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Queer and Trans* Students of Color: Navigating Identity Disclosure and College Contexts

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**ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore outness among undergraduate students who identify as queer and trans* people of color (QTPOC). Data for this study originated from The National LGBT Alumni Survey and included 386 QTPOC respondents. We utilized analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explore differences in outness across racial identities for QTPOC students and linear regression to understand the relationship between contextual influences and outness using Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity as a framework. We also analyzed participants’ open-ended responses to understand how QTPOC students navigate meaning making across their gender, racial, and sexual identities. The ANOVA was significant for outness, $F(3, 382) = 6.93$, $p < .001$, with a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = .05$). The linear regression analysis explained 44\% of the variance in outness among QTPOC student respondents ($p < .001$). Narratives from the open-ended responses offered additional perspectives and further informed how QTPOC students navigate their racial, gender, and sexual identities in complex manners as they negotiate their levels of outness while in college.

Queer and trans* students of color are oftentimes rendered invisible within higher education contexts and are also intensely aware that if they choose to be “out,” this visibility may also lead to vulnerability (Oliver, 2016). While navigating the intersections of several salient identities, queer and trans* people of color (QTPOC) move between many states of consciousness as they seek acceptance while also evading harm, battling stereotypes, and potentially being ostracized due to their identities (Mitchell & Means, 2014). The multiple dimensions of race, sexuality, and gender further add to the complexity of their lived experiences and oppressed identities. “Conversations about how one negotiates the intersections of both their queer and their racial identity are often far less common when talking about the coming out process” (Higgins, 2017, para. 6).
Several tensions are present because being “out” is a privilege that many QTPOC students are not often afforded, especially when compared with White queer and trans* individuals. There is a harsh reality in understanding that White queer and trans* students have privileges that QTPOC students do not.

For QTPOC students, the college experience can be tenuous due to isolation and marginalization. The complex nuances that encompass their distinct identities create a unique narrative for QTPOC students, especially in the ways in which they navigate and make meaning of outness and identity disclosure. The intersection of race, sexuality, and gender is a significant component in the everyday lives of QTPOC students. These students are often torn between their multiple identities as they move between social groups that focus more on race, sexuality, or gender (Misawa, 2010). Thus, QTPOC students are often faced with a tenuous choice regarding how they express their minoritized sexual, gender, and racial identities within society and the extent to which they disclose their identities within collegiate environments.

**Language clarification**

Throughout our manuscript, we chose to use the terms queer and trans* to represent the fluidity and non-normativity of people with marginalized sexual and gender identities, respectively. Although terms like lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans*, and queer (often denoted in the acronym LGBTQ) are more widely used in higher education literature, these identity classifications may not resonate with QTPOC as much as White queer and trans* people. Poynter and Washington (2005) stated that terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans* are often terms that relate to White culture and that many people of color distance themselves from those terms. Furthermore, these terms are somewhat limiting because they suggest a permanent status and present contrasting viewpoints that QTPOC may hold (Patton, 2011). As such, we use queer and trans* to represent the complexities of sexual and gender identities while centering people of color in our examination. We also understand that the use of an asterisk is contested and have chosen to use the term trans* to reflect the limitations of a solitary identity (Nicolazzo, 2017).

We recognize that outness may not and should not be viewed as a desired or attainable outcome for all. Disclosing one’s sexual and/or gender identity is a personal process and one shaped by external contexts. Although we do not advocate outness as the goal of all QTPOC students, we recognize the importance of outness as a developmental process (D’Augelli, 1994). Most studies examining outness privilege dominant assumptions of Whiteness, and through our study, we sought to center people of color within outness research. Rather than comparing QTPOC student identity disclosure relative
to White students, we foreground QTPOC students as distinct and important on their own.

**Literature review**

Higher education settings are oftentimes volatile for QTPOC students due to the pervasive presence of harassment and violence, chilly campus climates, and discriminatory experiences with various campus resources (Alvarez & Schneider, 2008; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Westbook, 2009). During the past decade, there has been an emergent discourse underscoring how QTPOC students reconcile their identities while navigating their postsecondary contexts. As such, we situated our study within the extant literature that has addressed these students’ distinct experiences.

**Campus environments for queer and trans* students**

Cocurricular contexts are of paramount importance in understanding how queer and trans* students navigate their campus environments and identity disclosure. LGBTQ centers and support groups are significant resources that provide support for queer and trans* students while affirming their identities (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Westbook, 2009). These spaces are vital because LGBTQ spaces offer immense opportunities for queer and trans* students to find community and support. Establishing and developing a social group helps LGBTQ collegians develop a sense of purpose and creates positive self-esteem (Gray & Serge, 2014). Regarding identity disclosure, students who are more out are more likely to utilize LGBTQ institutional resources and attend LGBTQ events compared with their peers who do not as readily disclose their identity (Garvey & Rankin, 2015).

Peers are central for LGBTQ student support and community (Garvey, Sanders, & Flint, 2017). In addition, connecting with resource centers or student groups focused on LGBTQ support helps students develop the relationships they need to be successful in college. LGBTQ student organizations provide support on and off campus by connecting students to LGBTQ-friendly opportunities within the institution and community and creating affirming spaces through mentorship and activity programming (Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2016).

Academic disciplines are a microclimate of students’ college environments and greatly shape queer and trans* students’ identity development and outness (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Hughes, 2017). Queer and trans* collegians must often navigate negative classroom contexts, including being silenced in the classroom (Misawa, 2010), hearing heterosexist and genderist remarks from classmates (Linley & Nguyen, 2015), or not being included by faculty members in queer or trans* topics (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Pryor, 2015). Trans* students in particular have expressed difficulty in navigating...
situations such as having their classmates looking at them and exploiting their experiences versus looking with them to understand their experiences (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017).

Faculty members can support queer and trans* students by challenging negative thoughts among cisgender and heterosexual students and by promoting inclusive language in the classroom (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Additionally, faculty can promote learning opportunities for students to develop competencies in LGBTQ-specific topics and can engage in allyship within their campus communities (Hughes, 2017; Linley et al., 2016; Linley & Nguyen, 2015).

**Outness among queer and trans* individuals**

Outness refers to the extent to which queer and trans* people disclose their sexual and/or gender identity to others (Sorgen, 2011). Queer individuals differ in how and if they disclose their sexual identities (Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012). The existent literature has argued that disclosure of one’s sexual or gender identity can be a healthy and positive developmental process (Kosciw, Palmer, & Kull, 2015; Villicana, Delucio, & Biernat, 2016; Weisz, Quinn, & Williams, 2016). Coming out has “historically been constructed as a process by which individuals pass through a series of key stages on a pathway from a split self into a person whose sexual orientation has been fully integrated into a healthy, whole self” (Klein, Holtby, Cook, & Travers, 2015, p. 317). Kosciw and colleagues (2015) found that because of outness, LGBT youth experienced higher self-esteem and lower rates of depression.

Few researchers have explored identity disclosure for trans* people (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Zimman, 2009). However, studies have shown that trans* individuals oftentimes do not have a choice in whether they come out due to name changes or modifications to their physical appearances (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). When considering outness among collegians, higher education contexts are especially relevant because of their relationship to identity disclosure. Negative campus experiences can hinder identity disclosure for queer and trans* students (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010). Higher levels of identity disclosure may also create negative perceptions regarding institutional support among queer and trans* students (Garvey & Rankin, 2015).

**Queer and trans* students of color**

There is a dearth of research that has examined QTPOC students and particularly studies that have explored outness and identity disclosure. The scholarship that exists has asserted that the level of outness among QTPOC differs from that of White queer and trans* students (Moradi et al., 2010;
Clark (2005) discussed that sexual identity is often a foremost identity for White queer people because it is often their most marginalized identity. However, QTPOC most likely have multiple marginalizing identities and experiences.

Queer and trans* people of color must navigate both internal and external processes when negotiating outness and identity disclosure. Jourian (2017) explored the perceptions of masculinity/ies among trans*masculine students. For trans*masculine students of color, “colonialism, respectability politics, and being seen as threats as racialized beings” (Jourian, 2017, p. 257) are all aspects of these students’ experiences. Internalized homophobia may hinder identity disclosure and, lead to concealment to protect oneself from heterosexist stigma (Moradi et al., 2010). Patton and Simmons (2008) examined the concept of coming in versus coming out for QTPOC students. The concept of coming in describes how a person copes with their internal sense of self in response to how external forces influence their identities. Mitchell and Means (2014) explored the experiences of Black gay and bisexual men at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) and found that these students faced challenges when navigating the complexities of their racial and sexual identities from a position of a double minority.

Moradi and colleagues (2010) posited that QTPOC experience tension with identity disclosure and reverence to their culture, family, and community connections. Camacho (2016) wrote that Latino men experienced barriers and opportunities through multiple borderlands between identities, cultures, and worlds. Villicana and colleagues (2016) contended that identity disclosure affected the experiences of queer Latinx men due to their cultural values of community inclusion, which likely necessitates nuanced constructions of masculinity on college campuses. Eaton and Ríos (2017) explored the social challenges queer Latinx college men experienced during the coming-out process. This study highlighted how Latinx “cultural values . . . produce unique experiences of sexual identity navigation and disclosure among queer, Latino college men” (Eaton & Ríos, 2017, p. 464). The researchers found that queer Latinx men experienced social challenges while coming out and endured a loss of familial relationships, peer aggression, and self-pathologizing behaviors. Strong familial relationships, or familismo, are essential in Latinx culture (Andrés-Hyman, Ortiz, Añez, Paris, & Davidson, 2006). Due to their upbringings, Latinx queer individuals may construct identities that emphasize masculine and feminine gender dichotomies (Peña-Talamantes, 2013).

Finally, there is limited research on Asian/Asian American queer and trans* students. Strayhorn (2014) studied gay Asian men and their academic and social lived experiences. Findings from his study suggested that U.S.-born Korean men went to college to recuse themselves from oppression at home and foreign-born Korean men went to college to flee from antigay oppression in Korea. Akerlund and Cheung (2000) discussed the importance of familial relationships on how
Asian and Asian American gay men navigate their outness during their college years. Similar to queer Latinx and Black students, Asian-American queer students oftentimes come from communities where being gay or lesbian is seen as an affront to traditional family roles (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000). Narui (2011) found that when Asian American queer students chose to be out, they gained a degree of agency with their disclosure in different environments (e.g., home, church, higher education). Poon and Ho (2008) posited that gay Asian men negotiate and reframe the social stigma of their bodies and desire for White men when navigating their racial and sexual identities.

Recent studies have focused on the experiences of multiracial LGBTQ people (Hudson, 2015; Hudson & Mehrotra, 2015; King, 2011; Kunstman, 2017). Scholars in the field of social work have studied how multiracial and biracial queer individuals lean on community for well-being and how geography and migration are meaningful factors in individuals’ narratives (Hudson, 2015; Hudson & Mehrotra, 2015). Kunstman (2017) studied how biracial and multiracial lesbian, gay, and bisexual students made meaning of their experiences as undergraduate student leaders. King (2011) studied how external environmental factors influenced identity formation in students who identified as multiracial/biracial–bisexual/pansexual; these students described the development of their racial and sexual identities as separate but simultaneous processes because of the external factors that influenced development.

**Purpose and research questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore outness among undergraduate students who identified as QTPOC. The following questions guided our study:

1. Are there differences in outness among QTPOC students who identify as Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American, Black/African American, Latinx, or Multiracial?
2. To what extent do QTPOC students’ identities and contextual influences relate to their outness?

**Positionality statement**

We represent a collective of coauthors across social identities (e.g., Black and White racial identities; gay, queer, and heterosexual sexual identities; cisgender man and cisgender woman gender identities). Our individual narratives are formed through the intersections of our multiple identities and uniquely shape our relationships with QTPOC students, experiences and perceptions of outness and identity disclosure, and campus contexts. In addition to our
social identities, we also approached our work through our current and previous professional roles within higher education and student affairs, including academic advising, faculty, LGBTQ student services, residence life, service and leadership, and student support services, among others. We provide our social identities and professional roles to position ourselves within our purpose and relative to QTPOC students.

Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework for this study was based on Abes, Jones, and McEwen’s (2007) reconceptualized model of multiple dimensions of identity (R-MMDI). Jones and McEwen’s (2000) original model of multiple dimensions of identity attended to the interactive relationship between students’ self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions, including racial identity, gender identity, and sexual identity, among others. The R-MMDI incorporates students’ meaning-making filters to understand the complexity and depth of students’ capacity of making meaning of contextual influences. Students’ meaning-making capacities enable them to understand both what relationships they perceive with their social identities as well as how they come to perceive these intersecting identities. Contextual influences include the relationship between students’ meaning-making of multiple identity dimensions and their external environments. Abes and colleagues (2007) noted that contextual influences are closely connected to perceptions of identity. Developed from a constructivist paradigm, students’ identities are representative of their performative and involvement decisions throughout their undergraduate experiences. As such, students’ contextualizations of their identities are a complex and fluid relationship between external influences and meaning-making capacity. Abes and colleagues discussed that “[f]urther research should address other factors . . . such as campus climate . . . [to] account for how students perceive certain contextual influences” (p. 19). Such an assertion is true for QTPOC students who make meaning across the intersections of their identities in campus contexts that shape their understanding of self.

The empirical model for this study was based on Abes and colleagues’ (2007) R-MMDI. Students’ multiple identities represented self-perceptions of multiple identity dimensions (i.e., race, gender, sexuality). Cocurricular contexts, curricular contexts, and campus climate formed contextual influences as articulated by Abes and colleagues. Finally, we examined QTPOC students’ meaning-making filters through open-ended responses. As we considered our theoretical frame while analyzing open-ended responses, we were given the opportunity to more closely examine how students come to make meaning of the relationship between their social identities and contextual influences, including cocurricular and academic involvements and perceptions of campus climate. Attending to the interactive nature among context, meaning making, and identity perceptions
among QTPOC undergraduate students enables a nuanced understanding of QTPOC undergraduate students’ identity development and disclosure.

**Method**

**Data collection**

Data for this study originated from *The National LGBT Alumni Survey* (Garvey, 2016). *The National LGBT Alumni Survey* included closed- and open-ended questions to allow respondents to provide quantitative and open-ended insights regarding their experiences as LGBTQ undergraduate students and alumnx. Data collection techniques included non-probabilistic chain-referral (Semaan, Lauby, & Liebman, 2002), point people (Miles & Huberman, 1994), and snowball sampling (Faugier & Sargeant, 1997).

Using point people, namely campus administrators and alumnx leadership, was a critical step in recruiting and involving LGBTQ alumnx (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Our research team initiated the sampling communication process by first contacting campus administrators and alumnx leadership at select 4-year institutions from each state, while focusing on institutions with preexisting LGBTQ alumnx outreach and/or established programs for students. We requested that these point people e-mail a brief description and survey link to LGBTQ alumnx and constituencies. To incentivize institutional participation, we offered personalized LGBTQ alumnx reports for every institution with 50 or more respondents. We used an electronic flyer to advertise the online electronic survey instrument via listservs within higher education and student affairs, alumnx relations, and LGBTQ advocacy. We also advertised electronically via social media, including Twitter and Facebook (Johnson, Drezner, Garvey, & Bumbry, 2016).

**Sample**

In total, we used 386 cases from the national data survey for this study and only included respondents who graduated in 2004 to 2013 and identified as QTPOC students. The sample population included the following racial identities: 16% (n = 63) Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American; 20% (n = 78) Black/African American; 21% (n = 81) Latinx; and 43% (n = 164) Multiracial (i.e., selected “Multiracial” and/or two or more racial identities). Within the sample, more than half (58%, n = 225) of respondents identified as cisgender men, 32% (n = 123) identified as cisgender women, and 10% (n = 37) identified as trans* or another gender identity. The sample population included the following sexual identities: 65% (n = 254) lesbian, gay, or bisexual; 31% (n = 119) queer, pansexual, or fluid; and 4% (n = 13) another sexual identity (i.e., heterosexual, asexual, questioning).
Participants attended public (N = 206, 53%) and private (N = 180, 47%) 4-year institutions across 43 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Regarding urbanization, a majority of participants attended an institution in a city (N = 254, 66%), with fewer attending institutions in the suburbs (N = 105, 27%) or town/rural locations (N = 27, 7%). Fifteen (4%) respondents attended a historically Black college or university (HBCU).

Regarding cocurricular contexts, 31% (N = 121) of respondents participated in a cultural/international club, 9% (N = 34) in a culturally based fraternity or sorority, 45% (N = 173) in an LGBTQ student organization, and 13% (N = 49) in a religious organization. More than half (52%, N = 200) of respondents lived in campus housing, 5% (N = 21) in fraternity/sorority housing, and 42% (N = 163) in noncampus housing. A majority of respondents (85%, N = 330) had used LGBTQ student services at least once, 11% (N = 42) did not use any LGBTQ student services, and 4% (N = 14) did not have LGBTQ student services available at their institutions. The sample population consisted of the following major classifications: 18% (N = 71) arts and humanities (e.g., English, history, dance); 35% (N = 137) science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (i.e., STEM); 30% (N = 117) social and behavioral sciences (e.g., psychology, sociology, criminal justice); and 16% (N = 61) professional programs (e.g., education, nursing, business).

**Constructs**

The outcome used in this study was outness, a construct adapted from Sorgen’s (2011) Outness subscale among a national sample of nonheterosexual undergraduate students, which he adapted from Mohr and Fassinger’s (2000) Outness Inventory. Outness measures the extent to which undergraduate students disclosed their marginalized sexual and/or gender identity across six dimensions within postsecondary contexts: around close friends; around extended friends; when they met new people; with professors, faculty, and instructors; with people where they lived; and with members of campus activity groups. Response options were on a 5-point Likert scale, with 1 indicating not at all out and 5 indicating completely out. All nine scores were added together and divided to create a composite outness score, and then scores were standardized for ease of interpretation (M = 0.00, SD = 1.00).

Campus climate describes “the overall ethos or atmosphere of a college campus mediated by the extent individuals feel a sense of safety, belonging, engagement within the environment, and value as members of a community” (Renn & Patton, 2010, p. 248). We developed a factor to represent perceptions of campus climate for LGBTQ students using principal axis factoring (Thurstone, 1935, 1947) with oblique rotation to improve the meaningfulness and interpretation (α = .83; Appendix B). This factor measured how welcoming an institution was for LGBTQ people when the alumnx was an
undergraduate student. Scores were standardized so that low scores on the LGBTQ undergraduate campus climate factor indicated negative perceptions of campus climate and high scores corresponded to positive campus climate perceptions ($M = 0.00$, $SD = 0.92$).

Two variables measured the number of LGBTQ faculty/staff and students who respondents knew as undergraduate students. Both constructs included quasicontinuous response options (1 = none; 2 = 1–2; 3 = 3–5; 4 = 6–8, 5 = 9–11; 6 = 12 or more). The average scores among respondents were 4.91 out of 6.00 ($SD = 1.53$) for LGBTQ students known and 2.62 out of 6.00 ($SD = 1.36$) for LGBTQ faculty/staff known. Appendix A details the means, standard deviations, and coding schemes for all independent and outcome variables.

**Data analysis**

To answer the first research question, we utilized analysis of variance (ANOVA) to explore differences in outness across racial identities for QTPOC students. To understand the relationship between contextual influences and outness for QTPOC students, we employed a linear regression analysis using Abes et al.’s (2007) R-MMDI to create four separate variable blocks: social identities, cocurricular contexts, academic contexts, and LGBTQ campus climate perceptions.

We supplemented quantitative analyses with participants’ narrative responses to open-ended questions to explore QTPOC students’ meaning making regarding outness and identity disclosure. This approach is what Creswell (2009) identified as a concurrent triangulation strategy, “when a researcher uses two different methods in an attempt to confirm, cross-validate, or corroborate findings in a single study” (p. 217). To contextualize the quantitative findings, we analyzed one open-ended question from the survey that read, “If you would like to elaborate on your undergraduate experience, please do so here.” Of the 386 total respondents, 83 answered this question. In addition, we also included open-ended responses from 6 Native American respondents who we could not include in the quantitative analysis due to low sampling numbers.

We used deductive coding and intercoder agreement (Creswell, 2009) to illuminate key themes and narrations based on regression results. Deductive coding allowed us to engage in a process in which our themes were attained based on our theoretical framing (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Furthermore, this process situated the open-ended responses within the meaning-making element of the R-MMDI model.
Limitations

Findings cannot be generalized to all QTPOC students as the sample is not representative of all QTPOC students because of our nonprobabilistic chain-referral, point people, and snowball-sampling techniques. As there is currently limited information on the true population of LGBTQ students, we have no way of identifying if our sample is representative nationally. Furthermore, the limited number of QTPOC respondents in the data set limited the sophistication of our analyses given sample size constraints. We provide detailed descriptive statistics and multiple analyses, so that readers can critically engage with the results relative to the sampling limitations of the study.

In addition, because the data were analyzed post-hoc, we were unable to control for other factors or ask probing questions that would give additional information on QTPOC student experiences. This limitation most directly related to our campus climate construct, which operationalizes perceptions of campus climate for LGBTQ collegians. Items within this factor examined how welcoming an institution was for LGBTQ when the alumnx was an undergraduate student, and they did not attend to climate perceptions among students of color at their alma maters. Although we were able to explore racial campus experiences and climate perceptions via open-ended responses, the survey instrument did not enable us to collect similar data quantitatively.

Results

In our Results section, we integrate both quantitative and open-ended results to illuminate key themes and insights related to our two research questions.

Navigating race and outness

An ANOVA was calculated to explore differences in outness among QTPOC students across racial identities. The ANOVA was significant for outness, $F(3, 382) = 6.93, p < .001$, with a medium effect size ($\eta^2 = .05$). Latinx ($M = 0.22, SD = 0.93$) and Multiracial ($M = 0.14, SD = 0.97$) queer and trans* students had higher levels of outness than Black/African American ($M = −0.24, SD = 1.03$) and Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American ($M = −0.36, SD = 0.98$) students. In other words, QTPOC respondents who identified as Latinx and Multiracial disclosed their identities at greater rates than did Black/African American and Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American queer and trans* respondents (Table 1).

Narratives from the open-ended responses offered additional perspectives and further informed how respondents navigated and made meaning of their
racial identities and how “out” they were able to be during their undergraduate years. Responses often conveyed the tensions and conflicts that were apparent as meaning making grew complex due to their campus context or peer relationships. Several graduates of PWIs expressed that they experienced tensions while negotiating their racial, sexual, and gender identities. Their ability to embrace their minoritized sexuality and/or gender identities was constantly in conflict with their racial identities. Much of this internal discord was due to the oftentimes tense racial climates that were embedded into their respective campus environments. Congruent to our quantitative findings, a Black gay man expressed that much of his reticence to be out during his undergraduate years at a large, public state university was because he was forced to navigate a hostile racial climate. He expressed:

There were also a lot of race-related social issues that I encountered. My roommates were attacked by the police and when the story hit the campus newspaper, a lot of people defended the police because we were ‘niggers’ and deserved such treatment. All of this overshadowed my issues with being an LGBT student.

His response conveys how the salience of his racial identity greatly affected how he made meaning of the pressures that are often apparent among Black students who have to navigate anti-Blackness and additional oppressed identities. The aforementioned statement is especially true when considering how collegiate contexts strongly influence the perceptions of QTPOC students and how they perceive how their campus responds to their racial, gender, and sexual identities. A sexually fluid genderqueer Native Hawaiian participant also shared similar sentiments of how their racial identity was at odds with their sexuality during their time in college and shared, “I was a student of color in addition to being LGBT, and those two communities did not mix well.”

Conversely, there were QTPOC graduates who felt comfortable with their racial *and* sexual identities. They believed strongly that there was a need for QTPOC students to disrupt and transgress their collegiate contexts by being out. As these respondents made meaning of their multiple identities while navigating their respective campus contexts, they also had to decide if and how they would

<table>
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<th>Race</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>0.98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>-0.24</td>
<td>1.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.93</td>
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<tr>
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<td>164</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>386</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(F) (3, 382)</td>
<td></td>
<td>6.93</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(\eta^2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.05</td>
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Note. *** \(p < 0.001\).
choose to be out. To them, being out at times created feelings of anxiety and
trepidation, but they also felt that openly embracing and expressing their queer
identities was a necessary act of resistance. A Latina lesbian female participant
shared:

I would say that no matter what campus/safety conditions, I would have come out.
To me, freedom was coming out even though I didn’t always feel safe. I knew
someone needed to be out. So was it safe for students to be out? Not necessarily for
students of color that was not the case, but, I had to be OK with that.

These responses illustrate that although QTPOC students face obstacles, they
also find courage in being out on their college campuses. Open-ended
responses within this study underscored that QTPOC graduates who chose
to be out during their undergraduate years were fully aware that they held
identities that were in the margins. However, several participants decided
that although they were read as queer and trans* and people of color, they
did not have to be invisible. They wanted to provide representation on their
campuses to provide opportunities for diverse expressions and perspectives.
Within their complex meaning-making filters, alumnx respondents illumina-
ted their abilities to reconcile their multiple identities while also often
resolving the relationship with how their higher education environments also
perceived them.

**Cocurricular contexts and outness**

We ran a linear regression analysis using Abes et al.’s (2007) R-MMDI
framework as a model with four blocks: social identities, cocurricular con-
texts, academic contexts, and campus climate for LGBTQ students. The
linear regression analysis with all independent variables explained 44% of
the variance in outness among QTPOC student respondents \( p < .001; \)
Table 2). To check multicollinearity between variables in the model, we
confirmed that variance inflation factor values did not exceed 10 (Table 2)
and correlations between each of the independent variables did not exceed
0.5 (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007). To assess independence of residuals, we
determined fewer than 0.5% of cases had standardized residual values greater
than 3.0 or less than \(-3.0\). The largest value for Cook’s distance was \(.06,\)
suggesting no major problems for independence (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2007).

Respondents who identified as queer or trans* and Asian/Pacific Islander/
Desi American \( \beta = -.11, p < .05 \) had lower levels of outness. Two cocurricu-
lar contexts positively related to outness for QTPOC students: LGBTQ
student organization involvement \( \beta = .22, p < .001 \) and the number of
LGBTQ students known \( \beta = .18, p < .001 \). Conversely, two cocurricular
contexts negatively related to outness for QTPOC students: living in campus
housing (compared with living in noncampus housing; \( \beta = -.20, p < .001 \))
and not using any LGBTQ student services (compared with using LGBTQ student services at least once; $\beta = -0.12$, $p < .01$).

Open-ended responses further confirmed the significance of LGBTQ student organization involvement among QTPOC students’ meaning making. Respondents noted that their involvement in LGBTQ student organizations was integral to their feeling like part of their campus communities. A lesbian Latinx woman expressed:

Although my undergraduate university wasn’t LGBT-friendly, I loved my time there because of the overwhelmingly strong sense of community I got from the LGBT community there. Being involved with the LGBT student groups at my alma mater was the best part of being an undergrad.

Conversely, open-ended narratives also highlighted the difficulty for QTPOC students to be out, thrive, and be involved on their campuses. Several respondents noted that although they were involved on their campuses, their ability to be out was hindered due to the visibility often associated with being a student leader. A Black lesbian woman noted, “I attended a historically Black institution (HBCU). It [was] still taboo to be LGBT and hold leadership positions within student organizations and be out.”

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<th>$\beta$</th>
<th>$p$</th>
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</table>

$R^2 = 0.441$ ***

Note. Reference groups for Race (Latinx), Gender identity (Cisgender man), Sexual identity (LGB), Living (Non-campus housing), LGBTQ student services (Used at least once), and Major (Arts and humanities).

Note. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. 

Table 2. Level of Outness Regression Analyses.
The effects of a lack of access to queer and trans* communities on campus were also made apparent within open-ended responses. Many respondents made it known that having queer and trans* friendships and connections was critical to their undergraduate experiences. A Black bisexual woman noted:

I felt utterly alone for most of my undergraduate years. It wasn’t that I didn’t have friends, I did. The problem was that I didn’t have LGBT friends who would understand my perspective on things. I just never felt like I could truly be myself, and that had an overwhelmingly negative impact on my academic performance and social life.

Academic contexts and outness

Academic contexts were also significant relative to outness and identity disclosure among QTPOC student respondents. Those QTPOC participants who knew more LGBTQ faculty/staff were more out ($\beta = .14$, $p < .01$) on their respective campuses. Open-ended responses revealed nuanced perspectives and meaning making about the academic experiences of QTPOC students. These students felt more affirmed when their institution offered LGBT and queer studies programs and when faculty members addressed topics related to race, sexuality, and gender in classes. A Latinx queer woman expressed, “When I was in undergrad, women and gender studies was my absolute savior!” This student’s response underscores the critical importance for faculty and staff members to create holistic intellectual spaces that are inclusive of issues that are germane to diverse queer and trans* communities.

There were also instances when some respondents had hostile or adverse encounters with faculty members. A Latinx bisexual male wrote, “I was president of the Gay and Straight Alliance, and I experienced negativity in my classes when representing the group. I witnessed LGBT bashing in courses and I had to speak out against this ignorance.” Unfortunately, many respondents reported being confronted with instances of discrimination from faculty members due to their sexuality and/or gender. Being out in the classroom had negative consequences and a considerable impact on their academic experiences. A genderqueer Pacific Islander student described the following instance:

I was discriminated against and wrongfully accused by a biology professor for plagiarism after I stood up for my classmate who was transgender. The professor was bashing her and using her political views to do so. The student felt really uncomfortable and eventually dropped out of school.

These examples shed light on the complex politics in higher education classroom environments. Queer and trans* students are often forced to
navigate toxic environments where queerphobic and transphobic faculty are present. Respondents made it known that their academic spaces had the potential to become distressing, especially if they were out.

**The influence of campus climate on outness**

Regression results revealed a significant and positive relationship for outness and perceptions of campus climate for LGBTQ students ($\beta = .29, p < .001$). Participants’ open-ended responses provided further evidence that for QTPOC students, both negative and positive perceptions of campus climates have considerable effects on their undergraduate experiences.

Several QTPOC graduates discussed how their campus climates were supportive of queer and trans* students. They expressed that the validation they received from faculty members, administrators, and peers was integral to their undergraduate experiences. A Native American gay man noted, “My institution was actually very warm and inviting to the LGBT community. When Westboro attempted to picket the campus, heterosexual students stood up with us in protest.” Respondents also discussed how their affirming campus climates offered them opportunities to embrace their identities due to the various forms of support that were present on their respective campuses. An Asian gay man expressed:

> My campus was one of the most LGBTQ-friendly spaces I have ever been in. It is a safe and inclusive space, made of a community that strives to be aware. I grew into my queerness on my campus, came out there, and received an overwhelming amount of support not only from my peers but from faculty, advisors, and resources on campus.

Whereas many open-ended responses focused on the considerable influence that peers, faculty, and administrators had in creating positive campus climates for LGBTQ students, other respondents indicated the significance of symbolic campus gestures. To these graduates, the presence of emblematic symbols (e.g., LGBTQ safe-zone signs) signified that their institutions welcomed queer and trans* students. A Black queer woman observed:

> I remember the first day I walked around the campus, I saw a rainbow flag in one of the windows next to the front steps of the Student Union, and that made me very happy to see our ubiquitous symbol in plain sight and made me feel very welcomed.

Queer- and trans*-affirming symbolism set a pivotal tone, conveying that campus environments were welcoming to QTPOC students.

Many graduates also articulated instances in which their campuses were openly hostile to queer and trans* communities. Open-ended responses exposed incidents in which respondents endured harassment and bullying not only from their peers, but from professors and administrators as well.
Several respondents revealed extreme resistance to trans* communities. An Asian transman noted, “I was closeted trans* in college and there were no real accommodations or acknowledgement of trans* people outside of the LGBT center.” Similarly, a Latinx transwoman expressed that her university was void of inclusive policies for trans* students and noted, “My university did not have a trans-inclusive health care policy nor were its financial aid policies accommodating of LGBTQ students who were disowned by their families.”

Respondents also revealed how they were often forced to stifle their queer and trans* identities due to having to navigate unwelcoming campus climates. A trans* masculine Alaska Native graduate expressed, “My institution was very unwelcoming . . . The LGBT group was still having meetings where the location was secret.” Similarly, a pansexual genderqueer respondent also felt that their institution was unwilling to embrace its queer and trans* students. They wrote, “A student burned a gay pride flag on my campus. The administration did nothing. They didn’t even release a statement—not until the media all the way over in Britain got wind of it.” What was also particularly salient among the open-ended narratives was that several respondents discerned that even with the presence of LGBTQ resource centers and/or programming, pervasive instances of discrimination still occurred. A Latinx gay man stated:

Though my university had an LGBT center and programs to support LGBTQ students, the general population was still outwardly hostile to LGBTQ students when they were ‘out’ with their sexuality. Women holding hands or men who were too ‘flamboyant’ were still open to hate speech and physical threats.

The aforementioned instances further convey how college and university campus climates regularly exhibit cultures that are perceived by queer and trans* students to be less inviting or unwelcoming when compared with their peers. Campus climate experiences of QTPOC students directly influenced their comfort with openly disclosing their sexual and/or gender identities.

**Discussion**

Within many postsecondary environments, QTPOC students live “invisible lives” whereby their narratives and experiences are often silenced (Squire & Mobley, 2015). Currently, there is a dearth of research on QTPOC students that has examined how multiple social identities (i.e., race, sexuality, gender) influence how these students engage with their campus communities, families, and friends (Mitchell & Means, 2014; Patton, 2011; Washington & Wall, 2010). It should also be noted that the decision to be out is not a clear, straightforward, or circuitous pathway. Queer and trans* students of color find
themselves constantly making the decision to come out and live in their truths on a daily basis in social, familial, and academic contexts (Samuels, 2003).

While an increasing number of QTPOC students are arriving to their respective campuses already out, there are many within these communities who experience the identity disclosure process after arriving to college (Berila, 2011). Race, sexuality, and gender are social constructs that often present political complexities for QTPOC students who are at the intersection of several marginalized identities (Means et al., 2017). Indeed, Berila (2011) wrote that QTPOC “[s]tudents might be scared, confused, empowered, and/or enthralled with their developing sense of queer identity” (p. 103). Thus, numerous tensions are often present for QTPOC surrounding their ability and/or choice to be out during their undergraduate years.

**Reconciling multiple identities and outness**

Overall, our results emphasize that QTPOC students navigate and make meaning of their racial, gender, and sexual identities in complex manners as they negotiate their levels of outness while in college. A finding that was quite surprising was that Latinx respondents disclosed their sexual identities at greater rates than the Black/African American and Asian/Pacific Islander/Desi American participants. This finding challenges and confronts the extant literature regarding Latinx queer and trans* people. Due to intense cultural pressures, Latinx queer and trans* individuals are usually reticent to come out and often conceal their sexuality and/or gender (Ascencio, 2011). These students regularly internalize the burden of needing to perform in “traditional” sexual and gender-performing dichotomies (Ascencio, 2011; Peña-Talamantes, 2013). However, the Latinx students in this study disclosed their outness more willingly when compared with other QTPOC respondents. This finding further illuminates the complexity surrounding the manner in which Latinx QTPOC students face “dichotomies imposed by Latino and American cultures, as well as by [queer] communities and educational institutions” (Sánchez, 2014, p. 110).

Results concerning Asian/Pacific Island/Desi American respondents confirmed previous research findings. They had the lowest levels of outness when compared with the other QTPOC alumnx respondents. Several factors could have contributed to this finding, including racism within queer and trans* communities, internalized queers isphobia, and/or transphobia among other Asian/Pacific Island/Desi American individuals and within Asian/Pacific Island/Desi American communities (Strayhorn, 2014). Familial influence was another factor that may have had an impact on identity disclosure, considering that similar to other communities of color, Asian/Pacific Island/Desi American students have to carefully negotiate how they navigate and make meaning of heteronormative and patriarchal cultural traditions (Akerlund & Cheung, 2000; Poon & Ho, 2008). Outness within Asian/Pacific Island/Desi American queer and trans* comminutes is also
made even more complicated due to ever-present issues surrounding how these individuals navigate their gender, sexuality, and the “model minority myth” that often expects assimilation or acculturation. Coming out has the potential to be perceived as a betrayal or rejection of their culture, family, and collective identity as a whole (Lee, 2014).

Our results also highlight how trans* students of color navigate decisions about outness and disclosure. Rohrer (2015) asserted that it is critical for researchers to be thoughtful and attentive when attempting to explore both outness and “transness” (p. 175). Some trans* students of color choose to “pass” to circumvent and “eliminate any sign of deviation from gender and sexual norms that are dominant in heteronormative society” (Bailey, 2013, p. 58). In these cases, they may work toward actively assimilating into their university contexts (Bey, 2017). For trans* students who may choose to pass, they often view this complicated and multi-layered choice as an act of preventative resistance to the discrimination and transphobia that they could endure (Aizura, 2006). However, there are other trans* students of color who selectively choose the manners in which they disclose their gender identities. On the contrary, many trans* students of color only disclose their identities to close friends or classmates, which may result in their being misgendered or inaccurately perceived as cisgender by their professors, classmates, or other trans* students (Nicolazzo, 2016a). It appears that one’s choice to publicly identify as trans* is a choice that is not always solely made by trans* students themselves (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Thus, passing, coming out as trans*, and the disclosure process as a whole are reified across quite the complex spectrum for trans* students of color.

The extant literature has also contended that among QTPOC students, their choosing to be out is secondary or tangential to their racial identities (Grov, Bimbi, Nanín, & Parsons, 2006; Patton, 2011). For QTPOC students, the powerful combination of sexism, heterosexism, racism, queerphobia, and transphobia greatly impacts their lived experiences (Follins, Walker, & Lewis, 2014). Many found it difficult to disclose their sexuality and/or gender openly. When choosing whether or not to be out within academic and social spaces, it was evident that many of our participants prioritized their racial/ethnic identities in response to several contextual barriers associated with environmental obstacles related to racial tensions on their campuses (Wallace, Carter, Nanín, Keller, & Alleyne, 2002). However, other QTPOC students demonstrated resilience and embraced their racial, sexual, and gender identities. These students found strength in their queer and racial identities and sought liberation from traditional gendered and heteronormative roles (Bowleg, 2013). Though several had to face toxic campus climates that forced them to endure adversity and trauma as they navigated and made meaning of their multiply oppressed identities, they still resisted and transgressed their campus cultures in their choice to be out and visible entities on their respective campuses.
Outness and navigating academic/cocurricular contexts

The results from our study fill a significant gap in higher education and student affairs literature regarding how QTPOC students navigate their outness within academic and cocurricular contexts, and they reaffirm the complexities that lie within QTPOC student experiences. The importance of institutional contexts is quite relevant as it pertains to the manner in which QTPOC students navigate and make meaning of how they negotiate their multiple identities and higher education settings (Abes et al., 2007). The systems of privilege, power, and oppression that are inherent in society also influence how students understand their multiple identities within different institutional contexts (Dooley & LePeau, 2016). In particular, graduate respondents from HBCUs emphasized the impact that their unique campus cultures had on their abilities to be out during their undergraduate years. While HBCUs have served as educational spaces that affirm their students’ racial identities, many of these institutions compel queer and trans* students to suppress their sexual and/or gender identities during their undergraduate careers (Mobley, 2017; Mobley & Johnson, 2015). This contrast presents quite the developmental quandary for QTPOC students. As colleges and universities continue to become more diverse with respect to race, sexuality, and gender, it is imperative that these educational spaces expand their understandings of the complexities involved in the experiences of students with multiple marginalized identities (Hayes, Chun-Kennedy, Edens, & Locke, 2011).

This study also reaffirms that while QTPOC students may experience tensions with their multiple identities, campus environments, peer communities, and involvement in academic and cocurricular experiences have the potential to positively affects their identity development (Renn, 2007; Sánchez, 2014). Our results showed that the presence of LGBTQ student organizations is of critical importance to QTPOC students within postsecondary contexts. These campus organizations afford QTPOC students with forums to mobilize and opportunities to create community and engage vital discourses surrounding LGBTQ issues on their respective campuses. Furthermore, these student-run organizations offer QTPOC students essential spaces to seek and find a sense of belonging that nurtures student retention and success.

Respondents also noted the necessity of community and informal relationships with peers as influential to their campus experiences. Having positive relationships with peers helps QTPOC students feel more affirmed about their experiences in the college setting. Students’ open-ended responses highlighted an intense meaning-making complexity that manifested in the lived experiences of QTPOC students and reaffirmed the critical importance for QTPOC students to have the presence and support of like-minded
individuals during their undergraduate careers. Environmental influences including cocurricular involvement and the ability to form relationships with other queer and trans* students have considerable impact on QTPOC students’ higher education experiences.

**Implications**

Our study contextualized and framed the tensions surrounding how QTPOC students navigate and make meaning of their multiple identities and outness. In our work, we examined outness as a dimension of QTPOC students’ sexual and/or gender identity development. There are consequences for QTPOC students who disclose their identities, including stigmatization on and off campus and the stress associated with negotiating their oppressed identities (Goode-Cross & Tager, 2011). We encourage future research that examines and problematizes current identity development literature and in particular outness as a desired and necessary developmental process for queer and trans* collegians. Such examinations are important given the unique racialized narratives for QTPOC students regarding identity disclosure (Grov et al., 2006; Mitchell & Means, 2014).

Within our study, we deliberately centered the experiences of queer and trans* communities of color and attempted to resist standards of Whiteness, as they often create deficit-laden assessments in scholarly inquiry. We recommend that scholars consider similar approaches while also exploring the possibilities of quantitative research using critical approaches. Critical quantitative research can challenge existing policies, theories, and measures and reexamine traditional questions for nontraditional populations (Stage & Wells, 2015; Wells & Stage, 2015). With a growing interest in critical approaches to quantitative research, we further emphasize the importance of attending to oppressive methods within higher education research and implore scholars to center individuals with marginalized identities when making survey design, sampling, and analytical decisions.

More research that further illuminates the complexities that lie in the multiple identities among QTPOC students is central for future sustained scholarly inquiry, policy creation, and campus programmatic interventions. It is imperative for scholars to consider systemic societal issues in conjunction with the queer and trans* student experiences. To understand QTPOC students better, researchers must also delve into the systematic, overt and covert institutional practices and traditions that exist and function with racism, genderism, transphobia, and homophobia. In particular, we encourage scholars to utilize critical and poststructural theoretical paradigms to contextualize power, privilege, and oppression across social identities, including critical race theory, queer theory, and intersectionality. Such theoretical paradigms will enable researchers to explore pervasive racism and White supremacy in LGBTQ spaces, as well as heterosexist and gendered oppression in spaces of color.
Although our study did not uncover the overt and covert racism that QTPOC students regularly face within queer and trans* communities, it does not mean that these experiences of racism do not exist within higher education contexts. Queer and trans* students of color are often forced to contend with racist acts and other forms of intolerance that derive from their White queer and trans* peers (Poynter & Washington, 2005). A rift is present where White queer and trans* students have and continue to silence QTPOC students in their quest for a liberation that does not include those queer and trans* individuals who hold oppressed racial identities (Boykin, 2005). We recommend that future studies intentionally challenge, confront, and analyze how QTPOC students make meaning and navigate both intraracial and interracial conflict.

Regarding the influence of collegiate environments on QTPOC identity disclosure and development, we encourage increased research across and within institutional contexts. In particular, scholars should explore the unique contexts of minority-serving institutions (MSIs) for QTPOC students because MSIs play an essential role in educating students of color (John & Stage, 2014). Within LGBTQ research, more scholarship is needed to understand the role of race and racism in LGBTQ resource access and community among LGBTQ collegians, which would require foregrounding QTPOC student narratives and quantitative responses in data collection and analyses.

Conclusion

During the past 50 years, researchers have documented a grand narrative of progressive change, greater resource access, and increased programming for LGBTQ collegians (Fine, 2012; Garvey et al., 2017; Marine, 2011; Rankin, Weber, & Garvey, 2015). These advances have likely contributed to more affirming environments for queer and trans* students to disclose their identities, but scholars have yet to examine how QTPOC students experience identity disclosure through their multiple marginalized sexual, gender, and racial identities. Although there is an emerging body of work in higher education and student affairs that explores how QTPOC students encounter their higher education contexts, researchers must continue to center and elevate the voices and experiences of QTPOC students.

Note

1. Alumni/ae and alumnus/a are plural and singular designations, respectively, for graduates based on gender. Rather than relying on terms that reinforce gender as a binary construct, we chose to use alumx for both plural and singular designations to represent graduates across the spectrum of gender identities.
References


Bowleg, L. (2013). 'Once you’ve blended the cake, you can’t take the parts back to the main ingredients': Black gay and bisexual men’s descriptions and experiences of intersectionality. *Sex Roles*, 68, 754–767. doi:10.1007/s11199-012-0152-4


### Appendix A

*Principal Axis Factoring and Coefficient Alpha*

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## Appendix B

*Descriptive Statistics and Coding for Independent and Outcome Variables*

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<td>1=Yes; 0=Not selected</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>0.18</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major: STEM</td>
<td>1=Yes; 0=Not selected</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>0.35</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major: Social and behavioral sciences</td>
<td>1=Yes; 0=Not selected</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>0.30</td>
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<tr>
<td>Major: Professional programs</td>
<td>1=Yes; 0=Not selected</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>0.16</td>
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<tr>
<td>Campus climate for LGBTQ students</td>
<td>Standardized factor; higher score=higher agreement</td>
<td>0.35</td>
<td>0.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Outcome Variable</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outness</td>
<td>Composite score; higher score=higher outness</td>
<td>0.00</td>
<td>1.00</td>
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