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Orlando's Pulse: Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education After a Tragedy

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ORLANDO'S PULSE: DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION
IN HIGHER EDUCATION AFTER A TRAGEDY

by

Jennifer C. Sands

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Abstract

by Jennifer C. Sands

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2018

The Pulse Nightclub Tragedy in Orlando shocked the nation, after a gunman who identified as being Muslim walked in to a gay nightclub and gunned down 49 people and injured 53 more. In addition to the LGBTQ+ community being targeted, the Latinx community had been targeted as well, considering it was Latin night. With many of those affected being of traditional college age, local colleges and universities took action to offer support. Focusing on the Pulse shooting, I explored the ways in which higher education institutions offered support after this tragedy occurred, while reviewing other tragedies and the responses by local colleges and universities. By using a document study of newspapers, institutional publications, and literature, I looked for information on how students were supported and noted best practices by the institutions which offered the most support to minority student groups. Additionally, I examined the themes and patterns regarding inclusion and what tactics were helpful for higher education institutions that could be implemented after a tragedy.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On Sunday, June 12, 2016, what was then the worst mass shooting in modern history occurred in Orlando, Florida at Pulse Nightclub, a club dedicated to the LGBTQ+ community but welcoming all. To have such an incident happen in a town you have grown to love, and in a place where plenty of friends have gone, felt unnerving. However, what I quickly began to think of is how this incident had targeted more than the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, Queering/Questioning, Intersex, Asexual, and others unnamed or yet to be identified (LGBTQ+) community. I recognized that this incident also involved the Latinx community, considering it was Latin Night the evening of the shooting and, in some ways, also involved the Muslim and MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) communities since the attacker identified as such. While this did not remain the worst shooting in modern history, it is worth noting that this event is still the largest shooting event targeting minority group(s) in modern U.S. history as of this date.

In the days that followed the Pulse tragedy, there was something inspiring that happened and seems to continue throughout Orlando: the city came together. As a member of the Central Florida community, I saw how we lifted each other up and wiped each other's tears. We held memorials, gathered together in support, and in 2017 we recognized June 12 as Orlando United Day, a day of love and kindness. But we had to return—or try to return—to our lives as they once were.

Working in higher education, this was difficult. Many of those who lost their lives were of the ages of my students, colleagues, and myself. Some of the victims and

survivors were in college themselves. And when students returned to classes the Monday following the tragedy, a little more than 24 hours after the incident, many were unsure if it was safe to do so.

Students from the targeted communities, that being students who identified as being part of the Latinx community, those who identified as being Muslim or as being someone from the MENA regions, and especially those from the LGBTQ+ community, seemed to have an overwhelming sense of fear upon returning to their daily lives. For these marginalized groups of people, facing adversity was not a new occurrence, but a sad truth of daily life. However, being part of an attack on this scale might have been new for many people in these communities. I do include those who identified as Muslim or as being from the MENA region because the attacker identified himself as being a Muslim and identified as having ancestry from the MENA region of the world. As a result of this, there could easily have been a potential backlash that might have occurred as the result of the shooter's identity and his actions.

For many students who identified as LGBTQ+ going off to college perhaps represented the first time that they had the ability to be a bit more themselves, and they could experience a real sense of freedom when going to a local gay bar or club. For LGBTQ+ students (along with the larger community), having a safe space attacked—perhaps the only place they had ever felt safe—meant that many felt there was no longer a place of comfort or safety. Prior to the attack, this group had faced numerous hate crimes and discrimination, including the denial of marriage rights until 2015, although there continue to be struggles regarding this and other matters, such as adoption of children. Additionally, various religious groups, political parties, and organizations have spoken out against the LGBTQ+ community, resulting in many who have identified as

LGBTQ+ continuing to hide their true identities. Thus, when the group's sacred place—in this case a gay nightclub—was attacked, it resulted in a feeling of great loss for the community, and a feeling of significant loss that a place that was once safe for them to show their true identities was now gone.

Students who identified as being part of the Latinx community also returned to school with grief and pain. Many of the victims who were targeted identified as being part of the Latinx community who were celebrating Latin Night the evening of the shooting. For these students, seeing the images of the victims meant seeing people who shared their physical attributes. Orlando, and Florida as a whole, having a large population of people identifying as being part of the Latinx community meant that many students returned to classes unsettled by the events that resulted in the death of many of their community members.

Lastly, students who practiced Islam or identified as being from the MENA region have faced the potential for others to place blame on them since the shooter identified as being Muslim with Afghan ancestry. Unfortunately, this was nothing new to those who identify as being Muslim or identify as having MENA ancestry, as media often perpetuates the image of MENA or Muslim persons as attackers. Even though this is a biased stereotype that is not true, in times of tragedy it is not uncommon for some to search for groups to blame. In such instances, many who identify as being part of the communities the perpetrator was associated with might become victim to hateful speech and physical violence. When this occurs, students who might identify as Muslim or were from the MENA region might face similar feelings of fear, grief, and pain.

Whenever there is a tragedy such as the Pulse Nightclub shooting, it is difficult for everyone to return to daily life, but especially for the groups that were victims as a

result of an attack. We have seen multiple school shootings from elementary schools to universities, we have seen churches and movie theaters attacked, we have seen various business and governmental facilities targeted, in addition to an increase in hate crimes and the beatings and killings of black-Americans and other minority groups at the hands of police officials. Experiencing these events on a regular basis via news and media has resulted in an increase of fear and grief in our students. As I continue to discuss such incidents, I will often use the term *tragedy* to include hate crimes, mass shootings (which by many sources is considered four or more people killed), the overuse of police power which results in serious injury or death, and any other instance where a minority group member is injured or killed. While this will include many events, it is important to note that every such occurrence affects our students who identify with the victims of such incidents.

I have long felt that education is part of the answer to overcoming hate and violence in our society. But how do educators implement this? And does such a focus of educational efforts only come about after such tragedies? Should this not be on the forefront of every agenda within higher education? Regardless of whether this has been implemented or not, I could not help but question whether this tragedy provided the local colleges and universities the push to ensure that every aspect of their institution made diversity and inclusion a valuable element of campus life.

Following any such tragedy, especially the Pulse Nightclub shooting, I have found myself asking, “How do I acknowledge this? How do I assure my students that they are safe?” It was shortly after the Pulse tragedy that I realized one way to indirectly answer these questions was to review our course material and see how we could make the classes more inclusive of all groups that reflected our diverse population of students. In

this way, I could show my students that they are valuable and their experience is important to me as an educator.

It has now been over a year since the Orlando Pulse Tragedy. While this incident is still fresh in many of the minds of our students, I wanted to see if the local colleges and universities were still diligent in their dedication to diversity and inclusion. There are three higher education institutions in particular that I will be focusing on: Valencia College, Rollins College, and the University of Central Florida. Valencia College is the state/community college serving Orlando and the surrounding areas and has several campuses around the community. Their student body has a large Hispanic population with 34% of their students identifying as such. Valencia College lost the most students in the Pulse tragedy, losing seven students that evening. Rollins College is the liberal arts private college in Winter Park, just north of downtown Orlando. Its student body is predominately white (57%), but focuses on diversity and inclusion through various groups that focus on culture, one being Spectrum, the LGBTQ+ Alliance Club. University of Central Florida (UCF) is the public university located in East Orlando, which has the largest number of students enrolled in the United States and boasts a large population of minority students (45.8%), with the number of Hispanic students being 24.9%. UCF lost one student and one alumnus in the Pulse tragedy.

The goal for my thesis is to learn about the support that was in place before the Pulse tragedy, what (if any) programs were implemented after, and if the higher education institutions I am exploring have worked to be more inclusive in all aspects of the students' college experience. In this thesis, I look to explore: Did higher education institutions offer support to minority students after tragedies? In what ways? What can higher education institutions do to offer support to minority students after tragedies?

What tactics implemented by colleges and universities have been successful? Lastly, what can higher education institutions do to prepare for such tragedies?

To accomplish this, I completed a document study reviewing local and nationwide news articles, college articles and published material, and literature. By reviewing what was previously published, it allowed me to understand what the campus culture was for the higher education institutions I studied both prior to and after a tragedy has taken place. Additionally, this allowed me to examine various documents to provide an impartial view of diversity and inclusion practices within higher education.

Chapter 1 has provided an introduction and motivation for my thesis. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth look at the literature that is crucial to this study. In Chapter 3, I present the methods I used in this study and the rationale for their selection. In the remaining two chapters, I discuss my findings and conclusions. I outline what my research has found, highlighting what has seemed to work and discuss the reason why some efforts have or have not been successful. I end this thesis by sharing important conclusions, noting useful practices for institutions responding to tragedies, identifying areas for future research, and making recommendations as to what we—both the Orlando community and higher learning institutions—should do in the future.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In preparation for this research, I focused my literature review in a few specific areas. To start, I looked at how selected tragedies—including a hate crime, mass shooting, the overuse of police power that results in serious injury or death, and other instances where a minority group member is injured or killed—have affected students in higher education and how these institutions responded to such situations. I then looked specifically at the Pulse Nightclub tragedy, where the people who were attacked identified as being part of the LGBTQ+ community and where a majority of those who were in attendance were part of the Latinx community. Furthermore, the gunman identified himself as being Muslim and of MENA (Middle-Eastern, North African) ancestry, and as such, I searched to find what higher education institutions did to prepare for a potential backlash against Muslim and MENA students. With these minority groups being at the center of this tragedy, I specifically looked to see if diversity and inclusion became a primary focus for colleges and universities and looked to see what research I could find in regards to implementing any related initiatives.

Tragedy Targeting Minority Groups

Over the last few years, there has been an increase in such tragedies. Kelley R. Taylor (2017), writer for INSIGHT Into Diversity, reported,

In 2015, there were reportedly more hate crimes committed against Muslims than there had been since 2001. At that time, in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the FBI noted a 1,600 percent increase in hate crimes against Arabs and Muslims. Recently, the FBI's Hate Crime Statistics report indicated that such actions against Muslims rose 67 percent in one year—from 2014 to 2015. (para. 4)

However, Muslims are not the only group that are being targeted. In an interview Taylor (2017) had with Evelyn Alsultany, Ph.D., Associate Professor and Director of the Arab and Muslim American studies program at the University of Michigan, Alsultany stated,

What distinguishes current events is how racist discourse is unapologetic and blatant and comes from the highest office in the country. . . . The result has been an increase in hate crimes against many groups—Muslims, Jews, immigrants, African Americans—from those who feel empowered and emboldened to voice and enact their racist perspectives. (para. 10)

Taylor also interviewed Tammi Rossman-Benjamin, a Co-Founder and the Director of the AMCHA Initiative—an organization devoted to protecting Jewish students—who added to this stating, “There are hundreds of acts of hatred and intolerance targeting [not only Jewish individuals, but also] Muslims, African Americans, LGBTQ individuals, immigrants, women, and people who hold divergent ideological and political viewpoints” (para. 14). As the number of these tragedies increase, the need to look closer at how it affects our students becomes more vital.

Impact on students in higher education. When tragedies occur, there may be students who are unable to cope with such incidents and there are a range of ways students have reacted to such events. Some gather to support one another. Some arrange protests. Some may even challenge the lack of support students feel with campus administration. In one such incident, violence broke out near and on the campus of the University of Virginia as a result of a “Unite the Right” protest (McLaughlin, 2017). According to Nell Gluckman (2017), writer for The Chronicle of Higher Education, students at the University of Virginia had several heated debates with administration after it appeared that the university failed to deny access to a white-supremacist rally that occurred on campus. In this instance, it appeared that the university failed to offer a safe

and welcoming environment for their students, which is generally one of the objectives in diversity and inclusion initiatives.

In other situations, students may not directly address the issues with college officials and often live in fear of being targeted. In 2015, three Muslim students were shot and killed in Chapel Hill, North Carolina in what was believed to be a hate crime according to Saeed Ahmed, senior editor for *CNN*, and Catherine E. Shoichet (2015), senior writer for *CNN*. Madeline Will (2015), writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Education Week*, reported that the local colleges and universities attempted to be more inclusive, leading Duke University to announce that they would sound the call to prayer from the bell tower, only to reverse the decision after a Christian evangelist condemned the decision and asked donors to withhold financial contributions. Situations such as this lead to fear among students who identify with being part of a minority group or groups.

These incidents are not the only ones that minority groups have faced. Damon Williams, Ph.D. (2017), Chief Catalyst for the Center for Strategic Diversity Leadership and Social Innovation and Senior Scholar and Innovation Fellow at Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory wrote,

Microaggressions and overtly hostile interactions between diverse groups are reported to be increasing; these include racial incidents in dorms, ideological conflicts, and professors of color being afraid to teach. Diverse student groups have been vocalizing their experiences of exclusion and pain via social media. And leaders spoke of the tragedy that took place outside the University of Virginia's campus in Charlottesville, fearing the wrong amalgam of emotions, ideologies, and hate on their campuses. (para. 5)

This results in overwhelming feelings of fear among all minority groups on campus.

Donovan R. Walling (2017), senior consultant for the Center for Civic Education,

supported these sentiments, discussing the callousness of the 2016 presidential election and continued by stating,

Teachers at all levels have reported negative effects, students made fearful by racist, xenophobic, antigay, speech at one end of the spectrum and, at the other end, students emboldened to be oppressors, freely hurling hate speech and menacing those who were targeted. (p. 95)

Response by higher education institutions. While there are plenty of examples where a higher learning institution could have provided a safer or more welcoming space for students from minority groups, there are examples where colleges and universities have supported their students to ensure their experience was one that allowed for growth and healing. Colleen Murphy (2015), writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, discussed one such situation involving the students at Harris-Stowe State University in St. Louis who were supported by the university's president, Dwaun J. Warmack. After the killing of eighteen-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson (Ferguson unrest, 2015), Warmack implemented a multi-step plan to ensure that not only the students would feel supported, but also the surrounding community. Warmack, according to Murphy, focused on working with the community, establishing connections with the local K-12 schools by having students of the university tutor children, walking them to school, and inviting them to campus to see what college life was like. Warmack then continued the discussion on campus over the following year, where 17 events—by way of small group discussions and town hall meetings—revisited the events in Ferguson. Warmack supported the reactions of his students, which included a prayer circle after the police officer was not indicted, as well as another “group of Harris-State students [who] formed a ‘human line’ to try to thwart the protesters” that faced off against the police (Murphy, 2015, para. 17). Murphy also noted that Warmack brought in community members to

have discussions with students, “including the police chiefs of St. Louis and St. Louis County” where students could have these talks and aid in the healing process (para. 21). The way in which this university president addressed the tragedies that faced the larger community and his students specifically, was exemplary. Rather than initially focusing on such events and potentially moving past/forgetting them, the university’s actions of continuing to address the issues that their students and the community faced showed the ongoing support they offered to their students.

In Taylor’s (2017) interview with Rossman-Benjamin, she addressed the importance of a university’s stand against intolerance. Taylor said, “She points to the University of California’s 2016 Regents’ ‘Principles Against Intolerance,’ which outlines the university’s policies for addressing intolerance and fostering a mutually respectful environment on its campuses” (para. 17). Taylor went on to say that Rossman-Benjamin

believes those principles—which, in part, call on the regents to ‘actively challenge anti-Semitism and other forms of discrimination within the university community’ and to ‘educate members of the community to recognize, understand, and avoid biases, stereotypes, and prejudices’—can serve as a blueprint for other universities. (para. 17)

In this way, she called upon universities to stand against intolerance and to provide education, not only for the students who attend, but also in the community that surrounds their campuses.

There are some other approaches that universities take as well. As hate crimes and discrimination rose on the University of Michigan campus, there was, according to Taylor (2017), a focus in three areas: “resource building, crisis support, and education” (para. 18). Additionally, Taylor reported, the Islamophobia Working Group, a campus group that worked to address anti-Muslim and anti-Arab sentiment, had “upcoming initiatives range from providing numerous resources for crisis response, support,

reporting, and counseling, to adding more prayer spaces on campus, to making changes to textbooks to better reflect Arab culture” (para. 18).

Similarly, there have been some higher education institutions, such as University of North Carolina, who have required students to take a diversity course as part of their required plan of study which “educates [students] about concepts like cross-cultural analysis and communication” (Taylor, 2017, para. 19). There have been some colleges and universities, Taylor asserted, that have also implemented “interfaith campaigns and created groups to encourage mutual understanding among people of different religions” (para. 20). In this way, educating students on cultural differences and encouraging understanding has helped students and the community come together during times of tragedy and daily interactions.

While having courses on diversity and statements against intolerance is vital for diversity and inclusion, a plan needs to be in place to address such instances after tragedies occur. Williams (2017) wrote,

We need to be proactive in diversity crisis readiness. Thus, all colleges should add diversity crisis preparedness to their crisis management plan. Just as every institution should have an active-shooter plan, they should have one to manage incidents related to diversity and inclusion. In the words of one leader, “When you’re dealing with emotions, conflicting ideologies, campus visitors, and as we saw in Virginia, the presence of weapons, that is something that is...more complex than even an active-shooter scenario.” (para. 8)

The way in which a college or university responds to such incidents is a reflection on the school as a whole. As Williams said, there is a complexity to such situations, and the way it is addressed can affect the students who attend the school.

Pulse Tragedy

On June 12, 2016, one of the worst mass shootings targeting the LGBTQ+ community occurred. This resulted in the killing of 49 people and injured another 53

(Zambelich & Hurt, 2016). The previous deadliest attack on the LGBTQ+ community occurred in 1973 when someone poured lighter fluid on the stairs that led to the Upstairs Lounge in New Orleans, which trapped and killed 32 people after it was lit (Ravitz, 2016). This tragedy did not have the same responses as the Pulse Nightclub tragedy. Jessica Ravitz (2016), reporter for *CNN*, stated there were no vigils or condolences, and very little media coverage at all. When the Pulse tragedy occurred, Lindsay Kincaide (as cited in Ozanne, 2016), director of development for Two Spirit Health Services, stated,

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Community Center of Central Florida served as the base of operations, with other free counseling locations established throughout the Orlando area, including LGBT-friendly bars. All told, nearly 700 people – ranging from licensed counselors, psychologists, pet therapists, interpreters and social workers – volunteered their time in the days and weeks following the shooting to assist hundreds of people. (para. 9)

Orlando, according to Mitch Perry (2017), reporter for Extensive Enterprises, has consistently supported the LGBTQ+ community, as evident by receiving a perfect score from the Human Rights Campaign's Municipal Equality Index. While the support for the community was there, there was an element of the tragedy that was largely missed in the media coverage. Kathy Wong(Lau), Justin Lincks, Kim Claxton, Deborah O'Dell, Corey Davidson, Katie Tate, Cheryl Ponder, Kathie Nicoletti, Jeremiah Stinnett, and London Bulgarelli, (2016), NCORE (National Conference on Race and Ethnicity) staff members, called our attention to the fact that there was no acknowledgement of “the racial and ethnic dimensions of identities and the brutal loss of such a large number of Queer Latinx people struck down by hate” (para. 2). This tragedy targeted the LGBTQ+ community and the Latinx community. At the same time, the shooter identified as a Muslim with MENA ancestry, which added to the multiple minority groups that were involved.

Impact on students and targeted communities. After the Pulse shooting, many were at a loss for what had occurred. Deborah Beidel (as cited in Cole, 2016), Founding Director for UCF Restores and Professor of Psychology, recalled a memory that impacted her,

I went down to the vigil at Lake Eola, and as we were standing there and they were reading off the names of the victims, I heard people behind me really sobbing. There were actually 4 or 5 young people there. A couple of them were in UCF shirts, and I just opened my arms to the girl right behind me, hugged her, and she hugged me so hard and so long. All I could think of was when I was her age, I was trying to figure out what classes I was going to take in the fall, and here she was obviously having lost someone, and her entire emerging adulthood [was] just shattered by the horror of this whole event. (para. 58)

In addition to the great sorrow that many people felt, the Pulse tragedy called attention to the need for inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community. Shane Windmeyer (2016), founder and executive director of Campus Pride, wrote, “Today, while the LGBT progress and momentum continue to build on college campuses, the bulk of the work is still happening on the backs of out LGBT students, faculty, and staff, who are responsible for their own safety” (para. 4). Windmeyer went on to discuss how some colleges and universities were starting to allocate funds for designated personnel to focus on LGBTQ+ concerns, however there were a mere 229 higher education institutions out of the 4,500+ institutions in the United States who have paid employees running an office or center for LGBTQ+ students. Windmeyer also reported, “when it comes to LGBT-inclusive nondiscrimination policies, only 26 percent of campuses nationwide prohibit discrimination based on ‘sexual orientation,’ and less than 13 percent include ‘gender identity and expression’” (para. 5).

After a tragedy such as Pulse occurs, Jared Misner (2016), writer for *Charlotte* magazine, noted, LGBTQ+ students live in greater fear for their safety. Windmeyer

(2016) shared the findings from a 2010 study that indicated, “nearly a quarter of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, faculty, and staff faced harassment on campus compared with 39 percent of transgender students, faculty, and staff” (para. 7). Windmeyer (2016) added to this stating, “more than a third of transgender respondents feared for their physical safety on campus. These percentages increased for LGBT people of color and trans people of color” (para. 7). After the Pulse tragedy, assuring students of the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities of their safety was and continues to be essential.

As noted earlier, the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities were not the only ones impacted by the Pulse tragedy. At the University of Central Florida, according to Beckie Supiano (2016a), writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Maha Qureshi, president of the Muslim Student Association, was among the first to enter the Pride Commons—a place designated as a safe space for LGBTQ+ students—after the shooting. This student helped to support the vigil at the University of Central Florida and spoke at the event stating that “the Muslim and LGBTQ communities have something in common: the struggle to be authentic when others judge your identity” (as cited in Supiano, 2016a, para. 16). With multiple minority groups at the center of this tragedy, many students belonging to these communities were left with a sense of uneasiness returning to daily life.

Response by local higher education institutions. Prior to the Pulse tragedy, all three higher education institutions in Orlando, Florida, had LGBTQ+ student groups. As noted on their Facebook page, Valencia’s East Campus had the Gay-Straight Alliance, which was founded in 2009. Rollins College had an LGBTQ+ student group known as Spectrum that was first organized in 2012 (Center for Inclusion and Campus Involvement, n.d.). The University of Central Florida not only offered a student group

known as Pride Student Association, but also offered a space for LGBTQ+ students known as the Pride Commons (LGBTQ+ Services). Lauren Healey (2016), senior staff writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*, spoke on this stating,

In an effort to provide support, encouragement, and guidance as well as role models to LGBTQ+ students, UCF developed the Alliance Mentoring Program (AMP) three years ago in partnership with LGBTQ+ Services and the Pride Faculty and Staff Association, an on-campus LGBTQ+ advocacy group. (para. 26)

Having these resources in place “is key to making students feel welcome,” Windmeyer states (as cited in Sandoval, 2016, para. 5).

In times of tragedies, especially ones that occur in nearby places, the way in which a higher education institution responds is of vital importance. In this case, Supiano (2016b) stated, all three institutions in the Orlando area released statements of condolences on the day of the incident. In addition to that, each institution worked to offer support. Valencia College, which lost seven students in the incident, sent out statements reassuring students by increasing the security on their campuses the following week of the event in an effort to bring “comfort and security” (Supiano, 2016b, para. 8). Valencia offered vigils, counseling sessions, and reflection rooms, offering students a place for contemplation (Public Relations and Marketing, 2016). In addition to these efforts, Valencia’s Peace and Justice Institute (Pherai, 2016) offered several events to continue the discussion regarding the shooting and inclusion of the LGBTQ+ community, including an interfaith panel discussing faith and the LGBTQ+ community and a film screening of *El Canto Del Colibri* and discussion on the intersectionality of the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities. Supiano (2016b) reported that Rollins College offered “a session on grieving and loss, . . . group counseling sessions,” and offered a phone number to call which allowed students to reach out for individual care (para. 13). Rollins also

called upon some of its graduates from the counselor program to aid in providing support for students (Rollins Graduate Counseling, 2016). Additionally, according to Rob Humphreys (2016), writer for the college, Rollins held a vigil the Monday after the shooting and held a series of talks regarding the shooting (Office of Marketing & Communication, 2016). Mark Schlueb (2016), assistant direct for Strategic Communications at the University of Central Florida, UCF held a vigil where over a thousand people attended. The university, as noted by Supiano (2016b), offered counseling services and held “conversations to help students, faculty, and staff talk about and try to make sense of the tragedy” (para. 12). In addition to the three institutions in Central Florida, around the country universities and colleges held vigils and memorials to honor the victims of the Pulse shooting, as cited by Lawrence Biemiller (2016), writer for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

Diversity and Inclusion in Higher Education

In the Pulse tragedy, there were several minority communities that were involved, showing the need for education on various groups. Alexandra Vollman (2016), editor of *INSIGHT Into Diversity*, interviewed Tia Brown McNair, Ed.D., vice president of the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Student Success at the American Association of Colleges and Universities, who stated,

Diversity and learning are critical to students for their full participation in society, so having them examine questions that are relevant to what’s going on in society gives them the opportunity to explore their identity, their experiences, their cultural background, their preconceptions, and to challenge those and get an understanding of who they are, [as well as] their relationship to others. [That] is a core part of the learning experience for all students, . . . and it helps them understand issues in a more complex way when they engage with people who have different backgrounds. (para. 30)

Williams (2017) supported this stating, “I recommend establishing campus climate and inclusion research projects. Too often, campus climate projects are viewed as an end, not as a means for powerful change” (para. 14). He went on to encourage having curriculum that focuses on developing “diversity leadership skills,” as well as offering “engaging spaces for diverse communities to establish a sense of belonging and receive professional support, like culturally relevant counseling” (para. 15).

Vollman (2016) wrote,

Actions such as infusing elements of diversity and inclusion into curricula, increasing retention efforts for minority students, hiring more minority faculty members, and increasing funding for multicultural and mental health centers have been common bullet points on students’ list of demands. (para. 10)

Adding to this, Alice Pettway (2016), writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*, shared what Brian Buford, Director of the University of Louisville’s LGBT Center, believed was necessary for successful inclusion of LGBTQ+ students,

The change starts with training faculty, staff, and administrators. When he gives workshops, he focuses on simple things faculty can do to send a message of support or inclusion, such as using appropriate names and pronouns, including a diversity statement in the syllabus and explaining it the first day of class, or making sure LGBTQ perspectives are included in course content. (para. 9)

In an interview Jamal E. Mazyck (2016), digital manager and writer for *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, had with professor Dr. Dan Tillapaugh, California Lutheran University Counselor Education Assistant Professor, Tillapaugh emphasized the need to “do better in reaching out to our LGBTQ students and finding ways to support them. LGBTQ student organizations and safe space/ally programs are important, but we need to go beyond these basic minimums” (para. 7). Tillapaugh went on to discuss the “need to create opportunities for cultivating civility and finding deeper connections with one another. Intergroup dialogues or interfaith dialogue work on campus can be helpful” (as

cited in Mazyck, 2016, para. 12). Mazyck reminded readers that “LGBTQ students of color may not deem that multicultural centers and designated safe spaces on campus are for them and they may seek refuge and more supportive environments off campus” (para. 13). Because of this, Tillapaugh stated, “The tragedy in Orlando serves as a stark reminder for LGBTQ students that violence is possible, even in spaces that many have largely seen as our safe spaces and sanctuaries” (as cited in Mazyck, 2016, para. 14).

Brooke Barnett, Ph.D., associate provost for inclusive community and professor of communications at Elon University, and Matthew Antonio (2017), director of the Gender and LGBTQIA Center at Elon University, suggested to educators that they look into resources such as the Campus Pride Index and provided questions such as “What are your library holdings around sexual orientation and gender identity? What courses do you offer? How are you supporting LGBTQIA students and colleagues?” (para. 2). They went on to encourage higher learning institutions to develop a list of items to address—using suggestions from resources such as the Campus Pride Index and what best practices other universities have implemented—that will ensure the college or university will support LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff (Barnett & Antonio, 2017).

Stephanie Chang, director of Student Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Delaware, in a conversation with Mariah Bohanon (2018), senior staff writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*, shared some of the paths her university has taken to support all LGBTQ+ students. Chang commented,

Because students come into the LGBTQ+ community with a range of experiences, identities, and needs, it is important to have a variety of programs and services available [for their] personal and educational development. . . . It’s all about giving them options from multiple support and engagement units on campus — whether it’s to assist with emotional needs, academic or career development, or [providing] social opportunities. (as cited in Bohanon, 2018, para 11)

In addition to providing a safe, welcoming environment and inclusive classes for the LGB community, Pettway (2016) called attention to trans students and noted,

On a larger level, colleges and universities need to look at policies. Rebecca Grant, a student at Sullivan University in Louisville, says that policies relating to dress codes, restrooms, ID cards, email accounts, housing, and healthcare are the ones that can potentially be the most treacherous for trans students. (para. 10)

Pettway (2016) went on to share the difficulties of changing a university's culture to be more inclusive of trans students. In an interview Pettway had with Genny Beemyn, Coordinator of the Trans Policy Clearinghouse and Director of the University of Massachusetts Amherst's Stonewall Center, Beemyn stated,

We are so used to making gender assumptions, and not only making those assumptions, but calling out those assumptions by assigning gender pronouns to people—by saying 'sir' and 'ma'am,' 'mister' and 'miss,' and sometimes by just saying 'man' and 'woman' in a way that we don't call out other aspects of someone's identity, like their race. . . . Trying to get away from that gender binary is really difficult, [as is] trying to change campus culture so we recognize that there are more than two genders. (para. 8)

Unfortunately, lack of funding has been one of the largest issues in higher education when providing resources for inclusion. Vollman reported,

A 2015 study by nonprofit advocacy group Young Invincibles shows that between 2008 and 2014, public two- and four-year colleges experienced a 21 percent decrease in funding as a result of overall cuts in state funding for higher education. And 95 percent of states are still spending less on higher education than they did before the 2008 recession. (para. 14)

In Vollman's (2016) interview with McNair, McNair shared,

Higher education is under-resourced in many ways, shapes, and forms, so we have been asked to do a lot with a lot less. . . . Any time we can redirect funding in higher education to support this work—increasing student engagement and their ability to understand difference and [gain] intercultural knowledge—it is going to require more time, more effort, more resources, more training, more development, more programming. (para. 15)

Vollman (2016) also interviewed Mary Wardell, Ed.D., Vice Provost in the Office of Diversity Engagement and Community Outreach at the University of San Francisco.

Wardell reiterated this by stating how important funding is and how, without investments and the commitment for inclusion, it is more difficult to train individuals to operate diversity offices and cultural centers.

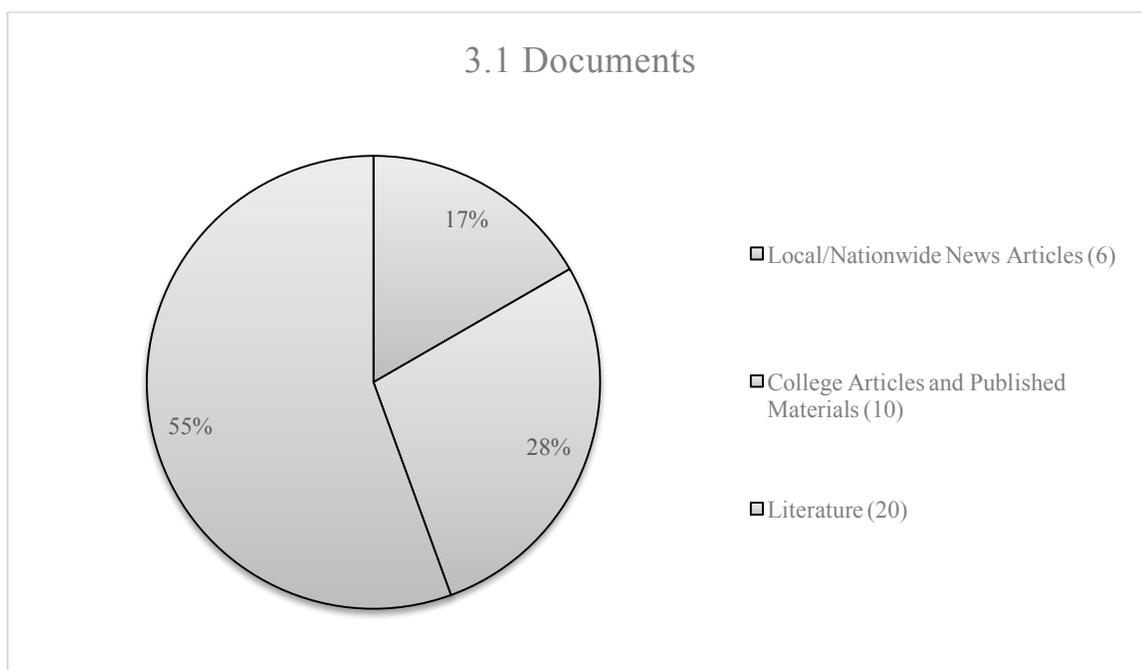
In this chapter, I reviewed materials that make it clear that some higher education institutions offer support to minority students after a tragedy. However, not all colleges and universities have, nor are some prepared for when tragedies occur. In the next chapters, I address what documents were included in my research, what schools have done, and how institutions can prepare for such tragedies.

Chapter 3: Methodology

For this thesis, the method I used was a document study which allowed me to review what literature was currently available. There have been numerous tragedies all over the United States. I looked at how these events have impacted students in college and how some universities have responded. Then, I took a closer look into what literature was available regarding the Pulse tragedy. Again, I looked at how this event in particular impacted students and considered the response from higher education institutions. Lastly, I looked at what literature was available regarding diversity and inclusion in higher education. This allowed me to see what information was currently available and what was not discussed.

Once I collected the resources that were available, I then completed a document analysis of that material. I used information from local and national news to provide details regarding the tragedies I discussed. This allowed me to provide additional details regarding each tragedy in the event the reader was unfamiliar with what transpired. I then researched what the local higher education institutions did prior to and directly after the tragedy by looking at college news or published material, as well as literature in academic journals. This provided some insight as to how students were supported in a difficult time. As I read material from the local institutions, I aimed to find information that would answer my research questions regarding whether higher education institutions offer support to minority students after tragedies. Lastly, I collected literature, predominately academic journals, to analyze best practices for inclusion. While I

reviewed this material, I looked for themes with regard to what institutions can do to offer support to minority students after tragedies and what colleges and universities can do to prepare for such incidents. In total, I cited 36 documents: six were news articles, ten were college articles and published materials, and twenty were literature (see graph 3.1 below).



There were several reasons as to why I have based my research on a document study. Although it has been over a year since the Pulse tragedy, many people in Orlando still have raw emotions regarding the incident that took place in the city. Because this tragedy is still a sensitive topic, I wanted to be mindful as I completed my research. As Glenn A. Bowen (2009), director of the Center for Service Learning at Western Carolina University, has noted,

Documents are ‘unobtrusive’ and ‘non-reactive’—that is, they are unaffected by the research process. (Previous studies found in documents are not being

considered here.) Therefore, document analysis counters the concerns related to reflexivity (or the lack of it) inherent in other qualitative research methods. (p. 31)

This also allowed me as a researcher, an LGBTQ+ ally, and a resident of Orlando, to remain more neutral as I present my findings. Furthermore, I reviewed multiple sources to ensure that one source was not partial. “By examining information collected through different methods, the researcher can corroborate findings across data sets and thus reduce the impact of potential biases that can exist in a single study” (Bowen, 2009, p. 28).

There were several other reasons as to why I chose to complete a document analysis. One reason was that I looked to the past to see what occurred and what the responses were. The other reason was that by looking at various materials, it allowed me to explore how colleges and universities acknowledged the tragedies and what the feedback was from students shortly after the incident took place. Bowen (2009) stated,

Bearing witness to past events, documents provide background information as well as historical insight. Such information and insight can help researchers understand the historical roots of specific issues and can indicate the conditions that impinge upon the phenomena currently under investigation. The researcher can use data drawn from documents, for example, to contextualise data collected during interviews. (pp. 29-30)

Many of the articles I reviewed included interviews with LGBTQ+ leaders, higher education administrators, and students that I might not have had access to if I completed my research in another format.

The last advantage I noticed in completing a document analysis was that it allowed me to see what steps were taken after a tragedy. Bowen (2009) noted, “documents provide a means of tracking change and development” (p. 30). By exploring various materials, it allowed me to document what the result was of certain situations,

thus allowing me to highlight what diversity and inclusion efforts seem to be the best practices.

However, there were some limitations to my research. As Bowen (2009) stated,

Documents are produced for some purpose other than research; they are created independent of a research agenda. (Again, previous studies located in documents are not being considered here.) Consequently, they usually do not provide sufficient detail to answer a research question. (pp. 31-32)

Similarly, I was limited in terms of gaining access to information such as what crisis plans might have been in place at the institutions I examined, or if certain institutions had a plan in preparation for tragedies such as the ones discussed throughout this paper. In this way, I acknowledge that the information that I have presented may only tell part of what occurred as a result of certain tragedies.

Chapter 4: Findings

For this thesis, I reviewed various documents—local and nationwide news articles, college articles and published materials, and literature—to find themes and patterns that revealed the reaction to the Pulse shooting and other tragedies. I examined higher education institutions efforts to bring comfort and support after a tragedy. I attempted to uncover what kinds of efforts were implemented by colleges and universities and identified what appears to be best practices in diversity and inclusion programs.

Local/Nationwide News Articles

On a consistent basis, news provides us access to much that has transpired in the world, especially when a tragedy has occurred. Because of this, information has never been easier to obtain. After I searched and reviewed many news articles regarding the Pulse tragedy, I found numerous other tragedies that involved the serious injury or death of many other college-age persons, a majority of whom were people of minority communities. I have noted (in chronological order, but discussed the Pulse tragedy at the end of this section) just some of the tragedies over the last few years that have left communities devastated.

In August of 2014, Michael Brown (aged 18 years old) was shot multiple times by a police officer in Ferguson. In many reports, Brown was reported to have had his hands up in a surrender position when he was killed. Because of the difference of race between the two men—Brown being black and the officer being white—this led to a discussion of the overuse of police power and brutality, as well as racism. Some statistics that the U.S.

Department of Justice released showed that 93% of those arrested in Ferguson were black, while only 67% of the population of Ferguson is black/African-American, which demonstrated the racial bias of the police department (Ferguson unrest, 2015).

In February of 2015, three Muslim-Americans were shot and killed in what was believed to be a hate crime in Chapel Hill. All three were students at local universities, either University of North Carolina and North Carolina State University. It was claimed that there was a parking dispute between the shooter and the victims, who were neighbors. However, the father of two of the victims stated that there were no issues prior to his daughters moving in, but because they wore hijabs, the attacker began to harass them (Ahmed & Shoichet, 2015).

Over the summer of 2017, with the height of activity having occurred from May until August, Charlottesville and the University of Virginia campus saw a tremendous amount of violence. It started when the decision was made to rename two parks which were previously named after Confederate generals and to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee. This resulted in white nationalist protesting, where they carried torches and chanted racist rhetoric. There were counter-protests, which escalated the violence and led to a car that drove into the crowd of counter-protesters, killing one and injuring 15 (McLaughlin, 2017).

In June of 2016, a shooter entered Pulse Nightclub, a gay club, where it was Latin Night and killed 49 people and injured 53. As noted earlier, of those who were killed, seven were current students at Valencia College and one was a current student at the University of Central Florida. Many of those killed were of traditional college age or had only graduated a few years prior. There has been some dispute as to why the man who identified as Muslim and of MENA descent might have selected this location to target.

The shooter pledged his allegiance to ISIS, while it was also stated that he was angered by two men kissing (Zambelich & Hurt, 2016). Yet others believed the shooter was struggling with his own sexuality and, as a result, targeted the LGBTQ+ nightclub (Zambelich & Hurt, 2016).

While these tragedies have affected different communities, the common theme has been that these incidents have included college-aged victims. This led me to investigate what higher education institutions have done to support their students when tragedies have occurred.

College Articles and Published Materials

After the aforementioned tragedies occurred, the local colleges and universities responded with action, but some students were left feeling less supported. Harris-Stowe State University near Ferguson comforted students by continuing dialogue which included 17 events, ranging from town hall meetings and small group discussions, and reexamined the events in Ferguson (Murphy, 2015). Students at University of North Carolina briefly came together after three Muslim students were killed, and a scholarship was setup to honor the victims (Will, 2015). However, after Duke University's conclusion to reverse their decision to play the call to prayer from their bell tower and the accusations that the chaplain for Muslim life at Wake Forest University was a radical jihadist, both schools in North Carolina, students felt insecure and resulted in several female students removing their hijab out of fear (Will, 2015). At the University of Virginia, while some have criticized the university's president for not doing enough to keep protesters off campus, a week after the incident a group was formed "to assess the university's response to the rally" which would look at what occurred and how to prepare

for the future with a large focus on safety and wellbeing of the students (Gluckman, 2017).

The response by the local schools in Orlando after the Pulse tragedy was one of community. Valencia College offered many services to its students. An Orlando United vigil was held the Wednesday following the shooting on one of the two main campuses, which was led by Valencia's Peace and Justice Institute (PJI) and the Student Government Association. The other main campus held a vigil a little over a week after the incident, as well as offered healing circles sponsored by PJI. Four of their (then) five campuses offered counseling services and all campuses offered prayer and reflection rooms to give students a safe space (Public Relations and Marketing, 2016). To honor the seven students who were killed, the Valencia Foundation created the Pulse Memorial LGBT Scholarship to honor the victims. Valencia also supported a space for conversation with the LGBTQ+ Latinx leaders, as well as the organization known as QLatinx that was founded in response to the Pulse tragedy. Additionally, Valencia screened several documentaries regarding the LGBTQ+ community, and one of them highlighted members of the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities. Lastly, Valencia's Peace and Justice Institute, with the help of the Muslim Ambassadors for Peace, participated in the Arab-American Cultural Festival to debunk stereotypes and build understanding (Pherai, 2016).

Rollins College offered a vigil for peace the Monday after the attack, just a little over 24 hours after it occurred. During the vigil, several students who identified as part of the LGBTQ+ community shared their thoughts. One student, Dylan Allen, stated, "Pulse was like a second family, a place of safety and acceptance upon coming out as gay in college" (as cited in Humphreys, 2016, para. 8). Rollins offered support through their

Wellness Center, which offered counseling for all students and stated, “The College acknowledges the increased impact that this tragic event has had on the LGBT+, Latinx, and Muslim communities. The Rollins Wellness Center, along with local counselors, is providing grief counseling services and support” (Office of Marketing & Communications, 2016, para. 3). In addition to counseling, Rollins offered “conversations about community engagement and social justice issues” called “Tars Talk” which was hosted by the Center for Inclusion and Campus Involvement (Office of Marketing & Communications, 2016, para. 6). The 2015-2016 Annual Report published by Rollins Graduate Counseling noted the efforts by faculty to support students that included mobilizing Rollins counseling alumni to support students, as they were “prepared for crisis counseling and working with diverse populations, including the LGBTQ+ communities and communities of color” (Rollins Graduate Counseling, 2016, para. 25). Rollins College has had several student organizations through the Center for Inclusion and Campus Involvement, including Spectrum for LGBTQ+ students and allies, Latin American Student Association, Black Student Union, Muslim Student Union, and Interfaith Collective, among others. Additionally, the campus has worked to offer training programs, collaborative partnerships, consultations for best diversity practices, educational workshops, and community partnerships to aid in diversity education (Center for Inclusion and Campus Involvement, n.d.).

University of Central Florida (UCF) offered a vigil the Tuesday evening after the shooting. Despite threatening weather, the vigil moved indoors, where over a thousand people joined, while over 125,000 watched virtually. Among the crowd were UCF Muslim Association students wearing hijabs, where Tasnim Mellouli stated, “We have to be here. Our religion says no life is more valuable than another. In fact, I’d say it’s our

duty to be here and support our community” (as cited in Schlueb, 2016, para. 14). UCF has had several groups to support minority community members. In addition to the Muslim Association, the Office of Diversity and Inclusion has offered mentoring programs for the Latinx, LGBTQ+, and ethnic minorities. Additionally, in 2017, UCF was identified as an emerging Hispanic serving institution, as the number of Latinx students has continued to increase, which will offer additional support and resources for this community in the future. Furthermore, UCF has offered LGBTQ+ services, which sought to educate and provide safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students. After the Pulse tragedy, a few friends of one of the victims who was a UCF alumnus joined together and started “The Dru Project, a nonprofit . . . to develop gay-straight alliance programs in schools” (Cole, 2016). Lastly, UCF has been one of the highest ranked schools on the Campus Pride Index, offering students services to support the LGBTQ+ community including a designated safe space known as the Pride Commons.

Literature

As I reviewed literature from various sources, every article I read noted the great loss of a safe space and how vulnerable people of the LGBTQ+ community felt after the Orlando Pulse tragedy. Shane Windmeyer (as cited in Sandoval, 2016), founder and executive director of Campus Pride, was quoted stating, “Young lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people are often particularly vulnerable and seeking supportive community . . . that often sends them to bars like Pulse, the Orlando club, where gay people are welcomed and their identities are celebrated” (para. 2). As Jared Misner (2016), writer for *Charlotte* magazine, described in his article, *Pulse as a Sanctuary*, Pulse—and other clubs or bars like it—was the one place young LGBTQ+ community members could finally be themselves without having to hide their identity or feel

threatened for being themselves. D.A. Dirks (as cited in Sandoval, 2016), co-chair of the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, supported these sentiments stating, “This is a very personal tragedy. . . . To go into a space that should have been safe for folks to celebrate, to gather, to connect—that sense of violation is quite profound” (para. 3). This feeling of insecurity was echoed when Denisse Lamas (as cited in Cole, 2016), founder of Hispanic Family Counseling and social worker who worked in the community after the tragedy, stated,

One thing that we learned in social work is that we meet the clients where they are. At that time, they were unable to come out of their homes, so we had to meet them where they were: in their homes, where they felt safe. (para. 21)

After the Pulse tragedy, many students did not feel safe to be themselves and could not focus on their education. Misner (2016) explained how being part of the LGBTQ+ community meant having to hide your identity every day, having to learn how to act the gender you were assigned at birth, and how the Pulse tragedy further proved the need to stay hidden in order to be safe. However, the local higher education institutions wanted to reassure their LGBTQ+ students by having a space on campus to allow for comfort and grieving, giving students the ability to visit as needed and demonstrated their support in a tragic time, as made evident by the resources each campus provided its students.

Of the victims, there were not only students who attended Valencia College and the University of Central Florida, but there was also one from Seminole State University, four from Ana G. Mendez University - South Florida campus, a staff member from Keiser University, and a student who intended to go to Mercyhurst University on a basketball scholarship starting in the fall term (Biemiller, 2016, para. 1). In response to the tremendous loss of life, the president from Valencia College, Sanford (“Sandy”)

Shugart (as cited in Biemiller, 2016), reminded students, faculty, and staff, “Take the time to reflect, be silent, be still. . . . Join the people you love, and embrace them. Come to school, here at Valencia, ready to hug and support others” (para. 4). In this way, Valencia’s president reminded everyone to support each other during that difficult time.

The University of Central Florida was prepared for such an event. Leadership met on campus just hours after the tragedy to determine how they would respond, as well as how to support their students. They were concerned for all the communities involved: LGBTQ+, Latinx, and Muslim communities. Supiano (2016a) stated, “Many of the students [at the University of Central Florida] praised the university’s actions, citing the presence of counselors, the help of administrators, and the public statement made by the president, John C. Hitt” (para. 30).

Other higher education institutions showed their support as well. Howard University’s president, Wayne Frederick (as cited in Mazyck, 2016) encouraged his students to speak against hate in all forms, and stated, “Intolerance of one group is intolerance of all. Our students, some of whom identify as LGBTQ, must be able to feel safe in their space, be it inside or outside the classroom” (para. 2). Biemiller (2016) reported that

At Harvard University, a dean and members of Hispanic and LGBTQ groups read the names of the dead during a memorial. . . . Commemorations took place as far away as Colby College, in Maine, the University of Wisconsin at Stout, and the Palm Desert campus of California State University at San Bernardino. (para. 3)

The support shown by all higher learning institutions demonstrates the willingness to come together in tragedy, yet also recognizes the need for inclusion of our unique and diverse campuses.

Review of Material

After I read about the Pulse tragedy and other tragedies that included college aged victims, I learned a lot about what schools do in terms of inclusion and support. There were a few schools that were exemplary in supporting their students. While others needed to make improvements or perhaps develop a plan for certain crisis situations.

After I reviewed all of the articles, the one that stood out to me the most was in regard to Harris-Stowe State University president, Dwaun Warmack, by Murphy (2015). Warmack actively participated in how he and the university were to respond to their students after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson and continued after the officer was not indicted. He sought to support his students and in doing so helped them to feel safe in an uncertain time, as well as empowered them in their expression. This was highlighted in his comment regarding his actions:

My intent as a president has always remained not creating a space, “Who is right or wrong?” . . . We wanted to be able to create a safe community where we can have conversations about “How do we heal this city during this tragic time?” (as cited in Murphy, 2015, para. 19)

The actions of Warmack and Harris-Stowe State University as a whole showed that their students were their most valuable asset, understanding that during a tragedy they must support their students.

The articles revealed that the University of Virginia did not do much to protect its students. The protests and violence was ongoing for several months, leaving students unprotected against hate groups. It was only after the protests occurred on campus and the students confronted the university president that action was taken. At that point, it seemed trust was lost between the students and administration. Nevertheless, the administration took steps to correct the wrong-doing after this incident. As I read the

actions the school took after the incident, I reflected on the suggestion Damon Williams, Ph.D. (2017), Chief Catalyst for the Center for Strategic Diversity Leadership and Social Innovation and Senior Scholar and Innovation Fellow at Wisconsin's Equity and Inclusion Laboratory, regarding the need to "add diversity crisis preparedness to [higher learning institutions'] crisis management plan" (para. 8).

After I searched for information on how some of the schools in North Carolina work to be more inclusive, there was little information to find. After the Chapel Hill murders in 2015, vigils were held and the presidents of the schools the three victims went to released statements of condolences, but little else appeared to have been done. No additional support for Muslim students was apparently provided. No ongoing discussions regarding hate crimes involving Muslims or other minority groups seemed to be held. Additionally, when Duke University reversed its decision to have a call to prayer played from the bell tower, it sent a message that Muslim students were not accepted, or at the very least that their university could be intimidated in to reversing its decision.

As I researched what the local colleges and universities in Orlando did to help support their students after the Pulse tragedy, I discovered the schools responded positively with a number of actions. After the incident, all three schools—Valencia College, Rollins College, and the University of Central Florida—responded quickly, sending out statements and organizing vigils. They continued their work by offering counseling support, hosted blood drives, allowed for safe spaces, and focused on ensuring the LGBTQ+, Latinx, and Muslim communities were supported. This may be due in part to the fact that all three schools prior to the attack had strong support systems in place to ensure their students had a safe place to focus on their education. But the way in which each institution recognized that not just the LGBTQ+ and Latinx communities were

affected, but also the Muslim communities demonstrated each institutions dedication to inclusion. Furthermore, the larger Orlando community may have also contributed to the support these communities were given. For several years, Orlando has received a perfect score on the annual Municipal Equality Index published by the Human Rights Campaign (Perry, 2017).

While Orlando and its higher education institutions have worked endlessly to be inclusive, as I researched it was clear this is not the norm nationwide. For many minority communities, especially the LGBTQ+ community, the responsibility to educate others, provide safety, and work towards inclusivity falls on the students, faculty, and staff of those communities. One of the reasons the communities in Orlando felt supported is because each institution was dedicated to supporting them financially. University of Central Florida has a dedicated LGBTQ+ center with staff, known as the Pride Commons, in addition to the support from the Social Justice and Advocacy Department and the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. All minority groups at Valencia and Rollins, while not having a center on campus, are supported by way of the Peace and Justice Institute and the Center for Inclusion and Campus Involvement, respectively. When colleges and universities do not make that effort to support their students, conflict between the students and administration occurs, much like how the students reacted at the University of Virginia's delayed response when the white nationalist protesters came on campus.

Implementing Diversity and Inclusion Efforts

I want to note that while the research showed the Orlando community coming together and local higher education institutions working to support students while making them feel safe, there may be those in the LGBTQ+, Latinx, and/or Muslim communities

who did not feel this sense of inclusivity. It is perhaps why I believe every college and university should constantly work at and improve inclusion efforts.

As I researched, there were many great suggestions to implement diversity and inclusion efforts. Kenneth P. Monteiro, Ph. D. (as cited in Vollman, 2016), president of the American Association of Blacks in Higher Education, suggested that one way of creating a more inclusive campus was for colleges and universities to “put [it] in a five-to 10-year plan” (para. 47). Once a school has dedicated time and funding to diversity and inclusion, “Actions such as infusing elements of diversity and inclusion into curricula, increasing retention efforts for minority students, hiring more minority faculty members, and increasing funding for multicultural and mental health centers” would help address concerns student often have (Vollman, 2016, para. 10). Williams (2017) supported this and suggested colleges and universities should “build a curriculum to help the entire campus develop diversity leadership skills, and create engaging spaces for diverse communities to establish a sense of belonging and receive professional support, like culturally relevant counseling” (para. 15). Brian Buford (as cited in Pettway, 2016), Director of the University of Louisville’s LGBT Center, pointed to things such as “including a diversity statement in the syllabus and explaining it the first day of class, or making sure LGBTQ perspectives are included in course content” (para. 9). To add to this, Alice Pettway (2016), writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*, concluded that working with students to provide their preferred pronoun and avoiding the use of assigning gender pronouns, while recognizing there are more than two genders will aid in the inclusion process.

To create more on-campus diversity, several suggestions were made. Williams (2017) suggested the importance of identifying,

diverse student influencers, involve them as leaders in your office, and hire them as social media interns; have real conversations with conservative and diverse voices, bringing them together regularly—perhaps in a new leadership initiative; and establish a digital communication strategy for students that skews toward their mobile-first, digital lives. (para. 13)

Brooke Barnett, Ph.D., associate provost for inclusive community and professor of communications and Matthew Antonio (2017), director of the Gender and LGBTQIA Center at Elon University, advised having a team or committee to help address some of the concerns when implementing new inclusion efforts. As a committee is formed, and as Williams recommended, bring in student leaders that can offer suggestions on how to make the institution more inclusive.

Rebecca Grant (as cited in Pettway, 2016), a student at Sullivan University in Louisville, recommended that colleges and universities should review policies regarding inclusion, and stated, “policies relating to dress code, restrooms, ID cards, email accounts, housing, and healthcare . . . can potentially be the most treacherous for trans students” (para. 10). Stephanie Chang (as cited in Bohanon, 2018), director of Student Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Delaware, discussed the work that is currently taking place on her campus where a committee was formed “to determine how to best implement a ‘chosen name’ policy” in an effort to progress the university’s LGBTQ+ inclusion efforts (para. 15). Chang (as cited in Bohanon, 2018) also stated that her university offers “all gender” housing and recently started offering gender-inclusive restrooms.

Having these options available for LGBTQ+ communities will help demonstrate inclusivity. However, as I reviewed my notes, I again read over the statement made by Jamal E. Mazyck (2016), digital manager and writer for *Diverse: Issues in Higher Education*, regarding LGBTQ+ students of color—and perhaps for all students belonging

to minority groups, such as religious minority groups—not feeling that multicultural centers or designated safe spaces are intended for them. Again, University of Delaware is exemplary as they currently have four organizations to help support their students: LGBT Program, Haven, AHAVA, and Out in STEM. The LGBT Program educates and advocates for LGBTQ+ students, while helping students with the process of name and gender changes. Haven is the largest LGBTQ+ student-run organization which is open to the LGBTQ+ community, including allies and any student, faculty, and staff at the university. AHAVA, meaning love in Hebrew, supports students who identify as Jewish and LGBTQ+. Out in STEM works to promote safe and supportive environments for the LGBTQ+ community within Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. These groups work to provide a safe, welcoming environment for students who identify as LGBTQ+ and part of other groups.

Perhaps the most valuable recommendation I read about, in addition to the aforementioned efforts, was Williams' (2017) suggestion to be prepared for a crisis that may impact minority groups. He said,

We need to be proactive in diversity crisis readiness. Thus, all colleges should add diversity crisis preparedness to their crisis management plan. Just as every institution should have an active-shooter plan, they should have one to manage incidents related to diversity and inclusion. (para. 8)

Being prepared in this way will lend to the security and confidence students have in their college or university.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

After the Pulse tragedy on June 12, 2016, Orlando and the surrounding areas came together as a community to comfort each other after such a horrible incident. The three main colleges and universities—Valencia College, Rollins College, and the University of Central Florida—worked to ensure students were safe and welcomed in light of what happened. The local schools in Orlando did a great job in supporting their students, especially the communities that were targeted, which was likely due to the fact that all three institutions had strong support systems in place before the Pulse tragedy took place. This allowed the colleges and university to rely on those resources to further support students, allowing them to heal and, inevitably, focus on returning to their studies.

However, there were some areas that I struggled to find information. In many responses, people spoke of coming together as a community and/or supporting our LGBTQ+ community. However, I wondered if students who identified as both LGBTQ+ and a person of color felt supported. In fact, much of the information I found mentions the LGBTQ+ community but not how that community intersects with the Latinx community, or vice versa. The lack of recognition that the people who were targeted were identified as both LGBTQ+ and a community of color highlights the need to invest in how these communities intersect and how to best support these groups. For future research, it may be of value to see how these intersecting communities face different struggles, both from inside and outside of these groups.

Furthermore, I found limited information on how Muslim students, or those who identified as being from the MENA region of the world, were supported. While all three schools in Orlando have Muslim student groups and the statements from each of the colleges included this group, there is little information on what specifically was done to help this group. This may be one area for future study: How Muslim and MENA communities cope and are supported after a tragedy where the attacker or attacked identifies as being part of those communities.

Lastly, I had trouble finding information on crisis response preparedness for the local colleges and university. While I only found mention of one of the schools—University of Central Florida—having a crisis plan, all three institutions were quick to respond and organize support teams to help students. As a potential future project, I would be interested to learn what each institutions' diversity crisis plan looks like and how it is implemented in the event of a crisis. Understanding what is needed in a diversity crisis plan would be instrumental for all higher education institutions. With uncertainty in our country, having a plan in place to face difficult times when a minority group is targeted will contribute to an institution's diversity and inclusion efforts.

If I were to do this research over, there are a few things I would do differently. To start, I would have expanded my search to more than the three Orlando schools that I presented. This would allow me to see what the other local colleges and universities have done in order to support their communities when they were attacked. I also would have contacted the local higher education institutions to speak with some of the offices I previously mentioned, including the Peace and Justice Institute at Valencia, the Center for Inclusion and Campus Involvement at Rollins, and the Pride Commons at the University of Central Florida. Moreover, if I were to do this research again, I would

likely interview students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community, a person of color, and/or Muslim or MENA ancestry, who were students in college when the Pulse tragedy occurred and are still students at the same institution. This would allow me to gather information from the targeted communities and speak with students to see if any change has occurred over the time that has passed since the incident. Because there was limited scholarly materials that address the concern of inclusion after a tragedy that impacts predominately minority students, I see value in expanding this research, connecting with the local institutions, and interviewing students as a way of providing a more robust account on what colleges and universities can do to prepare for future incidents.

Recommendations

After compiling my research and reviewing some of the best practices by higher education institutions around the country, there are several recommendations that I suggest colleges and universities implement.

1. To start, I propose institutions review what inclusion efforts their campus has. Throughout this thesis, I have highlighted some of the best practices from other schools and the suggestions range from having a diversity statement in each instructors' syllabi to creating a space for particular communities.
2. Additionally, if minority student groups exist, encourage subgroups or stand-alone groups that allow for two (or more) identities to intersect (e.g. LGBTQ+ and Latinx) to address the specific needs of people who identify with these communities.
3. Of equal importance, every higher education institution should have a diversity crisis plan in place. This allows the college or university to be prepared when

tragedies occur. Part of that plan should include the immediate statement release to show solidarity with the communities impacted. The diversity crisis plan should also include steps on how to support students and encourage education opportunities about the communities involved, as well as discussions regarding the incident. Furthermore, creating a safe space for students to reflect on the incident will further support the student.

It is by implementing these recommendations based on some of the best practices highlighted throughout this thesis that will show a more unified campus that supports their students.

As I researched the Pulse shooting, I came to realize that Florida has had several difficult years in terms of mass shootings. The Pulse shooting occurred June of 2016, killing 49 people and injuring 53 more. In January of 2017, there was a shooting at the Ft. Lauderdale airport, killing five people and injuring six from the shooting, and indirectly harming another 36 during the panic that it caused. The most recent occurred in February of 2018 when a former student walked in to Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School and killed 17 people, injuring 14 more, which has largely become known as the Parkland shooting.

As a result of these shootings, specifically the Pulse and Parkland shootings, it brought attention to a number of issues that has encouraged young people to get involved and speak out against. Days after the Pulse shooting, there was a large call to donate blood, as blood banks began to run out quickly. While many people donated (and often waited in lines for 3+ hours to do so), it was highlighted that gay men were ineligible to donate blood due to the risk of infecting blood recipients with HIV. While the rules regarding who is eligible for blood donation changed a few months prior to the tragedy, it

still enraged much of the community—LGBTQ+ and Allies—and continues to be a struggle to fight against.

After the Pulse tragedy, there was a void that many LGBTQ+ and Latinx members felt. Following the tragedy, a small group began to gather to support and grieve with one another. This led to the organizing a group called QLatinx in response to the Pulse tragedy. Today it works to support members who identify as both LGBTQ+ and Latinx, and to educate and build a loving community.

Following the Pulse tragedy, there was yet again a rally for gun control to end gun violence. Organizations like Gays Against Guns rallied to push through new legislation, but sadly nothing was passed. Then, yet another tragedy occurred—the Parkland shooting. The young high school students were devastated, much like the survivors of all mass shootings, and started to speak out against the access to guns. They made speeches and held walk outs. They pressured the Florida government to sign a new gun law that would change the age to buy a gun from 18 to 21, among other things. Then on March 24, 2018, just one month and ten days after the shooting, they organized a march in Washington, D.C. March for Our Lives had one of the highest turn outs recorded for a single day, having about 800,000 people participate. There, victims of gun violence, not only from Parkland, spoke out against gun violence. This event allowed communities of color and other minority groups that do not have the same media coverage as the students from Parkland have had, to shine a light on the gun violence that is seen on a daily basis. It is my hope that these students from Parkland—and everyone impacted by gun violence—will continue to pressure government for stricter gun laws, while continuing to highlight the daily struggles minority communities face.

With regard to Orlando, every effort is made to continue to support our LGBTQ+ community. From the Pulse memorial, to Orlando United Day, to the Lake Eola Bandshell painted in rainbow colors, the city—and its colleges and universities—strive to be inclusive of our LGBTQ+ community. It is just one way we try to live up to our name—the City Beautiful.

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