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Coming Out (or not) on College Applications: Institutional and Interpersonal Dimensions of Disclosing LGBTQ+ Identities

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Abstract

Many college campuses recently began asking undergraduate applicants about their sexual identities on their college applications. How do applicants who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and otherwise on the queer spectrum (LGBQ+) experience this question, and what factors influence how they respond? The authors use focus group and interview data with 60 LGBQ+ undergraduate students attending two college campuses to explore these questions. Although many students were comfortable with coming out, they described evaluating the potential risks and benefits of disclosure, and some lacked trust in the institution and were concerned about loss of information control. Unlike when coming out in other institutions, many expressed serious concerns about how the information might get back to their parents. Such spillover effects from institutional disclosure have not been previously identified in the literature. These concerns were heightened for students of color. The present results extend theoretical understandings of coming out and offer valuable insights to college administrators.

Keywords

LGBTQ+ college students, sexual identity disclosure, college application, coming out, queer college students

Recently, applicants to many college campuses have had the opportunity to indicate their sexual identities on their college applications, along with the usual financial and demographic information. Little is known about how students experience this question. Higher education institutions are interested in understanding their student body and in providing a positive climate for all students, including those who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or otherwise on the queer spectrum (LGBQ+).¹ Although this motivation may seem straightforward, how prospective students experience the question and the reasoning behind their answers are unknown. This study is the first to empirically examine these issues. This novel institutional

¹Our focus is on student sexual identity, specifically coming out (or not) as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or otherwise on the queer spectrum on college applications. With respect to gender identity, our sample includes cisgender, transgender, agender, and nonbinary individuals who identify on the queer spectrum. Because we are not focused on gender identity in this study per se, we use the acronym LGBQ+ rather than LGBTQ+ to highlight our analytic focus on sexual identities.

data collection practice provides us with the opportunity to theorize about what it means for individuals to come out on official records, to an institution. It is also of practical importance, in that educational institutions need to understand the meaning of the sexual identity data they are collecting: the students who come out on their college applications are only a slice of the LGBQ+ student population because of the many considerations that go into the decision.

Most research on coming out focuses on individual identity development or disclosing one's identity to friends and family. Some studies have looked at coming out directly to other people at work, in school, in the military, or in health care settings (e.g., Croteau, Anderson, and VanderWal 2008; Evans and Broido 1999; Herek, Jobe, and Carney 1996;

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Rossman, Salamanca, and Macapagal 2017). Few have examined coming out officially in institutional records and how individuals negotiate the decision of whether to do so. This form of communication, in which an individual is engaging in self-disclosure on an official form, raises a set of unique dynamics. Not only is the information shared via computer, rather than face to face, but student applicants do not know what will be done with the information, only that it will become part of their permanent institutional records. These characteristics make this disclosure act different from that considered by most sexuality scholars, who primarily study coming out via interpersonal exchange. The impersonality of the communication in the case of questions about one's sexual identity on college applications raises novel issues of trust, privacy, and control, while also having implications for personal relationships. We contribute to existing knowledge by using focus-group interviews to examine how LGBQ+ young adults interpret and react to these questions and identify several factors that influence their decisions to come out (or not) on their college applications. Furthermore, we argue that students' intersectional identities shape their assessments of the risks and benefits of coming out in this way.

Our unique case especially highlights an important phenomenon that has received scant attention in the scholarship on coming out. Limited prior research considers that coming out in one setting may spill over into others, creating what we call spillover effects. The concept of spillover has been used by sociologists studying range of topics, from social movements (Meyer and Boutcher 2007; Meyer and Whittier 1994), to the sociology of work (Griswold 2003), to academic disciplines (Bandelj 2019). Typically, it is used to refer to the transfer of information or practices from one entity to another, such as when one movement's ideologies and tactics are adopted by another social movement (Meyer and Whittier 1994). Here, we use it to refer to the transfer of information from one institution to another. Individuals may disclose their sexual identities to institutions, and that information may somehow make its way to their homes, families, or workplaces. Because many college applicants are minors, their parents or guardians have access to their college applications, and students must consider the possibility that their parents or guardians will be able to see their responses. Older, nontraditional college applicants may be more focused on spillover effects to the workplace. In addition, the potential for spillover might make LGBQ+ people of color concerned about losing support from their racial or ethnic communities if their sexual identities are disclosed by institutions without their consent. Thus, we argue that more vulnerable individuals, including LGBQ+ minors and people of color, may be especially reluctant to disclose their sexual identity to an institution, especially when there is no guarantee of privacy.

We explore here whether concerns about these issues influence how LGBQ+ young adults answer college application

questions regarding their sexual identities using data from a series of six focus groups (along with a handful of individual interviews) on two University of California (UC) campuses. In total, 60 undergraduate students who identified as LGBQ+ participated in our study and provided information on their responses to the inclusion of sexual identity questions on college applications. Our findings not only have practical applications but also shed light on coming-out processes more broadly and provide an opportunity for refinement of theory. Before providing more information on our methods and findings, we first review the literature on coming out to situate our research in the literature.

Coming Out to Friends and Family

A great deal of the scholarship on coming out focuses on the psychological process of identity development and the interpersonal factors that shape an LGBQ+ person's decision to disclose. Although institutional settings bring additional considerations to the table, individuals in these settings are still influenced by their own individual characteristics and qualities of the other people they interact with.

Although LGBQ+ people, as members of a marginalized group, share some similar experiences to members of other marginalized groups (and may identify with more than one such group), the nonvisible nature of sexual identity adds a different dimension to LGBQ+ people's experiences. Given the heteronormative nature of social life, whereby individuals are assumed to be heterosexual unless proven otherwise, those who are LGBQ+ must make a conscious decision to either disclose their sexual identities to others or not. Coming out presents both risks and potential benefits to LGBQ+ individuals. Interpersonally, they risk losing friends or the support of family, but they may benefit from the satisfaction of being themselves, as well as connection to LGBQ+ and ally communities (Asakura and Craig 2014). Institutionally, they may risk exclusion or discrimination or benefit from resources or opportunities provided to out LGBQ+ members (Evans and Broido 1999).

Scholarship from a range of disciplines, including psychology, sociology, management, and communication, has studied coming out, the act of disclosing one's sexual identity, to friends and family, at school, work, in the military, and in health care settings. This scholarship tells us that coming out is a fluid process. Over the course of their life span, individuals must decide repeatedly whom to come out to and in what settings. Orne (2011) used the concept of strategic outness to highlight the fact that individuals manage their sexual identities and that social context plays an important role in individual decisions to disclose. The act of coming out involves stops, starts, and backtracking (Cass 1979, 1984; Savin-Williams 1990; Troiden 1979). Guittar and Rayburn (2016) argued that coming out is actually a career to be managed. Disclosing one's sexual identity is a "perpetually managed social endeavor which requires

concurrent internal and external identity management” (Guittar and Rayburn 2016:352). This requires ongoing evaluations in a variety of contexts, with no definitive conclusion or end. In addition, in most contexts and situations, coming out is not a dichotomous phenomenon (Button 2004). Individuals can live openly as LGBQ+ without telling particular people explicitly of their sexual identity (Shallenberger 1994), or they may choose to tell some people but not others.

Life-course theory helps us identify the ways that coming out unfolds over time and is particularly relevant to our study because of our examination of young adults during an especially salient stage in the coming-out process. A life-course perspective highlights the ways individual identities and biographies intersect with contextually situated relationships and institutions to shape the timing and character of a variety of life events, such as entering the labor force or getting married (Elder 1985). Although less often applied to LGBQ+ experiences and identities than heterosexual ones, some recent research using this theory has highlighted the value of considering the coming-out process, and LGBQ+ people’s life experiences more generally, through a life-course lens (Floyd and Bakeman 2006; Lewis 2014). Late adolescence and early adulthood is a particularly important life-course stage for sexual identity development (Carpenter 2015). Key life transitions, such as the transition to college, are related to sexual identity development and disclosure (Carpenter 2015). For example, there is evidence that gay Black men’s decisions about where to attend college are influenced by the tension between not being out to their families and their anticipation of coming out in college (Strayhorn 2018). Life-course scholarship on coming out highlights the importance of considering the differing social and developmental contexts for those who come out as LGBQ+ during adolescence versus during early or later adulthood, in particular the challenges of being dependent on (potentially unsupportive) parents financially and emotionally for those who come out early (D’Augelli 1994; Floyd and Bakeman 2006). This is relevant to our study given that the majority of college applicants are dependent on their parents when they are applying to college, which may influence their decisions to disclose their sexual identities on their applications. We would expect the experience for older college applicants to be different from those who are minors at the time of application.

By the time someone comes out to others, and perhaps especially to an impersonal institution, they have gone through a process of identity development and self-acceptance. Scholars studying identity development suggest that people move through a series of stages as they develop an LGBQ+ identity (Cass 1979, 1984; Coleman 1982; Troiden 1979). Although there is variation in the number of stages suggested by these models, typically three to six, they commonly include a period of exploration during which the individual is uncertain about their

attraction, increasing recognition of difference, and then “progressive movement toward self-affirmation and disclosure to others” (McCarn and Fassinger 1996:513). Although some early models include identity disclosure as a late stage, more recent models include it as a possible but not necessary component of identity development, in recognition of the fact that some people experience an unsupportive social context that can make disclosure unsafe and/or unlikely (Savin-Williams 1990).

Social context and timing matter. Research shows that LGBQ+ people are coming out at earlier ages in recent years than those from older cohorts (Floyd and Bakeman 2006; Grov et al. 2006; Meyer et al. 2021). And although earlier cohorts of lesbian and bisexual women tended to come out at a later age than gay and bisexual men, in more recent cohorts there is no gender difference in age of disclosure (Balsam and Mohr 2007; Dunlap 2016; Grov et al. 2006). Individuals of the same age may nonetheless vary in the extent to which they have accepted an identity as LGBQ+ or integrated it into their lives. We would not expect those who have not adopted LGBQ+ identities for themselves to come out to others.

There is some variation in the likelihood of coming out among different LGBQ+ groups. Research has shown that bisexual people are less likely to be out to their families than are lesbians and gay men (Balsam and Mohr 2007; Martos, Nezhad, and Meyer 2015; Pistella et al. 2016), and some research suggests that they are less likely to be out to friends (Martos et al. 2015). This is likely because bisexual and pansexual people face greater stigma from heterosexuals than do gays and lesbians (Eliason and Schope 2001; Hayfield 2020; Herek, Cogan, and Gillis 2002; Prior 2021) and also encounter bias within gay and lesbian communities (Matsick and Rubin 2018; Mohr and Rochlen 1999; Sarno et al. 2020). Although the social climate for LGBQ+ people has improved in recent years and more bisexual people are coming out (McCormack, Anderson, and Adams 2014), research from the same time period suggests that they still come out at lower rates than lesbians and gay men.

Queer people’s other identities and social statuses, in terms of race/ethnicity, social class, gender expression, religion, and immigration status, may shape to whom and in what contexts they are out (Cisneros and Bracho 2019; Cisneros and Gutierrez 2018; Robinson 2020; Terriquez 2015). Robinson (2020) found that LGBTQ+ youth’s gender expression, race, and social class all affect their ability to be safely out both at home and on the street. Several studies have shown that LGBQ+ people of color, especially, may face a lack of support for their racial identities within the LGBQ+ community and negative attitudes about their sexual identities from their ethnic/racial community (Chan 1989; Loiacano 1989). Grov et al. (2006) found that although there is no overall difference in being out to oneself or others among members of different racial groups, people of color are less likely to be out to their parents. Cultural

differences, such as strong beliefs in family roles and gender dichotomies, may present challenges to Latinx youth considering disclosure (Andrés-Hyman et al. 2006; Eaton and Rios 2017; Peña-Talamantes 2013), and Akerlund and Cheung (2000) found a similar dynamic among Asian American youth. Individuals may risk losing needed support from other members of their ethnic or racial communities if they decide to come out as LGBTQ+. A social context marked by racial antagonism may heighten individuals' racial identities and need for support from their racial or ethnic communities, making their sexual identities less salient (Garvey et al. 2019). Because of these factors, we expect that students of color may be especially concerned about family members' learning of their sexual identity disclosures on their applications.

Personality and past experiences also shape LGBTQ+ people's decisions on whether to come out. In addition to those who have strong sexual identities, individuals who are generally risk takers are more likely to come out to others, as are those who are less concerned about social expectations (Clair, Beatty, and Maclean 2005). Experiencing a negative reaction from others in the past also makes someone less likely to come out (Ragins 2004; Schneider 1986).

An individual's decision of whether to disclose their sexual identity to someone is influenced by a number of interpersonal factors, including how close they are to the person and how much they trust them (Cain 1991; Herek et al. 1996; Holtzen, Kenny, and Mahalik 1995; Miller and Boon 1999), that person's attitudes about LGBTQ+ people (Boon and Miller 1999; McLean 2007; Ragins 2004), the extent to which the LGBTQ+ person enjoys support from others (McCarn and Fassinger 1996; Trolden 1979), and whether the potential discloser controls resources of value to the LGBTQ+ person, including emotional or financial support (Grafsky 2018; Icard and Nurius 1996; Schneider 1986). Telford (2003a, 2003b), for example, found that some gay British students were reluctant to come out because they believed that their parents might cut off financial support if they did. The decision to come out to parents is especially fraught, as parents can be such an important part of people's lives. In addition to the factors described above, young people are often especially hesitant to disclose their sexual identities to their parents because they fear rejection or because they do not want to burden or upset their parents (Ben-Ari 1995; Boon and Miller 1999; Grafsky 2018; Savin-Williams 2001; Savin-Williams and Ream 2003).

Interpersonal factors can be critically important, in both informal and institutional settings, because even at work, for example, people typically come out in person to coworkers, rather than in an impersonal, mediated communication. For example, health care provider characteristics, such as warmth and use of inclusive language (on forms and verbally), positively affect patients' sexual identity disclosure (Eliason and Schope 2001). Many studies of coming out in institutional

settings document the important interpersonal dynamics involved (Ragins 2004).

Coming Out to an Institution

Coming out to an institution, rather than to a friend or family member, brings a different dimension to the decision. Generally, this involves coming out to individuals within the institution, such as coworkers or a boss. Work and school relationships are often less close or personal compared with those with friends and family, and institutional settings are associated with different potential risks and benefits of disclosure for the individual. The fact that the case we examine involves coming out on a computerized form adds an interesting element, in that there is no risk for an immediate reaction from someone. At the same time, LGBTQ+ college applicants who come out on their applications do not know what will be done with the information. The literature has identified two primary concerns individuals have with coming out to an institution: potential costs, including harassment or loss of resources, and fears regarding the loss of control of information. There are also potential benefits to coming out to an institution, including increased support and connecting with community. We turn now to a more in-depth discussion of these issues.

The institutional setting and the fact that individuals rely on institutions for needed goods, like a job, an education, or health care, make the potential costs associated with disclosure different than those associated with coming out to friends and family. Certainly there are risks associated with both. LGBTQ+ workers thinking of disclosing their sexual identities in the workplace must consider a range of potential costs, including social rejection or harassment, job termination, and sometimes even physical assault (D'Augelli and Grossman 2001; Friskopp and Silverstein 1996; Herek et al. 2002; Ragins 2004; Schneider 1986). Although social rejection and physical assault are dangers an LGBTQ+ person faces when disclosing interpersonally, the potential for job termination adds a very crucial economic consideration in the workplace. Fear of facing stigma also prevents some LGBTQ patients from disclosing their sexual identities to their health care providers (Rossman et al. 2017; Stein and Bonuck 2001). In the case of coming out on a college application, failure to get into college because of the disclosure is a related potential cost.

The case we examine is unique in that colleges request that applicants disclose their identities on official records, unmediated by human contact or interaction. Those facing any request for the disclosure of personal information via internet communication technology are typically concerned about what will be done with the information, what management and communication scholars call information privacy (Hoffman, Novak, and Peralta 1999; Li, Sarathy, and Xu 2011; Smith, Milberg, and Burke 1996). Information control

is a concern for those coming out to work and health care organizations (Ragins 2004; Stein and Bonuck 2001) and educational institutions as well (Ettinghoff 2014; Reisner et al. 2020). Especially when information is shared via computer-mediated interaction, applicants may be unsure who will be the receiving entity and have concerns about what they may do with the information. They will be unlikely to disclose when they do not think the organization or institution needs the information. For example, research has found that LGBT patients sometimes do not disclose to health care providers because they do not think it relevant to their health care (Rossman et al. 2017; St. Pierre 2012). Most college applications do not provide applicants with information regarding the purpose of the sexual identity question and how institutions will use it. LGBQ+ applicants can thus only speculate on whether the information will be used to their benefit, for example, in admissions, scholarships, or roommate pairing, or, alternatively, whether it will somehow be used against them or shared with people, including parents, whom they may not want to know.

LGBQ+ people who are out at an institution face a loss of information control and the potential spread of information about their identities from the institutional setting to home. We term this a spillover effect and argue that it can occur in a range of institutional settings, including work, health care, and education. In their study of physician-patient relationships among the LGBT community, for example, Stein and Bonuck (2001) found that some of their respondents did not disclose their sexual identities to their doctors because they were scared their employers or families would find out. An LGBQ+ worker who is out in their personal life may be outed at work by a colleague who observes them in a queer setting or who learns of their identity through other means. Ragins (2004) notes that the reverse may also occur, whereby an LGBQ+ person who has disclosed their identity at work may face the information traveling home.

We suggest that spillover effects can have resource related costs. LGBQ+ people may be reluctant to come out at work because they fear losing their jobs (D'Augelli and Grossman 2001; Friskopp and Silverstein 1996; Ragins 2004; Schneider 1986). In health care settings, LGBQ+ individuals may be concerned that they will face stigma and receive lower quality care (Barbara, Quandt, and Anderson 2001; Hitchcock and Wilson 1992; Stein and Bonuck 2001). Young LGBQ+ people who live with family members are often concerned that disclosure of their sexual identities at school or elsewhere will result in their being outed to family members, potentially with negative consequences (Ettinghoff 2014; Reisner et al. 2020). College students who disclose their sexual identities on their college applications face the possibility that their parents may view the information, because many are minors and parents have access to the applications. Although some individuals come out to their parents while they are still minors, many young people delay or never come out to their parents for a variety of reasons (Boon and

Miller 1999; Grafsky 2018; Savin-Williams 2001; Savin-Williams and Ream 2003), including fear of rejection. For prospective college students who come out on their college applications, parental rejection may inflict emotional costs as well as financial costs, as parents may withdraw financial support for the students' education. Thus, coming out to an educational institution as an applicant includes the possibility that they will be simultaneously coming out to their parents as well, generating a spillover effect. In this study, we explore whether this possibility is a concern for LGBQ+ college students. We anticipate that interpersonal factors, particularly whether students are out to their parents and their perceptions of the danger of spillover, will play a larger role in shaping the decision-making process than will considerations about the institution itself. We also predict that concerns about spillover will be more salient to students of color, on the basis of our discussion above.

For LGBQ+ young adults who have already shared their sexual identities with their parents, the potential for spillover is not a concern. However, they may still be nervous about what the institution will do with the information. Older, nontraditional applicants may be concerned about this as well. Joinson and Paine (2007) noted in their study of self-disclosure on the internet,

Trust is a critical issue in both FtF [face to face] and online disclosure of personal information. By disclosing information, we are making ourselves vulnerable – one reason it is often easier to disclose to strangers than to close friends and family (Rubin 1975). (p. 247)

To establish trust in an impersonal interaction, individuals must rely on cues other than those provided (or shown to be lacking) via interaction and interpersonal exchange. If people are not satisfied with the trustworthiness of the entity, they are unlikely to disclose (Hoffman et al. 1999; Li et al. 2011; Miller and Boon 1999; Smith et al. 1996).

On the other hand, the sharing of information via computer can reduce fear because there is little chance of an immediate negative reaction or personal rejection. Moon (1998) found that people are often more willing to disclose personal information via computer rather than to known individuals because they perceive it as less risky for them. Indeed, LGBQ+ youth report that they like the safety and anonymity of online media (Bond, Hefner, and Drogos 2009; Craig and McInroy 2014; Tikkanen and Ross 2000). Although the college application form is not anonymous, the fact that it is on the computer reduces the risk of a negative immediate response. Furthermore, for teens and young adults who are acclimated to various forms of personal disclosure on social media platforms, the computerized application may evoke similar feelings to those types of online settings.

The institutional climate shapes whether individuals feel comfortable disclosing their sexuality. Rumens and Broomfield (2012) noted, "While disclosing a stigmatized identity is a matter of individual choice, these choices are

shaped by the contexts in which they are made” (p. 295). Scholarship has shown that LGBQ+ individuals are more willing to come out in workplace environments (Chrobot-Mason, Button, and Declimenti 2001; Driscoll, Kelley, and Fassinger 1996) and on college campuses (Evans and Broido 1999; Garvey et al. 2019; Garvey and Rankin 2015) when they find the climate welcoming. This can include the presence of LGBTQ+-affirming groups, the inclusion of sexual identity in diversity policies, and a positive classroom or workplace climate. We expect that these will have little impact in the case we examine because the prospective students are not yet on campus and likely have limited information about campus climates.

There are a number of potential benefits for individuals to coming out within an institution. These can include feelings of authenticity and the ability to access LGBQ+-positive social events and organizations (Cohen and Savin-Williams 1996; Croteau et al. 2008; Evans and Broido 1999). Because we are examining a unique case, in which individuals come out on a form rather than once they are embedded within an institutional context, some of these factors are not relevant to our case. However, the question does provide the applicants with an opportunity to come out, to “check the box,” or count in official records, which may be personally beneficial. For example, evidence from health communications research suggests that more LGBQ+-inclusive health intake forms may benefit LGBQ+ psychological and physical health by signaling inclusion (Goins and Pye 2013). When institutions do not ask, individuals do not have the opportunity to disclose, even when disclosure may be beneficial to them, for example, in health care settings (Rossman et al. 2017). Thus, we expect that some LGBQ+ students are happy to check the box identifying as LGBQ+, especially if they are already out to their parents or guardians.

In sum, prior research on coming out highlights numerous factors at the individual, interpersonal, and institutional levels that are linked to decisions to come out. Ours is the first study to examine how LGBQ+ people react to the college application question asking their sexual identities and the factors that influence their decisions to come out (or not) on the college application.

Data and Methods

To address our research questions, we conducted six focus groups ($n = 51$) and nine one-on-one interviews with LGBQ+ college students, for a total of 60 participants. Participants were self-identified LGBQ+ students who were currently attending two UC campuses, one located in northern California and the other in southern California. We include students from two campuses to ensure that the results are not driven by peculiarities of a particular campus. Both campuses are public PhD-granting universities that are Hispanic-serving institutions. Both have nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation. We do not disclose

the specific campuses in order to protect the privacy of our respondents.

We chose focus groups as our primary method of collecting data because we believed that the interactions within these focus groups would yield the most detailed responses, as students were able to share thoughts and experiences with one another; the shared space of empathy also created an environment in which students were comfortable discussing matters they otherwise may not have disclosed in a one-on-one interview. Because of the sensitive nature of the topic of coming out for some individuals, we also provided the option of participating in a one-on-one interview for students who either had time conflicts or were not comfortable being “out” in a space with other students. Data were collected in spring 2019 on one campus and fall 2019 on the other.

All six focus groups were mediated by two graduate student researchers without the faculty researchers present, so that in discussions of their university, students would not feel the need to censor themselves in the presence of a perceived authority figure. In terms of our positionality, one of the graduate students is a white heterosexual woman and the other is a Yemeni Muslim heterosexual cisgender woman. Two undergraduate research assistants also helped us with the research by recruiting advisory board members, attending the focus group meetings to assist with logistics, and contributing to coding and analyzing the data. One of the undergraduate research assistants identifies as lesbian and genderqueer, while the other identifies as queer and nonbinary; both also identify as Latinx undocumented DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients. Both graduate student researchers and faculty members on our team conducted the one-on-one interviews on the basis of time and availability. The faculty members include a white lesbian/queer woman and a white bisexual/queer cisgender woman in a lesbian relationship. At various intersections of their identities, the researchers on this team held both outsider and insider perspectives as it related to the multitude of identities that participants held. The research team’s complex relationship with privilege and oppression, and how it varies from one social setting to the next, provided them with a certain level of shared perspective with participants, while allowing room for them to probe for information rather than make assumptions on their understanding of certain experiences. These varied identities allowed a nuanced view of the data and the project at large.

All student participants were asked questions on their LGBQ+ identities, their coming-out processes and experiences before college, coming out to UC on their applications, and the impact of their LGBQ+ identities on their classroom experiences, as well as general academic and social experiences. Students were specifically asked whether they came out on their applications to the university and what their experiences and thought processes were in either coming out or not coming out on their applications. Students were also

asked why they believe other students may not come out on the application, which elicited commentary about their own concerns and hesitations when filling out the application, even if they had ultimately decided to come out. Student participants also completed a short demographic questionnaire with primarily open-ended questions on racial/ethnic identities, gender and sexual identities, major choice, and age at coming out to various individuals. Participants also selected their own first-name pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.²

Recruitment and Sample

To reach a sample that was diverse across a multitude of categories, including gender identity, sexual orientation, racial and ethnic identity, and major, we established a student advisory board at each university consisting of a total of five students on one campus and six on the other. Both advisory boards consisted of LGBTQ+ undergraduate students of various backgrounds who helped us both recruit participants and shape our interview guide on the basis of their experiences and current happenings on campus that we may not have been aware of. An undergraduate research assistant active in the LGBTQ+ community on each campus helped us recruit board members and participated in advisory board meetings. We compensated advisory board members for their participation with Target gift cards, and they were not eligible to also participate in the focus groups. In addition to personal recruitment by advisory board members, we also recruited participants for the focus groups and interviews via student groups, flyers, list servers, social media, campus center newsletters, and e-mails. Campus student support staff members who focus on LGBTQ+ students also assisted with outreach and publicity for our study.

Information on our study participants is provided on Table 1. In total, our participant sample was made up of primarily Latino/a (45 percent) and white (33 percent) students, as well as Asian (20 percent), Black (8 percent), and a handful of other races.³ When it came to sexual identity, our sample was largely made up of students who identified as bisexual (40 percent, including bicurious and biromantic), as well as queer (27 percent), pansexual (17 percent), gay (15 percent), lesbian (8 percent), and questioning (7 percent). A majority of our participants identified as cisgender women (55 percent), 23 percent identified as cisgender men, and 22 percent identified as nonbinary, genderqueer, questioning, or trans. In terms of age, the participants ranged from 18 to 38 years, with most between the ages of 18 and 22 (only two participants were older than 25).

²The research team modified a small number of duplicate and illegible names.

³Participants were allowed to check all that apply for both the race and sexual identity questions. That is why percentages total to more than 100 percent.

Data Analysis

We audio-recorded the interviews and used a professional transcription service to transcribe them. We created a preliminary codebook on the basis of the questions we posed during the interviews and what we had heard from the students in our advisory board. After the transcriptions were complete, we reread the data and edited the codebook to ensure exhaustive code lists. Because this was a collaborative project, we established intercoder reliability by multiple rounds of practice coding small excerpts from the various transcripts. We stopped the training and practice coding once we had achieved near complete agreement (>90 percent). All of the final coding was completed using Atlas.ti.

Findings

Coming out on a college application presents a new opportunity for prospective college students that comes with potential risks and benefits. For many LGBTQ+ young adults, this may have been the first time they were asked to specify their sexual identities on an official institutional form. Whether or not they chose to come out on their college applications, the vast majority of our respondents remembered having the opportunity to do so, suggesting that the question was salient to them. Only a handful did not recall the question or how they answered it. Overall, we find that a major concern for LGBTQ+ students is how information about their sexual identities disclosed in their college applications will be used and whether this information will get back to their parents. Little previous scholarship has investigated the possibility of someone out at work or at an institution facing a loss of information control regarding their identity from the institutional setting to home. Identifying the central importance of these interpersonal spillover effects adds an important dimension to understanding the process of coming out to certain kinds of institutions.

Individual Identity/ies and Coming Out

We found that almost a third of the students did not want to disclose their sexual identities for reasons unrelated to the institutions. Some of these reasons include being unsure about their sexual identities, not seeing their sexual identities listed, and prioritizing other aspects of their identities.

Students may not be sure of their identities, or even out to themselves, when they are going through the college application process. Previous research has suggested that sexual identity develops over time in a series of stages and that acceptance is usually not immediate (Cass 1979, 1984; Coleman 1982; Troiden 1979). Xatan (pansexual) expressed, "I've been thinking back to that time [of filling out the application], I probably still didn't . . . fully understand or accept it yet. So, if anything, I'd probably put . . . prefer not to answer, or whatever." Similarly, Jade (lesbian) noted, "I'm

Table 1. Focus Group Participant Information.

Name	Start Year	Major	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity	First-Generation College Student
A. J.	2018	Global studies	Cisgender woman	Pansexual/queer	Black	No Response
Al	2016	Psychology	Female	Bisexual	Mexican	Yes
Alan	2016	Biology	Male	Queer	White	No
Alejandro	2019	Sociology	Male	Queer	Latino	Yes
Alex	2017	Psychology	Female	Questioning	Latino-Mexican	Yes
Alfred	2017	Chemistry	Male	Bisexual	White	No
Andrew	2017	Political science	Nonbinary	Queer	Latinx-Mexican	Yes
Angel	2018	Biology	Male	Gay	Latino	Yes
Ari	2018	Linguistics	Trans-masculine, nonbinary	Queer	White	Yes
Arin (Alex)	2017	Spanish	Female	Lesbian, gay	Mexican, Italian, Spanish	Yes
Aurora	2019	Anthropology	Female	Queer/lesbian	White	Yes
Brutus	2017	History and political science	Cisgender male	Bisexual	Hispanic/Latino	Yes
Calvin	2014	Mechanical engineering	Male	Pansexual	White/Japanese	No
Celia	2017	Sociology	Androgynous woman	Bisexual	Latina	Yes
Clare	2019	Biology	Cis-woman	Bisexual	White	No
Conrad	2017	Physics	Male	Gay	Mixed race, white, Taiwanese, Hapa	No
Daniel	2018	Biology and psychology	Man	Bisexual	Latino/Native American/white	Yes
Dave	2016	Economics and environmental studies	Male (cis)	Gay	White/Middle Eastern	No
Dominic	2017	Physics	Nonbinary	Queer	White	No
Elle	2016	Biology	Female	Queer/bi	Hispanic	No
Emilia	2018	English	Cis-female	Pansexual/lesbian (?)	Chinese	No
Esperanza	2018	Ethnic studies	Cis-femme	Queer	American Mexican/ Chicana	Yes
Gisselle	2018	Sociology	Woman	Bisexual	Latina	Yes
Hannah	2018	Biology	Cis-female	Bisexual	Caucasian	No
Ivy	2018	Cognitive science	Cis-female	Pansexual	Black/African American	Yes
Jade	2016	Psychology	Genderqueer . . . still partially up in the air	Lesbian, gay, queer	Asian/Chinese/Lao	No response
Jasmine	2018	Chemistry	Female	Lesbian	Mexican	Yes
Jesse	2017	Art/art history and anthropology	Genderqueer	Pansexual	White	No
June	2019	Sociology	Nonbinary woman	Pansexual/bisexual	White	No
Kaitlyn	2018	Cognitive science	Female	Bisexual	Hispanic	No
Lauren	2016	Sociology	Womxn, questioning	Queer	Chinese American	Yes
Lesley	2019	Undeclared	Female	Queer	Latina	Yes
Leslie	2019	Political science	Female	Bisexual	Mexican American	Yes
Lilac	2019	Biology and history	Female	Bisexual	White	No
Lily	2017	Psychology and biology	Female	Homosexual	Chinese	Yes
Louka	2018	Computer science	Female	Bisexual/questioning	Hispanic	Yes
Mara	2018	Cognitive science	Female	Biromantic	Mexican/Indian	No
Maria	2018	Psychology	Female	Bisexual	Latina/Mexican/ Chicanx	Yes

(continued)

Table 1. (continued)

Name	Start Year	Major	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Race/Ethnicity	First-Generation College Student
Marie	2017	English	Questioning female	Bisexual, questioning pansexual	White and Mixed Asian	No
Marley	2016	Biology	Nonbinary	Bisexual	White	No
Marta	2018	Ethnic studies	Woman	Queer/bisexual	Latina/Chicana	Yes
Mathew	2018	Sociology and economics	Male	Gay	Hispanic/Mexican American	Yes
May	2018	Psychology	Cis-female	Bi-curious	Hawaiian	Yes
Melissa	2018	Political science	Female	Pansexual	Latinx, Mexican	Yes
Michael	2016	Biology and psychology	Male	Bisexual	Hispanic	Yes
Miranda	2019	Writing and literature	Nonbinary	Bisexual	Mixed (white/Latinx/Mexican)	Yes
Nick	2019	History and sociology	Cis male	Gay	Southeast Asian Indian	No
Parker	2017	Computer science	Male	Bisexual	Caucasian	
Richi	2019	Linguistics and anthropology	Male	Gay	Hispanic	Yes
Sabrina	2018	Sociology	Cis woman	Queer	Chicana	Yes
Sansa	2016	Environmental science	Female	Bisexual	Black, white	Yes
Strawberry	2017	Political science	Female	Bisexual	Latina	Yes
Summer	2016	Sociology and gender/women's/feminist studies	Cisgender woman	Bisexual/queer	Asian American (Vietnamese)	Yes
Susana	2016	Psychology	Female	Bisexual	Latinx	Yes
Vanessa	2016	Sociology	Female	Bisexual	Mexican and African American	No
Violet	2018	Religious studies	Cis woman	Bisexual	Caucasian	Yes
Xatan	2016	Biology	Questioning	Pansexual	Mexican	Yes
Xavier	2017	Management	Male	Gay	Persian	No
Xena	2017	Computer science	Female	Pansexual	Asian	Yes
Zoe	2016	Gender/women's/feminist studies	Cisgender woman	Queer	Mexican, Latinx	Yes

pretty sure I probably put that I was straight. Because up until like the second half of my first year [of college] I was very in denial and pretty in denial because of my parents.” Although a few students mentioned this issue, it was a fairly small number. This is not surprising, however, because everyone in our focus groups was openly LGBTQ+, with strong enough identities to feel comfortable participating in a group research study. In addition to those who described uncertainty about their identity, numerous students suggested that other students may not have come out on their applications because of being unsure of their sexual identities. This may be a more influential factor in the broader student population than it was among our research subjects.

Another issue our participants raised is not seeing one’s sexual identity listed as an option on an official document (options included “heterosexual or straight,” “gay or lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “not listed above please specify”). Lilac (bisexual) said, “I remember the question, but I also remember lamenting that it didn’t have my identity on it.” This student was sure of their identity, but did not see the appropriate box(es) to check at the time. Lauren (queer) further explained the challenge:

They will never include all the identities that exist out there. Or if they do . . . the whole structure of a form is usually . . . check one. But . . . some people might not see their identity on the form and . . . there’s the “other” box, but—that’s very othering, like it’s saying . . . “your identity’s not valid enough to be an option here.”

Coming out on an application presents challenges to people balancing their intersectional identities, consistent with previous research on LGBQ+ people of color (Akerlund and Cheung 2000; Andrés-Hyman et al. 2006; Eaton and Rios 2017; Peña-Talamantes 2013). Many respondents brought up their intersectional identities, often in connection with their families, with some making conscious decisions about which identity(ies) to prioritize:

I just feel like my parents would not be understanding because they have no representation, because China’s extremely conservative, and over here [in the United States] it’s like, all the gay people on TV are white. I just don’t think that they would be understanding, and that it would create . . . a larger divide. And I’m trying to just build . . . a relationship with my family because they don’t know anything about me and I don’t know anything

about them, because of these cultural expectations of saving face, and emotions are just nonexistent in my family, and so, I think that it's extremely hard and. . . to me right now it's not a priority [to come out to them]. (Lauren, queer)

Other respondents integrated their sexual identities and their other identities. "For my family, because I am Mexican and I am Catholic, it's kind of. . . a lot of people in my church have come out. . . so I see how difficult it is" (Al, bisexual). This aligns with previous research which finds that LGBTQ+ people of color may be concerned about a lack of support from their ethnic/racial communities (Chan 1989; Loiacano 1989) and supports our prediction that students of color will be especially concerned about the information spilling over to their families.

Coming Out to an Institution

We find evidence that some prospective college students asked to come out to an educational institution during the college application process incorporate similar factors into the decision as individuals do when coming out to an institution in general. They evaluate the potential risks and benefits of disclosure, lack trust in the institution, and are concerned about loss of information control.

College students expressed awareness of the risks of coming out on their applications. Many expressed concerns about possible disadvantages of disclosure for themselves, including reduced admissions chances, fear of parents' finding out, and confidentiality concerns. "I feel like. . . will people who may want to hire me or may want to accept me in. . . research or something. . . will they see this information?" (Elle, queer/bisexual). When asked why others might not come out on the application, Daniel (bisexual) said,

I could see people might think that they would be discriminated against for being LGBTQ+, a lot of states. . . are allowed to discriminate against LGBTQ+ students, which makes it really hard for students to be admitted into our field, like to be admitted into higher education institutions, or to feel accepted in those places openly.

A few students were interested in advantages that providing their sexual identities to the college might provide. Some students thought that coming out might help them get into school or obtain a scholarship. Sabrina (queer) said,

I went to community college and you get to choose, they have scholarships. . . depending on different identities. And I was like, if I could get paid for being LGBT, [laughing] yes, I'm getting paid for this. So I don't remember exactly what was the category. . . I wanna say it was lesbian, but yeah, that's when I clicked, I'm like, "Yes, give me the money. [Laughing] It's paying off, finally."

Violet (bisexual) described a similar motivation while also being happy to check the box: "I think I also put bi, I did that.

It was because I thought, 'Oh maybe I can get money from this,' [laughing] but then also to just be like, this is my identity and own it."

Only a very small number of students indicated that they were hesitant of potential advantages such disclosure could entail. "I don't want to be defined by my sexuality in the application process, I don't want to get a leg-up, I don't want to be. . . the token bi kid they accept and that'll be. . . their diversity for the year" (Alfred, bisexual). Others expressed uncertainty about whether such disclosure would provide an advantage or disadvantage but did not want it to be a factor either way.

I just didn't want that to negatively affect my. . . getting in, or positively. I wanted it to be. . . what I did. . . academically, what I did [for] volunteer work and everything. I didn't want it to be about me. I didn't want to be some school's trophy because I already felt like I would be just because I'm Black. (Sansa, bisexual)

Consistent with scholarship on coming out to institutions (Ragins 2004; Smith et al. 1996), numerous students expressed a lack of trust in the institution and concerns with how the information would be used. Alex (questioning) stated, "At first I was like, 'Why does it even matter?' . . . my mind-set was. . . 'Why do they care? Like what's the big deal?'" Strawberry (bisexual) said,

For me, when I put yes, I was kind of like, "I'm really going to come out to people I don't even know yet?" [Laughing] Like, I'd never done that. So I feel like maybe that's why some people put no, 'cause they're not ready to come out to strangers.

Susana (bisexual) questioned, "I. . . felt like why did they feel the need to make this an extra question? . . . I didn't really like the fact that they were just kind of grouping everyone together." Responses indicate that providing additional context to situate this question among the admissions material might be helpful in increasing the accuracy of application information.

Part of the lack of trust expressed by students stems from concern about the inability to control the information following disclosure. Findings indicate that students were concerned because they do not know how the information will be used by the university or why the question is being asked on their application. Clare (bisexual) stated, "I was. . . pretty nervous about what they were going to do with the information because. . . they don't state it with the question." Similarly, Maria (bisexual) said,

Whenever I go through applications or stuff now and it asks, like UC stuff, when they ask questions like that, I'm just like, unless you're giving me a scholarship, don't ask me personal questions that can come back and bite me in the ass. . . just a privacy matter. I was like, I don't know where this is going, I don't know what it's used for, but I don't want that out there. There's consequences still for me in my life for that.

The prospect of spillover, and thereby coming out to family, and parents in particular, is an especially daunting prospect for many LGBQ+ young adults. Many respondents were concerned about inadvertent sexual identity disclosure and its repercussions, possibly because they or people they know have been outed to their family by educational actors, sometimes with negative results (Ettinghoff 2014; Reisner et al. 2020). They were very cognizant of the potential for their parents to discover their sexual identities through the college application process. Students expressed apprehension that parents could access their responses by directly viewing their application but in some cases decided to come out anyway:

If I say yes, and then my mom does have access to see it, or if she . . . gets forwarded a copy . . . then I'm coming out. So that was a risk I took at the time [by coming out on the application]. (Xavier, gay)

Other respondents saw the potential for parents to figure out their sexual identities through later receipt of university materials (i.e., gender-inclusive housing brochures, LGBQ campus clubs and activities) on the basis of their application responses. Vanessa (bisexual) said,

I put down that I'm African American, and then, right away, they sent me African American clubs and information, saying, "Oh, come here, 'cause we have this and this." So I was like . . . if I put that I'm bisexual, what if I start getting, "Oh, join this and this and this." So that's why I put no.

Regardless of how parents could find out about their children's sexual identities through the application process, one student summed it up: "I think it's all just come to the fear, not really knowing . . . how to prepare for that situation or a conversation you're not ready to have" (Susana, bisexual).

Student fears about their parents finding out about their sexual identities ranged from physical safety to a loss of parental financial and/or emotional support. Physical safety was an overriding concern for some, including first-year student Mara (biromantic):

So my dad sat next to me the entire application process . . . he was watching me go through and fill everything out and he was asking me every single question. And then we got to that question and I was like, "Cool! This isn't the day that I wanna die . . . I don't want it to be bloody," so I'm gonna put straight.

Lilac (bisexual) shared that fear, stating, "One of my biggest fears is that, somehow, the information was going to get back to my parents . . . just because that would've put me in danger."

Although physical safety was expressed as an urgent concern for some, more students discussed how they did not want to lose financial and/or emotional support from parents: "I know . . . I wouldn't be able to be here without my parents'

support financially. And so it's not just physical safety, it's am I financially stable? Am I gonna have emotional support going through this?" (Mara, biromantic). Similarly, Xavier (gay) said,

Because I'm afraid . . . the word's going to end up getting back to my mom, who helps pay for like my rent, and other expenses. And so like, should she have a bad reaction, I don't want to have to get a second or third job and try to figure out how I'm going to make ends meet because of something that's, like, out of my control. It's just sad. It's a really sad reality.

Thus, because parents could view prospective students' applications, for some, the decision to come out or not was very directly tied to concerns about family members' finding out. Little research on coming out to organizations or institutions recognizes this concern about spillover. It also highlights the importance of paying attention to the life course when discussing coming out. Young people are especially vulnerable because they rely so much on parents and family for various forms of support.

The fact that the disclosure occurred via computer made the process more comfortable for some, as we would predict from the information and management sciences literature (Bond et al. 2009; Craig and McInroy 2014). The anonymity of the disclosure can make it easier for some students to share sensitive information. This quotation from Al (bisexual) nicely illustrates this:

You know I'm not fearful of people judging me and I've been judged so much my entire life because of how I look and you know, how my body looks, and always been body shamed and I just didn't want that judgment, but I felt here that like oh like, you know no one's judging anyone so I can come out and feel safe without having someone come and reciprocate and say like "oh, you know you're doing this, or you did that, or—"

Consistent with previous research (Goins and Pye 2013), some students were happy to "check the box." Several participants found it to be "no big deal" to respond to the question. Giselle (bisexual), who filled out her application in her high school AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination) class with close friends, recalled,

To me, it wasn't that big of a deal [to come out on the application]. But I do remember that was, I think, the first time that I had to actually like- kind of, like, on- like, physically, like, put down, like, my sexuality, which is something that I've never had to do before, so . . . I do remember that, but, to me, like, besides that, it wasn't that big of a deal.

Giselle's hesitation at finding the exact language to express the experience of being able to come out on an official institutional form highlights the novelty the question posed for many students, even if they were comfortable coming out. In a culture that routinely erases and ignores LGBQ+ individuals, being recognized in official documents is meaningful,

even if one is not concerned about coming out in that way. A number of other students found the opportunity to disclose their sexual identities to be a positive experience. Alejandro (queer) said, “I guess I’m just really comfortable with my sexuality, and I don’t question it, I’m just like, ‘Oh, it’s just a question that’s been asked.’ And I am grateful that they’re asking for my sexual orientation.” Celia (bisexual) noted how her long-standing outness made it easy for her to come out on her application:

Because I have been out so long. It was just like, “Yeah, okay.” Yeah, it was . . . it kind of felt like, now looking back, I—I’m kind of like really glad and I’m really happy that it was just something that I could just be like, “Yeah, that’s something I am.”

LGBQ+ students had mixed reactions to the question asking them to disclose their sexual identities. Some students were happy to check the box, while others had more anxious reactions. Although some students expressed concerns about privacy and control over information, their dominant concerns related to the potential for their identities to be disclosed to their parents. This form of spillover effect has not been previously considered by scholars in this area.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study is the first to examine the process of coming out (or not) on college applications among LGBQ+ young adults. Our findings illustrate that the decision of whether to disclose sexual identity on the college application is a salient experience for them. For a large number of students, coming out was a somewhat routine or even positive experience. Many of these students nonetheless noted that it was the first time (or one of the first) they had an opportunity to come out on an official form. We demonstrate that individual and interpersonal factors loom large in young adults’ decision, and that students’ main institutional concern is that the information they provide to the university will somehow out them to their parents, which we identify as spillover effects. Consistent with prior research on the life course and coming out, some students also were not yet certain of their identity and not ready to disclose it to anyone. The institutional factors students highlight concern privacy and how the data will be used and are related to spillover effects: that the information about their sexual identities might get back to their parents. At the same time, many participants who were out to their families and friends generally felt comfortable, even happy, to come out on their college applications.

Prior research on coming out to or within social institutions has largely focused on workplaces and health care. Studies of coming out in educational settings primarily examine interpersonal disclosure (coming out to friends or teachers), rather than disclosure to the institution itself. Our study suggests that coming out on college applications has

some commonalities with other institutional settings but differs in key ways. In terms of similarities, our participants mentioned considerations of trust and concerns over privacy that were analogous to those in studies of workplace and health care settings. Students wondered what the campus would do with the information, particularly how it would be used in admissions decisions. However, unlike workplaces, the climate for diversity, presence of LGBQ+ organizations, and supportive policies were not salient to our respondents. This is likely because applicants are being asked to disclose their sexual identities to an institution that they do not yet inhabit, so elements of the campus community were less meaningful.

We find that the potential spillover effect between institutions we theorized was of central importance for many of our students. Students were concerned that the information provided to the institution would come back to their parents, and some failed to disclose to the college out of fear that their parents would have a negative reaction, ranging from harsh words to potential violence or withholding of financial support. The institutions of school (or work) and family are connected, and the decision to come out to an institution is one that occurs in a broader context and is connected to decisions about coming out to individuals, in this case the family. Our findings highlight that information about an individual, including their sexual identity, can spill over from one institution to the other. This finding is likely true for those considering coming out in other institutional settings, such as K–12 institutions, workplaces, government offices, and even the census. In addition, because of the life-course stage and age at which many of those who apply to college are located, the connection between school and family can be especially fraught. Theoretically, this suggests that the salient factors for deciding whether to come out to institutions may vary depending on an individual’s life-course stage and stage of coming out, and we encourage sexuality scholars to adopt a life-course perspective when examining coming out in order to more fully consider the interplay between identity and institutions over time.

Our results also add important new information about the ways race and ethnicity intersect with sexuality in the transition to adulthood. In particular, there are ripple effects that emerge from the lower likelihood of LGBQ+ people of color to come out to their families relative to their white peers. Being closeted with families makes it less likely that students will come out to educational institutions and may heighten the anxiety some groups of students feel during the college application process when sexual identity questions are included. Furthermore, several students described tension between their racial/ethnic and/or immigrant identities and their sexual identities, feeling the need to prioritize one or the other in considering their application responses. Thus, it is important to consider how sexual identities intersect with race, ethnicity, and other identities in shaping decisions to come out on college applications.

The research described here was conducted on two public research university campuses in California with a subset of the student population. Although we are confident that the results are broadly generalizable, the results must be interpreted with some caution. Research suggests that LGBTQ+ people are more likely to disclose their sexual identities when living in a more supportive social context (Floyd and Bakeman 2006; Savin-Williams 1990), so prospective students living in more politically conservative states may be less likely to come out on their applications. Organizational context can also matter. People are more likely to come out within organizations that have supportive diversity climates, including nondiscrimination policies (Clair et al. 2006). The campuses included in our study both have nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation. Students may be less likely to disclose their identities to a religious institution or one that does not protect students from discrimination on the basis of their sexual identities. In addition, students who attend community colleges or commuter campuses may be less likely to disclose because they may plan on living at home during college and may be more concerned about potential negative reactions from family members. Finally, because most of our participants were between the ages of 18 and 22, we cannot generalize our findings to older students, who may have different considerations. We also did not explicitly examine the role of social class. Future research should consider how organizational and social context, age, and other social locations, especially social class, influence the decision to come out to an educational institution.

Our study highlights several practical issues that arise from including sexual identity questions on college applications. Clearly, these questions can signal to LGBTQ+ applicants that they are welcome in the campus community. However, without further explanation about how the information will be used, many students are left to guess, which dampens accurate responses. Also, many students who matriculate on a given campus may identify as LGBTQ+ but not be identified as such in campus records because their identities have shifted or they opted not to disclose their identities when they applied. Because of this, college administrators who seek to use the admissions data on LGBTQ+ students to plan for resource allocation, programs, or curricula should use extreme caution in doing so. There is most certainly an undercount of the LGBTQ+ student population in these data, particularly among students of color. There is substantial evidence that LGBTQ+ college students confront a host of unique academic and social challenges in college, so being able to accurately measure and track LGBTQ+ student progress is of utmost importance (Beattie, Van Dyke, and Hagaman 2021).

When California lawmakers and higher education leaders began collecting sexual identity information on undergraduate college applications in 2015, they did so with the stated goal to establish the “gold standard” for LGBTQ+

equity. Our study suggests that this change resulted in positive experiences for many LGBTQ+ applicants, while presenting new challenges for others as they wrestled with concerns over how the information would be used or who might learn of their answer. This research highlights the importance of having LGBTQ+ people at the table and providing them with the opportunity to share their experiences as institutional efforts at LGBTQ+ data collection advance and has implications beyond the academy. As research by scholars at the Williams Institute demonstrates, LGBTQ+ people face challenges in many institutional settings, including (but not limited to) discrimination in the workplace, higher incarceration rates, and inequalities in health and health care access (Meyer et al. 2021; Meyer, Wilson, and O’Neill 2021; Wilson et al. 2021). It is important that leaders within these institutions work to address these problems, and counting and communicating with their LGBTQ+ members is a good place to start.

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Hala Alnagar is the Inclusive Excellence Initiatives coordinator in the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of California, Merced. Her dissertation research explored the intersectional identities of Muslim American women and their experiences in higher education. In her current role in the Office of Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion, she assists in the coordination of campuswide initiatives that address the needs of underrepresented groups at the University of California, Merced. She also oversees the curation of professional development opportunities to equip both faculty and staff members with the skills and resources needed to be equity-minded practitioners. Two of the premier initiatives she is currently working with include the Valuing Black Lives Initiative and the Reflecting on Anti-Racist Pedagogy virtual discussion series.