



# LGBT and Queer Research in Higher Education: The State and Status of the Field

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In this article, the author provides an overview of existing literature addressing lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), and queer issues in higher education. She argues that although colleges and universities are the source of much critical and postmodern writing about LGBT and queer topics, scholarship on LGBT/queer people and organizations in higher education itself lacks theoretical depth. The author points to ways that existing research approaches and theoretical stances benefit higher education practice and suggests areas in which attention to methodological rigor and theoretical advancement is needed.

**Keywords:** gay/lesbian studies; gender studies; postsecondary education

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT), and queer research in higher education is embedded in a central paradox: Although colleges and universities are the source of much queer theory, they have remained substantially untouched by the queer agenda. Higher education is a strongly modernist system of organizations that contain LGBT/queer people but that have not been transformed by the postmodern project. What is more nonqueer than traditional doctoral education or the tenure system? What says “hierarchy and unitary structures” more effectively than work units (departments) arranged by disciplines and colleges, ranked at some institutions according to their ability to procure federal and industry funds? Although an argument can be made that efforts toward interdisciplinarity blur departmental boundaries, the reality remains that faculty and students in interdisciplinary programs face more structural obstacles in the academy than do their colleagues in the “pure” disciplines (Lattuca, 2001). In short, colleges and universities have evolved to tolerate the generation of queer theory from within but have stalwartly resisted the queering of higher education itself.

To be sure, policies and practices to protect the rights and safety of LGBT people in higher education have emerged, and higher education is the site of much research on LGBT/queer identities and identity development. Colleges and universities have also played a role in incubating LGBT/queer activism and

activists. In this article, I describe scholarship contributing to these advances.

I also contend that increased adoption of a queer theoretical approach would enhance understandings of LGBT issues in higher education and could be useful beyond the study of explicitly LGBT topics. Modernist and critical approaches that rely on fixed definitions of gender and sexuality limit what can be known about the identities and experiences of LGBT students, faculty, and administrators. Furthermore, general problems and questions of access, equity, learning, and leadership—among others—persist across all sectors of postsecondary education, despite decades of research and attempted policy fixes. Queer theory might shed light on these problems through research that questions normative constructions of socially constructed binaries such as male/female, teacher/learner, leader/follower, research/practice, or K–12/postsecondary. In identifying areas for future research, I highlight the ways that queer theory might contribute to addressing larger questions in higher education.

In this article, I combine categories of sexual orientation (lesbian, gay, bisexual) and gender identity (transgender). It is important to understand that although this conflation is common among activists on and off campus, it is contested in theory and in practice. *Queer* is used by some—but not all—LGBT people as an identity category including sexualities and gender identities that are outside heterosexual and binary gender categories.

*Queer theory* refers not to identity per se but to a body of theories that “critically analyzes the meaning of identity, focusing on intersections of identities and resisting oppressive social constructions of sexual orientation and gender” (Abes & Kasch, 2007, p. 620). As Pinar (1998) noted, queer theory migrated from language and literary studies to education, “a highly conservative and often reactionary field” (p. 2). In education as in literary criticism, “queer theorists seek to disrupt ‘normalizing’ discourses” (Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 61), such as those that have been used historically to police teachers, students, and administrators at all levels of education (see Blount, 2005; Dilley, 2002b; Quinn & Meiners, 2009).

Among education researchers, *LGBT*, *queer*, and *queer theory* are contested terms (see Mayo, 2007), and the prevalence and quality of LGBT/queer scholarship varies across fields within education research. This article focuses on research related to higher education, where there has been less LGBT/queer research than in K–12 education and curriculum studies. It is important

to remember, however, that many LGBT/queer scholars of K–12 education are faculty and students in postsecondary settings; higher education research therefore applies to them as well.

### **Evolution of LGBT/Queer Scholarship in Higher Education**

Higher education scholars frequently divide their work into categories of students (experiences, outcomes, demographics, development), faculty (preparation, tenure, satisfaction), administrative leaders (career tracks, leadership style), organizations (culture, structures, change), governance and finance (state oversight, boards of trustees, faculty governance), policy (national, state, institutional), and teaching (curriculum, pedagogy, technology). LGBT/queer scholarship varies considerably across these categories, with the greatest amount occurring in studies of and about college students. Few published studies about college students and faculty use queer theory as a framework, and no empirical studies of administrative leaders, organizations, governance, or policy do. Higher education research related to LGBT/queer people has evolved in tandem with activist movements, following trends seen in research on more readily identifiable populations of underrepresented<sup>1</sup> campus groups (e.g., people of color, and female students through the 1980s). Tierney and Dilley (1998) traced this evolution in education research (elementary through postsecondary) through the end of the 20th century; I extend their work into the 21st century and focus on higher education.

#### *Homosexuality as Deviance and Disease: Research Prior to 1974*

Tierney and Dilley (1998) identified Willard Waller's 1932 book *The Sociology of Teaching* as the foundational—and methodologically absent—text guiding scholars' and educators' approach to homosexuality and homosexual teachers before the 1970s. According to Waller, homosexuality was a deviant, contagious, and dangerous disease that could and should be avoided in the schools by firing teachers who demonstrated homosexual traits including "carriage, mannerisms, voice, speech, etc." (Waller, as cited in Tierney & Dilley, 1998, p. 51). Colleges and universities, following a similar philosophy designed to eradicate deviance from campus, routinely expelled male and female students caught in—or suspected of engaging in—compromising same-sex activities<sup>2</sup> (Dilley, 2002a, 2002b; Faderman, 1991; MacKay, 1992). These expulsions were generally kept quiet, and there was no reason at the time to conduct studies of homosexual students or of their experiences, identities, or presence on campus.

The emergence of the professional field of student affairs in the mid-1900s brought together two approaches that ultimately led to a new way of thinking about homosexual college students. Deans of men and deans of women, typically charged with keeping order on campus by enforcing disciplinary codes, were instrumental in the process of removing students identified as homosexual deviants (Dilley, 2002a). Yet they and their colleagues in the growing field of college counseling sometimes took a treatment approach rather than a disciplinary approach. Believing that homosexuality was a *treatable disease*, not an untreatable personality disorder, well-meaning student affairs professionals might be convinced by campus medical staff to keep a student on campus and enlist him or her in psychological

treatment (Bailey, 2002; Dilley, 2002a, 2002b). Rooted in counseling psychology, this approach followed standard practice at a time when homosexuality was listed as a disease in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (1968). Treating mentally ill students was within the mission of the college counseling profession, and keeping students in higher education was a way to offer them treatment that they might not get if they returned to disapproving families. The 1973 removal of homosexuality from the list of mental disorders further cleared the path for keeping students on campus.

#### *Evidence for Normalcy, Visibility, and Civil Rights: LGBT Research Since the 1970s*

Observations of clinical populations of gay college students, together with increasing awareness of an off-campus political movement composed of ostensibly healthy and well-adjusted gay men and lesbians, led to research on the development of gay and lesbian (sometimes also bisexual) identities and the experiences of gay and lesbian students. As Tierney and Dilley (1998) pointed out, it is important to understand this research interest in the enmeshed context of campus and community activism. The 1969 Stonewall Riots, led by working-class drag queens of color in reaction to persistent harassment by New York City police officers, sparked a movement on college campuses and in urban enclaves of gays and lesbians (see D'Emilio, 1992). The first known gay student organization—the Student Homophile League at Columbia University—was founded immediately after the riots, in the same city (Dilley, 2002a). Five years after the American Psychiatric Association reversed its stance on homosexuality, the *New York Times Magazine* reported there were more than 200 campus gay and lesbian groups (Hechinger & Hechinger, 1978), some of which were compelled to mount legal challenges against their institutions in order to be recognized (Stanley, 1983–1984).

Evidence suggests that campus and community groups often overlapped in membership, activities, and goals (D'Emilio, 1992; Dilley, 2002b), but it is important also to remember that many leaders of the gay rights movement were not college educated or affiliated with higher education institutions. Could the contemporary gay rights movement have gotten off the ground without campus activism? Almost certainly. Did campus activism and resources contribute to the movement? Surely they did. One cannot be fully understood without the other, nor can higher education research on LGBT issues be fully understood devoid of its social context.

As gay and lesbian students became more visible on campus, student affairs professionals—charged with attending to the holistic development of all students—took notice, just as they had and were taking notice of increasing numbers of women and students of color (primarily African American, then also Asian American and Latino/a). Uncertain how these newly visible groups fit into existing models of student development, and aware of the need to attend first to matters of campus climate and safety, then also to matters of individual identity development, counselors and researchers began to explore ways to understand student experiences and identities. Hall and Sandler (1982) introduced the notion of "chilly campus climate" to describe

women's experiences of discrimination, and the concept of campus climate took hold as an important way of understanding student access and success (see Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1998).

Thus four factors converged to stimulate scholarship on gay and lesbian issues in higher education: decreased pathologizing of minority sexualities, increased visibility of gays and lesbians on and off campus, emerging emphasis on understanding various domains (e.g., gender, race, sexuality) of student identities, and increased attention to campus climate and experiences of nonmajority students. Psychology was the predominant approach to identity and identity development on campus (as it was and remains for studying racial identity); an uneven mix of sociology, psychology, and policy analysis formed the foundation of campus climate studies. Although sometimes using the language of the emerging field of gay and lesbian studies, for the most part research on gay and lesbian identity and campus climate retained the modernist theoretical underpinnings that guided higher education scholarship.<sup>3</sup>

The agenda, if there can be said to be one, of this work was to demonstrate that lesbians and gay men were “normal,” just like everyone else save for what was sometimes called their “affectional preference,” and deserved the same chance to succeed. A parallel agenda was visibility; proving the existence and documenting the experiences of gay and lesbian students and faculty bolstered claims to normalcy. Normalcy and visibility, as Tierney and Dilley (1998) pointed out, were cornerstones of the campus climate reports and arguments for including sexual orientation in university nondiscrimination policies. Since the late 1980s, three strands of scholarship comprise the bulk of this work on LGBT issues in higher education, focusing on the following subjects: (a) visibility of LGBT people, (b) campus climate for LGBT people, and (c) LGBT student identities and experiences.

*Visibility of LGBT people.* Beginning in the 1990s, a cottage industry of edited narratives by and about LGBT youth and college students (e.g., Heron, 1994; Howard & Drukman, 2000) formed a foundation for making their experiences visible. A small number of empirical studies (e.g., D'Augelli, 1992; Lopez & Chism, 1993; Love, 1999; Rhoads, 1997)—typically single-campus studies, usually qualitative—supplemented these autobiographical accounts. Together with the growing presence of gay and lesbian, then gay/lesbian/bisexual, and eventually lesbian/gay/bi/transgender student organizations,<sup>4</sup> these narratives and studies provided a basis from which educators could begin to make decisions about policies and programs to support LGBT students.

At the same time, scholars established a smaller but informative literature about lesbian and gay faculty. Personal narratives (e.g., Garber, 1994; Mintz & Rothblum, 1997) and qualitative studies of individual faculty (McNaron, 1997; Tierney, 1994) raised the visibility of gay and lesbian academics. It is important to remember that this research emerged at a time when HIV/AIDS was taking a toll on the professoriate, sometimes forcing out of the closet men who had lived their professional and personal lives separately, and before the Internet became a way for scholars to identify potential research participants. Few states offered protection from employment discrimination (most still do not, and there is no protection at the federal level), and lesbian and gay academics reported widespread homophobia (McNaron,

1997). Writing about LGBT faculty—to say nothing of being known to be one—was not without its risks. Yet Toni McNaron (1997), William Tierney (1994, 1997), Estela Bensimon (1992), Linda Garber (1994), and Jill Dolan (1998) did, several of them before they were tenured faculty members.

Two decades later, some of the visibility literature seems almost quaint, and the temptation of edgy, new-millennium queer theorists to discount it—or to see it only as a historical artifact, like mimeographed copies of flyers for protest marches found in some campus archive—should be resisted. Although over a decade old, studies and personal narratives that describe LGBT faculty experiences are not outdated; they remind readers of a time when even at progressive institutions being out was a risky political and personal act, which is still the case at many institutions.

Following a larger trend in college student identity research, the scholarship of visibility persists, with increasingly narrow slices of identities brought forward to highlight diversity among LGBT people and to continue the visibility project in specific campus communities. For example, a compilation of personal narratives of lesbian sorority members (Windmeyer & Freeman, 2001) provides insight for student affairs professionals and a sense of visibility for members of this group. The occasionally breathless tone surrounding the release of some of these volumes (e.g., Windmeyer, 2005) overstates their novelty and impact, yet publishers find audiences for them. The emphasis on intersections of identities—sexual orientation and faith, for example (Love, Bock, Jannarone, & Richardson, 2005)—is seen primarily in literature on students, not faculty, and reflects the increasingly intersectional direction of identity research in higher education (see Abes, 2009; Jones, 2009).

*Campus climate for LGBT people.* Studies of campus climate focus on three areas: (a) perceptions and experiences of LGBT people, (b) perceptions about LGBT people and their experiences, and (c) the status of policies and programs designed to improve the academic, living, and work experiences of LGBT people on campus. Tierney and Dilley (1998) noted that the 1990s were marked by campus climate studies on campuses large and small, and although such studies are no longer a mainstay of LGBT campus literature, they remain a common practice (Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). Climate studies provide baseline data on experiences of and attitudes about LGBT people and have often been used to provide evidence for creating, improving, or expanding LGBT programs and services (Sanlo et al., 2002). They serve a symbolic function within the organization—signaling to queer and nonqueer members that LGBT campus climate matters to someone—as well as a practical one.

Since the 1990s, the Internet and online survey software have enabled geographically broad data collection, and although the sampling strategy cannot be said to be methodologically rigorous, the National LGBT College Climate Survey (<http://www.campuspride.org/research/qrihe.htm>) is now under way. For the first time, it will be possible for data to be compared across higher education institutions. National studies of K–12 school climate and experiences of LGBT youth have been available for several years (see Kosciw, 2004; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008); higher education has lagged behind. A report

(Rankin, 2003) of national campus LGBT climate was based on only 14 of the 4,000 higher education institutions in the United States, all of them 4-year institutions with support offices for LGBT resources (at the time, about 100 institutions had such offices, and as of 2008, about 150 institutions had them; see <http://www.lgbtcampus.org/directory/>). Windmeyer (2006) promotes a “comprehensive” commercial guide to campuses with “the best” LGBT campus programs and services, although the evaluation on which assessments are based is unreliable.<sup>5</sup>

Efforts to standardize data on LGBT campus climate represent a step forward from single-campus studies in terms of creating a broad national picture, although single-campus studies remain an important tool for assessing climate and supporting policy and programmatic change when indicated. A number of full-time professionals in the area of LGBT campus resources reported that campus climate studies were instrumental in the creation and/or expansion of their offices (Sanlo et al., 2002); individual campus climate reports have fulfilled other instrumental and symbolic roles over time. On a conservative campus, including LGBT issues in a more general survey of campus climate (of, e.g., gender and race issues) can provide both visibility and data that may be useful in opening a broader conversation. So although some queer theorists and activists on progressive campuses might see climate studies as a passé genre or critique them as old-fashioned essentializing of lesbian and gay experiences, “much work in LGBT issues in education is less interested in the theoretical nuances of queerness than in attempting to make those institutions more accountable to LGBT members” (Mayo, 2007, p. 80). Institutional and national climate studies remain part of this work.

*Changing constructions of LGBT identities and experiences.* The research area of greatest growth in volume and potential for theoretical richness is that of LGBT identities and identity development. No longer can it be said that there is a “gap in the literature” on lesbian, gay, and bisexual college student identities, although there remains a dearth of research on transgender students and on LGBT students of color. Indeed, LGB(T) identity research has become so normalized among scholars of student development that the leading journal in the field (*Journal of College Student Development*) routinely publishes articles describing empirical studies of LGBT issues and, increasingly, subtopics such as spirituality, student leadership, and career development among LGBT students (e.g., Love et al., 2005; Renn, 2007; Tomlinson & Fassinger, 2003). Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities have been effectively normalized and made visible in the field of college student development. Emergent work on LGBT students of color (e.g., Strayhorn, Blakewood, & DeVita, 2008) is bringing the normalization and visibility agenda to a more diverse population.

Transgender student identities—and LGBT identities among faculty and administrators—remain under-researched. Tierney and Dilley (1998) pointed out that the bulk of identity studies were from psychological and sociological approaches and rarely (if ever) employed queer theoretical frameworks; 11 years later, only a handful of scholars have done so. In this section, I briefly describe the state of LGBT research done in traditional (i.e., non-queer) modes and studies that employ queer theory as a lens.

The genre of studies of LGBT student identities grew from wholesale adoption by student affairs professionals of psychological models of gay identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979) into an array of quantitative and qualitative explorations of LGB and T experiences and identities. I separate *LGB* and *T* in this section to indicate that research on sexual orientation and on gender identity examines substantively different concepts. Political, social, and sometimes intellectual alliances of LGBT people have led to conflation of these distinct groups in campus contexts, where they are frequently treated as a monolithic community for the purposes of providing programs and services. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) compared stage models of sexual orientation identity development (e.g., Cass, 1979; Savin-Williams, 1990; Troiden, 1979) to life span and other nonlinear models (e.g., D’Augelli, 1994; Fox, 1995; Rhoads, 1994). They pointed out that the former—created before 1990—provide a clear, positivist conception of development as movement from less to more complex ways of understanding self and society; the latter—created since 1990—account more effectively for the contexts and processes of identity development. Bilodeau and Renn (2005) also noted that few of the stage models were based on empirical samples of youth and college students, whereas more of the nonlinear approaches were based on college and youth samples. Ethnographic exploration of gay college student experiences and identities (e.g., Dilley, 2002a, 2002b; Rhoads, 1994) were an important conceptual and methodological bridge from the earlier psychological, stage-based research to more recent context-based work. It is worth noting that few of these studies deal at all with diversity of race, ability, or social class within LGBT identities or communities; White, able-bodied, and middle-class are assumed norms.

Although researchers continue to produce a fair number of traditional psychological and sociological studies of LGB identity development, the most interesting recent and ongoing work incorporates queer theory as a framework for design, analysis, and interpretation. Queer theory enables a more contextual, less categorical examination of development that considers the mutual influences of multiple, fluid identity domains (e.g., race, social class, ability, religion, nationality). Elisa Abes (2009; Abes & Kasch, 2007) is perhaps the best example of a scholar applying queer theory to understanding college student identities. Working in the areas of epistemological development, intersectionality (i.e., intersections of identity domains, such as race and gender, and developmental domains, such as epistemology and psychosocial identity), and queer theory, Abes (2009) embraces the complexity and inherent contradictions of studying the unstable concept of identity without further reifying identity categories and the construction of normal-against-queer. Her work enables new ways of thinking about policies, programs, and curriculum that might best support student learning and development.

The study of transgender students is at a similar point. Ongoing, postpositivist explorations of transgender student experiences provide valuable evidence for the ongoing visibility and normalcy agenda; and a few scholars employ postmodern and queer perspectives to provide theoretical depth to the study of gender identity, genderism, and higher education. The inclusion of a transgender category on a few surveys of college students (e.g., Longerbeam, Inkelas, Johnson, & Lee, 2007) provides researchers with data from a random sample, as opposed to the convenience and/or

snowball samples most often used to recruit participants in studies of transgender individuals (e.g., Beemyn & Rankin, in press).

Bilodeau (2005, 2009), Pusch (2005), and McKinney (2005) went beyond postpositivism to incorporate queer approaches to gender in their studies of transgender college students. Although these four studies draw on small samples, they provide models for the potential of queer theory to open the study of gender and gender identity beyond the common focus on creating trans-friendly facilities such as restrooms, locker rooms, and residence halls (see Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). To be sure, improving campus climate for trans students through nondiscrimination policies and gender-neutral facilities is a critical step forward, but queer theoretical approaches such as that taken by Bilodeau (2009) allow for an examination of the underlying system of genderism—"a social system of structural inequality with an underlying assumption that there are two, and only two, genders" (p. 54)—that makes campuses unsafe for trans students, women, and men who do not conform to expectations of masculinity. Queering gender—and queering the social requirement to engage in the gender system—in higher education opens research on student identities to new perspectives and possibilities that cannot be achieved through postpositive campus climate studies or policy analyses.

I must repeat that the time for conducting campus climate studies—for LGBT issues, women's issues, or race—is not over. Although they may not be at the cutting edge of queer theory, they are critical for uncovering persistent, systemic disadvantages based on identities and group membership, as well as for measuring progress where it is occurring. Climate studies provide crucial evidence for holding institutions and systems accountable. They will not, however, move the field of education research beyond the categories into which they—by definition and of necessity—must place students and faculty. Queer theory has that potential, and the work being done by Abes (2009; Abes & Kasch, 2007), Bilodeau (2009), Jones (2009), and others provides models and direction for studying student identities and experiences in ways that do not contain and constrain gender and sexuality.

If studies of student gender and sexuality have been contained and constrained, studies of the experiences and identities of LGBT faculty, staff, and executive leaders have been nearly absent. Where they have occurred, they have more often used positivist or post-positivist approaches rather than postmodern, critical, and/or queer theory. The 1990s and early 2000s saw a minor burst of literature that provided insight into the experiences of LGB academics and administrators, often by field (e.g., sociology: Taylor & Raeburn, 1995; psychology: Liddle, Kunkel, Kick, & Hauenstein, 1998; education: Sears, 2002) or focused on women (e.g., Rothblum, 1995). Like the campus climate surveys, these studies relied on categorical definitions of lesbian, gay, and bisexual to provide important evidence for the improvement of disciplinary, departmental, and institutional climate for faculty members and administrators.

More interesting theoretically are the studies that approach LGB and T faculty experiences using queer theory or a combination of queer and other postmodern lenses on identity and identity construction. Tierney's (1997) *Academic Outlaws: Queer Theory and Cultural Studies in the Academy* is an excellent early example, focused not solely on faculty identities but extending

into gay and lesbian/queer studies as well. Talburt's (2000) *Subject to Identity: Knowledge, Sexuality, and Academic Practices in Higher Education*, a poststructural, interpretive ethnographic study of three lesbian faculty members, stands as the strongest example to date. Talburt negotiated the paradox of researching something (identity) that exists only as it is constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Her divergence from the earlier scholarship of visibility and normalcy—which relied on subscribing to fixed social identities—is evident:

Identity seeks recognition, yet depends on social relations and social knowledge to be recognized. As Lacanian arguments point out, recognition is never "full" or complete; it "is not conferred upon a subject but forms that subject." . . . This mutually constitutive relation of identity and recognition belies the possibility of "authentic" knowing, for both are predicated on existing discourses. (p. 11)

Talburt's arguments are dense, and her explanatory notes extensive. Such is the nature of achieving the paradox, and few higher education scholars have attempted to take up the challenge.<sup>6</sup> Talburt's contribution is especially marked, as it presses the field to take seriously the ways that identities are fluid and contextually bound yet have real consequences for careers in teaching and research.

The status and visibility of transgender higher education faculty are such that there are no studies of the topic and only incidental inclusion of trans faculty in the research literature (e.g., mentions of "LGBT faculty"). Occasional legal cases make the news (e.g., Chronicle News Blog, 2007), as do stories of individual faculty members' gender transitions (e.g., Chronicle News Blog, 2008; Wilson, 2005). Autobiographical accounts offer, at present, the most insight into the transgender faculty member's experience (see Boylan, 2003).

### *Summary of Current Literature*

Visibility, campus climate, and identity studies form the core of literature on LGBT issues in higher education. In many ways, this work lags behind the work on LGBT issues in K–12 education, where it is arguably harder to conduct (obtaining institutional review board permission to study youth and sexuality is notoriously difficult) and where proscriptions against studying LGBT topics remain rooted in homophobia promulgated in public schools and colleges of education throughout the 20th century (see Blount, 2005; Quinn & Meiners, 2009). Yet the ability of individual campuses to conduct climate studies and the relative ease of studying identity development in college students have provided comparatively rich, albeit theoretically unsophisticated, literature bases in these areas. Truly queer research on LGBT students, faculty, or higher education organizations remains rare, and there are few indications that much new inquiry in this vein is forthcoming.

### **New Directions for LGBT and Queer Research in Higher Education**

Predicting, or calling for, new directions in LGBT and queer research in higher education requires knowledge of what exists and analysis of what is needed to advance theory, research methods, and educational practice. The review contained in the previous

section of this article summarizes what exists and gestures toward what is needed. In this section, I propose an agenda for the next decade of LGBT research in higher education in terms of building and using theory, advancing research methods, improving educational practice, and connecting to other areas of education research.

### *Theory*

As noted throughout this article, studies that use queer theory are rare. Scholars could build on the work of Abes (2009; Abes & Kasch, 2007), Bilodeau (2009), Dilley (2002b), and Talburt (2000) in higher education and model work on other education researchers (e.g., Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2001, 2002; Mayo, 2007) who have employed queer theory effectively. A thoughtful observer might ask: Do we really need studies that use queer theory in higher education? Perhaps queer theory has little to offer to the study of postsecondary organizations and the people who inhabit them.

I argue that the insights to be gained from queered analyses of apparently nonqueer organizations have the potential to move discussions of persistent, intractable problems (e.g., access, equity, diversity, student success) to new solutions. For example, using Bilodeau's (2009) concept of genderism to study the underrepresentation of women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics and their overrepresentation in teacher education, nursing, and social work could lead to new ways of thinking about curriculum and career preparation theories. Renn's (2007) introduction of queer theory to the study of LGBT student leaders led to advances in thinking about leadership and activist identities. And Talburt's (2000) use of queer theory created new ways to theorize identity construction among faculty.

Queer theory, then, becomes a key to opening doors to theoretical advances across higher education research. The juxtaposition of queer theory with nonqueer higher education contexts casts new light on existing questions and problems, and indeed makes scholars question what is or might be a question to investigate. There is much to be learned from studies that use queer theory and studies that theorize on the nature of gender identity and sexuality as constructed in—and constructing—higher education organizations and the experiences of people in them.

### *Research Methods*

LGBT scholarship in higher education could also benefit from attention to research design and methods. Regardless of theoretical approach or research paradigm (qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods), existing studies of LGBT issues in higher education too frequently rely on convenience samples, limited data, and unsophisticated data analysis and/or interpretation. A study that claims to use a narrative approach but that has a total of 4 hours of interviews with three participants cannot be said to have adequately rich data to lead to meaningful interpretations of identity development, nor can an online survey with a convenience sample support statistical models claiming causality. Yet studies like these exist and are sometimes used to support claims about LGBT college students.<sup>7</sup>

Collecting random samples of LGBT people for quantitative studies and purposeful, criterion-based samples for qualitative studies can be difficult. But unlike colleagues studying K–12

education, higher education scholars have the advantage of dealing almost exclusively with nonminors, so no parental consent is required to participate in research. Postsecondary education researchers use several national data sets on students and their experiences (e.g., the University of California, Los Angeles, 30-year longitudinal Cooperative Institutional Research Program; Indiana University's National Survey of Student Engagement; the U.S. Department of Education's Beginning Postsecondary Student Survey; the National Science Foundation's Survey of Earned Doctorates), and one strategy to increase access to data on LGBT students would be to include demographic questions that capture sexual orientation and provide a transgender option for gender identity. Inclusion of these items on the 2004 National Study of Living-Learning Programs enabled Longerbeam et al. (2007) to conduct secondary data analysis on LGB student experiences and can serve as a model for large-scale surveys (the overall data set includes responses from 23,910 students from 34 institutions in 24 states and the District of Columbia; 4.0% of respondents indicated LGB identity, and 15, too few to include in statistical analyses, indicated transgender). A recent study of college outcomes and sexual orientation used the Harvard College Alcohol Study, which includes behavioral data—including gender of sexual partners, from which the author inferred sexual orientation—for 40,000 students, to conclude, among other findings, that gay men have higher grade point averages than their heterosexual peers (Carpenter, 2008). Samples for qualitative studies of LGB students could be improved by relying less on recruiting through campus LGBT centers and student organizations and increasing recruitment through screening surveys that ask behavioral as well as identification questions. Sell (n.d.) suggests data sources, sampling approaches, and established measures for LGBT research, few of which have been used in higher education research.

Although there is a core group of established scholars who study or have studied LGB and T issues in higher education (e.g., Elisa Abes, Brett-Genny Beemyn, Anthony D'Augelli, Patrick Dilley, Nancy Evans, Kristen Renn, Susan Talburt, William Tierney), graduate students conduct a substantial subset of research on LGBT people and experiences. To be clear, I do not assert that because they are graduate students they cannot conduct skillful inquiry; but they are constrained by time and resources in ways that often make national samples or longitudinal qualitative designs unfeasible. Indeed, graduate students may have more sophisticated knowledge of queer theory, research-enhancing technologies, and newer analytic approaches than do their faculty mentors. Encouraging partnerships between generations of scholars studying LGBT issues may be an especially fruitful way to leverage the resources, time, and experience of established researchers while maximizing the contributions of emerging scholars.

### *Educational Practice*

Improving theory and research methods is important, but the study of higher education is an applied field, and improving practice is one of its goals. As I have asserted elsewhere in this article, although they are no longer on the "cutting edge" of research on LGBT issues in higher education, campus climate studies remain a key tool in the work of what Mayo (2007) described as

“attempting to make those institutions more accountable to LGBT members” (p. 80). Surprisingly few campuses have conducted follow-up studies to compare progress (if any) since their initial campus climate reports, although the emergence of standardized tools for studying LGBT campus climate may facilitate reexaminations of campus climate following a decade in which hundreds of institutions put in place nondiscrimination policies, domestic partner benefits, and LGBT campus resource centers. Evidence (Rankin, 2003) suggests that in spite of these changes, LGB and especially T students continue to face discrimination, harassment, and violence. Changes, if any, in faculty experiences may be harder to assess, since they were not as well documented in the first place.

Another area that higher education scholars infrequently address is the place of queer theory and LGBT studies in the postsecondary curriculum. Queer theorists of K–12 curriculum and pedagogy offer examples (e.g., Britzman, 1995; Kumashiro, 2001, 2002; Pinar, 1998) on which higher education scholars could build. Scholars in the disciplines offer additional resources for understanding LGBT/queer issues in postsecondary contexts (e.g., anthropology: Lewin & Leap, 2002; humanities, social sciences, history: Lovaas, Elia, & Yelp, 2006).

In terms of research on LGBT/queer studies programs, Tierney’s (1997) foundational examination of queer theory and cultural studies in the academy is now more than a decade old in a field that has changed much in that time. There has been no recent attempt to synthesize information on the place of LGBT/queer studies in higher education curriculum and academic programs. I submit that understanding how LGBT/queer studies courses and programs evolve within institutions is valuable for others who seek to create such programs and also for understanding the intellectual history of the field.

### *Intersections With Other Critical Issues in Education*

Finally, I raise four other issues—of the many—that need greater attention in LGBT research on higher education in the next decade. First, as in many other areas of education scholarship, the bifurcation of K–12 and postsecondary education does a disservice to the overall research enterprise, to knowledge synthesis, and to LGBT people: students, faculty members, leaders, and parents. LGBT identities and issues extend across the gulf that currently exists between K–12 and higher education research. Whether considering particular liabilities (increased risk of homelessness, depression, substance abuse) or assets (resilience, creativity, epistemological development) of LGBT identity, the transition from high school to college could be a time of particular interest. Attention to buffering the stressors to LGBT youth and maximizing the advantages of LGBT identity and resilience could facilitate efforts to answer calls from the Obama administration for increased college degree completion (Dervarics, 2009).

A second key area of intersection is that between higher education research and research on preservice teachers and administrative leadership preparation. Higher education scholars know something about college students—which most preservice teachers are—and about adult learning, which guides approaches to graduate programs that prepare principals and superintendents. Using what is known about students’ perspectives on learning

about LGBT and other social justice issues could benefit teacher and administrator education programs, and understanding how undergraduate and graduate education programs address LGBT issues could benefit higher education scholars. LGBT issues could provide a meaningful point of connection between teacher educators and higher education scholars, although overcoming the history and ongoing culture of discrimination against LGBT teachers and administrators in public schools—and LGBT professors—could be a necessary first step in this project.

A third point of intersection relates to educational and public policy related to LGBT issues. Studies of how policies against bullying and for employment nondiscrimination, same-sex marriage, and domestic partner benefits affect educational outcomes, achievement, and public employment could provide important data for educational and public policy decisions. I recommend a pre-K-to-20 approach—including organizations, students, families, and employees.

Finally, the areas of globalization and internationalization of higher education are ripe for infusing LGBT issues. Topics of interest over the next decade include LGBT identities and identity development in international comparative contexts; higher education policy, curriculum, and programs; and intersections of LGBT identities with race, gender, class, and religious and cultural identities in higher education (see Coloma, 2006; Mama, 2004; Mayo, 2007). Country-based and international comparative studies of LGBT issues in higher education present rich opportunities for expanding theoretical understanding of gender and sexuality, as well as for learning how to improve higher education institutions and systems in the United States. There are no doubt other areas that will emerge as key topics for LGBT research in the next decade, but these four are likely to be among the most critical for improving the field and pushing it ahead.

### **Conclusion**

I return to the paradox with which I opened the article: Although higher education is the location of much development of queer theory, it is not an especially queer system of organizations or a system of especially queer organizations. Dolan (1998) said as much more than a decade ago, a year after “Yale University turned down playwright and activist Larry Kramer’s generous gift to establish a gay studies program, supposedly because the university didn’t want to ‘balkanize’ the campus with another identity-based area studies track” (p. 40).<sup>8</sup> For years, Yale had been a center of queer theorizing—the intellectual home, for example, of Boswell (1981), Butler (1990), and Chauncey (1994)—yet institutionalizing a cross-departmental center based on identity went against the grain of maintaining disciplinary boundaries and established roles within the academy. Queering theory was acceptable, but queering the organization was not. The same now seems true in education research.

I add an additional paradox: I call for increased use of queer theory and new research approaches at the same time that I call for continuation of large-scale studies of campus climate that of necessity reinforce established categories of hetero/homosexual, cisgender/transgender. I would like to see education researchers who work on non-LGBT topics use queer theory to examine policies, programs, and systems of knowledge that presume fixed categories (e.g., remedial education, merit aid, entrance exams).

I make this call knowing that faculty work within reward systems that rely on measurable outputs—articles in peer-reviewed journals, external funding from government and foundations—that historically have not welcomed the new research approaches and complexity required to explain studies rooted in queer theory. I call for increased (old-fashioned) “rigor” at the same time that I call for increased creativity and theoretical applications that eschew positivism, and I do so knowing that many scholars, for reasons of time and reward structures, cannot meet the call.

Finally, I call on higher education scholars to step up to the challenges posed by these two paradoxes and meet them with creativity and smart thinking. Using queer theory in higher education research—an applied field that resists heavy theorizing—is hard, and perhaps that is why there are so few good examples of it. But there is much to be gained by a comprehensive research agenda that retains practical, applied elements (like campus climate studies); includes high-quality research methods; and includes new approaches to applying queer theory to persistent questions and problems in higher education theory, research, and practice.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>There is no evidence to suggest that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people are underrepresented—or overrepresented—among college students and faculty. Lack of data on sexual orientation and gender identity precludes any assertions. Anecdotal evidence (Fain, 2007) suggests that there are very few—perhaps a dozen or so at the more than 4,000 institutions in the United States—openly LGBT people among college and university presidents. If this evidence represents reality, then LGBT people can be considered vastly underrepresented among university presidents (about 0.3%) in comparison with conservative estimates of about 2% to 3% of LGBT people in the general population (Robison, 2002, para. 1).

<sup>2</sup>Prior to about the 1920s, women’s same-sex relationships, described as passionate “smashes” or “crushes,” were not only tolerated but considered a normal part of healthy adolescent development (see Faderman, 1991; MacKay, 1992). Introduction of the concepts of deviant “female inversion” and lesbianism turned educators firmly against these relationships and led to removing young women from college if they demonstrated a tendency toward “unwise friendships” (MacKay, 1992).

<sup>3</sup>Reviewing mainly K–12 education research, Mayo (2007) warned against relying on a false dichotomy of essentialism and constructionism in examining LGBT/queer movements and the short history of LGBT/queer research in education. She proposed that women’s groups—the Radicalesbians and the Black lesbian antiracist feminist group the Combahee River Collective among them—blurred boundaries of identities and politics in ways that poststructuralist queer theory attempts to in troubling ideas of “gender, sexuality, and transgression” (p. 79). Nevertheless, few higher education scholars have ventured into poststructural approaches. There is a more robust and theoretically diverse literature on K–12 education and LGBT/queer issues (see Mayo, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Gose (1996) reported more than 2,000 campus groups in 1996, although this number may be overstated.

<sup>5</sup>Windmeyer’s multiple interests in promoting his organization, his books, and himself as a speaker overlap in ways that make it difficult to ascertain which if any products can be considered scholarly and which should more rightly be considered commercial ventures.

<sup>6</sup>There are structural reasons, as well as theoretical and/or philosophical ones, for many scholars to avoid such a complex task. For example, it is difficult to condense a queer theory analysis of identity development

into a standard-length journal manuscript. If a researcher seeks to reach an audience that primarily reads journals, not books, or if the researcher needs to publish peer-reviewed journal articles for reappointment, promotion, and tenure, the motivation to take on such a project may be lacking and the extrinsic reward may be absent.

<sup>7</sup>I omit citations for these studies in an effort to avoid embarrassing colleagues or publicly accusing them of shoddy scholarship.

<sup>8</sup>In 2001, Yale accepted the Kramer gift, although not as it was originally proposed (for a description of the history of LGBT studies at Yale, see [http://www.yale.edu/lgbts/lgbts\\_history.html](http://www.yale.edu/lgbts/lgbts_history.html)).

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