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BIRDS OF A FEATHER? FRIENDSHIP UTILIZATION BY SEXUAL MINORITY
STUDENTS DURING THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

By

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University of Nebraska, 2018

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Friendship is important for individuals at any point in their lives, but takes on a new role during emerging adulthood as individuals make the transition into adult roles and responsibilities (Arnett 2000, 2006). Potentially even more significant is the importance of friendship to sexual minority young adults who are also forming their identities at this stage (Brandon-Friedman and Kim 2016). Since the transition to college takes place during emerging adulthood, it is important to examine how sexual minority young adults utilize their friendships with other sexual minorities as well as heterosexual peers to navigate this transition. Drawing on in-depth interviews with ten sexual minority students attending a large Midwestern university, I found that participants often sought out friendships with other sexual minorities. These friendships, in many cases, buffered the stressors associated with being a sexual minority, and highlighted the significance of friendships with individuals who share one's minority status.

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Introduction

Friendship provides many benefits to an individual: happiness, psychological needs such as relatedness and belonging, social interaction, and emotional support (Demir et al. 2015; Demir and Ozdemir 2010; Demir and Weitekamp 2007; Myers 2000). Friendships and perceived close relationships with others may also help to alleviate or prevent feelings of disconnect or what Durkheim (1897) calls “anomie,” overwhelming feelings of not belonging within society. Conversely, the feelings of belonging and relatedness that friendships can provide may help to increase an individual’s feelings of social integration, which Durkheim (1897) defines as key to individual and societal well-being.

Much existing research supports homophily, or similarity of traits, between friends, yet research suggests that friendships with individuals who are dissimilar may have social and individual benefits (Cherng, Turney, and Kao 2014; Galupo and St. John 2001; Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould 2008; Weinstock and Bond 2002). Several studies have identified that positive friendships with similar others may have positive effects for minority groups, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and queer (LGBQ, where ‘queer’ encompasses individuals who are otherwise non-heterosexual) individuals (see Alessi et al. 2017; Doty et al. 2010). Research has also indicated that friendships between a minority individual and a member of the dominant group can have positive influence on the minority’s feelings of acceptance, and buffer negative feelings of dissimilarity (Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould 2008).

Friendship is particularly salient during emerging adulthood when individuals transition from childhood and adolescence to the roles and responsibilities of being an adult (Arnett 2000; 2006). Because many individuals in this age range may be living on their own for the first time,

they must seek support from new sources outside of their family and friends at home (Snapp et al. 2015). Because formation of a sexual minority identity often takes place at the same time as emerging adulthood (Brandon-Friedman & Kim 2016), strong friendships may be of particular importance for LGBQ individuals during this time. Previous research has shown that social support may act as a buffer for the negative health risks associated with being a sexual minority young adult, such as engagement in high-risk behaviors such as attempting suicide, use of illegal drugs, and risky sexual behaviors (Ryan et al. 2009). Both friendships with other sexual minority individuals as well as heterosexual individuals are important to LGBQ individuals, although differences in the utilization and benefits of both of these friendships may exist.

Drawing on data from ten in-depth qualitative interviews, the current study examines the friendships of sexual minority students during their transition to and first year of college. Based on prior research regarding both the benefits of friendships as well as the utilization of friendships with similar and different others, this study was guided by the following research questions. What role do friendships play during the transition to college for sexual minority students? Specifically, how are friendships with other sexual minorities used to navigate transitioning to college as a sexual minority? Findings suggest that sexual minority students do form and maintain friendships with other sexual minority students, and that these friendships are valuable and significant to them. These friendships were especially important for adjusting to campus and daily life on campus as a sexual minority student. This research is important not only for understanding the experiences that first-year sexual minority students having during their transition to college, but also to understand the ways campuses may be able to ensure the success of students in their first years and beyond.

Literature Review

Importance of Friendships

Common sense tells us that close relationships with others, such as friendships, are essential to the human condition. This is supported by several studies which point to the benefits of friendship: friendship as a correlate of happiness (Demir and Weitekamp 2007; Myers 2000), as providing a context where basic psychological needs, such as relatedness to others, are met (Demir and Ozdemir 2010), and fulfilling a need for social interaction (Demir et al. 2015). Among classical sociology, Durkheim (1897) also emphasized the importance of feeling connected and related to others with his theory of anomie, the sense of not belonging. Forming friendships with others can help to create and strengthen feelings of belonging, thereby potentially alleviating feelings of anomie. By seeking out and maintaining friendships, individuals experience not only intended benefits, but also unintended ones as well.

According to Coleman (1988), social capital exists in the relationships between individuals, and makes it possible for them to achieve certain ends that they would not have been able to do otherwise. Relationships, including friendships, are a result of social interaction, and may provide some motivation for individuals to seek out and form friendships, especially those that would be beneficial to them. Spending time with friends and engaging in enjoyable activities with friends have both been suggested as factors in the relationship between friendship and happiness (Demir et al. 2015). Social interactions with friends in an environment such as a college campus may even lead to the creation of new friendships and friendship networks,

further benefitting individuals by increasing their number of friendships. However, even social interaction does not even necessarily have to result in a friendship in order to be beneficial; simply the perceived possibility that a friendship may develop can provide mental health benefits (Cunningham 2008).

Emotional support may be one of the clearest benefits of friendship. Feeling supported with regards to problems may help to decrease feelings of disconnect or not belonging to the society around an individual, which may help to decrease anomie (Durkheim 1897). Additionally, feeling supported may help an individual feel as though they belong in and are a part of their community, increasing their social integration (Durkheim 1897). Feeling connected to others, and having a sense of belonging, which may be achieved through emotional support, may result in increased happiness. The relationship between friendship and well-being and happiness is not only a commonly held conception among the wider population, but has also been well-researched within the literature (Demir et al 2015). Demir and Weitekamp (2007) identified friendship as a correlate of happiness, and that both friendship quality and friendship quantity were positively correlated to happiness. This implies that both the number of friends, as well as the friendships themselves with regards to characteristics like closeness and reciprocity, may be equally important in influencing overall happiness.

Feelings of relatedness and belonging when friendships do develop are another benefit friendship can provide. Relatedness refers to feeling connected to and developing relationships with others (Baumeister and Leary 1995; Ryan and Deci 2000). Optimal well-being cannot be achieved without feelings of relatedness (Deci and Ryan 2000), which supports the importance of friendship to an individual's overall life. In fact, fulfilling social needs such as belongingness

and relatedness were identified by Maslow (1943) as necessary before advancing to personal esteem needs such as independence and self-respect.

These feelings of relatedness and belonging may be especially important during times of transition in an individual's life, such as the transition to and first year of college. Research has found that making compatible friends and developing strong friendships is essential to a successful first year of college (Wilcox, Wynn, and Fyvie-Gould 2005). This implies that finding friends and feeling a connection to them may facilitate feelings of belonging on campus as a whole, and that friendships may benefit a student in terms of independence, respect from self and others, and even achievement in college. The fact that friendships take on a new, highly significant role as individuals transition to college is just one of the ways that friendship differ over time and between groups.

In-Group and Out-Group Friendships

Several studies have pointed out differences between groups in the way that individuals form and utilize friendships (Cheng, Turney, and Kao 2014; Demir and Orthel 2011; Doty et al. 2010). In-group and out-group friendships or, more specifically, friendships between those in the dominant and non-dominant groups, may result in inequalities in the friendship. One of the most significant factors influencing many out-group friendships with members of the dominant group may be the imbalance in power between friends. This power imbalance may cause conflict between friends, especially for the sexual minority friend (Muraco 2012); attempts to rationalize or justify transgressions by heterosexual friends may also cause an emotional burden for sexual minorities (Ueno and Gentile 2015). Both in-group and out-group friendships have been examined, especially for minority individuals, and both types of friendships have displayed

weaknesses and strengths (Doty et al. 2010; Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould 2008; Price 1999; Weinstock and Bond 2002).

Several studies have found negative effect of cross-group friendships. These friendships are fragile when dominant group members view their minority friends' behaviors and status through their dominant group ideology (McWilliams and Howard 1993; O'Meara 1989). This has been shown to result in negative impacts for the minority individual in the friendship. For example, qualitative work on sexuality and friendship have indicated that sexual minority individuals may feel devalued or underappreciated by their straight friends (Muraco 2012; Price 1999; Weinstock and Bond 2002). Muraco (2012), in examining friendships between sexual minority and heterosexual individuals of opposite genders, found that sexual minorities were more likely to report conflict within their friendships. These conflicts were often a result of the straight friend's expectations that their sexual minority friend would fulfill stereotypes of sexual minorities as well as over differential access to resources, especially familial resources (Muraco 2012). Similarly, Ueno and Gentile (2015) reported that, despite reporting that their friendships with heterosexual peers were equal, sexual minority students had to rationalize their friends' potentially discriminatory behavior and justify it by emphasizing their more-accepting characteristics. These actions needed to maintain equality in the friendship ultimately resulted in a burden on the sexual minorities involved (Ueno and Gentile 2015). More broadly, cross-group friendships have been identified as less satisfying than within-group friendships, and as likely to dissolve more quickly than within-group friendships (Rude and Herda 2010; Stearns, Buchmann, and Bonneau 2009). However, cross-group friendships are not necessarily all negative for the individual with a minority status.

Some research suggests that benefits may come from an individual's friendship with someone who is dissimilar to them on a given characteristic. For example, friendships of students of color with white students at a primarily-white university were able to buffer feelings of dissatisfaction and a lack of belonging for them at the university (Mendoza-Denton and Page-Gould 2008). This is significant because a similar study of racial minorities found that minority students reported fewer friendships, and were less likely to report any friendships at all, than their white peers (Cherng, Turney, and Kao 2014). These different results may imply that cross-group friendships are particularly beneficial for some minority individuals, and may demonstrate a relationship between feelings of acceptance and well-being. Similarly, researchers have suggested benefits for sexual minority individuals forming and maintaining friendships with heterosexuals, such as opportunities to learn about straight people, to break down negative stereotypes about sexual minorities and the LGBTQ+ community, and to cultivate and strengthen a connection to the straight community (Galupo and St. John 2001; Weinstock and Bond 2002). Studies have also shown that sexual minorities view their friendships with heterosexuals and other sexual minorities as equal with regards to mental health benefits (Ueno and Gentile 2015), and that they do not necessarily view their friendships with heterosexuals as significant in their crossing of sexual orientation boundaries (Muraco 2012). This is significant because it implies that, at least to some sexual minorities, all friendships are equal, despite differences in sexual orientation.

In contrast to out-groups are in-groups. In-groups are groups to which an individual belongs and towards which an individual feels a sense of loyalty. Related to friendships, this implies homogenous friendships, such as friendships between females or a friendship group

consisting of sexual minorities. Research by Doty et al. (2010) found that sexual minority individuals report receiving higher levels of support for sexuality-related stressors from their other sexual minority friends than from their heterosexual friends. A similar finding has been presented by Alessi and colleagues (2017) in their focus group-based study of sexual minority college students. Specifically, their work indicated that being involved with other sexual minority students on campus resulted in decreased feelings of isolation and loneliness (Alessi et al. 2017). These potential benefits of in-group friendships, especially among sexual minorities, become even more significant when examining the transition to college, as young adults may be attempting to navigate new environments with new peers, adapt to college, and form their identity as a sexual minority.

Despite the potential negative effects of minority-majority friendships for the minority individual, research focusing on the friendships of sexual minorities have found mixed results as to if such friendships have a significant benefit over friendships with heterosexual individuals. A 2009 study by Ueno and colleagues indicated that there were not differences in relational quality for sexual minority individuals' friendships with other sexual minorities as compared to heterosexuals. Similarly, it has been found that sexual minority individuals did not see added mental health benefits from their friendships with other sexual minorities as compared to heterosexuals (Ueno et al. 2009). However, relational quality and perceived mental health benefits are only two dimensions of friendship, and other studies have provided results that indicate sexual minorities do see a difference in their friendships.

How individuals navigate in-group and out-group relationships depends upon social context. Kazyak (2012), for example, pointed out the ways geographic location can influence the

meanings of gender and sexuality in rural areas compared to urban ones. Many rural areas suffer from a “lack of queer critical mass,” (Gray, 2009: 58) which may further influence the way sexual minorities may navigate relationships with those similar to and different from them. Without a visible network of or at least one or two other sexual minorities, LGBTQ+ young adults may not have the ability to form in-group friendships. However, college is likely to offer exposure to other sexual minorities, therefore increasing the ability of sexual minority students to form friendships with them.

Friendships During Emerging Adulthood and the Transition to College

Many traditional-aged students begin college around 18, a time which coincides with the concept of emerging adulthood (Arnett 2000, 2006). Although there is not a specific age range associated with the concept, emerging adulthood is a period that follows adolescence, but precedes entering the adult world (Arnett 2000, 2006). According to Arnett (2000, 2006), emerging adulthood is characterized by several changes, including added freedom and responsibilities, the development of new relationships and roles, and new identity exploration. Because of the changes occurring during this period, friendships may become increasingly essential to a student’s successful transition to and navigation of college. Research has already indicated that friendships are essential to a successful first year of college (Wilcox, Wynn, and Fyvie-Gould 2005). The transition to college may be marked by several important milestones in various aspects of a young adult’s life, including personal, social, and academic issues. Many of these changes may present challenges to these students. Because a successful transition to college entails more than just academic issues, it may be inferred that these friendships provide support for other aspects of this transition.

Friendships may provide more emotional support during the transition to college than individuals needed before beginning the transition. Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gould (2005) liken the friendships made during the first year to familial relationships due to the increased importance of friendships within students' lives. These relationships provide direct emotional support to students, and also provide buffering support during times of stress (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gould 2005). Related to support during times of stress, a study of students' friendships during their first year of college indicated that, throughout the year, friendship was related to lower levels of both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors (Pittman and Richmond 2008). This implies that friendship may help students cope with obstacles and challenges in their lives in a healthier way.

Research has also identified that minority students, such as sexual minority students, may face additional challenges during their college transition along with those faced by majority or heterosexual students. While many more students are entering college out about their sexual orientation compared to earlier cohorts, the university setting is still a challenging one (Beemyn and Rankin 2011). Sexual minority students must contend with the academic and social pressures of college while also balancing issues relating to their sexual orientation, such as disclosure and hostility from others (Alessi et al. 2017; Sanlo 2004; Stroup, Glass, and Cohn 2014). In addition, individuals who have not yet formed and developed their sexual minority identity are likely to do so during their college years, as it is a process that occurs within the period of emerging adulthood (Brandon-Friedman and Kim 2016; Arnett 2000 & 2006).

The added pressures of dealing with issues of disclosure or identity formation may make the first year of college particularly challenging for sexual minority students (Alessi et al. 2017).

Just as strong friendships are essential to student successes during the first year of college (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gould 2005), sexuality-specific support may be especially important for sexual minority students during this transition as well. A 2016 study, for example, found that sexuality-specific supports on campus were associated with more complete identity development in LGBQ students (Brandon-Friedman and Kim 2016), a process which may be important for successful adjustment later in life. This finding compliments that of Doty et al. (2010), who found that sexual minority friends provide better support for sexuality-related stressors. Higher levels of support for sexuality-related stress, in turn, predicted lower levels of both general emotional distress and sexuality-related distress (Doty et al. 2010). This may point to the importance of not only friendships, but friendships with other sexual minorities, for student success during their first year of college.

The support received for sexuality-related issues can have a positive impact on the mental health and wellbeing of sexual minority students. Just as Pittman and Richard (2008) found that friendships in general can have a positive influence on both internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors, support for sexuality-related stressors is positively associated with reduced likelihood of risk-taking behaviors (Ryan et al. 2009). These stressors, including issues related to discrimination or rejection based on sexual orientation, issues relating to the sexual minority experience such as same-sex relationships, or other obstacles faced during identity formation, development, or disclosure, are part of the minority stress model (Meyer 2003). However, in-group friendships with other sexual minorities during the transition to and first year of college may provide support for these specific issues, and may result in increased feelings of belonging, acceptance, and connectedness to others on campus for sexual minority students.

Much of the previous work studying friendships among sexual minority young adults has been quantitative, examining broader trends across larger groups rather than gathering in-depth narratives on individual's stories. However, such studies have had mixed results and mixed conclusions. Ueno and colleagues (2009), for example, determined that sexual minority youth do not perceive any significant mental health benefits from their friendship with other sexual minorities compared to heterosexuals, and that these friendships do not differ in relational quality. Conversely, another study found that sexual minority friendships may provide better support for sexuality-related stressors than do heterosexual friends (Doty et al. 2010). However, quantitative studies do not allow for participants to elaborate on their answers; such elaboration may help to better understand why past results have been mixed.

Qualitative studies examining the friendships of sexual minority young adults with each other are relatively rare. One such study by Alessi et al. (2017) used focus groups to understand how sexual minority students navigated the transition to college and managed academic and social expectations while also contending with minority stress. This study indicated that involvement with other sexual minorities on campus could help to alleviate some negative mental health outcomes, such as feelings of isolation (Alessi et al. 2017). While the study did draw conclusions about the role of friendships with other sexual minorities during the transition to college, this was not the main focus of the study. Muraco (2012) examined friendships between sexual minorities and heterosexual individuals of opposite genders. While her research provided information about the formation and navigation of friendships for sexual minorities, the current study differs in that it focuses on a younger population. This difference is significant, as identity formation may still be taking place during the transition to college, so results may reveal

information on how friendship is significant during this process rather than focusing on individuals with more solidified sexual minority identities.

While research on the friendships of sexual minority young adults with other sexual minorities is relatively rare, there is a large body of literature on how young adults both understand sexual identity and participate in the LGBTQ+ community. Some researchers suggest that today's culture is *post-gay*, or concerned more with assimilation and an 'us-and-them' mindset rather than an 'us-versus-them' mindset (Ghaziani 2011). Others go so far as to say that, because of the shift towards post-gay, young adults today may even have trouble relating to identifying as gay (Savin-Williams 2005). However, other researchers find little evidence that young adults today are post-gay, and instead identify with well-known sexual labels that differentiate them from the heterosexual mainstream (Russell, Clarke, and Clary 2009). In selecting to identify with a well-known label, young adults are contributing to the collective gay identity, where collective identity is "the shared definition of a group that allows members to assert who [they] are" (Taylor and Whittier 1992: 105). While the environment of the gay community may have shifted from 'us-versus-them' to 'us-and-them,' (Ghaziani 2011; Tajfel and Turner 1985; Taylor and Whittier 1992) identifying as a member of the LGBTQ+ community will likely continue to be significant to young adults.

The current study seeks to further examine both sexual minority young adults' friendships with other sexual minorities as well as their transition to college. Specifically, by engaging in discussions with participants about their friendships during their transition to college through in-depth interviews, I hope to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of these friendships. This research fills a gap in the literature by taking a qualitative approach to learning

about student friendships among an LGBTQ population, and allows the students to lead the narrative and tell their own stories about their friendships.

Data and Methods

Data

Sexual minority students from a large Midwestern university were recruited for the current study, which consisted of in-depth interviews. Interviews began in summer 2017 and lasted through the 2017-2018 academic year. With participant consent, audio recording was used to capture the interviews, which each lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Interviews were transcribed by undergraduate transcriptionists and then coded by the primary researcher, who also completed the interview process. The interview template consisted of four sections that developed from each other, leading from the participants' self-described sexual orientation to the friendships that they utilized throughout their transition to college. Participants were asked to first discuss their experiences with coming out and as a sexual minority student on campus in order to allow conversation to flow naturally to friendships on campus, as this was the focus of the study (for the Interview Template, see Appendix B). This gave me a rough framework from which to build during the analysis stage of the current study.

When asked to describe their identity, participants gave a range of answers. Sexual orientations included gay ($n=2$), lesbian ($n=2$), asexual, bisexual ($n=2$), pansexual ($n=2$), and queer ($n=1$). In addition to their sexual orientations, one participant also identified their romantic attraction as panromantic, while another two identified as demisexual. Recruitment was initially restricted to sophomore student only, but was later expanded to all students beyond freshman year to increase participation. A majority of participants were in their second year at the

university (n=8); two participants were in their senior year. (for a table of participant information, see Appendix A). However, all participants answered questions about their first year in college.

Purposive sampling was used in order to recruit participants for the current study. Campus resources focused on the LGBTQ+ community, such as the LGBTQ+ resource center and student group, were contacted and asked if they would be willing to forward information on the study to students involved with the center and group. In addition, the Residence Director of the residence hall that housed the LGBTQ+ residence program was contacted and asked to spread information to residents who had lived there the previous academic year. In order to reach out to students who may have been less directly involved with the LGBTQ+ on campus but who may have still been interested in participating, I also contacted the Instructor of Record for courses offered during the 2017 Summer Sessions. Information sent to each of the contacts included a few paragraphs about the purpose of the study and the students I was hoping to reach, along with a flyer including the same information and my contact information. This allowed students to reach out privately, therefore alleviating concerns about students 'outing' themselves to others, as all contact prior to the interview was via e-mail. The study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

There were several limitations to the current study. First, recruitment of participants was limited to one university in the Midwest. Because of this, the themes discussed in the current study may not be applicable outside of this area and even the institution where data was collected. Although participants came to the university from other areas of the United States, because the interviews discussed their first year of college, the results are likely still not

generalizable. In addition, although the researcher attempted to collect an unbiased sample, advertisement through LGBTQ+ focused routes, such as the LGBTQ+ resource center, may have resulted in a sample of participants already involved with the LGBTQ+ community on campus. This involvement may imply that their sexual minority identity is extremely important to these participants, which may further influence their contribution to the data. Relatedly, a limitation to the current study is the number of participants – while ten interviews is acceptable for a qualitative study, a larger number of participants may have provided richer data from which to draw conclusions. Finally, the current political climate towards minorities, including sexual minorities, may have been a limitation on recruitment, as potential participants may have been hesitant to identify themselves as a sexual minority, despite the researcher's best attempts at ensuring confidentiality.

Methods of Analysis

Due to the qualitative, inductive nature of the current study, categories and themes were not selected before the data collection and analysis process began. Instead, a Grounded Theory approach was used for data analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1984). I elected to utilize coding methods that would allow me to draw themes and categories from the participants' responses, and to create codes and subcodes based on data collected. The data analysis program NVivo was used for the current study. Throughout initial readings of the interview transcripts, I created memos for each transcript (Saldaña 2016). These memos allowed me to think clearly about the codes that emerged from the data, as well as how these codes related or overlapped both within and across interviews. In addition, I used these memos to reflect on my relationship to the data that I was collecting. As a member of the community of interest as well as a student at a

university, memoing allowed me to examine both my emotions and sympathy towards participants, as well as any potential biases that I may have brought with me to the interview given my group membership with them.

Coding was iterative and utilized several techniques. During the interview process, field notes were used to record demographic information such as participants' age, year in school, major, and hometown. This information was then added to interview transcripts and used to categorize participant responses through attribute coding (Saldaña 2016). Although Saldaña (2016) suggests that sexual orientation may be included in attribute coding, because the current study is concerned so heavily with sexual orientation and related issues, participant responses to the corresponding item were not including for attribute coding, but were coded along with the rest of the data.

Following attribute coding, the body of each transcript was coded. The first round of coding followed the procedures of Initial Coding, including In Vivo coding (Saldaña 2016). Initial Coding was used to separate the interview transcripts into the different 'sections' laid out by the interview template that I used, as well as subsections within the larger sections. This allowed me to compare friendships of the participants, and particularly to make comparisons between sexual minority friendships and friendships with heterosexual peers. In Vivo coding was used in order to give the participants a direct voice in the study by using the words that they used themselves (Strauss, 1987).

Following the first rounds of coding, I gathered the themes that had emerged from the data. Focused Coding (Saldaña 2016) was then used to organize the original themes into larger categories. This also allowed me to create subcategories under each larger category, sometimes

using participants' exact words as a description. After these categories were created, I created a category and subcategory concept map in order to organize codes and the relationships between them based on the graphic presented by Basit (2003, 148). From this concept map I began to analyze the data, themes, and codes for relationships and trends across participants.

Findings

Each of the participants in the current study described their own unique experiences as they made the transition to college and adjusted throughout their first year. However, several common threads emerged from the interviews, suggesting that some of the students' experiences were similar. Issues relating to new friends, socializing, and academics, as well as those related to their sexual minority status such as identity management, relationships, and instances of discrimination were all brought up by participants. However, by forging friendships with other sexual minorities, whether they were sought out intentionally or started coincidentally, participants were able to create spaces that allowed them to be honest about their identities. Each of the 10 participants reported having at least one close sexual minority friend, and were often situated within larger sexual minority friend groups. These friendships provided a deeper understanding of the issues that sexual minority students face during the transition to and first year of college, like homophobia, and often fostered a deeper sense of acceptance and even pride about their sexual minority identities. This highlights the importance of these friendships to the mental health of sexual minority students.

Forming and Developing a Sexual Minority Identity

Emerging adulthood, which encompasses the college years for traditionally-aged students, is a time in which young adults develop and solidify their identities, including their

sexual identity (Arnett 2000, 2006). Participants' descriptions of their identities and their coming-out processes support the college years as a period of emerging adulthood and, therefore, identity formation and development. The idea of identity development was discussed frequently by participants. Many participants described several aspects of their identity, distinguishing between sexual and romantic attraction as well as gender identity. In addition, participants discussed the ways that their friendships, especially with other sexual minorities, helped to shape these identity development processes through acceptance, support, and even educational discussions about other identities. This was especially significant for the many participants who also reported being hesitant to disclose or discuss various aspects of their identity around mostly-heterosexual peers.

While most participants were out about their sexual orientation (meaning that they made their sexual identities known to friends and strangers either through direct disclosure or indirect signaling) before beginning college, others did not begin their coming-out process until the school year had already started. Penelope, for example, only came out as bisexual at the beginning of her freshman year. In coming out, she sought advice from a friend who was already out about her own sexual minority identity: "She was kind of a guide in that because she's bisexual and so...I kind of asked her for her advice." As Penelope went through her coming-out process, having a sexual minority friend to give her support and advice helped her.

Other participants were aware of their sexual identity but chose not to disclose it to others immediately upon starting the school year. Shauna, who identifies as asexual, did not openly identify as a sexual minority until near the end of her first semester on campus because, with asexuality, as she explains, "...it's kind of harder because you don't have the guarantee that

people will at least even know what it is...you have to explain what it is and just hope that they accept it as a concept before they even accept that you are it.” Not only was Shauna concerned with being accepted after coming out, she also faced the additional stress of being unsure if someone else would even understand her identity; this led her to remain in the closet at the beginning of her college transition. However, Shauna developed a friendship with another sexual minority student who reassured her that he and their friends would “love and accept [her] no matter what,” leading her to come out a few months after the school year started. The understanding and support offered by a sexual minority friend helped Shauna feel comfortable enough to come out about her asexuality.

Although most participants began the school year open about their sexual minority identities, their identity formation processes continued throughout the year as they discovered new identities for themselves throughout the year. Participants reported claiming new or additional identities during their first year, like Shauna, for whom identifying as panromantic was “a new part” of her identity. Similarly, Jordan described coming out as nonbinary recently, and highlighted the importance of friendship for this disclosure – it was “discussions about gender” with Harper, a gay friend, as well as Harper’s support, that made Jordan feel comfortable enough to come out. These participants’ stories highlight the shifting nature of sexual minority identity formation, as well as the importance of friendships during this process.

Similarly, participants highlighted the dynamic process of forming a sexual minority identity, especially during the period of emerging adulthood, as they described the processes by which they developed their identities. This was a process that often had multiple steps for many participants, with no clear starting or ending point. Vivian, for example, described the process

she had experienced before coming to identify as gay: “I realized I liked girls my freshman year of high school, I identified as by until the summer between senior year of high school and freshman year. It was my first semester of college when I started just using the term gay.” This quote highlights how self-selected identities may change with time as an individual learns more about themselves and their identity. Stan’s identity development was similar, as he initially disclosed to a friend, “I don’t know if I’m bi or gay. I don’t know.” The lack of certainty in Stan’s initial coming out, and eventual claiming of the label gay, further highlight this process. Stan’s description also emphasizes the importance of friendship in identity formation, as he knew approaching a sexual minority friend would let him start “asking her all the questions [he] had been bottling up and just asking [himself] and the internet” in order to answer questions about his sexual minority identity and eventually describe himself as gay. However, even at the end of the year, some participants felt uncomfortable with the label they chose to describe themselves.

Although bisexual was the most closely-fitting label to how she would describe herself, Penelope stated that she would “rather not claim” a label and often does not identify with any one sexuality. Harold experienced even more tension between the label he used to describe himself and his perception of his sexuality. A sophomore who identified as pansexual, Harold emphasized selecting that label because it was “knowledgeable and well-known,” despite disagreeing with some parts of the definition. He disagreed specifically with the commonly-held “hearts not parts” idea of pansexuality, as his sexual nature prompted him to state that “parts *do* matter, they just happen to be different parts.” Some participants, though, avoided this tension by claiming multiple labels for their identities, a distinction which was significant for some participants. Vivian, for example, even described it as “very important” to her when discussing

the differences between her panromantic and demisexual attractions. Amelia also differentiated between her pansexual and demisexual identities, emphasizing her need to feel “a strong emotional bond with somebody before [I] experience any sexual attraction.” Such participants highlight the continuity of the identity formation process for sexual minorities; an equally continuous process is that of coming out, as stated by Jordan: “LGBT individuals are always coming out.”

Outness was a sexual minority issue that was important to many participants, especially as they were starting over in a new place. Stan viewed college as a chance to “start completely fresh” and “not let anyone think I was straight or anything.” By being open about his identity from the beginning, Stan was able to avoid facing the coming out process later, after friendships had already developed. Similarly, Vivian “got to college and it’s a new start and I might as well be 100% me.” As both of these participants had faced rejection by classmates and peers due to their sexual orientation in their pasts, the opportunity for a fresh start – to be out and accepted at college – was significant to them. Edgar also highlighted the importance of being out to everyone around them, calling themselves “One of those, I throw it in your face that the straight people complain about.” To Edgar, their identity was so significant to them that they were willing to fill a stereotype about sexual minorities that many outside of the community may hold.

Although the opportunity to be more open about their sexual orientation was a change that participants were looking forward to throughout the transition to college, there were many other changes that they anticipated. For most participants, the transition was marked by worry in several ways, but participants were able to utilize friendship in order to navigate the transition successfully and have a successful first year of college.

Friendship During the Transition to College

The transition to college can present various significant obstacles to students regardless of their sexual orientation, and previous research has emphasized the significance of friends and friendships during this period (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005). Friendships become more important as individuals move away from home and adjust to college, providing greater amounts of support during stressful times and even taking on a familial role for some students (Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld 2005). While each participant discussed the ways their sexual minority identity influenced their first year of college, there were obstacles beyond those related to sexual orientation that were discussed throughout the interviews. Participants described their feelings regarding such obstacles and adjustments unrelated to their sexual orientation during their transition to college, as well as how their friendships helped to alleviate some of the stress caused by the transition to college.

While many of the worries participants described regarding their first year of college were related to their identities as sexual minorities, they also described other factors unrelated to sexuality that caused them to worry. One such adjustment was making friends, which Edgar concerned Edgar significantly before their transition to college: “I have friends. My biggest worry was that I wouldn’t know how to make friends but I did and now I have friends.” The fact that Edgar’s biggest worry before entering college was making friends highlights the importance of friendship both for individuals as well as within the transition to college. Other changes brought up by participants included socialization and meeting others in general, living with a roommate (an issue which was, in many cases, compounded by having a sexual minority identity), and adjusting to new academic structures and expectations. However, participants also

described the ways that they utilized friendships with others to buffer stressors related to socializing, academics, and emotional support.

Many of the friendships participants discussed as being significant during their first year of college were friendships made after their arrival on campus. Residence halls and classes were the most frequently-reported place for meeting friends, and most participants discussed friendships with roommates, neighbors, and classmates. In addition, these friendships were generally coincidental rather than intentional. Relatedly, academics and socializing were the two biggest things that participants turned to their friends for throughout the first year of college. These aspects of friendships were often described with little emphasis, as if they had become habitual to participants, implying the daily significance of friends for these reasons. Many participants reported meeting friends in classes, and would study or do work together. In addition, several participants were members of learning communities, and had formed friendships through associated activities. When asked to describe how they spent time with their friends in terms of activities and topics of discussion, most participants reported activities like “hanging out,” “getting food,” and “studying.” Participants used friendships to buffer negative feelings, like homesickness or loneliness, or when issues arose with mutual or outside friends.

Although participants reported that they would be willing to talk to their heterosexual friends for issues related to their sexual orientation, some stated the opposite. Harold felt uncomfortable talking to a heterosexual friend about sexual minority issues due to “ignorance or lack of experience” on the subject, and Shannon reported feeling similarly hesitant to discuss issues of same-sex relationships with heterosexual friends and teammates. Others reported being hesitant to discuss sexual minority issues with specific friends. Edgar, for example, talked about

avoiding LGBT-related discussions with one friend who was accepting of their sexual minority status and relationships, but who “doesn’t want to talk about anything else LGBT,” which they feel is due to his religious beliefs. Penelope even reported losing a few friendships after coming out as bisexual. In order to alleviate the combined stress of being a sexual minority and not being able to discuss or turn to friends for help, all participants reported having at least one sexual minority friend who provided them with more support on such issues.

Sexual Minority Issues and Friendships

Participants discussed daily life on campus as a sexual minority, and spoke of how they utilized friendships to navigate the transition to and first year of college. Specifically, most participants discussed their friendships with other sexual minorities, and how such friendships helped them in ways that friendships with heterosexual peers may not. Although some friendships with sexual minorities were coincidental, through classes or other mutual friends, many participants also reported seeking out other sexual minorities intentionally. This suggests that sexual minority students may view friendships with other sexual minorities as potentially beneficial to them, as many described seeking specific supports which they felt they could receive from other sexual minorities over heterosexual peers.

When asked about how friendships with other sexual minorities began, several participants reported coincidental friendships. The fact that many friendships between sexual minority students were coincidental implies that, although there are benefits that come with having sexual minority friends, sexual minority students were not necessarily seeking out such friendships in order to experience these benefits. Vivian, for example, found out that her roommate was also a sexual minority when she disclosed her own identity prior to moving into

their residence hall: “We had a conversation before meeting...and I’m like, if you ever bring like a guy or girl home, just let me know so we can organize. And she was like oh you don’t have to worry about that, I’m aro/ace (aromantic/asexual), and I’m like, well, perfect.” The mutual disclosure of their sexual minority identities, despite being coincidentally paired as roommates, led to a stronger initial friendship between Vivian and her roommate. Similarly, Edgar met one of their best friends, who is a lesbian, through their roommate. Penelope also described meeting other sexual minorities around campus purely by coincidence, forming friendships based on, “Oh, you’re gay too, let’s be friends!” after they saw her with her girlfriend. While these friendships were coincidental, the initial clarity of Penelope’s same-sex relationship spurred on the development of such friendships. Although these friendships, and some others described by participants, were beneficial with regards to sexual minority issues, they were not sought out for that purpose. However, several participants reported intentionally seeking out friendships with other sexual minorities.

Participants sought out friendships with other sexual minorities for several reasons. Some, like Stan, sought out exposure to other sexual minorities. Stan had never really been around other sexual minorities, so he took the opportunity when he arrived on campus: “I definitely joined like [campus’s LGBTQ+ student group] and the resource center’s LGBT Peer Mentor group...so that way I could just kind of see what...other queer people were like.” Other participants, like Edgar, intentionally attempted to surround themselves with sexual minority friends simply because they liked being around other non-heterosexual individuals. They told a story of their mother pointing this out to them: “She’s like, you only do things where you only meet gay people and it’s like, that’s the point. I wanna be around them.” Some participants

sought out and preferred these friendships because they provided a level of comfort and understanding about things like same-sex attractions, relationships, and issues of homophobia or discrimination that heterosexual friends would not understand. This implies that not only do sexual minorities perceive a benefit to having friendships with other sexual minorities, but that these friendships may even be sought out intentionally during the transition to college.

Participants reported meeting other sexual minority students in a variety of ways. One of the most frequently-discussed was the campus's LGBTQ+ student group. Almost all participants reported attending at least one group meeting at some point throughout their first year, and several participants – Stan, Edgar, Amelia, and Shannon – mentioned attending meetings more frequently. Other avenues for forming friendships with other sexual minorities included the campus's LGBT Peer Mentor program, which several participants took part in, and sexual minority-focused classes, such as the Intro to LGBTQ+ Studies course Edgar took during the first year. Additionally, some participants chose to signal their sexual minority identity in a way that could let other sexual minorities know about their common identity without saying a word. Edgar, for example, mentioned the “bunch of pins on [their] backpack that talk about it,” including the pride flag that prompted a classmate to introduce herself to them before asking about attending the LGBTQ+ student group meeting that day. Whether participants sought out their sexual minority friends or altered their presentation of self to attract the attention of other sexual minorities, the fact that friendship formation was able to occur in many different aspects of participants' lives highlights the way that sexual identity can also influence various aspects of life, and the importance of friendships and yeah. Along with the basis of their friendships with other sexual minorities, participants discussed daily life as a sexual minority on campus. An

important part of how participants experienced life on campus as a sexual minority was the friendships that they utilized to help them navigate their experiences.

Participants discussed their perceptions of campus, and how they felt day-to-day being a sexual minority on campus. Although many participants reported feeling safe and comfortable on campus and in the surrounding city, this was not always the case. Many participants reported feeling nervous about moving to and being a sexual minority in Lincoln and the Midwest more generally. Stan described the nervousness he felt before moving to campus because of the “stereotype of less openness to sexual minorities in Midwestern states.” However, joining groups designed for LGBTQ+ students and participating in other programs through the University’s LGBTQ+ Resource Center, as well as the friendships made in those spaces, gave Stan “a safe space where [he] could be completely out... about [his] life as a sexual minority.” Although he was initially hesitant to openly disclose his sexual minority identity, intentionally seeking out and making friends with others who he knew would be accepting allowed him to be more comfortable coming out. Other participants discussed more specific places on campus, such as residence halls, as causing them worry when it came to disclosing their sexual minority identity. For example, even just the traditional, old-fashioned appearance of her residence hall made Vivian hesitant to tell her floormates about her sexual minority status, as she assumed they would also be traditional and not accepting. She soon developed friendships with other sexual minorities who lived in her residence hall, such as her aromantic, asexual roommate, which helped her feel more comfortable to disclose her sexual orientation more widely.

Interestingly, some participants also reported feeling uncomfortable or unwelcomed by other sexual minorities, or by programs targeted towards non-heterosexual students on campus.

Harold, for example, struggled to fit in with the sexual minority community on campus because he felt that he did not align with all of their views: “It can be tough being a sexual minority anywhere, but...it’s not a great feeling to not be able to participate in LGBT issues or events or groups on campus because they’re all a bit radical for your taste or want you to be something more than you are.” Despite identifying as a sexual minority, Harold felt uncomfortable around other sexual minorities on campus, which prevented him from participating and engaging with other sexual minorities as much as he would have liked to. Similarly, some participants reported issues with programs designed specifically for them. Jordan in particular discussed being upset with the gender-neutral housing program on campus due to its cost and inaccessibility for students who may need it most. For the most part, though, participants felt comfortable and even preferred friendships with other sexual minorities, especially for issues related to sexual orientation.

Even participants who were already out when they arrived on campus reported issues relating to coming out, although they were able to fill the opposite role and help their friends come out. Stan, a student who was openly gay upon his arrival to campus, felt as though his sexual orientation made a friend more comfortable to come out to him and discuss their own sexual minority identity: “I think it [his sexual minority identity] made us closer...I think it probably made her more comfortable to come out to me.” He also believed that the shared experience of being a sexual minority helped to strengthen their friendship and bring them closer. Jake reported a similar experience with one of his closest friends from throughout his first year, as he helped a friend come to terms with and accept his sexual minority identity despite having an unsupportive family: “I basically helped him come out...he comes from a very

religious family that was not very kind to him and is not very accepting. And so he had a very difficult time kind of um, coming to terms with it and accepting himself. And so I kind of helped him a lot with that journey.” This quote highlights the significance of friendship in the coming out process not just when an individual is coming out themselves, but also in helping others come out about their sexual minority identity. Some of these participants felt as though they were able to ‘pay it forward’ and help others come out, just as they had turned to their friends for help during their own coming out experiences.

Same-sex romantic relationships were also a topic of conversation between sexual minority friends. Although participants did express feeling comfortable turning to almost all of their friends, even heterosexual friends, for advice regarding relationships, many described that they would feel more comfortable doing so with sexual minority friends, and that they would be likely to seek out advice from these friends before others. Penelope, for example, discussed how she would talk about her new relationship with a female to her bisexual roommate, who could understand “arguments and issues that I wasn’t used to, that you don’t see in a heterosexual relationship.” In addition, participants reported that they would feel more comfortable discussing their same-sex attractions with other sexual minorities. Edgar, for example, preferred to talk to a lesbian friend about attractive females: “We can talk about different things. We can talk about how cute girls are. Like I can tell [a male friend] this girl’s really cute and he’ll agree but it’ll be different ‘cause he’s seeing it from a man’s point of view.” While a queer woman and a heterosexual man are both attracted to females, Edgar preferred to talk about such attractions with another nonheterosexual individual due to different perspectives and perceptions of females, and because male friends would be seeing it from a gendered perspective.

An interesting balance between platonic and romantic relationships was also brought up by a number of participants. For Stan, what initially started as a romantic relationship dissolved, but was reestablished as a platonic friendship despite the “history” between him and his ex-boyfriend-turned-friend. Edgar reported becoming romantically involved with a gay female friend who they had met on campus. Their relationship started based primarily on their shared sexual minority identity: “...it was like we should just start dating since we’re both single and gay...we’ll talk about it now and be like why did we try to do that, that was weird.” Shannon also described an experience where romantic feelings came with friendship. After coming out to her closest friend, who was also a lesbian, Shannon began to develop deep feelings for her. Although she does not feel this harmed their friendship in any way, it led to her feeling “trapped...I didn’t have anyone else to talk to because I didn’t think anyone else would understand.” The easily-crossed line between platonic friendship and romantic feelings, as well as the reverse, highlights the interesting and dynamic between relationships and friendships for sexual minorities. A potential reason for such an easily-crossed line could be the shared identity as a sexual minority.

‘Personal Connection’

While participants described their friendships with other sexual minorities as starting both intentionally and coincidentally, one aspect of friendships with sexual minorities that most participants highlighted was the idea of shared understanding. Phrases like “things in common,” “the same experience,” and “personal connection” were used by participants to describe these friendships. Participants often went on to discuss how their friendships with other sexual minorities may provide support that their friendships with heterosexual peers did not. Jordan, a

bisexual student in their senior year, put it best when they stated, “We may share the same experiences and that gives us a lot in common.”

Instances of homophobia, for example, was something that participants felt their sexual minority friends could relate to and understand on a more personal level than their heterosexual friends. This was true both for individual-level homophobic acts or statements as well as structural issues of homophobia. Edgar described the deeper level of understanding that other sexual minorities have of homophobia due to their personal connection: “...obviously LGBTQ people are going to understand it (homophobia) more and they’re going to have a personal connection with that. Like I can talk about how awful Mike Pence [public figure; politician] is and straight people will get it, but they won’t get it...” While heterosexual peers may understand why homophobia has a negative impact on a sexual minority individual, sexual minority friends have a deeper connection to it and have likely experienced it themselves, giving other sexual minorities a deeper understanding of the issue.

Sentiments like Edgars regarding the significance of shared experiences of being sexual minorities were echoed by other participants. Jordan describes the way they can discuss homophobia with a sexual minority friend, and how their friend even helps with self-directed negative feelings. “...they also help with some internalized homophobia in some cases, making me feel proud to be who I am.” Similarly, Stan describes the way that being surrounded by sexual minority friends can make him feel better: “I feel really happy when I’m surrounded by other sexual minority students...I definitely feel like really happy and get really positive when I’m around those people...” When surrounded by heterosexual peers, however, he described feeling differently: “It definitely can get a little uncomfortable at times or just make me more

aware of who I'm around and maybe not as like happy and as excited as I am when I am surrounded by sexual minority people.”

Along with having a more personal understanding of homophobia and creating a space where sexual minority students could feel pride about their identities, sexual minority friends were also more likely to understand and respect participants' identities. This was in contrast to many participants' experiences with describing their identity to others, like Edgar's lack of outness about their nonbinary gender identity compared to their outness about their sexual orientation, or Shauna's hesitance to come out as asexual since others may not even know what asexuality is and coming out would require an explanation. However, when in the presence of other sexual minorities, participants reported feeling more comfortable discussing all aspects of their identity, and knowing that they would be supported for it. Edgar expressed appreciation for the fact that others in the LGBTQ+ student organization referred to them with they/them pronouns, and Shauna was happy that her sexual minority friends understood and accepted her identity as asexual. Friends that understood the various identities that participants claimed provided a safe space for them to be themselves and to be respected.

The adjustment to college can be difficult, and this was true for many of the participants in the current study. However, by utilizing their friendships to buffer some of the stress associated with this transition, participants were able to make the change successfully. In addition, participants discussed their friendships with other sexual minority students, and the ways that these friendships benefitted them throughout the first year of college. These friendships provided support in ways that heterosexual peers may not have been able to, and

ensured a successful continuation of participants' identity formation along with the transition to college more generally.

Conclusion

The current study makes several contributions to the literature on sexual minority young adults and the college experience for these individuals. Participants' descriptions of their friendships with other sexual minorities revealed that these friendships were often perceived as being better resources for issues related to sexual minority identity, particularly for buffering stressors associated with being a minority. This directly supports Doty et al.'s (2010) findings that sexual minority friendships provide better support for sexuality-related stressors, and highlights the importance of the shared experiences and understanding that in-group friendships provide. In addition, the intentionality behind many of the friendships described, and even participants' involvement with resources and groups geared towards sexual minority students, implies that students not only perceive a benefit of such relationships, but will seek them out on purpose with that benefit in mind.

Another implication of the current study is related to identity formation and the role that friendships play as individuals develop their identities. Several participants discussed the ways that their understandings of their own identities changed throughout their first year, even naming specific friends who were especially influential. This is significant as it relates to the period of emerging adulthood, which overlaps with the time in which identity formation takes place. Friends were significant not only for buffering stressors related to the transition to college, but also for helping participants discover and accept their sexual minority identities. Doty et al. (2010) contend that sexual minority friends can provide better support for sexuality-related

stressors, a finding which was supported by the participants who discussed greater acceptance and understanding expressed by other sexual minorities. Sexual minorities' use of the proper pronouns for nonbinary individuals was one way that friends helped participants to feel accepted and valid.

Many participants reported intentionally seeking out friendships with other sexual minority students through programs that target and directly support the success of LGBTQ+ students on campus. This intentionality implies that some participants may have had the perception that friendships with other sexual minorities differed from those with heterosexuals. By seeking out friendships with other sexual minority individuals, participants created spaces for themselves that they knew would be safe and accepting of them. Overall, while participants described each of their overall friendships in relatively similar ways, it was frequently discussed that they would feel more comfortable seeking out sexual minority friends for certain issues. Homophobia, same-sex relationships, and even pride in their identity were all some of the things that participants reported seeking their sexual minority friends for.

Participants reported that these friendships benefitted them in ways that their heterosexual friendships may not, making them feel happier and more comfortable with themselves, and ensuring that their identities were respected and validated. As Muraco (2012) discussed, sexual minorities who were in cross-sexual orientation friendships were more likely to report conflict due to the intersectional nature of their friendships, such as the straight friends' expectations that they would enact stereotypes of sexual minorities or differential access to resources. Similarly, Ueno and Gentile (2015) reported that sexual minorities may experience an emotional burden in their friendships with heterosexual peers, stemming from not being accepted

or understood. However, these issues are less likely to exist in friendships with other sexual minorities, giving these friendships the potential to be more beneficial for related issues.

Although no participant reported having only sexual minority close friends, all reported having at least one, highlighting the benefits and importance of sexual minority young adults' friendships with other sexual minorities.

Along with contributions to the sociological literature, the current study has several policy implications that could improve the transition to college for sexual minority students. Although all participants reported being mostly comfortable being out on campus, most also reported experiencing some hesitation and nervousness to come out upon their arrival. Implementing and continuing existing programs geared towards creating a welcoming environment for sexual minority students is important, as many participants discussed seeking out such resources intentionally in order to feel comfortable and connected to other sexual minorities. For example, one of the most frequently-discussed resources participants utilized was the LGBTQ+ Resource Center on campus: visiting the center, attending meetings, and participating in events and activities all helped participants feel safe and comfortable on campus. Along with interpersonal and social benefits, these resource centers can also provide educational materials to sexual minorities and allies. These resources are essential, and ensuring that all students who would like to access these resources are able to do so would help to make their transition to and first year of college more successful.

The current study's findings suggest several avenues of future research. Future research should consider the voices of transgender students, as well as non-traditional students who are experiencing the transition to college in a different context than students who enroll directly after

graduating high school. Similarly, it is important to understand the ways friendships may influence the entire college experience, so future studies could examine the friendships of older sexual minority students. The current study was also significantly limited with regards to geography, and the results of the current study are not generalizable outside of the sample of participants; future research should apply the questions of the current study to universities in more diverse settings.

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Appendix A: Participant Demographics

Participant	Sexual Identity	Gender Identity*	Year	Age	Rural or Urban Hometown
Stan	Gay	-	Sophomore	19	Rural
Shauna	Panromantic Asexual	-	Sophomore	19	Urban
Penelope	Bisexual	-	Sophomore	19	Urban
Jake	Homosexual	-	Sophomore	19	Rural
Harold	Pansexual	-	Sophomore	21	Urban
Edgar	Queer	Nonbinary	Sophomore	19	Rural
Shannon	Gay or Queer	-	Sophomore	19	Urban
Jordan	Bisexual	Nonbinary	Senior	22	Urban
Amelia	Pansexual Demisexual	-	Senior	22	Urban
Vivian	Gay or Panromantic Demisexual	-	Sophomore	20	Rural

*Note: I asked participants to describe their identity. Some included gender identity, while others did not. This table only reports participants' self-identification.

Appendix B: Interview Template

Interview Template

Intro Script

My name is Jessica Morrow. I am a graduate student in the Sociology Department and I am currently working on my Master's Thesis. For this project, I am interested in studying the friendships of sexual minority college students during their first year in school. To do this, I am interviewing students who have recently finished up their first year at UNL and who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, or otherwise non-heterosexual. The interview will take between an hour and an hour and a half, unless there is an extenuating circumstance. Although I have a number of questions to ask, I hope that you feel comfortable enough to engage in a conversation as well, and I would like to remind you that you are free to skip any question you are not comfortable answering at any time, and that you may withdraw your participation at any point if you wish. Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

*Unrecorded questions:

Introduction/Demographics

Age
Year
Major
Where from?

*Start Recording (with consent from participant)

Identity

What is your sexual orientation?
When did you come out?
To whom are you out in your life?
Probe: Parents? Siblings? Extended family? Friends? Work?
When you were coming out, did you turn to your friends for help?
Which friends? Are you still friends with them?

Transition to College

Did you come to school 'out'?
Did you do anything to either hide or emphasize your position in the LGBTQ+ community?
How do you feel being an LGBTQ+ student on campus? Does your identity influence your day-to-day life?
Have you met other LGBTQ+ students on campus?
If yes, did you do so intentionally? Such as by joining student support groups, attending events, or visiting the resource center?
If no, why? Have you tried?

Friendships

Tell me about your closest friends, either at UNL or at another school/not in school

What is their Gender/Sexual Orientation?

Physical description (?)

How many know each other? Are they friends with each other?

Follow up: If all friends are LGBTQ+, then are any of closest friends straight?

If all friends are straight, then are any of closest friends LGBTQ+?

Friendships in College

I'm going to ask you to tell me more about a few of your closest friendships

Specifically, I'm going to ask you a number of questions about each friend, then we'll move on to the next friend.

Length/basis of friendship (where/how did you meet, etc)

Where did you meet them?

How did you meet them?

How long have you known them?

How close do you feel you are to this person?

What kinds of activities do you do with this person?

What kinds of things do you talk about with this person?

Do they know about your sexual orientation/gender identity?

What is their sexual orientation/gender identity? If you know it?

Were you friends with them before coming out? If so, did your coming out change your friendship? How?

Did you lean on them during your transition to college? How?

What kind of things would you seek their support with?

Probe: Schoolwork, issues with other friends, relationship advice

Would you ask them for help regarding your sexual orientation/gender identity?

How do you return their friendship? (How do you support them?)

Appendix C: Recruitment Flyer

