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# Effects of Gay/Straight Alliances on LGBT Student Perceptions of School Safety and Belonging

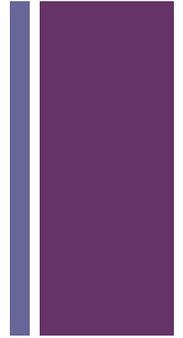Elizabeth Deming

Nicole Poulsen

Kathryn Soule

Tony Walker

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Our Role as Counselors

Perhaps the most significant therapeutic benefit achieved by group counseling members of the LGBTQAI population is creating an atmosphere of mutual trust, support, affirmation and openness to being in relationships with others
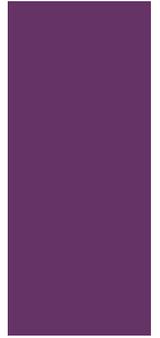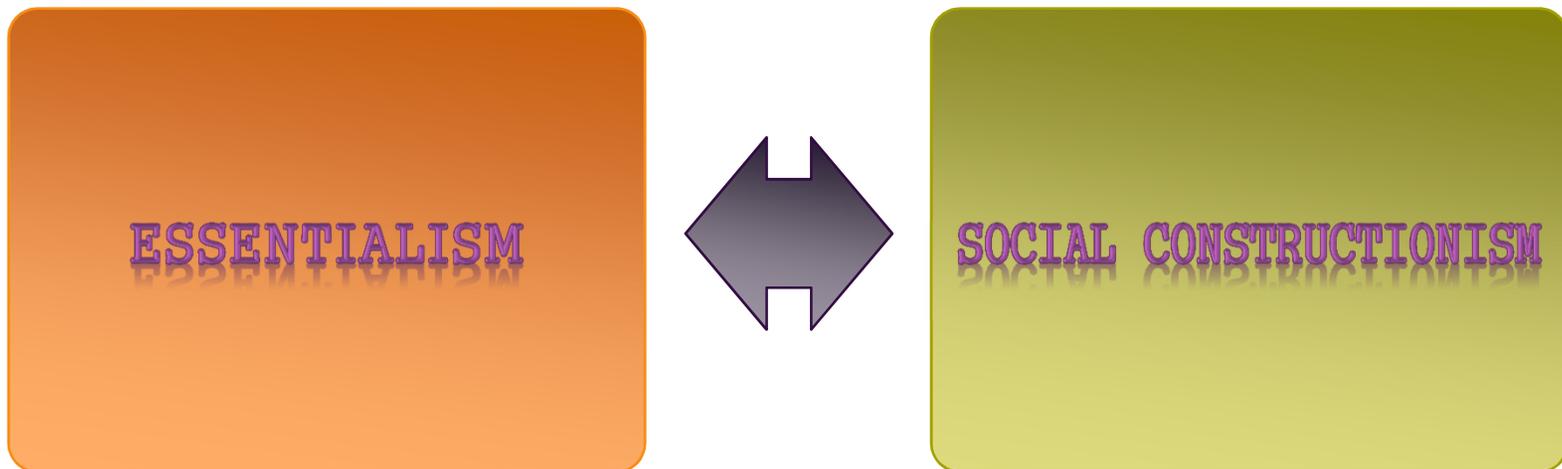
Appropriate Terminology

- Gender Identity

- Gender Expression

- Sexual Orientation

- Transgender

- Asexual

- Intersexual

- LGBTQAI

Historical Context of LGBT

- **Sexuality** and **Gender Identity** is historically defined through two major social science theories

ESSENTIALISM ⬌ SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Factors that Impact Perceptions of School Safety and Belonging

- Bullying

- Lack of support in the school
    - Teachers do not stop bullying when if occurs
    - School staff use and permit use of offensive language
   - Lack of a place to meet/talk/belong

More Likely To Be At Risk of…

- Bullying
- Harassment
  - ❖ "Bullying in our school is mostly verbal, but it hurts just as much as any physical pain… Teachers rarely do anything about it." (GSLEN, 2011)
- Absenteeism – 32% of LGBT students reported missing at least one entire day of school in the past month due to feeling unsafe or uncomfortable
  - ❖ "I stopped going to school for four months before graduation because I couldn't handle the bullying anymore. I will not get to attend my senior prom… and throw my graduation cap in the air." (GLSEN, 2011)
- Substance use
- Low self-esteem
- Depression
- Suicidality

(Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005; GSLEN, 2011)

Adverse Impact

- In a survey of over 9,000 high school students, it was found that LGBT youth are significantly more likely to be victimized by peers at school than heterosexual youth (Bontempo, & D'Augelli, 2002)

- In a study of 6,000 LGBT high school students, 86% reported verbal hassrassment within the last year, 44% reported physical harassment, and 22% reported physical assault. (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006)

- In a national survey of 8,500 LGBT youth, 64% reported feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2011)

- In a survey of over 1500 school principals, 95% reported students being harassed based on gender expression and 92% reported harassment based on sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2008)

  - 30% rated their teachers as "fair" or "poor" in their ability to address bullying of LGBT students

- Higher levels of victimization were associated with increased substance use and suicidality (Bontempo, & D'Augelli, 2002; Goodenow et al., 2006)
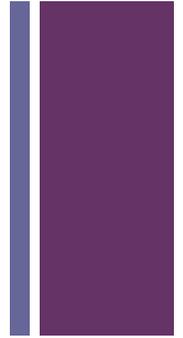
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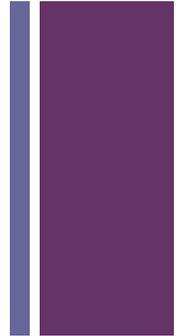
Role of School Counselors
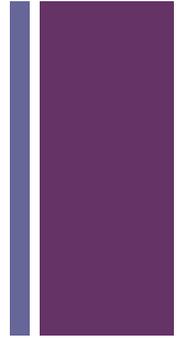
- Guidance Model

- CREST Application

- School Safety Initiatives
  - Tex. Education Code 33.006 (a) and (b)

- School Crisis Plan
  - An explicit LGBT anti-bullying policy was associated with lower rates of harassment, bullying, and suicidality

+ Recommendations for School Counselors

- Create and promote anti-bullying policies specific to gender expression or orientation

- Train teachers to recognize and intervene in bullying situations

- Work to integrate sexual identity into aspects of diversity in curriculum

- Support the creation of Gay Straight Alliances or similar on campus groups

- Help students locate school resources for writing a club constitution

Promote Anti-Bullying Policies Specific to Gender Expression or Orientation

- Advocate for policy changes through conversations with teachers and administrators

- In schools with an explicit anti-bullying policy identifying sexual orientation and gender expression, LGBT students reported hearing less homophobic remarks (59.5% vs. 73%) and staff were more likely to intervene when hearing homophobic remarks (28% vs. 12%). Only 23% of students reported that their school had a bullying policy that specifically addressed sexual orientation and/or gender expression.

- ❖ "I feel as if the school tries to seem like a safe place but… The anti-bullying policy doesn't say a thing about LGBT youth… It leaves me somewhat apprehensive that [reporting] will get turned right back on me."

(GLSEN, 2011; Russell, McGuire, Laub, & Manke, 2006, Heck et al., 2013)

Train Teachers to Recognize and Intervene in Bullying Situations

- Meet with teachers at the beginning of each semester to help decide how to address such situations

- Encourage teachers not to tolerate homophobic language

- Assist teachers in developing appropriate discipline plans

- "Teachers don't do anything about it. [The] PE teacher just told me to 'man up' and the other students will leave me alone. The English teacher told me to stay away from them and the principal wouldn't even talk to me" (GLSEN, 2011)

(GLSEN, 2011; Russell et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009)

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❖ "I am aware [that] some teachers and staff do not like LGBTs, so I do not feel safe saying anything about me being bullied about it…" 11th grade student (GLSEN, 2011)

(GLSEN, 2011; Russell et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009)

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❖ "Our school is very insensitive towards harassment issues towards GLBTIQ youth. I once tried to talk to our principal about the homophobic language rampant in our schools but he said he couldn't help because it would be too controversial." Female student, 11th grade (GLSEN, 2011)

(GLSEN, 2011; Russell et al., 2006; Heck et al., 2013; Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009)

# Integrate Sexual Identity into Aspects of Diversity Curriculum

- Only 16.8% of LGBT students reported they were taught positive representations about LGBT people in school

- Those with a positive curriculum felt safer, missed less school, and had a greater sense of connectedness with their school

(Russell et al., 2006; GLESN, 2011)

# + Support the Creation of Gay Straight Alliances or Similar On Campus Groups

- Identify teachers who might be willing to sponsor a club
- Help students locate school resources for writing a club constitution
- Help interested students navigate the school system, advocating where necessary, noting the Equal Access Act, 1984 in the case of public

(Russell et al., 2006; Murphy, 2012; Graybill et al., 2009; Heck et al., 2013)
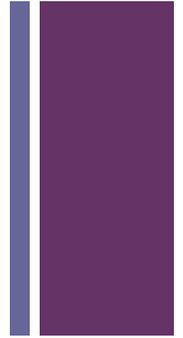
Support the Creation of Gay Straight Alliances or Similar On Campus Groups

- May need to education administrators on the purpose of GSAs being to promote safety and acceptance of all students as opposed to "promoting sexuality"

  o Recommendation to advocate in terms of protecting youth at risk (Graybill et al., 2009)

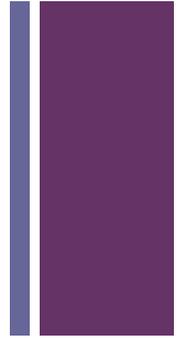 o If need continued help in advocacy, can contact ACLU or GSA Network
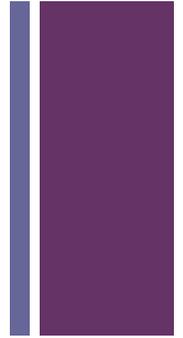
History of GSA
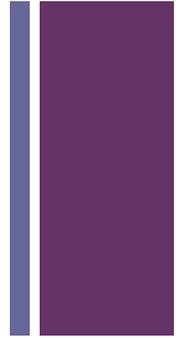
- 1984 Federal Equal Access Act mandates schools receiving federal funding cannot discriminate against student groups

- Several schools deny the right for GSA to assemble despite the Equal Access Act

- The American Civil Liberties Union is a common tool to get GSAs established despite school denial to meet. Click here!

- Often schools do not know about the ACLU or their civil liberties

# Gay Straight Alliance (GSA)

- 1984 Federal Equal Access Act mandates schools receiving federal funding cannot discriminate against student groups

- First formed in 1988, Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) are middle school or high school clubs, usually led by students to help improve the school environment for LGBT students, open to students of all orientations (GLSEN, 2007)

- There are more than 3,000 GSAs in the country, however less than half of LGBT students (45.7%) attend a school that had a GSA or similar group (GLSEN, 2011 – national survey of over 8500 LGBT youth)

Impact of GSA's on Campus

- provide individual support
  - provide information about topics like coming out, relationships, connecting with supportive staff, developing coping strategies
  - provide a safe place of development of positive relationships providing advocacy for changes in the school
- altering the campus climate makes supportive adults more visible to students
- educates staff and student body
- connects a network of students, enhancing belonging

(Lee, 2002; Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2010)

+ Impact of GSA's on Campus
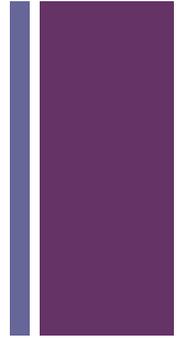
- Reduced suicidality
  - Students who could identify at least one supportive staff member at school they believed they could talk to were less likely to attempt suicide

- Provide advocacy for changes in the school
  - many students (both gay and straight) who join GSAs are interested in social justice students can advocate for changes in bullying policies to specifically sexual orientation and gender expression educate the student body about effects of harassment and bullying and ways to intervene

Impact of GSA's on Campus
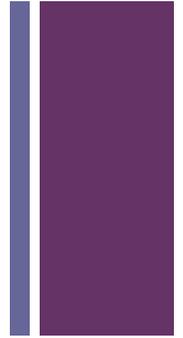
- ❖ "I feel I was lucky enough to have staff that are understanding and respectful of LBGTQ teens, because even though some of the students aren't… I knew I would always have a few teachers to talk and share with. LGBTQ teens need that. They need to know they're safe." (GSLEN, 2011)

- ❖ "I personally feel a lot less scared because of the group. Because we have numbers now. Because we are seen and because we are visible." female high school GSA member (Lee, 2002)
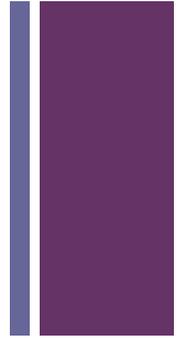
GSA's affect on safety and belonging
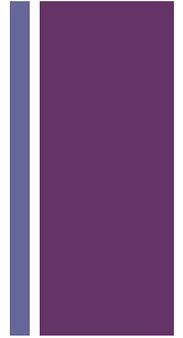
- LGBT students who participated in a GSA reportedly had:
  - increased comfort with their sexual identity
    - "This club… helped me a lot to understand who I was and it made me accept myself and be proud of who I am. And this is a BIG change. I used to feel ashamed of who I was. Now I am proud." Male high school GSA member (Lee, 2002)
  - greater self-efficacy
  - an increased sense of connection with their school
  - improved motivation for school and grades (Lee, 2002)
    - "Being a member of this group motivates me to come to school because I no longer feel out of place." female high school GSA member (Lee, 2002)
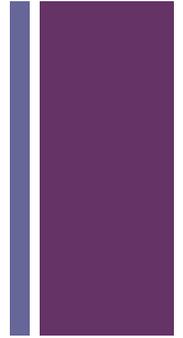
GSA's affect on safety and belonging

- greater interest in coursework

- improved educational aspirations

- fewer problems due to substance use in young adulthood

- lower levels of depression when bullied, compared to non participants who were bullied

- fewer suicide attempts

(Lee, 2002; Toomey, Ryan, Diaz & Russell, 2011)

GSA's affect on safety and belonging

- LGBT students attending a school with a GSA reportedly:
  - had higher GPAs

  - felt more belonging in their school

  - were less likely to hear homophobic remarks

  - felt safer

  - experienced less bullying and harassment

(Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2013;

GSA's affect on safety and belonging

- reported that school personnel were more likely to intervene when hearing homophobic remarks

- were at lower risk for depression and psychology distress

- were at lower risk for suicide

- lasting benefits: had higher psychosocial well-being and higher
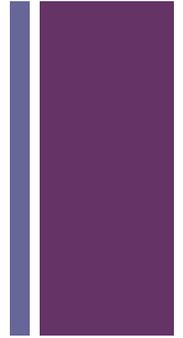
Lasting Benefits of a GSA

- Students reportedly had higher psychosocial well-being and higher educational attainment into young adulthood, even after high school, specifically lower depression, higher self-esteem, more likely to be college educated

- even after controlling for student demographics and school characteristics (size; urban vs. rural vs. suburban; region), LGBT students who attended a school with a GSA or similar group were half as likely to report being threatened, injured at school, or skipping school due to fear of harassment or bullying
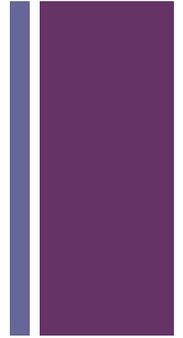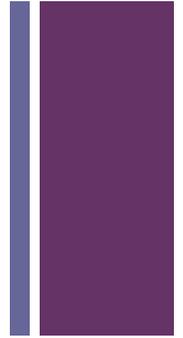
+ Barriers to GSA's
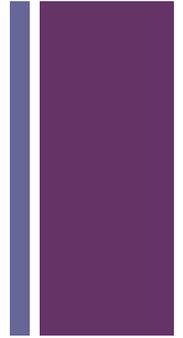
- Caudillo v LISD, May 2004
  - http://lubbockonline.com/stories/030404/loc_030404049.shtm

- Ways to work around barriers
  - Meet before school
  - Meet without faculty present in room, but nearby to monitor

Multicultural Facts
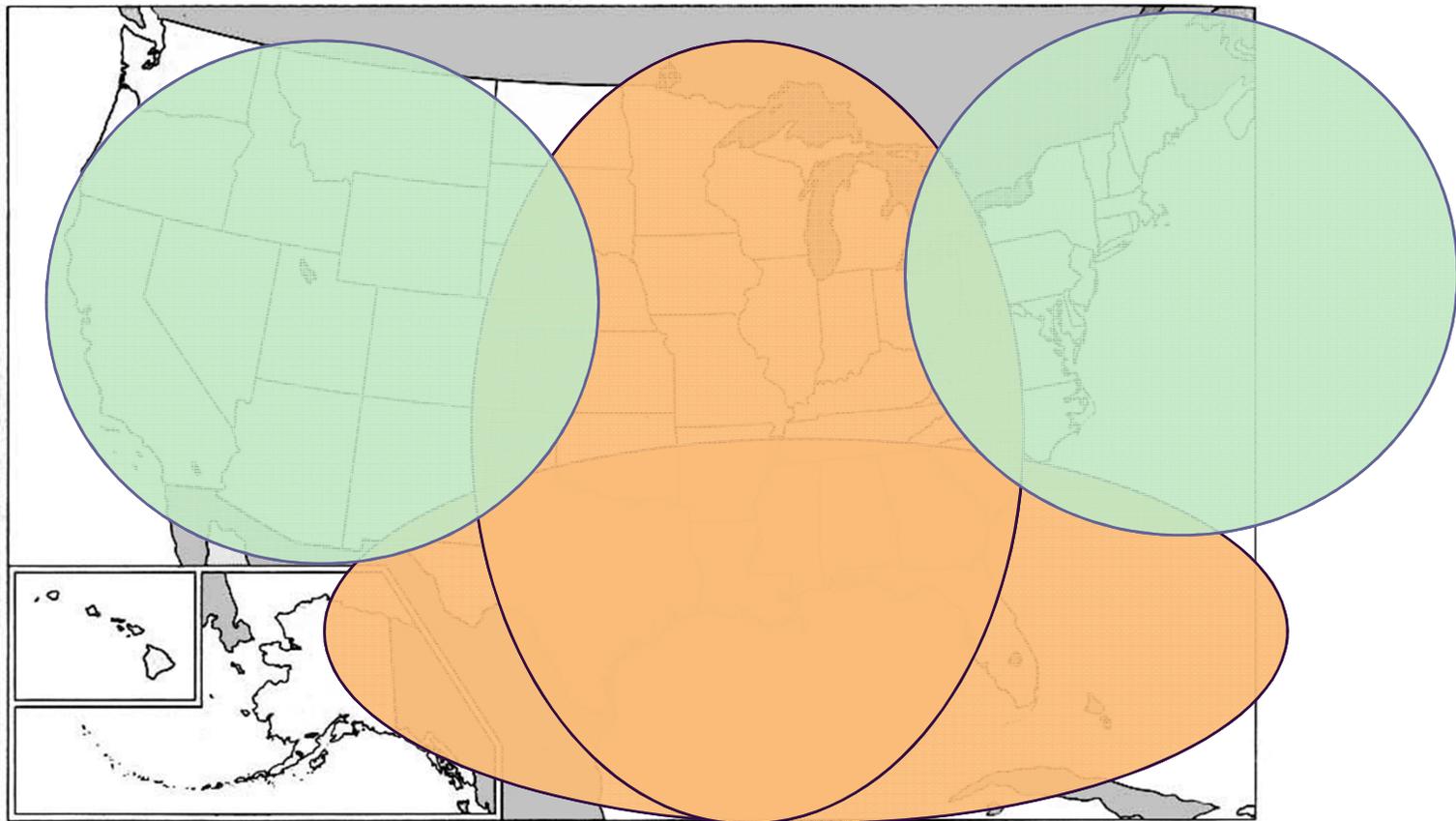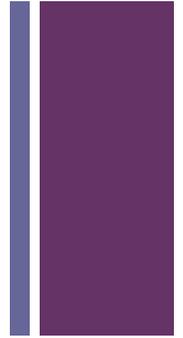# That WILL NOT Surprise You

- Gay and bisexual males may be more likely to experience victimization compared to their lesbian and bisexual female peers

- Transgender youth experienced higher levels of victimization that LGB youth

- White LGBT students experienced less racially motivated harassment in school than LGBT youth of color

Multicultural Facts
That WILL Surprise You
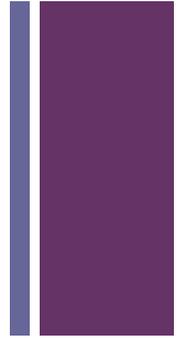
- African-American LGBT youth were less likely to experience victimization than White or Latino/a youth

- Junior high/middle school students are at greater risk of harassment and bullying than high school students

- Latin American culture view on men, depending on the role

- Youth in the S and MW were significantly more likely to hear homophobic language in school than youth in the NE or W

# Areas More Likely to use Homophobic Language

# Multicultural Facts
That WILL Surprise You
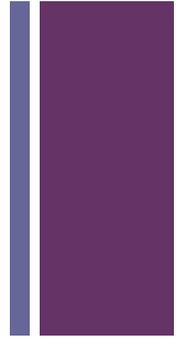
- Rural communities experienced more harassment and assault related to sexual orientation and gender expression than those in urban communities

- Youth in higher poverty communities reported more victimization in school than those in more affluent communities

+ Need for Research
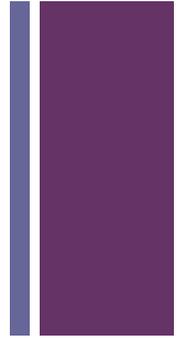
- Lack of research for group work in HS and College Populations

- Lack of empirically backed interventions-mostly referrals for outside agencies

- Only 3 theories are mentioned for working with the LGBT population: Person Centered Therapy, Feminist Theory, Multicultural Theory

+ References
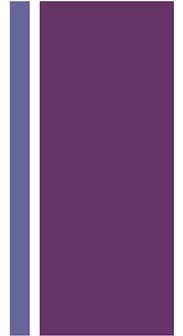
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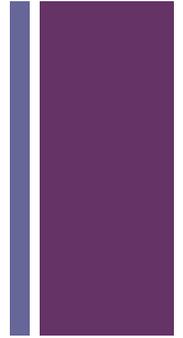
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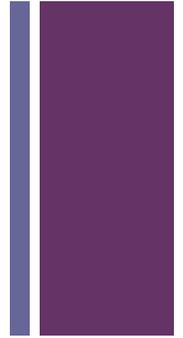
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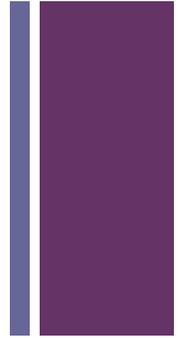
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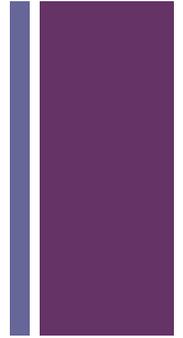
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