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Queer Voices: Learning from Experiences of Queer-Spectrum and Trans-Spectrum University Students

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Abstract. This study explores queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' voices on establishing a sense of belonging in the classroom. This study contributes to a growing body of research on the experience of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students in higher education institutions. Using long-form interviews with 25 students and alumni of a public research university in North Carolina, we find that the incorporation of small gestures by faculty have an outsized impact on fostering a sense of belonging among queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students. Specifically, small gestures such as the use of preferred pronouns went a long way in making students feel welcomed in the classroom. More broadly, queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students who identified with their gender assigned at birth also used the use of pronouns by professors as a cue. By virtue of professors taking the time to revise their email signatures, revise their syllabi to include language regarding anti-discrimination and scholarship by a diverse set of scholars, and make a welcoming statement aimed at establishing a safe space for queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students, signaled to students that they were an ally.

Keywords: Queer, Transgender, Social Integration, Belonging.

Roughly eight percent of undergraduates in U.S. research universities identify as queer-spectrum (7.3%) and trans-spectrum (0.3%) (Greathouse et al., 2018), yet our understanding of their college experiences is limited at best. In the past decade, the scholarship on queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' campus experiences has largely articulated a call to action for administrators, faculty, and staff in higher education institutions to increase efforts in creating environments where all students feel like valued members of the campus community.

Despite a growing body of research on queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' experiences in higher education institutions, our understanding of how instructors can improve the academic and social integration of these students by fostering a sense of belonging is largely underdeveloped. To address this gap in the research, this study aims to identify practices instructors can implement to foster a sense of belonging in queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students. Through a series of in-depth interviews with queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students and alumni, we identify five practices which can be implemented with relative ease and can be applied universally across disciplines.

The authors of this study choose to use the terms "queer-spectrum" and "trans-spectrum" to reference individuals who identify with sexual and gender minorities,

respectively. Greathouse et al. (2018, p.50) explain the value of using the terms "queer-spectrum" and "trans-spectrum", as opposed to the acronym LBGT, to reference sexual and gender minorities, as those terms provide more flexibility in "how individuals chose to identify themselves as opposed to placing them into socially constructed categories of sexuality and gender".

Literature Review

Tinto's (1993) student integration theory serves as the theoretical framework undergirding this analysis of the queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum student experience. This theoretical framework speaks to the impact of a higher education institution's social system on individual-level student persistence (Tinto, 1975, 1997) and student success. Queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students, in particular, are at-risk for negative academic outcomes as a result of the interplay between their social identity and the broader campus community (Cooper & Brownell, 2016).

In Tinto's (1993) student integration theory, institutions of higher education contain both academic and social systems each with their own formal and informal structures and communities. Contrary to conventional wisdom, less than 25% of institutional departures are for failing grades (Tinto, 1993). Rather, most individuals choose to abandon higher education institutions for reasons associated with their social and intellectual experiences. The less integrated individuals are in the social and intellectual life of the institution, the less likely those individuals are to complete their degree (Tinto, 1993). According to Tinto (1993), incongruence, the lack of institutional fit, and isolation, the lack of interactions sufficient for integration, are the "roots of student departure".

Tinto (1993) referred to students' ability to integrate into the intellectual and social life on campus as academic and social integration, respectively. Academic integration refers to the degree to which students are involved in the intellectual life of a collegiate institution, such as attending classes, working in laboratories, coursework, and achieving academic goals. Likewise, social integration refers to the degree to which students are members of the social system of an institution. Socially integrated students have established interpersonal relationships between their peers (students), faculty, and staff. Tinto (1993) notes that social integration for students "goes on in a large measure in residence halls, cafeteria, hallways, and other meeting places of the college" (p.107). Neither system can be understood in isolation as there is significant interplay between the intellectual and social life of a college campus (Cooper & Brownell, 2016). As such, Tinto (1993) noted that "events in one may directly or indirectly influence, over time, events in the other" (p. 109). Therefore, a student's lack of academic and/or social integration increases their odds of academic departure.

Concerns about social integration into the broader campus community are particularly relevant for marginalized groups, such as the queer and trans communities. Marginalized groups, by nature, compose the periphery of

institutional social and intellectual life. Tinto (1993) defined the periphery as comprising "other communities and subordinate subcultures whose particular values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior may differ substantially from those at the center" (p. 60). Tinto (1993) noted that individuals who identify with groups farther from the institutional center are more prone to academic departure as institutional attachments are considerably weaker than those at the center.

Sense of Belonging

Strayhorn (2018) found that the most prevalent reason students leave higher education is due to a sense of belonging. Strayhorn (2012) defined belonging as "students' perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)"(p. 3).[1] Social psychologists Baumeister & Leary (1995) characterize the sense of belonging as a "deeply rooted human motivation" that stems from our evolutionary history (Allen et al., 2022).[2]

Experiences of marginalization often generate barriers to the development of a feeling of belonging (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). In their model of belonging for privileged and minoritized students, Vaccaro and Newman (2016, 2022) describe the process of developing a sense of belonging in college as a confluence of environment, involvement, and relationships. In an analysis of survey data from queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students, Greathouse, et al. (2018) find that only about 75% of queer-spectrum students and 65% of trans-spectrum students report feeling a sense of belonging in their college campus.

Research on campus climates has consistently demonstrated that queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students often perceive a more hostile environment than their peers (Garvey & Rankin 2015; Vaccaro 2012; Brown et al., 2004; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). In a longitudinal analysis of American college students, Cress (2008) observed the highest level of hostility directed at queer-spectrum students. Roughly 40% of students indicated that "college was not a hospitable place for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals" (Cress, 2008).

Compared to their heterosexual peers, queer-spectrum students, regardless of their degree of outness (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006), report higher levels of victimization and unfair treatment (e.g. verbal insults, physical threats, destruction of personal property, had objects thrown at them, and been physically assaulted) (Bieschke et al., 1998; Baier et al., 1991; Brown et al., 2004; D'Augelli, 1992). As a result, queer-spectrum students often report feeling the need to hide their identity from other members of the campus community (Rankin, 2004).

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[1] Unsatisfactory social life and unwelcoming climate were ranked second and third, respectively (Strayhorn 2018).
[2] Baumeister and Leary (1995) conceptualize belonging as a "need" rather than a "desire" because "people who fail to satisfy it suffer various mental health and physical deficits" (Allen et al., 2022).

Queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students who do not have firsthand experiences with violence and harassment are more likely to report feeling unwelcome on campus (Rankin et al., 2010). This feeling of unwelcomeness is referred to in the campus climate literature as a "chilly" campus climate (Greathouse et al., 2018). Given the research suggesting that campus climate is closely correlated with students' success and persistence (Garvey et al., 2018), it is no surprise that queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students were about twice as likely to report obstacles to academic success than their heterosexual and cisgendered peers (Greathouse et al., 2018).[3]

Faculty's Role in Fostering a Sense of Belonging

Faculty play an essential role in the academic and social integration of students from marginalized backgrounds into the campus community (Garvey & Dolan, 2021; Woodford & Kulick, 2015). In the case of students identifying with marginalized groups, such as queer-spectrum students, student-faculty relationships are critical to student success (Cress, 2008; Kim & Sax, 2009). In fact, in an ethnographic study of undergraduate students by Vaccaro (2012), queer-spectrum students most often cited supportive faculty and staff as the factor that most positively influenced their campus experiences and perceptions. Moreover, positive student-faculty interactions have the potential to mitigate the effects of negative campus climates for marginalized students (Cress, 2008). Conversely, the promotion of queerphobic and transphobic rhetoric, ignore the contributions and issues of the queer community, and perpetuate heteronormative understandings of gender and sexuality can contribute to a harmful campus climate for queer-spectrum students' academic and social integration (Garvey & Dolan, 2021).

Student-faculty encounters which foster a sense of belonging leave students feeling as though they matter, bring a unique perspective to the table, play a critical role in the leading environment, and are cared about by the faculty member (Strayhorn, 2018). The sense of belonging becomes acutely salient to students when they feel "marginalized, unprepared for, and 'out of place'" in the learning environment (Strayhorn 2018, p. 97). This is why faculty interactions are particularly meaningful for students who are a minority in the field. Previous research by Strayhorn (2018) suggests that relatively simple behaviors such as knowing (and correctly pronouncing) students' names, demonstrating an interest in students' professional goals, and showing a concern about students' personal wellbeing fostered a sense of belonging within their students.

Faculty and staff are uniquely situated to structure learning environments and educational experiences such that queer-spectrum students can benefit from

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[3] Tinto (2012, p.127) defines student persistence as "the rate at which students who begin higher education at a given point in time continue in higher education and eventually complete their degree".

experiences of support and inclusivity (Ottenritter, 2012). In college classrooms, the spatial distance between individuals with different identities and backgrounds is narrowed to the greatest extent (Allport, 1954). This context provides a unique opportunity for prejudice reduction. Allport (1954) contends that instructors can increase the likelihood of prejudice reduction by creating settings where intergroup contact is encouraged, students share an equal status in class encounters, students share goals and work interdependently in a collaborative fashion (Mayhew et al., 2016). Pettigrew (1998) builds upon the conditions for prejudice reduction articulated by Allport (1954) with the inclusion of an additional condition, the opportunity for students to build friendships through classroom encounters (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Teaching practices aimed at students' exploration of cultures, life experiences, and worldviews different from their own increase students' awareness of what Kuh (2008) refers to as "difficult differences" in racial, ethnic, and gender inequality. As high impact practices that encourage students to reflect on their own behaviors, biases, and experiences can have the tendency to become "messy", Butler et al. (2021) emphasize that instructors "will need to consider their own relationship to the work and any preexisting schemas and world-views that might be relevant, as well as how their students may respond emotionally"(p. 10). To that end, this study seeks to identify teaching practices which encourage the social integration of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students into the academic and campus community.

Overall, the scholarship associated with establishing and fostering a sense of belonging within marginalized students, such as queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum student, ask instructors to critically reflect on their teaching practices in a relatively abstract manner (Ottenritter, 2012). This study, in contrast, seeks to identify simple practices aimed at increasing queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' sense of belonging that can be easily implemented by faculty in undergraduate settings.

Methodology

The research was conducted in June 2020 at a public research university located in the US South serving predominantly undergraduate students. The data used for this analysis was collected with the primary purpose of informing the role of the institution's LBGTQIA+ Resource Office. Prior to which, administrators at the university were largely operating without firsthand accounts by queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' experiences and perceptions of the campus climate.[4] At the time of the data collection and analysis, the university in which the pool of students was obtained was not a participant in the Campus Pride Index. This university was not a participant in any national-level benchmarking assessment program.

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[4] The LGBTQIA+ Resource Center is housed under the University's Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion and funded by an endowment established by individual alumni.

Data Collection

Data was collected in two phases. First, respondents completed a brief online survey. Second, respondents were recontacted to participate in an interview via Zoom. Due to Covid protocols, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Participants were sent a $10 e-gift card as thanks for their participation.

In the first phase of data collection, an initial survey was used to recruit and screen for interview participants. In order to identify queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students and alumni, participants were recruited through email request through the institution's LBGTQIA+ Resource Office email listserv and word of mouth. The recruitment flyer included the text, "are you a UNCW student or alum who identified as LBGTQ? We would like to interview you about your experiences." The survey took about 5 minutes to complete. Participation in the survey was completely voluntary, and all responses were kept confidential. No personally identifiable information was associated with responses to any reports of these data.

Twenty-one participants were recruited through recruitment flyers sent through the institution's LBGTQIA+ Resource Office email listserv. All students who responded to the recruitment flyer were included in the final analysis. A snowball sample approach was employed to recruit four additional participants. Participants were advised that they would be asked a series of questions about their experience at the University.[5]

In the second phase, 30-minute in-depth interviews were conducted via Zoom. Prior to the start of the interview, the interviewer explained "the goal is to identify specific areas for improvement such as registration forms and rosters, the educational experience, and housing. We also want to identify those items and practices that allow students to feel recognized, included, respected, and valued." Respondents were asked about their "total experience" at the campus. We asked about the application process, experience with staff and administrators, and experiences with faculty and in courses (F2F and online).

It should be noted that the interviews used in this analysis were conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. During this time of the pandemic, our ability to engage in human subjects research was greatly impaired. We could not rely on class announcements or social gatherings to recruit respondents. Students were largely taking courses fully online or in a hybrid modality. As such, anecdotes related to difficulty in finding and developing community or social connections, more broadly, are likely a more universal experience during the pandemic relative to other years.

Interviewers were instructed to let the conversation flow naturally. As such, interviews touched upon different topics that were central to participants' experience as a queer-spectrum and/or trans-spectrum student. Interview data was

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[5] The research proposal was submitted and approved by University of North Carolina Wilmington Institutional Review Board (IRB #20-0303).

transcribed via Zoom auto transcript then corrected. As the intention of the project emphasized letting the participants speak, an inductive approach was taken to analyze the qualitative data. The team looked for various themes and patterns that emerged from the interviews. Specifically, transcriptions of the in-depth interviews were analyzed via a process known as thematic analysis.

Guest et al. (2012) explain that "thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes". Thematic analysis is often used for the analysis of free-flowing textual data such as transcriptions of in-depth interviews like that of our study (Guest et al., 2012).

As the interviews used in this analysis were intentionally free flowing, allowing the participants to direct the topics of the interview, the content of the interviews varied by what was salient to the participants. As such, an inductive approach to thematic analysis was used to analyze interview transcripts. In contrast to a confirmatory approach to thematic analysis where thematic codes are developed prior to analysis, we took an inductive approach to thematic analysis which allows for thematic codes to evolve throughout the data analysis process (Guest et al., 2012). Rather than starting with a predetermined theory or focus, the researchers wanted to let the respondents guide the direction of the specific research question for this project.

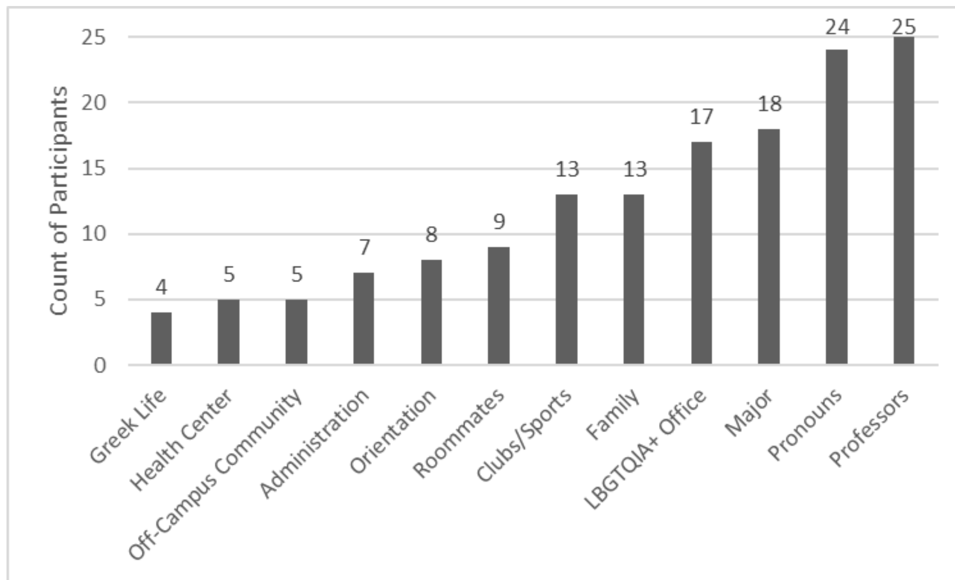
In carrying out our thematic analysis, we follow Marshall and Rossman's (2006) seven phases of thematic analysis: "(a) organizing the data; (b) immersion in the data; (c) generating categories and themes; (d) coding the data; (e) offering interpretations through analytic memos; (f) searching for alternative understandings; and (g) writing the report" (p. 156). First, participant interview transcripts were read by the researchers in their entirety and in chronological order. A preliminary list of thematic codes was generated from this initial analysis.

Thematic codes were identified as topics that were organically discussed by multiple participants without being primed by the interviewer. To increase stability and reliability of the coding process, an iterative procedure was used to generate a list of thematic codes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). As such, interview transcripts were read an additional time, in reverse chronological order, to finalize a list of thematic codes. Inter-coder reliability was achieved through sharing and agreement upon of emergent themes. Participant interviews were then coded on the basis of any mention of a topic or theme. Topics which students were interested in elaborating on are presented in Figure 1.

After applying the thematic coding scheme to data, researchers reduced the content used for inferential analysis to a manageable proportion by isolating the segments of the interview where participants engaged in discussion of the themes on the thematic coding list. The researchers then used the abbreviated content to generate inferences presented in the Results section below.

Figure 1

Topics of Conversation



Demographics

Table 1 presents the demographic composition of the sample. Thirteen of the 25 participants were university alumnae. Three were current graduate students, one was a junior, and eight were seniors. The sample was overrepresented by white participants (21). This reflects the majority white population of the student body of this university. Two students identified as black/African American, one student identified as Native American, and one student noted "other."[6] Additional demographics are available in Appendix Table 1.

Table 1

Demographics

Identity	%	N
Non-binary	12%	3
Genderqueer	4%	1
Genderfluid	4%	1
Gender non-conforming	4%	1

[6] One student's race was unknown.

Female	64%	16
Male	8%	2
White	84%	21
Black	8%	2
Native American	4%	1
Other	4%	1
Race Unknown	4%	1
Age 18-21	12%	3
Age 22-29	64%	16
Age 30+	12%	3
Age Unknown	4%	1
Total		25

Results

In the following section, we highlight not only our key findings, but also the voices of the queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students who participated in this study. In order to maintain the anonymity of the participants, we have assigned each participant a pseudonym. Five themes emerged from the interviews with queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' academic experiences: small gestures with great impact, coming out in the classroom, creating safe spaces, mentorship, and diversifying course materials.

Small Gestures with Great Impact

Every participant, regardless of their identification, highlighted the importance of small gestures in fostering a sense of belonging in queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students. The small gesture with greatest impact is the use of preferred pronouns (96%). The many participants noted to some extent that professors' articulation of their own preferred pronouns via email signatures, Zoom usernames, the syllabus, or during introductions were useful cues in determining professors' tolerance of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum identities (48%).

It should be noted that participants utilized these cues not only to make inferences about professor's personal beliefs, but also the extent to which the professor would establish a "safe space" for students of all backgrounds and identities. Students indicated small cues, like pronouns, provide a "safe environment." Participant "Bobby," a queer-spectrum student, noted, "when professors display their pronouns … that affirms a lot. That says a lot to students. It makes them know…this is a safe

space." As the respondents indicate, small gestures like pronouns listed in email signatures can open the door for even more meaningful communication. Participant "Trish," a queer-spectrum student, explained that when professors use email signatures with pronouns listed, "I feel like that's automatically a teacher I can talk to and that's automatically somebody … not … against me."

Other cues of note were pride flags and stickers indicating support for the queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum communities. Bobby, a queer-spectrum alumna, gave the examples of "pride flags, equal signs, all of that stuff. I think is helpful, because then you know you have an ally." These were particularly salient when students were considering one-on-one meetings with professors in their offices. Participant "Cam," a queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum student, explained:

> "I think that would have been really helpful to me to see even just a little sticker on professors' doors or even on the syllabus, especially since things are online so much now. Queer ally sticker or something that …lets folks know that it's a safe space for them."

It should be noted, however, these cues were not used to make inferences about professors' personal identity. Rather, in identifying queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum faculty and staff, participants looked to more solid evidence in the form of university provided lists of openly queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum faculty and staff or waited for professors to personally make a statement about their identity.

Coming Out in the Classroom

A major theme exhibited in a majority of interviews was the emotional burden of being queer-spectrum or trans-spectrum (52%). Thirty-six percent of participants expressed a sense of fatigue associated with "continually coming out" to their peers. Thirty-two percent of participants described their identity as "inconvenient." Participants "Hunter," a queer-spectrum student, lamented, "every semester it's a whole new set of classes and a whole new group of people that you have to like come out to again and again and again and it's tiring. Yeah."

What separates queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum identities from most other marginalized groups is that identity is largely invisible. As racial and ethnic minorities as well as some religious minorities can be identified by their outward appearance, sexual orientation and gender is less obviously observed. As remarked by one participant, "Jean," a student who identified with a gender different from the gender they were assigned at birth (but had not undergone gender confirming surgery), there was still a great deal of ambiguity in how their peers interpreted their outward appearance. The ambiguity in interpreting their identity by their peers seemed to be a greater issue for individuals who were assigned female at birth relative to individuals assigned male at birth.

To ease the burden of continually coming out, one participant highlighted the importance of ice breakers early in the semester. Specifically, activities in which all

students are given the opportunity to share important identities as well as learn more about their peers. As participant "Audrey," a queer-spectrum graduate student, explained:

> "I just feel like if there was some sort of like initial thing were like we all write down our names. What we like to go by and our pronouns and our favorite animal on this thing, like it's a little elementary like a little, a little middle school, but I think it might be helpful to like allow people to set the boundaries for themselves about how to not be put on the spot in front of me."

Likewise, participants were also anxious about sharing their identity with their professors and peers (28%). Participant "Casper," a queer-spectrum graduate student, expressed turmoil over sharing their identity at the expense of their future career. They contend that "it's a struggle, though, because you know there's always the chance that I don't make that choice right because once I make that choice. I can't take it back." As a result, this student noted:

> "I was only 30% out. I kind of met like I'm you know, I'm out to like friends in the cohort. And I think most of the other ancillary people in the cohort probably know just from like talking to other people. But to my knowledge, none of the faculty know, or have any reason to think that I mean I'm sure my mentor, probably, like, I don't know about that one".

Many students were conflicted in their recommendations for how students may announce their preferred pronouns to their peers. Although students expressed a desire for professors to take special care to use the students' preferred pronouns, they were not in favor of mandatory declarations of gender identity (32%). On one hand, students confident in their identity expressed support for public means of announcing their preferred pronouns (8%). On the other hand, public declarations may put added stress and discomfort on students who were more selective in sharing their identity (24%). As a compromise, multiple respondents (8%) indicated a preference for a choice in how and to whom they communicated this information. Specifically, a common suggestion was a combination of a private channel (i.e., online survey, "about me worksheet") where students could communicate something they wanted to the professor about themselves as well as an in-class activity where they could choose to share their identity with their classmates. Participant "Abby," a queer-spectrum female student, advised faculty that "if I was in a new class and they asked me that, I guess that would be kind of nice …. If you're okay with sharing …, then they would know." Other students, such as Jean, suggested a more private means of communicating personal information, "but at the same time, it's in a sticky spot. I've had some folks just do the method of emails or note cards. Where the person can write `I use he\him pronouns' and I want you to know that as the professor. But in class, I don't want any of the other students to know that."

Some respondents indicated that they were questioning their identity so the opportunity to provide and amend pronouns were viewed as "welcoming." Roto, a

queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum alumnus who became an instructor at another university, noted the importance of reminding "them that they have the right to change the pronoun, at any point in class, like if they want to go by different pronoun to just have to let us know and we will happily respect that." Given that all trans-spectrum participants expressed distress associated with earning the respect of their peers and professors, it can be inferred that the choice to transition publicly is not taken lightly. Therefore, it is important for professors to take into account that students may not be ready to share sensitive information until they have assessed the class environment.

Creating Safe Spaces

Consistently noted in the recommendations by participants was the importance of establishing a safe space on the first day of the course. In general, students' judgements about the class climate and their ability to develop interpersonal relationships with their peers were dependent on the behavior of the instructor. As articulated by participant "Jay," a bisexual female alumna, "I do think you can also like to make sure that you start off with, like, a really inclusive message and just like make it clear what your expectations are, what sorts of things you will not tolerate. I think that can really start things off on the right note." Some students' first impressions of the class climate hinged on explicit statements about professors' openness and acceptance of diverse perspectives. Participant "Evan," a queer-spectrum student, shared:

> "Even if you walk into class on the first day and the professors like, 'hey everyone, I'm Dr. Blah blah, my pronouns are blah, blah, blah. And I'm really excited to start the semester with you.' They took the time out of their day to tell you that like they care … they're not going to judge you."

Participants consistently noted their expectation that professors were largely responsible for moderating the rhetoric exhibited in the classroom. Beyond discouraging defamatory remarks by other students, professors were expected to take an active role in policing students' use of pronouns. Jay felt that "just as a faculty member would probably call out … bullying … I think it is also their responsibility to call out any sort of … of misgendering or …racism." Likewise, Eva, a queer-spectrum student, expressed that "it's teachers' responsibility to create a safe place for the students. Because that's also the professor's classroom. It's not any of those students' classroom."

All participants who spoke about classroom discussions held the expectation that instructors would enforce the use of desired pronouns throughout the duration of the course. Cam, argued that implementing such policies was only challenging in the short term:

> "And students are pretty chill about it. It's a little weird for about two weeks, but then they get over it. I think that's kind of how life works. People take a little bit of time to get used to things … I think universities can too."

Most students expressed more nuanced attitudes towards professors' and students' ability to inform themselves about the complexities of gender and sexual identity as well as implement that knowledge in their course dialogue. Participant "Campbell," recognized that "we're still living in an era in which it's relatively new to the public mind right about gender identity. So, I think I'm trying to have that patience with people."

Beyond the classroom, participants acknowledged that members of the university community were unlikely to be sufficiently informed about the queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum communities, however, participants emphasized the expectation that members of the university community "try" to do better in meeting queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' expectations. Casper, for example, expressed frustration in reminding others to use individuals' preferred pronouns, but was also aware of the difficulty in adopting new habits.

> "They're afraid that they're going to have to like memorize all this vocabulary. They're going be tested over this stuff, or that somehow I'm going to put them in a situation where they have to like remember my pronouns like I'm like I'm their girlfriend, trying to get them to remember our anniversary or something but I feel like there's a lot of people who get that misconception and even people who know that I use those pronouns will slip up from time to time, and I don't even say anything because I don't care because I know they're trying. That's all I want."

Additionally, when students in marginalized groups (LBGTQIA+, racial, ethnic, or religious minorities) were known to the professor, it was not acceptable to rely on their perspectives in lieu of engaging in their own research on the community in question. Jean explained that when instructors single out students from marginalized backgrounds to provide clarification, they feel "like a book …. I don't want to be a book for you." Participants, especially those who identified as a racial minority, expressed feeling an undue burden associated with educating others (24%). As explained by one participant, "it's a lot of labor for the marginalized person to always have to educate and always have to correct" (Cam). In the face of tokenism, others articulated a hesitance to give their opinion as they did not believe that their beliefs and experiences were reflective of the LBGTQIA+ community.[7] Additionally, 36% of participants articulated the inherent difficulty in characterizing beliefs of a coalition rather than a homogeneous group. As a queer-spectrum alumna participant "Sage," put it, "LGBT is not one. It's not a monolith. There are different people, different identities."

Mentorship

Students, especially those who came from a background and a family hostile to alternative lifestyles, expressed their search for advice and reassurance from their professors. While some students described at least one connection to an "out"

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[7] Respondents often cited differences between the group dynamics of the gay and lesbian community and the bisexual community.

faculty member, most participants articulated a more aspirational desire to develop a connection to a faculty member in the community. Jay expressed a desire for a mentor who was available to answer "any questions" or "grab coffee with a friend and like talk something out." Sage articulated the symbolic value of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum faculty mentors:

> "This person is kind of a role model. I can see that they're older than me and they're able to embrace who they are as a person. So for me, I would think, oh wow they can do that, then I will eventually be there. Oh, she's pretty inspiring."

Although students were primarily searching for professors who identify in the community as mentors, they were also searching for professors who they considered as "allies." For example, Roto recounted the pivotal nature of their mentorship experience with a non-queer faculty member:

> "She really took me under her wing and was able to help me integrate queer things and be able to complete my degree on time …. Having that faculty connection was the only reason I think I didn't drop out of college."

Diversifying Course Material

Participants expressed an expectation for the professors to include scholarly works by authors of "diverse identities and perspectives" (Roto) in their course materials. Similar to the use of pronouns as a cue, by highlighting the contributions of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum scholars in the discipline, students understood that the professor would be "okay with who I am and what I have to say" (Abby). Jay articulated a desire for professors to consider the sexual and gender identity to a similar degree as racial and ethnic identities:

> "Maybe it's too much to ask for an entire class that focuses on queer media (…). But even if just like for curriculums could include queer selections in their studies. That would be super awesome too…. I think professors should have an amount of responsibility to in some way include diverse experiences, whether that's just like people of color, or people of different religions or queer people."

Naturally, participants with instructional experience understood the difficulty of this task. As such, participants advocated incremental changes rather than overhauls. One participant explained what incremental change can look like, "Very easy. You know supplement your syllabus with, you know, this easy PDF reading or, you know, Google queer scholars" (Hayden). Echoing the adage "you cannot be what you cannot see," participant "Dice," a queer-spectrum student, noted that identifying one prominent scholar the field "who is a part of the community," would provide some evidence that "maybe I can get that far too."

Participants also noted a desire for instructors to use examples that differ from heteronormative societal expectations. Participant "Milo," a queer-spectrum and

trans-spectrum alum, suggested, "if there's an example they're giving in class that is about a relationship, maybe they don't always have to make that example about straight relationship." Likewise, participant "Darla," a queer-spectrum student, felt a greater sense of belonging in the classroom when instructors acknowledged that "people have different genders, instead of just saying men and women."

Discussion and Implication for Practice

The purpose of this study was to identify teaching practices associated with an improvement in queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum undergraduate learning environments and social integration into the broader campus community. The comments of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students largely support Tinto's (1993) student integration theory. Students' comments echo the importance of instructors in facilitating both academic and social integration for queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students. Instructors are not only viewed in their formal capacity as teachers, but also as on-campus mentors and confidants. Our results highlight the importance of small gestures with great impact. In the following section, we propose five concrete and relatively easy to implement practices in course instruction to increase the social integration of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students.

First, our findings are consistent with the findings of Linley (2016). Twenty-eight percent of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students discussed the importance of mentors and role models in the faculty. We find that professors' awareness of the importance of pronouns is a powerful cue to both queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students that a professor is likely an ally. We recommend that instructors consider sharing their preferred pronouns (i.e., she/her, he/him, their/them) in their introductions, communications, and course materials. Specifically, communicating pronouns in Zoom display names, email signatures, course website (i.e., Canvas, Blackboard), and syllabi.

Second, reflect on whether course materials reinforce heteronormative biases. We encourage instructors to consider the full spectrum of familial and social relationships when developing illustrative examples. Participants noted small changes such as the introduction of examples and hypothetical situations with same-sex couples can reinforce queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students' sense of belonging.

Third, when possible, identify and highlight queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum scholars and authors. For students who feel like outsiders in the discipline, acknowledging the presence of queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum scholars within the discipline could "make someone feel much more on welcomed in the class setting" (Baz). As the gender or sexual identity of scholars is widely unknown in most disciplines, we recommend the inclusion of contact information of professional organizations supporting queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum scholars on the course website or syllabus.

Fourth, we advise that instructors provide queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students public and private avenues for sharing their identity. It is important for faculty and staff to acknowledge that queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students may be in different stages of the coming out process.[8] Some students may wish to come out to their peers, while others may only want to communicate their identity to their instructor. We recommend that instructors facilitate trans-spectrum students' process of coming out to their peers via "ice breaker" activities where students ask and answer open-ended questions about themselves. Additionally, we recommend that instructors construct and maintain a channel through which students can communicate important identities privately to their instructors. This channel should remain open throughout the semester in case students would like to communicate an update to their preferred pronouns and/or identity.

Fifth, outside of the classroom, we encourage faculty to reimage their role as an academic advisor to that of a faculty mentor. What distinguishes faculty mentors from academic advisors is that their guidance transcends the formal roles of faculty. Linley (2016) describes the faculty mentor as a students' "confidant, reference, and advocate" (p.59). For queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students, the status of faculty role model is not exclusively reserved for queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum faculty. Consistent with Linley (2016), we find that queer spectrum students valued faculty who did not identify with the queer community but were seen as "allies" to a similar degree as queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum faculty (Linley, 2016).

These results of echo previous qualitative scholarship on queer-spectrum students highlighting students' efforts to seek out faculty mentors and role models (Linley, 2016). More broadly, research on students in marginalized groups has demonstrated that faculty mentoring is correlated with a heightened sense of belonging as well as a higher level of social integration (Holloway-Friesen, 2021). Specifically, faculty mentoring increases peer-to-peer interactions such as calling upon classmates to form study groups and seeking out peer support for difficult coursework (Holloway-Friesen, 2021).

Overall, we encourage instructors to revise practices to include even small gestures that establish and maintain a sense of belonging for an increasingly diverse classroom. As students' sense of belonging is associated with higher rates of persistence and academic achievement (Strayhorn, 2018), it is vital that instructors are aware of students at a higher-risk of negative outcomes such as queer-spectrum and trans-spectrum students. We encourage future research to continue to explore how teaching practices impact students' sense of belonging in higher education institutions. The collection of data from marginalized students is of particular importance in states with anti-diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) legislation. As research in this area becomes increasingly difficult as a result of hostile political climates, it is imperative that universities develop collaborative data

[8] In Ottenritter's *Room of Life* model (1998), the coming out process consists of four stages of sexual identity formation: *difference*, *identification*, *acceptance*, and *integration*.

sharing frameworks between academics and student affairs as a means of bolstering their ability to face anti-DEI measures.

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Appendix

Appendix Table 1

Individual Demographics of Respondents

ID	Status	Sexual Orientation	Gender Identity	Cisgender / Transgender	Race	Birth Year
Hunter	Senior	Lesbian	Female	Cisgender	White	1999
Abby	Senior	Lesbian	Female	Cisgender	White	1995
Baz	Senior	Lesbian	Female	Cisgender	White	1999
Milo	Alum	Pansexual	Genderfluid	Transgender	White	1991
Deborah	Alum	Lesbian	Female	Cisgender	Unknown	NA
Jay	Alum	Bisexual	Female	Cisgender	White	1997
Darla	Senior	Bisexual	Female	Cisgender	White	1999
Evan	Junior	Lesbian	Female	Cisgender	White	1998
Rita	Alum	Pansexual	Genderqueer	Transgender	White	1994
Cam	Alum	Queer	Gender non-conforming	Transgender	White	1996
Dice	Senior	Bisexual	Female	Cisgender	Black or African American	1997
Jean	Senior	Gay	Male	Transgender	White	1998
Hayden	Alum	Pansexual	Female	Cisgender	White	1990
Jesse	Graduate	Bisexual	Male	Cisgender	White	1994
Bobby	Alum	Lesbian	Female	Cisgender	White	1988
Lea	Alum	Lesbian	Female	Cisgender	Other	1995
Casper	Graduate	Pansexual	Non-binary	Transgender	White	1993
Sage	Alum	Bisexual	Female	Cisgender	Black or African American	1997
Audrey	Graduate	Bisexual	Non-binary	Transgender	White	1997
Liz	Alum	Bisexual	Female	Cisgender	White	1997
Trish	Senior	Bisexual	Female	Cisgender	White	1998
Maria	Senior	Pansexual	Female	Cisgender	Native American, White	1998
Inez	Alum	Pansexual	Female	Cisgender	White	1997
Campbell	Alum	Bisexual	Female	Cisgender	White	1994
Roto	Alum	Queer	Non-binary	Transgender	White	1989