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**The Effects of Trinity College's Campus Culture on The Social And Academic
Experiences Of Queer Male Students**

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EDUC 400: Senior Research Seminar

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Introduction:

For undergraduate students, feeling as if they belong at their chosen institution is one of the essential factors for cultivating a successful undergraduate experience both academically and socially. Inclusion takes shape in different ways for different students, such as feeling comfortable portraying themselves authentically in peer groups, classroom discussions, clubs, and the overall campus culture of an institution. Feeling excluded and ostracized can have numerous adverse effects on a student's academic experience.¹ Some of these effects include but aren't limited to isolation, decreased mental health, poor academic performance, and in some severe cases, suicide. It falls on the institution to cultivate safe spaces for all students to flourish. However, the historic campus culture and subconscious underpinnings of certain institutions make it extremely difficult to make students of different races, religions and sexual orientations feel authentically included. Small predominantly white institutions (PWI) tend to struggle the most with making students of marginalized identities feel included due to lack of representation and historical systemic biases within the university.²

Trinity College is considered a small PWI due to its small number of undergraduate students and its predominantly white student body. In addition, Trinity College's campus culture historically reflects deeply ingrained notions of conventional masculinity, racism and heteronormativity, making it difficult for queer male students to feel included and represented on campus as the campus culture impacts both the social and academic experience of each student.³

¹ Kart, A., & Kart, M. (2020, November 30). Academic and social effects of inclusion on students without disabilities: A review of the literature. *Education Sciences*. <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1283082>

² Impacts of PWI campuses on Black Students Mental Health and academic ... (n.d.). <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1647&context=studentengagement-honorscapstones>

³ Impacts of PWI campuses on Black Students Mental Health and academic ... (n.d.). <https://huskiecommons.lib.niu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1647&context=studentengagement-honorscapstones>

This study aims to uncover perceptions or beliefs about how Trinity College's campus culture impacts the queer male experience. Inclusivity isn't simply limited to classroom curriculum or friend groups, but rather plays a role in all aspects of campus life. Furthermore, this study aims to garner a holistic interpretation of the impacts of Trinity College's campus culture on its queer male population by hearing direct first-hand accounts through qualitative interviews. I chose to focus on this topic in particular as I was curious how the experience of queer male students is influenced by the intersections of gender and sexuality in such an overwhelmingly masculine heteronormative environment. Trinity College claims that its faculty works tirelessly to cultivate a safe and accepting campus for queer students. However, I was curious how effective queer male students find the efforts of the institution to be against a campus with a systemically homophobic history. In my study, I delve into where students have found safe spaces on campus and what areas of social and academic life need improvement to turn the campus into an authentic safe space. In order to gauge where the institution currently lies in terms of inclusion and safety, I posed two main questions: How do queer men at Trinity College describe the effects of campus culture on their social and academic experiences? Where does my sample population find safe spaces at Trinity College, and how can we create more?

This particular topic of queer inclusion on college campuses is crucial to delve deeper into as queer students all around the country have left their unsafe homes and communities to pursue living authentically in college. Two out of seven of my participants reported an inability to live authentically due to religious, familial or governmental influences for the first 18 years of their lives. For some, there is no home to return to, as they have lost the acceptance of their families, and in some cases returning to their country, identifying as gay is punishable by death. As a result, we owe not just these students but even queer students with supportive home

environments the safety to live authentically and the opportunity to excel socially and academically. For queer students, the word “safety” goes beyond inclusion in the lunchroom or culturally relevant teaching. For some, “safety” means an institution where they can seek refuge as their authentic selves. Cultivating spaces within each institution’s framework that create safety for queer students and fostering a campus culture that celebrates all identities can be life changing for queer students.

Literature Review:

What Is a Predominately White Institution?

The Encyclopedia of African-American Education defines predominantly white institutions as "institutions of higher learning in which whites account for 50% or greater of the student enrollment."⁴ In 2021 Jayla Jones wrote an article about her experiences attending both an HBCU and a PWI during her undergraduate years. In this article called *The Differences Between an HBCU and a PWI: I See Myself* Jones described feeling ostracized because of her race while attending a predominantly white institution, "it was hard to find more than a handful of people who looked like me. It was hard to feel like I belonged there."⁵ After only one semester, Jones transferred from the predominantly white institution to an HBCU where she could find a greater sense of community and acceptance. Predominantly white institutions have strong underpinnings in marginalizing minority identities, leading to exclusion and ostracization.

When examining Trinity College through the lens of a PWI, it is unsurprising that the school has historic roots in racism and marginalization. For my thesis, I wanted to know how the

⁴ Lomotey, K. (2009, December 15). Encyclopedia of African American Education. Sage Knowledge. [https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/africanamericaneducation/n193.xml#:~:text=Predominantly%20white%20institution%20\(PWI\)%20is,greater%20of%20the%20student%20enrollment](https://sk.sagepub.com/reference/africanamericaneducation/n193.xml#:~:text=Predominantly%20white%20institution%20(PWI)%20is,greater%20of%20the%20student%20enrollment).

⁵ Jones, J. (2021, February 10). The difference between an HBCU and a PWI: I see myself. Andscape. <https://andscape.com/features/the-difference-between-an-hbcu-and-a-pwi-i-see-myself/>

exclusion of queer men of color is exacerbated by Trinity College being considered a PWI. Investigating the intersectionality of sexuality and race at Trinity College can help uncover to what extent exclusion is compounded by the PWI context.

Trinity College's Campus Culture:

In order to properly understand the experiences of my participants, it's crucial to contextualize Trinity College's historic campus culture. In 2017 Chiarra Davis wrote an honors thesis titled *The Longest Walk: Rape, Drugs, and Racial Aggression at Trinity College*. Davis combines primary sources and ethnographic research in this thesis to paint a rich picture of Trinity College's campus culture. She starts her thesis by contextualizing Trinity College as a PWI with deep roots in racial aggression: "White students at Trinity College engage in acts of racial aggression with little to no policing or punishment by the administration. Nowhere is this more visible than in the social climate on campus."⁶ In this quote, Davis comments on how racial aggression is built into the institution's social hierarchy, which results in the marginalization of people of color on Trinity College's campus. She then addresses countless firsthand incidents of hate speech and systemic oppression within the institution. The unsavory aspects of Trinity's campus culture tend to go without punishment from the deans, which only perpetuates violence and stigma. Although Davis doesn't overtly discuss sexuality in her thesis, the blatant marginalization of other minority identities under Trinity College's campus framework directly correlates with the stigmatization of queer men uncovered in this thesis.

Previous Studies That Inspired Elements of My Interview Protocol:

⁶ Davis, Chiarra. *The Longest Walk: Rape, Drugs, and Racial Aggression at Trinity College* (2017) <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1660&context=theses>

The following three studies focused on three different facets of the queer college experience. When researching what previous literature might be out there to either support or inspire my study, these three papers were at the forefront. *Intersectionality and Queer Student Support for Queer Politics* By B.E Harr made me take an interest in how intersectionality could impact my participants within the framework of Trinity College's campus culture. *Safe Space: Student Perspectives on Classroom Environment* By Lynn Holley made me wonder how queer male students at Trinity would define a safe space and where they seek refuge on campus. Finally, *Queering Masculinity: Manhood and Black Gay Men in College* by Terrell Strayhorn made me wonder if there was a similar connection between expectations of masculinity and self-expression on a campus like Trinity College's. Overall, these three sources served as guidelines when creating my interview protocol. I was interested in uncovering possible relationships between intersectionality, safe spaces, and conventional masculinity within my research.

An Intersectional Approach to The Queer College Experience:

The Center for Intersectional Justice defines intersectionality as "the ways in which systems of inequality based on gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, class and other forms of discrimination "intersect" to create unique dynamics and effects."⁷ Considering that my participants are complex beings with multi-faceted identities, some of their intersections leave them vulnerable to increased marginalization beyond the intersections of gender and sexual orientation. At a small, predominantly white liberal arts institution that favors straight-white men, intersectionality is bound to impact the student experience at Trinity College.

⁷ Center For Intersectional Justice. *What is Intersectionality* (2023)
<https://www.intersectionaljustice.org/what-is-intersectionality>

A previous study by B.E. Harr aimed to unpack a similar relationship between sexual orientation and intersectionality at another small liberal arts institution. In her study, Harr distributed surveys to try and uncover a relationship between the intersectionality of identity and the support of queer politics on campus. Harr's study found that queer white students seemed less passionate about queer politics compared to queer students of color. She also found a similar correlation between socioeconomic status and support for queer politics. Her survey found that upper-middle-class queer students weren't as passionate about queer politics as their lower-middle-class counterparts. Although it wasn't directly included in her survey, Harr inferred that wealthy white queer students weren't as passionate about queer politics as they didn't receive as much backlash for their sexual orientation as their counterparts with different intersections.⁸ Harr's study proved that, to some extent, there's a correlation between intersectionality and a perceived need for queer politics.

In my study, I aimed to uncover a relationship between intersectionality and Trinity College's campus culture through qualitative one-on-one interviews rather than a survey, as the ability to ask follow-up questions would help me to draw more definitive conclusions rather than having to make inferences based off survey data like Harr did in the findings of her study. Based on the findings of Harr's study, I included questions surrounding how students felt their intersections affected their social acceptance at Trinity College in my interview protocol.

Safety At the Institutional Level: Why Are Safe Spaces Important?

When discussing safe spaces in the school system and their importance, literature by Lynn Holley is essential. In her article titled *Safe Space: Student Perspectives on Classroom*

⁸ Harr, B. E., & Kane, E. W. (2008). Intersectionality and Queer Student Support for Queer Politics. *Race, Gender & Class*, 15(3/4), 283–299. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41674665>

Environment, Holley comprehensively discusses the importance of safe spaces in and out of the classroom to encourage student learning. In this article, Holley defines a safe space as “a space in which students are able to openly express their individuality, even if it differs dramatically from the norms set by the instructor or other students.”⁹ During her study, Holley provided students with quantitative surveys that asked them to rank how important they found safe spaces in the classroom to be on a scale of 1 to 5, with one being not important and five being extremely important. Upon analyzing her data, Holley found that 73% of students found creating safe spaces in the classroom to be “extremely important.” Additionally, Holly found that students who don’t feel safe in the classroom tend not to participate as much or get as out of the class as students who feel comfortable.¹⁰

For my thesis, I was interested in whether or not students on Trinity College’s campus feel safe and represented in the classroom. Therefore, I added questions to my interview protocol about how students define safe spaces and where they go about finding them on campus. Furthermore, I included questions about classrooms as a safe space as I was curious to hear how participants evaluate classroom safety from social and academic standpoints.

Toxic Masculinity and Self-Expression:

A New York Times article entitled *What is Toxic Masculinity* defines it as "what can come of teaching boys that they can't express emotion openly; but they have to pretend to be

⁹ Holley, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). SAFE SPACE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1), 49–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23044032>

¹⁰ Holley, L. C., & Steiner, S. (2005). SAFE SPACE: STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT. *Journal of Social Work Education*, 41(1), 49–64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23044032>

tough all the time and outwardly present according to gender norms."¹¹ Toxic masculinity leans into outdated traditional conventions and interpretations of masculinity.

These strict expectations of how a man should outwardly present themselves tend to impact how all men, but especially queer men dress.

In 2013 Terrell Strayhorn conducted a study in which he interviewed 29 black gay men at a small liberal arts college to uncover how the expectations of "black masculinity" affected how they choose to present themselves. Strayhorn's interview participants consistently said that growing up, their parents forced them to lean into the conventional stereotypes of "black masculinity" by veering away from "feminine" clothing. Although his interview participants now live independently, they still worry about how straight black men on campus might perceive their masculinity if they dress femininely. Some of Strayhorn's participants also reported being called slurs on campus at an increased rate when they wore feminine clothing.¹²

For my study, I was interested in how the expectations of toxic masculinity affect Trinity College's campus culture and how my participants choose to present themselves within that framework. Therefore, in my interview protocol, I included questions that allowed me to have an open dialogue with my participants about how they choose to dress and how the broader campus interprets their physical presentation.

How My Study Fills A Gap In The Literature:

¹¹ Salam, M. (2019, January 22). What is toxic masculinity?. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/22/us/toxic-masculinity.html>

¹² Strayhorn, T. L., & Tillman-Kelly, D. L. (2013). Queering Masculinity: Manhood and Black Gay Men in College. *Spectrum: A Journal on Black Men*, 1(2), 83–110. <https://doi.org/10.2979/spectrum.1.2.83>

Although I took inspiration from elements of prior studies, my study will provide a nuanced approach to examining the queer male experience at a predominantly white institution. Unlike other studies, I delved into the firsthand social and academic experiences of queer men at a predominately white institution with a historic culture of marginizing minority identities. In addition, rather than approaching my interviews aiming to untangle one particular topic, I left my interview protocol relatively open-ended to have an open dialogue with my participants, allowing them to speak to whatever issues they found most poignant to how their experience intersects with Trinity College's campus culture.

Methods:

I conducted a qualitative study to uncover how Trinity College's campus culture impacts the social and academic experiences of gay men from the years 2019-2023. In this qualitative format, I conducted 30-minute one-on-one in-person interviews with each of my 7 participants to better understand their perceptions of safety and inclusion at Trinity College. I chose a qualitative format for this topic as I wanted to hear direct first-hand accounts from my sample population.¹³ Having open conversations allowed me to not just ask the questions in my interview protocol (APPENDIX A) but also enabled participants to speak about certain facets of their Trinity experience that they were passionate about. Allowing such an open dialogue granted me the ability to uncover what matters most to each of my participants in a way that I wouldn't have been able to predict when crafting my limited interview questions. Additionally, I went with in-person interviews as although it made scheduling and transcription harder face-to-face conversations allowed me to build a rapport with my participants that would've been challenging

¹³ Manzano, J. (2016, May 4). Creswell_qualitative_inquiry_research_design_five_traditions. Academia.edu. https://www.academia.edu/25034713/Creswell_Qualitative_Inquiry_Research_Design_Five_Traditions?from=cover_page

in a Zoom format. The in-person format also helped me read my participant's body language to indicate when they were uncomfortable discussing something or were passionate about a particular issue. Without disengaging from the conversation, I tried to mark down these movements to help me to interpret what aspects of my findings my sample population were most passionate about. Finally, the qualitative format allowed me to collect rich answers to my research questions while building rapport with my participants.

Who Were My Participants?

For this study, I limited my participants to upperclassmen men that identify as queer and had been publicly out for most of their college experience. I narrowed my scope only to examine those two grade levels as they had the widest range of experiences at Trinity College, providing me with the most viable data. I wanted to hear the perspective of participants that were publicly queer to the broader community as I was interested in how public perceptions of homosexuality affected campus experiences. I was able to gather seven participants that fit my selection criteria and were willing to participate. Through my strategic methods for finding my participants, I collected a highly diverse group that could comment on countless facets of the Trinity experience through their wide range of campus involvement and alternate intersections of identity. Out of my 7 participants, 3 were men of color who could speak to how racial intersectionality impacted their experiences alongside Trinity College's campus culture. My participants came from various majors, such as sociology, theater and dance, biology, economics and public policy. The range of majors reported by my participants allowed me to ask questions to uncover potential relationships between certain majors and culturally relevant teaching. Finally, my participants were involved in countless extracurricular activities, such as student government, club athletics, D3 athletics, Greek life and the Queer Resource Center. The range in terms of extracurricular

involvement allowed me to uncover additional spaces where my participants found safety, in addition to some spaces where they encountered homophobia. The range reported among my participants in terms of intersectionality and campus involvement allowed me to understand the experiences of queer men in more micro facets of Trinity's campus.

Data Collection:

Considering that my research topic was so sensitive, I prided myself on collecting an ethical sample. Therefore, I found my sample population half through snowball sampling and half through the contacts of the Trinity College Queer Resource Center (QRC). I conducted my first interview with a friend I knew matched my selection criteria. Once we concluded our interview, I asked if he knew anyone who was publicly out and would be willing to participate. From there, I asked if he would send my contact information along if his friend was interested. Through that method, I garnered four of my participants through snowball sampling. My final three participants came through the connections of the QRC. At the start of the spring 2023 semester, I met with Trinity College's Queer Resource Center Director, Crystal Nieves, to discuss my project. Once our meeting concluded, she agreed to send my email and details surrounding my project to her student contacts. Considering that I didn't know any of Professor Nieves's participants prior, her reaching out to them helped them trust me rather than me reaching out initially on my own as they see her as a safe person on campus. Through the help of Professor Nieves, I collected three additional participants who could comment on how their involvement with QRC has impacted their perceptions of inclusion. Overall I found this dual sampling method to be the most effective as I was able to ethically find a diverse sample.

Data Analysis:

To start my data analysis process, I began by transcribing each of my interviews into a password-protected Google Drive folder and assigning each participant a pseudonym. Once I transcribed each interview individually, I went back and re-listened to the recordings and put an asterisk where I felt as if a participant was particularly animated or passionate about a specific issue.

From there, I began my coding process. My code book consisted of two rounds of coding (Appendix B). My first round of coding was color coding by topic. I coded by color for six main topics: inclusion, exclusion, safe space, and safe space, intersectionality, and mentions of a shift on campus. Next, I followed up with a second round of inductive codes. My code book consisted of 19 inductive codes that I found most relevant to my interviews. Some of the inductive codes I coded for were FRIEND GROUPS, ATHLETICS, GREEK LIFE, and RACE. I only used inductive codes in my code book as I wanted the interviews to speak for themselves, and I didn't want to approach coding with any previous bias. Additionally, at the top of each interview, I wrote important moments in the interview to note that I wanted to go back to when analyzing.

Finally, in order to make meaningful connections from my qualitative interview transcripts, I looked at my transcriptions as a whole to see what colors I used most frequently. From there, I looked at each individual color and what inductive codes were included in those passages the most. Luckily my participants spoke about issues of intersectionality and safe space in similar ways, which made analyzing their opinions relatively straightforward.

Limitation Of My Study:

Although I conducted my study ethically and to the best of my ability within my time constraints, it does have some limitations. For starters, my sample is a small sample size of an already small subset of the Trinity College queer population. Considering that my sample size is

so small, it limits the scope of my findings. Therefore, I can only comment on these seven experiences and what they might imply about the experiences of queer male upperclassmen at Trinity College as a whole.

When I started conducting my research, I wasn't expecting all of my participants to mention a recent change to the broader campus culture during their time on campus. That being said, I limited my scope to upperclassmen, so underclassmen might be having an entirely different experience on campus following this recent shift. A possible future study surrounding queer men on Trinity's campus could pair the experiences of underclassmen with the experiences of upperclassmen reported in this study to get a more holistic and current picture.

Finally, although I aimed to interview queer men, only gay men chose to participate. I believe that my research lacks a bisexual opinion. In a future study based on my research, I would be interested in seeing how the intersections between gender and sexuality fluctuate through the experiences of bisexual men on Trinity's campus. In addition, I'm curious to see how other sexualities on the spectrum of queerness interact with the broader campus culture.

Findings:

Based on my research, I uncovered that Trinity College's campus culture significantly impacts the social and academic experiences of queer men. Within the context of this culture, queer men with alternate intersections are at an increased risk of social ostracization and exclusion. In order to survive in such an environment, queer male students have paved their own way, both finding and creating safe spaces.

When looking at my research broadly, my findings fall into five main categories: The Effects of Intersectionality on Social Acceptance, Safe Spaces on Campus, Unsafe Spaces on Campus, The Perceived Support of The Deans, and A Perceived Recent Shift on Campus.

Finding One: The Effects of Intersectionality on Social Acceptance

Debatably the most fascinating finding to come from my research is the impact of intersectionality on where queer students fall in Trinity College's social hierarchy. As mentioned earlier in my literature review, I was interested in how queerness intersects with other elements of student identity. When speaking to my second interview participant Justin about this concept, he brought up a particular phenomenon that was later agreed upon by the rest of my participants. My participants consistently spoke to this idea that the culmination of one's intersections dictates how accepted they are based on the palatability of their intersections in the campus culture.

When unpacking this idea further, my participants claimed that the social acceptance of queer men at Trinity is based on a scale of their intersections with white, masculine presenting gay men of a high socioeconomic status, who fall at the top as they are deemed most palatable to the rest of campus while feminine presenting gay black men fall at the bottom of the scale. Within Trinity College's campus culture, people of color, people that choose to dress outside of the expectations of their sex, and students of low socioeconomic statuses are already marginalized identities.¹⁴

When asking one of my participants whose particular intersections fall at the top of the "hierarchy of social acceptance," he agreed that his intersections have significantly affected his acceptance here. When I pressed him to speak more about this phenomenon, he stated, "I am a relatively well-off white man who is involved in Greek life, so I feel my experience is probably not typical. I have a lot of aspects of my identity that act as social lubricants in the sense that they insulate me from a lot of the more socially undesirable effects of being openly gay at Trinity."¹⁵ Under this framework, gay men that fall at the top of the scale have a unique ability to

¹⁴ Davis, Chiarra. *The Longest Walk: Rape, Drugs, and Racial Aggression at Trinity College* (2017)

¹⁵ "Justin" (2023)

blend into the rest of campus in scenarios that could be potentially dangerous as they outwardly appear to be the ideal man within the school's social expectations.

When I asked one of my participants whose intersections fell towards the bottom of Trinity's social acceptance scale, he agreed that his intersections have led to him being excluded and ostracized countless times over his four years. When I asked him about the perceived impacts of his intersectionality, he stated, "I believe that all of the intersections of my identity have impacted my inclusion here. The campus culture has a way of socially sorting everyone based on how palatable their intersections are to the greater campus community. As a black man, I experience double the hate speech and social exclusion on account of sexuality and race compared to a gay white man."¹⁶ Living at an institution with a campus culture like Trinity's that perpetuates conventional toxic masculinity and has historic roots in racism, adding queerness into the mix can potentially be detrimental to one's social acceptance and inclusion. Men on the lower end of this scale are vulnerable to exclusion and hate speech even in scenarios where people might not know their sexuality because of their socioeconomic status, race or physical presentation.

This unspoken scale of social acceptance is the culmination of Trinity's historic and systemic campus culture. Under this framework, it provides white masculine presenting queer men with the ability to shapeshift into heteronormative society to seek refuge from homophobia on campus. However, queer men on the lower end of this scale are constantly left vulnerable to racism and homophobia without the ability to mask in heteronormative or predominately white environments on campus.

Finding Two: Safe Spaces at Trinity College?

¹⁶ " Mathew" (2023)

On campus, participants found safe spaces in a variety of different places. The three main categories that students found safe spaces in were institutionalized safe spaces, student-cultivated safe spaces, and structured safe spaces. When asked, each of my participants defined safe space similarly, "I think a safe space is an environment where you feel safe to speak your mind and feel validated. Where you feel comfortable as your authentic self."¹⁷ Each of my participants emphasized how a safe space is somewhere where they feel both "comfortable" and "validated." In order to seek refuge from the confines of the school's campus culture, my participants have paved their own way, both finding and creating safe spaces.

For this research, I defined the institutionalized safe space as a space created directly by the institution to promote the safety of all students. My participants found that the Queer Resource Center and student government meetings were spaces of safety created by the institution. In these spaces, my participants felt safe discussing queer issues and the needs of the queer community without the fear of homophobia or backlash.

I define a student-cultivated safe space as a space created by the individual student or by a group of students to promote safety and equity on campus. My participants found their individual friend groups and the Underground Coffee Shop to be student-cultivated safe spaces. Under this framework, students can cultivate their own friend groups by selecting people with similar views and interests. I found the Underground Coffee Shop to be a student-cultivated safe space rather than an institutionalized safe space, as my participants claimed that what made the environment safe was the people that worked there, not the fact that the institution created it.

The concept of the structured safe space was the most surprising aspect of this finding. I define the structured safe space as a space that is safe because of the structure of the

¹⁷ "Conrad" (2023)

environment, not necessarily the people that occupy it. Going into my research, I thought that students would find classrooms unsafe as they can't select who's in the room. However, some of my participants found classrooms to be safe spaces as they felt as if students censor themselves in front of professors. When discussing the idea of classrooms as a structured safe space, Justin stated, "I feel like classrooms often act as a safe space because people who would otherwise say things that are unsavory about sexuality wouldn't say that in front of a professor for fear of punishment."¹⁸ However, three of my other participants disagreed with Justin claiming that classrooms where students aren't saying what they authentically feel creates a hostile environment, as it is difficult for people to suppress microaggressions. The idea of the structured safe space creates a complex intersection between perceived safety and underlying microaggressions that, with a broader study, could possibly be uncovered in additional places on campus. Luckily, all my participants have found safety in at least one of these three types of safe spaces. However, understanding the intricacies of these three different types of spaces is essential for the progression and enhancement of safe spaces currently operating within the campus community.

Finding Three: Where Are the Unsafe Spaces At Trinity College

My participants found that the two largest perpetrators of Trinity College's campus culture were also the two of the most unsafe environments on campus. My participants collectively defined an unsafe space as somewhere where they felt as if they had to suppress aspects of their identities or that there was underlying tension because of certain facets of their identities. Under that definition, my participants found the most unsafe environments on campus to be athletics and Greek life. The commonality between these two spaces is how they are both

¹⁸ "Justin" (2023)

hubs for heteronormativity and toxic masculinity. In the majority of cases, to receive social acceptance in either of these two spaces, one must be a straight white male of high socioeconomic status. Both of these spaces, especially Greek life, have a reputation for being highly exclusive on campus; however, granting entrance into these spaces is even more complex when queerness comes into the mix.

In my interviews, the most frequently mentioned Greek organizations were AD, PIKE, PSIU and HALL. Six out of seven participants reported feeling unsafe in Trinity College's fraternities to the point where two of my participants no longer go out on campus, "I've heard the F slur just thrown around, and I've been kicked out for no reason. I avoid going out because it can be so embarrassing."¹⁹ Four out of seven of my participants recounted experiences of being rejected at the door of certain fraternities, "an example is when I dressed up like a VSCO girl Halloween freshman year, and FRAT didn't want to let me in. They said "no faggots today."²⁰ The fear of being publicly embarrassed by being rejected at the door or being called a slur keeps numerous queer men on campus from going out on weekends when they could be strengthening their relationships with their community and cultivating lasting friendships.

One of my participants, who's involved in one of the more progressive Greek life organizations on campus, still reported homophobia within his fraternity. One of my participants claimed that although most of his brothers are generally accepting once alcohol gets involved, that acceptance falls to the wayside, "I think occasionally someone has a few too many at the house and says something out of line, but the brothers are pretty quick to back me up."²¹ Even on the rare occasion when a queer man is allowed access and acceptance in these exclusive spaces,

¹⁹ "Marco" (2023)

²⁰ "Conrad" (2023)

²¹ "Justin" (2023)

my participants say that they aren't exempt from systemic biases and homophobia as heteronormativity is so ingrained in fraternity culture at Trinity College.

Three of my participants are, or were at one point involved in athletics on campus. This subset of my population reported receiving or fearing homophobia among the coaches, in the locker rooms, and by other members. For example, one of my participants spoke of an experience he had playing for a team on campus during his underclassmen years where he received a great deal of homophobia from not just the captains but the coaches as well, "Eventually ended up quitting the team in part due to the actions of my coach during my junior year. I don't think that he properly handled the homophobia I dealt with on the team, which translated into how he coached me from there."²² Queer male athletes don't just struggle to find acceptance in these spaces among their peers but are also vulnerable to exclusion from the coaches meant to protect them. The influences of heteronormativity and toxic masculinity, especially in athletics, leave queer male athletes vulnerable to exclusion and homophobia rather than offering them the safety of a team environment.

Finding 4: Do the Deans And Faculty Really Care About Queer Issues?

During my interviews, my participants pointed out the distinct differences between the perceived intentions of the deans and their professors on queer issues. To continue to make progressive change, students need to feel supported both by their professors and the deans of the college. Student activism can only push change so far without the support of faculty and administration. When discussing the nature of statements released by the deans surrounding homophobia, sexual assault, and racism, six out of seven of my participants found their statements to be highly performative, "Every statement sounds very copy and paste. Like there

²² "Conrad" (2023)

was more effort put into the email about the president's dog passing than some of the profound hate crimes on campus.”²³ In addition, multiple students reported not feeling comfortable going to the deans to report hate crimes or homophobia as they feel as if the deans don't care about the progression of campus culture but rather maintaining the school's bottom dollar, "this school will only progress until the school's bottom dollar is affected. Change here has a dollar amount. It's sad, but it's true.”²⁴ Students feel even though student activism on campus is at an all-time high, it's becoming increasingly hard to maintain momentum when students constantly face adversity from the deans. The deans tend to promise students change and conversations that never come to fruition. To many, it seems as if the deans are simply trying to pacify them until they graduate to protect the school from losing funding from their conservative donors.

The 2020 gender-inclusive floor is just a small example of student advocacy met with the bare minimum from deans and the administration. After years of students advocating for gender-inclusive housing in the freshman dorms, institutional higher-ups finally announced a gender-inclusive floor in freshman dorms starting in 2020. However, once the school announced the location of the gender-inclusive floor, student advocates began speaking out. The 2020 gender-inclusive floor was set to be Jones basement, which is notoriously the most outdated and unpleasant freshman dorm. One of my participants lived in that gender-inclusive housing his freshman year and spoke to his experience, "freshman year, I agreed to live in the "new" gender-inclusive housing, which consisted of shoving all the queers into Jones basement. Considering that it was during covid, we could only really speak to each other. People all over campus were cracking jokes about the gender-inclusive floor, saying that the school hid the gays away and they weren't kidding. Just that housing arrangement alone taught me where I fall in the hierarchy

²³ "Ethan" (2023)

²⁴ "Matt" (2023)

here."²⁵ When students living on that floor complained to the deans about their living conditions and how the location of the floor was further stigmatizing the queer community on campus, the deans weren't much help and seemed to dismiss the students. The 2020 gender-inclusive floor made queer students on campus question their place here as they could instantly sense the lack of administrative support.

Although my participants report being frustrated by the lack of support from the deans, all seven of my participants felt as if their individual professors deeply cared about their inclusion and acceptance both in and out of the classroom. Regardless of major, participants felt comfortable talking to their professors outside of class about queer issues and even felt safe enough to speak about their sexuality if the topic was to come up during classroom discussions. In addition, many of my participants spoke about how their professors genuinely care for each student, "The professors that I've spoken with seem like people who genuinely care. I strongly believe that those professors are the people that genuinely care about creating safety for the students, not the deans."²⁶ Despite the wide range of majors and disciplines my participants are involved in, I didn't hear a single mention of homophobia among Trinity College professors. Although having supportive professors is a crucial part of academic success, increased support in ways that are perceived as genuine from the deans would encourage queer students to maintain momentum within their advocacy.

Finding Five: A Recent Campus Shift Towards Progression

On a more positive note, all seven of my participants said they have noticed a shift in the broader campus culture towards inclusion over their time at Trinity College. According to them, the potential causes of the recent shift fall under three main categories: the work of the Queer

²⁵ "Matt" (2023)

²⁶ "Matt" (2023)

Resource Center, Trinity as a reflection of society, and student activism. My participants believe that these three pieces have culminated to create a slightly more accepting campus over the past several years, which has motivated them in their studies and advocacy.

In 2019 when the current seniors first came to Trinity, there was no director in the school's Queer Resource Center, which led to a lack of community among queer students. Over the past two years, director Crystal Nieves has been in charge of the QRC. During her brief time on campus, Professor Nieves has hosted countless events in an attempt to strengthen Trinity College's queer community. Although only three of my participants were directly involved with the QRC, all seven participants had positive things to say about their recent work, "I'm not personally involved with the QRC, but I really appreciate the work they are doing."²⁷ One of my participants spoke about how he has felt ostracized on campus due to his racial identity and sexuality for the past three years. However, he claims that the first semblance of community he found on campus was after attending a Queer Resource Center event, "I went to the queer BIPOC event hosted by the QRC a few weeks ago, and it was the breath of fresh air I needed. I didn't know that this many people like me were right here. We finally have a place to congregate that shields us from the rest of campus."²⁸ Although the QRC is just getting started, it has already made life-changing strides for members of the queer community that feel excluded by the school's campus culture. With only a few years under its belt, the QRC has quickly become a haven for many and a glimmer of hope on a campus saturated with racism and homophobia.

When discussing possible reasons for the slight shift on campus over the past few years, my participants have noticed that the shift might result from broader societal progression. My participants noted a significant progression towards inclusion and equity, within the wider

²⁷ "James" (2023)

²⁸ "Ottis" (2023)

society, following the pandemic. Some suggest that the shift on campus reflects society as a whole, "I think the world is becoming more inclusive. Trinity is a microcosm of the world therefore, it will reflect the broader progression of society, not necessarily the institution itself."²⁹ My participants implied that as the world becomes more progressive, society will create people that are more accepting and tolerant of different sexualities and identities, which is starting to be reflected in Trinity's underclassmen population.

Finally, my participants noted an uptick in student activism in recent years. In the wake of the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements, Instagram accounts began to emerge where students could anonymously share their experiences with racism and sexual assault on campus. Following the widespread distribution of these posts, students began advocating for action from the deans and stricter Title IX regulations. Due to the uproar, the school strengthened its Title IX policy and hired a new coordinator, "I think one of the things that is really working is student activism. During Covid, the emergence of the Instagram accounts showed students that banding together directly correlated with positive campuswide change."³⁰ Student activism is the backbone of not just societal progression but institutional progression as well. If students continue to use their voices on campus to demand deans and administration to make the campus safer and more inclusive, monumental progression can occur in the coming years. In the coming years, the work of the Queer Resource Center, combined with student activism, can create drastic changes to the school's campus culture.

Contributions And Recommendations:

How Can Trinity College Continue to Progress?

²⁹ "Xavier" (2023)

³⁰ "James" (2023)

In light of the current progression on campus, the student body must maintain its momentum to continue to bring about change. Three main ways to continue to progress are through furthering student activism, continuing the work of the Queer Resource Center and creating classroom environments that leave room for critical discussion. Students need to continue speaking out in safe situations to break the systemic stigma surrounding heteronormativity on campus. One of the main ways to break the stigma is by facilitating difficult conversations to work through these systemic stereotypes through both in-person and digital platforms. Professors on campus have a unique role in facilitating such discussions. Professors in certain disciplines can choose to incorporate culturally relevant topics into their curriculums that leave room for safe and supervised critical discussions. Considering the recent success of the Queer Resource Center, more funding from the institution could drastically increase marketing efforts, leading to greater turnout at events. Continuing to host events that incorporate first and second-year students will likely create a lasting sense of community among this incoming student body of queer students. The activism of students, professors and faculty has helped kickstart Trinity College's campus culture reform. However, their work isn't nearly done.

Conclusion:

Through my qualitative interviews, I was able to answer my research questions and determine a possible correlation between Trinity College's campus culture and the social and academic experiences of queer male students. My study uncovered a connection between intersectionality and campus-wide palatability, which infers that students with marginalized identities, in addition to queerness, face an increased risk of ostracization and social exclusion on

campus. However, queer masculine presenting white men can effectively blend into heteronormative spaces on campus in situations that might pose a danger if they were to present their sexuality openly. My participants were able to list two main unsafe spaces in which they felt consistently uncomfortable portraying themselves as their authentic selves. Athletics and Greek life serve as unsafe spaces for my participants as the heteronormativity and toxic masculinity that tend to occupy those spaces contradict with queerness. When advocating for a more inclusive campus, students are frequently met with opposition from the institution's deans, which makes it challenging to maintain momentum surrounding student activism. However, my participants have found their individual professors have greatly enhanced their experience and promoted safety in spaces where the deans have failed. Finally, each of my participants noted a shift in the broader campus culture since the start of their Trinity College experience, which they believe is due to a combination of the recent work of the Queer Resource Center, student activism, and potentially a broader shift in society as a whole. In order to continue to untangle the systemic oppression of marginalized identities within Trinity College's campus culture, students must maintain momentum in their activism, and teachers must continue to leave room in their classrooms for critical conversations that help break systemic stereotypes.

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Interview With “Justin” (April 2023)

Interview With “Mathew” (April 2023)

Interview With “Conrad” (April 2023)

Interview With “Marco” (April 2023)

Interview With “Ethan” (April 2023)

Interview With “Matt” (April 2023)

Interview With “Ottis” (April 2023)

Appendix A:

Erica Desmond Interview Protocol

Section 1 Basic Questions:

1. What year are you?
2. What's your major?
3. Where have you lived on campus during your time here at Trinity?
4. How many semesters have you physically spent on campus?
 - BASED ON ABOVE: How did covid impact you socially?

Section 1.5 Identity Questions:

5. How would you define your sexuality?
 - a. How long have you been "out" in college if at all?
6. Are you involved with the QRC?
 - a. What clubs or activities are you involved in?
7. Are there any other parts of your identity that you find important to your experience here that you would like to share with me?
 - a. How do you identify racially?

Section 2 Delving a bit deeper:

8. Overall, do you think you belong/feel included here at Trinity College? Why or why not?
 - a. Can you describe a time where you've felt included at Trinity?
 - b. Can you think of a time where you've felt excluded?
9. How do you define a "safe" space in terms of sexuality?
10. How do you define "unsafe" space in terms of sexuality?
11. Based on your definitions, where are the safe spaces here at Trinity?
12. Based on your definition of unsafe spaces, where are they at Trinity?
13. Are there any environments on campus where you don't feel comfortable talking about your sexuality or being open?
 - Why do you think that is?
14. In your major/classes do you feel represented or safe talking about your sexuality or queer issues?

15. Do you think Trinity is moving towards or away from becoming more inclusive why or why not? (maybe cut this one)
16. Do you find the statements made by the deans to be genuine or performative?
17. Have you noticed a “shift” on campus since you came to Trinity?
 - What do you believe is causing that shift?

Appendix B:

Erica Desmond Educational Studies Senior Thesis Codebook

Coding Round One:

Safe Space (green)	Either how a student defines a space where they feel safe or an example of what a “safe space” is for them on campus.
Unsafe Space (red)	Either how a student defines a space where they feel unsafe or an example of what an “unsafe space” is for them on campus.
Intersectionality/Palatability (purple)	A moment in which a student discusses how the intersections of their identity coincides with the broader campus culture.
Inclusion (pink)	Either how a student defines inclusion on the basis of sexuality or an example of inclusion.
Exclusion (blue)	Either how a student defines exclusion on the basis of sexuality or an example of exclusion.
“Performative” (orange)	Is used to highlight the repetitive usage of the word “performative” when discussing the actions of the institution.

Coding Round Two:

Institutionalized Safe Space (ISS)	Safe spaces created by the institution to promote queer communities.
Structured Safe Space (SSS)	Safe spaces that are created through the

	structure of the environment.
Student Cultivated Safe Space (SCSS)	Spaces on campus that are safe due to the views of the students that populate them or relationships that the participant has formed with people that make them feel safe.
Greek Life (FRAT)	Mentions of fraternities or greek life
Toxic Masculinity (TOXM)	Mentions of the phrase “toxic masculinity”
Campus culture (CC)	Mentions of the underpinnings of the current or historic campus culture
Race (Race)	Mentions of race
Socioeconomic Status (SES)	Mentions of socioeconomic status or wealth
Physical Presentation (PRES)	Mentions of how a person chooses to present themselves physically
Friend Groups (FG)	Mentions of friend groups or platonic relationships
Queer Resource Center (QRC)	Mentions or commentary surrounding the Queer Resource Center
Underground Coffee Shop (UG)	Mentions of the Underground Coffee Shop
Student Government (SGA)	Mentions of student government or its potential influences on campus life
Deans (DEAN)	Mentions of the Deans
Hate Speech (HS)	Mentions of hate speech and slurs
Majors (MAJ)	Mentions of a student’s major/minor
Covid-19 (COVID)	Mentions of the impacts of the Covid-19 Pandemic
“Shift” (SHIFT)	Mentions of the “shift” towards progression that the school has taken over the past few years.
Athletics (ATH)	Mentions of athletics

