s), 10 of the 13 respondents (76.9%) responded in the affirmative. The three respondents who do not plan to continue their involvement indicated they anticipate graduating in May 2024.

Survey Respondent 1 mentioned involvement with two identity-based student organizations. They specified that while they plan to continue participating in their transgender student group, they do not intend to maintain the same level of involvement in their institution's broader sexuality and gender alliance student group. The respondent explained, "...no because the executive board does not respect [the identity-based student organization] or have understanding of including neurodivergent students." This was the only survey respondent who mentioned a second minoritized identity in their response, indicating a potential topic for future research.

The results of the open-ended responses were supported by Likert-scale responses of statements aimed at the connection between belonging within their institutional culture and their student organization(s). Table 2 shows the Likert-scale responses, and measures of central tendency: mean, median, mode, and standard deviation for these statements.

Table 2*Respondent Reflection on Experience of Belonging, Community, and Authentic Self*

Statement	M	Mdn	Mod	SD
Participation in an identity-based student organization has given me a sense of community.	4.05	4	5	1
Being involved in my college or university's student organization has made me feel like I belong.	4.1	4	5	0.85
Engaging with a student organization in my college or university has empowered me to live authentically.	3.95	4	3	0.94
I feel like a valuable member of a student organization.	3.8	4	3	0.95
I can really be myself in my college or university's student organization.	4.1	4	5	1.12
Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my college or university's student organization.	2.65	2.5	1	1.42
It is hard for people like me to be accepted in my college or university's student organizations.	2.6	2.5	1, 2, 3	1.31

On the Likert-scale, ranging from “1 – Strongly Disagree” to “5 – Strongly Agree,” the mean scores indicate a positive relationship between participation in identity-based student organizations and a sense of belonging within students’ respective institutions of higher education. The highest mean score of 4.1 reflects strong agreement among respondents that their involvement in these organizations enhances their sense of belonging and allows them to feel authentically themselves. Conversely, the statement with the lowest mean score, 2.6, indicates that respondents generally find it hard for

people like them to be accepted into their college or university's student organizations. This statement does not specify the student organizations are identity-based and may represent an opportunity to explore feelings of belonging across student organizations and groups.

Belonging

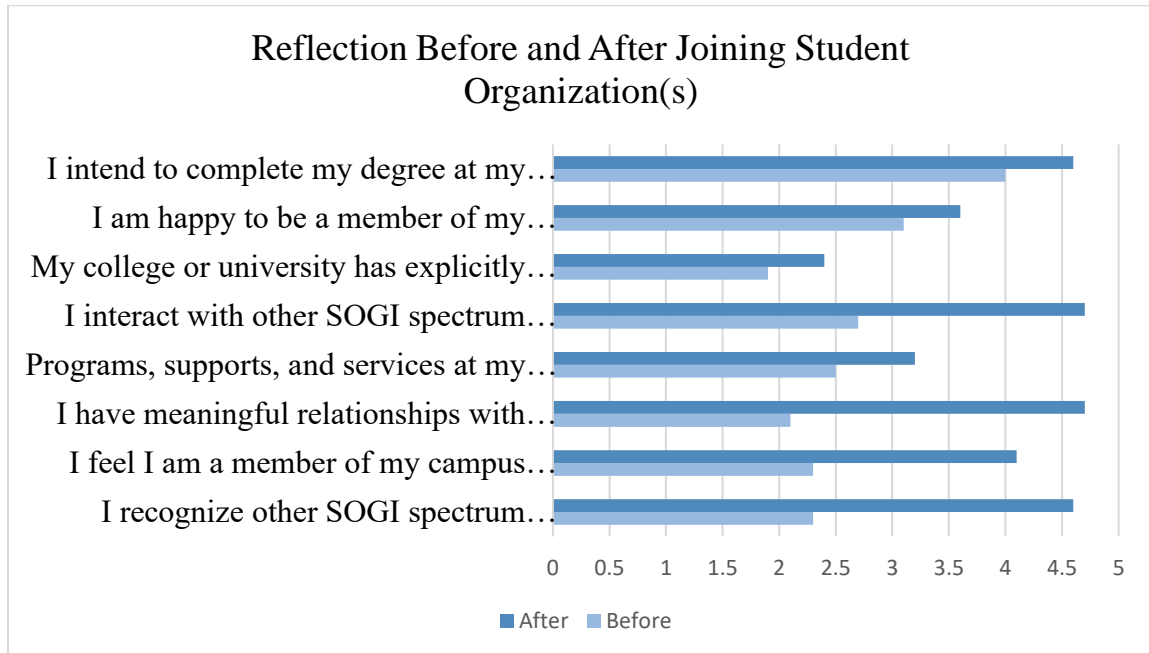
Institutions of higher education help students develop a sense of belonging (Supiano, 2018). Scholars often measure this belonging through social connectedness (Grieve & Kemp, 2015). Strayhorn (2019) noted that all students seek a sense of belonging during college, which aligns with the human development literature that identifies belonging as a basic human need (Maslow, 1970). Students can experience belonging through their social relationships, which Grieve and Kemp (2015) defined as “the feelings of belonging and affiliation that emerge from interpersonal relationships within social networks” (p. 239). One of the aims of this research study was to explore how, if at all, identity-based student organizations created a sense of belonging among enrolled students.

Students' sense of belonging within their institution of higher education is a prominent topic in current literature and is discussed in depth in Chapter 2. The theme of belonging was prominent within the survey in this research. To explore the relationship between belonging and engagement with identity-based student organizations, survey respondents were provided a list of eight statements and asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Respondents were asked to consider their Likert-scale responses from the perspective of their time before engaging with their institution's identity-based student organization, and after. In total, 10

survey respondents completed this section. The mean (average) score for each statement is indicated in Figure 4.3 below.

Figure 4.3

Average Level of Agreement, Before and After Joining Student Organization(s) (N = 10)



A deeper analysis of Likert-scale responses (N = 10) was conducted to compare before and after responses. Table 4 presents the mean (M), median (Mdn), mode (Mod), and standard deviation (SD) for each statement. The mean scores, which reflect respondents' feelings before and after engaging with their identity-based student organization, showed a notable increase for all eight statements. On average, the mean response increased by 1.38 points, indicating stronger agreement after participating in the organization. This suggests that involvement in identity-based student organizations significantly enhances students' sense of belonging and overall experience.

Table 3*Likert-Scale Analysis of Agreement, Before and After Joining Student Organization(s)**(N = 10)*

Statement	Before Engagement				After Engagement			
	M	Mdn	Mod	SD	M	Mdn	Mod	SD
I intend to complete my degree at my college or university.	4	4	4, 5	1.15	4.6	5	5	0.52
I am happy to be a member of my college or university.	3.1	3.5	4	1.37	3.6	3.5	3, 5	1.17
My college or university has explicitly communicated its commitment to prioritizing the inclusion of individuals across the SOGI spectrum.	1.9	1	1	1.29	2.4	2.5	1	1.35
I interact with other SOGI spectrum minorities in my campus community.	2.7	2.5	2	1.34	4.7	5	5	0.48
Programs, supports, and services at my college or university meet my needs.	2.5	3	3	0.97	3.2	4	4	1.14
I have meaningful relationships with other SOGI spectrum minority students in my college or university.	2.1	2	2	1.1	4.7	5	5	0.48
I feel I am a member of my campus community.	2.3	2	2, 1	1.16	4.1	4	4, 5	0.99
I recognize other SOGI spectrum minority people on campus from social activities I've attended.	2.3	2	2	1.06	4.6	5	5	0.52

Academic Persistence

Academic persistence refers to a student's commitment to achieving their academic goals (Chen et al., 2019). In Table 4, the statement "I intend to complete my

degree at my college or university” measures the survey respondents’ level of agreement regarding their persistence at their current college or university. Response options range from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Likert-scale data shows that respondents were more likely to rate their agreement with this statement higher when reflecting on their experience as an engaged member of the organization (4.0 before and 4.6 after).

In addition to the quantitative data, several survey respondents provided qualitative statements that connect their academic satisfaction with a sense of belonging within their respective college or university community. When responding to the question “In what ways does participation in identity-based student organization(s) influence your sense of connection to your college or university?” respondents had different answers:

- Survey Respondent 5 stated, “It makes me feel like part of something bigger.”
- Survey Respondent 32 stated, “Providing me with community and an emotional outlet.”

Another question prompted responses from survey respondents that highlight the relationship between academic persistence and engagement with identity-based student organizations. The question asked, “How important is it for you to participate in a student organization that provides you with a sense of belonging? Please explain your answer.”

Example responses from respondents included the following:

- Survey Respondent 3 stated, “I think [belonging] is a human need, and the organizations are there to support that need for people that don’t have much else to turn to.”

- Survey Respondent 13 stated, “I’m shy so it is helpful to connect with other students who I already know I have something in common with.”
- Survey Respondent 32 stated, “It wasn’t something I thought I needed at first but it is now something that makes my college experience more bearable.”

Qualitative Themes

Identifying themes in the data is essential for uncovering underlying patterns and insights. Using open-ended questions and analyzing the resulting data makes it possible to interpret these themes to reveal significant trends, behaviors, and perspectives within this minoritized student community. Analyzing the data and identifying themes allowed the researcher to draw meaningful conclusions from the survey responses and make informed recommendations. This process drew parallels between the survey responses and the three research questions. The following section explores four prominent themes identified in this study and offers a detailed analysis of each.

Community and Connection

One prominent theme to emerge from the data is the notion of community and connection within the SOGI spectrum. Participants described their respective identity-based student organizations as vital spaces for fostering a sense of belonging and support among members. These organizations facilitate meaningful relationships and provide opportunities for connections among individuals with shared minoritized identities.

Participants expressed a sense of belonging within their respective identity-based organization, underscoring the significance of finding like-minded individuals with whom they can share experiences and form friendships. These identity-based student organizations provide a support environment where participants feel understood and

accepted, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. Participants highlighted that the student organizations not only offered social connections but also served as a platform for mutual support and personal growth.

Moreover, participants reported feeling valued and recognized within their respective identity-based student organizations, which positively influenced their overall experience within the broader college or university community. They noted that the work and community within the identity-based student organization promoted recognition and a feeling of inclusion within the broader academic community. The sense of belonging, both within the identified student organization and amongst the larger institution, enhanced the overall satisfaction and positive outlook on their post-secondary academic experience.

The following are illustrative quotes from the participants:

- Survey Respondent 2 stated, “Being in these clubs helps me to feel like I have a place here. There is a lot of hate against us in the world for existing, and that isn't different at school. We know people don't like us, they don't want us here. There are terrible things said about us, posted on fliers, hateful events targeting our existence, harassment online, etc. Having a club in defense of us at school is a rebellion against it all, against the other students who wish harm on us, against the school for not preventing their harassment, etc. And at the end of the day, whether we need to exist as a rebellion or not, it's nice to share our interests and spaces with people who understand our experiences. I am glad these spaces were here when I came into this school, and I'm glad that I can help support new students at the school.”

- Survey Respondent 1 stated, “I am able to see other people like me at my university. I am connected to offices and resources and see the staff who want to support us. I am given a space to exist and build my leadership in and I am able to meet friends who share some similar values and experiences.”
- Survey Respondent 49 stated, “Being a part of identity-based student orgs has allowed me to feel recognized and valuable to [university]. As we've had support from the university in multiple endeavors, it feels like our community and our identities are being recognized, acknowledged and supported.”
- Survey Respondent 12 stated, “It would be nice to be involved with others in the community to know whose safe, open, and/or affirming. SOGI people need to connect with each other to feel connected at school.”

Advocacy and Visibility

The theme of advocacy and visibility underscores the role that identity-based student organizations play in promoting the rights, interests, inclusivity, and well-being on academic campuses. Identity-based student organizations serve as powerful advocates for the recognition and celebration of diverse, minoritized identities. The space ensures that these minoritized voices are heard and respected within their academic communities.

By creating safe and supportive spaces, student organizations offer members a refuge where they can express their authentic selves without fear of judgement or discrimination. Through events, campaigns, and educational initiatives, the identity-based student organizations bring attention to issues of social justice and equity, challenging popular culture and deep-seeded stereotypes concerning this minoritized student community.

While some participants noted that their involvement with identity-based student organizations fostered advocacy and visibility, others reported feeling disconnected and isolated. These participants observed that members of their broader learning community often attend events for giveaways but do not commit to regular engagement. One participant described their institution's identity-based student organization as a "band-aid." These counter-narratives highlight the need for improvement in how identity-based student organizations promote advocacy and visibility for minoritized populations.

The following are illustrative quotes from the participants:

- Survey Respondent 31 stated, "These organizations often advocate for the visibility and representation of marginalized groups on campus, which can make me feel more valued and recognized within the university community."
- Survey Respondent 42 stated, "The club feels like a more formal place to talk about the very real and heavy topics of being a visibly queer young adult. They understand the very unique culture of this school. I feel more connected to other queer students whether they are in the club or not."
- Survey Respondent 14 stated, "It unfortunately makes me feel less connected. Many people at [university] know what [identity-based student organization] is, but few are consistently engaged with the club. It's almost isolating how often people only come to our large events with giveaways but don't attend the rest of our events or meetings."

Identity Recognition and Education

The theme of identity recognition and education stands out in this data, highlighting the critical need to acknowledge, validate, and educate about diverse

identities within higher education institutions. In this context, education aims to inform and raise awareness about the history, culture, experiences, and challenges faced by individuals on the SOGI spectrum. Respondents stressed that recognizing and validating their identities are essential to their sense of belonging and overall well-being on campus.

Respondents noted the existence and support of identity-based student organizations demonstrate their college or university's commitment to inclusivity. The organizations play a role in educating the broader educational community about the SOGI spectrum, promoting awareness and understanding of the unique experiences and challenges faced by this minoritized group.

Providing resources, hosting events, and creating opportunities for dialogue were recognized in fostering inclusive environments where all students feel seen, included, and valued. Participation in the student organization not only enhances visibility for the SOGI spectrum identities but also encourages a positive, empathetic campus culture.

The following are illustrative quotes from the participants:

- Survey Respondent 18 stated, "I think it's really important to have these organizations to create that space. It shows the university cares about inclusivity."
- Survey Respondent 16 stated, "I feel, being a part of [identity-based student organization], that I am helping create that safe space for the people who are in search of one. We also educate on topics that relate or are in the LGBTQ+ realm."
- Survey Respondent 10 stated, "I am able to attend events with people like me who have experienced similar struggles because of their minority status. I am also able to learn more about other people's cultures and partake in some of the events as well."

- Survey Respondent 58 stated, “I think identity-based organizations are important for cultural reasons when it comes to the LGBTQ community and for educating those who want to be allies of this community...while person of the LGBT community do not want to be pointed out for being gay or transgender there still needs to be conversations about what is appropriate or not appropriate to say or do to LGBTQ persons.”

Emotional and Mental Health

The theme of emotional and mental health is prevalent throughout the respondent statements, emphasizing the profound impact that a sense of belonging and community has on students’ well-being. Participants highlight that feeling part of a supportive community significantly enhances their mental health, reduces feelings of isolation and loneliness, and increases happiness and fulfillment.

As perhaps an extension of the theme of community and connection, respondents express that identity-based student organizations provide essential support systems and are vital to their mental and emotional resilience. Several respondents link their engagement with student organizations to their continued success within their institutions of higher education.

The following are illustrative quotes from the participants:

- Survey Respondent 31 stated, “Feeling like [I] belong to a community can significantly impact my mental health and overall well-being. It provides a support system, reduces feelings of isolation, and increases feelings of happiness and fulfillment.”

- Survey Respondent 14 stated, “Being alone is really hard for me and having an organization where I feel supported and like I belong plays a huge role in my mental health.”

Summary of Findings

Research has shown that SOGI spectrum minority post-secondary students face unique challenges in the pursuit of their academic goals due to their minority status (Renn, 2022). SOGI spectrum minority students face discrimination (Coley, 2018) and harassment (Chica, 2019). There is also evidence that institutions of higher education may create environments where SOGI spectrum minority students can thrive (Renn, 2022). One form of institutional support is the creation and maintenance of identity-based student organizations.

Identity-based student organizations are not uniformly available across the United States. One study found that LGBTQ student groups (referred to as the SOGI spectrum in this research) are officially recognized by their institution in 62% (1,210) of four-year, not-for-profit colleges and universities (Coley & Das, 2020). These student organizations need both human resources, such as institutional personnel willing to be leaders and allies (Edwards and McCarthy, 2004), and organizational resources (Edwards & McCarthy, 2004), including physical space and institutional marketing.

Within existing literature, the words “persistence” and “retention” are often used interchangeably (Hagedorn, 2005). The U.S. Department of Education (2022) differentiates these terms by using “persistence” as a student measure toward academic goals, and “retention” as an institutional measure. Institutions of higher education aim to retain, and students strive to persist. Although this research study aimed to understand the

student perspective of academic persistence, some qualitative data was collected that pointed toward identity-based student organizations as resources for retention. Survey Respondent 56 stated, “Knowing that those organizations exist and are supported/embraced by the campus community makes me think more favorably about my institution.” This sentiment was supported by Survey Respondent 16 who provided, “I don’t think my college experience would be as rewarding as it is now. I wouldn’t be as happy and I think I would feel pretty lonely.”

Institutions of higher education play a crucial role in helping students develop a sense of belonging (Supiano, 2018). Belonging is an inherent human need and can significantly influence student engagement within their learning community. As Thomas (2012) noted, “engagement develops relationships with others and promotes connectedness” (p. 12). Belonging is a central concept in Astin’s (1984, 1999) theory, which emphasizes the importance of helping students feel connected to their learning communities through active involvement (Richmond, 1986). In this research study, survey respondents emphasized the relationship between a sense of belonging and their participation in identity-based student organizations within their respective institutions of higher education.

Belonging

A central theme in this research study and subsequent data collection is the sense of belonging students feel within their college or university community. Strayhorn (2012) defined a sense of belonging as “the students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling of connectedness, or the sense that one is important to others” (p. 16). Survey respondents reinforced this relationship as they consistently indicated that experiencing

community and feeling a sense of belonging were key factors in their continued involvement with their institution's identity-based student organization. This was demonstrated by Survey Respondent 49, who stated, "It's extremely important to me that I became a part of a student organization that provided me with a sense of belonging. I say this because being a part of a massive university can cause you to become lost in the ruckus of college itself and being a part of these orgs have allowed me to become grounded and accustomed to the grad school life."

One of the research questions posed was this: "In what ways, if at all, do identity-based student organizations contribute to a sense of belonging among SOGI spectrum minority students?" Data from both qualitative and quantitative survey responses provide insight.

Quantitatively, the Likert-scale question which asked survey respondents to reflect on their level of agreement with eight statements, comparing their experiences before and after engaging with their college or university's identity-based student organization, provided substantial insight into the feeling of belonging. This analysis highlighted the significant role that a sense of belonging has played in these individuals' post-secondary experience.

The average score for each of the eight statements was higher when survey respondents reflected on their experience after engaging with their identity-based student organization. This increase indicates a stronger level of agreement, with a response of 5 or "strongly agree" being the highest possible option. The most significant increases were observed in the statements "I have meaningful relationships with other SOGI spectrum minority students in my college or university" and "I recognize other SOGI spectrum

minority people on campus from social activities I've attended." These changes suggest that relationship building is closely linked to fostering community and cultivating a sense of belonging within a post-secondary learning environment.

Student Organizations and Campus Culture

Survey respondents articulated that their engagement with identity-based student organizations allows them to build community, have a platform for advocacy and leadership, grow personally and professionally, and access resources and education. Their responses to the survey show that identity-based student organizations serve as a tool for developing a sense of belonging among SOGI spectrum minority students and serves as a gateway toward community engagement.

In addition, survey respondents indicated that being accepted by other attendees influenced their decision to continue their membership within the organization. As Survey Respondent 2 stated, "Sure, I could have gotten through the last year without being in these clubs. I am very busy and don't always participate, but I am glad to have these spaces and friends and when I get a chance, I am very glad to participate in social events with people who understand my experiences ... being trans on campus is a struggle sometimes. Being Queer in a predominantly cis/het [cisgender/heterosexual] degree is a struggle. Meeting people that understand gives me hope." Respondent 2's statement highlights how identity-based student organizations support academic persistence and provide a sense of community for SOGI spectrum minority students, offering spaces where they can connect with peers who understand their unique experiences and challenges.

Survey respondents provided insight into how identity-based student organizations impact their perception of the broader learning community. These qualitative statements illustrate the complex relationship between academic persistence and institutional retention, highlighting both positive and negative aspects. For example, Survey Respondent 1 noted, “I am connected to offices and resources and see the staff who want to support us.” This response, and others, shed light on how SOGI spectrum minority students navigate their broader academic community and view identity-based student organizations as micro-climates for inclusion and support from their learning community.

While some survey respondents highlighted the positive impact of identity-based student organizations in their learning communities, others emphasized the significant challenges still facing inclusion and belonging initiatives, both within their learning communities and in the broader national culture. The negative national sentiment against SOGI spectrum minorities is palpable in their experiences. These statements underscore the persistent adversity faced by SOGI spectrum minority students, and the critical need for robust support systems within institutions of higher education. It may also point to the current state of identity-based student organizations, and the opportunity to create change and promote a culture that minimizes marginalization and strengthens the connection SOGI spectrum minority students have to their broader learning communities.

Engagement Contributing to Academic Persistence

The third research question in this study aims to understand the benefits that SOGI spectrum minority students perceive from participating in identity-based student organizations. Responses to this survey questions highlight the critical role these

organizations play in fostering a sense of belonging and positively shaping campus culture. Several survey respondents directly linked their involvement in identity-based student organizations to their ability to persist toward their academic goals. For example, Survey Respondent 49 noted,

It's extremely important to me that I became a part of a student organization that provided me with a sense of belonging ... I can say that my success in my program is partly because of joining these organizations. I have developed a large sense of community and belonging which I feel is important for student success.

Similarly, Survey Respondent 1 stated, "Without student orgs I would not still be in school ... that support me encourage me and provide me with the strength to keep going. Finding belonging for the first time through student organizations was life changing." These statements underscore the importance of identity-based student organizations in supporting academic persistence among SOGI spectrum minority students. They suggest that faculty and administrators should prioritize and support these organizational resources to enhance student persistence and success within their institutions of higher education.

Implications for Practice

The data collected from survey respondents in this research study highlighted the significant role identity-based student organizations play in fostering supportive environments that promote student retention and academic success. Data indicated that these organizations help students persevere through challenges by providing emotional support and a sense of community. Survey responses clearly demonstrate the relationship between identity-based student organizations, belonging, and academic persistence. For

instance, Survey Respondent 31 summarized their experience by stating, “Participating in a student organization that provides me with a sense of belonging is not only important for my happiness and well-being, but also for my academic success and personal growth during time at university.” These insights, along with the supplemental quantitative data, suggest key opportunities for institutions of higher education to better support their SOGI spectrum minority student populations.

While many survey respondents indicated that identity-based student organizations foster feelings of belonging and inclusion, others emphasized the need for ongoing evaluation and improvement to address reported feelings of marginalization. For example, Survey Respondent 3 stated, “I feel like it is a bandaid for the lack of connection I feel to the university, a sort of auxiliary mechanism that is the only option for connection I have available to resort to.” Additionally, Survey Respondent 2 expressed concern about whether SOGI spectrum minority students receive genuine support, sharing, “There are people within the school who show support for us. But in many ways, the higher ups and board of trustees do not support us.” This suggests a potential disconnect between the support perceived at the student level and that from institutional leadership.

The issue of institutional support is particularly pronounced in survey respondents with multiple minoritized identities. One international survey respondent noted, “Interacting with these organizations can be intimidating for some people with social anxieties or neurological differences.” This highlights the additional challenges faced by students with multiple minority identities, even those who find supportive communities within identity-based student organizations. Survey Respondent 10 provided another

example, stating, “At times I feel like my mental disorders which form a part of my identity are taboo. I almost feel scared to talk about them even the ones that qualify as a disability.”

The survey respondent insights underscore several implications for practice: institutional support, inclusive practices, and mental health awareness. By acknowledging these barriers experienced by SOGI spectrum minority students, institutions of higher education can identify and implement more inclusive and supportive resources that foster a stronger learning environment to best serve all learners.

Limitations

This research study has several limitations. First, the number of survey respondents and their wide geographic range may limit the study’s applicability. The online survey was released on public social media platforms, leading to inconsistent exposure and contributing to uneven representation, with some states having multiple respondents and others having none. Additionally, the survey was distributed during the spring semester when students may face academic challenges, potentially reducing response rates. More responses might have been collected if the survey had been open for an entire academic year, and if the survey had been distributed by administrators from the respective colleges and institutions.

Another limitation is the diverse identities included under the term *SOGI* spectrum minorities, which encompasses anyone who identifies as other than heterosexual and/or cisgender. All survey respondents were asked the same questions, and all were provided with opportunities for reflection through open-ended questions.

However, the researcher acknowledges the importance of recognizing the fluid spectrum of identity.

Finally, the term *SOGI spectrum minority* was used in this research study, in an effort to be inclusive of various sexual orientations and gender identities. While this term is supported by the literature, it is not as widely used as the LGBTQIAA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual/aromantic, ally, other identities) acronym, which labels each individual identity within the SOGI spectrum and has been more widely acknowledged. It is possible some prospective survey respondents did not recognize or identify with the SOGI spectrum minority terminology.

Recommendations for Further Research

Existing literature has explored the role of belonging (Gopalan & Brady, 2020; Hoffman et al., 2002; O’Keeffe, 2013; Strayhorn, 2018) and engagement within learning communities (Comeaux et al., 2014; Groccia, 2018) on the college student experience. There are identified gaps in understanding the SOGI spectrum minority student experience within institutions of higher education, and the institutional resources aimed at supporting their higher education experience.

Future studies could explore the institutional structure of identity-based student organizations to understand their role and impact within institutions of higher education. This study found that these organizations play a critical part in fostering a sense of belonging and support for students within the SOGI spectrum. Qualitative statements from survey respondents, however, suggest that identity-based student organizations may create silos between marginalized student populations and their broader learning community. By examining how these organizations are structured, funded, and supported

by their respective institutions, researchers can identify best practices and areas for improvement to enhance their effectiveness and create a more cohesive, inclusive learning environment.

Another important area for future research is the exploration of specific identity experiences within the SOGI spectrum. By isolating specific identities, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the unique challenges and needs of various minority students. This approach may provide valuable insights into the personal and academic experiences of these students, highlighting the nuances and diversity within the broader SOGI spectrum.

Additionally, future research should focus on the infrastructure of support aimed at promoting academic persistence for SOGI spectrum minority students. This includes investigating how individual colleges and universities determine which supports to implement in the pursuit of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging within their learning communities. Understanding the decision-making processes and the effectiveness of different supports may help institutions of higher education create more inclusive, supportive learning environments.

Finally, repeating this study with an identified focus on different educational settings could provide a broader understanding of the needs and experiences of SOGI spectrum minority students in their post-secondary learning communities. Studies could recruit international, graduate, community college, or individuals within historically Black college and university (HBCU) communities. Each of these presents unique challenges and opportunities for SOGI spectrum minority students and understanding their experiences could help tailor support strategies to better serve diverse student

populations. This approach would ensure that the findings are relevant to a wide range of educational environments, ultimately benefiting many students.

Conclusion

This research study sought to understand the role of identity-based student organizations as an institutional resource intended to engage SOGI spectrum minority students within institutions of higher education. Guided by three questions, the study explored factors driving students to seek membership in these organizations, the contribution of these organizations to a sense of belonging, and the perceived benefits of participation in identity-based student organizations. The purpose was to elucidate the relationship between students' sexual orientation and/or gender identities and their decision to engage with these organizations, highlighting the benefits derived from the organizations' existence and the students' subsequent participation.

The data revealed four central themes: community and connection, advocacy and visibility, identity recognition and education, and emotional/mental health. These themes underscore the significant role identity-based student organizations play in fostering a supportive and inclusive environment for SOGI spectrum minority students. Students reported that these organizations provided a vital sense of community and connection, helping them to navigate the challenges of their academic and personal lives. They also highlighted the organizations' role in advocating for visibility and inclusivity on campus and promoting awareness and acceptance of diverse identities. Furthermore, identity recognition and education emerged as central themes, with survey respondents appreciating the validation and understanding of their unique experiences. Lastly, the positive impact on emotional and mental health was evident, with many respondents

attributing their academic persistence and overall well-being to the support they received from their fellow students and institutional leadership.

In conclusion, identity-based student organizations were shown to serve as essential pillars for SOGI spectrum minority students in their post-secondary educational experience. They not only facilitate a sense of belonging and community, but also advocate for visibility and inclusivity, promote education, and contribute significantly to students' emotional and mental well-being. The insights gained from this study underscore the need for institutions of higher education to recognize and support these student organizations, ensuring they have the resources and infrastructure necessary to continue their vital work. By doing so, colleges and universities can enhance the overall academic and personal experiences of their SOGI spectrum minority students, fostering a more inclusive and supportive campus environment and promoting academic persistence.

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Appendix A

Research Survey

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE
VOLUNTARILY IN A RESEARCH INVESTIGATION
PLYMOUTH STATE UNIVERSITY

INVESTIGATOR(S) NAME: Caitlyn R. Veenstra, Doctoral Candidate

STUDY TITLE: Exploring the Impact of Engagement with Identity-Based Student Organizations on the Educational Persistence of Sexual Orientation and/or Gender Identity (SOGI) Spectrum Minority Students

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this research study is to explore the impact of engagement with identity-based student organizations on the educational experience of SOGI spectrum minority students.

You are invited to participate in this study as a currently enrolled student within an institution of higher education. Before taking the survey, you will be asked to confirm your self-identification as a SOGI spectrum minority individual (someone identifying outside of the heterosexual and/or cisgender binary).

DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY

The study will use student responses to understand the relationship, if any exists, between participation in identity-based student organizations and SOGI spectrum minority student persistence.

This portion of the study will be a confidential, online survey. You will be asked to respond to all questions in the survey. Survey questions have been crafted to answer the identified research questions.

The amount of time required to participate in the study, by completing the online survey, is approximately 5-10 minutes.

RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

Potential risks and discomforts associated with participating in this study are anticipated to be minimal. Due to the subject and subsequent questions in the survey, there is a possibility that participants may experience mild distress. Should your discomfort become overwhelming, you are free to stop participating in the survey by closing the

survey window. If you feel the need for additional support, please refer to the resource below:

The Trevor Project provides a 24/7/365 suicide hotline offering confidential and free access to crisis counselors via text, chat, or phone for LGBTQIA+ individuals. To access this resource, text “START” to 678-678 or visit their website:

<https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/>

BENEFITS

There may be no direct benefits of participating in this study; however, the knowledge gained may be valuable in improving the educational experience for SOGI spectrum minority students within the USNH.

ALTERNATIVE PROCEDURES

The alternative to this study would be to not participate.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All documents and information pertaining to this research study will be kept confidential in accordance with all applicable federal, state, and local laws and regulations. Any communication via the internet poses minimal risk of a breach of confidentiality. Further, the data generated by the study may be reviewed by Plymouth State University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is the committee responsible for ensuring your welfare and rights as a research participant. The IRB review would be to assure proper conduct of the study and compliance with university regulations. If any presentations or publication result from this research, you will not be identified by name. As per federal guidelines, the information collected during your participation in this study will be kept for a minimum of three years.

The survey you are being asked to complete is confidential. The anonymized response setting in Qualtrics prevents the collection of identifiable information including contact information and IP addresses. You will not be asked to provide directly identifiable information, but there are several open-ended questions. In addition, I plan to maintain the confidentiality of all data and records associated with your participation in this research. There are, however, rare instances when I may be required to share individually identifiable information with the following:

Officials at Plymouth State University (PSU), Regulatory and oversight government agencies to help protect the confidentiality of your information, study data will be maintained on an external hard drive, password protected, and kept in a private locked office desk. Only I will have access to the data unless requested by officials at Plymouth State University (PSU) or regulatory and oversight government agencies. Data may be used for future studies. The results may be used in reports, presentations, and

publications.

TERMINATION OF PARTICIPATION

You have the option to withdraw from this study at any point and for any reason. If you decide to stop participating, you can close the Qualtrics window. Any incomplete surveys will not be included in the study data.

COMPENSATION

You will not receive payment for being in this study. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. There will be no cost to you for participating in this research.

INJURY COMPENSATION

Neither Plymouth State University nor any government or other agency funding this research project will provide special services, free care, or compensation for any injuries resulting from this research. The treatment for such injuries will be at your expense and/or paid through your medical plan.

QUESTIONS

If you have additional inquiries regarding this study, please reach out to Caitlyn Veenstra, Principal Investigator, at crg27@plymouth.edu, or Scott Mantie, PhD, Faculty Supervisor, at SMantie@plymouth.edu

If you have any questions about the rights of research participants, you may call the Chairperson of the Plymouth State University's Institutional Review Board at 603-535-2915 (Valid until July 1, 2024).

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION

You understand that your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and that refusal to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits. You are free to withdraw or refuse consent, or to discontinue your participation in this study at any time without penalty or consequence.

You voluntarily give your consent **to participate** in this research study. You will be given a PDF copy of this consent form at the completion of the survey.

Plymouth State University's IRB has approved the solicitation of participants for the

study until January 29, 2025.

By checking the box below, I confirm my voluntary consent to participate in this study. I confirm I understand the consent form, and have had the opportunity to ask questions regarding the nature, risks, and benefits of participation in this research study.

I consent (1)

I do not consent (2)

Screening Questions

Are you 18 years or older?

Yes

No, I am under 18 years old.

What is your current age (in years)?

Do you self-identify as a sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) minority person?

Yes

No

Part I: Demographic Information

In which college or university are you currently enrolled? Please provide the full school name.

Please complete this sentence, specific to your academic identity: I am a(n) _____.

- Online learner
- Residential student (living on campus)
- Living in off-campus housing
- Fraternity or sorority housing
- Commuter (living off campus)
- None of these (self-describe)

How long have you been enrolled at your college or university?

- 0-9 months (first academic year)
- 10-18 months (second academic year)
- 19-27 months (third academic year)
- 28-36 months (fourth academic year)
- 37+ months (fifth academic year and beyond)

The next two questions relate to gender/gender identity and sexual orientation. For the purposes of this survey, please refer to the operational definitions below when providing your response.

Gender/gender identity = *One's innermost concept of self in relation to maleness, femaleness, a blend of both, or neither. This can be the same or different than one's sex assigned at birth.*

Sexual orientation = *An instinctive or enduring emotional, romantic, or sexual attraction to other individuals.*

What is your gender/gender identity?

- Man
 - Woman
 - Two-spirit
 - Transgender
 - Gender non-conforming
 - Intersex
 - Preferred response not listed (please specify)
-

What is your sexual orientation?

- Heterosexual
- Bisexual
- Gay
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Questioning
- Asexual
- Preferred response not listed (please specify)
-

Part II: Identity-Based Student Organization Engagement

The next section relates to identity-based student organizations. For the purposes of this survey, please refer to the operational definition below when providing your response.

Identity-based student organization = Organizations or clubs run by enrolled students, working toward a shared mission of bringing together specifically defined social identities. This research focuses on student organizations with the mission to build community and engagement for sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) minority students.

Have you ever been involved with one or more identity-based student organizations in your college or university?

Yes

No

Please provide the name of the student organization(s) with which you are currently involved.

How long have you been actively participating in student organizations at your college or university?

Less than 3 months

Over 3 months but less than 6 months

Over 6 months but less than 1 year

Over 1 year but less than 2 years

Over 2 years but less than 3 years

Over 3 years

I am not an official member of any student organization

How many hours per week, on average, do you spend involved in your student organization?

This includes meetings and any other activities (i.e. social media, networking, communications, etc.) related to the organization.

Please describe the main reasons why you chose to engage with your institution's organization(s).

Do you plan to continue your involvement in your institution's identity-based student organization(s)? If so, why?

Part III: Belonging

Thinking about yourself, as a student with your respective institution of higher education, please answer the following questions:

In what ways does participation in identity-based student organization(s) influence your sense of connection to your college or university?

How important is it for you to participate in a student organization that provides you with a sense of belonging? Please explain your answer.

Reflecting on your experience with an identity-based student organization at your college or university, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

Strongly Disagree (1) *Disagree (2)* *Neither Agree nor Disagree (3)* *Agree (4)* *Strongly Agree (5)*

<i>Participation in an identity-based student organization has given me a sense of community.</i>	
<i>Being involved in my college or university's student organization has made me feel like I belong.</i>	
<i>Engaging with a student organization in my college or university has empowered me to live authentically.</i>	
<i>I feel like a valuable member of a student organization.</i>	
<i>I can really be myself in my college or university's student organization.</i>	
<i>Sometimes I feel as if I don't belong in my college or university's student organization.</i>	
<i>It is hard for people like me to be accepted in my college or university's student organizations.</i>	

Reflecting on your experience both *before* and *after* you joined your college or university's identity-based student organization, please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements:

Scale: **1** - Strongly Disagree, **2** - Disagree, **3** - Neither Agree nor Disagree, **4** - Agree, **5** - Strongly Agree

	Before joining your school's organization					After joining your school's organization				
	1	2	3	4	5	1	2	3	4	5
<i>I recognize other SOGI spectrum minority people on campus from social activities I've attended.</i>										
<i>I feel I am a member of my campus community.</i>										
<i>I have meaningful relationships with other SOGI spectrum minority students in my college or university.</i>										
<i>Programs, supports, and services at my college or university meet my needs.</i>										
<i>I interact with other SOGI spectrum minorities in my campus community.</i>										
<i>My college or university has explicitly communicated its commitment to prioritizing the inclusion of individuals across the SOGI spectrum.</i>										
<i>I am happy to be a member of my college or university.</i>										
<i>I intend to complete my degree at my college or university.</i>										

Please provide any additional comments, questions, or thoughts pertaining to the topic and focus of this research.

Appendix B*First Digital Flyer*

Participants Needed

For a research study investigating the impact of involvement with identity-based student organizations on the collegiate experience of individuals who self-identify as sexual orientation and/or gender identity (SOGI) spectrum students.

PARTICIPATION INCLUDES: 5-10 MINUTE ONLINE SURVEY

- *Are you an individual who self-identifies as a person on the SOGI spectrum?*
- *Are you 18 years or older?*
- *Are you currently enrolled within an institution of higher education?
Have you attended an event or*
- *been a member of your school's identity-based student organization(s)?*



To participate, scan here:



Appendix C*Second Digital Flyer*

SEEKING PARTICIPANTS

For a research study investigating the student perception of the role identity-based student organizations play in their collegiate experience.

Participants are individuals who:

- Are enrolled in a college/university
- A sexual orientation and/or gender identity minority (member of the LGBTQIAA+ community)
- Have 5-10 minutes to complete one online survey

To participate, scan here:



Appendix D

Qualitative Open Coding

Survey Question: Please describe the main reasons why you chose to engage with your institution's organization(s).

Responses (n = 13) included:

1. "Engaging with different groups and activities can broaden my perspectives, enhance my self-confidence, and foster personal growth."
 - a. Code 1.1: Broaden Perspectives
 - b. Code 1.2: Enhance self-confidence
 - c. Code 1.3: Foster personal growth
2. "[The organization] has made me feel at home from the beginning and it feels right to continue fostering this environment for future students."
 - a. Code 2.1: Feel at home
 - b. Code 2.2: Foster welcoming environment
 - c. Code 2.3: Support future students
3. "I am part of the community in which this organization advocates."
 - a. Code 3.1: Community involvement
 - b. Code 3.2: Advocacy
4. "Found people who accept me. Found people with similar interests to me (nature) that are safe to be around."
 - a. Code 4.1: Acceptance
 - b. Code 4.2: Shared interests
 - c. Code 4.3: Safe environment
5. "It gives a sense of community, friends, comradery, comfort, and protection."
 - a. Code 5.1: Sense of community
 - b. Code 5.2: Friendship
 - c. Code 5.3: Comradery
 - d. Code 5.4: Comfort
 - e. Code 5.5: Protection
6. "I was missing a lot of resources and knowledge about how to exist as a trans student at [university] and was able to help create a space for trans students. I wanted to meet more people like me who I can be around without it having to be that my gender is a big deal."
 - a. Code 6.1: Lack of resources
 - b. Code 6.2: Created safe space
 - c. Code 6.3: Meet similar people
 - d. Code 6.4: Gender acceptance
7. "Making connections with other LGBT law students."
 - a. Code 7.1: Making connections
 - b. Code 7.2: LGBT law students
8. "I wanted to become more involved with my community on [university] campus especially with the political polarization of the LGBTQ community in the state of Louisiana. Furthermore I wanted to meet more LGBTQ members on the

- [university] campus, which allowed me to develop a sense of community on the campus.”
- a. Code 8.1: Community involvement
 - b. Code 8.2: Address political polarization
 - c. Code 8.3: Meet LGBTQ members
 - d. Code 8.4: Sense of community
9. “Work and I have a scholarship through the organization. Also I am passionate in making change to the current political climate.”
 - a. Code 9.1: Work involvement
 - b. Code 9.2: Scholarship recipient
 - c. Code 9.3: Passion for political change
 10. “Wanted more queer community who understood campus life.”
 - a. Code 10.1: Desire for queer community
 - b. Code 10.2: Understanding campus life
 11. “Peer support; advocacy; education.”
 - a. Code 11.1: Peer support
 - b. Code 11.2: Advocacy
 - c. Code 11.3: Education
 12. “Started the club to spread interest in a niche art.”
 - a. Code 12.1: Club initiation
 - b. Code 12.2: Interest in niche art
 13. “Because I want to add values.”
 - a. Code 13.1: Desire to add value

Grouping Codes into Categories:

Community and Support

Patterns:

- A strong desire for community and belonging is evident across multiple statements.
- Participants frequently mention feeling at home, seeking peer support, and making connections with like-minded individuals.
- There is a recurring emphasis on finding acceptance and a safe environment within their community.

Codes 2.1, 3.1, 5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 6.3, 7.1, 8.1, 8.3, 8.4, 10.1, 11.1

Acceptance and Safety

Patterns:

- Safety and acceptance are recurring themes, particularly in relation to identity.
- Statements emphasize the importance of being accepted for who they are and having a safe space where their gender or identity is not a focal point of difference.

Codes 4.1, 4.3, 6.4

Personal Growth and Development

Patterns:

- Participants express a desire for personal growth, increased self-confidence, and broader perspectives.
- Engagement in activities and groups is seen as a way to achieve these goals.

Codes 1.1, 1.2, 1.3

Advocacy and Change

Patterns:

- There is a motivation among participants to engage in advocacy and drive change, particularly in political and social arenas.
- Participants show passion about making a positive impact, especially in terms of political climate and rights.

Codes 3.2, 8.2, 9.3, 11.2

Education and Resources

Patterns:

- The need for education and resources is highlighted, particularly for marginalized groups such as transgendered students.
- Participants seek knowledge and resources to better navigate their environments.

Codes 6.1, 11.3

Initiatives and Contributions

Patterns:

- Participants show a proactive attitude toward initiating clubs and contributing to their communities.
- There is a strong drive to add value and foster environments of interest, such as niche arts.

Codes 2.2, 2.3, 6.2, 12.1, 12.2, 13.1

Career and Academic Involvement

Patterns:

- Academic involvement and career support are mentioned, with specific references to scholarship and work.
- Participants value opportunities that aid their professional development and academic success.

Codes 7.2, 9.1, 9.2, 10.2

Overall Patterns:

1. **Community Building:** Survey respondents identify a need for fostering communities that promote acceptance, safety, and peer support.
2. **Advocacy and Leadership:** Survey respondents are driven by a desire to advocate for change, and to lead change initiatives.
3. **Personal and Professional Growth:** Resources and programs that support personal and professional growth are valued among survey respondents.
4. **Inclusivity and Resources:** Survey respondents identify that inclusivity, particularly for marginalized identity groups, along with access to resources and education are crucial.