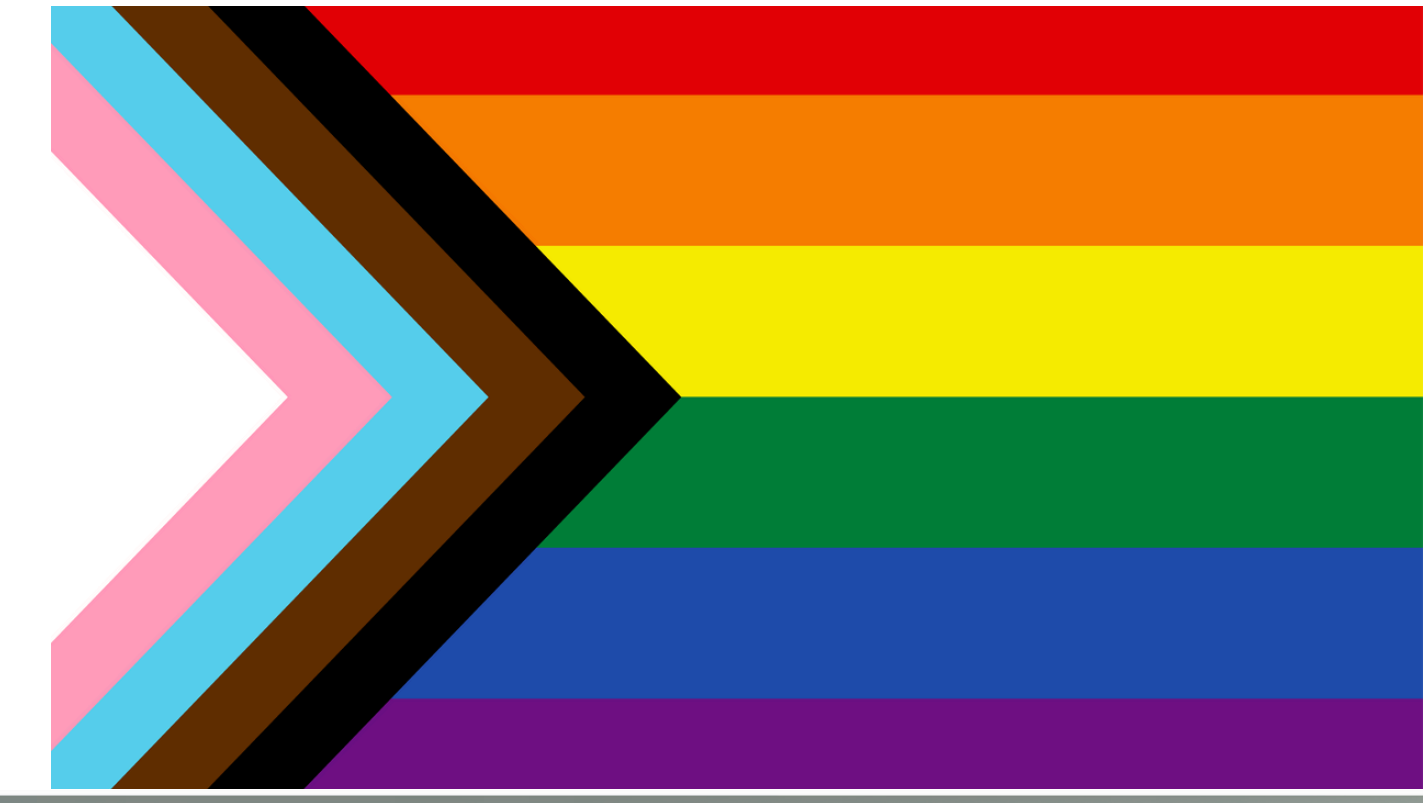


California State
University Chico
College of Agriculture

School-Based Agricultural Education Teachers' Comfort Levels in Students' Identities



By: **Stephen C. Cole & Dr. Jessica M. Toombs**
California State University, Chico

Introduction

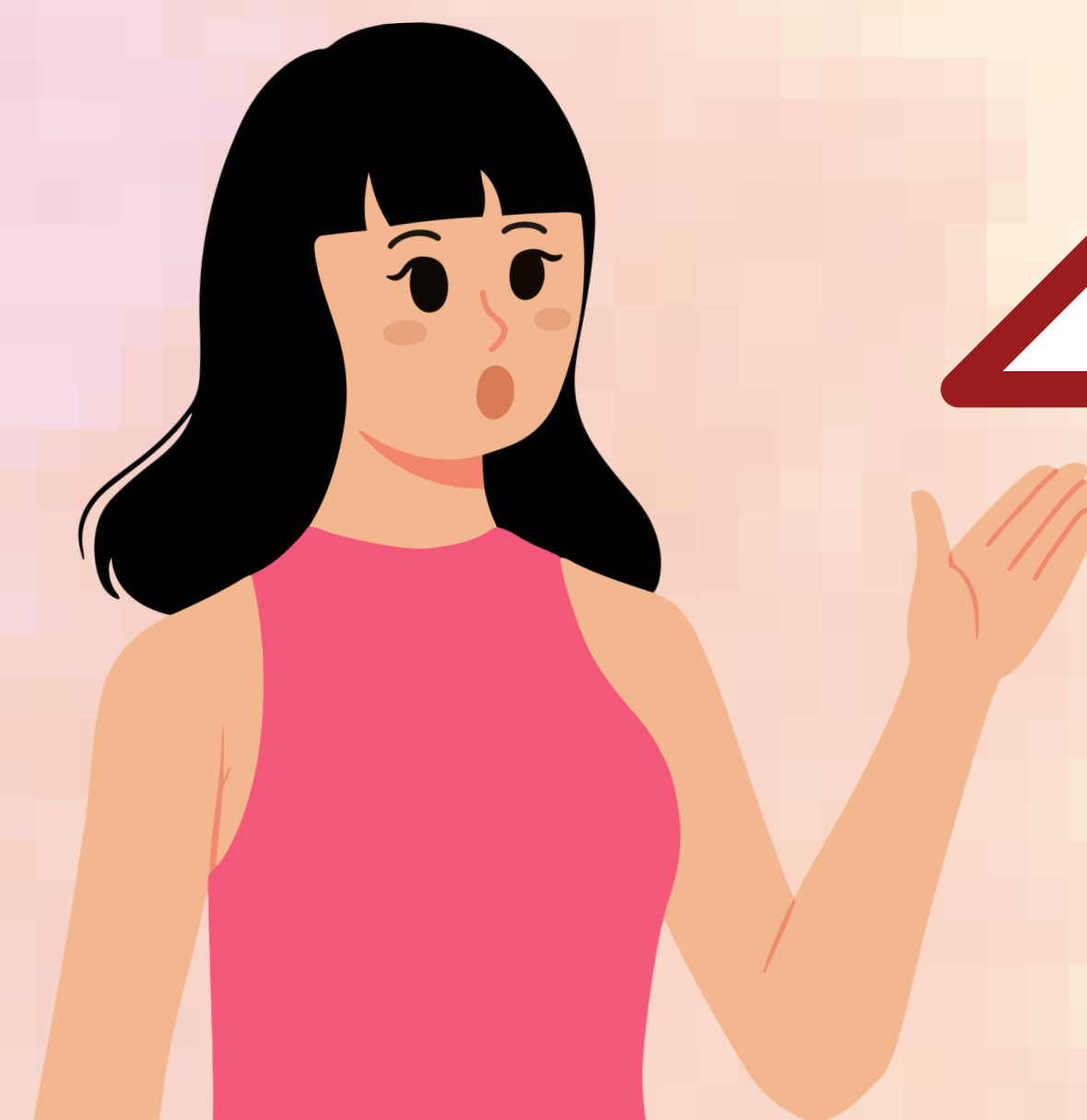
- California SBAE teachers often feel unprepared to support LGBTQ, low-income, and Hispanic students, leading to disconnection (Halpern et al., 2022; Price & Edwards, 2024).
- Inclusive classrooms improve student success and belonging (Cottrell, 2021; Taylor, 2021). Guided by social distance theory (Albrecht et al., 1982), this study explored teachers' comfort working with diverse students in California.
- Results can inform future training to better equip educators in creating supportive, inclusive environments.

Objectives

- The purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of California SBAE teachers in fostering an inclusive environment for diverse student populations.
- Describe the differences in California SBAE teachers comfort level in working with students who identify as gay, low-income, and/or Hispanic.

Methodology

- A Bogardus Social Distance Scale was used to measure California SBAE teachers' comfort with diverse student identities based on income, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, modeled after Vincent and Austin (2021). The instrument showed high reliability (Cronbach's alpha = 0.94–0.98) and was validated by experts.
- Participants (n=99) were recruited from a statewide listserv of 965 SBAE teachers. After data cleaning, a 12.64% valid response rate was achieved, with no significant differences between early and late respondents.
- Among respondents, 84% identified as straight, 87% as middle class, and 87% as White. Social desirability bias is a possible limitation despite assured anonymity.

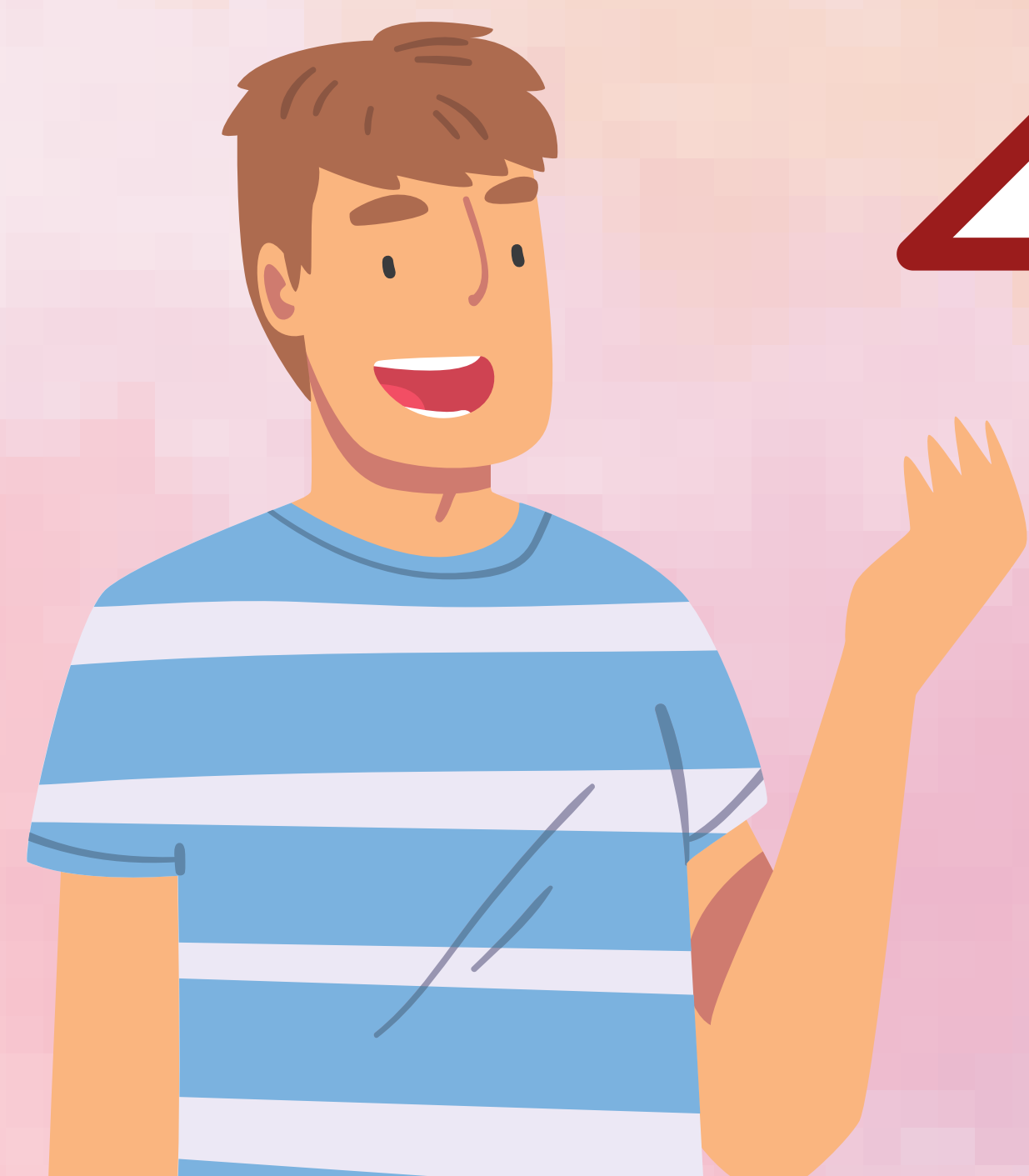


U.S. school populations are becoming increasingly diverse (Cottrell, 2021).

How comfortable would you feel with this student in the following situations?

	In School		In Class		FFA Member		Competitive Event		Chapter Officer		Overnight Trip	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Student 1	1.29	0.81	1.27	0.79	1.27	0.79	1.30	0.82	1.34	0.86	1.41	0.93
Student 2	1.31	0.75	1.29	0.75	1.27	0.71	1.35	0.80	1.40	0.91	1.79	1.17
Student 3	1.26	0.72	1.22	0.70	1.23	0.70	1.25	0.72	1.27	0.73	1.33	0.81
Student 4	1.33	0.82	1.31	0.82	1.31	0.82	1.38	0.89	1.41	0.92	1.79	1.12
Student 5	1.24	0.72	1.21	0.69	1.21	0.69	1.26	0.72	1.26	0.72	1.33	0.80
Student 6	1.30	0.75	1.26	0.73	1.26	0.72	1.38	0.86	1.36	0.86	1.79	1.15
Student 7	1.24	0.72	1.21	0.69	1.21	0.69	1.25	0.71	1.27	0.73	1.37	0.82
Student 8	1.34	0.87	1.30	0.82	1.30	0.82	1.42	0.93	1.40	0.92	1.79	1.15

Note. 1 = Extremely Comfortable, 3 = Neutral, 5 = Extremely Uncomfortable



Ag teachers need training in creating inclusive environments for LGBTQ students (Murray et al., 2020).

Results

- SBAE teachers generally felt comfortable teaching and advising students of all identities, but showed more hesitation with students identifying as gay.
- The greatest discomfort was reported when gay students were involved in competitive events, held leadership roles, or attended overnight trips, with these scenarios showing the highest means and standard deviations.
- According to social distance theory, competitive events marked the "tipping point" of teacher comfort, with overnight trip responses showing the most variability (SD > 1.00), indicating mixed comfort levels.

Conclusion

- SBAE teachers were generally comfortable working with students of all identities, but showed the most discomfort with gay student profiles—especially during competitive events, chapter leadership, and overnight trips—where responses had the highest variability (SD > 1.00).
- Social distance theory identifies competitive events as a key tipping point in teacher comfort, highlighting increased unease in closer, more involved student-teacher interactions.
- In California, with 10.3% of secondary students identifying as LGBTQ, support from teacher associations and preparation programs is needed to help SBAE teachers better support LGBTQ students, especially during overnight activities; further research should explore diverse student demographics.