CrossMark

Showing your pride: a national survey of queer student centres in Canadian colleges and universities

John Ecker[1] · **Jennifer Rae**[1] · **Amandeep Bassi**[1]

Abstract The presence of queer student centres (QSCs) across Canadian universities and colleges is largely unknown. It is an important area of investigation since queer-identified students have previously identified several benefits of these services, including receiving support from other queer individuals. The focus of the current study was to determine (a) the number of QSCs in Canadian universities and colleges; (b) factors predicting their existence; (c) types of support they receive; and (d) future directions. A national online survey of 156 institutions and two in-person focus groups ($n = 5$; $n = 2$) were conducted. Descriptive analyses and a logistic regression were completed, and qualitative responses of the survey and the focus groups were thematically coded. Results demonstrate that universities and institutions with larger student populations are more likely to have a centre and that institutional support is crucial for their operations. Implications for the sustainability and creation of centres are discussed.

Keywords Queer · LGBT · Student services · University · College

✉ John Ecker
  jecke081@uottawa.ca

  Jennifer Rae
  jrae010@uottawa.ca

  Amandeep Bassi
  abassi@uottawa.ca

[1] School of Psychology and Centre for Research on Educational and Community Services, University of Ottawa, 34 Stewart St, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5, Canada

Introduction

The transitional period from high school can be influential in the sexual identity development of queer[1] youth who attend post-secondary institutions (Evans and Broido 1999). It is the first time that many students have lived away from their parents, with some moving from rural to urban areas. With this independence, the sexual identities of many queer students begin to evolve (Waldo 1998). This evolution presents new pressures, as students experience the stresses of both post-secondary life and an emergent sexual self (Zubernis and Snyder 2007).

Unfortunately, queer students may encounter discrimination and harassment within post-secondary institutions. Studies completed in the 1990s found that 65 % (Herek 1993) and 75 % (D'Augelli 1992) of queer students experienced verbal assault and approximately 25 % were threatened with violence (D'Augelli 1992; Herek 1993) while on campus. More recent studies report that one-quarter (Rankin et al. 2010) to one-third (Rankin 2005) of undergraduates experienced harassment within the past year, three quarters viewed the campus climate as homophobic (Rankin 2005), and 61 % were targets of derogatory remarks (Rankin et al. 2010). Tetreault et al. (2013) report that approximately half of their 70 queer undergraduate respondents experienced unfair treatment by other students and close to 40 % of respondents experienced some form of harassment. Both "open" and "closeted" students reported receiving unfair treatment from students, professors, and administrators, with "open" students perceiving the post-secondary environment more negatively than "closeted" students (Gortmaker and Brown 2006).

Post-secondary administrators have begun to recognize the issues that queer students face and have initiated programmes in response (Evans and Herriott 2004). Such programming is important, considering that age-appropriate recreational activities for queer youth have historically been minimal (Lepischak 2004). Queer student centres (QSCs) can act as gateways to information about queer identity and help reduce influences of societal stereotypes (Zubernis and Snyder 2007). The presence of QSCs also creates a sense of community amongst its members (Evans and Herriott 2004). By immersing themselves amongst other queer youth, students can begin to feel positively about their sexuality (Dietz and Dettlaff 1997) and offset the effects of homophobia experienced on campus (Stevens Jr. 2004). For "open" students, QSCs allow for involvement in social activities, whereas for "closeted" students, QSCs provide education on, and awareness of, sexuality issues (Gortmaker and Brown 2006).

Despite their importance, the availability of QSCs is an underdeveloped area of research. Drawing heavily upon American research, it has been found that specific variables influence the probability of an institution operating a QSC. Fine (2012) predicted the presence of QSCs on over 1700 American campuses based upon five different criteria: (1) the student population; (2) admittance rates and tuition fees; (3) financial resources; (4) a public or private institution; and (5) the political environment. Data were collected from the American integrated post-secondary data system (IPDS). Fine's (2012) results demonstrate that large, publicly funded institutions with higher tuition fees located in more liberal states were more likely to have a QSC.

Other research has focused on individual QSCs in the USA. Results have indicated that queer students want social networking opportunities with queer-identified individuals on

---

[1] Queer is an umbrella term for individuals who do not identify within the binaries of sexual identity and gender identity (Abramovich 2013). It can include, but is not limited to, individuals identifying as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and/or transgender.

campus (Vaccaro 2012), and groups that provide confidentiality, social support, use of gender-inclusive language, and educational materials (Welch 1996). Ritchie and Banning (2001) sampled eight university-supported, professionally staffed QSCs. The majority had been created in the past 5 years, and most were created due to a taskforce, though several emerged in response to negative incidents against queer students on campus. Some difficulties were encountered in establishing the centres, particularly ensuring the provision of physical space to house the centre.

One clear omission within the limited available literature pertains to QSCs offerings at community colleges. Ivory (2012) states that few articles have been published about the needs of queer students at two-year community colleges, which may differ from those of students at institutions with four-year programmes. Given the scant amount of the literature on QSCs, in general, and community colleges in particular, it is imperative that additional studies of QSCs be conducted.

To the authors' knowledge, the present study provides the first national survey of services available for queer students in Canadian universities and colleges. The study includes two components: (1) a national survey of all Canadian universities and colleges and (2) focus groups with the staff of two student-run QSCs within Ontario. The decision to focus on student-run QSCs, as opposed to services offered through counselling centres within the institutions, was made to allow for a greater scope of centres to be included.

Method

The objective of this research was to assess the status of QSCs across 156 Canadian universities and publicly funded colleges. Specifically, the research addresses the difference in accessibility and support for QSCs across Canada and examines the benefits and challenges that can arise from these differences.

The current study addresses the following questions:

1. How many universities and colleges have active QSCs?
2. What predicts the presence of QSCs?
3. For those active QSCs, what services are offered, approximately how many students access the services, and what type of support does the service receive?
4. How does this support, or lack of support, affect QSCs?
5. What are future directions for QSCs?

Variables to predict the presence of a QSC were selected based upon the work of Fine (2012) and the availability of public data. It should be noted that a database equivalent to the IPDS used by Fine (2012) is not available in Canada; therefore, the same variables used by Fine (2012) were not possible.

Materials

Survey

A seven-item electronic mail survey with questions pertaining to QSC operations was developed. Respondents were asked to describe the nature of their organization (e.g. student club, student service, student centre), date of establishment, service offerings, number of students accessing services, the types and sources of support received and how

such support, or lack thereof, affects operations. Respondents were also invited to make additional comments about their QSC or QSCs in general. The survey contained only open-ended questions. However, as explained by Dillman et al. (2009), some of these questions were structured as open-ended requests for numerical responses, others were open-ended requests for a list of items, and some questions were open-ended requests for description and elaboration.

Focus group

A semi-structured, open-ended focus group protocol was developed to expand upon themes that emerged from the e-mail survey responses. The protocol included questions about the participants' specific QSC and its operations, the campus environment for queer students (e.g. How would you describe the climate for queer students on your campus?), the role of the QSC on campus, the sources and types of support available to the QSC (e.g. Does your university provide any support for your operations? What are the benefits or challenges to receiving this support?), the sustainability of the QSC, and its future direction. The protocol concluded with an invitation for participants to make additional comments.

Procedure

The study involved a mixed methods design. The focus groups served as a means of triangulation for the data. As recommended by Krefting (1991), triangulation of data is essential in establishing the credibility of the results and ensuring consistency and confirmability of the data. Triangulation allowed for a modified type of member checking to occur, which served to confirm the accuracy and generalizability (Shenton 2004) of the cross-Canada survey findings to local institutions. By conducting focus groups, we were able to address discrepancies in the survey responses and gain clarity on emergent themes. This was useful given the limitations associated with electronic surveys, where follow-up questions cannot easily be asked to improve understanding of responses (Jackson and Trochim 2002).

E-mail surveys

An inclusive list of all Canadian universities and publicly funded colleges was generated based on those institutions affiliated with national and provincial councils, such as the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, and Colleges and Institutes Canada. Private, career colleges were excluded from this list for logistical reasons, given that there are so many of these colleges (over 500 in Ontario alone), and they typically feature small campuses, many online and correspondence courses, and compressed, short-term programmes. In total, 70 colleges and 86 universities were identified, as of September 2012. A search of each institution's website was conducted to determine the size of the student body. An internet search was also conducted to determine the population of the city the institution is located in and the local political affiliation (i.e. the political affiliation of the Member of Parliament currently representing the riding in which the institution is located).

An internet search was then conducted to determine whether a student-run QSC was currently operating at each institution. This involved examining each institution's official website, as well as conducting a Google search using keywords such as "queer", "lgbtq", "gay", and "pride" alongside the name of the institution. Social media sites, including

Twitter and Facebook, were also searched. For those institutions for which a QSC's presence could not be determined, the institution was e-mailed directly, usually via the student federation, to verify whether a centre was in operation and its coordinates. If no reply was received, a follow-up e-mail was sent.

A verified list of all operating campus QSCs was created, and e-mail surveys were distributed to centre coordinators. The e-mail introduced the researchers and the study, including its voluntary nature. Responding to the e-mail with a completed survey was assumed to imply informed consent. To ensure optimal response rates, follow-up e-mails were sent to centres whose coordinators did not initially respond. These follow-up e-mails were sent two weeks apart. In cases where a response was not received, the student federation or the general e-mail account of the institution was e-mailed to verify the centre's contact information. In some cases, the centre was reached through Facebook and/ or Twitter. The data collection took place over the course of several months, from September 2012 to February 2013.

Focus groups

Four focus groups were planned with the four local QSCs. However, over the course of the study, one of these QSCs stopped operating. Coordinators of each of the three remaining QSCs were invited via e-mail to participate in a focus group alongside any other interested staff and volunteers from their respective centre. All three of the coordinators responded to this invitation, and a focus group date and time was scheduled with each of them. Although three focus groups had been scheduled, only two were successfully completed, as one of the QSCs closed subsequent to the initial invitation.

Prior to co-facilitating the focus groups, the researchers completed a sensitivity training workshop offered by one of the local QSCs. The focus groups themselves took place in the offices of each of the respective QSCs. The first focus group involved three participants, while the second involved five. Participants of each focus group included centre coordinators, other staff, and volunteers. Each focus group was approximately one hour in duration and was audio-recorded and later transcribed. The focus groups took place in the spring of 2013.

Ethics

Ethical approval was received from the Ethics Review Board of the authors' host institution for the e-mail survey and one of the focus groups. Ethical approval was also received from the Ethics Review Boards of the three local institutions where focus groups were intended to take place. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. No compensation was provided to participants.

Data analysis

Survey

Quantitative data analysis   Descriptive statistics were compiled to determine the number of institutions with a QSC and the number of students accessing the centres. Descriptive statistics were also compiled for the survey responses to the open-ended questions regarding QSC operations. Responses to the questions pertaining to type and source of

support received by a centre, and services offered by a centre, were coded to allow for descriptive analysis.

A logistic regression analysis was completed to examine predictors of the presence of a QSC across Canadian post-secondary institutions. Direct binary logistic regression was conducted, with predictors entered in one discrete block. The four predictors were (a) institution type (college or university); (b) population of the city where the institution was located; (c) the student population at each institution; and d) the political affiliation of the area where each institution is located [Conservative compared to all other parties (Liberal, New Democrat, Green Party, and Independent)]. As stated previously, these variables were selected based upon the work of Fine (2012) and the availability of Canadian data. All analyses were completed using SPSS, version 21.

Before proceeding with data analyses, the predictor variables were screened for violations of normality. Size of city and student population both presented distributions that were relatively bimodal in nature, so these variables were independently dichotomized. Size of city was dichotomized into (1) populations of 99,999 or less or (2) populations of 100,000 or more. Student population was dichotomized into (1) populations of 9999 or less or (2) populations of 10,000 or more. Therefore, all predictor variables were categorical. Assumptions of multicollinearity were not violated.

There were a total of 156 institutions included in the analysis. Due to missing values, this number was reduced to 135. Fifteen of these missing values resulted from institutions not responding to our initial e-mail requests. Chi-square tests were run to compare institutions that responded to the survey to institutions that did not respond on size of city, student population, and political affiliation. No significant differences emerged.

Qualitative data analysis   The final two open-ended survey questions asked respondents to comment on the ways in which support (or lack thereof) affected their QSC operations as well as to comment on QSCs in general. The process of first cycle and second cycle coding was used for these questions (Saldana 2013). For first cycle coding, survey responses were summarized into descriptive codes defining important information within the responses. Using the descriptive codes, pattern coding was then applied as the second cycle coding method. Pattern coding was useful in synthesizing themes across all responses. All three members of the research team participated in the coding process, first coding independently, then meeting to confirm, disconfirm, and discuss the generated codes to ensure consistency and rigor.

Focus groups   Each member of the research team participated in data analysis, which was based on a modified version of grounded theory (Charmaz 2006; Ryan and Bernard 2000). To begin, each team member independently reviewed the two focus group transcripts in their entirety, reading line by line, and identifying key segments of information, particularly those referring to processes, actions, and assumptions (Ryan and Bernard 2000). A code was assigned to these important portions of text. Each team member then compiled a comprehensive, hierarchical list of codes. The three members of the research team then met to discuss the generated codes and to come to a consensus on coding inconsistencies. A final coding list was then developed, incorporating the work of all three team members. The team members reviewed the transcripts once more, ensuring that important portions of text were captured by the final coding scheme. From there, the team members sorted the list of codes into overarching themes and sub-themes by comparing and contrasting them to identify meaningful patterns and theoretical linkages and relationships amongst them.

Results

Email surveys

Quantitative findings

QSC presence The internet-based search revealed that 79 of the 156 (50.6 %) institutions had a QSC on their campus. Seventy-three per cent of universities ($n = 58$) were found to have a centre, compared to thirty-five per cent of colleges ($n = 21$). Information was unavailable from 4 % of universities and 15 % of colleges. Of the 58 universities with QSCs, 41 (70.7 %) responded to the survey. For the 21 colleges with QSCs, eight responded to the survey (38.1 %). Therefore, the overall response rate was 62.0 %.

The majority of QSCs were located in central Canada (see Table 1). The average city population and average student population were higher for institutions with QSCs compared to institutions without QSCs. Institutions with and without QSCs were equally likely to be located in a federal conservative riding.

For institutions with QSCs, the majority defined themselves as student clubs or student services (see Table 2). University QSCs were primarily established from the 1990s to the 2000s; however, some services were established in the 1980s and earlier. For colleges, all of the QSCs were established in the 2000s or later. The average number of centre users was 61 per week (SD = 62). Universities had a higher average number of centre users compared to colleges (see Table 2). Service offerings were varied and included social events

Table 1 Descriptive information of institutions with queer student centres and without queer student centres

	Has a queer student centre	Does not have a queer student centre
Type of institution		
University[a]	58 (67.4 %)	24 (27.9 %)
College[b]	21 (30.0 %)	38 (54.3 %)
Location		
Western Canada[c]	18 (22.8 %)	31 (50.0 %)
Central Canada[d]	47 (59.5 %)	21 (33.9 %)
Atlantic Canada[e]	14 (17.7 %)	8 (12.9 %)
Northern Canada[f]	0 (.0 %)	2 (3.2 %)
Average city population (SD)	1,009,603.20 (1,681,308.37)	509,521.52 (1,060,465.46)
Average student population (SD)	14,117.59 (12,800.92)	6,186.62 (8,714.66)
Institution located in a federal conservative riding (%)	35 (44.3 %)	30 (48.4 %)

[a] Includes 4 % missing data

[b] Includes 16 % missing data

[c] British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan

[d] Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec

[e] Newfoundland, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island

[f] North-west Territories, Nunavut, Yukon

Table 2 Descriptive information of institutions with queer student centres

	University	College
How would you describe your services?		
Student centre	5 (14.3 %)	1 (12.5 %)
Student club	11 (31.4 %)	5 (62.5 %)
Student service	11 (31.4 %)	1 (1.4 %)
Student organization	3 (8.6 %)	1 (1.4 %)
Student association	2 (5.7 %)	0
Gay straight alliance	1 (2.9 %)	0
Student group	2 (5.7 %)	0
What year was your organization established?		
Pre-1970	1 (3.2 %)	0
1970–1979	6 (19.4 %)	0
1980–1989	2 (6.5 %)	0
1990–1999	7 (22.6 %)	0
2000–2009	12 (38.7 %)	5 (83.3 %)
2010-present	3 (9.7 %)	1 (16.7 %)
Average number of student accessing services per week (SD)	62 (64.25)	25 (7.07)
Receives funding (% yes)	34 (97.1 %)	8 (100.0 %)

(80 % of centres), workshops (61 %), drop-in space (52 %), educational materials/library (41 %), advocacy/awareness campaigns (36 %), discussion groups (30 %), and peer support/emotional support from staff (27 %).

The overwhelming majority (97 %) of centres received some form of institutional support (e.g. monetary, logistical, technical, physical space). Support was received from student unions (62 %), the institution (7 %), the student union and the institution (12 %), and other sources (e.g. from the community) (2 %). Nine per cent of centres did not state the source of their support. The majority of support for all institutions involved financial contributions.

Predictors of QSC presence   With all of the independent variables in the equation, the model was significant, *Chi-square* (4, $n = 135$) = 42.83, $p < .001$. Two significant individual predictors emerged (see Table 3). The odds of having a QSC increased if the institution was a university and had a larger student population. In terms of the classification rates, with all predictors in the model, the specificity rates were moderate (63 %). The sensitivity rates were higher (79 %). These numbers indicate that the model was better able to classify institutions with a QSC.

Qualitative findings

The following describes the main themes to emerge from the open-ended survey questions.

Importance of receiving support and recognition from the institution   QSCs receiving institutional support were considered more professional and credible, boosting the morale of members. Beyond providing financial or tangible support, respondents recognized the importance of their QSC being embraced by the institution. One respondent commented:

Table 3 Predictors of queer student centre presence

	$n = 135$			
	Estimate in logit scale	Standard error of estimate in logit scale	Estimated odds ratio	95 % CI
Type of school	1.67	.45	5.33***	[2.2, 12.92]
Member of parliament	−.83	.47	.44	[.18, 1.09]
Size of city	−.68	.44	.51	[.21, 1.2]
Student population	−1.99	.52	.137***	[.05, .38]

*** $p < .001$

> While most colleges and universities in Canada have queer student organizations, their presence is often very understated by the schools themselves, in a way unlike that of other clubs and organizations…. Schools need to take pride in their queer organizations, and demonstrate that for everyone to see.

Collaboration with existing campus and community services   While institutional support was described as highly valued, so too were other sources of support, which many centres reported actively seeking out. For example, one centre stated, "We are currently working hard to affiliate ourselves with the Safe Spaces Network on campus as well as promoting greater inclusivity and communication between our city's many queer and queer-friendly organizations". Respondents appreciated the collaboration that occurred between QSCs and other organizations both on and off campus. Support from the broader community offered continuity of services from year to year, and in some cases, financial support too. One centre reported, "We do not receive anything from the University. However, another group sponsors us to help us out each year… The money from the other group helps a lot". Another centre explained the role of community groups by saying, "Students graduate after three or 4 years and often know-how and personal connections go with them. We try to ameliorate this problem with exit reports and by fostering connections with more permanent local organizations".

Limitations of support   Despite the many benefits respondents associated with receiving support, challenges also arose. Receiving support had the potential to impact a centre's autonomy. As one respondent explained, "Since we operate under the Students Association, and depend on their infrastructure and support, we are subject to the politics and decisions of the Students Association Council as to how that support is given/received".

Another respondent commented that operating within a broader institutional framework limited a centre's ability to truly effect change: "What can happen is that a service centre has money provided, but no way to impact the hierarchical structure which is making choices that create barriers to service".

For one respondent, the upside of a lack of support was the ability to maintain a sense of independence. "We are just starting our organization, so not being associated with the College for now is probably a good thing because it means that we have more freedom to choose what we want to do".

Optimistically, some respondents did report that they were able to accept support while maintaining independence, as exemplified by a respondent who explained, "The Student

Union provides the building and staff for us to learn from in the operation of our student group, while affording us financial and logistical freedom to run the group".

Lack of secure support and its impact on quality and sustainability of programming　Respondents whose centres were lacking support confirmed that their centres suffered as a result, experiencing staff shortages, a reduction in the scope of events and services offered, and tensions and conflict within the centre itself. The difficulty of a lack of support was illustrated by one respondent, who stated, "With a membership of around 12,000 people, and only 2 paid staff, we often are required to drop some projects in favour of others". A respondent with a similar experience commented, "Whether because of too little funding or too little prioritization, it is almost impossible for these services to run at full capacity. This centre exists on three campuses and there is one part time staff member to run it". Another centre explained how they function with limited support by saying, "Our small budget (from Student Union) restricts events that we can hold… We rely on those who are willing to speak or facilitate for free or small honorariums".

Without certain types of support, respondents indicated that the long-term sustainability of their QSC was in jeopardy, leaving them "at the whim of whatever engaged section of the student body is enrolled in any particular semester". One respondent expanded on this point. "The group only exists if there is a student willing to put in the work… I believe that more precautions need to be put into place to always ensure the group's survival and success". Respondents indicated that the challenge of sustainability could be mitigated by support from more permanent organizations, or through the support of a dedicated Faculty Advisor. For example, one respondent commented, "The Student Union support provides us with the benefit of some institutional memory and continuity". Having a secure source of funding from year to year, and the ability to pay staff, was also regarded as critical. One respondent explained that this type of support "would allow the group to function more effectively, in my opinion, while also ensuring that transitioning, changing, or recruiting new executive members each year is something that happens more easily".

Interest in a national network and evolving mandates　Several respondents also expressed a desire for support from a collective of other student-run QSCs across Canada. Plans to initiate such a collective are underway, as one respondent explained:

> The idea for this network is to provide: a central support system for knowledge and resource-sharing; and a forum for academic discourse specifically relating to the issues that campus organizations encounter across the country.

One respondent called for a reconfiguration of QSC mandates. The respondent stated:

> Previously these groups existed as necessity for socialization and a sense of security…Now, people don't rely on us for the same services, and it's important for us to recognize this…Ideally, we would like our group to be mentioned as a staple service, especially for new and international students who lack the initial comfort and social integration the first year of university often provides.

Focus groups

The following describes the main themes to emerge from the focus groups.

Role of QSCs and services offered   Focus group participants explained the many different roles assumed by their QSCs. Their diverse range of services was targeted to queer students, but also to other students and to community members, in response to the wide variety of services any given individual might be seeking.

> Some people are strictly looking for a book or resource. Other people are looking for, actually listening in for guidance and for, um, to talk to someone. Other people are just looking to meet people and hang out. Some people just want to spend, you know, have down time between classes… Um, or some people only come for events, other people never come to our events, they just come during the day.

Providing a physical space for queer students was considered one of the most critical services offered, considering what were described as heteronormative campus climates. Users of the centres' services regularly encountered incidents of homophobia on campus, as expressed by a participant who said "just walking around you can get slurs thrown around". As a result, the participants described the importance of offering an open, welcoming, comfortable space that was non-judgmental and sex positive. In describing their centre's efforts to create such a space, one participant explained,

> A lot of what goes on in terms of that is about the language we're using and like really consent-based and … not speaking about them in a way that they don't want to be spoken about and like respecting what people tell you in terms of like their identities…You're not supposed to ask somebody specifically what their sexual orientation or what their gender identify is.

Participants defined these spaces as "safer", recognizing that no space can ever be completely "safe". One participant explained the need for a safer space by saying, "It's so huge for people to have just a place that they can go that they know is like, a space for queer and trans people".

The ideal location for this type of safer space was described as being central, accessible, and easy for new consumers to find. However, the location was also required to be somewhat anonymous and discrete, so that "people don't walk by and shout homophobic slurs", and so that students who are more shy, nervous, or vulnerable still feel comfortable accessing the space. Participants at one centre spoke of how they required adequate space for the growing resource library, as well as for the people who came to the centre to socialize. Participants at the other centre described the need for amenities like frosted glass and sound proofing, to protect students' confidentiality.

The participants also discussed how the centres fostered a culture of advocacy. Participants described initiatives like the "Gender Inclusive Washroom Campaign", in which centres advocated for the institution to address the lack of gender-neutral washrooms available on campus. One participant described the centre's advocacy role as follows:

> If there's like specific issues with like professors or people on campus, like we tend to help people go through the process with Student Affairs or like Equity Services to see like how that can be resolved. If it's like a larger issue on campus, we'll like run some sort of awareness campaign or educational workshop.

The importance of engaging in advocacy was countered by a sense of pressure to maintain a politically neutral role. Participants agreed that their centres should not be politically partisan, though being completely apolitical was impossible. As one participant stated, "The reality is that student centres are rooted in, and they came up from, radical politics". Another expanded on this notion, explaining:

We're political in the sense that we're inherently political. We fight homophobia, that's political…We fight transphobia, HIV-phobia, stigmas, all these things are inherently political and so it's impossible to have, even to have an LGBTQ space, that's not political.

Operational needs of QSCs

Staff and volunteers   Participants explained that much of their centre's success hinged on the dedication of student staff and volunteers. Staff at both centres was hired by the Student Association, with varying degrees of input from the centre itself. Participants from one centre said that the hiring process was working well. These participants found that they were able to ensure that people who were familiar with the centre were hired. In describing the hiring process, participants said:

> It's a conversation between our mandate, our needs of the staff, and [the] executive in general… Something that's taking effect now with the new [human resources agreement] is actually, the coordinator has a say in the hiring of the new staff, um, especially with the new coordinator.

At this centre, five staff positions existed: service coordinator, communications supervisor, advocacy and equity supervisor, volunteer supervisor, and outreach supervisor. Over 150 volunteers were also a part of the centre and were described as being instrumental to the centre's activities.

For this centre, the transition process for recently hired staff was described as effective, aided by transition reports and guidance from the previous person holding that position.

> With the transition reports that we kind of get to—like it's nice because it's being written by a person who filled our position in a previous year. And so if there's anything that they specifically thought could be improved upon or, like, addressed from, you know, from their experiences, we know that right from day one.

Participants from this centre generally described an environment of ongoing self-directed training and development that extended beyond the transition period.

The experience of participants from the other centre was much different. These participants questioned the staff hiring process at their centre, saying that staff was not always appropriately hired by the Student Association. New staff was given little oversight or preparation for their new roles. As one participant described, "We got like given the keys, and it was like, 'Here is your service centre!'" They commented, "I'm not guaranteed time to train the next person, so that's really unfortunate. Like I think that there is definitely some knowledge fallen between different sets of coordinators". More formal training opportunities that could help meet students' needs for counselling, suicide prevention, and mental health support were desired.

Financial support   Financial support was also considered fundamental to the QSCs' operation. One centre (the centre that expressed satisfaction with the hiring and transition processes) was funded by student levies—the provision of which was included in the constitution of the Student Association. Additional funds were also available through an application to the institution. The centre's budget, and all purchases, had to be approved by the Student Association. Participants at this centre were satisfied with this funding structure, saying,

I think the whole operating under [an institutional framework], doesn't affect as much, just because the Student Association is quite good to us, for lack of a better word… We interact with a lot of the executives as well quite often, especially at our events, and they've always been extremely positive to us… They're always supportive of us, all of our initiatives, all our incentives and so that's great.

Participants from the other centre (the centre that expressed dissatisfaction with hiring and transition processes) were not as satisfied. These participants stated that being funded by a student levee would be ideal, allowing for the centre to operate as an independent body with little interference from external forces. However, their centre was actually funded directly through the Student Association. This system gave rise to several challenges, including difficulties in passing budgets, as explained by a participant who said,

Every year, like, your funding is conditional upon the Student Association passing your proposed version of the budget…If I want to hold an event or like workshop on something that perhaps the person over top of me is not familiar with and I sort of have to be like no, really, like this is important and let me explain why and like sort of do that like mini-education crash course before they'll like sign off on my funding approval.

Despite such challenges, participants from this centre were quick to outline the advantages of receiving funding, saying it facilitated planning, allowed for events and programming to be free to consumers, and saved staff and volunteer time because it was not necessary to fundraise.

Non-financial support Centre operations were also reliant on sources of non-financial support. For example, participants discussed the importance of collaboration with other student services and clubs on and off campus. In some instances, staff from multiple campus service centres combined finances and other resources to organize a common event. Although it could be difficult to work out a mutual budget and programming, partnerships with off-campus community groups were also described as valuable because they resulted in knowledge sharing and community relationship building.

Participants expressed interest in further developing a support system for their QSC, perhaps through a national collaboration amongst all Canadian student-run QSCs. One participant explained:

We're striving for the same movement, the same goal even if we have our own ways of doing it so I feel that you know the best way that we can accomplish that is for us to build and create this interconnectivity.

Participants envisioned a website or online forum where staff from the various centres could discuss programming and campaigns they are working on, issues they are facing, strategies that had worked for them, and sources of training they would recommend.

Establishing a collaborative network on a national level was considered important to improving the sustainability of QSCs in Canada. Participants described a desire to share their knowledge and to offer support to other centres that might be struggling, such as new, recently established centres, or those established within smaller institutions, rural institutions, conservative climates, or colleges. College centres were described as vulnerable because of a lack of available funding, and because of increased turnover due to shorter, two-year student programmes. To overcome challenges, one participant stressed the importance of advertising the centre to potential consumers and of keeping detailed records:

Keep track of your involvement, things that you're doing, and the effect that you have on campus. Also, how many people you have coming through. Because if you can show that you are being used, that you have students behind you that support your service, you can pressure your student union and your student federation into creating a service, out of showing that it meets a demand.

Envisioning future growth and development for QSCs

Participants shared their ideas of how their centres could continue to grow. Goals for the future included becoming more actively involved on campus, increasing the array of services and activities offered, providing more training to students, increasing outreach and awareness of the centre's services, creating a more inclusive campus environment, establishing formal mentorship programmes, and increasing the extent of collaborations with other partner organizations. For example, one participant described an upcoming activity of the centre that included creating a protocol to address hate speech on campus.

Right now there's not really a particular venue where students can report like acts of like discrimination or hate speech. It's not really easy to know what to do to report those things, so we're working to try and create something… I'd like to see us do more things like that.

Participants also discussed their intentions to target their services to the needs of different groups of students that they have not previously engaged, such as mature students, graduate students, recent immigrants and refugees. One participant explained,

I would love to make an environment where graduate students and older mature students feel comfortable in this space…And one of the other reasons I want to like have more formalized mentorship things too is because I think for like students new to Canada particularly it's like such an overwhelming environment to come into.

Discussion

The current study contributes new information about the availability of services for queer students in Canadian universities and colleges. More than half of Canadian post-secondary institutions have a QSC; however, as the quantitative analysis uncovered, the presence of a QSC is influenced by two variables—type of institution and the size of student population.

In terms of institution type, close to three quarters of universities, compared to only one-third of colleges, have a QSC. Interestingly, all college QSCs were created within the past 20 years, whereas universities had QSCs dating back to the 1970s. Qualitative findings indicate that colleges often have greater difficulty in creating and sustaining QSCs due to the shorter programme offerings and the decreased availability of funding. This is similar to what Ivory (2012) reports, noting that the "transitory nature of community college students makes it difficult for LGBT students to form a viable student organization that can serve the needs of sexual minorities on campus" (p. 488).

Campuses with larger student populations were more likely to have a QSC. This finding replicates the work of Fine (2012). Fine (2012) states that campuses with a large student body have greater resources and more diverse student populations and are therefore more inclined to create services for queer students. The importance of resources was well substantiated across the findings from the survey and focus groups of the current study.

Without support from student associations and the institutions themselves, centres felt they would not be able to operate to their full capacity.

Interestingly, size of city was not a significant predictor of QSC presence. This is surprising since many queer youth migrate to urban areas from smaller communities (Lepischak 2004). One possible reason for this result is the distribution of institutions across the country. Some smaller communities may be viewed as "university" or "college" cities, such that there are a large proportion of students living in the community. For smaller communities, a QSC at an institution may be the only queer organization available in the area. As a result, queer students may be more apt to become involved in QSCs and ensure their sustainability.

The surveyed QSCs offered a wide variety of programming. The most common services included social events, workshops, and a drop-in space. The social nature of QSCs is something users have listed as important (Dietz and Dettlaff 1997). Focus group participants noted the importance of QSCs as safe and supportive meeting places where queer students can interact with one another. This support network is particularly important when queer students encounter homophobia on their campus (Stevens Jr. 2004). Educational materials and events were also common amongst the centres. These types of activities are important since they can help students with their emerging sexual identities (Gortmaker and Brown 2006).

Although many QSCs are providing comprehensive programming, new directions should be considered. Queer youth are coming out at younger ages and support groups, such as Gay–straight alliances in high schools, are quite common (Ryan 2003). As a result, queer students are entering post-secondary institutions with a different set of experiences than queer students of past generations. Centres once focused on helping queer youth embrace their sexuality through education and awareness may now encounter queer youth comfortable with their own sexualities, not requiring the same levels of support. Thus, QSCs with lengthy histories may need to adjust their mandates. This point is illustrated by a survey respondent calling for QSCs to reach out to international students. Focus group participants also provided new programming opportunities targeting older students, graduate students, and immigrant or refugee students. These latter two groups require significant support since youth raised in immigrant families often have to adjust to a culture with different social and gender roles (Ryan 2003). As well, queer international students may come from nations with anti-queer cultures. QSCs should be cognizant of this and develop ways to reach out to these individuals.

A significant theme to emerge from the data was the importance of institutional support. Support came in various forms—financial, logistical, physical, collaborative—and from various sources—student unions, the institution itself. Centres without support were unable to provide the same type of programming that funded centres could. This mirrors the experience of Teman and Lahman (2012) who found that engaging with the centre they investigated was difficult since there was no full-time coordinator. A lack of consistent programming is concerning given that students often access centres when they have experienced some form of homophobia on campus.

Although support was vital for the success of a QSC, it was associated with some challenges. Operating under an institutional framework can limit a centre's autonomy and create conflict. As demonstrated by one of the focus groups, budgetary challenges and staffing difficulties arose between the Student's Association and the QSC. Survey respondents also noted that centres may have to operate within institutional structures that are inherently oppressive. This is apparent by the staggering rates of harassment reported by D'Augelli (1992), Herek (1993), Rankin (2005), and Tetreault et al. (2013). QSCs may need to take on activist roles when harassment and discrimination are encountered within

their campuses. Thus, QSC staff may need to collaborate with other student groups, faculty members, or equity officers when dealing with such issues.

One form of support that extended beyond the home institution of the QSCs was the idea of a national network of QSCs. This is a novel idea that garnered much support from the majority of participants. A national conference, the Canadian University Queer Student Services Conference, takes place annually and allows service providers to network and engage with other service providers. However, not all institutions are able to attend due to financial constraints. A national online network would provide a more inclusive venue for knowledge exchange between QSCs, particularly amongst smaller institutions. The challenge in establishing a website is the need for a central body to create and maintain it. Since there is no national network currently in existence, larger bodies, such as the Canadian Federation of Students, could be approached to help facilitate this process.

Universities and colleges without QSCs, or institutions with centres that are experiencing operational difficulties, can take valuable lessons from results of this study. Determining a location for the centre can be one of the more challenging processes (Ritchie and Banning 2001). The space should be readily accessible, but not in a high-traffic area since anonymity and confidentiality are important to centre users (Welch 1996). Programming should be varied and include social components, but centres should be cognizant of the changing climate of queer student issues. Support should be sought from the institution and the student association. The acquisition of support is particularly important for colleges and institutions with smaller student populations since they are less likely to have a QSC. Support can help to ensure the sustainability of centre operations. Sustainability can also be promoted through developing partnerships with queer or straight allied faculty members, administrators, counsellors, or campus service officers. These types of partnership allow faculty members or other campus employees to be aware of the activities of the QSCs and to provide tangible support (White et al. 2012), as well as ensuring a presence that is not time limited (e.g. students leaving the centre once they have finished their degrees). Lastly, the importance of an accurate and current website is imperative to the exposure of a potential QSC. The researchers found that many websites were difficult to locate. When websites were located, many had inaccurate contact information or outdated materials. A centre's web page may be the first contact that interested students encounter, and thus, it is important that the website be clear and informative.

Limitations

Several limitations exist within the current study. Some institutions did not respond to requests to confirm whether a QSC was present or not present on their campuses. The lack of response often resulted from poor maintenance of the institution's website. This difficulty in communication also hindered the response rate to our survey, with only 62 % of institutions with QSCs responding. Not receiving a response proved to be telling of the status of some QSCs since "inadequate time to complete the survey" was a common response.

Conducting only two of the intended four focus groups was a further limitation. One of the focus groups did not occur because the centre had disbanded prior to the beginning of the 2012–2013 academic year. The second group was not completed for a similar reason, but the group disbanded at the end of the 2012–2013 academic year. Although telling of the difficulties QSCs face, the removal of these two focus groups resulted in a less representative sample.

Future research

Future research should focus on institutions without QSCs, particularly colleges. Interviews with administrators could elucidate why such a presence on their campuses does not exist. It is interesting to note that many institutions without a QSC expressed interest in the idea of a QSC being created on their campuses. Several of these respondents wanted to the results of the study to have guidance in developing their own QSC. Recently created QSCs should be interviewed to provide insights into other institutions that are in the process of creating a centre. Users of QSCs should also be interviewed to understand their needs and satisfaction rates with the centres.

Conclusion

This study reveals that there is a great deal of variability in the presence of QSCs on college and university campuses in Canada. One student attending a Canadian post-secondary institution may encounter a well-established QSC that receives a funding levee from the institution and is able to pay multiple staff members to offer a wide range of services to students while also engaging in campus-wide advocacy initiatives. A student at a different campus may find a nascent QSC that receives little institutional support and offers occasional social events. Yet another student may find that no QSC exists on their campus.

This level of variability raises questions about the significance of QSCs, and the institutional obligation to ensure an inclusive campus. Are the services that QSCs offer essential? The findings of this study suggest that indeed they are essential to ensuring safety and security for queer students, essential to maintaining an environment where acts of homophobia are not tolerated, and essential to promoting equality on campus. It is problematic that the responsibility for providing these essential services is being handed down to students, often to be delivered in the form of impermanent, under-funded, under-staffed student centres. Or not to be delivered at all.

When institutions relegate the provision of QSCs to the students themselves, a great deal of responsibility is being placed into the students' hands. Students only attend institutions for a short period of time are otherwise occupied, in that they have other obligations to fulfil within their own role as students, and lack power, given that they rarely have the level of influence needed to make their recommendations actionable. The findings of this study demonstrated that there are many examples of QSCs across Canada that have shown remarkable commitment in rising to this challenge, by dedicating their time, energy, and ingenuity to supporting their fellow students and making a difference on their campuses. While their efforts are commendable, they are not being matched by those of Canadian institutions. The need for QSCs and the services they offer is not going away. It is time that institutions recognized their responsibility to ensure QSC services are provided, in a sustainable, consistent manner, to all Canadian students.

References

Abramovich, I. A. (2013). No fixed address: Young, queer, and restless. In S. Gaetz, B. O'Grady, K. Buccieri, J. Karabanow, & A. Marsolais (Eds.), *Youth homelessness in Canada: Implications for policy and practice* (pp. 387–403). Toronto, ON: Canadian Homelessness Research Network, The Homeless Hub.

Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

D'Augelli, A. R. (1992). Lesbian and gay male undergraduates' experiences of harassment and fear on campus. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 7*(3), 383–395.

Dietz, T. J., & Dettlaff, A. (1997). The impact of membership in a support group for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 12*(1), 57–72.

Dillman, D. A., Smyth, J. D., & Christian, L. M. (2009). *Internet, mail, and mixed-mode surveys: The tailored design method.* New Jersey: Wiley.

Evans, N. J., & Broido, E. M. (1999). Coming out in college residence halls: Negotiation, meaning making, challenges, supports. *Journal of College Student Development, 40*, 658–668.

Evans, N. J., & Herriott, T. K. (2004). Freshmen impressions: How investigating the campus climate for LGBT students affected four freshmen students. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(3), 316–332.

Fine, L. E. (2012). The context of creating space: Assessing the likelihood of college LGBT center presence. *Journal of College Student Development, 53*(2), 285–299.

Gortmaker, V. J., & Brown, R. D. (2006). Out of the college closet: Differences in perceptions and experiences among out and closeted lesbian and gay students. *College Student Journal, 40*(3), 606–619.

Herek, G. (1993). Documenting prejudice against lesbians and gay men on campus. *Journal of Homosexuality, 25*(4), 15–30.

Ivory, B. T. (2012). Little known, much needed: Addressing the cocurricular needs of LGBTQ students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 36*(7), 482–493.

Jackson, K. M., & Trochim, K. (2002). Concept mapping as an alternative approach for the analysis of open-ended survey responses. *Organizational Research Methods, 5*(4), 307–336.

Krefting, L. (1991). Rigor in qualitative research: The assessment of trustworthiness. *The American Journal of Occupational Therapy, 45*(3), 214–222.

Lepischak, B. (2004). Building community for Toronto's lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and transgender youth. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services, 16*(3/4), 81–98.

Rankin, S. A. (2005). Campus climates for sexual minorities. *New Directions for Student Services, 111*, 17–23.

Rankin, S., Weber, G., Blumenfeld, W., & Frazer, S. (2010). *2010 State of higher education forlesbian, gay, bisexual, & transgender people.* Charlotte, NC: Campus Pride.

Ritchie, C. A., & Banning, J. H. (2001). Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender campus support offices: A qualitative study of establishment experiences. *NASPA Journal, 38*(4), 482–494.

Ryan, C. (2003). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth: Health concerns, services, and care. *Clinical Research and Regulatory Affairs, 20*(2), 137–158.

Ryan, G., & Bernard, H. R. (2000). Data management and analysis methods. In N. K. Denzin & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 769–802). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Saldana, J. (2013). *The coding manual for qualitative research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*, 63–75.

Stevens, R. A, Jr. (2004). Understanding gay identity development within the college environment. *Journal of College Student Development, 45*(2), 185–206.

Teman, E. D., & Lahman, M. K. E. (2012). Broom closet or fish bowl? An ethnographic exploration of a university queer centre and oneself. *Qualitative Inquiry, 18*, 341–354.

Tetreault, P. A., Fette, R., Meidlinger, P. C., & Hope, D. (2013). Perceptions of campus climate by sexual minorities. *Journal of Homosexuality, 60*(7), 947–964.

Vaccaro, A. (2012). Campus microclimates for LGBT faculty, staff, and students: An exploration of the intersections of social identity and campus roles. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice, 49*(4), 429–446.

Waldo, C. R. (1998). Out on campus: Sexual orientation and academic climate in a university context. *American Journal of Community Psychology, 26*(5), 745–774.

Welch, P. J. (1996). In search of a caring community. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 11*(1), 27–40.

White, V., Greenhalgh, M., & Oja, M. (2012). GLADE: Supporting LGBT staff and students in a community college district. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice, 36*(7), 526–530.

Zubernis, L., & Snyder, M. (2007). Considerations of additional stressors and developmental issues for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender college students. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 22*(1), 75–79.