

# Attrition Risk and Resilience Among Sexual Minority College Students

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*Retention is one of the most frequently studied issues regarding college students. Most of this research has focused on majority college students, e.g., White, middle-class. More recently, retention literature has expanded to look at reasons why minority (e.g., non-White, disabled) college students decide to stay at or leave a university. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, however, remain an under-acknowledged and little-studied group in retention literature. This article seeks to demonstrate how sexual minority students are at high risk of attrition and why this group deserves research devoted to reducing this risk. This article also discusses how changes to college policy can improve the campus climate and quality of life for LGBT students.*

## A Population at Risk

Retention of college students is a frequently studied issue (Sanlo, 2004). The reasons why a student may decide to leave or stay at a particular school is of great importance to colleges and universities. Beyond an interest in improving quality of life for students, tuition loss due to attrition (student drop out) is one of the primary negative financial influences on institutions of higher learning (Penn, 1999, as cited in Freeman, Hall, & Bresciani, 2007). Dozens of papers have been published on attrition risks and persistence among college students, and, in the more recent past, a growing number of studies have considered the health, resilience, and retention of minority (non-White) and disabled students due to increased awareness of the salience of these factors (Sanlo, 2004). Absent from this body of literature is information on the attrition and retention of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students, although this population is at high risk for many of the issues identified in retention literature as predictors of attrition (Sanlo, 2004).

More than 50% of students voluntarily leave their first

college or university in the United States, and 46% of these students never earn a college degree (Freeman, et al., 2007; Berkner, He, & Cataldi, 2002). Data remain scant on how many sexual minority students have withdrawn from their schools, in part because admissions data do not track sexual orientation (even LGBT scholars like Ronni Sanlo admit that these data—unlike information about race and sex, which is typically less fluid and controversial—would be hard to collect, while the board of the Common Application, an application option offered by 414 universities, recently rejected a move to include sexual orientation as an optional checkbox, citing concerns about how the question would be “perceived by students.”) (Sanlo, 2004; Steinberg, 2011).

However, the 2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People found that 33% of all LGBT students and 38% of transgender students have seriously considered leaving their institution due to sexuality-related problems they experienced on campus (Rankin, Blumenfeld, Weber, & Frazer, 2010). Sherrill and Hardesty (1994) found that 31% of sexual minority students surveyed left their schools for a semester or longer, and 33% reported dropping out completely due to issues surrounding their sexual orientation, including harassment (as cited in Sanlo, 2004).

Existing college retention theory, explored more deeply in the subsequent paragraphs, has helped guide college policy for other student groups in hopes of maintaining student enrollment. Retention theory has identified social isolation and alienation, difficulty identifying with peers and faculty, and prejudice as leading reasons for attrition (Sanlo, 2004). While all students run the risk of such experiences, the sexual minority population is especially vulnerable in these areas (Sanlo, 2004). More research is needed to identify LGBT students’ specific needs and to develop intervention strategies that will allow these students to persist to graduation.

### **Risks Beyond Attrition**

The threat of cutting short one’s education is serious. However, sustained abuse, harassment, discrimination, and social

isolation can make an impact that goes far beyond decreased earning potential for those students who do not graduate from college. Several well-publicized incidents in late 2010 highlight the need to address the campus climate for LGBT students. One case involved a male student at a large university in New Jersey who committed suicide three days after two of his classmates secretly filmed his sexual encounter with another male student and posted the video on the Web (Hutchinson, 2010). The following week, another openly gay student hanged himself in his dorm room at a university in Rhode Island (Hubbard, 2010).

These were two of five gay youth suicides reported by the national media in the fall of 2010. While each incident was the result of its own separate set of circumstances, these tragic events have sparked serious national interest and concern over the quality of life for gay youths and students (Hubbard, 2010). In her study of the relationship between college students, homosexuality, and suicide, researcher Heather Murphy found that gay, lesbian, and bisexual college students were twice as likely as heterosexuals to have planned and to have attempted suicide in the previous year (University of Washington, 2007). Interestingly, students in this study who identified as heterosexual but reported being attracted to people of the same sex or engaging in same-sex sexual behavior also emerged as a higher risk group (University of Washington, 2007). These students were found to be three times as likely as heterosexuals to have made a plan to commit suicide in the past year and six times as likely to have actually attempted suicide in the same period (University of Washington, 2007).

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in Murphy's study reported more verbal victimization than did heterosexual students, which included homophobic statements; overhearing others talk about gays, lesbians, and bisexuals in derogatory terms; and being harassed for their sexual orientation. More sexual minority students also reported experiencing physical victimization, such as being physically threatened or assaulted, and getting into fights. Murphy noted that the study showed that victimization—not sexual orientation—was the risk factor that increased suicidal behavior risk (University of Washington, 2007). As more research is

gathered, the challenge to school administrators will be to help reduce on-campus victimization of sexual minority students to keep students enrolled, and, most importantly, to reduce their risk of suicidal behavior.

### **Retention Theory**

Student retention has been studied from a number of perspectives looking to explain the interaction between the individual student and his or her institution of higher education. Starting with Tinto's Student Integration Model (SIM) of 1975, these theories provide the foundation for intervention programs that have helped decrease student attrition. Retention literature is built on the bedrock of three frameworks that were introduced early on in the study of retention: Tinto's SIM, Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984), and Bean's Student Attrition Model (1980) (McQueen, 2009). These theories, especially the SIM, have sparked dozens of research initiatives to prove, disprove, expand upon, and improve these models, resulting in a more refined idea of what contributes to student attrition.

The SIM has reached "near-paradigmatic status," having been cited by over 400 papers and linked to 170 dissertations (McQueen, 2009). The SIM places academic and social integration at the heart of the attrition process. This model suggests that, through formal and informal interactions on campus and in academic and social settings, "students either affirm or reevaluate their initial goals and commitments," and those who lack a necessary amount of interaction with others or experience negative interactions may reevaluate in favor of departing the institution (Fischer, 2007).

Astin's Theory of Involvement relies on the "input-process-output" model, which posits that the more involvement a student has in various aspects of college life, which is defined as "the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to the academic experience" (Astin, 1984), the higher the likelihood that the student persists to graduation (Fischer, 2007). Fischer (2007) noted that both the SIM and the Theory of Involvement emphasize the importance of making connections to

individuals and groups as a predictor of student retention.

Bean's Student Attrition Model is based on the idea that students arrive at a university with certain beliefs and expectations that are either affirmed or disproved through their experiences on campus (Fischer, 2007). Eaton and Bean (1995) updated Bean's original theory from 1980 to include student background characteristics related to integration, such as socioeconomic status or past academic or personal achievements. This updated version theorizes that social and academic integration combine with characteristics of the university (e.g., administrative response to student needs, faculty-student interaction), as well as personal factors, such as wanting to be with a significant other at another school or losing scholarship funding, to influence the student's attitudes (Fischer, 2007). These attitudes then determine the student's feelings of commitment to the institution and his or her sense of belonging (Fischer, 2007).

### **Where Prevailing Theory Falls Short**

Despite a substantial success in helping colleges develop policy and programming to reduce their attrition rates, retention theory suffers from the fact that the prevailing models are based primarily on "the experiences of a 'typical' college student who is likely White and middle to upper class" (Fischer, 2007). While many challenges faced by transitioning college students are universal, some issues specific to "nontraditional students" may combine with or supersede more universal concerns to shift priorities related to attrition. For example, receiving a scholarship increases the likelihood of retention for all students (Wohlgemuth, Whalen, Sullivan, Nading, Shelley, & Wang, 2007), but withdrawal of scholarship money would likely combine with or supersede other attrition risks (e.g., social isolation) for a student of a lower socioeconomic background. In other cases, the theory may not be applicable to certain groups. Tinto's SIM, for example, maintains that separation from home communities is necessary for students to successfully transition to college (Fisher, 2007). However, later research on the retention of minority students found that personal support from off-campus

family and friends was crucial for persistence for some specific minority student groups (Fisher, 2007). In her own work on differences in college involvement by varying race and ethnicity, Fischer adds three factors that may affect adjustment and subsequent success in college: “minority status, socioeconomic disadvantage, and being a first generation college student” (Fischer, 2007). Future research should add “sexual minority status” to this list and guide the creation of college policy to address the specific risks facing these students.

### **Attrition Risk Factors for Sexual Minority Students**

As described earlier, very little data exist on the risk and resilience of sexual minority students and college attrition. What is known, however, is that sexual minority students face high levels of stress that differ from those experienced by the general college population (e.g., on-campus discrimination, harassment, and exclusion) (Sanlo, 2004). Some of these additional stressors translate into risk factors for attrition, if analyzed in the context of prevailing retention theory.

### **Social Isolation**

As Fischer stated, “There is a reasonable assumption underpinning models of attrition that low solidarity and feelings of isolation prevent social and academic integration” (2007). With the 2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People study reporting that 23% of LGBT students at U.S. universities have experienced harassment (Rankin et al., 2010), discrimination is likely a prevalent factor contributing to the risk of attrition among sexual minority students. While a record 52% of Americans perceived gay and lesbian relations as “morally acceptable” in a 2010 Gallup poll (Saad, 2010), campus climates still appear less than fully welcoming to sexual minority students. In 2004, fewer than 10% of colleges and universities in the United States had sexual orientation specified in their nondiscrimination policies (Sanlo, 2004). This number has grown over the last several years as more schools have expanded their nondiscrimination policies

to include sexual orientation; however, as of 2010, more than 33% of all transgender students and 13% of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students report fearing for their physical safety while on campus (Rankin et al., 2010). The recent suicides committed by sexual minority students, discussed above, have highlighted the vulnerability of this population and have increased public concern about the issue (“Raymond Chase”, 2010). Hopefully, this concern will bring about real changes made to public and university policy to improve the campus climates for these students.

As Tinto said, “students are more likely to persist and graduate in settings that involve them as valued members of the institution” (2001). Students who experience harassment and fear for their physical safety will no doubt struggle to perceive themselves as “valued members of the institution,” and, according to this theory, may be at higher risk of attrition.

### **Academic Integration**

Academic integration is another important component of all three aforementioned retention theories. Though these theorists diverge on what contributes to or results in academic involvement (McQueen, 2009), Davidson, Beck, and Milligan were able to identify several salient factors, including taking an interest in class discussions and perceiving that faculty cares about students’ intellectual growth (2009). In her article “Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people,” Rankin found that 43% of LGBT college students believed their schools’ curricula did not represent the contributions of LGBT people (2003). This perceived lack of representation may affect the strength of sexual minority students’ academic integration [e.g., academic confidence and positive relationships with one’s teachers (Strage, 1999)], or, at the least, support the idea that LGBT students are undervalued in their educational environments.

### **The Role of Race**

In her article on the roles of race and ethnicity in college involvement and outcomes, Fischer found that Black and His-

panic students are less likely than White students to succeed in the critical transition to college and less likely to persist to graduation (2007). Fischer determined that heightened risk for these students was the result of compounded factors: Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be first-generation college attendees; more likely to be from a lower socio-economic background; and more likely to struggle with adjustment as a racial minority, if their campus is predominantly White (2007).

If the Black or Hispanic student is also a sexual minority student, the list of risk factors grows beyond the threat of “racial hostility that inhibits their adjustment to college” (Fischer, 2007), to include the potential for harassment or discrimination based on sexual orientation. Moreover, compounding the adjustment issue for racial minority and sexual minority students is that many do not find acceptance in either of their minority groups. Research shows that sexual minority students of color are more likely to conceal their sexual orientation than White LGBT students are (Rankin, 2003). Rankin (2003) found that LGBT students of color did not feel comfortable being open about their sexuality among heterosexual people of color and felt “out of place” in predominantly White sexual minority settings. This effect can heighten these students’ feeling of isolation and increase their chances of attrition.

### **The Gender Effect**

Belonging to two or three campus minorities can have a significant impact on a student’s mental health. In their study of sexual minority college women’s experiences with discrimination, Friedman and Leaper (2010) emphasized that sexual minority women experience both sexism and heterosexism, and reported that experiencing both kinds of discrimination had an “especially detrimental impact on psychological well-being.”

### **Socioeconomic Status**

Studies show that any student who comes from a lower socioeconomic background is less likely to persist to graduation



(Wohlgemuth et al., 2007). In a recent survey by Public Agenda, 56% of young adults said needing to work full time was the biggest impediment to them returning to college after they had left (Survey, 2010). Of those surveyed that had failed to graduate, 58% did not receive support from their parents or relatives, and 69% did not receive financial aid support (Survey, 2010).

Black and Hispanic students are more likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds (Fischer, 2007), but for any sexual minority student, financial stress carries an additional risk, because it can be tied to sexual identity. Many students are dependent on some parental contribution to continue their educations. When a student's sexual orientation is revealed to a parent, withdrawal of financial support is one of the first things that can, and often does, occur if the parent feels angered or betrayed by their son or daughter's announcement (Sherrill & Hardesty, 1994).

## **Mental Health and Development**

Fear of rejection—from parents, peers, or community—can keep sexual minority students from revealing their sexual identities as they work to determine what exactly their identities will be. Late adolescence and emerging adulthood is a period of significant identity development (Sanlo, 2004). This development is complicated for sexual minority students navigating what are usually heteronormative environments (Friedman & Morgan, 2009)—environments where heterosexuality and heterosexuals are considered “normal,” and nonheterosexual people are considered to be outside the norm. Chickering and Reisser (1993) established seven vectors of development for all college students, including developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing purpose, developing integrity, developing mature interpersonal relationships, and establishing identity (as cited in Sanlo, 2004). It is these last two that pose unique and heightened challenges for the sexual minority student, and Sanlo (2004) theorizes that increased concentration on these two areas of development as students explore and come to terms with issues of sexuality, gender, and

same-sex relationships may come at the expense of other developmental tasks.

That these issues would monopolize the sexual minority student's developmental process seems reasonable because so many factors are to be weighed. If the student is open about his or her sexual minority status, he or she faces higher rates of harassment and exclusion (Friedman & Morgan, 2009). In addition to affecting a student's chances of achieving academic success and maintaining enrollment, stigmatization and harassment can result in a variety of serious problems that can have deep impact on the student's physical and mental well-being (Sanlo, 2004). These potential effects include feelings of alienation and isolation (primary risk factors in attrition), low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, substance abuse, self-destructive behaviors, and suicide (Sanlo, 2004).

Conversely, if the student hides his or her sexual minority status, he or she loses opportunities to form intimate and mature interpersonal relationships that are critical to development (Friedman & Morgan, 2009). According to the 2010 State of Higher Education survey, more than half of all LGBT students hide their sexual identity or gender identity to avoid intimidation. In addition to reducing opportunities to form close relationships, concealing one's sexual identity can involve maintaining two identities, such as presenting a heterosexual identity to family and friends at home, while cultivating a sexual minority identity at school. Keeping the two identities distinct creates "enormous stress of identity management" (Sanlo, 2004), wherein the student may be in two very different phases of identity development depending on whether he or she is on campus or at home (Fassinger, 1998). This duality significantly complicates the identity development process (Sanlo, 2004).

### **Protective Factors**

Whether sexual minority students are open or taciturn about their sexual orientation, some students experience harassment or significant feelings of isolation yet, nevertheless, the students persist to graduation. In fact, "most sexual minority youth

cope with the increased stress and some even excel” despite the pressures created by “threats of rejection, harassment, and abuse” (Sanlo, 2004). To what can the resilience of these students be attributed?

To answer this question would require research yet to be conducted (Sanlo, 2004), but some coping strategies used by persisting students can be inferred from existing literature. Both the SIM and the Theory of Involvement highlight the importance of students making connections to individuals and groups, which increases the likelihood of retention (Fischer, 2007). Indeed, Abrahamowicz (1988) found that students who were involved in campus activities, such as student groups, clubs, arts troupes, and social-community organizations, reported much higher levels of satisfaction with their university than those who participated in noncampus activities. This effect is seen in sexual minority students who are willing and able to join campus groups based on sexual orientation. In their study of sexual minority college women, Friedman and Leaper (2010) found that when these women joined groups based on their sexual orientation, they not only created bonds between the members, but group membership may have protected them from further discrimination—even as increased demonstration of their sexual orientation may have opened them to more potential stigma. By joining a group of people whose identities affirm one’s own, however, an amount of support and protection can be gained that may offset the impact of other stigmatization (Friedman & Leaper, 2010).

Other protective factors identified by the general retention theory discussed above also likely apply to sexual minority students, including higher academic achievement, institutional commitment, degree commitment, strong familial and peer support (Davidson et al., 2007), living on campus (Freeman et al., 2007), athletic involvement, and receipt of financial aid (Wohlgemuth et al., 2007).

## **Conclusion**

As retention researcher George Metz (2005) pointed out, there is no “one size fits all” approach to student retention (as

cited in Davidson et al., 2009). However, researchers have and continue to mete out salient factors contributing to the risk of student attrition and look for ways to enhance what they have identified as protective factors. This has led, in turn, to the adjustment of university policy to improve student retention rates by targeting at-risk students. Based on the concepts in existing retention literature, sexual minority students are at high risk for attrition because of ongoing discrimination and prejudice that reduce their satisfaction and sense of involvement. Universities must show these students that they are valued members of their communities. With 23% of LGBT college students reporting experiences with harassment (Rankin et al., 2010), expanding school nondiscrimination policies to include sexual orientation would be a strong step.

More research is needed, however, to pinpoint the specific attrition risks that sexual minority students face. The loss in human capital is significant for those students who depart from college and never return. The financial losses to the institution from which the student departs are also to be considered. Lastly, it is necessary to acknowledge that these students are visible and important members of college communities who enrich the quality of campus life for all students, and they deserve the same attention afforded other student groups in retention literature.

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