UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF 2SLGBTQ+ STUDENTS ATTENDING A RURAL COLLEGE WITHIN A TRADITIONALLY CONSERVATIVE STATE

A DISSERTATION

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

By VAUGHN N. ZRAIN-NEGLEY

Norman, Oklahoma

2026

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EXPLORING THE EXPERIENCES OF 2SLGBTQ+ STUDENTS ATTENDING A RURAL COLLEGE WITHIN A TRADITIONALLY CONSERVATIVE STATE

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR THE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

BY THE COMMITTEE CONSISTING OF

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Acknowledgements

I could not have accomplished all I have done without the support and love of all those around me. While I cannot possibly thank every single person on my life journey that lead me to this point, and I am sure I will regrettably leave out a name or two, I do want to especially thank those who loved me, cheered for me, supported me, and brought joy during my time completing this dissertation.

To my ZZ: Even though you do not know it fully yet, I am so grateful for the joy and hope I find in your hugs, giggles, excitement, and curiosity as you grow up. I am proud of you and I hope I can make you proud, too.

To JJ, Dr. Jacob Negley: Nothing I write here will do it justice to show how much I appreciate you and love you, especially during my time in graduate school. Thank you for never doubting me and for letting me cry on your shoulder. Thank you for some reality checks and for dreaming with me. I am so grateful for your deep knowledge and golden heart in my life. I love you, 3000.

To my parents and family: I cannot adequately put into words how much you have done for me and how grateful I am for you both. Mom, thank you for always cheering me on, loving me for who I am, and pouring your love into my life. Dad, thank you for constant reminders of how proud you are of me, for showing me love and encouragement in my adventures, and for teaching me what it means to be kind yet fight for what I believe in no matter what. To Sega and Lupin, for countless hours of comfort and love when I needed it most. Todd and Lisa, thank you for always cheering me on and encouraging me, no matter what. To the family that has been my village and raised me, especially my Oma. Thank you for teaching me grit and instilling pride in my education. I hope I made your spirit proud. I miss you, Ich habe dich lieb.

To my committee and faculty mentors: Dr. Robin Zape-tah-hol-ah Starr Minthorn, thank you for wisdom, kindness, and feedback to help me finish my degree and my dissertation. I appreciate you letting me pour out my thoughts, ideas, heart, and questions throughout this process. To Dr. Hyunju Lee and Dr. Christy Oxendine: Thank you for all your time and dedication to reach this huge milestone and helping me grow during this process. Dr. Wendy Mallette: I am incredibly grateful you took on some random graduate student for independent study… and believed in me. Thank you for challenging me, providing me with incredible feedback, and for encouraging me the entire way. Dr. Jenny Sperling: Thank you for your invaluable mentoring, feedback, knowledge, and support throughout my doctoral journey and my dissertation. Dr. Mirelsie Velázquez, Dr. Lindsay Marshall, Dr. Shamari Reid, Dr. Benjamin Heddy, and Dr. Neil Houser: Thank you for creating incredible learning environments, for challenging me to think deeply, and for pushing me out of my comfort zone in the best ways. Mike Jenkins: Thank you for your unwavering support and answering all my emails, silly questions, and amazing guidance throughout my journey. The College of Education is lucky to have you!

To my friends and chosen family: Commuting hours to Norman every week, I never thought I would establish amazing friendships and find people who instantly cheered me on through my education and this dissertation. Thank you to the drag community in Norman. Thank you Robert, Regan, Ross, Kirsten, Steph, and Claire. I cannot tell you how much I appreciate the nights of laughter, adventures, venting, and care we have shared in Norman. Thank you.

To Kaydee, Laura, and the brew crew: I am incredibly grateful for allowing me to take up space and having a safe place for me to write. Thank you to my friends and students who inspire

me to continuously be better and learn more. I appreciate all my student participants and peers who took time to help me proofread, expand, and uplift my work.

It is hard for me to receive compliments or acknowledge how much I have accomplished. I know this work is important and I have worked hard in my research and care of this dissertation. However, it is obvious that we all need communities, villages, mentors, to do great things - and I am lucky that I have those support circles. Therefore, thank you *all* who have been there for me and guided me these past few years, big or small moments. Thank you.

Dedication

To all those who came before us, those here now, and those who are hereafter.

To all us queer folk, rural communities,

who have hope, looking for hope,

are full of joy, need joy,

full of love, need to hear they are loved,

for you.

Abstract

This qualitative case study explores experiences of queer and trans (2SLGBTQ+) students attending a college situated within a rural area in the Midwest, especially Kansas. Engaged with critical rural and queer theories with an intersectional analysis, this study adopts Bingham's (2023) steps for qualitative data analysis to outline themes. These themes are outlined from each participant's experiences and across all interviews as a whole. Student participants were currently attending a rural college or had attended a rural college within the last two years. Findings from this study highlight 2SLGBTQ+ narratives directly from the students who are experiencing college and rural life every day. Sense of belonging, identity, and support from student and faculty members were themes that were common among most interviews, while each individual interview held its own themes. These other themes that emerged from student interviews varied from online connections, (dis)comfort in spaces, and activity/campus involvement. After evaluating these findings and implications, this study emphasizes the needs for more research that centers rural, queer people and communities. Additionally, this dissertation challenges assumptions of metronormativity, urbanormativity, and media narratives of what 2SLGBTQ+ people experience in rural places.

Keywords: *Rural, 2SLGBTQ+ students, higher education, qualitative case study, student experiences, Midwest, narratives*

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Chapter One

Introduction

While support for 2SLGBTQ+[1] rights has increased in the United States since the 1970s, there are still overwhelming assumptions that rural places are inherently hostile toward queer and trans people (Flores, 2014; Gallup, 2024). Although rural counties and states do hold a higher percentage of residents that vote in favor of conservative ideologies (Coleman, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024), including anti-LGBTQ+ beliefs, there are still 2SLGBTQ+ people who live or want to live in rural places. Generalizations about rural communities perpetuate a limited narrative, often excluding the experiences and knowledge of rural people. Some of these generalizations reproduce a belief that rural townspeople are inherently unwelcoming or violent toward queer and trans people or that 2SLGBTQ+ people must move to urban areas to thrive. Therefore, uplifting voices from rural, 2SLGBTQ+ students at this moment is critical. The community deserves to share their lived experiences without their identities or circumstances being portrayed inherently from a negative angle or a deficit framework.

In the last 15 to 20 years, there has been growth in academic literature related to higher education and 2SLGBTQ+ students, with many studies focusing on rural students who move to an urban setting for higher education (Maltzan, 2006; McNamee, 2022; McNamee & Ganns, 2023). Students who stay in or choose to move to a rural institution of higher education are not

[1] I use the term "2SLGBTQ+" when referring to two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, and other non-heterosexual or cisgender identities. I use "queer" and "trans" to help individualize the acronym that can be overgeneralized or mistaken for looked at as a group as all similar in needs and experiences. When I use other or shortened versions of the acronym like "LGBTQ+" and "LGBT", I do so intentionally as authors use them in their original work and writing. While the term "queer" holds past stigma and negative connotations, I believe the term has been reclaimed and is used by many in the 2SLGBTQ+ community. Reflecting on Cohen's work (1997), this is not meant to be a form of erasure or to assume all queer or transgender people are identical in needs or share the same experiences. I use these terms as a starting point to center a community that has been discriminated against, harmed, and neglected from research and society (Pryor, 2021). While not every gender or sexuality is represented by this study, I chose to use 2SLGBTQ+ to hold space for those who can be represented, even if they are not directly interviewed or public with their identity.

well represented, leaving the possibility of missing insight and knowledge from their stories. Their experiences hold important insight on what queer and trans people truly experience or desire from rurality and higher education.

Currently 2SLGBTQ+ people, particularly trans people's rights, and elements of higher education are being aggressively targeted in politics and legislation at a historic rate (ACLU, 2025; MAP, 2025). In this study, 2SLGBTQ+ students described their experiences and how those experiences related to their identity while attending rural college in a traditionally conservative state.

Problem Statement

This increase in literature has provided crucial insight regarding elements commonly associated with rurality and how those elements relate to students' identities and their college experience. Much of this research investigated how college admission and attendance affected students from a lower socio-economic status, a student's sense of belonging, and differences in social norms transitioning from rural hometowns while attending urban campuses (Maltzan, 2006; McNamee, 2022; McNamee & Ganns, 2023). While these studies covered students based on their rural and socio-economic backgrounds, they did address other factors such as gender, sexualities, and race. More of these insights and nuances will be covered later in Chapter Two.

As mentioned, rural places and the 2SLGBTQ+ community are often portrayed from a deficit model, with negative narratives and stereotypes portrayed by news and entertainment. It is accurate that current literature explores ways students from rural hometowns and cultural backgrounds can be an isolating experience for 2SLGBTQ+ youth and students beginning college (Handke; 2012; Christiaens, 2015; McNamee & Ganns, 2023). Higher education institutions are principal places for 2SLGBTQ+ students' identity and success yet are historically

discriminatory toward queer and trans students. However, educational research is often described within urban cities or large campuses. Academic discussions do not regularly include the experiences of queer and transgender students moving to, or currently living in, rural areas for college. Additionally, the backgrounds and demographics (e.g., hometowns, identities, socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, and citizenship status) of 2SLGBTQ+ students attending a rural college are not homogeneous and can differ greatly, person to person and by geographical locations.

Each of these students are affected by the repercussions of local resources, laws, culture, and overall physical environment. Unfortunately, little has been explored concerning the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ college students who are situated within the spatial, social, or cultural sentiments of a rural area, particularly within a traditionally conservative state, such as Kansas. More work must be done to uplift voices of 2SLGBTQ+ students from rural colleges without basing their experiences or identity from a deficit framework.

2SLGBTQ+ Students in Higher Education

College is usually a crucial time period for a 2SLGBTQ+ student's life for multiple reasons. This time holds numerous possibilities related to transitions, coming out, and critical reflections around their identity (Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Currently, much of the research involving queer and trans students in higher education focuses on the consequences of discrimination from society and retention rates. The argument to investigate those issues is not baseless. Although national opinions supporting 2SLGBTQ+ rights and issues have increased rapidly since the mid-1990s (Flores, 2014; Gallup, 2024), college campus surveys illustrate that queer and trans students in higher education still face discrimination and harmful campus climates (Gray, 2009; O'Neill & Conron, 2022). According to the Access to Higher Education

Survey from 2021, students in both undergraduate and graduate levels face these challenges in multiple areas:

> LGBTQ people were more likely to have lived in campus housing while attending college (59.5% vs. 46.4%) and were more likely than non-LGBTQ people to have experienced bullying, harassment, or assault while living in campus housing (25.2% vs. 11.3%). LGBTQ people in campus housing were more likely to experience online or other indirect bullying or harassment (6.7% vs 1.9%), sexual harassment (6.8% vs. 1.2%), and sexual assault (8.0% vs. 1.0%). Additionally, LGBTQ people were more likely to report unfair treatment from residence life staff (5.5% vs. 0.8%) and hearing slurs or negative comments about LGBTQ people while in campus housing (38.0% vs. 14.1%) than their non-LGBTQ peers. (p. 3)

Additionally, LGBTQ students were twice as likely to change their appearance or mannerisms to avoid discrimination and have reported significantly higher rates of mental health struggles, less access to supportive resources, and harassment than the non-LGBTQ community, "Almost twice as many LGBTQ participants experienced bullying, harassment, or assault at four-year colleges as non-LGBTQ participants (32.6% vs. 18.9%, respectively)" (O'Neill & Conron, 2022, p. 15).

These statistics are particularly troubling when paired with the fact that programs and resources for queer and trans students are less accessible in rural areas, further adding to the inequities these students face (Gray, 2009; O'Neill & Conron, 2022). Reports from these student surveys are significant because challenging environments are shown to interfere in students' overall learning and wellbeing in school (Renn, 2022).

Many college campuses across the United States established physical spaces for minority student organizations, including 2SLGBTQ+ resources that offer safety and support (Phan,

2024). However, many of these with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices or programs are now continuously being shut down with the U.S. Department of Education under the Trump administration (Spitalniak, 2025). Some of the current Executive Orders have been temporarily paused and lawsuits have been filed against this order by various organizations but higher education institutions are continuing to strip down the DEI programs, offices, and initiatives in order to comply with federal demands, reinforcing discrimination in academia (Tanner, 2024; Gretzinger et al., 2025). While this setback in progressive policies and inclusion is jarring, it should be noted many institutions have historically upheld societal and institutional systemic barriers that have discriminated against marginalized populations since the founding of higher education (Thiem & Dasgupta, 2022; Phan, 2024).

The rationale of investigating how 2SLGBTQ+ students experience higher education alongside these statistics has merit, but it is equally important to understand how students thrive and find joy during their years in higher education. There is a notable lack of literature that does not frame gender or sexual minorities from a deficit model (Bletz, 2023; Phan, 2024). Furthermore, many narratives spun about how queer and trans students experience education in rural places are not typically founded from first-hand experiences or 2SLGBTQ+ voices. Research lacks these students' voices, causing gaps in viewpoints and knowledge. This lack of representation enables false narratives to perpetuate regarding queer or trans people in rural spaces:

> However, rural America is not a monolith; queer and trans people, people of color, and many other marginalized groups have existed and thrived in rural places for centuries, and urban views of rurality as dangerous and "backwards" both overshadow and oversimplify the actual experiences of minority populations" (Bletz, 2023, p.1)

Media narratives, assumptions about rurality, and urban vs rural views will be explored later in this chapter.

When research moves away from research designs and frameworks that view 2SLGBTQ+ students automatically as victims or centered in harm, community members are allowed to define their own stories and desires. Queer and transgender students deserve to have joy and thriving define their identity and experiences, not simply the acts of violence or fights for survival through college (Hill et al., 2021). In a study that highlighted experiences of thriving of queer and trans students in college, Hill et al. (2021) challenged this framework and rationalize why research addressing 2SLGBTQ+ communities should be reframed, "Inspired by Tuck's (2009) work addressing Indigenous communities, we argue that these frames perpetuate *damage-centered research*: research that considers its subjects (in our case, LGBTQ+ students) as marginalized and otherwise damaged by a legacy of oppression." (p. 270)
Although comparing queer and trans students' experiences in relation to their heteronormative peers is an important step to addressing societal injustices and understanding ways students might experience college, these designs still center institutional discrimination or oppression (Hill et al., 2021). Therefore, exploring and featuring experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ students as they are told by these same students is critical, especially in spaces with populations that are often seen as straight and white by default.

For this dissertation's research findings, the students' experiences had the possibility to be positive and/or negative. It is important that a research design can primarily focus on ways 2SLGBTQ+ students experience negativity or harm on campus could miss out on authentic queer joy and experiences. Reframing this understanding and framework of how researchers

investigate and represent these experiences that could be key for uncovering 2SLGBTQ+ desires and success in higher education.

Nuances of Rural and Rurality

The term rural is often tied to concepts of agriculture, small towns, and low populations; however, there is no single definition of what makes a place rural. In this dissertation, how students define rural[2], how the United States Census Bureau, and other government entities have defined rural differently. The United States Census Bureau has changed their definition of rural and urban for the information collected in the 2020 census by using the measurement of housing unit density instead of only population density to determine an area's category (Urban Area Criteria, 2022). For this definition and categories, each boundary is made up of multiple factors, including city and county limits, land designated as residential vs. nonresidential, and how many "housing units" are situated in a square mile (Sanders & Cromartie, 2024). Concepts of land use and what counts as "housing unit" related to how many people are expected to be in each unit is subject to the government's systems and definitions, factoring in how the data is calculated (Urban Area Criteria, 2022).

Other official departments, such as the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and those working with the data derived from the United States's census, break down the definitions of rural and urban even further. They divide urban and rural areas into metropolitan (metro), non-metropolitan-micro (micro), and nonmetropolitan-noncore (noncore) categories. These boundaries are dependent on the urban and rural areas previously outlined by the Census Bureau within a county, parish, or borough (Sanders & Cromartie, 2024). To sort each county or borough, the USDA looks at the population of each area that was labeled urban and if they have

[2] This definition is explained in the participant recruitment section.

more than 50,000 people, they are deemed central. To label the rest of the counties, they go deeper to see how many people in the surrounding counties travel to or from that central county for work. If there is enough to or from each county then they are both labeled as metro. The remaining countries are then divided into two more categories, both of which are directly dependent on the urban area definition. If a county has a population between 10,000 and 49,999 but without the employment numbers to or from a metro area, then it is labeled as a micro county. The last division of counties is called "noncore", which means it has a population under 10,000 and is not centered around a metro county (Sanders & Cromartie, 2024). Due to rural areas being less likely to have access to resources like healthcare, grocery options, and education opportunities compared to urban areas (Hart et al., 2005; Christiaens, 2015), many federal and state programs utilize these population labels to organize how cities and counties are allocated funding and services.

Diversity of Defining Rural

Even when accounting for patterns of physical space and systemic consequences, operationalizing or conceptualizing rurality remains a challenge. This includes who occupies rural spaces and calls it home. White, heterosexual, Christian residents are the dominant population in most rural places, but rural populations and towns are not a monolith (Gray et al., 2016; Connor & Okamura, 2022; Bletz, 2023). Gray et al. (2016) addresses this fact in the beginning pages of their work *Queering the Countryside*, an edited compilation of work that highlights and critiques the interdisciplinary side of rurality and queerness, showing, "that 'rural' is first and foremost a name we give to an astoundingly complex assemblage of people, places, and positionalities" (p. 8).

In educational research, studies have highlighted ways degrees of rurality exist, such as how towns and homes vary in ways they are isolated from larger cities or populations (Handke, 2012) and:

> [...] racial distinction between rural areas of the northern United States and those in the southern United States, with rural students from the South much more likely to be African American and students from the North more likely to be European American. Maltzan, 2006, p. 202).

Conner & Okamura (2022) review LGBT+ narratives alongside secondary analysis from a 2013 Pew study to better understand how LGBT+ experiences, feelings, and geographical location relate to cultural and personal identity. Their study proposes that some "rural LGBT+ residents may have delinked their sexual selves with their cultural and political selves, thus illustrating the plurality of rural queer voices that exists" (p. 1040). This plurality and "delinking" parts of one's identity is an important concept, related to ways research and literature situate and describe sexuality and gender. While this study focuses on a student's sexuality alongside their college experiences, the conceptualization of one's identity may not be the same as the researcher or other participants. In other words, just because a person is a part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community does not mean that they feel that their sexuality or gender identity directly influences other parts of their lives or values. Understanding a difference of how, or if, parts of one's identity influence another variable is another reason that supports intersectional analysis.

In a larger scope of understanding rurality and the queer community, Conner & Okamura (2022) aim to "provide a more nuanced narrative of rural LGBT+ people" (p. 1041) using interviews from LGBT+ participants living in rural areas at large. The participants and framing of this study demonstrate the variety in political, social, cultural identities, and beliefs.

Metronormativity

In the last two decades, there has been an increasing amount of research that does not focus on urban areas to conduct research about queerness and looks to 2SLGBTQ+ people living in rural spaces (Stone & Compton, 2024; Connor & Okamura, 2022; Garringer, 2024). A significant scholar in the field of gender, sexuality, and cultural studies, J. Halberstam addresses and analyzes queer and transgender visibility and representation in society. In their work titled *In a Queer Time and Place*, Halberstam (2005) critiques the urban-rural binary culture created with rurality being paired with violence against queer people alongside urban areas being the desired cultural and physical destination, calling it metronormativity. Scott Herring's work *Another Country: Queer Anti-Urbanism* (2010) utilizes archives, history, and document analysis to explore and create space for rural, queer history. LGBT people have not existed exclusively in urban spaces, and over time queer culture was shaped to appear in opposition to rural living. Similar to Halberstam's (2005) critique of metronormativity, Herring (2005) examination of queer anti-urbanism intentionally resists that urban places are required for 2SLGBTQ+ survival. Previous research utilizing greater populations of queer people in urban places to study 2SLGBTQ+ is not innately negative and does have its benefits. It is true that urban areas are typically places with a significantly large population in a condensed area, naturally fostering the opportunities for in-person socialization, diversity of sexual partners, and various resources, including for people who identify as 2SLGBTQ+ (Ghaziani, 2010; Ayoub & Kollman, 2021). As Knopp (1995) illustrates this in their chapter over sexualities and urban space: The density and cultural complexity of cities, meanwhile, has led to frequent portrayals of sexual diversity and freedom as peculiarly urban phenomena. As a result, minority sexual subcultures, and the communities and social movements sometimes associated with these, have tended to be more

institutionally developed in cities than elsewhere. (p.136) Furthermore, historians and sociologists have pointed to factors that are believed to have contributed to some urban places becoming disproportionately populated with 2SLGBTQ+ people and culture. Some of these events were the relocation of people after the military issued dishonorable discharges for queer and trans members serving during WWII or industrialization with the trends in the economy. In some of these urban areas, activists are able to use major events in higher population densities to focus and rally for rights and issues related to queer and trans lives, allowing for greater visibility to a broader population (Marcus, 2018; Ayoub & Kollman, 2021). An iconic example of an event becoming a focal point in queer activism involves The Stonewall Riots, made up of several demonstrations and protests in New York City that began as a police raid at a bar frequented by many that were pushed to the margins of society including trans and queer people. A consequence of cities and urban places being portrayed as the main space where 2SLGBTQ+ people and subcultures thrive is how this relationship is used to control and politicize urban spaces and communities. Knopp (1995) explains, "On the other hand, the concentration of these movements and subcultures in urban space has made it easier to both demonize and control them (and to sanctify majority cultures and spaces)." (p.136)

When research or activism is rooted in rural spaces, they do not automatically become non-metronormative. It is important to frame rural places and communities in a way that does not assume rurality is equal to suffering or dangerous for queer and trans people. In Thomsen's work, *Visibility Interrupted* (2021), she examines the lives and feelings of rural, queer women in the Midwestern region of the United States through interviews and analysis, focusing on the rhetoric of "out, loud, and proud" in queer culture and what she calls "visibility politics and discourse" (p. ix). In order to examine the politics and movements that stem from queer rights

and equality, she grounds her study in the experiences and desire of rural residents, but are seemingly positioned on the outside of queer freedom and visibility by residing in rural areas:

> We have a problem. A visibility problem. And a rurality problem. But these problems, as I suggest here, are not those that gay rights supporters have sold with remarkable success: they are not problems of LGBTQ invisibility and the homophobic nature of rural places. The problems lie in how good LGBTQ (loving) people imagine and deploy gay visibility (Possibility! Freedom! Change!) and rurality (Homophobic. Backwards. Dangerous.). It is the contention of this book that these two problems are intertwined and, further, that rethinking the celebratory affects attached to visibility politics creates possibilities for rethinking the negative affects tethered to the rural, and vice versa. (p. viii)

In addressing the visibility politics and effectiveness of queer movements in relation to visibility, Thomsen confronts the assumption of queerness being out of place or suffering in rurality (2021). Much of previous rural LGBTQ research concentrates on viewpoints gay white men and erases the experiences of queer women, nonbinary, transgender, and people of color (Thomsen, 2021; Bletz, 2023). This rural-urban dichotomy pushes minorities to the margins even within the 2SLGBTQ+ community while simultaneously using all those living in rural spaces as a scapegoat for undesired political outcomes (Thomsen, 2021; Bell & Valentine, 1995).

Metronormativity in the Media. Narratives that exacerbate a rural vs. urban binary extend farther than academia. In entertainment and the media, shows like *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*, *Will and Grace*, and *Queer as Folk*, were praised for their queer visibility and mostly positive stories about queer life, all set within large, thriving cities. Although these shows became a symbol of progress for 2SLGBTQ+ rights and representation to a large audience, it also fueled a belief that queer and trans people do not or could not thrive in rural areas. The

storylines and underlying narratives all tied urban places as necessary for 2SLGBTQ+ communities to thrive (Jerke, 2010; Bletz, 2023). This is not a critique to say shows or films should not reflect queer lives in cities or that these stories are intrinsically harmful. Addressing urban-centered biases and how rurality is underrepresented can help show ways people with different identities and backgrounds can live and thrive in multiple places.

In Garringer's (2024) book, *Country Queers: A Love Letter*, they address that depicting urban cities as safe while rural remains unsafe for 2SLGBTQ+ people is an "oversimplification" that "flattens the deep complexity and multidimensionality of all our communities" (p. 10). Rae Garringer has dedicated over a decade of their life to traveling and interviewing rural queer people about their lives and histories. Their interviews and photos are a beautiful reflection on the joys and hardships of queer people living in rural areas.

Sociopolitical Climate of 2SLGBTQ+ Topics in the United States

> *As I write this, legislative and physical attacks on trans and queer people are sweeping the nation, and it feels like conservatives are trying to legislate us out of existence while right-wing militants are killing us in our bars and in the streets. It becomes clearer to me every day that small towns and conservative cities across the South, Midwest, and West are the new front lines in the battle for queer and trans liberation.*
>
> *- Rae Garringer, Country Queer (p. 14)*

States with a higher percentage of rural counties are normally deemed "red" states, meaning the residents historically vote in Republican or conservative politicians (Coleman, 2023; Pew Research Center, 2024). While Republican representatives are more likely to sponsor or support anti-2SLGBTQ+ bills, these laws and their consequences affect people all across the nation (Ulrich-Schad & Duncan, 2022; Bletz, 2023). These legislative bills aggressively target

2SLGBTQ+ rights, such as protections from discrimination and medical care, fostering hostility toward queer and trans people. Compared to 10 years ago, these legislative attacks have been introduced to legislation at a much higher rate in the United States. In 2014, a total of 85 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced across the United States, eight were passed into law (Gill, 2015). In 2016, a total of 252 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced, eight were passed into law (Warbelow & Diaz, 2016). Jumping to 2022, which was a record breaking year in terms of the number of anti-LGBTQ bills introduced across the United States, 315 bills were introduced with 29 signed into law. That record was broken again in 2023 when 571 anti-LGBTQ bills were introduced and 77 became law (ACLU, 2025). This type of legislation has language and consequences that target 2SLGBTQ+ people both directly and indirectly. Examples of these ways these bills target 2SLGBTQ+ people range from language that weaponizes binary definitions for "male", "female", "sex, and "gender" in a way that erases validity and protection from discrimination for any person who is outside of the male/female binary (S.F. 418, 2025) to bills that give protection to medical professionals to discriminate and refuse care to anyone that would go against their "conscience" and allowing exceptions for facilities with a religious mission or association so they may refuse to employ or care for those outside of their preferences (Medical Ethics Defense Act, 2025). If passed, these and similar laws make it easier to discriminate against anyone seen as outside of the male/female binary (sex or gender) with little to no consequences. Even if state legislation is only introduced or dies in committee, these bills still have an effect on 2SLGBTQ+ people and the political climate that echoes throughout the nation.

Focusing specifically on rural states, high-profile murder cases of Brandon Teena and Matthew Shepard are historic milestones that further associating rurality with violence against 2SLGBTQ+ people (Halberstam, 2005; Jerke, 2010). In 1998, Matthew Shepard was a college

student at the University of Wyoming who was violently beaten and left to die, followed by a controversial court case due to the motivation of the murderers. It was brought up in the trial that Matthew Shepard was gay and the lawyers of the defendant unsuccessfully tried to argue on the basis of "gay panic" and an original intent by the offenders to rob Shepard, not murder him (Sheerin, 2018; Matthew Shepard Foundation, 2023). Activists and politicians pointed to Shepard's case to cite the need for laws regarding anti-hate crimes and against violence, discrimination that targeted those in the 2SLGBTQ+ community. In Nebraska, Brandon Teena was a young transgender man who was turned into a prime example of brutality and violence against queer and trans people in rural spaces. Bringing up these cases does not mean to dishonor or make light of these tragedies. These murders were horrific and sad events, but the way these violent events were projected across media and organizations facilitated the belief that queer people would find only intolerance and violence against them in rural spaces (Halberstam, 2005; Jerke, 2010). These key events in junction with narratives of rural culture, opportunities for physical social networks, and general limited access to resources perpetuate a belief that queer people are seen as being stuck within a rural geographical "closet" if they cannot move to an urban setting (Gray, 2009).

Kansas Legislation

Anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) legislation and the dismantling of DEI programs started at the federal level and became the blueprint used at the state level. In Kansas, a bill was approved that included a new law concerning policies enforced by public universities or colleges (SB 125). This bill resulted in 2SLGBTQ+ resources centers closing and inclusion policies being removed, including at a public university attended by a student participant of this study (Perez, 2025; Ring, 2025). These closures occurred in the middle of this study and are not reflected in all

of the interviews. However, the legislation and political climate of Kansas, where this study was focused, is important for contextual understanding of this research. Anti-DEI policies not only hurt 2SLGBTQ+ students but can hurt rural communities across the United States (Fischer, 2025) Fischer (2025) describes specific examples such as how "detrimental vouchers programs would be for rural public schools and how private schools would be unprofitable and doomed to fail in a small community" (para. 19).

According to the Movement Advancement Project (2025), Kansas receives a low score when it comes to laws and policies that affect equity for LGBTQ people. This score accounts for multiple checks that add positive points for protections and inclusive policies, negative points for harmful laws in place, and highlights laws that are missing that protect LGBTQ+ people and their families within the state (MAP, 2025). For clarity, it is important to note these state-level policies and laws affect all of Kansas, not only rural counties. Individual counties or local governments can pass different laws or policies that affect a smaller jurisdiction within the state.

Although Kansas has a Democrat governor, many districts and counties have elected Republican state representatives. As discussed in the previous section, conservative representatives are more likely to sponsor, sign, or support legislation that is anti-LGBTQ or blocks protections for queer and/or trans lives in the state. Laws that are counted towards the positive tally of LGBTQ equity and rights include: the federal protections from the U.S. Supreme Court decision of the *Obergefell v. Hodges* case, nondiscrimination laws for state employees or local housing laws, and some punishments for hate crimes related to sexual orientation (MAP, 2025). However, Kansas does have "negative laws" or legislation that discriminates or includes harmful policies for LGBTQ+ people in the state, such as religious exemption laws, targeted laws against transgender students in sports, banning medical care or benefits for gender-

affirming minors and transgender people, and refusing gender changes on some forms of identification[3] (MAP, 2025).

A study that focused on LGBTQ+ youth and rural Kansas found that these students did face challenges but the issue was not directly connected to the place itself. Instead, LGBT youth felt isolated and lacked resources that were specific to their needs and community (Paceley, 2016). Paceley (2016) brought up the lack of LGBT research outside of urban areas but their study focused on youth and not college age students. Therefore, this dissertation and research is aimed at the gap in the research that is specific to college students and rural areas.

Purpose of the Study

While considering the current sociopolitical climate, campus climate, and dominant narratives surrounding the 2SLGBTQ+ community and rural spaces, there is not enough literature that involves 2SLGBTQ+ higher education students in rural spaces without positioning queerness and rurality as contrasting identities and culture. In particular, this work examines the social, academic, and institutional experiences of queer and trans (2SLGBTQ+) students and their feelings of belonging at a rural college. By engaging directly with students, this study seeks to bring attention to their voices and stories while exploring deeper themes from their experiences. The following research question guided this study:

How do 2SLGBTQ+ students at a rural college describe their experiences with campus life, the local community, and living while in a traditionally rural, conservative state?

Along with my main research question, I used the following subset of questions to help form my essential research question and design themes for my interview questions:

[3] In January 2026, this policy tracker did not yet reflect that the restriction of changing gender on driver's licenses was overturned in 2025 (Irwin & Lyson, 2025) However, after the governor was vetoed on another bill in February 2026, Kansas legislators then passed a bill which invalidated driver's licenses practically overnight for transgender people who hold a license in Kansas who have previously changed their gender markers.

What are the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ students attending a college in a rural, traditionally conservative state in relation to their gender and sexuality and broader narratives of rurality and queer belonging?

How do policies, faculty/staff, support services, and student organizations impact queer and trans student experiences?

How do students engage with, resist, or acknowledge dominant narratives about rurality and queerness?

In order to give space for each individual student's story as well as viewing possible themes and deeper meanings from their experiences, I conducted an exploratory qualitative case study utilizing inductive coding and thematic analysis with student interviews. Each student's interview will be reviewed and represented individually as well as collectively to explore possible themes that carry across all cases (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016).

Summary of Chapter One and Dissertation Roadmap

This first chapter reviewed significant topics, terms, and contextual information related to the field of research and the groundwork for this dissertation. Generalization of rural areas often ignores people who live in these places that are considered minorities, many of which were shaped by outside acts of violence, involuntary immigration, colonization, oppressive power structures, and continued acts of racism. The Census Bureau's terms and portrayals of rurality can give a starting point to what it means to call a place rural. Researchers have shown, and continue to show, the need to push back on assumptions, rigid definitions, and geographical boundaries of what is considered rural and who belongs in rural places. Tying this information with the problem statement leads to my research question and how I framed my study.

Moving forward in the next chapter, I review existing research related to topics, findings, and how previous work connects this dissertation. My third chapter reviews the design of an exploratory qualitative case study, demographics of my students, the space they come from, and the research design with methods and the process of data analysis. Chapter Four draws out findings from each interview, including quotes and themes of each interview. Each student's interview and thematic analysis will be individually represented as well as viewed alongside all other participants. The last chapter discusses findings that were outlined in Chapter Four, intersectional considerations, my reciprocity statement, and implications for future research.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Chapter Two reviews literature relevant to the nuances of rurality, the experiences 2SLGBTQ+ students in relation to their identities, and how these relate to higher education. In this chapter, I examine how previous research has discussed ways identities of 2SLGBTQ+ students can impact their experiences in education. This chapter also reviews different areas of higher education that can impact students, such as college affiliations, policies, and faculty/staff support. Additionally, I review how critical rural theory, queer theory, and intersectional analysis relate to this study's framework, guiding my methodology and research methods.

2SLGBTQ+ Students' Experiences in Education

Intersections of Identity and Education

Researchers over the last 15 to 20 years have focused on queer and trans students in education, such as topics to campus climate, student transitions to higher education, faculty/staff support, and holding physical spaces for 2SLGBTQ+ students (Gray, 2009; Gray, Johnson, & Gilley, 2016; Shea, 2021; Pryor, 2021). In *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural Americ*a, Mary Gray (2009) embraces an ethnographic methodology with rural queer youth in order to better understand how evolving media works within their lives and how visibility plays into different areas of political and social aspects of their lives. Gray lays out an account of rural students organizing to have a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) student group established at their high school, specifically their experiences and a reflection on that process. Gray (2009) explains that the lack of GSA student groups in rural schools was not solely based on rural intolerance of queer or trans people but the result of a complex intersection "of racial and class tensions that structure rural life" (p. 82). These experiences and challenges are not

exclusive to high school queer students but show they are applicable and experienced intertwined with other marginalized communities and identities (Gray, 2009; Hulko & Hovanes, 2017).

This framing of how parts of one's identity are not to be disconnected or delineated when understanding their impact on one's experiences or background is in agreement with findings from Maltzan's (2006) and McNamee's (2022) work in higher education that was previously discussed in Chapter One. For example, McNamee and Tate (2022) reflect in a collaborative autoethnography that they "knew that our intersecting identities of being both queer and rural influenced our experiences in our rural hometowns and in higher education" (p. 133). They use their own identities and narratives to evaluate how they had difficulty with shifting spaces and the feeling of having multiple identities that worked against them. In their rural hometowns, they felt excluded due to anti-2SLGBTQ+ attitudes and hostility. However, in postsecondary education, they felt othered when moving into higher education as rural students with queer identities. Even with more students who identified as queer or allies as compared to their hometowns, they felt left on the outside of acceptance or inclusion because they were the "out-group" due to their rural background and identities among peers who grew up in or moved from larger cities (p. 142).

Although McNamee and Tate's (2022) ethnography is situated in a typically rural state, their university was a larger, R2 (known as High Research) institution with a community that included diversity and resources that most smaller communities do not have. Their work serves as an important starting point to explore how these rural identities can impact queer students who identify as coming from a rural space or how students who transfer from larger cities or schools into colleges situated in a rural area.

Similarly, McNamee's dissertation (2022) titled, *The Cultural Transition Into and Navigation of Higher Education for Rural Students from Poor and Working-class Background*, explored how rural students, specifically with poor and working-class backgrounds, transition, navigate, and experience college. His methods involved interviews, focus groups, and journal writing. Although his study does not initially center the sexual, gender, or racial identity of students, the variety of ways the students describe themselves and their identities gives insight on how intersectionality is functioning to affect their experiences for future research.

McNamee (2022) outlined how the students' experiences emerged in interviews and focus group discussions where students described their identities "layered on top of and/or compounded upon their rural, poor and working-class identities and backgrounds" (p. 222). The students felt unsupported when they did not fit in with rural peers who were white, cisgender peers who were transitioning to college at the same time. McNamee's research shows a transition and contrast of rural hometowns to larger populations, diversity in student demographics, and opportunities for networking and resources - all commonly associated with urban cities but outside of rural possibilities.

As mentioned earlier, literature and research concerning specific experiences and desires of students living and attending school in rural communities is not well explored or represented. It should not be the burden of a queer or trans person to relocate their lives or families because society is unkind or unjust, and that "viewing LGBT student academics, health, and well-being through the lens of minority stress theory points to the environment, not the individual" (Renn, 2022, p. 189). Currently, existing literature primarily represents urban places and higher education in urban spaces (Goh, 2018; Patton, 2023; Pitcher, et al., 2018), and there is a need for more research situated within rural America.

Student Housing and Policies

Dorms and housing are a major topics for 2SLGBTQ+ students in college settings. Criteria for student placement in on-campus dorms and housing often raise challenges for students with marginalized sexual and/or gender identities as well as vulnerability in isolated spaces like bedrooms, living spaces, and bathrooms. Using a critical lens with narrative analysis, Marine, Wagner, & Nicolazzo, explore student affairs practitioners' roles in creating or running gender-inclusive housing on campuses within higher education (2019). The methodology of centering trans* student experiences as well as being conscious of how policy and dynamics of the institution influence the interviews. Because this body of work is revolving around critical trans* politics as a framework, the researchers explore how the gender-inclusive housing policies and practices not only affect their program development within the college but also how it affects student safety and impact on students with student affair practitioners.

Involving Private and Christianity-affiliated Institutions

While a Christianity-affiliation of the college is not an intentional part of this dissertation, some of the students who were interviewed studied at a Christianity-affiliated private college and it is important to explore how this unique affiliation could have on 2SLGBTQ+ students.

In a study by Yarhouse, et al., (2009), they investigated campus climate with 104 students who identified as being a part of the sexual minority (lesbian, gay, bisexual, or any non-predominant sexual identity) while attending a Christian college or university. Yarhouse, et al. (2009) study's findings showed that 84% of students reported that their campus viewed homosexuality as negative. A system review by Bradbury-Jones et al. (2020) supports this finding as several studies cited religion as "creating discriminatory environment" when considering gender and ethnicity and that heteronormativity and homophobia is not common on

campuses (p. 1629). However, students reported that these views were mainly from comments by their peers and from the general campus atmosphere. These sentiments were not often directly by faculty or staff, "Students typically heard them in social settings that involved peers but not as much faculty and staff" (Yarhouse et al., 2009, p. 104).

Due to the Supreme Court and White House administration's support for faith-based institutions and their discrimination against marginalized people, it is not surprising 2SLGBTQ+ students felt unsupported on campus. In 2021, a class-action lawsuit was filed representing 40 students/alumni who sued religiously affiliated colleges. These Christianity-affiliated colleges were granted religious exemptions from following federal requirements created to protect the 2SLGBTQ+ and other marginalized students. If colleges are allowed this exemption, colleges can receive federal funding for their operations despite practicing discrimination based on one's gender and sexuality. In their decision, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the 9th Circuit ruled in favor of these Christian institutions of higher education (*Elizabeth Hunter, et al. v. U.S. Department of Education*, 2023).

Administration, Faculty, and Staff Supporting 2SLGBTQ+ Students

Studies have shown faculty and staff members can have important roles in supporting 2SLGBTQ+ students in higher education (Linley et al., 2016; Wolff et al., 2017; Renn, 2022). Faculty and staff support 2SLGBTQ+ students during class time, on campus, or out in the community. In Liney et al.'s (2016) study, student participants gave examples of ways they felt supported: professors being respectful and using correct pronouns and names provided by the students, supportive academic advising, visibility of other LGBTQ faculty or allies at events, and checking in with students and their personal well-being (pp. 57-59). Administrations support queer and trans students with inclusive, nondiscrimination policies and support of 2SLGBTQ+

programs and resources on campus (Pitcher et al., 2018; Renn, 2022). For example, campus policies and forms that provide clear, helpful procedures for name changes and housing applications reduce types of bureaucratic discrimination that impact marginalized students (Renn, 2022).

Theoretical Framework

To better understand the complexities of rurality, marginalized identities, and higher education, I review the concepts of critical rural theory and queer theories while applying an analytical framework of intersectionality. Patricia Hill Collins (2019) comments on how intersectionality should not be used to conflate categories of race, gender, class, ability, or other identities nor to forget the power dynamics that are unique to each of these identities and communities. Consequently, the ways experiences are impacted by identities are not understood in isolation but to be viewed as a whole.

Critical Rural Theory

Critical rural theory specifically addresses the juxtaposition to urban systems and urbanormativity, which refers to the way society centers urban areas as ideal or most important in comparison to rural spaces socially, culturally, and physically (Thomas et al., 2011). As mentioned in my first chapter, rurality is not just a spatial or locational definition but has a social structural and cultural facet that challenges a singular definition of rural. The complexity of being able to define what is rural reinforces that rurality is not simply a location or made up of a single demographic.

Critical rural theory and rural studies push back on the notion that urban places exist independently separate from rural spaces, outlining ways large populations and cities depend on rural agriculture, land, and resources to exist (Thomas, et al., 2011). This binary concept of rural

being the opposite of urban leads to rurality being othered; Rural is positioned as backward or dangerous compared to urban landscapes, yet both rely on a historical white settler dominance of land, resources, and acts of colonialism (Thomas, et al., 2011; Thomsen, 2021).

Queer Theory

The definition of what exactly queer and queer theory means and how it is used in research is a notably argued topic in academia (Mayo, 2007; Renn, 2010; Ingrey 2018). David Halperin (1995) has offered a widely cited definition of queer as "whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant" (p. 62). Teresa de Lauretis (1991) first popularized the term queer as pertaining to theory, pushing back on gay and lesbian studies that upheld assumptions to define "gay" or "lesbian" and what was counted as knowledge in academia:

> In a sense, the term "Queer Theory" was arrived at in an effort to avoid all of these fine distinctions in our discursive protocols, not to adhere to any one of the given terms, not to assume their ideological liabilities, but instead to both transgress and transcend them – or at the very least problematize them. (p. v)

While concepts of queer theory has been used to critique binary systems, disrupt limits of gender and sexuality, or challenge assumptions in society, the idea that queer theory is a uniform framework with a single definition creates a paradox of what it means to be queer or queer theory, limiting its use or meaning (Berlant & Warner, 1995; Ingrey, 2018). Taking up the thoughts of Jennifer Ingrey (2018), I explore queer theory here in a way that does not outright define what queer *is,* but how it is used:

> Some practitioners and scholars take up queer as either signifier or signified or both; in other words, how queer is the act of unsettling and disrupting the normalization of sexuality and gender, how queer can mean merely the act of critique of basically

> anything even that outside of sexuality or gender expression/identity, or how queer can be an additive piece of content in terms of LGBTQ knowledge. (p.4)

In this case, I purposefully do not outright define what it means to be queer or what queer theory means but instead discuss how queer theory can be used and how it can work with other critical theories, including within education research. To help clarify this use of queer theory and how it applies to my dissertation, I continue to explore similar ways queer theory has been used, including alongside other critical theories.

While this study is working with 2SLGBTQ+ students and recognizing how their identity plays a part in their college experiences, the way queer theory is used in this study goes beyond queering gender and sexualities, looking "outside" on how queerness can be applied to understanding rurality and higher education in different ways. Halberstam (2005) considered how queerness intersects with rurality, noting that some previous scholarship showed "the rural/urban binary reverberates in really productive ways with other defining binaries like traditional/modern, Western/non-Western, natural/cultural, and modern/postmodern" (p. 36). Applying queer theory alongside critical rural theory, scholars can better understand, challenge, and rethink how researchers view urban vs. rural concepts and metronormativity (Halberstam, 2005). When applied in qualitative research, queer theory helps frame the work to explore possible systemic issues and experiences, such as queer students in rural higher education, without framing queerness or rurality as a complete deficit to lives or their education (Wozolek, 2019; Renn, 2022).

However, queer theory has not been without its own critiques. In the past, even research with a queer theory framework has focused on experiences of non-heterosexual, white middle-class men (Bletz, 2023). When theories and praxis uphold white normativity, which Ward (2008)

defines as “cultural norms and practices that make whiteness appear natural, normal, and right”, other dominant societal norms remain unchecked and reproduced (p. 564). Ward (2008) highlights a connection between white normativity and heteronormativity:

> Akin to the example of lesbian and gay inclusion, the concept of white normativity implies that even in racially diverse environments in which people of color are extended a degree of institutional power, whiteness may still be a dominant ingredient of the environment’s culture and a determinant of prevailing norms for communication and behavior. (p.564)

A Queer of Color critique, as I will discuss below, challenges such scholarship, decentering witnesses from queer experiences and desires (Eng et al., 2005; Hames-Garcia, 2011). It is not enough to just include racially diverse experiences in research; it is important to acknowledge ways white, heteronormative assumptions, desires, and practices have, or could, affect frameworks and analyses. The use of an intersectional lens when analyzing the 2SLGBTQ+ students’ experiences in rural higher education can bring “attention both to the event and the underlying understandings that are central to that event as it occurs”, giving deeper contextual information and a chance of a more equitable understanding of these experiences (Wozolek, 2019, p. 6).

This understanding of intersectionality comes from Kimberlé Crenshaw’s legal work, which highlights the inequalities specifically faced by Black women from the policies and practices of established systems of power when discrimination is only viewed as a single-axis or only from the viewpoint of one identity in analysis. Representation of Black women’s experiences were erased when legal definitions of discrimination were assigned only by one’s sex or race, not both. The category of sex covered discrimination against “women”, leaning in

favor of white women, and "race", mainly protecting Black men. Black women were "protected only to the extent that their experiences coincide with those of either of the two groups" (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 143).

Beyond Crenshaw's theoretical framework in legal studies, Black lesbian feminists in the Combahee River Collective Statement (1977) showed how social theories and movements can leave out social identities that are just as important in their life experiences. Leaving out sexual orientation from the Black feminist movement and the representation of those who experience injustices is exactly what Collins warns against regarding conflating marginalized identities together.

Michael Hames-Garcia (2011) applies a similar intersectional lens to decentering whiteness from queer theory. He proposes a new "genealogy" of queer theory that does not put scholars and experiences of people of color at the margins. Queer topics and experiences of race are viewed as inseparable to their experience, not in addition to it (Hames-Garcia, 2011).

Situationing queerness and rurality together, Hulko and Hovanes (2017) discussed intersectionality in their study that explored how LGBTQ youth find community in rural towns: Intersectionality assists researchers and activists to challenge inequalities and create new ways to work against social injustices:

> Researchers and theorists using an intersectional lens do not attempt to isolate a particular aspect of a person's identity nor to prioritize one form of oppression over another; rather they consider various facets of a person's social location and treat oppressions (and privileges) as interactive and mutually reinforcing. (p. 8)

Therefore, viewing rurality, queerness, identity, and experiences through an intersectional lens and critical theories such as Queer of Color critique and Critical Rural Theory, allows for

deeper understandings of students' experiences without neglecting the unique ways queer and trans students might experience a rural college or community.

Summary of Chapter Two

This chapter reviews current literature surrounding 2SLGBTQ+ students, rural education, and student experiences. There is a basis for this study to fill gaps in the literature as well as applications for the possible findings and framing of future literature. By using critical rural theory along with queer theory to frame my research, I show how and why these critical theories can work together with an intersectional analysis to call out and rethink oppressive boundaries, working toward a more just and inclusive understanding of how 2SLGBTQ+ students experience higher education.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This dissertation focuses on 2SLGBTQ+ students in higher education and their experiences while attending a college in rural Kansas. In particular, I examined the students' sense of belonging in relation to their experiences surrounding campus life, gender and sexualities, and rurality. While some research discusses experiences and feelings of 2SLGBTQ+ students coming from rural hometowns or attending rural secondary schools to then larger universities (Christiaens, 2015; Handke, 2012), there is limited research that specifically explores queer and trans students' higher education experiences while residing in a rural area regardless of background or hometown.

With qualitative methods and research design, I incorporate critical elements and concepts of intersectionality analysis with identities, space, and experiences for this study. As I will explain below, qualitative research allows the researcher to explore complex issues while raising silenced voices, speaking directly to the people identified throughout the study, and allowing them to put their experiences and knowledge in their own words (Creswell and Poth, 2018). Lee and LaDousa (2015) emphasize that qualitative research is "crucial for gaining access to nuanced interactions and social patterns in rich analytical detail" (p.3).

Positionality Statement

It is important to be transparent with my positionality and reflect on how I am both inside and outside the field I am studying. Being a white person in the United States, I have many unspoken privileges that I must be conscious of and responsible for while working and writing about marginalized identities. I am a part of the queer community and have lived in both rural and urban places throughout my life. I aim to uplift marginalized voices, rather than conduct work to extract information, stories, and data for only personal gain.

With me I bring knowledge as a queer person, educator, activist, first-generation student, being from a lower to middle-class family. My interests and activism are all influenced by my background and life experiences, from growing up queer in a small town and teaching in urban and rural spaces to attending my father's naturalization of citizenship ceremony, being involved with and performing drag, and volunteering to organize our rural community's pride events.

In academia, I received my Bachelor's degree in Education with my state accreditation to teach English/Languages Arts for the 7th -12th grade levels. I expanded that license to include Speech, Theater, Debate, and Forensics. After teaching for a few years, I received my Master's of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction with emphasis on ESOL. I taught in public schools for 7 years, urban and rural districts, before returning full-time to graduate school for my PhD. While completing my coursework and required exams, I participated in collaborative reading and discussion groups across diverse networks, traveled and presented at academic conferences, and worked as a graduate research assistant in the College of Education at the University of Oklahoma.

In the last stages of my dissertation and research, I have returned back to the classroom and am teaching full-time at a public rural school again. These lessons and experiences influence my praxis in research, teaching, and who I am as a person today.

Research Design

Qualitative Case Study

As Ferguson (2013) explains, in relation to Turner (2000), my methods and ways of meeting needs of the community must be flexible and sensitive:

We truly do not know what we are doing unless we are sensitive about the representation of queer subjects within our studies and actually listen to their voices instead of attempting to

contain them within a hierarchical ranking of importance based on seeing participants as numbers rather than human beings. (p. 7)

Therefore, to answer my research question - *How do 2SLGBTQ+ students at a rural college describe their experiences with campus life, the local community, and living in a traditionally rural, conservative state?* - I applied a qualitative approach through an exploratory case study, uplifting experiences and voices directly from the students. Yin (2003) and Merriam (2009) recommend case studies be used for investigating "how?" and "why?" research questions, aiding in understanding a unique situation or experience with context. However, while Yin focuses on the quality control, design of research, and objectivity, Merriam (2009) defines case studies based on the "unit of analysis" (p. 42) and outlining the bounds of a case. This bounded case here would be defined as the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ students who are attending a rural college or university in a conservative state, focusing on the unit or bounded phenomena along with my questions aimed to gain an "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system" (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). This understanding of case studies allowed for using multiple methods and information sources. While this study mainly uses interviews as a method, I purposefully examined and presented legislation and current events within this study, giving context and adding meaning to my findings. There is attention to process, design, and quality that still reflects parts of Yin's (2003) understanding of case studies, but ultimately my epistemological stance and theoretical framework lead me to Merriam's (2009) approach of qualitative case studies.

Student Recruitment

After receiving IRB approval for my study from the University of Oklahoma Institutional Review Board (Appendix G), I used purposeful sampling in order to recruit students who would

bring important insight and understanding to my study and the research questions (Patton, 2002). In order to reach a variety of students in Kansas, I used different means of sharing the infographic and questionnaire linked in it with a QR code (Appendix C). I sought out communication directories or contacts of different colleges, asking if they would share the infographic and study information through their email domain. On Facebook, I created a public post and a post in a specific public group page with those who specialized in queer studies research. On Bluesky, I created a short post, including the infographic. On Instagram, I shared my post and through the story feature, allowing for friends and organizations related to colleges and 2SLGBTQ+ groups to share within their own networks as well. In a follow-up email with the private, 4-year college later discussed in this chapter, I had to submit for IRB approval from their college's committee before the information could be shared with their student body. I completed their IRB form along with the letter of approval I received from my institution. After they approved my study, the communication staff member shared my call for participants with the infographic in their newsletter for a few weeks.

From this recruitment overall, I received eight valid[4] responses in total through Qualtrics; however, two responses had to be thrown out because the students reported their university or college being from a school not in Kansas. For those who did attend a college or university in Kansas and were at least 18 years of age, I emailed each student separately (Appendix D) to schedule a time for their one-on-one interview with me, using the email they provided in the questionnaire. Overall, I had five students complete an interview.

[4]A few responses were deemed invalid, not because of their answers, but because of the same IP address submitting multiple responses in a row with different emails and names. These were likely spam, bot, or fraud and were thrown out of the possible participants.

The original design of this study was to recruit students attending only one specific college campus; however, after gaining a deeper understanding of how diverse rurality can be from one person to another, I submitted and received approval with an amended IRB (Appendix G) to widen the range to recruit any student attending a rural college in Kansas before beginning interviews. As explained in previous chapters, rurality is not monolithic and is complex to define, even within one state or region (Gray et al., 2016; Connor & Okamura, 2022; Bletz, 2023). This change allowed students to apply their own understanding of what qualifies as rural and for the opportunity of this variety to be seen within this study. (Handke, 2012; Gray et al., 2016; Bletz, 2023; Inouye et al., 2024). Because this study is designed as a qualitative case study within the bounds of rural Kansas and places of higher education, I focused on getting quality interviews and uplifting individual voices rather than needing a specific quantity of interviews or generalizing across cases (Creswell, 2007).

Institution Context

Of the students who completed an interview with me, four came from a private nonprofit 4-year college and one from a public research university in Kansas. The private college is affiliated with a Christian denomination but maintains a nonprofit status, which I assigned the pseudonym Ad Aspera College. The exact denomination of the college was withheld in order to uphold anonymity for some of the student participants.

The physical campus is located within a town with 12,000 – 13,000 people with less than 1,000 students enrolled, with some online class options available (NCES, 2022). According to the NCES report for 2021-2022, the make-up of student demographics by race were 42% white, 1% Indigenous (American or Alaskan), 2% Asian, 15% Black or African American, 15% Hispanic or Latino, 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islands, 2% two or more races, as well as 3%

non-resident and/or international students, and 20% that declined to respond about their race (NCES, 2022). According to the college's website, a relatively large population of students at this college participate in athletic programs or activities. Transfer students or international students also make up a significant part of the student body. Noted by one of the students I interviewed, this college has a variety of clubs and activity groups outside of athletics but does not currently have a GSA or queer support/alliance sponsored group. Currently, there is no official number of current students that identify as queer or 2SLGBTQ+ at any of the colleges or universities represented in this study. This lack of 2SLGBTQ+ student population data is connected to how the NCES is only required to collect data based on gender, race, and ethnicity but not sex, orientation, or other demographic information (NCES, 2025).

The other student interviewed for this study attended an R1 (high research) public university, named Midland University for this study, with roughly 16,000 students enrolled during the Fall semester of 2023. The physical campus is situated in a town made up of roughly 50,000 people, with 76.2% being white (non-Hispanic), 8.7% Hispanic, 3.5% two or more races, 2.9% Black, 2.1% Asian, 0.4% Indigenous (American or Alaskan), 0.1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander with 4.9% being non-resident or international students and 1.1% being unknown or refused to report their race (NCES, 2023)

Each campus offers a range of living arrangements: campus dorms, homes or apartments, or with their family. All represented colleges or universities list different options or accommodations for transgender students who seek to live on campus and to contact the housing services department for more information.

Demographics of Student Participants

Of the five students that participated, four identified as white and one as Black. Four students were from a private college and one was from a public institution. Two of these students identified as male or cis-male, one as female, one as female but also "nonconforming", and one as nonbinary. As for sexual identity, three students identified as bisexual, with one who noted "contemplating pansexual", one student identified as gay, and one as pansexual (without using bisexual).

All students chose to have pseudonyms created for them, instead of using their own names or creating their own pseudonym for this study. Students who participated in this study had a range of living arrangements: campus dorms, houses in town, apartments, or with their family. They all attended classes on campus with two students mentioning that they had a class online, but mostly in person. Below is a table of the student demographics information, consistent with the words the students used about themselves.

Student	*Pronouns*	*Gender*	*Sexual Orientation*	*Race/ Ethnicity*	*Institution*
Chris	he/him	Male	Bisexual	Black	Midland University
Cora	she/her	Female	Bisexual/ Pansexual	White	As Aspera College
Riley	they/them	Nonbinary	Bisexual	White	As Aspera College
Taylor	he/him	Cis-Male	Gay	White	As Aspera College
Silver	she/they	Female/ Nonconforming	Pansexual	White	As Aspera College

Student Interviews Process

For all of my forms and emails, I used OU's secure Qualtrics platform and my OU email to communicate with the students and any college or university personnel when sending information. Once the student and I agreed upon a meeting time, I sent a calendar invite and Zoom link to use for the meeting. Prior to the interview meeting, each student received the consent form to review (Appendix A). Additionally, I asked each student if they would like a copy of my overview for their interview before it is possibly published anywhere and noted their responses.

As I completed interviews with each student, it became apparent students would vary in how much they would say, the details they would give, and if they required additional prompting or questions to expand their answers. Interviews varied in length and were mostly dependent on how long of an answer the student gave per question and how deeply they got into their experiences.

Interview Protocol

For each interview session, I opened the meeting room a few minutes early and waited for the participants to join. After greeting each person, I confirmed that the student received the consent form via email prior to the meeting and got their verbal consent to participate and to record the meeting. Once I had consent to conduct the interview and to record, I would let them know I would start recording and begin the interview. The semi-structured interview questions (Appendix B) were organized by theme and helped with the natural progression of the interview, while still allowing for flexibility and to cover all the aspects of my research question and the different ways 2SLGBTQ+ students might experience college. The themes of the questions were background information, experience in college (in and out of academic possibilities), exploring

rural, queerness, and identity, and understanding of students' experiences and expectations. Each question was intended to be open-ended and allow for participants to expand on questions or to allow myself to ask follow-up questions that might not be explicitly on the question list but were related to their answer. Outside of the general themes, questions were not limited to a specific order, preparing for variances in student responses and fluid conversations during the interview (Brinkmann, 2013). This reason for this flexibility is to allow the student and researcher to "fully attend to the processual nature of conversation and the social dimensions of knowledge production" (Bartlett & Vavrus, 2016, p. 55).

At the end of the interview, I would ask the student if they had any questions or discussions they wanted to add that I did not cover. If they did not, I would end the recording, confirm if they wanted to use a pseudonym for the study and any name preferences. I would then thank them for their time, remind them to email me if they had any follow-up questions or concerns, and sign off.

Post-Interview

In accordance with the information put out in the call for participants, each student was sent $15.00 compensation for completing an interview for my study through Venmo or Cash App, with privacy settings on. Before beginning data analysis, I went through each interview transcript to remove identifiable information, correct any audio-to-text errors, and insert pseudonyms as needed.

Data Analysis

Each interview transcript was read and reread before I started the analysis and coding phases. I followed a process for inductive coding and completed a thematic analysis of each interview as well as themes across all interviews. Inductive coding allows for the codes and

themes to be informed by the students' voices themselves and not trying to fit the data within a predefined set of codes or assumptions beforehand (Braun & Clark, 2006; Witkowsky & Bingham, 2021). For this case study, I drew from the phases of coding as outlined by Bingham (2023), particularly phases 3-5, which support analysis in case studies. These phases include:

Phase 1: Organizing the Data

Phase 2: Sorting Data into Relevant Topical Categories

Phase 3: Open/Initial Coding

Phase 4: Identifying Patterns, Themes, and Findings

Phase 5: Applying Theory and Explaining Findings

In "From Data Management to Actionable Findings: A Five-Phase Process of Qualitative Data Analysis" by Bingham (2023), they note that the phases that require the researcher to identify deductive codes from theory or pre-existing literature are not used the same way as a study that utilizes open or inductive coding. Due to the phenomenological nature of the data, I also followed a process called horizontalization. Horizontalization is grouping responses by a participant into "meaning clusters", developing descriptions of those clusters, then representing the experience of each student as a whole (Bingham, 2023, p.10). This description aids the researcher with presenting their findings as well as preserving the individual representation for each student's experience.

Throughout the entire process, it was important to draw upon an intersectional lens and a queer theoretical framework while making sense of the data in order to recognize the complex and multidimensional possibilities of each students' experience. As mentioned in Chapter Two, while I do not specifically call attention to other marginalized demographic groups, I can

acknowledge and critique systems of oppression and possible inequities woven into students' experiences.

After reading and rereading each interview transcript, I completed the first phase of inductive coding with each interview, one interview at a time. I used the comparative method throughout each phase of coding and thematic analysis. Using this method, the researcher assigns codes they have created or can create a new code. This was done throughout all my phases of coding, across all student interviews (Witkowsky & Bingham, 2021; Bingham, 2023). As codes were created and sorted, I created a spreadsheet as a coding guide. This guide allowed me to organize codes, track any changes or refining of codes, and keep quotes pulled from student interviews aligned with their associated codes (Bingham, 2023). Once I completed the first phase of coding, I began the next phase of coding to condense codes, again with each interview and across all interviews. Each student had their own sheet within the spreadsheet with quotes from their interview and the corresponding codes (Appendix F). From here, I identified themes for each individual interview. On another separate sheet, I recorded themes that emerged across all students' experiences. Themes developed from pattern coding do not aim to compare experiences or themes against each other; they aid in clarifying the nuances and representation of the students' experiences as well as how they relate to each other (Riger & Sigurvinsdottir, 2016; Bingham, 2023).

Ethics and Reciprocity Statement

Throughout this research process, I felt it was important that my epistemology guided my design and my actions. As noted throughout Chapter Three, the design of this study and ethically interacting with students who participated with this study was extremely important to me. In my coursework during my doctoral program, professors and students discussed the IRB process.

With their advice, I was able to provide important information and understand the IRB's expectations to ensure the process was less stressful and done correctly. Faculty and peers advised me to contact the Board if I had any questions. While the idea of calling the IRB office was intimidating at first, the Board representative I spoke to was extremely kind. They were helpful with the process and understanding the forms I needed.

Student consent in order for me to contact plus interview the students was completed for each step of the process, allowing students to back out if they needed for any reason and without questions or intimidation from me, the researcher. Although not required, I wanted to pay the students as a way to give back for their time and effort. As mentioned earlier, if a student wanted me to send a copy of their interview overview before this dissertation was finalized, I sent that to them via email. Not every student wanted a copy before I included their interview in my dissertation, but it was important to me to find ways to help students feel more comfortable and to have accountability as a researcher in telling their stories accurately.

After my dissertation and defense is complete, I hope to share my findings with local institutions or community members who are dedicated in supporting its students, especially the 2SLGBTQ+ community. There is vulnerability in allowing a dissertation to be accessible online and to a larger audience. I know my writing and these findings could be used in ways I might not know or understand yet, but I aim to continue advocating and centering rural 2SLGBTQ+ students to support them and the community as a whole.

Summary of Chapter Three

This exploratory qualitative case study centers queer and trans students and their experiences while attending a rural college or university in Kansas, exploring each case through individual interviews without trying to prove a hypothesis or theory. My epistemological stance,

theoretical frameworks, and understanding of ethics in research are central to qualitative research and the weaving together of complex layers that come with identities and human experiences. I ensured all students were provided with, and agreed to, the consent forms before recording or asking questions. Then, I followed the interview protocol that was approved by the IRB and spent careful time and attention to each individual interview transcript and analysis.

Chapter Four: Experiences and Thematic Findings

I think I was expecting [stereotyping] to be worse, but honestly, I feel like, especially with this college, it does bring back to the feeling of community, you know, especially with being in a rural college.

-Taylor, student participant

Each student and their stories while attending a rural college in Kansas is unique and holds importance on its own. Through the coding and analysis process, I have worked to preserve each student's voice and story. These student participants and their experiences are not substitutions or meant to summarize for one population, demographic, experience, or location. Instead, each student's story and experiences contribute to an underrepresentation of queer, trans students and rural education, especially in traditionally conservative places. In this chapter, I have outlined specific themes that were prevalent throughout their college experiences along with commentary and quotes from their interviews. After representing each student's story and themes individually, I end the chapter with an overview of themes that emerged across all the interviews. Further implications and discussion of the students' experiences will be addressed in Chapter Five.

Cora's Story

Cora (she/her) was a recent graduate of Ad Astra College and majored in graphic design. She lived and worked in the small town that surrounded the college. When asked if she grew up in that town, she said she "did and didn't." Her early life began in that town in Kansas, then she moved away for a period of time in grade school to an even smaller town in Texas. Later, her family returned to Kansas during her middle school years, back to her original hometown. The way she described the towns and their relative size was not by population size directly, but by

what the town contained, such as businesses, neighborhoods, and resources, “It was definitely small, smaller than [here] for sure. Like a little town with, like, basically a suburb and a gas station, and that was it… and technically a school.” Cora went on to describe how the school was a combination of two towns that were joined together as one district:

> It didn’t seem like a lot of poor people because my school was conjoined with a different town. Like, it was in the middle of these two. And I came from the smaller town. So all my friends there had nice houses.

After returning to Kansas for middle and high school, Cora first started at a different college than Ad Astra. After her friend transferred, Cora had a hard time getting out to socialize, felt isolated, only going through the motions of things, and wanted to have a better time. She visited her friend, who transferred to Ad Astra College, and decided to transfer there as well. Cora felt she took an adventurous huge step by moving out of the house, away from her family, and making a big decision for her life by herself. She lived in the dorms the whole time she was in college, living with her friend who influenced her to transfer to Ad Astra. However, after her roommate moved in with their partner, she was by herself the rest of the school year except for the occasional roommate for summer housing but would be by herself during the Fall and Spring semesters. She noted that living by herself was fine and she had a dog there as well.

Cora’s story highlights how she was involved on campus in various clubs and events, received support from faculty and peers in class, and that the campus students and the surrounding town were separate entities but overall, it felt like a connected, welcoming community:

> It’s separate but they are of the same [...] obviously, there’s people at Ad Astra, like the students who aren’t from [here], who are from different places. But I feel like they come

> together in the same way that the town will come together and, like, have a great community like at festivals or Pride or something else that doesn't necessarily involve the school.

Cora discussed that she has not been openly out for a long time and that some of her college experiences were notably different from her peers. While she had not personally experienced any outward bullying or discrimination from her sexuality and that it was not as overt as she had expected, she commented that she assumed it was not like that for everyone. During the interview, she agreed that there is a general narrative from social media and media stories that depicts rural communities being tied to hate and oppression for 2SLGBTQ+ people, but that was not her personal college experience.

Themes of Cora's Experiences

After multiple read-throughs, phases of coding, and analysis, two main themes merged from Cora's college experience in relation to the interview questions and discussion. These themes were *Inclusiveness and Belonging* and *Faculty and Academic Support*. Both themes were recurring and spanned across different experiences and topics throughout Cora's interview.

Inclusiveness and Belonging. One central theme that emerged from Cora's experiences centered around how she felt inclusiveness and belonging while at Ad Astra College. These experiences occurred both on and off campus and involved the town around campus, community members, and other students or friends on campus. When asked about positive experiences during her college years, she brought up end of the year street or block parties, sporting events, the Pride festival in town, being involved with peers in clubs, and seeing diverse students and people in town come together to support one another and the college. All of these experiences and stories from Cora held a theme of feeling belonging with peers and the town as well as

feeling included as a member of the 2SLGBTQ+ community specifically, for both her and her friends:

> Zrain-Negley: So, what do you think it means to be queer in a rural place like [town] or Ad Astra? How has your queer identity had any effect in a rural place like [town] for you personally?
>
> Cora: It was my first time going to Pride and it definitely brings up a lot of, like, a different community that you don't see otherwise, which is awesome. It's a great community. It kind of gives you like another group of people. [...] another community to, like, be a part of, you know what I mean? Besides just being like it's a tight knit community that you can call yourself a part of. [...] One of our friends that was on the football team came to Pride with us, and he had lots of fun.

Cora held a sense of belonging throughout experiences involving campus clubs, activities, and friend groups on campus. She felt her friends and those she met who were involved with theater expressed acceptance of others, making her feel welcome as well as giving the impression they were an inclusive group overall.

When asked about places or times she did not feel comfortable or included during college, Cora did not feel comfortable everywhere; however, she believed her identity and being a part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community did not hinder her sense of belonging during college or within the town:

> Zrain-Negley: And then, did you feel or did you find any spaces that were, like, just not well, not comfortable, or that you felt like would be uncomfortable in that space or excluded?

Cora: It's kind of hard to determine. I'm always kind of, like, always, like, anti-social kind of when I'm by myself, at least. So I kind of would normally be uncomfortable, like, about anything. So it's kind of hard to determine whether I would be uncomfortable for a specific reason, you know what I mean?

And "...with the college bringing in a lot of diversity, you'd think, it being a rural town, there would be some conflict. But I really have never seen things like that. With [the town] being, like, such a welcoming place."

Cora felt included and generally positive about her time at Ad Astra and how the rural community surrounding the college was involved throughout her experiences.

Faculty and Academic Support. Another theme that I found with Cora's experiences was related to how she felt supported with academics and specifically how the faculty supported her time at Ad Astra College. While she commented that she had "never been great at school" and classes were tough, she brought up how faculty at Ad Astra and peers were willing to help one another was a part of her positive experience:

Zrain-Negley: What did you do for support? Did you feel like you confided in the staff, faculty, or friends, or any kind of outside help? What do you think was the best to help you?

Cora: I definitely would ask my teachers, with the computer classes and stuff, it's easy to, like, just call your teacher over and they'll help you through it. And that was always good. And I would try to make friends with whatever students are around me so that I could maybe ask them for help or they could ask me for help.

Cora felt she could ask her peers for help or ask questions about the content to get help with her coursework.

Chris's Story

Chris (he/him) attended Midland University, majoring in computer science. He grew up in a predominately Black community on the East Coast in a town that is slightly larger than where he currently lives in Kansas. He felt his home community was more focused on cultural and spiritual identities than gender or sexualities. Chris said he felt he was not religious and it did not influence him that much growing up. Chris moved to Kansas and began his college journey to focus on his education and find a new diverse set of people on campus than what he previously experienced. On campus, there was more diversity, "there on campus, you get to interact with young people from many different social backgrounds [. . .] different parts of the country" And while the town around the campus does feel slightly separate from the campus, describing that the town is less diverse and less interactive than campus life, he still felt it has connections and influences. His daily campus life was a mix between in-person and online interactions. He took courses on campus and online and interacted with friends on the physical campus and through online gaming.

Chris's story highlights that there are places that do not feel welcoming on campus as a queer person, but he explained that he makes an effort to adapt, actively trying to make things more comfortable for himself rather than rely on others to change. Chris expressed that, while some of these social interactions for him were uncomfortable, most of the negative anti-2SLGBTQ+ experiences were online, not on campus. After college, Chris stated that he might move away from his college town after graduation but it was not a major concern and would revolve around tech and job opportunities:

Zrain-Negley: What other goals do you have after you graduate, just in general?

Chris: Yeah, I'm thinking of finding a job, a more full time job. Working for, like say, like three to five years. Yeah. Gaining some industry experience and maybe continue to further my studies. And also contributing greater to the tech, maybe even inventing some new techniques of maybe cyber security, yeah.

Zrain-Negley: When you look for those goals, do you feel like you will want to branch out somewhere different, like geographically, like out of a rural area? Do you want to go to an urban area or do you feel like it doesn't matter?

Chris: I'm kind of thinking maybe to move into a new place. Yeah.

Zrain-Negley: Have you thought about what kind of area you want to move to?

Chris: I've not given a thought about it, but yeah, it will depend on maybe the place where I'll get a job.

Themes of Chris's Experiences

While the questions and topics covered various types of experiences and stories, two themes stood out from Chris's experiences at Midland University. These themes were *Online Community and Belonging* and *Supportive Friends and Faculty.*

Online Community and Interactions. Multiple experiences and discussions throughout Chris's interview had a common theme of an online community and interacting with others online, through college friends, online courses, or general public and trends of internet culture. Chris took courses both in-person and online, played games online, hung out with friends through an online platform, and interacted with public online and media trends while in college. While some of his positive experiences came from playing video games and chats with his friends online, Chris felt that most of the outward hostility or negativity against 2SLGBTQ+ people he saw online. While discussing spaces on campus, he felt that there were some spaces on

campus he felt awkward within, but that he would see negative comments from "online trends or maybe to post awkward stuff about LGBTQ." He went on to explain that campus was pretty calm outside of sometimes feeling awkward within certain physical spaces like the cafeteria. The cafeteria was uncomfortable to him because he felt others would distance themselves from others if they realized someone was queer and general body language became much less welcoming afterwards:

> For example, the cafeteria. Yeah, it's kind of crowded. And then you find that most people, once they realize that you are a member of LGBTQ, like they kind of isolate you in the lines. You find that it's kind of an awkward situation. So yeah, I keep avoiding the place or finding that I go to the place when it's a bit less crowded, yeah.

While he saw his friends and other students on campus and in class, he and his friends preferred to hang out while online and through online video games together. Additionally, his academic interests and career field is mainly technology and online based, so he had multiple experiences involving IT, app development, and online security courses while at Midland University.

Supportive Friends and Faculty. Another theme that showed up from Chris's experiences involved Chris's friends and faculty that supported Chris throughout college. One of his favorite experiences in college so far was when his peers and faculty worked together to develop an app for a club outside of class. The students divided tasks and worked as a team with support from faculty to solve problems and create a product that they would develop and test. In a related discussion, Chris felt that the students or faculty in IT classes and tech department, especially in a rural area, would be more likely to show discrimination against someone who identifies as 2SLGBTQ+; however, he did not experience this while at Midland University. When reflecting on his time in college so far, he felt he focused a lot on academics and growing

professionally in the tech field, but hopes that institutions and app developers partner and intentionally work with 2SLGBTQ+ students with support and internships in the future, “I would really encourage institutions to partner with some organizations and LGBTQ+ for tech” [...] “Yeah, maybe… maybe find internships for people who identify in LGBTQ. Yeah, it would really be beneficial.”

Riley’s Story

Riley (they/them) attended Ad Astra College and grew up in a nearby county. Riley had recently changed their plan for a degree and was planning to major in psychology. They described their elementary school as feeling like a “tight-knit community” but middle and high school were much different for them as more students joined together into one building. The most drastic change for them in high school was that their freshmen year was Fall of 2020, near the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their school days were partially online and when they attended in-person, they were divided based on alphabetical order to attend either morning or afternoon sessions. They had been openly out as bisexual & nonbinary since high school and thought it was important to show up for other queer people to know they are not alone and create a sense of belonging. Riley chose to enroll at Ad Astra ultimately because of the choir program and the ability to be involved in the arts programs there. Riley was planning to major in psychology and was considering trying to qualify for the honors program after their first full year in college. They mentioned the college does not currently have a club or group centered around support for 2SLGBTQ+ students but wanted to try and establish one next year.

Riley’s story highlights how attending a rural college in Kansas defied negative expectations of what it meant to be queer and interacting with others in a rural community while still experiencing some challenges in their first year in college related and unrelated to their

identity. Riley anticipated that religion and political issues would affect how people on campus and in town interacted with them, or they would witness blatant actions of homophobia, but found that was not the case while attending Ad Astra College. Their reflection was not that there were zero accounts of discrimination or prejudice against themselves or others but that it was not as common as they expected:

> Zrain-Negley: Did you have any other expectations of what it would be like to be there?
>
> Riley: I expected there to be a lot more… Just like blatant homophobia, I guess, like on campus. Obviously there's still homophobia around campus, but it's not as out there. And because I was like Ad Astra's town is bigger than my hometown, but it's still a small town. I expected there would be a lot more of that and I was really surprised when there wasn't that much.

Riley felt that admin, faculty, and staff on campus were very welcoming and helped make college a positive experience as well as their friends helping include them, making them less anxious to get involved in various activities on campus.

One challenge Riley brought up about their experience was having to navigate college life and a new environment while mostly on their own. They faced mental health struggles after a conflict with their roommate, which left Riley without a roommate for the rest of the school year. Physically on campus, places they did not feel comfortable going to, such as the campus cafeteria and sports facilities, was due to unfriendly students who commonly occupied that space. However, Riley sometimes went to the campus cafeteria if they were with their friends. In classes, they felt that a few students would stare, display negative body language, or would gossip about them because of their identity and appearance as nonbinary. Despite negative interactions with peers, Riley felt it was still important for them to be visible and open as a

member of the 2SLGBQ+ community so that other marginalized genders or sexualities might feel less alone. Riley brought up that a common narrative they hear is that people think college is full of queer students but that there are not as many 2SLGBTQ+ students on campus as the narratives make it seem in the media:

> Zrain-Negley: What you said about expectations like .. How do you feel like that narrative compares to what you've experienced so far at [Ad Astra]?
>
> Riley: I think there's like a lot of similarities, but there's also a lot of differences as well.
>
> Zrain-Negley: What would you say like the biggest differences are then?
>
> Riley: In media, they're like "all those college students, they're all gay now." But there's not a lot… there's not a huge population of queer people on campus.
>
> Zrain-Negley: And what about how media and narratives talk about, like, rural life? Do you feel like that is true to [Ad Astra] as well?
>
> Riley: A little, yeah. Well, because I mean that it's like, small campus, small town. And so it's a little… it's kind of like the, "everyone knows everybody's thing" like, not as much because it is a bit bigger, but still other people know a lot of people. But word travels fast.

Themes of Riley's Experiences

From Riley's interview about their college experience, three main themes emerged. These themes were: *(Dis)comfort of spaces, Support of Faculty and Friends*, and *Involvement on Campus.* There were examples and dialogue that crossed over these themes but held distinct meanings and feelings from their experiences.

(Dis)comfort of spaces. This theme came up from experiences that were both positive and negative to Riley based on how spaces on campus made them feel as well as who took space

and how other students acted within those physical locations. Places on campus that felt positive or welcoming to be in for Riley were places like the Fine Arts building or their Improv group. Riley attributed these places being positive because of how much time they spent doing activities they enjoyed as well as being with their friends on campus, "improv was, like, super welcoming because like just a bunch of weirdos being weird."

Riley discussed places on campus where they felt uncomfortable were mainly due to who took up space and how those students acted, "The cafe is normally full of all of the sporty people who, depending on who they are, can be mean." It was not that the students being there by themselves made Riley uncomfortable, but it was how the other students acted towards Riley and their friends. While discussing with Riley that they did not see as much blatant homophobia as they expected in a rural college and town, they brought up how there were times they felt discomfort from their peers and the subtle ways they would talk about them or change their body language to their presence, "Yeah, I mean, like, there's always like the people that talk about you, like, behind your back and stuff. I would notice walking into class, there would be people that would look at me and be like…" [Riley then scrunched their face and gave a side-eye glare to imitate other students' expressions]. It was not every class that Riley felt this discomfort but depended on the interactions of individual students while attending class on campus.

Support of Faculty and Friends. The next theme closely ties to (dis)comfort of spaces but holds meanings outside of physical space and comfort. Riley described experiences of faculty and friends that influenced her time at Ad Astra College and made their first year more enjoyable. During the first few days of classes, professors would call a name that Riley no longer went by when taking attendance but then easily corrected the issue:

Zrain-Negley: So it could be academic, it could be from any activities, or it could be just anything. In general, during college, tell me about a positive experience you've had so far.

Riley: I feel like the positive thing just as a whole is, like, all of the professors were really welcoming and because first day classes, they would go through roll or whatever, and they would say like my birth name and be like, 'Oh, actually, I don't go by that.' And they're like, 'OK, cool.' And that was a really good experience.

Riley was apprehensive about how others would act because the college is in a rural area as well as being affiliated with a Christian organization. When I asked if they expected that reaction, they said, "I had hoped it would happen, but I was like, people are people. It's… It is a religious college. And so I was like…[shrug]" Riley said some faculty members showed that they supported them by encouraging them to apply for the honors program and another said they would be the faculty sponsor if they wanted to lead a LGBTQ+ or equality student group if they wanted to start one next year.

Riley's friends were an important part of their college experience at Ad Astra College. They mentioned attending classes, going to the cafeteria, going to campus activities, and being involved in different clubs with the help of their friends:

I feel like with my friends, they're what really helped me get involved on campus. Because I'm a very.. I can be a very anxious person. And I don't like to get out much when I don't know what's going on. But my friends were very helpful in that, getting me out, exploring, like, around campus, and going to different things on campus.

They recalled a few positive experiences where their friends were supportive during those activities or events or encouraged Riley to be active on campus.

Involvement on Campus. This leads to the last theme that emerged from Riley's story, how being involved on campus was important to their overall college experience at Ad Astra College. Outside of having support from their friends and teachers in college, Riley stated that they loved the different areas they were involved with and how those clubs or activities were a good thing for their experience so far. Riley said they really liked being involved in band, choir, theater, and the Chapel/Worship team at Ad Astra. They said that the particular denomination that was affiliated with the college was mostly accepting of the queer community and that it was freeing to be able to be a part of something they believed in as well as be themselves in college, "It is a lot more like freeing, being able to just be who I am on campus and in the college town in general."

Taylor's Story

Taylor (he/him) was an education major and grew up in a different small town than where Ad Astra is located but within the same county. Taylor described his hometown as small and rural:

> Zrain-Negley: So tell me what the community is like there, when you were growing up.
>
> Taylor: So [town] is very much one of those towns where it's everybody knows everybody. And it's kind of crazy because it's like, oh, I can't think of what the town is, but it's the town from Desperate Housewives, where everybody knows the secrets of, like, everybody. And so there was always something going on with the neighbors…

Although he entertained the idea of moving for college, Taylor contributed his high school participation in theater and contacts with one of Ad Astra's theater directors that influenced him to pursue a degree from the college near his hometown. He is not majoring in theater but he is

regularly active in arts-related clubs, activities, and productions, as well as frequently attending sporting events on campus.

Taylor attended a local high school near Ad Astra but reflected that his high school experience was different from what he found with the local college, even though they were in the same town. He feels that his high school experience upheld the stereotype of being queer in a rural area that came with a negative stigma, unfriendly toward 2SLGBTQ+ students. However, Taylor was able to meet people in college who have similar views or values as him and he developed boundaries. He mentioned hearing a few negative comments from students toward the 2SLGBTQ+ community during his freshmen year, but after that first year he was more selective with whom he associated. This was a privilege Taylor felt he did not have in high school despite living in the same "bubble."

Taylor's story highlights that he had preconceived notions that 2SLGBTQ+ people would likely be treated negatively at rural college but that was not his experience. He expected attending a rural college as a gay male would feel like a witch hunt, "very *Crucible*. I was very, like, I got to hide this." He did not think he would make any friends outside of the theater or arts-related clubs. After joining a group of students as spirit squad/pep band for football and basketball games, he found himself with friends who were on the football team and athletes would attend theater productions as well, "The whole football team was at a show, and we were like, oh, my God, like, this is pretty cool!" He describes getting the idea that the two groups of students would not get along mostly from the media, and made a similar connection to 2SLGBTQ+ students, music/theater students, and athletes:

> I think it's just like a stigma thing. You kind of see it especially with media. You don't really see a lot of, like, interaction between the theater folk, the choir folk, and all this.

> And, like, you know, the football players. They were always [...] they all stuck with one group or another. The only positive media we've gotten so far includes [...] that one line from *Glee* as well where it's like, 'Hi, my name is Kurt Hamel, and I'll be auditioning for the role of kicker'

Outside of student groups and clubs, Taylor said an important form of support as an openly gay student was from a select number of faculty members on campus. He recalled about how one professor went out of their way to make 2SLGBTQ+ students feel seen and safe.

Themes of Taylor's Experiences

Two major themes were found from Taylor's experiences at Ad Astra College: *Identity and Belonging* and *Faculty and Student Support*. Taylor discussed the diverse ways that he was involved on campus and how important those activities were to him, but I contributed these experiences to the theme of *Identity and Belonging* after realizing that all these experiences referred back to how Taylor felt during those activities and the deeper connections made from clubs or events on campus.

Identity and Belonging. Taylor talked about the different ways he was involved on campus. From the pep band, academic groups, game clubs, performing arts, and advocacy organizations, Taylor felt very connected with the college, his peers, and faculty at Ad Astra. Outside of groups that focused on academics, Taylor said his involvement with student groups or campus events helped him understand who he was and made him more comfortable with himself. He used face paint, dress, performance, music, and theater to express who he was and learn more about himself that he did not get to experience in previous life experience or high school. Taylor said that the community and the small town nature of it gave him a sense of belonging like he was not just another student number:

Zrain-Negley: What were your expectations and how did they compare to what you actually experienced?

Taylor: I don't know, there's just something about the school that, you know, it really does have that community and that feeling of being a person… and not just being a student number.

Off campus, Taylor talked about how the local Pride celebration held locally each year and his work establishment were both places where he felt safe and gained a better understanding of his identity. He felt a sense of belonging and normalcy that he did not experience in high school, even though all were physically within the same general town.

Faculty and Student Support. Taylor said that he felt supported during his time at Ad Astra College from both faculty and students alike. The student support was not only from his friends, but from the college's basketball and football players that attended performances by the Fine Arts department and student groups that held shows on campus. As described in his narrative and interview highlights, Taylor thought the athletes supporting the theater kids was a positive act but unexpected. He attributed this feeling to the way general media portrays the student groups and giving them contrasting characteristics that they do not get along together. These narratives were not simply described as rural vs queer but had multiple dimensions of athlete and straight compared to artistic, theater and 2SLGBTQ+ all within a rural landscape.

When describing other positive experiences, Taylor named faculty members as an important part of his time at Ad Astra College. One professor in the Fine Arts department was key in convincing Taylor to attend the college and that he "was always, like, the number one for making sure that everybody felt seen and included, safe." In a different department, Taylor

named another professor who made a point to be inclusive in their lessons or offered courses that challenged students to try things outside of their comfort zones or think beyond gender norms.

Silver's Story

Silver (she/they) attended a larger university for their undergraduate degree in education but attended Ad Astra College for graduate school, both of which were in Kansas. Silver grew up in both urban and rural areas of Kansas. She described being from one town but not solely tied to one single place at the same time, "moved in, around the area, like, I am from one town but then another town. But they feel related, connected." When discussing the small town where she grew up, Silver gave descriptions like "one main street, no stop lights" and "lots in the farming community." She later described the rural college and town surrounding the campus as "rural but did not feel as far from the city." While Silver had experiences off and on campus during their time at Ad Astra, most of their coursework was online. The most challenging part of her experience at Ad Astra was about work and life balance.

Silver's story highlights experiences that were online rather than in physical spaces on campus. Her identity was not a part of the challenges of college but did play a part in several ways. The fact that the college was rural in nature was not seen as a major concern to her; however, Silver mentioned that because it was a private college and the college or faculty being affiliated with a particular religion did give her anxiety.

Themes of Silver's Experiences

From Silver's interview, two major themes were found from her experience at Ad Astra College. Most of her time involved with the college was spent online, but they still had ties to the town and community where the college was physically situated. These two themes were *Connections Between Community and Campus* and *Interactions During Online Courses.*

Connections Between Community and Campus. Silver did not live on campus during graduate school at Ad Astra College, but they did live in the immediate town that surrounded the campus. She did step foot on campus for events and activities unrelated to classwork and did not feel unsafe or unwelcome unless it was dark outside and the area was not well lit:

Zrain-Negley: When you were on campus, have you felt excluded from anything or has it been mostly just open and inclusive, or?

Silver: I've never felt like I couldn't go anywhere on campus [...] avoided walking at night or in the dark but that's it.

She felt that the community and the college were close together physically as well as connected from support or positive mentions of the school:

> You see a lot of flyers or advertisements of the college… like, at local places or restaurants or whatever. But people wear the [logo] or school colors and go to games, so there is a sense of connection. Town school pride, I guess.

Interactions During Online Courses. In regard to personal experiences and time spent at Ad Astra, Silver said her degree and the majority of her interactions with students and staff were through online courses, discussion posts, or grading feedback from professors. The online discussions among students were about the course material or assignments. These discussion posts sometimes included introductions or background information about students and professors who were involved in the class. As mentioned previously, the college was a private college and affiliated with a Christian organization. A few professors openly included if they were Christians or if their religion was important to them during class introductions. She felt these comments and discussions changed how she would express herself because of what she felt comfortable sharing after these posts:

> Each class had the typical online discussion posts and replies, where you'd give some background and details about ourselves [. . .] Professors would sometimes start them off. One had a lot about their background in religion, and like how important it was to them, so I felt like I had to be careful around her. Not that it was a given, but, maybe.

Silver explained that she did not believe all religious people were prejudiced or anti-2SLGBTQ+, but that at a religious college it "just felt more likely" to her. She did not experience overt hostility or hear negativity concerning 2SLGBTQ+ people but was worried that a professor would be negatively biased when grading if they knew she was a queer student.

Making Connections: Themes Across Students' Experiences

After phases of initial coding, narrowing down codes and into themes for each student participant, and pulling quotes or examples from the interviews, I created a new spreadsheet to look over themes from each student's experiences. By reviewing them together on one sheet, I was able to see if any themes held throughout the students' experiences. These connections or implications found across interviews are not outlined to oppose or discredit any other student experience but rather help consider how each story can be understood from an intersectional lens and what these findings could mean for future research.

Theme One: Support from Faculty and Students

One theme that developed from nearly every interview related to the support of the college's faculty or other students/friends that attended the college with the student participant. Numerous experiences mentioned during interviews involved specific faculty members or friends of the student, while others mentioned support or positive interactions in a more broad manner across campus. A few examples of negative student interactions showed up; however,

the majority of experiences mentioned focused on how faculty, peers, and close friends supported their time in college one way or another.

Students described academic support or time in class with faculty:

> Cora: I definitely would ask my teachers, with the computer classes and stuff, it's easy to, like, just call your teacher over and they'll help you through it.
>
> Chris: The most positive experience I had was during a time when we were developing an app with faculty.
>
> Riley: All of the professors were like, really welcoming … First day classes, they would go through roll or whatever. They would say like my birth name and be like, "Oh, actually, I don't go by that." And they're like, 'OK, cool', and that was a really good experience.

Other experiences of support were about their friends or classmates on campus:

> Cora: I really love the end of the year, like, street parties we'd have. Those are always fun. Everyone can just let loose and hang.
>
> Taylor: The whole football team was at [our] show, and we were like, "Oh, my God. Like, this is pretty cool."

Even if it was not the main theme that emerged from a student's interview, there were discussions in every student's story about at least one other student or faculty member. Students recalled distinct types of support, such as academic, social, and emotional examples during their interviews.

Theme Two: Sense of Belonging and Community

The second theme that stood out across most interviews was over a sense of belonging and community. Across all interviews, a sense of belonging, expressing their identity, and having

a supportive community was brought up multiple times by multiple students when describing positive college experiences. How support was shown and specific types of experiences varied, but they were generally reflected upon as positive or fun by each student. Some of the students' answers revolved around how the students had freedom to express themselves, felt supported with that expression, and how the community or friend groups fostered positive experiences during college.

> Silver: But a lot of the town supports the college like coming or going to football games, plays, that kind of thing.
>
> Taylor: I've got to kind of play around with the, like, idea of identity, I guess. And it's just been really interesting because, like, I will either go and, like, full face paint and make myself kind of this, like, version of myself that's still me, but it's touching on the way that it's kind of draggy.
>
> Riley: In college, I can be a lot more open about my identity and who I am. Because my family, they're supportive of my identity, but they don't necessarily like the whole non-binary aspect of that … It is a lot more like freeing, being able to just be who I am on campus and in the college town in general.

Summary of Chapter Four

Each 2SLGBTQ+ student that participated in this study is represented in this chapter with an individual section that contains background information about themselves, experiences concerning college, and life while attending a rural college in Kansas. Themes developed from the process of coding and analysis outlined in Chapter Three were outlined following each student's narrative. Each interview held two, sometimes three, themes. I then reviewed all of these themes as a whole and found two themes carried throughout almost all of the students'

interviews. I expounded on these themes and how each emerged across their experiences. I continue to emphasize that this work is not meant to serve as a total summary or representation of one type of student or location but to draw attention to individual, underrepresented narratives, as well as looking toward a broader picture of how their knowledge and experiences inform our future.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Implications

They come together in the same way that the town will come together and, like, have a great community like at the [town] Festival or at Pride, or at something else that doesn't necessarily involve the school, but will have the same energy as, like, school events.

-Cora, Student Participant when discussing differences in the college's town and campus

Through interviewing students directly and preserving their voices about their own experiences, this qualitative case study explored the research question: *How do 2SLGBTQ+ students at a rural college describe their experiences with campus life, the local community, and living while in a traditionally rural, conservative state?* In this chapter, I discuss the findings from individual interviews as they relate to my research question and their implications, which are guided by critical theories and an intersectional analysis. While this study focused on experiences in college in relation to students' gender and sexuality, this identity is not experienced in isolation and to view these findings while considering the students' other identities, such as race or socio-economic status when possible (Hulko & Hovanes, 2017).

Discussion of Individual Experiences and Themes

Cora's Experiences

Several topics and events that were discussed in Cora's interview about her college experiences held themes of inclusiveness, support, and belonging. As discussed in Chapter Four, these topics ranged from how she felt included in spaces off and on campus, faculty support, how her friends included her and others in activities or friend groups, or how she felt she had a community where she belonged. Some of Cora's experiences with coursework and grades were not positive and she referred to herself as a student who struggled with school and grades even before college. However, she was able to get help from her professors and felt comfortable

asking questions in class. On the surface, this experience might seem insignificant but shows that she felt supported by faculty on campus, not only her peers.

Outside of the classroom, Cora held a sense of familiarity with rural communities, had established a close group friends on campus, and participated in the town and college's events. Throughout these experiences, she mostly felt comfortable and had a sense of belonging while attending Ad Astra College. This is in line with previous research that has shown rural students who attended college in a larger town did not feel like they belonged as they did not have as many friends in the same town and did not feel familiar with the social expectations on campus (Maltzan, 2006; McNamee, 2022; McNamee & Ganns, 2023). By knowing the area and having friends with her in college who she knew before college, she was able to participate in events like the community's Pride festival and sporting events while feeling included and safe. Another factor that likely supported Cora's feeling of inclusion and belonging was that she was a white student attending a PWI. This identity maker does not mean she would automatically be included or have a sense of belonging, but prejudiced actions because of her race were not likely to be an issue in a predominantly white institution and small, predominantly white town.

Chris's Experiences

Attending Midland University, Chris had a mix of positive and negative experiences. While he participated in a select number of groups and activities on campus, Chirs and his friends would chat and play games online, both as a group and with strangers, as a way to hang out, have fun, and socialize. While he had the most fun and preferred an online community, Chris felt he saw the most hostility toward 2SLGBTQ+ people while online. These comments or posts were not necessarily targeted toward him specifically, but were memes, trends, or posts by others for general viewing. Online communities are unique in that users who share or comment

hateful posts can hide with a veil of anonymity that protects them from social or punishable consequences but also allows the readers to distance themselves from these people or posts.

On campus, Chris felt comfortable working with his peers and faculty members that worked on projects involving technology, online security, and app development. This was an area he felt knowledgeable and that would lead to a successful job in the future, which he valued. Chris felt that someone who is queer or trans would be more likely to face discrimination in a rural IT department but that he himself did not experience that so far with his time at Midland University. An area on campus where Chris did not feel comfortable was the campus cafeteria. He said that although the space itself is usually crowded, people will isolate others or change their body language if they think someone is queer or trans. It is important to note that this is how Chris interpreted it, even if another student did not do it intentionally.

Another important factor to consider with Chris's experience at Midland University is that he was a Black student from a different state attending a PWI. His hometown on the East Coast did not hold the same norms or cultures compared to what he found on campus in a rural area of Kansas. The concept of borders and cultures are shaped by geographical landscapes and the demographics of people who reside there has been described in previous sections but, by utilizing an online platform, Chris transcended physical borders and found a community where he felt more comfortable. He could be more selective of who he allowed in his friend group while filtering hate speech and hurtful posts when possible.

Riley's Experience

Riley felt most comfortable with their friend group or with students who enjoyed similar activities such as theater and choir. These activities often took place in the Fine Arts building and the space became a safe haven for them. This fostered an environment of inclusion and support,

especially for 2SLGBTQ+ students. While the college did not have a dedicated student group centered around gender or sexualities support/equality, Riley described a similar structure with interest in helping establish one in the near future. These groups have shown to have a significant role and form of support in 2SLGBTQ+ students' lives, even when students are not formally involved with them (Gray, 2009; Hulko & Hovanes, 2017). The college's affiliation with a Christian denomination that is outwardly accepting and supportive of queer and trans students also played an important part of Riley's experiences of comfort and sense of belonging. Riley wanted to be involved with worship services and outreach programs but commented that they had apprehensions that faculty, students, and the community would be unaccepting or hostile toward 2SLGTQ+ students. When asked if they expected faculty to be accepting of their pronouns and name during rollcall, Riley was optimistic but uncertain:

> Zrain-Negley: Is that something you kind of expected when you came to college, or kind of have reservations, or did you even think about it?
>
> Riley: I had hoped it would happen, but I was like people are people. It's….It is a religious college.

Based on their experience, faculty were accommodating with using Riley's correct name, pronouns, and they felt comfortable getting involved with religious services on campus. One faculty member encouraged Riley to apply for the honor's program and another encouraged them to lead the gender/sexualities equality group and would agree to be their faculty sponsor if they needed one. At this particular private non-profit college, faculty and students were not required to attend any religious aspect of the college nor be directly affiliated with the church in their personal lives.

Outside of campus or college classes, Riley was somewhat familiar with the area and rural communities, including the politics of the state. In their hometown, Riley had been open and out about their sexuality and gender identity. There, they felt they heard more homophobic and anti-LGBTQ talk, but it was much less common at their college and the town it:

> I expected there to be a lot more… Just like blatant homophobia, I guess, like on campus. Like, obviously there's still homophobia around campus, but it's not as out there. And because I was like [this town] is bigger than my hometown, but it's still a small town. I expected there would be a lot more of that and I was really surprised when there wasn't that much.

Riley felt similar sentiments with how queer and trans students have been portrayed in the media versus the reality of what they experienced in college, stating "In media, they're like 'all those college students, they're all gay now.' But there's not a lot of… there's not a huge population of queer people on campus." After Riley's interview, an interesting statistic emerged when I was searching for information surrounding the population of the United States who identified as 2SLGBTQ+ by different demographics. According to a 2024 Gallup poll, "College graduates (9%) and nongraduates (10%) are about equally likely to identify as LGBTQ+" (Jones, 2025, para. 15). In the same article, Jones (2025) identifies why this statistic is likely viewed differently:

> Differences in LGBTQ+ identification by racial, income, marital status, parental status and religious subgroups reflect age skews among those subgroups. For example, younger adults are less likely than older U.S. adults to be higher income, to be married, to have children, to be religious or to be Non-Hispanic White. Those groups, in turn, have lower

> rates of LGBTQ+ identification than lower-income, unmarried, nonparent, nonreligious and non-White Americans. (para. 16)

Transitioning from media and narratives about queer and rural life, Riley discussed their views on moving away from a small town. Riley did want to move away after college but their reasoning focused on money and feeling stuck if they did not take that opportunity:

> Riley: I would like to go to a bigger place ‘cause I would like to get out of my hometown. Because people here like to joke that this town is a vortex. And like, once you're here, you're stuck.
>
> Zrain-Negley: What do you think it means, like people get stuck? What do you think that looks like?
>
> Riley: Because you form a routine and a habit here. And then like you make friends and family here, and then you just say, well, I don't want to leave all my friends. And then you're just like, you feel obligated to stay. And also moving is expensive.

This shows that their reasoning for wanting to move away from a small town is more than rural politics or 2SLGBTQ+ friendly communities, but more about socioeconomics, routine, and obligation to family or familiar social networks in a small town.

Taylor’s Experience

At Ad Astra College, Taylor had a generally positive experience. He was able to find ways to express his true self while feeling supported by faculty and friends in college. Taylor had experience with a small, rural community in high school and was able to compare his experiences at each level. He noted that his college experience was notably different from his high school experience, even though they were both in the same area. Taylor explained that he felt a stigma against queer and trans students and felt “stuck in that bubble” in high school.

However, in college, he felt like he was able to be free and play with his idea of identity, and become more comfortable with himself. Additionally, Taylor reflected that he had his own preconceived notions of stereotypes and media narratives coming into college that were then changed from his experiences. He expected to feel scrutinized for being gay while feeling like he had to protect himself from other student groups, such as student athletes, that he felt might be hostile toward queer students. Instead, Taylor was able to express himself more freely and felt comfortable to be active on campus and in the community. He experienced acceptance, encouragement, and established friendships with other college students, including student athletes. He mentioned making friends with students who were on the football team and that he did not expect that. When asked about this, Taylor said, "I think it's just like a stigma thing. Like, you kind of see it especially with media."

When discussing a faculty member that made him feel safe on campus, Taylor acknowledged that there was a privilege in being a straight white male showing openness and expressiveness, creating a norm in the classroom. The professor acted and showed interest in topics that pushed against societal stereotypes of a masculine, white male, creating an environment of safety and acceptance for his students who might feel apprehensive about being openly queer or trans. Taylor's comment that the professor was straight, white, and male showed Taylor understood how one's gender, race, and sexuality impacted himself and others in the classroom.

Silver's Experience

While attending Ad Astra College, Silver mostly interacted with faculty and students during online courses but had been on campus and in the local town as well. Due to the nature of the classes and the coursework being entirely online, Silver was able to mask parts of her identity

as a form of self-protection from her point of view. She had reservations about being openly queer in a class with students and faculty members who were outspoken about their religious beliefs. Through discussion posts and the faculty's feedback from grading, Silver did not encounter any homophobic or anti-2SLGBTQ+ rhetoric. Silver was not certain anyone would make negative comments or that professors would treat her differently, but they did not want to risk it in the first place.

When physically on campus, they did not feel uncomfortable or name any specific spaces as unsafe. The only time Silver did not feel comfortable was walking on campus at night. She commented that concern was related to her physical appearance, being smaller and female-presenting. This shows Silver did not feel uncomfortable with the campus as a rural location but had a general feeling of discomfort with safety and the ability to protect herself as a target of assault at night. This fear of assault and campus safety is not an uncommon feeling. A fear of being a victim of a gender-based crime is more common for women and LGBTQ+ and can negatively affect a student's mental and academic wellness during college (Steele et al., 2025). Walking alone or at night is often viewed as a risk or in a way that makes people vulnerable to crime, even if it is not statistically significant.

Limitations

While this study aims to shed light and fill a gap in important research within higher education, there are limitations that I must acknowledge. As a researcher, I aim for transparency and trustworthiness in my research while understanding I am human and have my own beliefs and biases that could impact my analysis and writing. Additionally, this study contains narratives by four white students and one Black student. At no point does this study aim to speak for all

identities or experiences, but it does lack voices of races and ethnicities that could bring valuable insight to this area of research.

While none of the participants identified themselves as transgender, I felt it was important to name queer and trans students as related to this study because of the fluid nature of gender, sexuality, and to not erase transgender students from the 2SLGBTQ+ community. In a similar thread, Riley acknowledged that their family was accepting of their sexuality but was not openly supportive of their identity as nonbinary. Similarly, this study did not focus on possibilities of oppression that could impact one's college experience like ableism, racism, sexism, or classism. Information provided in each interview was limited by what students provided in their interviews, which inherently are subjective and not easily replicated. As mentioned previously, this research is not meant to be a sweeping generalization for all queer or trans lives and their experiences.

While I intentionally used an intersectional analysis and critical framework for my study, I know that there are forms of oppression and power dynamics that I missed or did not address. Rural itself is a complicated term and holds histories of "colonization, forced removal, genocide, and enslavement" that I cannot entirely represent here (Garringer, 2024, p. 11). I outline multiple, complex ways rural spaces are understood and theorized, but there is an incredible amount to consider when factoring students' experiences, sense of belonging, and history.

When designing the interview questions, I focused on student experiences with physical space and other people in those spaces. However, I did not have follow-up questions that address ways students could have experienced the land the college was on and feelings toward rurality to

them. Garringer (2024) explains how complex these feelings can be and recognizing the tensions in similar work they have done:

> What does it mean for white country queers to find a sense of belonging through our relationships to land when that comes at the expense of Indigenous peoples' displacement from their own lands and erasure from our local and regional histories? What does it mean for descendants of enslaved folks to be in relationship to land their ancestors were forced to work, in an ongoing context of rampant Black land theft? What is the responsibility of white country queers in the movements around reparations and returning stolen land to Indigenous stewardship? (p. 12)

Reflecting with Garringer, I recognize that my study was limited in ways I confront colonization, stolen land, injustice, and violence against those who have been displaced or dispossessed. This study is situated in Kansas, of the federally recognized Sac and Fox and Prairie Band Potawatomi Nations and the Iowa and Kickapoo Tribes, as well as the historically home to Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kaw/Kansa, Kiowa, Osage, Pawnee, and Wichita peoples (Kansas Historical Society, 2020; Kansas Native American Affairs Office, 2024). A study situated in other states, reservations, or nations with varying cultures, histories, as well as from tribal or historically Black colleges, could have a significant impact when considering study replications.

Academic Discourse and Intersectional Considerations

Findings from these students' experiences connect to previous studies that show how students desire tight-knit, personal connections similar to their rural hometowns (Handke. 2012; Christiaens, 2015). Therefore, a small college situated in a rural community, rather than a midsized or larger school in a rural county, would likely feel more like one's hometown to a

student with a rural background. Related to McNamee's (2022) research discussion with rural students feeling isolated at a larger campus, students with urban backgrounds might feel isolated in rural spaces due to being an outsider to a tight-knit community or feel isolated in an unfamiliar environment. As seen from Chris's experience in this study, rural or urban, an online community could support 2SLGBTQ+ students by helping them have a comfortable space to interact with friends or find others with similar situations/interests. However, public online games and spaces are also places Chris saw anti-queer and trans posts as well. Students could use online communities or interactions as a form of support but should not be a complete replacement for in-person experiences or communities.

A number of student participants expressed how they expected, and other 2SLGBTQ+ people, to face hostility existing in a rural community. This was based on broad, media narratives or previous experiences from high school. While some students did encounter negative comments, uncomfortable situations, and faced struggles related to their sexual or gender identity, they also found friend groups and community events which helped them find a place of belonging and support.

Similar to findings from Yarhouse et al. (2009), uncomfortable spaces and situations described by my student participants were rooted in interactions with other students on campus, not faculty members. Faculty and staff were shown to be an important form of support for these students by humanized students' experiences in college. Examples from this study included professors using a student's correct name and pronouns, including lessons and activities that break heteronormative performances and traditional gender roles, and volunteering to step in as a faculty sponsor to assist in a 2SLGBTQ+ student-centered group being established on campus. With state and federal representatives passing multiple bills containing intentionally

dehumanizing rhetoric across the United States, support for queer and trans students within traditionally oppressive institutions or in rural, conservative-voting counties could be a form of resistance with intentional results.

As stated in previous chapters, these findings are not meant to generalize or contradict any students' narrative. Each student's voice is preserved and valid on its own. When viewed across interviews, their experiences reveal that stereotypes and media narratives are not always the reality for 2SLGBTQ+ students living in rural spaces. This study supports research that highlights ways queer and trans people desire rural places, and how students have chosen to stay within rural counties and communities. Future literature could include deeper counter-narratives of rurality and 2SLGBTQ+ communities, as the literature is currently limited and further studies are needed (Stone & Compton, 2024; Garringer, 2024). Three out of the five student participants grew up in rural areas and chose to stay in a rural area for college: Taylor, Cora, and Riley. Out of these three, only Riley expressed the desire to move away after college but cited reasons unrelated to their gender or sexuality. As mentioned in my findings, Riley discussed wanting to move because they were worried about feeling "stuck" in town. They described being stuck as feeling as if they would not want to leave their friends and how moving was an expensive process. Their explanation strengthens Gray's (2009) and McNamee (2022) findings of how students growing up in rural towns can face challenges outside of their gender or sexuality, rooted in their socioeconomic status or cultural backgrounds.

While this study did not have any transgender students apply to participate, it is important to note that, due to the recent increase of anti-trans legislation in the United States, more transgender people are moving or considering moving away from places like Kansas. Research has shown that individuals who identify as trans are more likely to experience prejudice than gay

males (Hinton et al., 2022). A 2025 study has found that 48% of transgender people surveyed by the Williams Institute wanted to move or have moved away to a more transgender-friendly location. Select participants had even considered moving out of the country altogether. People that were from places that had stronger anti-LGBTQ laws and those with lower incomes were more likely to respond that they wished to move:

> Respondents from less supportive communities and states with unsupportive laws and policies, along with those worried about federal policies affecting health care access, discrimination, and vulnerability to hate crimes, were more likely to want to move to a more transgender-affirming state. Those with lower incomes were also more likely to want to relocate. (Williams Institute, 2025, para. 3)

This survey's findings might appear to reinforce an urban-desired narrative for queer and trans people; however, while rural areas and historically conservative states were included, the effects of these laws are impacting far outside of rural communities.

Taylor, Riley, and Cora all felt comfortable on campus, were involved in student groups and activities, and had a positive sense of belonging with others while at Ad Astra. Silver felt comfortable on campus during the day. She felt a weariness of any place alone in the dark on campus, but this was not related to the rurality of the space. Riley and Chris commented that there were places, such as the campus cafeteria, that they generally said were uncomfortable or felt unsafe for them on campus. Both students are a part of a demographic minority by their gender appearance and race, respectively. While other forms of identity were not the focus of this study and could have influenced their experiences, it is important to remember one's gender or sexuality is not the only factor or experienced in isolation.

Student participants varied by their discovery and understanding of their own identities. The same students who identified openly as a part of the 2SGBTQ+ community before attending college mentioned expecting exclusive or anti-2SLGBTQ+ behavior. Only Cora did not expect this type of behavior or to feel physically excluded or unwelcome in campus spaces. This expectation could be due to several reasons, including Cora's lack of exposure from not being out as queer until later in college as well as being white in a majority white town as well as at a PWI.

Four out of the five student participants mentioned media narratives or general assumptions that depicted rural areas as hostile or unwelcoming toward 2SLGBQ+ people were not usually from personal experiences. Discussions about hometowns and interactions with their local small towns showed some of the student participants did experience some outspoken conservatives and homophobic rhetoric growing up. In Riley's interview, they did experience some outspoken conservatives and homophobic rhetoric growing up, but they felt these interactions or comments were less overt than they expected while in college. One reason for this could be because student participants varied by their discovery and how they understood their own identities. Cora said she did not see herself as queer or a part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community until late college, while Riley had been openly out with their gender and sexuality since before college. Cora felt she did not encounter anti-2SLGBTQ+ actions directly and was not aware of anything like that on campus while she was there. Riley, however, did see examples of these negative behaviors in their hometown and some on campus. This does not mean Cora was never around any anti-2SLGBQ+ behavior or comments or that Riley experienced more or less than others in their hometown.

According to a review of research related to identity centrality and psychosocial by Hinton et al., (2022) “this suggests valuing a stigmatized minority identity as a central part of your self-concept enhances your perception of threats of discrimination toward your identity group and increases sensitivity to these threats” (p. 580). In other words, frequency and strength of noticing anti-2SLGBTQ+ rhetoric could be attributed to how confidently someone identifies as queer or trans and how often they notice threats or negative behaviors toward the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Implications for Research, Policy, and Praxis

While more research needs to focus on rural spaces of higher education and 2SLGBTQ+ students, early findings from this study show that 2SLGBTQ+ people are able to thrive in rural places. This study strengthens ties of how students report positive college experiences with ways 2SLGBTQ+ students’ hold a sense of belonging plus connections to inclusive friend groups/communities. Additionally, the majority of participants commented on ways faculty members were supportive, used identity-affirming language, taught inclusive lessons, and donated their time and energy to support 2SLGBTQ+ students on campus. These findings are important to the field and literature in that each is a direct experience by a queer college student in a rural area and not an assumption. Outside entities, such as some researchers, allies, or legislators, might have good intentions; however, it is vital that students living out these practices and are directly affected have a say in the creation, and implementation, of these policies.

One way future research could explore and address similar experiences is to look at 2SLGBTQ+ staff and faculty members who work at rural higher education institutions. This dissertation was not able to explore external support and resources in the rural community, as in it is not found on campus or associated with higher education. It could be beneficial to expand

this research and similar concepts to specific impacts of legislation or policies on 2SLGBTQ+ rural people and/or communities.

As discussed in earlier chapters, an understanding of rurality from a critical theory standpoint reveals that rural is more than just a physical space. Often rural places are associated with conservative regional politics and homogeneous religious beliefs, whether it is statistically accurate for that town or not. The way the participants described and defined rural in their interviews strengthens the elements of critical rural theory and how rurality is more than just a physical space or based on population size. These findings could support research and frameworks that address urbanormativity and complicate beliefs built on an urban-rural binary relationship.

Findings from this study do not imply or erase the possibilities and impacts of other experiences by those who differ by race, ability, socioeconomics, gender, or other sexualities. Instead, this study is a steppingstone to encourage future research to center voices of queer and trans students, which might challenge narratives about rural towns and 2SLGBTQ+ communities. More must be done to decenter products and narratives created by larger media, sensational news outlets, and politicians while uplifting the participants and researchers who are currently living the reality of being queer in a rural town. This is crucial during a time queer and trans people are the target of numerous political and societal attacks. Rather than relying on stories and images by those outside of the community, voices and experiences by current rural 2SLGBTQ+ people can better shape policies, rhetoric, and practices that affect queer and trans lives across the country.

For example, two participants mentioned ways they left isolated or struggled with mental health while attending college. This does not mean one part of their identity is the reason

students struggled or felt this way, but policies and programs that are specific to the needs of students who are more likely to face discrimination or isolation could benefit these rural students, including students of color. It is true that there is a higher percentage of queer and trans people living in urban cities (11%) than rural spaces (7%); however, what these percentages do not reflect is how large that number actually is. 7% of the rural population is still over 3 million people (Jones, 2025).

Looking toward Labelle's (2020) work with LGBTQ organizations and decentering whiteness, institutions of higher education should follow what they call an "intersectional praxis at the margins" (p. 211). This practice would support queer and trans students of color to create, organize, and run spaces and policies that are safer for that community as well as possibly challenging whiteness and white normativity within PWIs.

Future research and changes with university policies could support students' mental health, assistance with safer, compatible roommate assignments, and inclusion of students to help them meet new people and get involved with campus activities. Small, rural schools might not have the funding to build entire facilities or departments for this support, but intentional procedures, policies, or repurposing unused spaces on campus is an option.

Researchers Reflection

When I was not actively interviewing students, analyzing data, or writing this dissertation, I still found myself thinking about my research, theoretical significance, and impacts of this work all the time. Every time someone would ask me about my dissertation topic or research, I noticed how I approached my response changed throughout these last couple of years. The deeper I got in the literature and interviews, the easier it became to give a concise and clear explanation. Depending on who, when, or where someone asked about my research, I found

I could protect myself and my peace by how much I divulged about my research and topics in casual conversations. This masking, I would call it, was not because I felt shame or insecurity in my research. Instead, this was a way I could protect my own mental well-being and set boundaries with this important knowledge.

I noticed myself contemplating the pressure to uphold traditional research methods, such as worrying about sample size or and academic procedures, instead of focusing on highlighting the knowledge and value my students brought from their experiences. Discussions with my advisors and faculty mentors helped me push past that mentality.

It was extremely important that I carried out safe, ethical practices with the students and information they gifted me through this study. This study challenged my own biases and assumptions in ways I did not predict. In the concept stages of this research, I had to acknowledge gaps in my own knowledge and experiences that could influence my research and dissertation writing. Opening myself up to critique and feedback was incredibly important to grow as a research and educator.

Learning from my own research design, I think similar research could benefit from bringing student participants together or asking questions about specific connections 2SLGBTQ+ students they meet on campus. This would have to be done in a way that carefully navigates not outing other students and maintains forms of anonymity if they desire it. I do think this research can expand to a larger scale and/or area but would need to take more time and resources than what I had available. Overall, I am proud of the work I have done and connections I have made through this dissertation and research. I hope to keep exploring and researching ways to support and uplift 2SLGBTQ+ lives and rural communities, in and out of academia.

Conclusion

As an exploratory case study, there is no hypothesis or theory to prove. Each student's account holds value and important knowledge about ways 2SLGBTQ+ students experience their identity, rurality, and higher education. These interviews are detailed out in the findings section of Chapter Four and individual implications in Chapter Five.

When reviewing the experiences as a collective, common themes emerged from the students' experiences through stages of qualitative analysis and coding. When asked about positive experiences, students recalled experiences that related concepts of belonging, inclusion, and faculty support while in college. Having an inclusive group of friends (in person or online) and supportive faculty were key factors in ways they became active on campus and developed their sense of belonging. Faculty members who were able to humanize students' experiences had substantially positive influences on the participants' time in college. Most student participants gave specific examples of ways professors made them feel included and supported in and outside of class time.

When discussing comfort and belonging in physical spaces on campus, students felt crowded places like the campus's cafeteria were often unwelcoming and unsafe. Students said it was due to being anxious in crowded spaces or the body language of others related to the participant's identity.

Another interesting commonality students discussed was their assumptions about what they expected at a rural college versus what they actually experienced. Some students could not recall any anti-2SLGBTQ+ discrimination or hostility from professors. Other students recalled negative comments or unwelcoming feelings regarding queer or trans people but were far less common than they anticipated. The student participants reflected that this assumption was related

to what they see or hear in media productions (news, movies, etc.) or online comments that portrayed rural places as inherently anti-queer or anti-trans.

Further research that will intentionally center the voices of rural queer and transgender students is needed. However, this research should not perpetuate a binary of rural vs. urban beliefs or take away from urban resources and activism. In the current United States political climate, it is crucial that 2SLGBTQ+ students are heard in research, that individual needs and voices are accurately represented by their own lived experiences, and that allies intentionally support the community however they can, whenever they can.

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Appendix A

Consent Forms for Participation

These forms were sent to participants who filled out the contact form (in Appendix C) along with an email from me to set up their interview time (Appendix D).

Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

Hello, my name is Vaughn Zrain-Negley and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma, in the Educational Studies program. I am inviting you to participate in my research study: *Exploring the Experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Students Attending a Rural College.* This research is being conducted via Zoom. You were selected as a possible participant because: You are attending a college or university in a rural Kansas town, or have been in the past 2 academic years, and you identify as queer or a part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research. Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? This research aims to center queer (2SLGBTQ+) students and explore their experiences while attending higher education in rural Kansas.

How many participants will be in this research? About 5-10 people can be expected to participate in this study. If this number goes above expected entries, you and the University's IRB will be notified immediately.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, you will complete one 45-60 minute interview, time will give or take based on the length of responses. The interview will be

recorded for transcript review only and be deleted after the transcription process (Turning audio to text format). You may skip any questions you do not feel comfortable answering.

What are the risks and benefits if I participate? During the interview, some questions will ask you to reflect on your overall experiences during your time in college. These may trigger strong emotional reactions. If these questions make you feel uncomfortable, **you do not have to provide an answer.** During the Zoom interview, **you can choose to stop our session and/or discontinue participation in the research at any time.** If I can see signs that you are distressed, I will pause the discussion, check in on your status and wellness, give you space, then ask if you would like to continue. Additionally, here are some mental health and wellness resources that can if needed after we have completed the interview:

National Suicide Crisis Hotline: Dial 988 (or 1-800-273-8255) for the main crisis line. To access LGBTQ+ services, press 3 if calling. You can text "PRIDE" to 988 to indicate LGBTQ+ specifically.

Trans Lifeline: Call 877-565-8860.

The Trevor Project and their services: https://www.thetrevorproject.org/get-help/

Or Finding LGBTQ+ friendly therapy and services

Online Security: The organization of Zoom Video Communications, Inc. hosts the data collection platform and has its own privacy and security policies for keeping our information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to or retain your data or your IP address which could be used to re-identify you.

No assurance can be made as to their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research. To minimize this risk, I will be logged into Zoom using my University's SSO account.

Will I be compensated for participating? There is reimbursement for your time and participation in this research. All the interviewees will receive monetary compensation of $15.00 and an artistic thank you card after the interview.

Who will see my information? There will be no identifiable information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you without your permission. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. **If you decide not to participate, you do not have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.** I, the primary researcher, will not be upset or will try to contact you afterwards if you choose not to participate.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses unless you agree to be identified. I will send you a copy of my analysis and

summary after I complete this process to allow you to edit and give feedback to ensure accuracy and ownership of your lived experience.

Please respond Yes or No to all of the following options:

I agree for data records to include my identifiable information. ___Yes ___ No

I agree to be quoted directly, without the use of my name (If yes, I will use a pseudonym if requested). ___Yes ___No

I agree to have my name reported with quoted material. ___Yes ___No

Do you have a preference of pseudonym: ___Yes (Please Specify: _____) ____ No

Audio and Video Recording of Research Activities: To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews will be recorded on this Zoom call on this device with video and audio. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording.

Please select one of the following options:

I consent to audio recording. ___Yes ___ No

I consent to video recording. ___ Yes ___ No

What will happen to my data in the future? We might share your de-identified (or identified if agreed above) data with other researchers or use it in future publications without obtaining additional consent from you.

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at: **3163036311 or vzrain@ou.edu** Advisor: Dr. Jenny Sperling, jenny.sperling@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as

a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

Finally, would you like an electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed? _____

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

IRB #_____ IRB Approval Date_____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

These are the interview questions that address the themes of my study and align with my research questions. By having a list without a concrete, strict script or chronological checklist, it allows flexibility for the student and researcher to engage in dialogue.

Background Information:

Tell me a little about yourself and your pronouns.

How do you personally describe your gender and/or sexual identity?

Where did you grow up? What was your town or community like going up?

What goals do you have while in college? After college?

What are you studying while in college/desired degree?

Experiences in College [In and out of academic possibilities]:

Tell me about your college journey – such as, when did you first enroll and attend college, where, for how long, how or why did you arrive at your college/university, etc.?

Are you involved in campus activities or sports? How many classes are you taking or took normally?

What is your living situation in college?

How would you describe your typical day in college? For example, what about typical paths, people, spaces, or feelings for you on campus?

What is an example of a positive experience you've had during your time in college?

What is an example of a challenge you have experienced during your time in college? What about outside of the classroom or learning?

Exploring Rurality, Identity, and Queerness:

What does it mean to be queer in a rural place like this?

Did you have any expectations of what it would be like to be queer or trans at this college before you arrived? How do those compare to your experiences now?

Your college is situated in a town that is categorized as rural, rather by different programs, identities, people, and population markers. Do you think that your college or college town is rural or in a rural place? What makes it rural? And if not, why is that?

(If they did not grow up around the college or town) How is your hometown or previous town/city different from your current college and the town around it?

Has your gender or sexual identity changed the way you navigate or experience college? What about from high school? With college friends or at home? How so?

Rural towns and areas often get labeled as being unwelcoming in different ways, such as those who do not fit within the majority of demographics like race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc. - Do you feel like rurality in general has an impact in college and campus life?

Have you been able to find a supportive 2SLGBTQ+ community on campus? If so, where, and how? - What about online?

Are there spaces around campus or in town where you feel the most comfortable or safe as an 2SLGBTQ+ student? Why? - What about places that make you feel uncomfortable? Or that you avoid?

How do your friendships and relationships with those on campus impact your experience as a 2SLGBTQ+ student?

Understanding of students' experiences and expectations:

How do you think the media and dominant narratives about queerness and rural life compare to your actual experiences?

Where would you like to go after college? Do you feel pressure to leave the rural area after graduation?

Since this study is about queer student experiences at a rural college and understanding experiences, is there anything you would like to add or bring up that we might have not discussed?

Before we sign off, would you like me to contact you via email to check in on how you are doing after this interview a week from now? Are there any other ways I can support you before we go?

Appendix C

Composed Email and Infographic

Subject: Paid Participant Opportunity about 2SLGBTQ+/Queer Student Experiences

Hello, My name is Vaughn Zrain-Negley and I am a PhD candidate at the University of Oklahoma. I am looking for students to participate in a research study with my dissertation about the experiences of queer students at a rural college.

I am seeking 2SLGBTQ+/queer-identifying students who currently attend Southwestern College of Kansas, or have attended in the last 2 years, and are willing to participate in a [roughly] 60 minute interview. Participants **will** be compensated $15.00 for completing the interview. You **must** be 18+ years of age to participate.

Interviews will be completed via Zoom. The interview involves demographic and life experience questions. There are no foreseen risks to completing this interview. If you are interested, please complete a questionnaire with your basic contact information and I will reach out and schedule an interview time with you. Before the interview, you will be briefed about the study as well as asked about consent with participation and recording interview audio.

If you are interested in participating, please complete the online contact questionnaire from scanning the QR code or the link here:
https://ousurvey.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_6Y9H0ZyU30SkczY

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at vzrain@ou.edu (Vaughn Zrain-Negley) or committee chair Dr. Jenny Sperling (jenny.sperling@ou.edu).

The University of Oklahoma is an equal-opportunity institution.

The OU IRB has approved the content of this recruitment email.

Student Participants Needed!

Looking for Queer/2SLGBTQ+ students to complete a 45 - 60 minute interview via Zoom as a part of my dissertation research study.

Students will be compensated $15.00 via a gift card after the interview

Requirements:

- Must be a student at college or university in rural Kansas (or were in the last 2 years).
- Must be at least 18 years old.
- Identify as queer/A part of the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Click here or scan below to participate:

Questions? Contact: vzrain@ou.edu

The University of Oklahoma is an equal-opportunity institution.

Approved by the OU IRB: #18444

Appendix D

Email to Schedule Interview

Subject: Consent Forms and Scheduling for Research Participation Interview

Thank you for filling out the contact information with interest in participating in my dissertation research study! I am reaching out to schedule a time to complete the one-on-one interview with you.

Second, please let me know what days and times work best for you over the next 2 weeks and I will help schedule a specific date and time and confirm it with you. I am attaching the consent forms for you to review before the interview. You may sign any time before the interview or right before we start the interview. You may contact me with questions or concerns with the study or consent forms at any time during this process. If you need to cancel or move your interview at any time, you are allowed to do so without any penalty from this study or myself.

Thank you again for your interest and help with this study for the completion of my doctorate!

Best,

Vaughn Zrain-Negley

Appendix E

Contents of the Call for Participants Questionnaire

This is what they students will see when you link the Qualtrics survey interest form link or scan the QR code.

University of Oklahoma

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

Hello, my name is Vaughn Zrain-Negley and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of Oklahoma, in the Educational Studies program. I am currently looking for students to participate in a study for my dissertation about the experiences of queer students while attending a rural college.

This research is being conducted at a Zoom(online) meeting. I am seeking queer-identifying (2SLGBTQ+) students who currently attend a college or university in a rural Kansas town, or have attended within the last 2 years, and are willing to participate in a 45-60 minute interview.

You must be 18+ years of age to participate.

Please read the information below and feel free to reach out with any questions you may have:

Interviews can be done via Zoom or in person. The interview involves demographic and life experience questions. Participants will be compensated $15.00 for completing the interview.

Online Security: The organization of Experience Management (XM) and Qualtrics hosts the data collection platform and has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. All interviews will be conducted via Zoom platform with my OU account. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may

gain access to or retain your data or your IP address which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made as to their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

Who will see my information? There will be no identifiable information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records. Only the de-identified research data may be uploaded to an online data repository platform where it would be publicly available for anyone interested to examine.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide not to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time. I, the primary researcher, will not be upset or try to contact you afterwards if you choose not to participate.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses unless you specifically agree to be identified.

What will happen to my data in the future? We might share only de-identified data with others.

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research or have experienced a research-related injury, contact me at: vzrain@ou.edu Advisor: Dr. Jenny Sperling, jenny.sperling@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

This is not a consent form for the interview. Once this recruitment questionnaire is complete, I will reach out via email to schedule your interview, as well as send electronic consent forms and answer any questions you may have. At the beginning of the Zoom meeting for the interview, you will asked about confirming participation and recording of interview audio.

If you are 18 years or older and ready to fill out the contact information questionnaire, please press "NEXT" to fill out basic contact information so I may schedule and interview with you.

If you do not wish to participate, please close this window.

IRB # 18444 IRB Approval Date: 04/29/202

Your name: _____

Are you at least 18 years of age? Yes No

What is the name of the college/university that you currently attend or have attended in the past 2 years?: _____

Your email address. I will only use this email to schedule your interview and send consent forms: _____

Thank you!

If you have any questions about the study, please contact me at vzrain@ou.edu (Vaughn Zrain-Negley) or committee chair Dr. Jenny Sperling (jenny.sperling@ou.edu).

The University of Oklahoma is an equal-opportunity institution.

The OU IRB has approved the content of this recruitment questionnaire.

Appendix F

Color Codes & Themes

This is a visual representation of the codes used for the interviews, organized by theme[5]. Each box held a quote and notes from the transcripts and was color coded. The actual text of quotes and notes were removed for identifying information and privacy reasons.



[5] Cell boxes are not to scale.

Appendix G

IRB Approval Letters

Below are the IRB approval letters, the initial and amended copies.

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: April 30, 2025 **IRB#:** 18444

Principal Investigator: Vaughn N Zrain-Negley

Approval Date: 04/29/2025

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Exploring the Experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Students Attending a Rural College

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Study Modification – Expedited Review – AP0

Date: May 20, 2025 **IRB#:** 18444

Principal Investigator: Vaughn N Zrain-Negley **Reference No: 776629**

Study Title: Exploring the Experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ Students Attending a Rural College

Approval Date: 05/15/2025

Modification Description: Wider recruitment via social media

The review and approval of this submission is based on the determination that the study, as amended, will continue to be conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of 45 CFR 46.

To view the approved documents for this submission, open this study from the My Studies option, go to Submission History, go to Completed Submissions tab and then click the Details icon.

If the consent form(s) were revised as a part of this modification, discontinue use of all previous versions of the consent form.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the HRPP office at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu. The HRPP Administrator assigned for this submission: Kat L Braswell.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board