

While the landscape of college campuses, as well as the lived experiences of student attending college, is continuing to change, many students still interact with a system that privileges and affirms a single set of norms of thought and experience, and excludes or marginalizes experiences outside those norms (Bullen, 2012; Harper, 2013; Museus & Quaye, 2009). If a student believes their needs to be unimportant, or excluded from the norms of the campus environment, they are at greater risk of not persisting through to graduation (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011; Derosa & Dolby, 2014). Part of what is necessary for students who have historically been marginalized within systems of higher education are spaces in which they can feel integrated into the campus culture and environment, rather than experiencing hostility (Fine, 2012). Student affairs professionals, the administrative staff who work with students to shape their out-of-classroom college experiences, have the ability to help create these spaces on campus that students perceive to be welcoming and that tend to foster student success in college (Museus & Ravello, 2010). This article seeks to understand if the use of transgressive teaching can connect the needs of students who identify as both people of color and as members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and/or Trans\* (LGBT\*) communities and the practices of student affairs professionals. Additionally, this study seeks to understand how those connections can help students to feel more connected to the campus, and persist to graduation.

### **Defining Transgressive Teaching**

Engaged pedagogy, an umbrella term used to describe a variety of critically minded approaches to education, is described by bell hooks (1994) as an approach to teaching that seeks to develop each person personally and spiritually, in addition to rather than solely intellectually. It can be summarized as an approach to teaching that addresses the wholeness of each student as a human being (Florence, 1998), and engages a mutual vulnerability as students and teachers learn together in their respective roles (Berry, 2010). The definition I have constructed, and will use transgressive teaching to mean for this article is: an approach to engaging with students in spaces of learning that seeks to move beyond the traditional boundaries of teacher and student roles, to engage the entirety of each persons' being, acknowledge the value of their experiences and perspectives, and connects with and to the potential for learning and teaching in a mutually constructed process of growth and empowerment.

### **Literature Review**

There are three major areas of research that need to be addressed in order to frame this study. The first area of literature covers the use of transgressive teaching in student affairs. This is important because it addresses the areas in which this topic has and has not been covered in order to better understand the context in which this study takes place. Additionally, while there is a host of literature addressing the use of transgressive teaching in classroom settings, specifically in K-12 teaching, little has been written about the use of these practices in non-classroom educational spaces. The second area of literature covered is the retention and persistence of college students who hold identities that have historically been marginalized in institutions of higher education. This will help ground the practices of student affairs within the context of the challenges and potential of students who may feel as though the university environment was not designed for them to succeed or belong/feel included or valued. The final area of literature covered is the intersection of identities. This is an important area of literature because it addresses the complex ways that multiple identities interact with one another in social spaces,

and serves to better contextualize the specific experiences of people who identify as both members of the LGBT\* community and as people of color.

### **Transgressive Teaching in Student Affairs**

Bullen (2012) distilled 27 concepts of the version of engaged pedagogy described in hooks seminal work, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as Act of Freedom* into a list of action statements, and for the purposes of this study is referred to as transgressive teaching. Bullen speaks to transgressive teaching as a way to create a sense of purpose and determination in students who are usually alienated and excluded from spaces of education. She further asserts these practices can offer an increased sense of self and empowerment in students who are often targeted for violence because of their identities. Stewart (2008) adds that transgressive teaching is a way of building a space of trust in order to continue to engage students. Stewart uses the analogy of a guide, writing “in order for me to be an effective guide, those following me must trust me, that I know where I am going, and that I will make sure to reach the destination without undue harm or exposure to unnecessary danger” (p. 12). Both Bullen and Stewart respectively speak to their connection and use of transgressive teaching and its importance in the work of student affairs professionals, and they also do not incorporate the experiences of students into their recommendations.

Danowitz & Tuitt (2011) emphasize this role more directly, offering that a faculty member or a student affairs professional cannot see themselves as the omniscient being; rather they must see themselves as a participant in this student’s process. They address this from their roles as faculty in a PhD program, and address only the incorporation of transgressive teaching as a pedagogical framework in an academic program, rather than in developing their students’ capacities to practice these same approaches. Bradley (2009) emphasizes these practices as being able to expand faculty member’s capacity to respond to the needs of students, and Bradley’s work focuses on the benefits of transgressive teaching on classroom environments. Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) offer that there can be a mutual process through which a faculty member or student affairs professional can better understand themselves as they become more capable of responding to their students needs because students are offering a new mode of learning for the faculty or student affairs professional. As mentioned earlier, there is a great deal of literature and data available that suggests the use of transgressive teaching in classrooms will support and engage students, particularly students of color and LGBT\* identified students. There is also little data collected on the out of classroom experiences of students, and what has been written does not situate these recommendations on the experiences or perspectives of students, but rather on the expertise and recommendations of the authors.

In reviewing the literature, a theme emerged that, to this point, has gone unaddressed by other authors. When the authors speak about certain aspects of transgressive teaching, and the ways that teachers and student affairs professionals approach practicing these aspects, the individual actions appear in one of three ways. For the purposes of this article, I have placed these actions into three groups: internal, external, and communal. Internal is named so because they are actions that take place inside the student affairs professional and evident by actions that would have required a degree of learning, understanding, and processing to have already taken place. External refers to actions that on their own could be observed being initiated by the student affairs professional, and communal refers to interactions and experiences co-created by both the student and the student affairs professional, having moved beyond and across the boundaries of role and identity. The actions that fall into each category can be seen in Table 1.

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Table 1

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*Groupings of transgressive teaching concepts*

Individual concepts are separated by a semicolon

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Internal	Understanding reality, critical reflections; embracing contradiction; no absolute agenda; shifting thinking, writing, and speaking; sharing in spiritual and intellectual growth; no immediate affirmations; students resisting; politics informing practices; conceptualizing the learning space.
External	Flexible agenda, generating excitement, being an active participant, speaking differently, responding to unique beings, linking confessional narratives, unwilling to be silent interrogators, no longer a melting pot, excitement generating engagement.
Communal	Breaking a culture of domination; no neutral education; diversity of feedback; replacing dictatorships; refusing social amnesia; changing, inventing, and re-conceptualizing strategies; evolving in dialogue; freedom from distortion.

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The connection of these concepts can be understood in the core values of the field of student affairs. Student affairs can be defined as the aspects of a college experience that contribute to student learning and development in our of classroom settings while being in collaboration and connection with classroom learning. The goal of student affairs is to center the holistic learning of each student rather than focusing on a singular intellectual pursuit (American Council on Education, 1937; ACPA & NASPA, 2010). A commitment to “education and development of the total student, diversity, multicultural competence, human dignity” (ACPA, n.d.) as well as valuing “access, voice, acknowledgement, opportunity, and participation at all levels” (NASPA, n.d.) shows a field committed to ensuring all students are able to access spaces in which they can develop their full potential, actively participate in all educational spaces, and develop and expand their potential to achieve. Transgressive teaching connects to all of these values and commitments, as well as offering a frame through which to understand ways to take up practicing these values. As Bullen (2012) contends, educators of any kind cannot empower students to embrace all that the students have to offer if they (in this case faculty and student affairs professionals) are not themselves willing to embrace that which the students have to offer to the environment of learning.

### **Persistence of Minority Students**

Institutions in which students of color are in the numerical minority can be perceived, by these students, as hostile. That perception of hostility can lead to feelings of exclusion (Harper, 2013). This phenomenon can also be seen when a person who identifies as a member of the LGBT\* community feels as though their campus is not adequately working to integrate their experiences into the campus environment (Fine, 2012). This begins to illuminate what a college or university environment can be like for a student who identifies as both a member of the LGBT\* community and as a Person of Color on a campus where they perceive themselves to be in the minority—and, in almost all cases, are in the minority. While this may seem like an issue that needs to be addressed, many universities have not sought to change the culture of their campuses in order to address the needs of an ever-diversifying student population (Museus &

Jayakumar, 2012). Research also indicates that students who perceive themselves as being in the minority on their campus will be more likely to succeed if they perceive the environment as welcoming to them (Museus & Ravello, 2010). Museus & Quaye (2009) also spoke to the ways that students' understanding of the college environment is informed by the dominant culture, and therefore makes understanding the differences of experience an imperative. The more willing agents of the campus are to validate student experiences that differ from the dominant narrative, the more likely those students are to persist. This information reinforces the importance of transgressive teaching as it can impact the experience of students interacting with student affairs professionals.

### **Intersections of Identity**

The importance of understanding the intersections of identities of college students lies in the idea that it is impossible to understand an identity as singular, but that they must be understood in relationship to other identities a person holds (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007). Crenshaw (1991) used the term intersectionality to describe the experiences of women of color who felt that they were expected to only acknowledge either their race- or gender-based oppressions instead of exploring how their race- and gender-based oppressions interacted to form their experiences. If a student were to be asked to assimilate themselves and their experiences into a singular, dominant narrative around one of their identities, then they would be asked to recreate the same systems that have refused to value their own unique and important perspectives. Crenshaw further offers that this dominant narrative "seeks to conflate or ignore intragroup differences" (p. 1242), and from this concept introduced the term "intersectionality" as a way to describe how members of particular identity groups are further marginalized because of the intersections of their identities.

A host of models address the development of LGBT\* and people of color identities. Cass (1979) offers a series of stages through which people move as they develop their homosexual identity, and from there new models that move away from stages and describe the process as a fluid process, impacted by other psychosocial identities and social contexts (D'Augelli, 1994; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Additionally, there are a number of models that speak to the development of racial identities that are grouped together as people of color. The most prominent is Cross' (1991) model of Black racial identity development, which addresses the stages and experiences that inform the ways Black people come to understand that aspect of who they are as they encounter the world. From this model other scholars have formed a basis for the development of models that speak to the experiences of other racial groups that are targeted by systems of oppression (Tatum 1992). While this article does not expand upon the literature around identity development, it is important to understand the impact of the processes of developing multiple identities and how these processes are part of the experience of college students as they interact with student affairs professionals.

If the commitments of colleges and universities, as well as the individuals who serve as agents of these colleges and universities, are to the engagement and development of the entire student (ACPA, n.d.), then an understanding of the differences that arise from the ways in which different social identities interact within a student is an important foundation on which to build a capacity to respond to student needs. The interconnected nature of each student's identities, in turn, influences that ways in which students, student affairs professionals, and even entire universities engage with one another. Additionally, multiple layers of structural inequities

targeting individuals and their intersecting identities means that while the experiences are highly individualized, they also inform a narrative experience among members of groups (Smith, 2009).

### **Problem Statement**

While there is a body of available literature recommending the use of transgressive teaching in shaping both the in- and the out-of-classroom experiences of all college students, the literature on its use by student affairs professionals does not ask students with multiple marginalized identity intersections about whether these practices will best address their unique needs. Transgressive teaching can, I believe, serve as one way to address issues of persistence and graduation of students who identify as both members of the LGBT\* community and as people of color. Additionally, it is important for students to have space for their voices in naming how their specific needs can best be met. This study will seek to fill in this gap in the literature by exploring how undergraduate students who identify as people of color and as members of the LGBT\* community describe transgressive teaching when articulating what they need from student affairs professionals to best support their retention and persistence in college. This study will also seek to understand how perceptions of the intersecting identities of the students and of the student affairs professionals by the students influence the extent to which students' feel their needs were being met.

### **Research Questions**

In this study, one primary research question and three secondary research questions guided the design of the study and the interpretation of the data collected. The primary research question was "how do undergraduate students who self-identify as people of color and as members of the LGBT\* community describe what they need from student affairs professionals to best support their retention and persistence to graduation?" The secondary research questions were: "From the perspective of the students, how has the race of the student affairs professional influenced the extent to which their needs have been met", "from the perspective of the students, how has the sexual orientation of the student affairs professional influence the extent to which their needs have been met", and "from the perspective of the students, how has the gender identity of the student affairs professional influence the extent to which their needs have been met?"

### **Methods**

The methodology used for this study is qualitative in nature. More specifically, I used a phenomenological approach, in that my efforts were to understand the meaning made of events and actions by specific people in their own experiences in the world (Bogdan & Biklen 2007). Phenomenology offers a chance to see a deeper connection underlying the individual meaning made from experiences in the world (Jones, Torres, Arminio, 2013; Creswell 1998; van Manen, 1990). This methodological approach connects to the problem statement in that it offers an opportunity to better understand deeper meaning made by students in their interactions with student affairs professionals, which again has gone largely unexplored in the current literature on transgressive teaching. The research was conducted at a small, private, Catholic university in the American southwest during the fall semester of 2014. To find participants, a convenient, purposive sampling method was used. An email was sent to a group of students who have all indicated they identify as both a member of the LGBT\* community and as a Person of Color. Each of these students, as well as me, is members of a

student organization that offers social justice trainings to students, faculty and staff around issues of privilege and oppression. The final sample size was 3 students, all of whom were undergraduate students at this university. All identified as cisgender (two male and one female identified), one of whom identified as Asian, one of whom identified as an ethnically Taiwanese Third Culture Kid, and one of whom identified as one quarter black and three-quarters white. Two of the participants identified as gay and male, and one identified themselves as either bisexual or pansexual and female over the course of the interview.

### **Data Collection**

The data for these interviews was collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting between 35 and 45 minutes. The semi-structured format was chosen to “understand themes of the lived everyday world from the subject’s own perspective” (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 27). Each student was asked the same set of pre-planned questions, and a variety of probing questions based upon the participant’s responses allowed me to gain greater insight into the lived experience of the student. Each interview was transcribed verbatim after it was completed. The interview questions were separated into five major thematic areas: individual information, general interactions with student affairs professionals, specific positive interactions, specific negative interactions, and general improvement of student affairs professionals. As a whole, the questions were designed to gain insight into what students’ experiences were in interacting with student affairs professionals, to understand if transgressive teaching practices were at all connected to the positive interactions, and if using transgressive teaching practices would have positively impacted the negative interactions students have experienced.

### **Analysis**

Each of the interview transcripts was examined using a hypothesis coding system, an “application of a researcher-generated, predetermined list of codes to qualitative data specifically to assess a researcher-generated hypothesis” (Saldana, 2013, p.147). Given the nature of the study connected to both the problem statement and the research question, I determined the best way to go about coding was to determine the elements of transgressive teaching, which were derived from Bullen’s work (2012), which distilled conceptual ideas from hooks (1994).

During the initial coding process, the positive interactions between the student participants and student affairs professionals, as described by the students, were coded to understand what, if any, aspects of transgressive teaching were present in those interactions. The negative interactions reported by the student participants were coded for the elements of transgressive teaching that the participants believed could have made the experience more positive. The recommendations for further learning and improvement reported by the student participants were coded for the elements of transgressive teaching these recommendations would lead to being incorporated into the practices of student affairs professionals.

A second round of hypothesis coding was done to connect the individual practices of transgressive teaching into the previously described, researcher-generated thematic groups. When doing the initial round of coding, student’s descriptions of transgressive teaching consistently fell into one of the following groupings previously described as internal, external, and communal.

### **Position of the Researcher**

It is also important to acknowledge my position within this research, and to acknowledge the potential impact my position may have on this process. I identify as a White, heterosexual, cisgender male. Given that all of the people being interviewed for this study identify as people of color and as members of the LGBT\* community, there are very distinct differences in the realities and experiences of the participants and of the researcher. This has the potential to impact my analyses and interpretations of the data collected during the interviews because my interactions with the world, and with student affairs professionals when I was an undergraduate student, are very different. This is, in part, the reason for using the theoretical frame of transgressive teaching, as it asks the researcher and student affairs professionals to take these experiences as real, even if they are drastically different from one's own.

I also work as a student affairs professional on this campus, and have relationships with some of the people about whom the students spoke when describing their positive and negative interactions with other student affairs professionals. It is also important to acknowledge that I have known these students previously, as we are all members of a campus organization that focuses on doing educational workshops and trainings on this college campus around creating more inclusive spaces for members of the LGBT\* community. Because of my previous connection to the participants, I could most easily be described as an external-insider, or "an adopted insider" (Banks, 2006, p. 778), since I hold the experience of a culture different from the one being studied, and I live in community and in connection to members and the larger community of which the participants of this study identify as members. These pre-existing relationships have the potential to influence the interpretation of data, in that I may be more likely to take what the participants have said at face value rather than asking probing questions or asking for further explanation of their meaning-making. Additionally, these relationships can create a tension within all of the relationships that inform how I am showing up to these interviews and to the analysis. Specifically, It offers me the opportunity to balance a dominant and counter narrative at the same time, and to hold the subjective and objective elements of both together as I make sense of the students' experiences.

The intent of this study is to understand how the students are making sense of their experiences, how their needs can be met, and how their interpretation of the race, gender, and sexual orientation of the student affairs professionals with whom they are interacting influences their interpretation of those experiences. Rather than assuming that research that does not take student voice and experience into account will be able to objectively speak to students' needs, this project aims to take in the experiences of students who identify as both members of the LGBT\* community and as people of color, and considers both a dominant narrative and counter narrative existing together. In an effort to address the impact of my positionality, I engaged in two different processes to attempt to ensure the trustworthiness of my findings.

### **Trustworthiness**

There were two processes used through this study to ensure trustworthiness, that data was captured appropriately and that the analysis was accurately connected to the thoughts and feelings of the participants expressed in the interviews. First, an external auditor was asked to review segments of the interview recordings and compare what they heard to the transcripts. This external auditor is a student affairs professional, and is familiar with the training and education necessary to do this type of work with college students. They are also specifically familiar with working to create connections across multiple spectra of identity between students and staff within a university. This external auditor is not, however, familiar with the students participating

in the study, or with the student affairs professionals about whom the students are speaking when describing their positive and negative interactions, which helps to ensure the confidentiality of the student participants. Second, I engaged in a process of member checking (Saldana, 2013) in which sections of the findings of the study were sent to the participants for their review and approval. These processes added to the trustworthiness of the findings in ensuring that the interpretation of the data was an accurate reflection of the answers provided by the participants in the interviews, and also ensured that the meanings I made from coding and analysis was consistent with the meaning made of the experience by the participants.

## **Findings**

In seeking to better understand how students who self-identify as LGBT\* and as people of color describe what they need from student affairs professionals to best support their retention and persistence in college, as well as how participants' perceptions of the race, gender, and sexual orientation of student affairs professionals impacts the students' meaning-making of the interactions, several themes emerged from coding the interview transcripts for practices of transgressive teaching. This section will describe those findings, and connect the experiences participants had with student affairs professionals to the impact of those experiences on the students and their persistence through college.

Because I used a hypothesis coding approach in this study, the findings addressed here will use headings related to the aspects of transgressive teaching that emerged in interviews with the participants. Each of the below sections will offer the connections made between experiences shared by the participants and specific aspects of transgressive teaching. For this reason, each of the below sections' title refers to the aspect of transgressive teaching to which the participants spoke. The findings are presented in a specific order, first addressing the internal aspects of transgressive teaching that emerged, then addressing the external aspects, and final the communal. When possible, I attempted to address aspects of transgressive teaching that were present and addressed the needs of students, and in those instances labeled those as positive experiences. Conversely, when the participants spoke to experiences in which transgressive teaching was not present, and could have differently impacted the situation, I termed those experiences as negative. In one section it was not possible to present both a positive and a negative experience, because only one student spoke to that aspect of transgressive teaching. It seemed important to include this finding, however, as this student spoke to the power and importance of the communal aspects of transgressive teaching for their experiences.

## **Understanding Student Reality**

**Positive experiences.** An effort to understand the student's reality helped to create a relationship that made the student feel valued and appreciated in the university environment. Sydney, who identifies as a Chinese American, bisexual or pansexual, cisgender woman, spoke to this when remembering the relationship she had developed with a student affairs professional, one who Sydney perceived to be a white, heterosexual, cisgender female. She stated:

well I think I just know that she won't judge me for what I do, and I think she also knows where I come from. Because I am not, like, soft-spoken or anything, I don't fit many of the stereotypes that most people think about Asian women. Like I cuss a lot, and it gets me into trouble, but she understands me, so that dynamic is really nice.

Sydney continued, speaking to how her identity as a bisexual or pansexual person often makes discussing her dating life complicated:

she has always been very conscious of her language, and like, I don't, she was just very understanding of me and my sexuality definitely. I identified as straight and then when I started experimenting she never, like, misgendered the person I was dating or, like, you know batted an eye whereas most of my interactions with people, people get very confused.

Sydney's story further emphasizes the notion that a student affairs professional being willing to understand the reality of the students with whom they are interacting can have a positive impact on the interactions.. Even when there are differences in the lived experiences of the students and the student affairs professionals with regards to race and sexual orientation, that positive impact can be felt, and that impact can contribute to the students feeling connected and valued within the university community. All of these things can add to the potential of Students of Color who also identify as part of the LGBT\* community to persist through college.

**Negative experiences.** The perception by students of a lack of a willingness to validate their lived experiences makes the environment feel unwelcoming and makes the student feel as though parts of who they are less important to the university community. Brandon, who identifies as a one-quarter Black, three-quarters White, Gay, cisgender male, spoke about his interactions with a variety of student affairs professionals regarding an incident between Brandon and a resident for whom Brandon served as the Resident Advisor, as during the administration of the division of Student Affairs response to the incident. All of the student affairs professionals with whom Brandon interacted were perceived by Brandon to be heterosexual, cisgender men or women. Two of the student affairs professionals were perceived by Brandon to be Black with the rest being perceived as White. Brandon said,

I just kept getting pushed from like, one professional to another, kind of like up the ladder and then back down of like Student Affairs, kind of saying like you should, we should do this [referring to holding a restorative justice conference between Brandon and the other student]. And I was like okay I will do this but I don't think it is going to be helpful. And I just like, kept getting the same message from like, various people. It was very frustrating.

Brandon is describing here his experience of not having his perspective taken into consideration, and the exclusion and disengagement he experienced as a result. Rather than having the impact of the situation on him being a part of the design of the educational experience for himself and the other person involved in the incident, Brandon perceived the student affairs professionals were trying to convince him that their solution was right, and he needed to do it because they knew what was best. When asked how his perception of the sexual orientation of the student affairs professionals may have impacted the situation, Brandon recalled,

I feel like they didn't necessarily understand, um, like towards the end of the incident, I feel like they didn't understand the situation was about to go bad with respect to the resident disrespecting me because of my sexual orientation but it was like, cut off from there. I don't feel like they realized fully like, how impactful that would have been if it had gotten worse. So I, I don't think

that they really took that into account with respect to the entire situation because it didn't happen, it like almost happened, the things that he started to say. So, um, yea that felt, I felt kind of invalidated um, because that was one of the like, more traumatic pieces for me, even though it was like the most brief.

Even when there are similarities between the identities of the student and the student affairs professional, a failure or an unwillingness to understand the different realities experienced by Students of Color who also identify as members of the LGBT\* community in the areas where those identities diverge can have a large impact on those students perception of the campus environment and community. These experiences can then have an impact of the student's potential to persist through college.

### **Responding to Students' Unique Beings**

Responding to the uniqueness of each student allows the student affairs professionals to connect with the student and to better serve the needs of each student as they emerge from the specific nature of how that student's identities influence their experience. Responding to student's unique beings can also be understood as and external practice that is possible once a student affairs professional understands the reality of an LGBT\* identified Student of Color. Paul, who identifies as an ethnically Taiwanese Third Culture Kid, gay, cisgender male, spoke to experiencing this during his interactions with two academic advisors, one of whom Paul perceives to be a White, cisgender, heterosexual male, and the other of which Paul perceives to be a cisgender, heterosexual, Taiwanese American woman,

I remember a few of our conversations involve with coming from a traditional Chinese family, trying to balance my life. Um, having a life in San Diego, a life in Taiwan and at the same time identify as a gay man. Speaking about these specific subjects that, um, because my parents don't tend to, or they really aren't comfortable with the fact that I identify as a gay man, but speaking to [my academic advisors] they show a lot of support.

Paul continued to describe how this willingness to take these factors into consideration when advising him created a connection that made him continue to seek out their participation in his life as both advisors and mentors, "I think they want to make students feel comfortable talking about their personal issues or just to make sure students feel very welcome. And they did, they did indeed make me feel a lot more comfortable speaking with them." In this instance, we can see that a willingness to respond to the uniqueness of a student's being made a Student of Color who also identifies as a member of the LGBT\* community want to continue to seek academic advising and mentoring through their college experience. Again, while differences in race, gender identity, and sexual orientation, as well as sharing similarities across many of those identities, can mean that the lived experiences of students and student affairs professionals can be very different, responding to the uniqueness of each student's being can help to ensure a positive impact on students' experience on the campus, and can help them to feel as though their identities and experiences are valuable to the campus community. These things have the potential to contribute to a student's retention and persistence through college to graduation.

### **Conceptualizing the Learning Space**

**Positive experiences.** Conceptualizing a learning space that emphasizes the needs and experience of LGBT\* identified Students of Color can enhance the student experience and contribute to a campus culture of inclusion and acceptance, and this can lead to a greater chance of students who identify as both people of color and within the LGBT\* Community being retained and persisting to graduation. Conceptualizing the learning space can take the form of both direct and indirect actions. Brandon spoke to his interactions with the staff members of the campus multicultural center, who he perceives to be cisgender (one male and one female), Latina/o, and heterosexual. Brandon said that “they have been very supportive of me, and uh, my cheerleaders I guess.” When asked why that was important to him, Brandon offered, “I like knowing that, um, that allies are, you know, rooting for the queer community, and um, that they will go out of their way to tell me nice things.” In this instance, Brandon offers that conceptualizing a space can be focused on creating a space in which positivity and praise for identities and people who often do not receive praise and validation, regardless of the physical space in which those interactions take place. Paul also spoke to this concept, though he spoke to the physical aspects of conceptualizing of a space for learning and engaging. When speaking about his interactions with the academic advisors mentioned previously, Paul said, “they even have the little rainbow square of safe space ally on their door, so I think they want to make students feel comfortable.” In both of these instances, students described a need to experience thought and care being given to their identities, experiences, and needs. These elements can play an important role in developing relationships LGBT\* identified Students of Color to student affairs professionals, can help to create interactions that increase the feelings of connection and support on campus, which can in turn enhance the potential for these students to be retained and to persist to graduation.

**Negative experiences.** A perceived lack of attention to the needs of students who identify as both people of color and members of the LGBT\* community enforces the dynamics of power that already negatively impact these students, such as sexism, heterosexism, and racism. Sydney spoke to this as part of her experience interacting with two mid-level student affairs professionals who she perceived to be White, gay, cisgender men. Sydney described a meeting in which these two student affairs professionals were tasked with asking her to resign from a student leadership position, and specifically mentioned the dynamics of the room, “it was very official, [the two student affairs professionals] were both behind a desk. Both of them were behind the desk, I couldn’t figure out how they did that.” She further elaborated, “I wasn’t really sure why [the staff member who had responded to the incident that lead to Sydney being asked to resign, who Sydney perceives as an Asian American woman], and instead two white men replaced them.” Sydney continued:

it also felt like they were very uncomfortable with the entire situation and they were, like, they were being assertive in, like, a very strange way. I feel like they were trying to be a lot nicer in the beginning, I think probably because they knew I was a woman and they wanted to help the dynamic. But then I reacted negatively and they were just like “this is it”.

Both the physical set up of the room and the feeling of the environment, again, create an impact on the experience of the student in this moment, contributing to the feeling that the space is designed for their own learning. When it is not, it can increase the feelings of an unwelcoming campus climate, one in which the systems of oppression these students already experience are

being reinforced. This can then lead to a greater potential for students who identify as people of color and within the LGBT\* community to not persist to graduation.

### **Breaking Culture of Domination**

In addition to the concepts put forth above, the incorporation of the needs of students who identify as people of color and as members of the LGBT\* community allows those voices to join with others in support of shifting campus culture away from cycles in which certain identities (heterosexual, white, male, cisgender, faculty, etc.) are seen as the place from which learning on college campuses should stem. Brandon spoke to this idea, relating a story in which the staff of the multicultural center on campus had asked him to co-instruct a for-credit, undergraduate course offered to students participating in a social justice organization on the campus. The staff member with whom Brandon would be co-instructing was perceived by Brandon to be a Latino, heterosexual, cisgender male. Brandon recounted the experience,

“would you be willing to teach the [multicultural center student organization] course for, like, undergraduates” like, asking me to do more because they like the work I do makes me feel really good about myself. Even if I can’t always commit, um, to know that I have desirable skills and something to contribute is really helpful for me.

Brandon elaborated further about his ability to contribute, and the value placed on his contributions related to presentations he has given where he tells the story of his own understanding of his identities, offering “that’s very much, like, me sharing myself with the audience, and so to get a lot of positive feedback about that is a validation of my identity.” To place a person who identifies as Brandon does in a position that allows their stories and their identities to be emphasized as valuable to the educational experience of undergraduate students, to ask that undergraduate students learn from their peers, particularly their peers whose experiences at the university may be very different from theirs and usually not emphasized as an important part of the cultural narrative. Offering students the opportunity to see themselves as contributing to the learning of the campus also contributes to breaking a culture in which one set of experiences dominates the landscape, which can then lead to students who identify as both people of color and members of the LGBT\* community to feel an investment in a campus culture that values their lived experiences and needs. This can then offer these students a place to feel connected to the campus, and can create a greater potential that they will be retained and persist to graduation.

It is also important to note that Brandon was the only student to speak to this aspect of transgressive teaching in these interviews. His experiences were the only ones that corresponded to this aspect of transgressive teaching, or any of the other aspects within the communal aspects of the theory. The reasons for including this finding, and its importance in connection to transgressive teaching, will be further explained in the next section of this paper.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to better understand how students who identify as people of color and as members of the LGBT\* community describe what they need from student affairs professionals to best support their retention and persistence through college, as well as how the students perception of the race, gender, and sexual orientation of student affairs professions impacted the degree to which their needs were met. Using transgressive teaching as a frame for understanding how student affairs professionals could address the needs of the students who

participated in the study revealed findings that can offer a great deal to our understanding of the importance of this model. This section will discuss the findings within that context.

The students who participated in the study spoke to practices of transgressive teaching as one way that student affairs professionals can positively impact their experiences on campus in ways that will add to the likelihood that students will persist through college. The students spoke to ways that it is important for student affairs professionals to have understood their own position in interacting with students, “to contemplate, explore, manipulate, and critical analyze our world” (Bullen, 2012, p. 23). Further, students asked that the environments in which they were interacting with student affairs professionals be ones that are responsive to the students’ lived experiences, that were willing to understand the students needs and incorporate them into the experience of the campus (Bradley, 2009).

The students participating in this study also spoke to the ways in which their negative experiences could have been better educational experiences had transgressive teaching been used. Students understood that not all of their experiences would be without difficulty and discomfort. However, that discomfort, if approached from a transgressive teaching perspective, could have provided those students opportunities to be continually engaged in their own learning rather than to be expected to conform to a standard paradigm. In instances where students had to be challenged or put in difficult situations where their comfort was tested, students still spoke to needing an environment to be shared with student affairs professionals that “respected and cared for the students rather than using a rote, assembly line approach” (Berry, 2010, p. 20). For the students participating in this study, these practices would help student affairs professionals be more willing to understand and to validate the different experiences of students to aid in their persistence through college (Museus & Quaye, 2009).

Brandon’s stories that spoke to the communal aspect of transgressive teaching, specifically breaking the culture of domination, highlight the difficult nature of using transgressive teaching as an approach. Brandon’s stories show the trust and courage that can be built and developed over a continual engagement between students and student affairs professionals (Stewart, 2008). We can see from Brandon’s story that when student affairs professionals are willing to embrace the potential and the power that students’ bring into spaces of education (Bullen, 2012), it further develops the mutually engaging relationship between the student and the student affairs professional and offers new ways of furthering ones own learning (Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005)

The impact that the race and sexual orientation of the student affairs professionals can have on the students’ perception of how their needs were met by their interactions with student affairs professionals also arises. All of the students spoke to their most positive experiences interacting with people who they perceived to be a different race and sexual orientation from those with which the students identify themselves, which means that these practices are able to help student affairs professionals connect with students across the differences of lived experience that these identities create. Transgressive teaching offers student affairs professionals the opportunity to interrogate the privileges that follow them into the spaces in which they interact with students who identify as both people of color and as members of the LGBT\* community (Edwards, 2008). So while students see the differences in race, gender, and sexual orientation as having an impact, doing the work of transgressing those boundaries can create equally important relationships between students and student affairs professionals. This in turn can be seen by both the students and by student affairs professionals as being participants in the learning process of students rather than as an all-knowing authority on student needs. (Danowitz & Tuitt, 2011).

## **Limitations**

There are a few limitations that need to be considered when beginning to interpret the findings in this study. The first is limitation was the time available to create and implement the study. Because this study emerged as a project for a one-semester course, there was not as much time available to gather a larger group of participants, conduct follow up interviews, or perform more than two rounds of coding. These opportunities would have presented a much greater opportunity to examine the breadth and depth of student experiences. Additionally, this limitation impacted the number of participants that could be found and the representation of the diversity of identities that exist under the umbrellas of people of color and LGBT\*.

The second limitation to this study is that the experiences shared by the participants are all bound by a number of contexts. Therefore the findings may not be easily transferable to a different context such as college or university, or even applicable to the lived experiences of a different group of students. The intention of this study is not to present a generalizable set of experiences to address within each context, but rather to focus on how a theoretical frame can be applied within one of many contexts.

Another limitation of this study is the fact that all of the student participants are “out” to the general campus community. This fact could potentially have great impact on the students’ willingness to participate in the study and also on the relationships and experiences that these students were willing to share in the interviews. Additionally, the students’ meaning-making of the experiences, and their interactions with the student affairs professionals in each of the interactions shared, may have been very different if the students were still “in the closet.” This is not to say that the theoretical framework would not be applicable to addressing the needs of students who are not out of the closet on their campuses or in their relationships with student affairs professionals, but rather an acknowledgement of the potential impact this dynamic may have had on the relationships between the students and student affairs professionals, as well as on the level to which the students were willing to participate in the study.

## **Implications and Future Research**

This study also has offered several implications for future work. This section will address areas in which future research is needed, and also what the implications for the practice of student affairs professionals arise from this study. With regards to research, the findings of this study emphasize the importance to expand the participant pool for a future version of this study and the time frame within which the study would take place. These two things will help to further capture both the depth and breadth of student experiences that are different from those captured in these interviews. This will continue to emphasize the intragroup differences discussed by Crenshaw (1991), as the terms used to group students are still umbrellas under which there are still a large number of differentiations and permutations of experiences related to those differentiations. In the same vein, there were a host of identities not represented in the participants. None of the students identified as trans\*, Latino/a, asexual, or intersex to name just a few, and these experiences, while different, could continue to offer new insights into the relevance of practicing transgressive teaching as a way to positively impact student persistence through college. Similarly, exploring the experiences of students at different types of institutions (such as public research, non-religiously affiliated, and community colleges) would offer new insights into how the context of the institution can play a role in the ways that students navigate their experiences and interactions with student affairs professionals. Finally, it would be

necessary to research how capacities for these practices could be developed and expanded within student affairs professionals.

### **Student Affairs Practice**

As emphasized throughout this paper, the biggest implication for student affairs practice in this study is the more broad incorporation of transgressive teaching practices into the ways student affairs professionals think about and enact their interactions with all students, especially LGBT\* identified students who also identify as people of color. This study offers evidence that transgressive teaching can help student affairs professionals create and support the kind of student experiences that will validate the experiences of students who often find themselves disengaged from the dominant culture of a college campus. Previous literature (Stewart 2008; Danowitz & Tuitt 2011; Bullen 2012; Berry 2010; Bradley 2009) emphasize the continued relevance and importance of transgressive teaching to the experiences of students in college, both in and out of classrooms, and this study reinforces that literature with student voices that speak to the need for these practices to be a part of how student affairs professionals engage with students. Student affairs professionals, in their continued work to understand the role of students' identities connection to student experiences, must begin to use transgressive teaching as one way to validate and enable the voices of students who are seeking those opportunities (Museus & Quaye, 2009).

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