

Sage Reference

The Sage Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ STUDIES

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Author: Genny Beemyn, Leigh E. Fine

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Campus Climate

Campus climate is the term used to describe how students, staff, faculty, and administrators individually or as part of a group feel about the environment at their institution based on their and others' experiences and perceptions. This entry explores three topics related to the campus climate for LGBTQ+ individuals at colleges and universities in the United States. First, the entry provides a general overview of the literature on campus climate, which until the 2010s, focused largely on LGB individuals and rarely considered the experiences of trans people. The next section reviews the literature on the campus climate for various groups within the LGBTQ+ community, including trans people and LGBTQ+ people of color. The entry concludes by examining future directions for analyzing and addressing issues related to campus climate.

The Campus Climate for LGB People From the 1990s to the Mid-2000s

The earliest uses of the phrase *campus climate* come from the 1950s and 1960s, when researchers were interested in the general effects of the campus environment on various psychological outcomes. In the 1980s, the term began to be applied to the study of people of color on campuses. In the 1990s, with the proliferation of research studies on LGB populations, researchers started to turn their attention to examining the campus climate for LGB people. The early LGB-focused campus climate works were interested in how engaging with an educational institution that assumed that everyone was (or should be) heterosexual might affect the psychological functioning of LGB individuals. Some studies also examined the campus climate's effect on LGB students' academic outcomes or general satisfaction with the institution. Most of the research conducted in the 1990s through the early 2000s found that LGB people faced a chilly—that is, a largely unwelcoming—campus climate. Given that most of the early studies of campus climate were conducted by student affairs professionals and education faculty at research institutions, the preponderance of this literature focused exclusively on the experiences of LGB undergraduates attending 4-year colleges. Some researchers looked at LGB students' experiences navigating the process of coming out to their roommates. Others examined classroom environments, noting that many LGB students were afraid to come out in class—even when it was relevant to the classroom discussion—because they feared retribution from their peers or instructors. Many LGB students in these early studies also reported having trouble finding LGB peers and constantly hearing anti-LGB comments on campus.

The most extensive research on campus climate has been conducted by Susan Rankin. In a groundbreaking

study, she surveyed LGBTQ students, staff, and faculty at 14 colleges and universities across the country in the early 2000s. Her findings showed that more than 1 in 3 undergraduate respondents had personally experienced harassment on their campus within the previous year. Nearly three fourths thought that harassment toward trans people was somewhat or very likely at their institution, and more than half believed the same about harassment toward LGB people. Additionally, 1 in 5 respondents feared for their physical safety on campus because of their gender identity or sexual orientation, and more than half indicated that they had sought to conceal their gender identity or sexual orientation to try to avoid intimidation.

Many researchers in the 2000s noted that apprehensions about the campus climate took a large psychological toll on LGB college students, who reported higher levels of stress and lower levels of satisfaction at their college than did heterosexual students. Few campuses at that time collected data on the retention and graduation rates of LGB students, but many studies indicated that the stressors that LGB students experienced negatively affected their ability to complete college. Studies that focused on LGB students who lived in residence halls discovered that the participants often reported that their roommates reacted with hostility to their coming out, sometimes resulting in students having to move to escape the situation. Other research found that many LGB students felt that they lacked campus mentors, that LGB student groups received meager office space and funding, and that campus professionals lacked training on how to be LGB inclusive and create LGB-supportive environments.

More-Inclusive Studies of Campus Climate

Prior to the 2010s, most of the campus climate literature on LGBTQ+ people was limited to undergraduate students. More recent studies have included or focused on graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators and sought to differentiate their concerns from those of undergraduates. For example, LGB faculty, staff, and administrators may choose not to disclose their sexual identities for fear of damaging work relationships or being fired or denied tenure or reappointment. LGB graduate students, as compared with their undergraduate counterparts, tend to report lower levels of overt harassment and higher levels of activism around LGB inclusion, but have comparable perceptions of campus attitudes toward LGB people. Research also indicates that the campus climate for graduate students, faculty, staff, and administrators can be more heavily influenced by the environment in their department or office, rather than by the institution as a whole, and that the experiences of LGB people in these different microclimates can vary greatly.

Almost all of the literature on campus climate prior to the 2010s, with the notable exception of Rankin's work, did not include trans people. Since then, studies have looked at the campus climate specifically for trans stu-

dents, either by focusing solely on the experiences of trans students or by separating the experiences of trans students from cis LGBTQ students in research on LGBTQ+ young people. In these studies, the trans respondents reported that they experienced higher levels of harassment, discrimination, and violence; felt less safe; and had a lower sense of belonging and social integration on campuses than their cis LGBTQ counterparts did. Contributing to a negative campus climate for trans (including nonbinary) students is the lack of supportive policies at many colleges, such as providing gender-inclusive bathrooms in most if not all campus buildings, offering gender-inclusive housing where housing is available, giving students the ability to have a chosen name and pronouns on course rosters and other records, and including “gender identity” in the institution’s nondiscrimination policy.

While the number of studies of the campus climate for LGBTQ+ students has grown significantly, some segments of the LGBTQ+ community have received little attention thus far. For example, outside of the groundbreaking work of Amanda Mollet, there has been almost no research on the campus experiences of asexual students, and beyond the studies of Ryan Miller, few scholars are considering LGBTQ+ students with disabilities. Furthermore, as of 2023, not a single study has been published on intersex college students. There also remains a lack of research on how campus climates may be perceived differently by bisexual students, as compared to lesbian and gay students, and by students of color, as compared to White students, or how experiences may vary within communities of color. At the same time, studies of the racial climate on campuses often fail to recognize LGBTQ+ students of color and consider possible differences between their experiences and those of cis, heterosexual students of color.

The research that does examine the experiences of LGBTQ+ students of color has tended to focus on Black lesbian/gay or trans students. These studies find that the students often felt a tension between their racial and sexual or gender identities. Many did not publicly disclose their sexual or gender identities in their racial communities for fear of being ostracized, but this meant that they could not be themselves and, in some contexts, had to tolerate anti-LGBTQ+ comments. At the same time, they frequently felt marginalized and invisible in LGBTQ+ student groups that were predominantly White, as these organizations typically ignored race and failed to address the needs of students of color. Much more research is needed on how LGBTQ+ students of color from different racial groups and at different types of institutions (e.g., historically White colleges and universities, historically Black colleges and universities, Hispanic-serving institutions, Asian American– and Native American/Pacific Islander–serving institutions, Tribal colleges) view campus climates.

Future Directions for Research on Campus Climate

Research on campus climate is likely to look different in the future because of changes affecting LGBTQ+ college students. One such change is the growing acceptance of LGBTQ+ people by the dominant society, despite increasingly hateful anti-trans rhetoric from the far Right and more and more conservative states passing laws to limit the rights of trans people, especially trans youth. Younger cis, heterosexual people, in particular, have become very supportive of LGBTQ+ people, which has meant unprecedented levels of acceptance on college campuses, as well as at many primary and secondary schools. However, this does not mean that the campus climate is necessarily better for all LGBTQ+ students, as the environment can vary greatly by how students identify (e.g., trans students in general and LGBTQ+ students with multiple marginalized identities report far less support than do cis, White, able-bodied LGBQ students) and by the type of college they attend (e.g., public vs. private, secular vs. religiously affiliated). The climate may also vary in different campus environments, so researchers now often focus on microclimates. For LGBTQ+ students, environments that are based on a gender binary—athletics and fraternities and sororities—can be especially hostile microclimates. Future work on campus climate will hopefully provide greater insights into the relationship between increasing social acceptance and campus climates and microclimates.

Another change that will shift studies of campus climate is the proliferation of data on LGBTQ+ students. Prior to the mid-2000s, few survey instruments or admissions forms asked students' gender and sexual identities. Since then, all major national surveys of college students, including the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment, the Cooperative Institutional Research Program Freshman Survey, and the National Survey of Student Engagement, have added optional gender and sexual identity questions. In addition, the Common App, the admissions form used by more than 1,000 colleges, began giving students the ability to indicate their gender identity and pronouns in 2021. Some colleges that use their own admissions form also include gender and sexual identity questions, and as colleges are increasingly conducting their own campus climate surveys, they are typically asking about students' gender and sexual identities to consider the specific experiences of LGBTQ+ students. With all of these data, researchers can better understand the challenges and needs of LGBTQ+ students by being able to compare their perceptions of the campus with those of their cis, heterosexual counterparts, and college administrators can make more informed decisions to develop a positive campus climate for LGBTQ+ students.

See also [Activists in College](#); [College Athletes](#); [College Undergraduate Students](#); [Historically Black Colleges and Universities, LGBTQ Students at](#); [Trans Inclusion on College Campuses](#); [Trans Students, Access to Sex-](#)

[Segregated Facilities and Programs](#)

Further Readings

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