



TROUBLING THE COMPLEXITY OF STUDENT INVOLVEMENT IN MINORITIZED IDENTITY OF SEXUALITY AND/OR GENDER-BASED CAMPUS ORGANIZATIONS

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Research has highlighted the connection between involvement and important postsecondary outcomes such as persistence, interpersonal/intrapersonal development, civic engagement, and multicultural competence, among many others. However, for students with minoritized identities of sexuality and gender (MIoSG), engaging in identity-based organizations comes with both risks and benefits, especially in a time of increasingly prevalent anti-queer and anti-trans U.S.-based legislation. Our findings reveal the complexity of student experiences, with a specific focus on STEM students who hold MIoSG, from overall positive involvement experiences to barriers such as danger, inactive clubs, and lack of campus spaces. This focus on MIoSG students within STEM disciplines is important, as students often report STEM spaces as particularly oppressive, therefore having a high need for counter spaces where their identities are supported. These findings could help practitioners rethink how to design campus spaces where students do not have to fear for their physical, emotional, and professional safety.

We exist in a time of increasingly prevalent anti-queer and anti-trans U.S.-based legislation (Peele, 2023) that affects how students with minoritized identities of sexuality and/or gender (MIoSG, Vaccaro, et al., 2015) experience colleges and universities. For example, at the time of this writing, Florida lawmakers are actively trying to implement the Individual Freedom Act (2022), commonly known as the Stop WOKE Act, at the higher education level. The Individual Freedom Act, currently in effect in Florida's K-12 schools and some workplaces, limits how educators can discuss topics including race and gender and limits any discussion on systemic oppression and/or violence. This legislation will impact both if and how MIoSG community and history, especially Black and Indigenous MIoSG history, will be discussed in courses and represented in curricular content. With these increasingly oppressive campus environments, campus involvement can hold many benefits for students' postsecondary outcomes (Komives, 2019; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Vetter et al., 2019). Supportive communities, which are often found through involvement, are imperative for students with MIoSG who already face additional barriers to college persistence, such as representation, financial strain (Garvey et al., 2022), and access to equitable facilities such as restrooms (Vigneau et al., 2023).

The present study highlights the complexity of both positive and challenging involvement experiences of STEM students with MIoSG. As such, it adds to the literature in two distinct ways. First, our participants were STEM students with MIoSG. Literature has revealed pervasive cisheteropatriarchy in STEM environments (Friedensen

et al., 2021a; Miller et al., 2021b; Wright & Delgado, 2023). For example, Miller et al. (2021b), found that students with MIOGS often navigate a “dude” culture within STEM, where those who are not heterosexual and identify as a man are treated as inferior and less intelligent. This may lead students with MIOGS to seek safe and affirming spaces on campus, including clubs and organizations. Second, our work provides insight into the involvement experiences of students with MIOGS in affinity-centered groups. Understanding and unpacking these experiences is even more critical given the wave of anti-MIOGS legislation sweeping the country. The purpose of this study is to examine the campus involvement experiences of STEM students with MIOGS in MIOGS organizations. As such, this work offers student affairs professionals nuanced and contextualized insights for working with STEM students with MIOGS on contemporary college campuses.

It is important to address the difficulty in finding language that fully encompasses the identities present in this study. For example, the language used by, and about trans people is steadily and actively changing, and there are no widely accepted terms in the English language that adequately encompass all non-cisgender and non-heterosexual identities. Our research team made an intentional decision to avoid the use of LGBTQ+ as an identity label because the acronym leaves out and makes invisible many queer identities. Although imperfect, we have intentionally chosen the MIOGS acronym because we believe it most fully and authentically represents the participants in this study as a group that experiences minoritization based on sexuality and/or gender. In the following sections, we use the term MIOGS unless referencing a specific study or organization that used a different acronym.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Involvement Benefits

In 1984, Astin postulated a theory of student involvement that discussed the importance of the quality and quantity of student involvement in academic work, extracurricular activities, and interactions with faculty, staff, and peers. In a later definition of involvement, Astin (1993) referred to it as the amount of physical and psychological time and energy a student puts into the educational process, including activities (e.g., student organizations, activism) that occur outside the classroom. Decades of empirical research have highlighted the connection between involvement and important postsecondary outcomes such as persistence, cognitive complexity, interpersonal development, intrapersonal development, civic engagement, and multicultural competence, among many others (Garvey et al., 2017; Komives, 2019; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Vetter et al., 2019). In their study of 2973 students at 13 universities, Vetter et al. (2019) found that “investing deeply in one or two meaningful co-curricular experiences” (p. 39) can lead to positive scores on the thriving scale, an instrument used to measure the ways in which students experience college, persist in their degrees, and have academic and emotional success. These positive trends can also be seen in students with MIOGS, as a recent study of 3,121 graduates from all 50 states and Puerto Rico found MIOGS student involvement in co-curricular activities correlated with positive campus climate perceptions (Garvey et al., 2017).

Despite the benefits, MIOGS students can also face challenges when attempting to become involved in campus organizations, including concerns for safety (Forsythe et al., 2023) or only receiving partial acceptance from their peers or mentors (Marine and Nicolazzo, 2014; Miller & Downey, 2020; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). For example, Forsythe et al. (2023), found that students with MIOGS must make calculated decisions on whether to participate in organizations they may be outed in for fear of harassment by their peers or fear of professional ramifications within their fields. To address these concerns, many campuses have organized identity-specific organizations to help increase students’ sense of belonging and persistence through their degrees.

Involvement in MIOGS-specific organizations

A large body of research highlights the benefits and challenges of student involvement in identity-specific organizations on campus. Often, students become involved in identity-specific campus groups and organizations (e.g., MIOGS student organizations) as a way to find support, belonging, and camaraderie with others who hold a similar identity (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Mena & Vaccaro, 2011; Pitcher et al., 2018; Vaccaro & Newman,

2017). Specifically, MIOGS student organizations provide safe and comfortable environments where students can connect, often leading to satisfaction and retention on campus (Pitcher et al., 2018) and providing vital resources and support to LGBTQ students (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Westbrook, 2009). The mere presence of such organizations often has a positive impact on sense of belonging for students with MIOGS, whether or not they participate in the organizations (i.e., as members, attendees, or officers; Forsythe et al., 2023; Garvey et al., 2017; Pitcher et al., 2018; Vaccaro & Newman, 2017). Nicolazzo et al. (2019) discussed the importance of these organizations for trans students, specifically citing the impact of these organizations on trans students' persistence through their collegiate careers by building community and support both on and off campus.

Despite the vast benefits of involvement in MIOGS campus organizations, a few studies also note challenges. Marine and Nicolazzo (2014) found that umbrella organizations focused on the queer community often led to tensions for support and resources, such as how to name centers to include all identities (specifically trans identities), the types of programming offered, and to whom it was offered, and the over /under-representation of specific MIOGS in the staff. Duran and Nicolazzo (2017) found that some MIOGS-focused organizations created toxic environments for trans students who were continuously misgendered, and McKinney (2005) uncovered that staff within MIOGS centers had little education on trans student support. Other scholars have found predominantly white student organizations for MIOGS students to be racist and emotionally exhausting spaces (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011).

In sum, the literature suggests that despite some challenges, involvement in extracurricular activities (general campus-wide or MIOGS-focused) yields educational, social, and identity-related benefits to students. Yet, we know little empirically about campus involvement broadly and involvement in student organizations for MIOGS students majoring in STEM fields.

METHODS

The findings in this paper come from a larger study (Vaccaro et al., 2021) in which we used constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) to answer the following main research question: How do students with MIOGS majoring in STEM experience and navigate campus learning environments and their disciplines/fields? This paper delves deeper into one of the findings from the larger study, which focuses on how college students with MIOGS encounter and experience opportunities for campus involvement.

Setting and Sample

Data for this paper comes from STEM students at three public and one private university in the United States. In grounded theory methods, researchers use purposeful initial sampling (Charmaz, 2014) to identify participants best able to answer the research question. Purposeful initial sampling (Charmaz, 2014) included identifying and inviting students with minoritized sexual and/or gender identities in STEM programs. Therefore, we sent our recruitment materials to the STEM academic departments and campus LGBTQ+ centers/organizations at the four collection sites and posted flyers around the campuses. The recruitment flyer included the following eligibility statement: Any student majoring in a STEM field whose gender and/or sexual identity is minoritized within American society. Having a minoritized gender and/or sexual identity means that at least one of the following two statements accurately describes you: 1) you do not identify as a cisgender woman or man; or 2) you do not identify as heterosexual. While we recognize the ongoing work to be done in relation to the oppression of women in STEM fields, due to our specific focus on interlocking oppressions rooted in cisheteropatriarchy, we only accepted cisgender women participants if they also held a minoritized sexuality. Overall, 56 STEM students participated in the study, comprising 51 undergraduates and five graduate students.

We invited students to self-select all gender and sexuality terms that applied to them. Gender response options included Woman, Man, Transgender, Cisgender, Genderqueer, Not Listed (Please Specify); sexuality response options included Asexual, Bisexual, Gay, Heterosexual, Lesbian, Pansexual, Queer, Questioning, Not Listed (Please Specify). Participants reported their gender identities as: man (24), woman (18), cisgender (14), transgender (7), genderqueer (6), nonbinary (5), female (4), male (2), and agender (1). Sexual identities included: gay

(22), bisexual (18), pansexual (11), lesbian (7), asexual (4), queer (4), questioning (3), gray-asexual (2), dyke (1), gynophile (1), homoromantic (1), panromantic (1), straight (1), and woman-loving-woman (1). Racial demographics mirrored the predominantly white institutions where data were collected—with approximately 20% of the sample identifying as students of color. Racial identities for our sample included: Latinx (4), Black (4), Asian American (2), Arab/North African (1), bi-/multi-racial (2), Native American (2), South Asian (1), and white (45). Participants identified their STEM majors/fields as: engineering (29), computer science (9), biology (5), food science and nutrition (4), environmental science (2), marine science (2), neuroscience (2), kinesiology (1), mathematics (1), and natural resources (1).

Data Collection

We collected data using semi-structured, audio-recorded individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011). Semi-structured individual interviews (Rubin & Rubin, 2011) are a commonly used technique within constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). A semi-structured interview protocol allows for slight variations in the phrasing and sequencing of questions to replicate the norms of a conversation (Charmaz, 2014; Rubin & Rubin, 2011). This form of data collection, however, still establishes sufficient structure to ensure that all participants are asked about the same set of topics core to the inquiry. Due to space constraints and the fact that our semi-structured approach led to questions being asked in a different order and with slightly different phrasing by each of the five interviewers, we do not share our complete protocol here. Instead, we provide examples of semi-structured questions that relate most directly to the topics presented in this article. The interview protocol included questions about student experiences regarding their gender and sexuality in college, in general, and in STEM fields, specifically. We asked questions such as: I'd like to ask you to tell me a little bit more about what it's like to be (gender/sexuality) on this campus and in your field. Participants were also asked: What types of activities are you involved on campus outside of class (employment, student organizations, research assistantships, etc.)? Data from these and other questions led to understandings of the experiences of students with MIOGS in relation to campus involvement, both within and beyond STEM programs.

Data Analysis

Per constructivist grounded theory, we began the data analysis process concurrently with collection and used constant comparative analysis (CCA) to structure this process (Charmaz, 2014). CCA is an iterative process of constantly comparing data points, emerging codes, and categories with the literature and study conclusions. In CCA, researchers begin by assigning initial and selective codes to the data. As our emergent codes and study conclusions pointed toward the importance of campus involvement, we compared our data to the literature and composed this paper to illuminate rich student experiences grounded in their responses and contextualized by the literature (cited earlier).

Our specific procedure is described here. We first analyzed data using an iterative grounded theory CCA process (Charmaz, 2014), assigning 100 initial open codes to the data. The purpose of initial codes is to sort and organize data into manageable segments. Following grounded theory initial coding processes, we assigned selective codes to synthesize initial codes into larger meanings grounded in participant narratives. Selective codes included involvement, lack of involvement, exclusion/stigma in involvement, resources used, campus resources not used, and campus climate for diversity. We concluded our process by analyzing our data in the context of involvement literature that recounts significant benefits to student success and retention (Astin, 1984, 1993; Komives, 2019; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella and Terenzini, 2005; Vetter et al., 2019) and sociopolitical context (Peele, 2023). Through this final stage of our analytic process, we uncovered student narratives that revealed a complex picture of involvement in campus MIOGS organizations.

We used multiple qualitative strategies to establish trustworthiness and credibility, including discrepant case analysis, member checking, expert reviews, and scholar reflexivity on identity and power (Jones et al., 2021). These processes allowed us to ensure that our conclusions accurately described the complexity of involvement experiences from a diverse pool of 56 participants. These trustworthiness strategies also offered participants an opportunity to provide feedback about our emergent study themes through which we received affirmation from

participants that our themes adequately captured their lived experiences. We invited participants to give feedback at multiple points. First, all participants were invited to review transcripts for accuracy. Second, we emailed a document with our main emergent study categories and invited written feedback. Third, we invited participants to participate in the study. We also invited 25 STEM and MIOGS experts on three campuses to six separate presentations where we shared print copies and verbally summarized emergent categories and conclusions. They provided positive verbal feedback about the credibility and trustworthiness of our work.

As a research team, we engage in ongoing reflexivity in relation to our identity and positionality. Our team includes five of six authors holding a minoritized sexual and/or gender identity. All authors are active in social justice and student advocacy through research, administration, and/or teaching. Given that multiple authors of this paper self-identify as people with minoritized sexual or gender identities, we acknowledge the impact this undoubtedly had on participant recruitment and willingness to share personal experiences. At biweekly research team meetings, we used reflexivity to interrogate our privileged identities—namely, our team being predominantly white—and the impact our racial identities had on both our recruitment of participants and our analysis of our findings. We asked ourselves questions like: How might race, racism, and white privilege impact every aspect of our process (recruitment, collection, analysis, writing)? We engaged in tough conversations and called out one another if/when we believed whiteness was shaping any aspect of our process or product. We worked to mitigate study-related power through ongoing process consent before, during, and after the interview (e.g., thank you emails and member checking). We also addressed interviewer/interviewee power differentials by ensuring that none of the interviewers had a direct power-laden relationship with students (e.g., professor, advisor, and supervisor) on campus.

Limitations

Although we attempted to mitigate many of the challenges associated with our study, there are some areas where different choices could have strengthened our work. First, we focused this study broadly on STEM and campus experiences of MIOGS students, and involvement was one of the many topics covered in the interview protocol. Had this study focused exclusively on organizational involvement (including questions about the specific organizations at each campus), the findings may have been more complex. Second, our grounded theory methodology does not capture specific and detailed data about campus contexts (e.g., structures, policies, and climates) beyond the co-constructed notions of campus perceptions shared within the interviews. This could affect our ability to understand the importance of institutional context for participant experiences.

FINDINGS

In this section, we share the ways participants both had positive experiences, yet often encountered barriers related to engaging in MIOGS campus student groups. As readers engage with the narratives below, we encourage constant reflection on the temporal limits of this data and imagined present realities for the participants in this study.

Positive Involvement Experiences with MIOGS Groups on Campus

Many students discussed the positive effects participating in MIOGS-affirming spaces had on both their social and academic well-being. Given that many STEM spaces felt cis-heteropatriarchal and carried high academic stress, participants expressed relief in the ability to find a community that allowed them to feel safer to express themselves and provided a place of reprieve, an escape from the everyday struggles of their personal and academic lives.

One of the most prominent benefits of participating in MIOGS campus groups is finding a sense of community. Students discussed how a sense of community was important to both their mental well-being and in building a network of friends across academic spaces. For example, Lance, a gay man, mentioned how he felt the Gender and Sexuality Center on campus helped him relax from academia:

The Gender and Sexuality Center is a nice place to go sometimes...I have a friend that works there, so I often go to events, things like that. And I guess it's a way to get away from the academic aspect a bit and just sort of relax a bit.

Jack, a gay man, discussed that it was only after finding a queer community on campus that he felt able to be more himself. Jack discussed how he made friends through the multiple clubs on campus that gave him the confidence to be himself in various spaces, regardless of who was around:

A lot of my daily experiences and daily interactions now are with other queer people around campus. Especially with some of the organizations that I'm involved with. I've made more and more friends that are queer...so if I see them on campus, I am much more outward [in] who I am because I feel comfortable with them. I feel like I can do that, and I can be on top of the world with them, regardless of whether or not we're in the quad right out here, or if we're in a classroom or something. It's just easier because they're there with me, I guess.

Likewise, Flint, a gay cisgender man, spoke about how he found community in a group designated for queer students in the first year:

It was very nice to have a little get-together club...that was just like other LGBT people, whether they were in my field or not, it was just like a nice escape, I guess. It was once a week I think maybe, maybe once or twice a week, but it was just very nice. It got me through the week and was something to do. I don't know. They always made me feel good. And nowadays when I go into the MRC (Multicultural Resource Center) and I see new people all the time walking in I'm like, 'I've seen you walking around campus, I never knew you were a part of the community.' It's always nice.

These quotes highlight the impacts of students' participation in groups on their sense of belonging on campus. These experiences also helped students further develop their social and communication skills, as participating in the organizations allowed them to grow in a safe environment. For example, Cato explains:

I'm a super shy person, but when I went to Spectrum, they forced me to talk. So um, it's good. It's great, because you know, once you start talking it's just like...keeps going and going. That's how you make friends really.

Other participants found it difficult to find community and a sense of belonging but, through the interview process, began thinking that perhaps MIOGS campus groups could be a starting point in finding community. Finn shared:

It's hard to network when you're a minority and you're looking for other people that are in the same boat with you...So, these student organizations that you've mentioned would probably be a great start.

Here, Finn expressed both the difficulty in finding community but also that he could perceive the benefits of participating in the groups mentioned in the interview.

Barriers to Involvement in MIOGS Groups on Campus

While many participants spoke to the positive impacts of involvement, many participants noted several barriers to participation in MIOGS-focused campus groups. These barriers ranged from personal concerns to structural issues of access. While participants often shared multiple overlapping barriers that affected their willingness and/or ability to get involved in campus MIOGS groups, we present them as categorized issues below to help identify specific areas of concern and move toward possible recommendations for campus activities coordinators.

Danger in Participation. Participants shared that they felt anxiety around participating in MIOGS-focused organizations, fears that ranged from outing oneself by being seen to having to go alone without the support of friends or other members in their community. Some participants shared issues related to visibility, as they felt being seen in MIOGS spaces could pose a potential threat to their academic and/or social networks. This is especially pertinent for students with MIOGS in STEM, as STEM spaces are particularly unwelcoming to those who identify as queer and trans, both at the academic (Miller et al., 2021b) and professional levels (Cech, 2017). While many faculty and administrators advocate broadly for more MIOGS visibility on campuses through orga-

nizations, the hiring of individuals with MIOsG, and MIOsG-focused events, individual visibility can be deemed as dangerous, and those with MIOsG often practice strategic invisibility as a choice of personal safety or political reasoning (Nicolazzo, 2019). Asha, a bisexual, pansexual, and queer woman, described her anxiety at seeing a classmate at a LGBTQ+ Women's group:

We both saw each other, and we're at the meeting, but after that, I'm nervous seeing her in class because in case conversations go that way, and I get nervous about what other people might think because it's definitely... a sort of thing. I don't think anyone in class would outright say something, but I think I wouldn't put [it past] people [to] talk about it behind my back or bring it up that way. So, it makes me nervous to talk to her now, which is stupid, and it shouldn't be that way, but yeah.

Here, Asha highlights the way that attending an event led to distress in her class as she attempted to balance finding community among the LGBTQ+ Women's group with her decision to not be out publicly in her major, a space that she deemed as unsafe to her MIOsG. Asha highlights the connection between visibility and fear of being outed and or harmed (Nicolazzo, 2019), an aspect that requires STEM students with MIOsG to weigh elements of danger against their desire for community.

Several participants shared other safety concerns related to attending MIOsG groups alone. For example, Nia, a bisexual and questioning cisgender woman, initially described her lack of participation because she was unaware of what opportunities existed. However, as Nia began to explain, it became apparent that she also held anxiety about attending the meetings alone:

In high school, I had my friends who knew and supported me. I even had some that went to clubs with me, and we were all on the executive board of the club and it was so great, and then I got here, and I didn't know anyone, so I didn't feel comfortable going to the meetings by myself. I tried to go to one by myself and everyone knew each other, and I was just standing there, and I was like, "Oh no." And I left. Panic. I'd like to go again, but again, I don't really have any LGB people who are anything other than heterosexual here, sad. Sad. If I did, I'm sure I'd go with them, but I don't really have any friends. Sad.

Nia's experience highlights the ways in which the transition from high school to college can be especially difficult for students who find it challenging to find community. For those with MIOsG, community can serve as a protective factor against harm, with a lack of community increasing experiences of danger. Familiarity and community can never assure complete protection for those with MIOsG, but it decreases the odds of individual targeted attacks on emotional, physical, and professional safety. In sum, several students reported varying levels of danger in being seen or going alone to MIOsG clubs and organizations—despite their desire to get involved and meet people.

Inactive Groups and Physical Space Constraints. Another notable barrier participants identified related to finding information about MIOsG campus groups was the accuracy of this information and the consistency of group meeting times and locations. Nolan, a gay cisgender man, described his disappointment in finding the clubs he was interested in joining were listed as inactive on the campus organizations website:

When I went to orientation, we had split off from the main presentation into smaller groups that were led by students that already attend here and they had mentioned [a website] here to find all the organizations. It sounds silly but when I moved here, I barely know anyone here. I knew one person at this campus before I applied so the friend network is not very expansive right now, so I really made it a goal this semester to make at least five friends and I wanted some of them to be LGBT. I went to [the website where organizations are listed] to see if there were any LGBT groups and there's three and they're all inactive. They were from people that had graduated three or four years ago. I was like, oh well, there goes that.

What made Nolan's experience even more troubling was that many of these clubs were active, but the website on which they were listed had not been updated. Nolan had missed out on joining these organizations because a website served as a barrier for connection.

Kylie, a gay, lesbian, and queer cisgender woman, had a different frustration than Nolan. While Kylie's organization did exist, it was very hard to find a dedicated space to meet in. She said:

Like for example, Spectrum. We just kind of meet in random rooms wherever there was room. One time we met in the theater. That was last semester, the only time they met. We're just kind of meeting in the room next to Einstein's bagels or one of the rooms in the union upstairs...We are so far behind in this state. Partially because we don't have things like a center for example, it's not that difficult. I mean how many rooms are there on campus? I mean with all the buildings and stuff you have on campus; how hard would it be to set up a room? It doesn't need to be huge. It just needs to be something.

Kylie's raw frustration can be read in this quote as she communicates how not having a steady meeting room feeds into her perception that her state is so far behind in supporting people with MIOGS. Kylie went on to mention that many of the MIOGS-related groups she participated in struggled to maintain steady involvement, resulting in disorganization and lack of consistency:

This semester there's been one meeting so far (for a MIOGS group) and I was one of four people who showed up. I've tried to get involved with Spectrum. The problem is that group is going through a lot of changes right in this moment. Last semester they were just dead. They did one meeting and then we're dead. This semester, they have done one meeting and I don't know what happened to a secondary meeting that was supposed to happen. I didn't hear anything.

Aldo, a pansexual man, spoke to many of the same concerns as Kylie and Nolan. While Aldo did discuss how an MIOGS group he was part of helped him make friends, he also described how the disorganization of the clubs led to difficulty in being involved:

I would describe it as a lot less connected, I think, than I thought, just because it seems like there's not really ... besides the LGBT Center, it's hard to interact with other LGBT groups or coordinate with them. I have had friendships with LGBT people on campus, but generally they're just random relationships. They're not really through any program or organization.

Simple actions by faculty, administration, and staff could help alleviate some of these barriers. For example, Camila, a lesbian, queer, dyke, gay woman, shared her experience in wanting to start her own MIOGS campus group. She received the support of professors but was empowered herself to organize and run it:

I organized everything, but they (the professors) helped reserving the space and everything, and it was great, because a lot of people showed up, so I'm really happy about it. It turned out really well. Yeah, so that was actually really, really cool.

Camila's example highlights the ways in which students can, and should, have agency over their own clubs and organizations, but through the support of those in positions of power at the university, they can more effectively handle the logistical hurdles of areas such as space.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Involvement literature touts the benefits of student participation in clubs and organizations (Astin, 1984, 1993; Komives, 2019; Mayhew et al., 2016; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Renn & Arnold, 2003; Vetter et al., 2019). Some of our data align with these prior works to show that students can have positive experiences, build community, and find an escape from their academic stressors when participating in campus organizations designed for MIOGS students. Given the socio-political context of anti-MIOGS legislation across the U.S. (Peele, 2023),

campus organizations for MIOGS students may play an increasingly important role as safe spaces within the larger campus and community context of MIOGS oppression. We find this point especially salient given that these data were collected prior to the recent influx of anti-MIOGS policies. At the time of data collection, participants came from varying sociopolitical contexts ranging from rural conservative to urban liberal spaces, and their experiences varied in alignment with these contexts. While the U.S. has historically held geographical pockets of relative safety for students with MIOGS, current political shifts are creating increasingly tenuous spaces for students with MIOGS. As such, these findings illuminate that the nuanced barriers to involvement in MIOGS (and non-MIOGS) organizations are more important than ever.

Our findings also align with limited literature that suggests the benefits of campus involvement are complicated for students with MIOGS (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; McKinney, 2005; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). Our data suggest that students worried about being outed or experienced anxiety about attending meetings and events alone. Students with MIOGS often find themselves positioned as responsible for educating others on what is problematic and harmful in relation to their identities in collegiate spaces (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017), adding to the anxiety many students might already feel when entering new spaces. Moreover, our data align with prior research suggesting the ways in which intersecting identities can further complicate involvement experiences for students with MIOGS (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011), especially students within STEM. The students interviewed in this study often spoke to the added complexity of holding a MIOGS in STEM, as they often needed to seek spaces outside of their major to find community; however, they were simultaneously nervous to be spotted by those within their major while participating in affinity organizations. In the following section, we offer recommendations for student affairs professionals to enhance the benefits of MIOGS involvement while minimizing the challenges experienced by our participants.

In alignment with prior literature (Vaccaro & Newman, 2017), our participants noted sense of community and belonging to be the most common benefits of MIOGS organizations. In this current sociopolitical environment, where anti-MIOGS legislation is proliferating, one of the most important things involvement professionals can do is ensure that clubs and organizations for students with MIOGS continue to operate on campus. Campus activities professionals are on the front lines of helping students identify involvement opportunities, providing logistical support (e.g., budget, officer elections, space reservations) for campus organizations. Professionals also have an important role in advocating for the importance of identity-based organizations to campus leaders who may be indifferent or hostile to such organizations. We hope that student voices in this paper about the benefits of MIOGS organizations provide an impetus for campus activities professionals to challenge campus efforts to close or defund organizations for MIOGS students.

Fear of being outed is real. Given the U.S. sociopolitical landscape (Peele, 2023), student affairs professionals must recognize the inherent dangers mentioned by our participants about being outed on campus as a result of MIOGS involvement. As advisors, campus activities professionals can work with MIOGS organizations to develop guidelines for participation. This might include creating community norms at the beginning of each semester where students can share their expectations on identity sharing, comfort with outness, and hopes for interactions beyond the group setting. Advisors may need to regularly remind leadership (who are often composed of out activists) that not all students with MIOGS are comfortable being publicly out. Advisors can also work with student leaders to engage in activism to fight systems of oppression on and off campus in a way that honors the outness comfort levels of all members of the organization. Additionally, advisors can work alongside STEM professors to help educate and support professors in creating a safer and more welcoming STEM environment.

Students in our study reported anxiety about going alone to MIOGS clubs and organizations—despite their desire to get involved and meet people. Campus activities professionals can develop programs and initiatives to respond to this fear—such as hosting new member nights where potential new members are welcomed into the fold. Or resident assistants can host programs where they invite groups of students to attend MIOGS events or meetings on campus. This way, students are not walking to a meeting alone.

Students like Nia teach us that new attendees can feel like outsiders when everyone in the group already knows each other. Advisors can work with student organization leaders and members to develop meeting practices (e.g., introductions, get-to-know-you activities) at the beginning of each meeting so that all new attendees feel included. Advisors can also remind current members of how important it is to be intentional about welcoming new members into the community.

Some of our participants were excited to participate in identity-affirming student organizations upon arrival to campus. Unfortunately, students like Kylie often get excited about joining a student organization, only to find out that the club is inactive. Student affairs professionals must keep better track of and publicize which clubs and organizations are operational, when they are meeting, and who the officers are. Websites or programs like OrgSync can be incredible resources—only if they are kept up to date with contact and meeting information. We also contend that it is important for student affairs professionals to ensure that identity-based groups flourish on campus—especially when there is a change in leadership or a new school year. Sometimes campus activities professionals take a hands-off approach to organizations—letting them ebb and flow as student leadership and interests increase and/or wane. Given the student voices in this paper, we propose that student affairs professionals might want to take a more hands-on approach to ensure that identity-based groups do not go defunct. This might mean providing extra support and advising for clubs, encouraging leadership training and succession, and possibly additional funding to ensure that these organizations do not end up inactive. Finally, campus activities professionals can work collaboratively with student leaders and gender and sexuality centers to intentionally advertise organizations and foster interest and attendance at meetings.

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