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Queer Student or Student Who is Also Queer?

A Mixed Methods Study of Competing Master Statuses in Higher Education

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Kayla A. Densberger

May 2024

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Dr. Martha Copp, Chair

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Keywords: LGBTQ+, queer identity, master status, college experiences, mixed methodology

## ABSTRACT

### Queer Student or Student Who is Also Queer?

#### A Mixed Methods Study of Competing Master Statuses in Higher Education

by

Kayla A. Densberger

People pursuing LGBTQ+ rights in the United States have faced triumphs and setbacks over time but now face equality-restricting legislation in several regions. Previous researchers have studied LGBTQ+ college students and LGBTQ+ identity as a master status, but less on how queer identity competes for salience with other identities. This study uses qualitative and quantitative secondary data on student responses to a university-wide climate survey (n=1699) conducted in the Fall semester of 2022. I analyze LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ student experiences and satisfaction with their school. The quantitative results of this research find that LGBTQ+ students have a markedly different campus experience, while the qualitative results find that student identity takes precedence over gender and sexual identity when assessing East Tennessee State University (ETSU). Data analysis includes personal narratives from LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students on their college experiences with belongingness, academics, and campus political landscape.

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## CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION

Existing literature estimates 18-20 percent of all undergraduate and graduate students in the United States identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community (American College Health Association [ACHA] 2020a; 2020b). Unsupportive environments deter LGBTQ+ college students from academic and social success as young adults (Craig, et al. 2017). Stigmas attached to gender and sexual diversity are the primary motivators of heterosexism and intolerance on college campuses. Research on LGBTQ+ identities among young adults is thus paramount (Veldhuis 2022), as nearly one in five students identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community.

The current study uses quantitative and qualitative methodology to investigate the experiences of college students in terms of their diverse gender and sexual identities. Understanding the experiences of the collegiate population is important because their generation is preparing to enter the workforce, build families centered around personal values, and ultimately take over a larger portion of the voting population.

### *Political Context*

Conservatism is typically associated with the Republican party in the United States. Subsequently, liberalism is associated with the Democratic party (Nadeem 2021). The current political climate in the United States holds the two parties at opposing sides, making it difficult to pass legislation and creates social conflict among everyday Americans. A lack of compromise on both ends of the political spectrum stunts the efficiency at which lawmakers pass legislation that is beneficial to their constituents.

As a microcosm, East Tennessee State University is subject to similar political circumstances. Conservative identifying students critique the platform of liberal students, saying that they are too progressive. Liberal identifying students critique conservative students for



ushering in apathy and turning back the clock on social progress (Keeling 2023). And like the United States, ETSU experiences political disruptors, protesters, and activists—some are represented through home-grown student organizations or campus chapters of national organizations, while others are well-funded campus visitors who know the legal landscape that allows them to engage with or confront the people who live, work, and study on campus.

### *Importance*

This study occurs at a period of time when social tensions regarding minority identities are coming to a head in the United States. As with “anti-woke” legislation blocking critical analyses and education on race and racism, many states are passing anti-LGBTQ+ legislation that undermines and rejects the human rights of LGBTQ+ people, transgender affirming care, and support for questioning and LGBTQ+ youth. Many public universities face a double bind and public criticism depending on whether they support the right to expression and free speech of students or follow increasingly conservative political trends in order to protect state support and donor funding. Thus, it is important to understand how LGBTQ+ young adults understand their identities amid evolving social and political climates. Acceptance of same-sex identities had been increasing since the 2015 legalization of same-sex marriage by the Supreme Court of the United States in *Obergefell v Hodges*. Public opinion in the United States is largely supportive of same-sex marriage (61%) (Pew Research Center 2019). However, since Barack Obama’s departure from the Presidency and the rise of Trumpism—a political movement that idealizes the politics associated with Donald Trump and his political base (Cambridge Dictionary), conservative and alt-right political groups have aggressively pursued restrictions on LGBTQ+ rights, producing a decreased acceptance of sex and gender minorities among their followers.

Now, more than ever, research has the potential to illustrate how intergroup perceptions are changing the social landscape.

## CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Background*

LGBTQ+ students are more likely to have a non-normative college experience, facing greater marginalization, devaluation, stress, mental health challenges, and wellness issues relative to their non-LGBTQ+ peers (Meyer 2003; Cech and Rothwell 2018; Hatchel, et al. 2019). These challenges come from stigmas surrounding gender identity and sexual orientation that impact the academic, social, and personal trajectories for LGBTQ+ students (Mustanski and Liu 2013). A study of allied, heterosexual, college peers estimate that stigma and homophobia are perpetuated by religion, [willful] ignorance, and a lack of education about the LGBTQ+ community (Grzanka, Adler, and Blazer 2015). Other literature investigating the intergroup sexuality stigmas observed that the groups exhibiting lower tolerance of the LGBTQ+ community include Republicans, non-party affiliated students, multiracial students, business and education students, and African American students (Holland, Matthews, and Schott 2013).

Groups that are intolerant of gender and sexual diversity often reinforce heterosexism to maintain space between themselves and those they stigmatize. Heterosexism is defined as the ideology that heterosexuality and heteronormativity are the only acceptable sexual identities while upholding discriminatory values regarding the LGBTQ+ community (Chonody and Smith 2013). This anti-LGBTQ+ bias operates at the micro and macro level, creating policies, practices, and cultural ideologies that privilege and empower cisgender and heterosexual people and impose social biases against gender and sexual minorities (Kitzinger 2005). Marginalizing experiences with heteronormative culture and heterosexism create additional strains on top of already-stressful transitions for LGBTQ+ students beginning college (Fox and Warber 2015). These environments distract LGBTQ+ students from their academics and social support systems

that college students rely on for success (Craig, et al. 2017). Groups that are consistently more LGBTQ+ tolerant include women, Christians of liberal tradition, non-Christian faiths, non-religious groups, and other LGBTQ+ self-identifying people (Holland, et al. 2013). Tolerant heterosexual college students often cite deliberately induced friendships with members of the LGBTQ+ community as personally enlightening and bringing them into a stage of political activism (Ueno and Gentile 2015).

In order for LGBTQ+ college students to succeed academically and personally, it is paramount they have affirming resources on campus (Woodford, et al. 2018) as majority-group students tend to have. In a study assessing the needs of collegiate nonbinary students, successful outcomes were associated with kinship networks and a welcoming campus climate (Nicolazzo 2017; Nicolazzo, et al. 2017). Although research on LGBTQ+ and other marginalized groups may be considered ‘political’ or ‘activist’ (Veldhuis 2022), it is crucial for understanding structural inequalities and informing future research (Patton, et al. 2016).

### *College Belongingness*

College students—in general—face unique struggles apart from other identity groups; for example, struggling with self-esteem and self-worth from academic pressures leads to lower academic and later life outcomes (Hardy, et al. 2013). Buffering factors for low personal and academic trajectories include positive membership with peer groups and social integration (Crabbe, et al. 2019). Engaging in several campus friendships is a consistent, positive predictor of academic outcomes, with emotional connection being the strongest predictor of graduation (Bronkema and Bowman 2019). It is in students’ best interests to seek positive social interactions in college to improve their potential academic outcomes. After all, college students want to

succeed in their educational endeavors and to acquire the skills needed for their next phase in life (Ritzer and Sleigh 2019).

As in high school, there are identity-based, social subgroups in the college environment all associated with varying personal outcomes. Important social groups on college campuses are student political groups. Advertisement by these groups communicates to students that engaging in politics is a normative part of the college experience and they determine what political engagement looks like (Anderson 2023). Among student political groups, there are feelings of belonging and feelings of exclusion. Existing literature has demonstrated that conservative and Republican-identifying students tend to harbor negative stereotypes for disadvantaged social groups, whereas liberal and Democrat-identifying students have stronger negative stereotypes towards politically powerful groups such as Caucasians and Christians (Beyer 2022). Other important social groups on campus are fraternities, sororities, and college athletics. Association with these groups have a direct effect on the social views of their members. Male athletes and fraternity members are less supportive of the LGBTQ+ community than female athletes and sorority members (Worthen 2014).

College belongingness looks different for LGBTQ+ students. Evans, et al. (2017) find that negative personal outcomes for LGBTQ+ students in college are often characterized as discriminatory, isolating, and avoiding. Contributing factors to these experiences include receiving differential treatment after disclosing identity, interacting with antagonistic persons, and receiving excessively negative feedback. Avoidance is a tactic used by LGBTQ+ students to create space between themselves, intolerant religious campus groups, and those non-accepting of LGBTQ+ identities. Belongingness differs by sexuality subgroups as well, with collegiate

bisexuals (BrckaLorenz, et al. 2021) and gay men (Hill, et al. 2017) reporting a higher sense of belonging than their LGBTQ+ counterparts.

### *Heterosexual College Experiences*

Heterosexual college students engage in what might be considered a normative college experience. White, cisgender, heterosexual, middle-to-upper class students tend to dominate the narrative about what to expect on a university campus—academics, Greek life, hookup culture, drinking, and more (Matheos 2014; Lamont, Roach, and Khan 2018; Merrill, et al. 2023).

Experimentation with identity and sexuality is also a normative feature of the college experience (Conroy, et al. 2022). Socially prescribed sex roles afford more freedom to young women in terms of experimentation and sexual deviance while limiting young men to masculine identity commitment (Morgan 2012; Kanazawa 2022). Open dialogue of sexual experimentation by college heterosexuals serves to acknowledge heterosexual privilege (Morgan and Thompson 2011) as the dialogue of LGBTQ+ sexual experimentation is still considered taboo and immoral in most social settings.

There are institutional and social barriers in place that reinforce heterosexual privilege in academic institutions. At the institutional level, universities have been known to be ambivalent—if not negligent—when addressing the needs of LGBTQ+ students (Maughan, Natalier, and Mulholland 2022). Safety and wellness resources are made accessible to cisgender heterosexual students while it is unclear if there is equitable access to these resources for LGBTQ+ students (Weise, Courtney, and Strunk 2023). Socially, campus culture tends to favor cisgender heterosexual student experiences, forcing LGBTQ+ students to carve out their own social niche. Some identity groups, such as women, are more likely to recognize their heterosexual privilege than straight, cisgender men, who are less likely to recognize their own heterosexual privilege

and the fundamentally different experiences of LGBTQ+ students (Montgomery and Stewart 2012).

### *LGBTQ+ College Experiences*

The college experience of LGBTQ+ students is equally variant among the community's subgroups and the academic programs of which they are enrolled. LGBTQ+ students of engineering programs adopt similar strategies as the LGBTQ+ student community at large—passing, covering, and compartmentalization—to navigate an academic environment unwelcoming of minorities (Cech and Waidzuna 2011; Yoder and Mattheis 2016). LGBTQ+ social work students face discriminatory attitudes from faculty and peers, academic programs lacking relevant identity-based content, and an absence of representative role models in their field (Atteberry-Ash 2019; Dentato, et al. 2014).

A qualitative interview study by Dolan (2023) illustrates that nonbinary students often define a sense of campus belonging by what it is not. Consistent characterizations include feeling seen, understood, embraced, accepted, and validated—many qualities that are lacking from colleges and universities. Spaces that evoked a sense of belonging for nonbinary students included those that asked for and observed preferred pronouns, established agreed-upon community norms and guidelines for 'safe' interactions. These descriptors and desired safe spaces are not isolated to the nonbinary student population, as other identity groups of the LGBTQ+ community echo the same sentiments. Transgender and gender-nonconforming students describe colleges as lacking appropriate knowledge, spaces, and resources needed for transgender students to succeed personally and academically (Glazzard, Jindal-Snape, and Stones 2020). Transgender and gender nonconforming students also report unwelcoming, discriminatory, and dangerous campus climates at higher rates than cisgender heterosexual and

LGBTQ+ students (Garvey and Rankin 2015). Another exception to campus marginalization is when LGBTQ+ students feel more comfortable expressing themselves in their college community than their home communities (Narui 2014; Strayhorn 2014), creating a stronger sense of belonging and community at college. This sense of community is fostered among LGBTQ+ kinship networks of students with similar family backgrounds (BrckaLorenz, et al. 2021). Like the overall college student population, LGBTQ+ students utilize group membership and inclusion as protective factors during transitional periods (Moran, et al. 2018). Inclusive, safe spaces centered around marginalized identities such as race, culture, gender, and sexuality are best equipped to meet the needs of the LGBTQ+ community on a college campus (DeBlaere, et al. 2014; Kulick, et al. 2017). These spaces are legitimized to vulnerable student populations by their organizational foundation, social network, student participation, and physical safe spaces (Bardhoshi, et al. 2018). Sexual minority and gender non-conforming students are more likely to have academic success and experience a more welcoming campus climate when they develop and participate in inclusive kinship networks (Nicolazzo 2017; Nicolazzo, et al. 2017).

The common phenomenon of heterosexual-LGBTQ+ discrimination is not isolated, as discrimination and exclusion occur within the LGBTQ+ community as well. Bisexual individuals are among the most common to report feeling isolated and discriminated against by other members of the LGBTQ+ community (Evans, et al. 2017). LGBTQ+ students even engage in homophobic language under the guise of ‘banter’ to create friendships with heterosexual classmates. Compromising personal values on anti-gay rhetoric allows homophobic culture in public spaces to persist and pressures LGBTQ+ students to be hyper-vigilant of identity presentation and stigma consciousness (Pinel 1999; Owen 2020). Homophobic banter by LGBTQ individuals perpetuates stigma consciousness and marginalization for themselves and



for other LGBTQ+ people, allowing harmful jokes and stereotypes to be socially acceptable (Pinel 1999; Glazzard and Stones 2020).

Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991), describes how a person's two identities converge and explain personal experience that cannot be understood from the perspective of only one identity. Intersecting inequalities of gender, sexuality, and race can reinforce minority group marginalization such as health and academic disparities. In a study of protective factors by Kulick, et al. (2017), white LGBTQ+ students experienced lower levels of heterosexist-related depression when engaging with student leadership structures and engaging in opportunities to create a more inclusive student population. LGBTQ+ students of color do not have similar privileges of engaging in highly public student leadership positions; rather, their experiences of buffering effects is limited to engaging with LGBTQ campus resources available to them. For students of color, engaging in LGBTQ+ activism can moderate the relationship between multiple-identity victimization and depression (Kulick, et al. 2017) but poses internal obstacles to balancing master status (Hughes 1945).

Like everyone, those who have multiple identities experience conflicting master statuses—more than one identity competing for salience. LGBTQ+ students may either have 'student' or 'LGBTQ+ person' as their master status. However, LGBTQ+ students of color or other marginalized identities (i.e., female, disabled, low-income) have even more identities competing for master status to guide them socially (Graham-Bailey 2019). The intersection of disability and gender and sexuality is one that complicates belonging on campus, as these students view their multiple identities as vital to their self-concept (Miller 2018). Being LGBTQ+ was different if one was also disabled and being disabled was different if one was also LGBTQ+; this identity interaction is inseparable. By viewing LGBTQ+ identity and disability as

mutually beneficial, interactive, and reinforcing, students with these identities increased resilience to depression and lack of belonging (Miller, et al. 2018). It was easier for students to build community and solidarity while decreasing their sense of social isolation when they recognized a LGBTQ+/disabled identity overlap. These students also felt as though the mutually beneficial role of these identities manifests in matters of community visibility. The inclusivity of intersection makes both groups welcoming and validating for LGBTQ+ disabled identifying students (Miller 2018).

### *Role of LGBTQ+ Allies*

A unique identity among the LGBTQ+ community is the cisgender, heterosexual ally. Grzanka, et al. (2015) find that self-reported allies describe diverse upbringings that include liberal-agnostic families and conservative religious families. Depending on their family upbringing, they cite their allyship as either being lifelong or a product of self-discovery in their early college years. Allport's Contact Hypothesis (1954) posits that intergroup contact is the most efficient way of reducing prejudice. In the case of gender and sexuality, intergroup contact plays a role in normalizing homosexuality, challenging stereotypes and stigmas, and developing LGBTQ+ supportive attitudes (Garner 2013). However, there is emerging literature that discusses the limitations of the contact hypothesis in which intergroup contact can actually reinforce stereotypes and prejudice (Paluck, Green, and Green 2019). Beyond the contact hypothesis, there are individuals who believe their frequent interaction with and support of the LGBTQ+ aid in constructing their moral identity (Kleinman 1996). This social phenomenon is akin to white people who cite their minority friendships to avoid being labeled racist and those who are staunchly antiracist cite their interracial friendships to prove their noble intentions (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Hughey 2012). For people who use their minority friendships to construct

their moral identity, the content of these friendships matter far less than what the symbolic relationship legitimizes to others (Ueno and Gentile 2015).

In terms of LGBTQ+ friendships aiding moral identity construction, a qualitative interview study by Ueno and Gentile (2015) found similar occurrences. Respondents tie their LGBTQ+ friendships to their narrative on societal discourse and campus discourse while signaling to others their open mindedness and rejection of homophobic attitudes. Cisgender heterosexual students' deliberate intentions to forge LGBTQ+ friendships displays their efforts to construct and sustain higher moral identity (Kleinman 1996; Ueno and Gentile 2015). Allies construct their identity as an ally in terms of their relationship to homophobia and degree of participation in LGBT activism. Most participants demonstrated that their degree of activism was directly related to relationships and experiences with LGBT peers. Identity choreography is taking place when cisgender heterosexual allies choose to act either discriminatory or supportively depending on their audience—either LGBTQ peers, other cis-het allies, or unsupportive cisgender heterosexuals (Grzanka, et al. 2015).

## CHAPTER 3. METHODOLOGY

### *Data*

Data analyzed in this study originates from East Tennessee State University's 2022 State of the University survey conducted by the Applied Social Research Lab (ASRL). The intention of the State of the University survey is to measure the thoughts and experiences of faculty, staff, and students at ETSU. The survey was fielded via Qualtrics allowing respondents to confidentially and anonymously submit their responses using computers and smart devices between November 2, 2022, and December 19, 2022. No personal identifying data such as emails, IP addresses, or names were collected though the survey did utilize individual password embedded links so that the survey could only be taken by the intended individual one time. The survey was sent and successfully delivered to 16,877 inboxes and the full data set includes 2,935 responses for an overall response rate of 17 percent. No additional information is provided on subgroup response rates – including for students only – so it is not possible to report a student response rate (Applied Social Research Laboratory 2023). The selection criterion for this analysis was based on student status only. Responses were included in the analysis on the basis of enrollment status as a student even if respondents also serve as faculty/staff at the university. Faculty and staff responses were excluded from the analysis because the primary goal of the study is to understand the student experience.

In fall 2022, ETSU's student enrollment was 13,738 (East Tennessee State University 2022) and the completed data set included 1699 student responses for a conservative estimated response rate of 12 percent. It is possible that the response rate is actually higher because this does not account for survey invitations that were returned undeliverable. It is important to note that while response rates are useful, they are not indicative of non-response bias. In fact, there is

not even a moderate correlation between response rate and non-response bias (Groves 2006). In order to determine if the respondents to the survey are similar and representative of the ETSU student population it is helpful to review demographic information from respondents compared to known demographics among ETSU students. However, the ETSU factbook details enrollment data only for main campus whereas this survey includes students from main campus, pharmacy, medicine, and online programs. With this in mind, I was able to conduct a limited comparison with sex and race between the survey respondent population and the overall ETSU main campus student population from Fall 2022. A higher proportion of females responded to the survey than the main campus population (69.8% vs. 62%) and more whites (85.3% vs. 73%). Furthermore, about 17 percent of ETSU students identify as LGBTQ+, which is on par with the national average of LGBTQ+ students in higher education (American College Health Association [ACHA] 2020a; 2020b). Again, these are not directly comparable, but they do give some limited insight into how the survey respondents compare to the main campus population (East Tennessee State University 2022). The demographic makeup of student responses is detailed in Table 1.

For the purpose of this study, it is important to acknowledge the social context in which the data were collected. Between the survey's opening and closing dates of November 2, 2022, and December 19, 2022, Pro-Life disruptors were present on campus for a few days displaying graphic images of late-term abortions and verbally harassing students. Also, the student political group Turning Point USA aired films considered by many to be racist and transphobic in open view of campus foot traffic. Both of these displays were permitted by campus administration despite outcry from DEI campus groups and countless concerned individuals. These events are discussed further in Chapters 4 and 5.

**Table 1.** Student Demographic Data

Demographics	Student Responses
Race	
White	85.3%
Black	6.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander/Native American	2.6%
Two or more races	4.0%
Other	1.8%
Gender	
Female	69.8%
Male	23.5%
Transgender/genderqueer/ gender-nonconforming/nonbinary	4.8%
Other	.3%
Prefer not to answer	1.6%
Sex	
Female	74.8%
Male	25.2%
LGBTQ+	
Yes	23.1%
No	76.9%

*Measures*

*Dependent variables.* I selected 12 questions from the State of the University survey to analyze student experiences in terms of LGBTQ+ identity. These questions serve as my dependent variables. Eight dependent variables were quantitatively analyzed using either crosstabulations or independent samples t-tests. Four of the 12 dependent variables in this study were qualitatively analyzed. The dependent variables, their levels of measurement, and response format are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Dependent Variables: Survey Format, Level of Measurement, and Response Format

Question	Level of Measurement	Response Format
In your opinion, what is the biggest problem facing ETSU?	Open-ended	Qualitative response
What grade would you give ETSU (0-100)?	Interval	0-100
What would ETSU need to do in order to have you give ETSU a grade of 90 or higher (A)?	Open-ended	Qualitative Response
How likely are you to recommend ETSU to someone?	Interval	0-10
Recoded variable: Are respondents promoters, detractors, or passive?	Nominal	0-6: Detractor 7-8: Passive 9-10: Promoter
What types of students are not likely to find ETSU to be a good fit for them?	Open-ended	Qualitative Response
Have you ever seriously considered leaving ETSU?	Nominal	Yes, No
What was the main reason you considered leaving ETSU?	Open-ended	Qualitative Response
If you live on campus, how satisfied are you with your ETSU residence?	Nominal	Very satisfied, satisfied, not very satisfied, not at all satisfied
Do you think that ETSU has the resources to support physical health and wellness?	Nominal	Yes, No
In politics today, do you consider yourself a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?	Nominal	Republican-Democrat, Don't know, Prefer not to say
In general, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?	Nominal	Very conservative- Very liberal, Don't know, Prefer not to say

Dependent variables that are recorded as open-ended qualitative responses were qualitatively analyzed using Atlas.ti's AI coding feature and open coded by hand. Qualitative responses were coded for emergent patterns of identity and university experience. Questions that asked respondents what grade they would give ETSU on a 100-point grade scale and how likely they are to recommend ETSU to prospective students were analyzed using independent samples t-tests. All dependent variables measured at the nominal level were quantitatively analyzed using crosstabs and Chi-Square tests of significance.

*Independent variables.* The independent variable used for all analyses in this study was "Are you a member of the LGBTQ+ community?". This variable is operationalized at the nominal level, as respondents had the choice between "Yes" and "No". I chose this as my independent variable because it best describes my research to investigate possible differences in LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ college students' experiences.

#### *Quantitative Procedure*

Quantitative analysis was completed using IBM's SPSS version 29. Dependent variables measured at the nominal level were analyzed using bivariate crosstabs and Chi-Square tests of significance with "Are you a member of the LGBTQ+ community?" as the independent variable. I ran Chi-Square tests of significance on all crosstabs to determine if the results were statistically significant. I used independent samples t-tests to determine if there were statistically significant differences in LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ responses to grading ETSU and the potential of recommending it to prospective students. For all quantitative analyses in this study, relationships were considered significant if  $\alpha < .05$ .



### *Qualitative Procedure*

Qualitative response data to the four open-ended questions were sorted by LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ responses in SPSS and then exported to Excel for hand-coding and to Atlas.ti for AI-assisted coding. The purpose of using both hand coding and AI coding was to ensure that any possible themes present in the qualitative data were not missed. Atlas.ti produced over 1,000 codes per question—many of them not relevant to the research questions of this study. The Atlas.ti AI coding feature creates an exhaustive list of codes, with no opportunity for the user to input specific coding commands. The result of this program limitation is the arduous task of analyzing the 1,000 codes provided by Atlas.ti. Therefore, hand coding was instrumental in creating more suitable codes and sorting survey responses that were/were not relevant to the research topic. During open coding, I closely reviewed qualitative survey responses, noting themes related to gender/sexual identity and campus politics. Consistent relevant codes that appeared included (but were not limited to) anti-LGBTQ sentiment, pro-LGBTQ sentiment, politics, and political disruptors. Data initially coded as not relevant were sub-coded so that I could recognize emerging themes that are potentially more important to students than LGBTQ+ identity and campus politics. Sub-codes for data not central to this research included finances, parking, food, safety, and academics.

## CHAPTER 4. FINDINGS

### *Quantitative Findings*

Quantitative analysis was conducted using SPSS version 29. Statistical tests included in this study include crosstabs with Chi-Square tests of significance, and independent samples t-tests. Quantitative findings are listed in Table 3.

*Crosstabs and Chi-Square analysis.* When looking at experiences on the ETSU campus and whether or not they have seriously considered leaving ETSU, there is a statistically significant difference between LGBTQ+ students and non-LGBTQ+ students. Nearly four in ten (39.9%) of LGBTQ+ students have seriously considered leaving ETSU, compared to 28.2 percent of non-LGBTQ+ students ( $X^2_{(1,1328)}=15.077$ ;  $p<.001$ ). Though not sufficient as a stand-alone analysis to determine campus experience, this indicates that there may be differences in experiences on ETSU's campus between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students. There is a statistically significant association between being a member of the LGBTQ+ community and serious consideration of leaving ETSU.

With regard to how satisfied students are with their on-campus housing at ETSU, there is a statistically significant difference between LGBTQ+ students and non-LGBTQ+ students. Combining 'not very satisfied' and 'not at all satisfied' responses show that 38.4 percent of LGBTQ+ students reported dissatisfaction with their campus residence, compared to 20.8 percent of their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts ( $x^2_{(3, N=420)}=21.239$ ;  $p<.001$ ). This statistical test adds an additional data point that LGBTQ+ students report a less satisfying campus experience than non-LGBTQ+ students in more ways than one.

**Table 3.** Analysis of Student Experience Variables with Respect to Student LGBTQ+ Identity

Variable	Non-LGBTQ+	LGBTQ+	Significance Test
Grade given to ETSU on a 100-point scale ( <i>mean</i> )	86.74	82.83	$t(452.473) = -5.172^*$
Likelihood to recommend ETSU on a scale of one to ten. ( <i>mean</i> )	7.92	7.24	$t(1282) = -4.853^*$
Percent who say they have seriously considered leaving ETSU.	28.2%	39.9%	$X^2_{(1, N=1328)} = 15.077^*$
ETSU residence hall satisfaction			$X^2_{(3, N=420)} = 21.239^*$
Very satisfied	20.1%	5.4%	
Satisfied	59.1%	56.3%	
Not very satisfied	15.6%	29.5%	
Not at all satisfied	5.2%	8.9%	
Thinks that ETSU has the resources to support physical health and wellness			$X^2_{(1, N=1311)} = 6.040^*$
Yes	92.9%	88.4%	
No	7.1%	11.6%	
Considers themselves a Republican, Democrat, or Independent?			$X^2_{(6, N=1316)} = 224.920^*$
Republican	26.0%	1.0%	
Republican leaning	15.3%	1.9%	
Independent	17.3%	17.2%	
Democrat leaning	11.0%	26.9%	
Democrat	13.5%	38.0%	
Describes personal political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?			$X^2_{(6, N=1312)} = 294.020^*$
Very conservative	11.0%	0.3%	
Conservative	22.0%	1.3%	
Moderate	28.3%	14.0%	
Liberal	14.8%	32.8%	
Very liberal	7.3%	36.7%	

Note: \* results statistically significant at the  $p < .001$  level

When analyzing whether students believe ETSU has the resources to support physical health and wellness, there is a statistically significant difference between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ student outlooks. Fewer LGBTQ+ students believe that ETSU had the proper resources to support physical health and wellness (11.6%) than non-LGBTQ+ students (7.1%). This difference is statistically significant ( $\chi^2_{(1, N=1311)}=6.040$ ;  $p<.001$ ). This further supports that LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students perceive their experience at ETSU differently.

In this analysis, I examine the differences between political party affiliation and whether students are members of the LGBTQ+ community. Far more students of the LGBTQ+ community identified as Democrat and Democrat leaning (64.9%) than Republicans and Republican leaning (2.9%), while substantially more of the non-LGBTQ+ students identified as Republicans and Republican leaning (26% and 15.3%, respectively). These differences are statistically significant ( $\chi^2_{(6, N=1316)}=224.920$ ;  $p<.001$ ). While one test does not communicate a full story, these results show that the political divide between students is in some way associated with their (non)LGBTQ+ identity.

The crosstab analysis of LGBTQ+ identity and political views finds that 36.7 percent of LGBTQ+ student respondents identify as being very liberal and only 7.3 percent of non-LGBTQ+ students identified as being very liberal. Most (28.3%) non-LGBTQ+ students identified themselves as being politically moderate ( $\chi^2_{(6, N=1312)}=294.020$ ;  $p<.001$ ). This further supports the statistical findings from analysis of political party affiliation that more LGBTQ+ students also identify as very liberal. Although identifying oneself as very liberal is not exclusive to identifying with the U.S. Democratic party, previous literature has found a strong association (Pew Research Center 2021).

*Independent samples t-tests.* When analyzing “What grade would you give ETSU (0-100)?”, the assumption of equal variances for the independent samples t-test was tested using Levene's test. There was a violation of the assumption of equal variances ( $F(1322) = 7.377$ ;  $p < .005$ ). Therefore, I applied the Welch's t-test, which does not assume equal variances, to measure the differences between the two groups. On the whole, LGBTQ+ students reported that they would give ETSU a lower grade ( $\mu = 82.8$ ;  $\sigma = 11.98$ ) than non-LGBTQ+ students ( $\mu = 86.7$ ;  $\sigma = 10.35$ ). This difference is statistically significant ( $t(452.473) = -5.172$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The observed difference between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students is quite large (Cohen's  $d = 10.75$ ).

The following tests examines how likely (out of a 0-10 scale) students are to recommend ETSU to prospective students, with 0 being not likely at all and 10 being extremely likely. I assessed the assumption of equal variances using Levene's test and found no significant violation of the assumption ( $F(1282) = 1.995$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, the standard independent samples t-test is appropriate for comparing the means of the two groups. On average, LGBTQ+ students ( $\mu = 7.24$ ;  $\sigma = 2.206$ ) were less likely to recommend ETSU to someone they know than non-LGBTQ+ students ( $\mu = 7.92$ ;  $\sigma = 2.089$ ). There is a statistically significant association between (non) LGBTQ+ identity and how likely a student is to recommend ETSU to someone else ( $t(1282) = -4.853$ ;  $p < .001$ ). The effect size, measured by Cohen's  $d$ , is 2.116, suggests a substantially large effect size.

There was a violation of the assumption of equal variances when analyzing the re-coded variable for ETSU recommendation ( $F(1282) = 13.935$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). Therefore, I applied the Welch's t-test, which does not assume equal variances, to measure the differences between the two groups. Overall, fewer LGBTQ+ students ( $\mu = 1.98$ ;  $\sigma = .75$ ) would recommend ETSU to others than non-LGBTQ+ students ( $\mu = 2.25$ ;  $\sigma = .758$ ), placing higher proportion of LGBTQ+

students in the ‘detractors’ category of likelihood to recommend ETSU to others. This result is statistically significant ( $t(494.899) = -5.538; p < .001$ ). The observed difference between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students recommending ETSU to others is somewhat large (Cohen’s  $d = .756$ ).

### *Qualitative Findings*

It was equally important to the research goals of this thesis to analyze respondents’ accounts on what it is like to be LGBTQ+ and a student at ETSU. Responses to open-ended questions were sorted by LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ identity, then hand-coded based on content. The questions I focused on for the qualitative data included what students felt the biggest problem was at ETSU, what they felt ETSU could do better, what types of students they felt were not a good fit for ETSU, and reasons they may have considered leaving ETSU. I selected these questions because they provided students the opportunity to share opinions of ETSU with respect to the identities they have and other personal aspects that cannot be fully captured by quantitative data. Codes I found in the data relating to my research aims include pro-LGBTQ and anti-LGBTQ sentiment, politics, discrimination, and campus disruptors. In addition to the relevant data codes, I coded all other content that provided additional insight into students’ experiences at ETSU.

The most prevalent emergent themes in the qualitative data for all students, regardless of identity, were concerns about academics, political unrest, and personal troubles. Additional themes at play in students’ critiques include the financial burden of attending college, infrastructure (e.g., parking, accessibility), and amenities such as food. Comments such as these surpass the number of LGBTQ-related comments. The findings in the qualitative data do not negate the statistically significant quantitative findings that LGBTQ+ students’ experiences differ

from non-LGBTQ+ students. Instead, the qualitative data illustrate the importance of larger “universal” issues concerning students’ experiences at ETSU. Because each open-ended question directly shaped the topics respondents were asked to consider, the following qualitative findings are organized question by question.

*In your opinion, what is the biggest problem facing ETSU?* There were many emergent themes within the qualitative data critiquing East Tennessee State University such as campus politics, academics, financial concerns, student amenities, and parking and safety. Many respondents felt as though there was a “lack of parking for students” and that this may “result in numerous accidents and issues” [responses provided by LGBTQ+ students] as the lack of parking can lead to overcrowding, unsafe driving and parking, and problems getting to class on time. Another pressing concern of students is the cost of attending ETSU. A common sentiment was that “ETSU lacks in helping students [with financial concerns]. The financial aid department is not as helpful as it could be, telling a student to ‘Google it’ does not help me stay informed” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. Students feel as though they are unsupported by ETSU when it comes to paying their academic fees and making ends meet to receive an education. Other respondents with money-related concerns spoke out about the insufficient financial support for staff and graduate students: “We want an end to graduate student fees, we want a livable \$15/per hour wage... The faculty and staff here are dedicated to this institution, but the institution does not seem dedicated to them” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. Students recognized that every penny counts whether they are paying for tuition, finding financial aid, or their graduate peers and support staff are compensated fairly. The emergent themes in the data for this question are diverse, and all convey important critiques. However, the

most prevalent themes among these open-ended responses were identity and campus politics and academic support.

Identity and campus politics: Of the 1008 responses to “What is the biggest problem facing ETSU,” about 19 percent (194 responses) included content pertaining to matters of identity and campus politics. Many students echoed that one of the biggest problems facing ETSU is “Allowing large protests to gather on campus...to harass students. This was very unsettling” [response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student]. It is important to note that this survey was fielded during a time when a well-funded outside group was heavily present on campus. The group protesting on campus used extreme tactics to gain attention, such as large graphic displays of Holocaust victims alongside images of fetuses from late-term abortions, yelling at those who passed by them, and persistently attempting to hand people flyers. Students noted that these aggressive engagements were disruptive to the learning process and the campus environment. Additionally, they found the group to be intentionally divisive and especially triggering for individuals who may be sexual assault victims or who have family histories and lived experiences related to the Holocaust or other acts of genocide. Negative responses regarding disruptive protestors on campus occurred in all of the open-ended questions analyzed in this thesis.

Academic support: The second most common problem that was mentioned in response to “What is the biggest problem facing ETSU” were the academics at East Tennessee State University. Of the 1008 responses to this question, almost 18 percent (181 responses) referenced the quality of academics at ETSU: “Biggest issue would be the professors and the quality of the colleges...” [response provided by non-LGBTQ+ student]. Most responses that critiqued academics could be sub-coded into ‘professors’, ‘online courses’, and ‘program of study’. The



prevalence of academic concerns within the response data underscores students' desire for an improved academic experience at ETSU.

*What would ETSU need to do in order to have you give ETSU a grade of 90 or higher (A)?* Improvement of academics: Of the 602 responses providing recommendations for ETSU to improve, almost 23 percent (135 responses) pertained to improving academics and academic quality. In fact, responses imploring the university to improve its academic quality surpassed the number of responses related to LGBTQ+ identity and campus politics (94 responses). When asked “What would ETSU need to do in order to have you give ETSU a grade of 90 or higher?” academics-related responses provided consistent recommendations: “Completely revamp the learning requirements, online class requirements, pricing and fees, course materials required, and focus more on teaching information that will actually be used in a career instead of focusing on the ‘experience’ [response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student]. Comments like this provide additional evidence to support that ETSU students are primarily concerned with academic quality.

Anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment: In addition to these important findings, respondents with queerphobic views took this question as an opportunity to share ways in which ETSU could reinforce their unwelcoming views: “Care about ALL students, not just those that are LGBTQ+ or minorities.” Another commenter wrote that ETSU should “use resources to uphold the Constitution and the values our country was founded upon instead of focusing on issues that are unnecessary like the LBGTQ Pride community.” These commenters perceive that ETSU is allocating a disproportionate level of attention to support the campus LGBTQ+ community. While these comments do not reflect the majority of responses, it is important to acknowledge

their intensity as they reflect potential reasons why some LGBTQ+ students may not feel completely comfortable on college campuses.

*What types of students are not likely to find ETSU to be a good fit for them?* The expected response format for this question requires students to consider what type of person would be incompatible with the characteristics of ETSU. This response format is markedly different from the other open-ended qualitative questions and requires respondents to consider a typology that would challenge their perception of the normative student who attends ETSU.

Academically incompatible: The most common responses to “What types of students are not likely to find ETSU to be a good fit for them?” are students who do not ascribe to varying levels of academic rigor (25.7%). There is a contradiction among students as some believe that ETSU is not a good fit for “students [who] do not want a challenge or [want] an easy way out,” [LGBTQ+ student response], while other respondents feel as though ETSU is not suitable for “advanced students looking to be pushed” [LGBTQ+ student response]. These responses demonstrate that there is a disconnect among student opinions regarding the academic rigor at ETSU; some feel as though ETSU may be challenging while others believe ETSU is not challenging enough.

Socially incompatible: Respondents also answered in terms of students who would not be able to socially fit in (18.1%) with the majority. Social reasons someone might not find ETSU to be a good fit include being too introverted or extroverted, identifying as a non-traditional student (i.e., older than normative college aged students, full-time workers, students with families), and those who have a desire for party culture or a ‘big college feel’. Nontraditional students might find an ETSU student role to be incompatible with other full-time identities: “[ETSU would not be a good fit for] full time working parents that need to be 100% online,” [response provided by

a non-LGBTQ+ student]. The time required to raise children and work a forty-hour work week leaves little time for a college education, and if there are not enough online course offerings, non-traditional students with careers and families might feel as though their university is not a good fit for their lifestyle. Students also suggested incompatibility for people who prefer a larger university setting with a more “wild college experience” [response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student]. Some students expressed that a larger and more lively campus culture may include “a ton of school spirit”, “frat or sorority parties”, and an “active campus social life” [responses provided by LGBTQ+ students], and those students “who have a proclivity to drink and party” [response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student] may fit into other school settings better than they would ETSU. These responses convey students’ opinion that people who desire a traditionally large and exciting college experience should not expect this type of experience at ETSU. Students imply that ETSU is quieter, less accepting of party culture, and not known to be a buzzing social environment. Respondents might suggest ETSU to someone who desires a more intimate social setting and a campus culture that does not emphasize partying.

Gender and sexual orientation: Responses that pointed to members of the LGBTQ+ community and those affiliated with either liberal or conservative politics occurred far less (6.4%) but are still important to the sociological analysis of student opinion as they signal a consciousness of anti-LGBTQ+ sentiment and political unrest on campus. LGBTQ+ students indicated that ETSU would not be a good fit for members of their community: “I do worry about members in the LGBTQIA community. There are resources, but I don’t know if everywhere is as accepting” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. The acknowledgment that LGBTQ+ students would not find ETSU to be a good fit for them demonstrates that LGBTQ+ students are aware that barriers to inclusivity still exist for them. A finding of interest is that more non-

LGBTQ+ students said that ETSU would be a good fit for anyone. I intend to further explore reasons why this might be in the next chapter.

*What was the main reason you considered leaving ETSU?* Academic critiques: An open-ended response opportunity was posed to students who previously answered “Yes” to “Have you ever seriously considered leaving ETSU?” Of the 410 students who seriously considered leaving ETSU, 35 percent reported that this consideration was due to academic reasons. Upon seeing the large influence of academics in students’ reasons for why they considered leaving ETSU, I further analyzed responses for more precise understanding. More than half of students who considered leaving for academic reasons specified that it was due to a negative experience with their program of study or experience with professor(s), “[there is a] lack of support from mentors and instructors, feels like students are thrown in the deep [end] and left to drown unless they teach themselves,” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. This student was in the majority of students who were critical of ETSU’s academics. Throughout the qualitative data (consistent with the other questions I analyzed), there is evidence to support that students have prioritized their academic concerns when responding to the State of the University survey: “Lack of focus in my specific field is my main reason why I’ve considered other colleges” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. For some, their academic program has not lived up to their expectations or met their needs. Programs that do not specialize in more specific studies can leave students questioning if other schools might be a better fit for them. Additionally, some students have reported that their program of study has left them feeling unprepared to take on important careers, “I want to be a competent and safe [health] provider and I do not think ETSU has prepared me to do so” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. In combination with the many responses that reference academics as the largest problem facing ETSU, the qualitative

data made it clear that students were dissatisfied with their academic instruction and that some students went so far as to consider leaving ETSU because of low academic quality.

Personal reasons: Second to academic critiques, respondents considered leaving ETSU due to personal reasons other than LGBTQ+ or political identity. During open coding and qualitative analysis, ‘personal reasons’ for leaving ETSU ranged from feeling homesick or becoming a caretaker for family members, to mental health, or struggling to fit in on campus. As one student put it, they considered leaving because “[ETSU is] far away from home, [I’m] very unhappy with my roommate, lots of extra costs like books and supplies, not feeling educated adequately...” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. This response echoes previously analyzed sentiments about academics and costs, while also sharing common feelings that college students experience: homesickness and roommate troubles. This also captures how life as a student is central to the reason respondents consider leaving ETSU. Perhaps personal troubles such as homesickness and roommate issues bring students to consider leaving college, or perhaps they add on to larger feelings of distress and concern for academics and cost.

The students in this survey were also candid about their struggles with mental health and how it has affected their experience: “I have considered leaving ETSU because of my mental health...” [response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student]. Because college students juggle a lot of stressors such as academics, finances, and personal relationships, mental health plays a central role in the quality of their college experience. Student services such as the counseling center are in place for students to seek support. Students may also communicate with faculty about their struggles with mental health; however, one student reported their negative experience: “I suffer with mental illness and some professors do not care” [response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]. There could be many factors that contribute to a student leaving due to mental health

struggles, making it imperative for faculty to be supportive of student mental health and referring them to the student counseling center and other mental health services.

## CHAPTER 5. CONCLUSION

### *Discussion*

Quantitative analysis indicated that LGBTQ+ have a generally less satisfactory campus experience than do their non-LGBTQ+ peers. More LGBTQ+ students reported that they considered leaving the university and fewer are likely to recommend it to prospective students than non-LGBTQ+ students. The quantitative data also show that LGBTQ+ students have less confidence in the university's ability to provide adequate resources that support wellbeing (i.e., housing and health resources). However, the qualitative data demonstrate that students are overall more concerned with academics and campus politics than matters of LGBTQ+ identity. In this section, I pursue potential explanations for this pattern.

*Student as a master status.* There has been compelling evidence—both in the quantitative survey data and in existing literature—that LGBTQ+ is a master status for those who identify as such. However, there are contradictions to this concept in the qualitative data trends. When given the opportunity to voice their grievances with the university (by being asked to identify the most pressing issues), respondents prioritized ‘student’ as their master status as opposed to any other identity they possess.

The most pressing concern students identified was academics. LGBTQ+ identity and academic identity may intersect, but the primary identity that the college experience engages is ‘student.’ One’s queerness may not be the chief factor in assessing the effectiveness of class instruction or earning good grades. Student identity is best suited for confronting these challenges because a student understands academic nuances and is even shaped by them. Therefore, student identity was a primary driver in how students responded to the survey questions presented to them about how ETSU is performing.

When asked to identify problems, students had no shortage of material to share. The goal of the survey was to measure where the university is doing well and where it is falling short. It is not surprising to find that students of all identities expect a quality education. For example, some responses to this study suggest that ETSU should be closely monitoring professors' instruction, actively re-structuring inefficient academic programs, and working to help students get the most out of their degrees in their post-graduate careers, as this respondent wrote:

Completely revamp the learning requirements, online class requirements, pricing and fees, course materials required, and focus more on teaching information that will actually be used in a career instead of focusing on the "experience". I didn't pay for the experience, I paid to learn and to further my education and my career. Period. That's the ENTIRE point of higher education in the first place. And pay closer attention to what your instructors are actually doing/teaching/requiring. [Response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student]

While students attend college for different reasons, this respondent makes a strong case for academic improvements. Regardless of students' degree-seeking status, there is a general expectation that they will gain knowledge from the academic instruction they are paying for. The open-ended questions in the State of the University survey take a problem-oriented approach, asking students what "*the* biggest problem" is at ETSU rather than what "*their* biggest problem" is at ETSU. Therefore, the nature of these questions shaped student responses. Their answers seemed to depersonalize their experiences and focus solely on what needs to be done to solve an observed problem.

Some students' grievances with ETSU are not easily overcome. Nearly a third of the students who completed the survey (410 out of 1328, or 30.9%) reported seriously considering



leaving ETSU. Of the students who seriously considered leaving ETSU and expanded upon their reasoning, 35 percent shared that this consideration was due to academic reasons that ranged from conflict with professors, frustration with program requirements, to low-quality instruction. Leaving for academic reasons outnumbers the students who wanted to leave because of finances or personal troubles. For some, a desire to leave ETSU is rooted in students' disappointment with the quality of their education. Though there is a significant difference in those who considered leaving ETSU (28% of non- LGBTQ+ students compared to 39% of LGBTQ+ students) only about 2 percent of students who seriously considered leaving ETSU did so on the basis of their LGBTQ+ identity. This creates additional support for the idea that for most respondents, their student identity takes precedence over other identities and guides their decision making in terms of their education.

Aside from the overarching critique of academic quality, students are mostly concerned with the everyday things that contribute to college experience such as campus culture, politics, and finances:

There are a lot [of issues]. Parking and parking tickets, the athletics department, acceptance for those that have different opinions than the liberal majority on campus, politics in class. Every semester, the class gets the [spiel] of 'we are not talking about politics in this class,' and they cannot help themselves [from doing so], the TOILET PAPER. the toilet paper is paper thin, I am almost 100,000 in debt from attending this university, how does it still have see-through toilet paper? The pay for GAs, I get paid a little over 900 a month and it doesn't even cover all of my tuition, I do not feel safe on campus after dark and make it a priority to leave campus before dark. I also feel that

sometimes the university tenures the wrong professors. [Response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student]

Being a college student is much more than attending classes—this response is emblematic of frustration over debt, cost of attendance, and how students want their financial contribution to the university to be recognized. Improvements to infrastructure and common resources are tangible ways in which students may feel like their presence matters. The response further underscores how a student identity takes precedence on campus matters. Finding parking and avoiding parking tickets matters to the student because it could be the difference in making it to an exam on time or affording textbooks. Finding parking and avoiding tickets does not directly conflict with a student's LGBTQ+ or heterosexual cisgender identity. However, gender and sexual identity are not null and might intersect with student identity while confronting campus politics and social barriers to equity and inclusion.

The latter comment also shows that the respondent feels there is a liberal majority on campus; however, the data show that this is not true among students as 25.6 percent identified as Conservative or Very conservative and 33.3 percent identified as Liberal or Very liberal—neither holding a majority. Skewed perceptions of a liberal or conservative majority contribute to political polarization on campus. However, a political matter that all students agreed on is that extremist political disruptors on campus are a threat to students:

I wish ETSU offered more online classes. Also allowing pictures of dead babies on our campus is ridiculous. It's traumatizing and the people are yelling at us just trying to get to class. Calling people derogatory things. I don't care who believes in what but that is making me not want to be on campus or go to my classes that I pay A LOT of money for.  
[Response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]

A recurring theme among students of all identities is the emphasis on academics and their financial contribution to the university, yet still feeling ignored and uncomfortable. Despite any perceptions of political polarization, both LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students are against inflammatory groups on campus disrupting students' wish to pursue their education in peace. Student identity is central to evaluating critiques of East Tennessee State University such as academics, financial contribution, and campus politics. Although responses such as the one just quoted address campus politics and student identity, it exhibits how, ultimately, students want to attend high-quality classes unbothered.

*LGBTQ+ experience at East Tennessee State University.* There is an overwhelming amount of qualitative evidence indicating points to 'student' being the most salient identity for East Tennessee State University students. Examples of this included responses regarding ETSU's biggest issues and what the university could be doing better. Presented with this evidence, we should ask what makes LGBTQ+ students different, then?

There is both qualitative and quantitative evidence that some respondents perceived institutional barriers to equitable education for LGBTQ+ students at ESTU. It is not lost on some students that there is still hostility toward the LGBTQ+ community in higher education. In response to the "What types of students are not likely to find ETSU to be a good fit for them?" quite a few responses echoed a similar sentiment: "LGBTQIA+ community unfortunately. Again... do better to include everyone." Being LGBTQ+ may complicate the experience of student identity on some issues and, under certain conditions, become painfully relevant. There are personal accounts in which members of the LGBTQ+ community report discriminatory barriers at ETSU:

Due to the politics in TN, I still struggle with recommending ETSU to my fellow LGBTQ students, particularly those who are transgender. I was extremely disappointed to hear that a transgender family member, who is an ETSU alumna, was recently unable to find an avenue to update her university records, including the name on her degree. She attempted to seek a meeting with [the Vice President of Equity and Inclusion] to express her concerns, but he canceled their meeting on the day-of without explanation and declined to reschedule. This is a critical safety issue for trans and non-binary alumni, who currently risk being outed if they cannot update their records appropriately. What upset me most about this incident was the sense that my relative, who belongs to what is currently one of the most marginalized groups in our state, was treated dismissively by the person in charge of Equity and Inclusion at ETSU. [Response provided by an LGBTQ+ student]

Respondents' perceptions of the university's limited efforts to support diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) come at a time when state elected officials have imposed restrictions on public schools and higher education institutions. A university perceived as contradicting its own DEI initiatives undermines the message of being an ally to LGBTQ+ students, and thus a number of survey respondents expressed that more could be done.

The presence of political groups and political disruptors prevent campus from being a safe and respectful space for all students. Turning Point USA's racist and homophobic initiatives were largely discussed with a negative connotation in the qualitative data; Turning Point USA's campus : was permitted to air a transphobic film in a central campus space in view of people passing by—an action widely regarded as inappropriate by LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ students. Students translate the university's freedom of speech policy and Tennessee's Divisive

Concepts Bill (East Tennessee State University 2017; Tennessee General Assembly 2022) as a lack of support for the LGBTQ+ community on campus. Not backing the objections from student groups and individual student pleas on the matter had a negative impact on their sense of safety and belonging, as the following non-LGBTQ+ student wrote: “Sometimes I believe that inappropriate events are allowed on campus, such as screening *What is a Woman?* I understand freedom of speech, but that doesn't mean people should be allowed to make other students feel unsafe or unwelcome.”

Data in this study also indicate that queerphobia and transphobia are present at ETSU. Some of the most pointed findings come from individual survey responses that reinforce queerphobic and transphobic sentiment on campus. In response to “What would ETSU need to do in order to have you give ETSU a grade of 90 or higher (A)?” patterns of hostility are illustrated by responses such as “Care about ALL students, not just those that are LGBTQ+ or minorities,” and “Have more equal coverage and opportunities for those who might believe differently than the PRIDE groups.” The latter comment provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student is ironic because it conveys that some who consistently receive heteronormative reinforcement view lackluster DEI initiatives as somehow favoring minority groups. A more extreme example that reflects these attitudes is one response that dually criticizes the university for having overly liberal views and preferential treatment of the LGBTQ+ community:

Don't fire staff who stand for America and what is good, right, true, and just. Patriots are hard to come by especially at a liberal university. We can use resources to uphold the Constitution and the values our country was founded upon instead of focusing on issues that are unnecessary like the LBGTQ Pride community... [Response provided by a non-LGBTQ+ student]

There is no evidence to support the claim that East Tennessee State University has fired faculty or staff for ‘standing up for America.’ This respondent also makes the mistake of associating patriotism—devotion to and vigorous support for one's country—with being politically conservative. The beliefs demonstrated in this comment run counter to reported discrimination (shortcomings of the Office of Equity and Inclusion previously mentioned in this chapter) and at nearby universities such as Milligan University—a private, Christian college, five miles away from ETSU—that forced the resignation of a faculty member for identifying as LGBTQ+ (Keeling 2020). Students who oppose DEI initiatives at ETSU may be perceived as a social barrier to inclusion by LGBTQ+ students.

In addition to qualitative accounts in which students detail institutional and social barriers to being LGBTQ+ in college, the quantitative data point to the differential experience that LGBTQ+ students have at ETSU. On average, more LGBTQ+ students reported serious consideration to leave ETSU than non-LGBTQ+ students, and on average, scored the university 3.91 points lower than their non-LGBTQ counterparts. These results were statistically significant and indicate that this observed relationship is unlikely to have occurred by chance. LGBTQ+ students also have less favorable perceptions of the university's ability to provide adequate student resources. Compared to their non-LGBTQ+ peers, LGBTQ+ students feel as though ETSU does not have the resources to satisfactorily support their physical health and wellness. A similar trend appears regarding student housing: more LGBTQ+ students reported being ‘Not at all satisfied’ or ‘Not very satisfied’ than non-LGBTQ+ students. All in all, LGBTQ+ students have a more negative perception of ETSU and its student resources.

### *Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research*

This study sought to investigate the differences between LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ college student experiences. Quantitative analysis determined that LGBTQ+ students at East Tennessee State University report a very different experience than non-LGBTQ+ students do. Qualitative analysis found that while institutional barriers and queerphobic sentiments are still present as concerns at East Tennessee State University, ‘student’ as a master status is more often engaged to confront pervasive challenges to their academic success—regardless of students’ gender or sexual orientation. These discoveries convey that institutions of higher education must still actively work to improve diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives while also striving for a higher degree of academic excellence.

The primary limitation of this study is that it surveys the student body of only one mid-size regional university in the southern United States. This population reflects regional patterns in political views and the university’s campus culture. Had the survey data been collected at numerous mid- to large-size universities across a larger geographical area, the data might have yielded broader patterns in how LGBTQ+ students assess their campus experiences and concerns in contrast to non-LGBTQ+ students. Such a study would have the power to inform colleges and universities of the needs of their students—especially members of the LGBTQ+ community.

Another potential limitation is the timing of the State of the University 2022 survey. The survey was launched during a politically contentious time for the ETSU campus. While gathering data that are unbiased by environmental factors is nearly impossible, controlling for major campus disruptions could be mitigated by evaluating a comprehensive campus schedule before scheduling a survey launch. The prevalence of qualitative data on transphobic organizations and pro-life political disruptors could not be ignored in the analysis.

Future research on the topic would be best executed by increasing the scale and breadth of data collection. This would help results be more representative of the region or country as a whole. While there are nevertheless interesting findings that pertain to ETSU, LGBTQ+ college students as a population could benefit from research that illuminates their needs and experiences, particularly at a time when sexual and gender minorities are openly criticized, and their lives politicized in some spaces.

Smaller-scale suggestions for future research include examining different dependent and independent variables from the same State of the University dataset. There is rich data to be analyzed with regard to different student identities, such as potential differences in students' experience by race, gender, and socioeconomic characteristics, etc. Future survey instruments could pose more open-ended questions on a wider variety of topics. It is possible that different open-ended questions could have captured more about LGBTQ+ students' experiences on campus with regard to housing, resources for physical health and wellness, and student support services. Furthermore, the use of a different data collection method—such as in-depth qualitative interviews or focus groups—has the potential to yield more nuanced data. Qualitative survey responses are usually no longer than a few sentences, limiting the scope of sociological interpretation and making it difficult to establish sufficient context for understanding what people think and feel. Additionally, brief responses in a survey format may limit the effectiveness of digital qualitative tools such as Atlas.ti. The exhaustive nature of its AI coding feature may be best suited for in-depth qualitative interview data rather than thousands of brief survey responses.



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APPENDIX: ETSU State of the University 2022 Questions Utilized for Analysis.

Question 10: In your opinion, what is the biggest problem facing ETSU?

Question 11: What grade would you give ETSU (0-100)?

Question 12: What would ETSU need to do in order to have you give ETSU a grade of 90 or higher (A)?

Question 23: How likely are you to recommend ETSU to someone?

Question 24: What types of students are not likely to find ETSU to be a good fit for them?

Q23\_NPS\_Group: Are respondents' promoters, detractors, or passive?

Question 34: Have you ever seriously considered leaving ETSU?

Question 35: What is the main reason you considered leaving ETSU?

Question 42: If you live on campus, how satisfied are you with the residence halls?

Question 44: Do you think that ETSU has the resources to support physical health and wellness?

Question 138: Are you a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

Question 141: In politics today, do you consider yourself a republican, democrat, or independent?

Question 142: In general, would you describe your political views as very conservative, conservative, moderate, liberal, or very liberal?

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