

# BEING LGBTQ+ IN A COLLEGE OF AGRICULTURE: A FOCUS GROUP EXPLORATION OF BELONGING AND EXPERIENCES IN AGRICULTURE & RURAL COMMUNITIES



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## INTRODUCTION

- 2.9 million to 3.9 million U.S. citizens identify as LGBTQ+ and many reside in rural communities, engage in agricultural practices, and serve critical roles as community members (Movement Advancement Project, 2019).
- Research largely ignores the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals across rural America and in agriculture (Murray et al., 2020), specifically in postsecondary agricultural education (Elliot-Engel et al., 2019).
- In a study conducted in the Texas Tech University Davis College, 14% of students indicated a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (N=312).
- The lowest mean scores for LGBTQ+ students using a sense of belonging scale indicate they do not always feel like they belong in their college, report few connections with other university students, and assert that staff members are not like them (Rinehart et al., 2023).

## METHODOLOGY

- A focus group format allowed the researchers to understand the collective experiences and individual challenges of LGBTQ-identifying students (Krueger, 2014; Johnson & Parry, 2015) across the agriculture industry and rural communities; challenged the systematic structures of traditional one-on-one interviews.
- The use of a facilitator not associated with the research team was employed using the recommendations from a previous study (Krueger, 2014).
- During the two-hour focus group, students were assigned an alphabetical letter to support privacy and to ensure data remained de-identified throughout the discussion.

## CONCLUSION

- More inclusive language and understanding of allyship is crucial for the support and development of programs across colleges of agriculture.
- Focus group participants indicated a need for more LGBTQ+ representation in faculty and staff in the College. Some participants were unaware of on-campus resources for LGBTQ+ students.
- While most participants did not feel that their sexual orientation or gender identity prevented them from being active or involved at TTU, it has prevented their LGBTQ+ peers from doing so.
- Participants expressed how discrimination and lack of empathy by faculty, staff, and students across the College affect their mental health.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

- The behaviors of adaptive leadership (Heifetz, 1998) allow for a prescriptive approach to understanding the process of guiding change from a leader's perspective and creating space for discussion and action to help move the process forward.
- Adaptive leadership can be defined as the process of leaders providing people with the environment to prepare themselves to navigate challenging issues (Northouse, 2021).
- The use of adaptive leadership as a framework created a holding environment to capture the perspectives and insights of LGBTQ+ students.

## RESULTS/FINDINGS

### Agriculture Industry Self-Monitoring

- Student participants voiced they do not feel supported or welcomed in various sectors of the agriculture industry.
- All participants reported experiencing discrimination because of their sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Participants feel pressured to self-monitor (DeVito, 2013) throughout various spaces on campus.

### LGBTQ+ Hierarchy of Needs

- Participants expressed the need for public support, recognition, and outreach of the LGBTQ+ community from the College.
- A need for a club or organization focused on LGBTQ+ students in the College as students find it difficult to meet other LGBTQ+ students.
- Participants also expressed interest in gaining perspective from LGBTQ+ college alumni.

### Rural Support

- Most participants who grew up in rural communities felt a lack of support from family and community members.
- Others expressed they do not feel comfortable openly expressing themselves in their home community.
- Lack of support was largely attributed due to religious principles or a lack of understanding.

## IMPLICATIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

- Students should know they are supported- regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.
- It is important to inform students that they are supported and there are available resources as their personal experiences directly impact their mental health.
- Focus groups allow for colleges of agriculture to identify how to best serve these populations and learn from their experiences by providing an environment to voice their thoughts and concerns which can lead to appropriate action.
- Representation matters in terms of how agriculture students see LGBTQ+ professionals in the agriculture industry. As the agriculture industry grows in its commitment to DEI, the policies and practices of the industry in colleges of agriculture must reflect the spirit of inclusion.

ABSTRACT & REFERENCES

