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# The impact of GSAs, school size, and geographic location on school climate in South Texas

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# *Empowering student researchers:*

## *Critical contributions by emerging 21st Century scholars*

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# *The impact of GSAs, school size, and geographic location on school climate in South Texas*

*Heraclio Flores*
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**Abstract**

*While gay-straight alliances (GSAs) play a role in improving the well-being and sense of safety for LGBTQ students, additional factors such as school size, geographical location, and the community climate at large may have more controlling implications for school diversity and acceptance. This survey research type, quantitative study, investigates the retrospective responses of subjects from two Hispanic-Serving Institutions to examine the impact of GSAs, school size, and geographic location on school climates in rural South Texas high schools. Results suggest that the effect of GSAs on school diversity and acceptance may be diminished in a conservative, rural setting. Other factors (school size, geographic location, and community climate at large) may play a greater role in establishing school diversity and acceptance. Further research is warranted to uncover the mechanisms that drive school diversity and acceptance in conservative, rural geographical locations like South Texas.*

As the intersection of differences, especially around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) students, becomes more visible in schools, understanding school climate has become increasingly necessary. Especially given that the current social-political climate condones discrimination against students who identify with differences (Beirich, 2010; Grygiel, 2009; Traywick, 2010). Bullying remains a serious problem in learning communities; as frequent targets of bullying, LGBTQ students, remain a vulnerable population whose safety and welfare need protection (Campos, 2017). Educators often assume they do not have sufficient agency to advocate for students who identify with difference (Hattam & Every, 201; Kilman, 2007; Nord, 1995; Yeung, 2008), and student advocacy groups such as GSAs are typically not present in all schools. This study then seeks to document the school climate, regarding the treatment of LGBTQ students in high schools. Specifically, we focused on an under-studied geographic region—the southwest United States—and recruited students from two small, Hispanic-Serving Institutions that largely serve non-traditional students (delayed enrollment, part-time, working, financially independent, married/parent, or earned a GED) from rural school districts.

## Literature review

Factors that might contribute to school climate in conservative rural settings include the implication of outness, school size, geographic location, and the presence of a GSA.

### *The implication on outness from socio-political environment and other variables*

Disclosing one's sexual orientation (being "out") has generally been understood as part of the identity development of LGBTQ individuals and has been shown to improve self-esteem, school performance, and psychological well-being and to reduce anxiety among LGBTQ adolescents (D'Augelli et al., 2005; Ueno, 2005). One's "coming out" process is typically understood as disclosure along a continuum from high to low risk across distinct groups (e.g., family, friends, work, peers, public). Outness is fluid and is conceptualized as levels and modes of

visibility. It is a process that varies among individuals, occurring most often between 14 to 16 years of age (Ryan et al., 2009). While being out can result in more support and acceptance, due to homophobia and heteronormativity, it can also result in more harassment and risk (Kosciw et al., 2012). Culture and community context contribute to outness and acceptance (Saewyc, 2011). Family factors, such as parents' attitude toward LGBTQ issues, can impact whether a child comes out and whether that child will be accepted and feel safe (Ryan et al., 2009).

Geographical location also influences LGBTQ youths' ability to be out and find acceptance. Dillon and Savage (2006) found that urban areas have a more positive response and provide more resources for out LGBTQ students, whereas suburban and rural communities may offer less support and fewer resources. A 2014 study by Kosciw et al. found that students who had high levels of outness had higher self-esteem and decreased depression but also reported higher levels of victimization. Authors specific comparison of community context found that an "increase in victimization associated with outness was substantially larger for rural youth than for urban and suburban youth" (p. 174). The study also found that the connection between depression and lower academic outcomes were stronger for rural students than for urban students. Rural schools in the Southwest, in states with policies or practices that discriminate against LGBTQ people, tend to exacerbate hostility (Loftus, 2001; Seltzer, 1992). Attention to the variables inside and outside of rural schools in this region is warranted, especially since negative attitudes about homosexuality are more prevalent in small towns and rural areas of the country (Dillion & Savage, 2006; Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2008).

***School size and location as a determinant of climate***

Evidence suggests that schools can significantly improve climate and the well-being of LGBTQ students by implementing affirming policies and practices that serve to create a culture of support that address LGBTQ students' unique needs and elevated risks (Hanson et al., 2019). However, schools do not exist in a vacuum. The socio-political climates of rural settings may affect the impact of school-based interventions for LGBTQ

students, such as GSAs. A 2018 study conducted in rural California found that the presence of a GSA was associated with lower levels of LGBTQ student safety (De Pedro et al., 2018). Instead, what improved LGBTQ student safety was direct peer and teacher intervention. Another Colorado study found that increased access to supportive adults rather than the presence of a GSA increase student engagement (Seelman et al., 2015).

Indeed, culture and norms in rural communities may have a greater impact on school climates than GSAs. Adam (1998) maintained that behavioral norms are contingent upon place and often determine who is sacrificed for the perceived greater good of the group: "When kinship codes constitute the primary mechanism whereby the means to survival are produced and distributed, then homosexual relationships may be marginalized as irrational, subversive, or inconsequential to the predominate social code" (p. 176). Foucault (1979) conceptualized this behavior as a panoptical force where every member of the community is expected to adhere to the norms and assist in regulating the behavior of others. In other words, the development and performance of identity is highly influenced by the regulatory gaze of the community in which one lives. Schools are direct microcosms of their local communities and reflect the climate outside of them; in order to study school climate, one must examine the larger climate in which the school exists.

Variables outside of the school building have been explored for their impact on climate as it pertains to safety of LGBTQ students. For example, Kosciw et al. (2009) reviewed the effect of geographical, school district-level, and community-level variables and determined that rural communities and communities with lower adult educational completion may foster hostile school climates for LGBTQ students. Such was the case in Drumheller and McQuay's (2010) study, which found that the LGBTQ community perceived their rural context as unsupportive and a barrier to community building. Moreover, Goodenow et al. (2006) found that sexual minoritized youth were more likely to have experienced violence if they attended smaller schools, suburban schools, or schools with little or no racial and economic diversity.

The tight-knit social composition present in smaller and homogenous schools exposes and magnifies difference, especially among LGBTQ students (Kazyak, 2011). In large urban and suburban schools, students are afforded the opportunity to blend into a diverse crowd (Miceli, 2005). Conversely in rural settings, LGBTQ students are more visible and thus are increasingly prone to victimization (Galliher et al., 2004; Poon & Saewyc, 2009). Although, larger urban schools have historically been associated with higher rates of behavioral problems and student alienation (Anderman & Kimweli, 1997; Cotton, 1997; Haller, 1992), schools within urban contexts have been found to be more supportive for LGBTQ students than schools situated in rural settings (Jones, 2015).

***Gay-straight alliances and climate***

Gay-Straight Alliances, or GSAs, are often credited with improving school climate for LGBTQ students. The presence of a GSA is associated with fewer reports of victimization and better academic and health outcomes for students (Goodenow et al., 2006; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Szalacha, 2003). According to Szalacha (2003) GSAs have the most salient influence on school climate for gender nonconforming and LGBTQ students. Concurring, Heck et al. (2014) found that LGBTQ youth in schools with a GSA were less at risk for drug use. Others have shown that the presence of a GSA is associated with safe school climates for all students (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004; Russell et al., 2009).

While research on GSAs suggests that they are associated with positive youth development and increased safety, little qualitative information exists on the reasons why GSA groups are effective (McCormick et al., 2015). For example, McGuire et al. (2010) found that policies, practices, level of personnel support at a campus, and presence of a GSA all factor into formulating a school climate for LGBTQ students. And connections and relationships with adults—whether on campus or at the district level—played the greatest factor in whether LGBTQ students felt safe overall. Perhaps, then, a school climate conducive to learning for LGBTQ students is contingent upon the relational aspect between

teacher and student, not only the presence of a GSA, as is traditionally suggested by many scholars (Mayberry et al., 2011).

In summary, there is important research on school climate and its impact on LGBTQ students' senses of belonging and safety. However, most research does not consider the school climate as characterized from the perspective of students after they have left the environment in question and have had a chance to reflect upon it. Furthermore, missing from prior studies has been an analysis of information from rural regions in Texas from the perspective of both LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ students.

## The present study

Though the research survey was conducted at institutes of higher education, the results focus on experiences during respondents' final years in high school. For the purposes of this study, we hypothesized that schools with a GSA (GSA schools) would have climates conducive to accepting LGBTQ students compared to schools without a GSA (non-GSA schools). Second, we hypothesized that GSAs schools would be more diverse than non-GSA schools. Because we are interested in student experiences, we operationalized these variables of interest by measuring student perceptions of the demographics and climate at GSA and non-GSA schools. However, we also expected variables indicative of community sentiment, such as school size and location, to influence the climate toward LGBTQ students and teachers. While there has previously been comprehensive analysis of school climates and attitudes towards LGBTQ students in K–12 settings (e.g. GLSEN, 2014), much can still be learned by analyzing data from a range of sources and identifying defining characteristics of schools, such as size, demographics, and location. Previous literature has praised the role of GSAs in building safer schools; however, our results indicate that school size and location are a greater predictor of school diversity and acceptance than the presence of a GSA. This research comes at a time when unjust policies and practices are leading to increased harassment of LGBTQ students at public schools (Aragon, et al., 2014; Crary, 2010; Dragowski et al., 2011; Friedman, 2010; Martinez, 2010; O'Hare, 2010). We argue that

diversity and acceptance would not be initiated in such areas where the overall community climate condones discrimination.

## Methods

This survey research type, quantitative study, investigates the retrospective responses of subjects from two Hispanic-serving institutions to examine the impact of GSAs, school size, and geographic location on school climates in rural, South Texas high schools. We hypothesized that GSA schools would have a climate conducive to accepting LGBTQ students, compared with non-GSA schools. Second, we hypothesized that GSA schools would be more diverse than non-GSA schools. The following research questions were investigated: Does the presence of a GSA serve as a predictor for school climates that are more accepting of LGBTQ students? Is the presence of a GSA correlated with increased school diversity? Do other factors, such as school size and geographic location, serve as better predictors of school climates that are more accepting of LGBTQ students? A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc analysis using Tukey's procedure was used to test the hypotheses.

### *Respondents*

Respondents were recruited from freshman and transfer student populations of two southwestern Hispanic-Serving Institutions. These universities serve non-traditional populations, and it is not uncommon for students' hometowns to be within 100 miles of the university. The National Center for Education Statistics defines nontraditional students as meeting one of seven characteristics: delayed enrollment into postsecondary education; attends college part-time; works full time; is financially independent for financial aid purposes; has dependents other than a spouse; is a single parent; or earned a GED (U.S. Department, n.d.). More recent variables that have been used to identify non-traditional students include race, gender, and being enrolled in non-degree occupational programs (U.S. Department, n.d.).

All freshmen and transfer students at these universities were invited to participate via e-mail invitation. The e-mail described the study as a "survey of school climates related to issues around sexual orientation

and gender, race, and religion," and included a link to the online survey (I. Aguilar, personal communication, October 1, 2015). A total of 476 surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of about 25%.

**Exclusion criteria.** Many surveys (31%) were missing some or all demographic information and were excluded from analysis. This resulted in 327 respondents used in the final analysis. However, it is important to note that, because responses to all questions were not required, many respondents skipped some responses. Finally, some questions offered a "don't know" response option, and these responses were excluded from analysis. Therefore, the number of actual responses and degrees of freedom differ between analyses.

**Demographics.** While most respondents (75%) graduated in the last two years, 25% of respondents reported graduating more than two years ago. However, according to a series of *t*-tests on all variables analyzed in this study, responses did not differ significantly ($p$s > .05) between those graduating more than or less than two years prior to data collection. As such, these respondents were included in all analyses. The mean age of respondents was 20 years old ($SD$ = 1.28).

Respondents could identify with as many or as few gender identifiers as they chose. The majority (95%) identified with a single gender category and the remaining 5% identified with more than one, so note that there is some overlap (N = 15) in reported gender categories. As a result, categorical gender definitions resulted in 232 females (70%), 98 males (29%), 10 transgender students (.03%) and two who selected "other" but declined to specify. The majority of respondents reported being white (40%) or Hispanic/Latino (28%), with the remainder identifying as Black/African-American (7%), Asian/Pacific-Islander (4%), or Native American (3%); only three respondents selected "other" (< 1%) and 17% of respondents declined to self-identify. Finally, 69% of respondents identified their religious affiliation as Christianity, 14% identified as atheist/agnostic, and 15% identified as "other;" Jewish, Hindu, and Muslim respondents comprised the remaining 2%.

Respondents also responded to a range of questions regarding the

high schools from which they graduated. Schools were somewhat evenly represented as being urban (39%), suburban (36%), or rural (25%). Thirty percent (30%) of respondents reported having graduated from large schools with a graduating class size of 500–1000 students. Only 2% reported that their graduating class was larger than 1000. The rest of the respondents came from schools with graduating classes of 300–500 (15%), 150–300 (10%), 50–150 (12%), or fewer than 50 people (9%). Most respondents graduated from public (92%) non-charter (83%) schools. Sixteen percent of respondents graduated from charter schools, both public and private. The rest of the schools reported were religious (2%), other types of private or independent schools (4%), or "other" (2%). A small percentage of respondents (14%) described their school as a magnet school.

***Instrumentation***

The survey instrument was obtained from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2014) and modified to function as a comprehensive survey of high school climate regarding religion, gender, sexual orientation, and race. The survey was mixed-format and included both Likert-type scale and short-essay response questions. The survey obtained from GLSEN (2014) examined the experiences of LGBTQ students regarding the following indicators of negative school climate:

- Hearing biased remarks, including homophobic remarks, in school;
- Feeling unsafe in school because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation, gender expression, or race/ethnicity;
- Missing classes or days of school because of safety reasons;
- Experiencing harassment and assault in school; and
- Experiencing discriminatory policies and practices at school.

***Research protocol***

The following research protocols were submitted to the Institutional Review Board. After approval, e-mails were sent out once a week for four weeks containing a short description of the study as well as a link to the online consent form and survey instrument. During the survey, respondents were asked to reflect on their final year of high school.

Time to complete the survey was about 20 minutes. For the purposes of this study, we analyzed only data related to sexual orientation and the demographics of the school (school size, location, race, religion).

First, respondents completed a series of questions discussing their experience with negative remarks about people's sexual orientation, such as homophobic remarks. Respondents also responded to a series of questions about their experiences with negative remarks related to gender expression, such as masculinity or femininity. These questions asked about the frequency of such comments, as well as the location at which they were heard. Respondents were also asked if either students or teachers were present when such comments were made and if either were likely to intervene. Examples of questions include "How often did you hear the expression 'that's so gay' or 'you're so gay' in school?," "How often did you hear these remarks from other students?," and "When these remarks were made, how often were teachers or staff present?" Respondents responded on a Likert-type scale, with options ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (frequently).

Finally, respondents answered a series of questions related to the school from which they graduated. This included descriptive questions, such as the size of their graduating class (school size), and the location of the school as either urban, suburban, or rural (school location). Respondents were also asked if their school had a Gay-Straight Alliance and if their school had openly gay/lesbian teachers or teachers that were supportive of LGBTQ students. Response choices were Yes, No, and Don't Know. This section also included demographic questions, such as the number of LGBTQ students, which was estimated on a scale ranging from 1 (1–2) to 5 (more than 20), and percentage of students representing different religions, which was estimated on a scale from 1 (10% or less) to 10 (100%).

## Results

### *Presence of a gay-straight alliance*

A one-way ANOVA was used to test the hypothesis that GSA schools would be more accepting than non-GSA schools. Researchers began

by analyzing variables dependent upon the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA). First, we compared the indicators of school climate between GSA and non-GSA schools. GSA and non-GSA schools differed only on one variable. Specifically, students from non-GSA schools expected to "hear homophobic remarks in college" more than students from GSA schools. This would suggest that students likely expect the college environment to mirror that of high school. Means and inferential statistics are displayed in Table 1.

Next, we compared the descriptive variables between GSA and non-GSA schools. Schools that had a GSA (51%) were no more likely than schools without a GSA (49%) to have openly gay or lesbian teachers or staff. Similarly, schools with a GSA (47%) were slightly less likely than schools without a GSA (53%) to have teachers or staff supportive of LGBTQ students. Finally, the presence of a GSA did seem to make students more aware of other LGBTQ students. For example, students at schools with a GSA reported a higher number ($M = 5.42$, $SD = .82$) of LGBTQ students than did students at schools without a GSA ($M = 4.11$, $SD = 1.59$), $t(199) = 8.31$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.03$. More specifically, 60% of students who attended a school with a GSA reported "more than 20" LGBTQ students, whereas only 27% of students with no GSA reported the same. However, while the presence of a GSA may make other students more aware of diversity, it does not appear to impact acceptance. Students who attended a school with a GSA (18%) were slightly less likely as those who attended a school with no GSA (29%) to report that they "believe it is wrong to be gay/lesbian/bisexual based on religious reasons" but this difference was not statistically significant, $\chi^2(244) = .09$, $p = .12$.

One explanation for these results may be that climate is largely driven by the demographics of students at the school. For example, students attending schools with no GSA estimated significantly higher ($M = 6.80$, $SD = 1.94$) percentages of Christian students than did students from schools with a GSA ($M = 5.80$, $SD = 1.84$), $t(244) = 3.53$, $p < .001$, $d = .52$. Likewise, estimates on percentages of students belonging to other religions (e.g. Jewish, Muslim, Hindu) were higher for schools with GSAs ($M = 2.62$, $SD = 1.39$) than without GSAs

**Table 1**
**Comparison of responses between students from GSA and non-GSA high schools**

| Item | Non-GSA | GSA | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| How often did you hear the phrase "That's so gay" or "You're so gay"? | 2.12 (1.27) | 2.11 (1.11) | .089 | .92 |
| How often have you heard other homophobic remarks used in school (e.g. faggot, dyke, queer)? | 2.43 (1.28) | 2.62 (1.32) | 1.0 | .31 |
| How often did you hear these remarks from students? | 2.47 (1.27) | 2.48 (1.23) | .04 | .96 |
| How often did you hear these remarks from teachers or staff? | 4.61 (.63) | 4.64 (.67) | .29 | .76 |
| When you heard these remarks, how often was a teacher or other school staff person present? | 3.09 (.70) | 3.11 (.63) | .76 | .81 |
| How often did a teacher or staff person intervene? | 2.69 (1.01) | 2.69 (1.01) | .03 | .97 |
| How often did another student intervene? | 3.40 (.69) | 3.30 (.71) | .96 | .33 |
| How often do you expect to hear homophobic remarks in college? | 2.73 (.85) | 2.46 (.80) | **2.18** | **.03** |
| How often did you hear comments about a student not acting masculine enough? | 3.08 (1.26) | 3.27 (1.21) | 1.05 | .29 |
| How often did you hear comments about a student not acting feminine enough? | 3.36 (1.17) | 3.54 (1.19) | 1.06 | .28 |

**(continued)**

**Table 1, continued**

| Item | Non-GSA | GSA | *t* | *p* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| How often to you expect to hear sexist remarks in college? | 2.90 (.88) | 2.72 (.95) | 1.43 | .15 |

**Note:** Responses were made on a Likert-type scale format with options ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (very often/frequently). Means for GSA and non-GSA schools are shown, standard deviations are in parentheses. T-tests compared GSA to non-GSA schools; significant value is in bold.

($M = 1.65$, $SD = 1.16$) a GSA, $t(91) = 4.97$, $p < .001$, $d = .75$. Finally, estimates on percentages of atheist/agnostic students were higher for schools with GSAs ($M = 2.32$, $SD = 1.65$) than for schools without GSAs ($M = 1.61$, $SD = 1.18$), $t(83) = 3.12$, $p = .002$, $d = .49$.

These results provide mixed support for the hypothesis that schools with GSAs are more diverse or inclusive overall. Further, on the majority of the questions in the survey, respondents from schools with a GSA responded similarly to those from schools without a GSA. *T*-tests (see Table 1) indicated marked similarity between the two. This seems to suggest that the presence of a GSA by itself is not sufficient to explain school climate. School climate, as it relates to diversity and acceptance of LGBTQ students, may be better explained by other variables.

### *Geographic location of school*

To test our hypothesis that school diversity and acceptance would be influenced by other variables, we began by examining school area as an explanatory variable. Additionally, we expected that demographics and sentiment would differ between urban, suburban, and rural areas. Echoing results from previous research, our results indicate that schools in urban (30%) and suburban (33%) areas are more likely to have GSA than schools in rural (6%) areas, $\chi^2(246) = 15.67$, $p < .001$, $v = .25$. Similarly, schools in suburban areas had more openly gay teachers and staff (55%)

than did schools in urban (33%) or rural areas (12%), though these differences were not statistically significant, $\chi^2(130) = 5.89$, $p = .20$. However, a significantly larger proportion of teachers and staff in suburban areas (54%) were supportive of LGBTQ students than were teachers in urban (34%) or rural areas (12%), $\chi^2(132) = 16.80$, $p < .001$, $v = .35$.

While 40% of students from suburban schools and 45% of students from urban schools indicated that their high school had "more than 20" LGBTQ students, only 10% of students in rural areas responded this way. Students from rural areas were more likely to indicate that their high school had a specific number of LGBTQ students, with 39% reporting "between 2 and 5." A one-way ANOVA, using school location as the independent variable and estimate of LGBTQ students as the dependent variable, also confirms that these differences are statistically significant, $F(2, 310) = 20.27$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .11$. Post-hoc analysis using Tukey's procedure indicates that students in rural schools ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.46$) reported lower numbers of LGBTQ students than students in both urban ($M = 4.58$, $SD = 1.68$), $p < .001$, and suburban schools ($M = 4.79$, $SD = 1.34$), $p < .001$.

***School size***

Finally, we investigated the effects of school size. There were some noticeable differences between students from large and small schools. The variable describing graduating class size was dichotomized using a median-split, so that a graduating class of fewer than 500 was categorized as "small" and a class size of 500 or more was categorized as "large." Large schools are more likely than small schools to have a GSA, $\chi^2(246) = 33.53$, $p < .001$, $v = .36$. Further, students from small schools ($M = 3.27$, $SD = 1.34$) were more likely than students from large schools ($M = 2.02$, $SD = 1.10$) to hear the expressions "That's so gay" and "You're so gay" at their high school, $t(319) = 2.50$, $p = .01$, $d = 1.01$. This heightened level of awareness might be expected in a smaller, close-knit environment.

Fewer students at small schools (22%), as compared to large schools (78%), reported the presence of openly gay/lesbian/bisexual teachers or

staff, $\chi^2(99) = 9.89$, $p = .002$, $v = .31$. Similarly, fewer students at small schools (30%), as compared to large schools (70%), reported the presence of teachers and staff who supported LGBTQ students, $\chi^2(133) = 13.24$, $p < .001$, $v = .31$.

Not surprisingly, students at large schools were more aware of the presence of other LGBTQ students than were students at small schools. Respondents from large schools reported a higher percentage ($M = 5.20$, $SD = 1.07$) of LGBTQ students than did students from small schools ($M = 3.58$, $SD = 1.67$), $t(63) = 5.46$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.15$. However, a similar proportion of respondents from both large (20%) and small (15%) schools identified themselves as LGBTQ, $\chi^2(324) = 1.82$, $p = .11$. These results may indicate that the presence of a GSA simply makes LGBTQ students more visible, even in large school environments. However, it is left to future research to uncover whether LGBTQ students are more visible at these schools because the GSA empowers them to be more visible or because the community is more aware of the GSA's presence.

Finally, the dynamics of school size appear to influence school climate and expectations of school demographics in various ways as could be expected in homogeneous environments. For example, estimates regarding the percentage of religions represented at one's school differed between large and small schools. Students from small schools estimated a higher percentage ($M = 6.95$, $SD = 2.29$) of Christian peers than did those at large schools ($M = 5.94$, $SD = 1.76$), $t(95) = 2.42$, $p = .01$, $d = .49$. Similarly, students at small schools estimated fewer peers ($M = 1.45$, $SD = .81$) from other religions (Judaism, Muslim, Hinduism) than did those at large schools ($M = 2.44$, $SD = 1.56$), $t(90) = 4.10$, $p < .001$, $d = .79$. However, the estimates of atheists/agnostics did not differ between small ($M = 1.62$, $SD = 1.40$) and large schools ($M = 2.05$, $SD = 1.53$), $t(96) = 1.39$, $p = .16$. Following these estimates, a larger proportion of students at small schools (60%) expressed disapproval towards being gay/lesbian/bisexual based on religious reasons when compared to students at large schools (40%), $\chi^2(96) = 4.20$, $p = .04$, $v = .21$. While it should be noted that these estimates and sentiments may be largely geographical, as this survey was conducted in a particularly conservative region, these results nonetheless help shed

light on factors driving acceptance and diversity in rural, conservative regions of the Southwest.

## Discussion

This survey research type, quantitative study, investigated the retrospective accounts of school climate at South Texas schools. Our results provided mixed support for our hypothesis that GSA schools would be safer and more diverse than non-GSA schools. Overall, these results indicate that there are many dynamics involved in creating diverse, inclusive, and supportive environments for LGBTQ students. These factors include school location, school size, and school demographics, which are closely tied to the socio-political climate of the region.

The results indicated that GSAs contributed to the awareness of LGBTQ students and possibly helped with outness, albeit not acceptance. The difference between awareness and acceptance, was marked in the data. For example, our results showed that while students at GSA schools were more aware of the presence of LGBTQ students, we still found that many respondents had moral reservations about sexual orientation. This discrepancy suggests that outness (or awareness of diversity) is not necessarily correlated with acceptance, and that the presence of a GSA contributes more to outness and awareness than to acceptance—a paradigm driven largely by public sentiment (Hackimer et al., 2015; Poteat et al., 2015). However, our study did not investigate why students at schools with GSAs are more aware of LGBTQ students. One possibility may be that GSAs empower students to be more visible. Alternatively, another possibility may be that GSAs are simply more visible in smaller, homogeneous, conservative environments and, therefore, students at these schools are more aware of LGBTQ students even if they are not accepting. This is an important topic for future research.

Differences between GSA and non-GSA schools surfaced when comparing school size and school location. Students in larger, less homogenous communities are more likely to be exposed to diverse lifestyles, whereas students from small communities may feel more pressure to "hide" (Baams et al., 2018; Kazyak, 2011). As suggested by the data,

homogenous schools in rural areas are less likely to have GSAs and visibly out LGBTQ students (Poteat et al., 2016). Rural communities may avoid thinking about sexuality, and by doing so, avoid labeling LGBTQ behaviors and identities, or otherwise having to face the fact that this kind of difference exists in their community (Dahl et al., 2015; Gray, 2009). This type of avoidance behavior may serve as a defense mechanism, allowing for the preservation of a "traditional community" and the ability to avoid changes brought on by acknowledging the heterogeneity of their community. Hence for LGBTQ students in rural, in less diverse and supportive, communities, the risk to be out may be deemed too great (Poteat et al., 2016).

Our results are consistent with other studies (Dahl et al., 2015; Galliher et al., 2004; Goodenow et al., 2006; Hall et al., 2017; Kosciw et al., 2013; Poon & Saewyc, 2009) which identify specific problems present in smaller, rural schools. Specifically, we hypothesize that these smaller, more traditional communities may be more resistant to acceptance and diversity—an issue which manifested itself during our investigation of GSA schools in these regions. That is, the intrinsic nature of communities in these areas may limit the benefits of GSAs seen in larger, more diverse schools (Calzo et al., 2018; Dahl et al., 2015; Hackimer et al., 2015).

## Limitations to the study

The current research does have some limitations. First, this survey was conducted at two Southwestern, Hispanic-Serving Institutions and the generalizability of these results is likely limited to this context. However, this region is relatively under-studied, and these results provide valuable information for leaders at schools in these regions. Second, the e-mail invitation to this study described it as a survey investigating "sexual orientation, race, gender, and religion" and students who elected to participate in this study may have responded more positively to our questions. Finally, our research focused specifically on the students' retrospective perceptions of the demographics and climate of their schools. While perceptions and memories may sometimes bias responses, respondents here responded consistently, whether biased or not. Still,

we did not investigate teachers' perceptions of school climate. Future research should implement other ways to identify LGBTQ faculty and staff members to correlate the school environment with that of the community and local demographics (Graybill et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

We believe that this research adds to the continuing discussion on how to make schools safer and more inclusive for sexual minority students. While these results are no doubt troubling, they provide an honest picture of rural, Southwestern school environments, which are largely neglected in the literature. We expect that these results are best generalized to other Southwestern areas and communities. While this study has helped clarify the roles and interactions of some important variables, we have left many questions unanswered and have raised additional questions. In particular, we hope that school leaders view these results as opportunities to enact and expand leadership for social justice (Steck et al., 2016). Because change would not be initiated in such areas where the overall community climate condones discrimination, leadership thus becomes an important factor in facilitating change. We look forward to continued discussion on, and progress toward, making schools and communities safer, especially those schools in remote, rural areas which are often overlooked by those of us in larger, metropolitan areas.

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