

Investigating the Campus Pride Index's Relationship to Perceived Student Support

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Abstract

The Campus Pride Index (CPI) is often used as a litmus test for assessing the level of LGBTQ+ inclusion and support within higher education institutions. However, little research has explicitly examined the relationship between CPI rating and LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of supportiveness. To explore this, we analyzed 118,244 student responses about their institution's support for diverse sexual orientations and gender identities. Results indicate that at top-rated CPI institutions, LGBTQ+ students had lower perceptions of support than their peers. We discuss the implications of these results, focusing on how institutions may uncritically utilize CPI as the ceiling for LGBTQ+ support rather than a minimum, with ideas for how student affairs practitioners can utilize CPI while also going beyond CPI's metrics.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, Campus Pride Index, campus climate

Introduction

Despite steps taken to support diversity and inclusion across higher education, LGBTQ+ students face numerous barriers. LGBTQ+ students experience higher rates of victimization and discrimination (Hong et al., 2016; Seelman, 2014; Seelman et al., 2017) which relate to worsened sense of belonging, safety, and resource access (Blackmon et al., 2020; Wilson & Liss, 2022). More recently, higher education scholarship is beginning to take a thriving orientation (Hill et al., 2021), focusing on the agency and needs of LGBTQ+ people to counter purely deficit narratives. In the realm of higher education practice, such realities and questions have prompted moves toward assessment that more accurately captures the needs and experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Perhaps most popular among these assessments is the Campus Pride Index (CPI), a star-based national benchmarking tool focused on measuring institutional LGBTQ+ inclusion via the presence of different campus structures. While this tool is a critical step forward for LGBTQ+ inclusion, little research has interrogated whether the star-system relates to LGBTQ+ students' perceptions of a supportive campus environment.

In this study, we seek to better understand the relationship between the Campus Pride Index and student perceptions of a supportive environment. To do so, we focus on the following research questions:

- 1) Is there a relationship between CPI star rating and student perceptions of a supportive environment?
 - a. What does this relationship look like at five-star schools by student identity (where student identity is specifically sexual orientation and gender identity)? At non-five star schools by student identity? Between five-star and non-five star schools by student identity?

To examine these questions, we conducted a series of OLS regressions with data from the National Survey of Student Engagement. Ahmed's (2012) conceptualization of non-performatives and Catalano et al.'s (2023) conception of benign neglect guided our work. Our findings suggest a need for higher education institutions to reframe how they approach the use of the CPI – from marketable benchmarks to bare minimum requirements for LGBTQ+ inclusion.

Literature Review

We frame this study by first exploring how higher education scholars have tackled the assessment of LGBTQ+ populations and issues in higher education. We follow by focusing specifically on what the Campus Pride Index is and how it has been examined in the literature. This background provides the foundation from which our study draws, especially the critiques and challenges laid out by previous scholarship.

Assessment of LGBTQ+ Communities in Higher Education

As campus administrators seek new initiatives to improve the experiences of LGBTQ+ students, many individuals rely on assessment tools to evaluate what has been effective and what needs to change to continue making progress towards inclusivity and equity. However, assessment is not apolitical. Assessment practices on campus are riddled with politics that relate to human capital, finances, and individual motives (Brown & Gortmaker, 2009). As a result, those individuals on campus responsible for conducting assessment on particular populations, such as LGBTQ+ students, must negotiate campus power dynamics while also seeking ways to measure experiences and outcomes with the goal of benefiting marginalized communities. For that reason, although many practitioners see the value in assessment, many are wary of having to navigate campus politics.

In addition to the challenges that come with campus politics, assessment coordinators must also find ways of capturing the diverse array of experiences within a diverse population. Many assessments are quantitative, and by that nature, seek to categorize and operationalize whole identities (Feldman, 2023). However, this categorization can be limiting with respect to capturing complex identities (and practices of identification) and diverse communities. For example, Garvey (2017) discussed the difficulties of adequately capturing identities on the sexual spectrum. Similarly, non-binary people, by virtue of their resistance to a gender binary, may identify in unique and/or fluid ways that are not easily captured by simple selection boxes (Golberg & Kivalanka, 2018). As such, certain experiences – by the failings of assessment initiatives to fully capture all the complexity of LGBTQ+ identities – may be inadequately captured (Feldman, 2023). However, research has shown that there are sub-group differences within the LGBTQ+ community on important vectors like belongingness (e.g., BrckaLorenz et al., 2021). A dire need exists to attend to multiple vectors of LGBTQ+ experience, an approach that assessment projects like the Campus Pride Index have attempted to address.

Campus Pride Index

First developed in 2007, the Campus Pride Index (CPI) is perhaps the most widely known national benchmarking tool used for assessing LGBTQ+ campus climate (Garvey et al., 2017). Institutions self-report data on the resources and services available for students, faculty, and staff and then Campus Pride converts that data into a rating system, with 5 stars being the strongest possible rating. In addition to an overall score, institutions also receive 5-star ratings for sexual orientation and gender identity/expression separately as well as for the following sub-designations: policy inclusion, support and institutional commitment, academic life, student life, housing and resident life, campus safety, counseling and health, and recruitment and retention

efforts. These selections reflect strains of research that suggest that LGBTQ+ politics, messaging, and resources are critical to LGBTQ+ students' experiences of support on campus (Pitcher et al., 2018; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017; Woodford et al., 2018).

Despite its wide use by hundreds of colleges and universities, the CPI has been critiqued for its unreliable assessment measures (Feldman, 2023; Nicolazzo, 2017; Pryor & Nachman, 2022). As a self-reported assessment platform, many institutions may interpret questions differently and answer in ways skewed to more positively (and perhaps less accurately) depict their campus environments. In its current iteration, the CPI also does not contain open-ended questions that allow for more nuance; instead, the CPI relies exclusively on questions that essentially function as a list of checkboxes of services or policies offered at the institution. This practice not only reifies Ahmed's (2012) notion of "tick-box diversity" in its approach, but also fails to fully consider that higher education simply does not exist in such binary modes of representation (Feldman, 2023). Therefore, a checkbox of policies and services will never fully capture the depth of experiences that LGBTQ+ communities might have at an institution.

Conceptual Framework

In this article, we draw connections between two theorizations of diversity work in higher education: Ahmed's (2012) conceptualization of non-performatives and Catalano et al.'s (2023) conceptualization of benign neglect. Ahmed (2012) describes non-performatives as statements that demonstrate institutional commitments, yet which do not follow through in their commitments. She discusses how institutional statements of diversity often discuss a commitment to diversity or a valuing of diversity; however, they fall short in actualizing that commitment. As an example, an institution may list a values statement on their website, which says "At our university, we value diversity and create inclusive environments for all students."

However, upon further examination, despite the institution's warm statement, evidence may suggest that the institution perpetuates systems of oppression that limit diversity and create unwelcome environments on campus.

Catalano et al. (2023) add an additional layer to the discussion of non-performatives by proposing the concept of benign neglect. In their article, they describe benign neglect as “a form of appeasement to diversity work with all the hallmarks of what it might take to transform campuses into more inclusive spaces, yet never enacts such work” (p. 13). Put another way, benign neglect can be thought of as the process by which Ahmed's non-performatives take shape. Though an institution may mean well, their ultimate neglect remains harmful, especially for minoritized communities.

Both theorizations of diversity work were useful for us as we considered the role of the Campus Pride Index on campus. Using these theorizations as a foundation for this study allowed us to contextualize the CPI in the landscape of diversity work on college campuses. In particular, the concepts of non-performatives and benign neglect helped us situate the CPI as a tool that simultaneously advances diversity work in some cases and stifles diversity work in other cases. We expand on this idea further in our discussion and implications sections.

Methodology

Data

This study used data from the 2021-2022 administrations of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). NSSE explores the experiences of first-year and senior students at four-year colleges and universities. All students participating in NSSE respond to a core set of questions, as well as any optional sets of items that participating institutions selected. For the purposes of this study, we focused on the 118,244 student respondents from 237 institutions that

opted to include the Inclusiveness & Engagement with Cultural Diversity topical module. This module asks students questions about their experiences with diversity-related coursework and activities, institutional values and commitment regarding diversity, inclusive teaching practices, etc.

Measures

Sexual Orientation

During the years 2021-2022, NSSE's demographic question for sexual orientation read as: *Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?* Participants were able to select one of the following: *Straight (heterosexual); Bisexual; Gay; Lesbian; Queer; Questioning or unsure; Another sexual orientation, please specify; I prefer not to respond.* Our sample included 89,902 (76.3%) straight students, 11,245 (9.5%) bisexual students, 1,728 (1.5%) gay students, 1,922 (1.6%) lesbian students, 2,402 (2%) queer students, 2,348 (2%) questioning or unsure students, 2,101 (1.8%) students that selected another sexual orientation, and 6,160 (5.2%) students preferred not to respond. We categorized students as LGBTQ+ if they selected bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, questioning or unsure, or another sexual orientation. We categorized students as non-LGBTQ+ if they selected straight.

Gender Identity

During the years 2021-2022, NSSE's demographic question for gender identity read as: *What is your gender identity?* Participants were able to select from *Man; Woman; Another gender identity; I prefer not to respond.* Our sample included 37,486 (31.8%) men, 76,341 (64.7%) women, 2,099 (1.8%) people who identified with another gender identity, and 2,034 (1.7%) people that preferred to not respond. We categorized students as a gender minority if they selected woman or another gender identity.

Campus Pride 5-Star Schools

Using lists from Campus Pride's website (Campus Pride, 2021; Campus Pride, 2022), we categorized institutions as those that received 5-star ratings and those that did not receive a 5-star ratings, resulting in nine 5-star institutions that also participated in NSSE: Adelphi University, George Mason University, Hofstra University, Indiana University Bloomington, Southern Illinois University Carbondale, Texas Tech University, The Ohio State University, University of Northern Colorado, and Washington State University. Together, these nine institutions accounted for 13,080 NSSE student respondents.

Supportive Environment

To determine whether a campus fosters a supportive environment, we examined responses to the question: *How much does your institution provide a supportive environment for the following forms of diversity?* Participants could select from *very little; some; quite a bit; very much* when responding to items asking about their institution providing a supportive environment for sexual orientation and gender identity.

Analyses

To answer our research questions, we ran a series of OLS regression models. Each model included controls for institution type, institution size, geographic location as well as respondents' racial identity. When we were examining outcomes by students' sexual orientation, we controlled for respondents' gender identity, and when we examined outcomes by gender identity, we controlled for respondents' sexual orientation. We standardized all support outcomes so that coefficients could be interpreted as effect sizes.

We first examined whether CPI star rating related to perceptions of a supportive environment for sexual orientation as well as for gender identity while controlling for

respondents' sexual orientation and gender identity. Next, we examined perceptions of a supportive environment among LGBTQ+ and gender minority students, limited to those attending 5-star schools. We then repeated this for LGBTQ+ and gender minority students attending non-5-star schools. This allowed us to determine what relationships exist within 5-star schools and non-5-star schools, separately. Finally, we examined perceptions of a supportive environment among LGBTQ+, straight, men, and gender minority students between 5-star and non-5-star schools. This allowed us to determine what relationships exist within each identity group, separately.

Positionality

All of us identify as white, queer scholars who have extensive backgrounds in researching LGBTQ+ communities in higher education as well as directly supporting LGBTQ+ communities in practice. I (Steven) have previously worked in LGBTQ+ Services at a few institutions and I (Olivia) have volunteered in several LGBTQ+ centers and organizations. I (Allison) have extensive experience using assessment data to explore the experiences of sexual and gender minorities both at individual institutions and across the United States. All of us recognize the importance of benchmarking and assessment for the overall success and improvement of LGBTQ+ services. As a former Associate Director of an LGBTQ+ center, I (Steven) coordinated the administering of the CPI on campus and experienced firsthand, the benefits and challenges of the CPI. We seek to highlight the value in assessment of campus LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts and critique the methods we use for that assessment. Ultimately, our goal is to help improve and amplify the necessary work cultural centers do to create more equitable and inclusive environments across college campuses nationwide.

Limitations

As previously mentioned, the CPI has faced criticism for unreliable self-reported assessments of campus resources that essentially function as a checklist as opposed to a more nuanced understanding of the availability and usefulness of support systems. Without more knowledge about the supports and resources the institutions in our study have for LGBTQ+ students, we similarly had to rely on a checkbox of quality (5-star or not) for our study. We also had to limit our study to institutions that had CPI star ratings *and* had participated in NSSE *and* had opted into the additional optional item set about inclusivity and engagement with cultural diversity. Although a diverse group of institutions, it is possible that there are commonalities between these institutions that would make larger generalizations difficult to make. Finally, we found ourselves limited by our chosen survey instrument in how it asked about sexual orientation and gender identity. We were unable to determine whether participants identified as cisgender or transgender, and we were not able to disaggregate data for students that selected *another* gender identity or sexual orientation. This could very likely lead to an inability to detect significant differences in these students' perceptions when compared to their peers.

Results

Findings indicate that overall, attending a 5-star institution relates to stronger feelings of a supportive environment for sexual orientation ($B = .044$, $F(30; 103,505) = 38.953$, $p < .001$) but did not show a significant relationship with a supportive environment for gender identity ($p > .05$). When examining differences within our star-rating categories (Table 1), at non-5-star schools, LGBTQ+ students more strongly feel that their institution is less supportive for sexual orientation ($B = -.127$, $p < .001$) and gender identity ($B = -.229$, $p < .001$) than non-LGBTQ+ students. Similarly, LGBTQ+ students at 5-star schools more strongly feel that their institution is less supportive for sexual orientation ($B = -.182$, $p < .001$) and gender identity ($B = -.277$, $p <$

.001) than non-LGBQ+ students. Notably, although the effect size difference between LGBQ+ students at 5-star versus non-5-star institutions is relatively small, the coefficients are more negative at 5-star schools than non-5-star schools. We did not find differences for gender minority students compared to men.

<< Insert Table 1 >>

When comparing experiences between our star-rating categories, attending a 5-star institution appears to have a greater impact on perceptions for men and straight students (see Table 2). Straight students who attend a 5-star school are more likely to perceive a supportive environment for sexual orientation ($B = .039, p < .001$) than straight students at non-5-star schools. Relatedly, men who attend a 5-star school are more likely to perceive a supportive environment for sexual orientation ($B = .077, p < .001$) as well as for gender identity ($B = .053, p < .01$) than gender minority students at non-5-star schools.

<< Insert Table 2 >>

Discussion

Our findings demonstrate the perceptions of support at institutions with a 5-star rating varies greatly by identity and in particular, tends to benefit those with more privileged gender and sexual identities. Results indicating that LGBQ+ students at 5-star schools, reported as having the most inclusive campus environments by CPI, feel less supported may point to critiques of CPI and “tick-box diversity” (Ahmed, 2012). Much like the ways that institutions lean on LGBTQ+ centers as the sole mechanism for LGBTQ+ programming/resources (Pryor & Hoffman, 2021), the CPI is used as a sole benchmark for indicating LGBTQ+ inclusion/resources but does not necessarily indicate the level of accessibility or acceptance in using those resources. If a school touts their 5-star rating as the conclusive signifier of LGBTQ+

inclusion, students who continue to experience heterosexist, transphobic campus culture may more negatively perceive their campus's supportiveness than students at schools who do not tout 5-star ratings. These students may perceive 5-star campuses as performative and perfunctory, where there is more concern for achieving the 5-star rating rather than continuously evaluating their campus environment (Ahmed, 2012).

Another critical finding of this study is that CPI rating was most notable for straight students and students who were men. While not necessarily a negative outcome (indeed, we hope that LGBTQ+-centered efforts reach all on campus), this outcome is troublesome when put in concert with the previous finding. Clearly, an awareness of what resources are available for queer and trans students is permeating campus, but it is unknown whether this awareness is affecting attitudes or behaviors. Furthermore, while straight students and students who are men may have awareness of these resources, they may not know whether those resources are truly inclusive. Their presence alone is sufficient to impact the perception of queer/trans campus inclusion of these students, yet their queer and trans counterparts do not find these to be significantly impactful.

While we levy concerns about CPI here, we feel it important to state that our concern is not necessarily for the CPI itself. Rather, we are most concerned with how institutions engage with and utilize the CPI. If institutions are solely concerned with achieving 5-stars as a tactic to market their institution, they participate in a continued effort to performatively include LGBTQ+ students. Any lack of deeper, more meaningful deconstruction of heterosexism, transphobia, and the intersections of other systems of oppression affecting LGBTQ+ students render the CPI as simply a mechanism for "tick-box diversity" (Ahmed, 2012). This only further feeds the perception and actualization of LGBTQ+ diversity work as a non-performative and a form of

benign neglect (Ahmed, 2012; Catalano et al., 2023). Although the CPI is designed to assess LGBTQ+ campus climate with the hope of improving outcomes for LGBTQ+ people, our study shows that the greatest impact is on those with privileged gender and sexual identities and that, in fact, attending a school with a 5-star rating is more likely to relate to lower perceptions of a supportive environment among students with minoritized gender and sexual identities.

Ultimately, we argue that the CPI should be the floor, not the ceiling, for what work institutions are doing to address the needs and desires of LGBTQ+ students. This central tenet forms the basis for the implications we offer for research and practice.

Implications

The results of this study hold several important implications for both research and practice. To start, our study demonstrates how campus assessments can be tremendously useful tools for improving campus climates. However, it is important to consider that not all changes made from assessments will benefit *all* students. Given how men and straight students perceived campus to be more supportive for sexual orientation and gender identity than LGBQ+ and gender minority students, future research should explore the implications of implementing campus-based assessments on improving diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts for both privileged and minoritized identities. Future research should also look at the specific ways that institutions have used the CPI to effect change on campus. In other words, were their efforts targeted towards LGBQ+ students or straight students? Finally, because of the limitation in how the gender identity demographic question was worded, we were unable to differentiate between cisgender and transgender students. Considering the role that CPI has in assessing resources and supports for trans and nonbinary students, future research should work to explore the relationship between the CPI and transgender students specifically.

In terms of practice, we want to make clear that we are not advocating for institutions to not use the CPI on their campuses. As we have discussed, the CPI is often used politically to leverage campus partners and advocate for increased funding and resources. We argue that campuses should use the CPI intentionally. Campuses must recognize that offering more resources and supports for LGBTQ+ students is a necessary first step towards inclusivity; however, these resources alone will not change the hearts and minds of cisheterosexist people. On its own, a 5-star rating demonstrates the availability of resources, which can give the appearance of inclusivity and equity. But just because straight men are aware of such resources, that does not mean they will engage with them or change their own problematic behaviors. Campuses must consider how they can move beyond the CPI to enact change on campus.

Conclusion

As colleges and universities continue to work to improve campus climates for LGBTQ+ communities, staff must consider how they can leverage campus-based assessments to their advantage. As perhaps the most widely known tool for assessing LGBTQ+ campus inclusion, staff must intentionally use the Campus Pride Index to avoid assessing campus climate in limiting or ineffective ways. As our study indicates, treating the CPI as an all-encompassing indicator of fostering a more inclusive environment for LGBTQ+ people may further the perception of an inclusive environment among men and straight students but may not be sufficient to create a perception of an inclusive environment among LGBTQ+ students. Colleges and universities must consider the benchmarks assessed by CPI not as the height of LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts, but as the bare minimum necessary to support queer and trans students on campus.

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Table 1

Regression Coefficients for Student Perceptions of Support by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity by 5-star Rating

	Supportive Environment – Sexual Orientation		Supportive Environment – Gender Identity	
	LGBQ+	Gender Minority	LGBQ+	Gender Minority
	B Sig.	B Sig.	B Sig.	B Sig.
5-star school	-.182***		-.277***	
Non-5-star school	-.127***		-.229***	

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. We only present statistically significant coefficients here ($p < .05$). We standardized outcomes so that unstandardized B could be interpreted as an effect size. All models included controls for institution type, institution size, and geographic region, as well as respondents' racial identity. Gender identity and sexual orientation were controlled for in the models where they were not the variable of interest.

Table 2

Regression Coefficients for CPI-Star-Rating for Students by Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Regarding Supportive Environments

	LGBQ+	Straight	Gender Minority	Men
	B Sig.	B Sig.	B Sig.	B Sig.
Supportive Environment – Sexual Orientation		.039***		.077***
Supportive Environment – Gender Identity				.053**

Note: * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$. We only present statistically significant coefficients here ($p < .05$). We standardized outcomes so that unstandardized B could be interpreted as an effect size. All models included controls for institution type, institution size, and geographic region, as well as respondents' racial identity. Gender identity and sexual orientation were controlled for in the models where they were not the variable of interest.