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### Taking Up Space: Community Formation Among Non-Urban LGBTQ Youth

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Oberlin College

Taking Up Space:  
Community Formation Among Non-Urban LGBTQ Youth

Madison Bishop

Comparative American Studies

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## Introduction

In December 2014, the Oberlin High School Gay/Straight Alliance decided collectively that they would like to change the name of their group. The students agreed that while “Gay/Straight Alliance” is a familiar and widespread name for groups like theirs, they wanted a name that made the club more visible as an LGBTQ-specific organization that is meant to support and affirm LGBTQ students instead of simply building bridges between “gay” and “straight” people. They turned down names such as “The Safe Zone” that obscured the identity-related aspects of the meetings. However, they also agreed that they needed the support of non-LGBTQ individuals and wanted a name that highlighted the inclusion of allies. We wrote out lists of terms, covering the classroom whiteboard with words like “Lambda,” “Rainbow,” and “Alliance,” all of which the students eventually turned down, favoring instead “The Queers and Allies Club,” which explicitly named the group as a space for LGBTQ people and other supportive individuals. One student explained that she wanted to ensure that everyone felt welcome, but that this group was for supporting LGBTQ students specifically.

The visibility of the Oberlin Queers and Allies Club (QAAC) serves to mark it as an explicitly queer space within this public school, a group whose objective is to provide a comfortable and communal opportunity for sharing personal experiences, discussing current events, and asking questions about identity and history. Groups like QAAC serve an important purpose in the current national school climate; in a 2013 survey of LGBTQ school climate, 74.1% of LGBTQ students surveyed reported being verbally harassed by their peers for their sexuality, and 55.1% reported being harassed for their gender expression. 36.2% reported physical harassment. 55.5% reported discriminatory policies in their school. These policies

include banning students from forming GSAs or writing about LGBTQ topics in school assignments, and preventing students from attending dances with someone of the same gender (Kosciw et al). While this is a national survey and does not necessarily reflect the experiences of students at Oberlin High School, it does illuminate the problems that LGBTQ high school students face in the United States. QAAC, with its openly LGBTQ-related name, serves to provide an unapologetically queer space for students who may not feel able to discuss their experiences in other spaces on campus or at home.

Though QAAC provides students with the opportunity to discuss harassment and other harmful and potentially dangerous behavior, it is also a celebratory space. The five to seven students who attend QAAC every week are sophomores and juniors, most of whom already know one another from their classes. Frequently, older students who have been members of QAAC since its revival in 2013 join in the meetings, and on one occasion students from the original Oberlin GSA, which was founded in the mid-2000s, returned to discuss the progress of QAAC and offer insight into the history of the group. Often, students share personal victories, such as when they have a successful conversation with a friend or relative about sexuality or gender identity. Though some students joined the group in pairs or groups of friends, in general, students tend to come to QAAC alone and become friends with the other members over time. Though they occasionally discuss their romantic lives and ask one another for advice, this is not a central theme of the meetings. Instead, students primarily use the time to have discussions and plan events.

Though my relationship with the group extends back through the previous year, I have been working with QAAC on this project since autumn 2014. I got involved with the

organization when a professor connected me with Amy<sup>1</sup>, who has been the advisor for QAAC since it began as the Oberlin Gay/Straight Alliance several years ago. Amy has been a resident of Oberlin for over a decade and was a teacher and writer for many years prior to becoming a professor at Oberlin College. Like Amy, with few exceptions, the students in the group are all longtime residents of Oberlin. Most have attended Oberlin City Schools for much of their academic career.

### **Discussion of Terms**

This project takes a highly interdisciplinary approach to answering the question of how non-urban youth use the spaces available to them to create connections with one another in unconventional and often unnoticed ways. In doing so, it also offers strategies to adults in support roles to better provide for the specific needs of non-urban LGBTQ youth.

My intent in writing this paper is twofold. First, I would like to describe the resources that exist for local LGBTQ youth as well as how those resources are used. Second, I will demonstrate the ways in which these organizations, initiatives, and support structures fail to fill the specific needs of non-urban youth. In doing so, I will highlight and analyze the ways in which local youth craft their own sources of support using both the provided spaces--meet-ups, for example—as well as online spaces to enact unexpected methods of support. I will demonstrate how the relative scarcity of resources for local youth is indicative of a larger problem within LGBTQ communities in general, many of which often tend to focus on the needs of metropolitan, adult LGBTQ people at the expense of youth, and youth in non-urban areas in particular. I will explore how youth interpret “community” and how this differs from the way

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<sup>1</sup> All names have been changed to protect the identity of participants.



national LGBTQ organizations wield this term. I will explore how these young people use the tools available to them to try to build connections with each other and with supportive adults that suit their specific needs.

I will describe ways in which adults can provide for the comfort and wellbeing of LGBTQ youth by using the term “support.” For the purposes of this project, “support” describes actions and initiatives that help LGBTQ youth achieve whatever they set out to do. In most cases, in my role as an assistant advisor to QAAC, enacting support means giving students the space to name the conversations they want to have and the events they would like to put on, and using my experience as a facilitator and event organizer to help them effectively do those things. On a more general scale, enacting support in this context means ensuring that LGBTQ youth feel heard and understood; that they have access to information about being an LGBTQ person through books, websites, and positive role models; that they are connected to LGBTQ peers; and that they know who to contact in an emergency if they feel unsafe at home or in school.

Another one of the most common terms I will be using throughout this paper is “non-urban,” which I will use to describe those who live in places without easy access to a city. I chose this term because it does not categorize these places as specifically rural; while parts of Lorain County are rural, Oberlin does not fit into this designation. However, Oberlin residents may still struggle to get to Cleveland or other urban spaces, and cannot accurately be described as a suburb of Cleveland. In order to highlight the shared experiences of people who cannot simply take a short train ride into the closest city, I chose the term “non-urban” to encapsulate all of these places. However, I do use the term “rural” in this paper when specifically describing the experiences of rural communities.

While working with a population of people who may still be working through how to describe their sexuality or gender and who rely quite a bit on the Internet to do so, I want to ensure that I am using inclusive terminology that at least approximates the wide-ranging assortment of genders and sexualities. Because of this, throughout this paper, I will often use the term “LGBTQ” to describe the population of people who identify as something other than heterosexual and/or cisgender. This acronym itself, as well as the more contentious term “queer,” is based in a Western understanding of gender and sexuality and is by no means all-inclusive. Though *queer* has come into vogue as a catch-all term, it has a violent history as a slur and is less common as an identity marker among older LGBTQ people. Because of this, I will be using the term “queerness” to describe the political and social aspects of being a non-heterosexual and/or non-cisgender person and will use “LGBTQ” as an imperfect umbrella term to indicate identity throughout the rest of the paper.

I will also avoid using the term “real life,” instead using “offline” to describe in-person or otherwise non-Internet interactions. For many people, the Internet provides connection and community that is no less “real” than conversations they have in person, and in many cases may actually feel more genuine and gratifying. I seek to subvert the idea that online relationships are inherently less important than offline ones.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss how LGBTQ youth use the resources available to them as well as their own invented resources to build community, but my work cannot be useful without a full understanding of what “community” is. The term as I use it here goes beyond the dictionary definition of “a group of people with something in common,” though this is certainly an important component. The term “LGBTQ community” has a specific political visibility and indicates a collective identity that is often wielded by national organizations in order to effect

social change, most visibly marriage equality. However, there is also a fundamental human element to the categorization; it is important for anyone to feel like they are not alone.

Mary Gray writes, “[m]y use of the term ‘community’ is meant to acknowledge its importance as an organizing principle to the people with whom I worked more than to signal my belief in its existence beyond an aspiration or ideal” (Gray 27). While I agree that “LGBTQ community” is an overinflated political category, I don’t want to downplay the importance of community to my students. This community includes the members of their specific local groups, like QAAC, as well as the students (LGBTQ or otherwise) who attend the local LGBTQ youth events, like meet-ups and conferences.

Often, organizers and national campaigns use the term “LGBTQ community” to instill a sense of collective identity among LGBTQ people, but I do not find this use of the phrase to be relevant or useful to my work in this paper. I do not wish to presume that all of the students and LGBTQ adults I’ve spoken to have the same political or personal priorities or view themselves as part of some national movement. The claims of a “coherent and tangible ‘LGBT community’ speak to the power of nationally mass-mediated conversations to manifest an ‘imagined community’ of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people whether L, G, B, or T-identifying people are present or not” (Gray 27). When describing community throughout this project, I am not describing this imagined coalition among all LGBTQ people. Instead, I wish to describe the in person or online connections that young LGBTQ people make with one another, linking them together by shared interests, geography, or common goals.

This also extends into the online world, where the possibilities for individual and group connections are infinite and widely varied. In particular, online community allows young people to quickly develop and spread their own in-jokes, terminology, and ideas that build and solidify a

sense of togetherness and shared experience. In this paper, I highlight as a case study the Internet community around the popular television show *Supernatural* because of its relevance to many of the young people with whom I've spoken. I note, however, that there are many more such fan-based communities that create bonds among LGBTQ youth online.

### **Literature Review**

In contextualizing my argument and developing a historical framework for my analysis, Sociologist Mary L Gray's *Out In the Country* has served as an invaluable resource. Her work with groups in Kentucky, while wider in geographical scope than this project, introduced the idea of rural LGBTQ teens using the Internet to connect to a larger population of LGBTQ people. I hope to contemporize and expand upon her investigation of certain now-defunct websites and explain how teenagers are using today's popular sites to a similar end.

Similarly, Colin Johnson's *Just Queer Folks: Gender and Sexuality in Rural America* and John D'Emilio's *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* situate queer history within location-specific contexts; Johnson discusses the relative lack of explicitly rural queer studies while D'Emilio describes the urban conditions that led to the development of sexuality as a category of identity. Both writers take a historical and sociological approach to queer identity formation in a way that calls into question the immutability of gender and sexuality as categories themselves, which informs my understanding of community and queerness and opens these terms up for exploration.

I also rely heavily on the writings of those who study fan culture and the development of communities around media. In particular, Henry Jenkins' canonical *Textual Poachers* and Christy Carlson's essay "Is This Because I'm Intertextual?" examine the important ways in

which fandom connects and divides individuals and allows them to develop their own culture around television shows and other media. Carlson in particular focuses on the importance of fan-produced content and its importance in the development of in-jokes and shared language among fans, particularly those who are LGBTQ, which is highly relevant to my own analysis of *Supernatural* and the ways in which youth interpret and enhance the queer elements of the show. While Jenkins does highlight the historical relevance of the common Kirk/Spock pairing in early fan-made *Star Trek* content, his analysis is distinct from his analysis of *Star Trek* itself. Carlson criticizes this approach, noting that fan producers are, in fact, producers themselves, and their work carries implications for the primary story, as well (Carlson 178).

### **Methodology**

Since November 2014, I have been engaging in participant observation and taking field notes during weekly QAAC meetings as well as special events, including meet-ups and conferences. I chose to focus on QAAC rather than multiple groups in the local area due to the limited time in which I conducted this research as well as the relative lack of active groups nearby. I chose to focus on building my relationship with QAAC and helping them with event planning and organization rather than driving to other groups. Upon completion of this project, I recognize that the addition of meetings with other local GSA-type groups may have enhanced my understanding of how groups other than QAAC function. I did, however, meet 20-30 students from various other organizations through the events that I attended with QAAC.

In addition to the weekly QAAC meetings, I attended two library meet-ups, one conference, and one meeting of Café Q, an Oberlin-based monthly social space for LGBTQ youth. At all of these events, I explained my position as both an assistant advisor to the group as

well as a researcher. While in attendance, I focused on taking notes that accurately represented my own observations of the space as well as the ideas expressed by students. However, I was unable to conduct interviews with any of the youth present. While I did my best to prioritize the interests and opinions of students in group discussions and include what specific information I could, the required parental consent forms were a deterrent for the students who otherwise would have wanted to participate in interviews. This certainly impacted the direction of my research and I hope that anyone conducting a similar project in the future will manage to interview students and include those students' viewpoints in their final product.

As a young queer person working with high school students, I see my role as an advisor as an opportunity to act as an example of an attainable “queer future.” When students ask me questions about my own life, I answer them honestly or tell them that I would prefer not to answer. I try to use my connections with the college to help the group whenever possible, such as organizing a panel of my peers to answer questions about being an LGBTQ young adult and contacting campus LGBTQ groups for resources and information. My supervisor and I publicize relevant on-campus performances and events and often organize group attendance so that none of the students have to go alone. My priorities in conducting this research is to use my position as a student to illuminate the needs that the youth have expressed to me, and analyze the ways in which the current methods of support—national organizations, local meet-ups, and GSAs—both succeed and fail in particular ways to meet the needs of the students I have worked with. I have been open with the students about my role as a researcher since beginning this project, and have invited them to share their thoughts and concerns with me at any point during my time working with them. When I began the research process, my intention was to craft the project that would

be most useful to them, and this has remained my top priority throughout my time doing this work.

While I worked to present myself as a resource to QAAC members, I also recognize that my experiences are necessarily different from most of the students in the group. Throughout my time working with QAAC, I have attempted to remain constantly aware of my unique and sometimes complicated position as a young researcher and advisor. The youngest students I have worked with are seven years younger than I am, meaning that I am just a few years older than many of the students. I am also an Oberlin College student, a position about which some of my students have complicated or conflicted feelings due to the college's enormous presence in the town. I am also a relative newcomer, having moved to Oberlin at the start of my freshman year in 2011, and also a temporary presence, given that I am moving to the East Coast for graduate school in May. All of these aspects of my own life necessarily affect how the students relate to me, and how I relate to them. I am not a longtime Oberlin resident, and during my time here I have only ever been a member of the Oberlin College community. I am also a white cisgender woman, and this affects how I relate to students as well as how I process and analyze what I observe. My perspective is limited by these factors.

### **Chapter Guide**

I begin Chapter 1 by discussing the demographic context of Oberlin and the ways in which the town informs my understanding of non-urban LGBTQ youth communities. Chapter 2 analyzes the nature of safety for LGBTQ youth, and what the term means in the context of schools and local communities. This lays the groundwork for the rest of the paper. In Chapter 3 I describe in further detail the local organizations and events that exist in Northeast Ohio and their

actual relevance to the students I've worked with. I demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of both the rigid structure of the local GLSEN Youth Conference and the local library meet-ups as two examples of events meant to help students develop friendships with one another as well as organizational tools. I explain how the students build community when they are in the same physical space and how that relates to the way they connect online. My analysis of this online connection and its importance in the lives of the students, as well as how their online presences affect their consumption of television and other more traditional forms of media, composes Chapter 4, the final section of this paper. I conclude by discussing potential next steps for this research and envision a future of intentional and effective support structures for LGBTQ youth.





## Chapter 1: Background and Demographics

### **Oberlin High School in Context**

Comprised of approximately 370 students, Oberlin High School is a relatively small community of students between the ages of fourteen and eighteen. According to census data, 45.6% of students at OHS are categorized as “economically disadvantaged,” prompting the Department of Education to label OHS a “Medium-Low Poverty” school. 48.4% Oberlin residents make under \$50,000 a year, which is comparable to 48.1% in all of Lorain County. 13.3% of Oberlin families, compared to 10.7% in the county, are below the poverty line. Though Oberlin is often considered to be unique in the context of the region because of the existence of Oberlin College, the economic standing of many residents is similar to the rest of Lorain County (Ohio Board of Education).

Because there is no public transportation in Oberlin and limited transportation throughout the rest of the county, youth who may want to attend LGBTQ-related events outside of town would need to travel by car, which is an issue for people who are too young or otherwise unable to drive. It may also present a danger to young people who feel unsafe asking for a ride—an LGBTQ young person may live with parents or guardians who do not know they are LGBTQ and would react negatively, or perhaps even violently, if that child were to reveal their identity. Furthermore, 8.9% of residents in Lorain County do not have a car available to them, and 33.4% have only one car, which presents an obstacle for students with working parents or guardians, even if they are supportive (ACS Demographic and Housing Estimates).

Cleveland, which is the closest city to Oberlin and which hosts the most numerous youth-specific LGBTQ events, is about forty-five minutes away. It is not feasible to expect that youth

are able to venture there in order to attend meetings and events meant for them. Amy and I often arrange a carpool for events, bringing students to Cleveland ourselves, but this is not possible for every event. In the time that I have been working with QAAC, we have never had a student attend an event without a carpool, despite many students often expressing interest in those events. This indicates that transportation is a massive barrier for QAAC members who would otherwise want to attend.

For QAAC members, Cleveland is just barely out of reach, but, as a significantly more urban space, represents queer possibilities that are unattainable in Oberlin. “The City” as a general concept in popular imagination is a place where people can explore their identity without judgment from neighbors or other community members. Mary Gray writes, “Cities are imagined to draw out and bind together the nameless throngs of same-sex desiring and gender-variant people....This particular history of gay and lesbian visibility positions the city’s capacities to make space for queer difference and consolidate capital as necessary precursors to modern lesbian and gay identity formation” (Gray 7). Cities are imagined to offer opportunities for organizing queer people together, but they may also create the conditions necessary for performing a legible and acceptable “queer identity” in the first place. In some cases, this idea of “The City” goes beyond even the scope of Cleveland and only incorporates the largest metropolises into its conception. The national headquarters of GLSEN (the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network) is in New York City, The Human Rights Campaign Headquarters is in Washington D.C., and the NOH8 Headquarters is in Los Angeles. While local initiatives may have offices in smaller cities, and most of the largest organizations will have chapters in those cities as well, the resources and manpower are all centralized in cities with large, visible, easily-mobilized queer populations.

Most cities have LGBTQ community centers with support groups, social events, and even LGBTQ-friendly exercise classes and job fairs. Furthermore, most scholarly research about queerness, unless specified to be strictly about rural or non-urban people, focus on urban locations because “if the rural is often seen as conceptually too small or too big to organize meaningful historical claims around, the urban is usually regarded as being appropriately scaled for the purpose of making generalizable claims on the strength of numerous examples” (Johnson 12). Cities are discrete entities that are generally understood to have the resources they need to support their populations and its own history of social change that cannot be applied as cleanly to rural areas.

### **The Landscape of Local Organizing**

Many national organizations focus on the safety and happiness of LGBTQ youth in general, though none focus on non-urban youth specifically. Some, like GLSEN and the No H8 Campaign, focus on policy initiatives and demonstrations on a national scale, perhaps the most famous being the Day of Silence each April, which was pioneered by GLSEN in 1996 (DayofSilence.org). Other organizations, like It Gets Better and The Trevor Project, focus more directly on suicide and self-harm prevention, while still more attempt to help young people work through their daily struggles and anxieties, often taking on an irreverent and conversational tone in order to engage their audience. Everyone Is Gay and similar advice-based groups and sites are examples of this. Many of these organizations consist of in-person meetings and online resources. The GLSEN websites host a massive amount of information as well as free promotional materials for their events.

Locally, the organizations that are most visible and present are GLSEN Northeast Ohio (GLSEN NEO) and the Teen Pride Network (TPN). TPN is a collaborative project of the Unitarian Universalist Church of Akron, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) and Community AIDS Network/Akron Pride Initiative (CANAPI). Because TPN operates out of Akron, which is at least an hour away by car, the students I work with in Oberlin only travel for the biggest events (such as the annual Pride Prom hosted at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship building) and even then, only when my supervisor provides transportation. The UU Fellowship in Oberlin also hosts Café Q, which occurs once a month and which just began this year. Because it is a new organization, Café Q is still building its infrastructure and gaining attention among youth.

Though TPN and Café Q are the result of local organizing efforts, GLSEN is by far the most visible LGBTQ-focused organization for youth in the area. According to their website, GLSEN is a national organization primarily focused on shaping educational policy; their mission is to ensure that all students are “valued and treated with respect, regardless of their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression. [They] believe that all students deserve a safe and affirming school environment where they can learn and grow” (“Who We Are”). They work toward that goal by “working in hallways across the country -- from Congress and the Department of Education to schools and district offices in your community -- to improve school climate and champion LGBT issues in K-12 education.” GLSEN is also one of the most consistent producers of research on the lives of LGBTQ students, including school climate, Internet use, and relationships with peers.

In the day-to-day lives of my students, GLSEN’s primary function is to set the national calendar for LGBTQ youth advocacy, including the annual Day of Silence, a GLSEN-created

day during which all participating students remain silent throughout the school day to demonstrate the absence of LGBTQ voices in classrooms. GLSEN's structure consists of local chapters throughout the U.S. that disseminate information from the national organization and host their own events, including meet-ups, dances, and conferences, in addition to the nationally scheduled events.

Over the course of my time with QAAC, I've noticed that this goal-oriented meeting style works to help the students develop ideas for school events, but does little to fulfill their need for connection with other LGBTQ people. After all, GLSEN is an education-based organization that exists to help students raise awareness about LGBTQ issues in schools and address issues of bullying and harassment. This is important work, and the research that GLSEN has done on LGBTQ youth experiences is indispensable. However, GLSEN is the only major organization in the local area that caters specifically to LGBTQ youth at any level. Their meetings and conferences offer some of the only spaces where the students from Oberlin can meet other LGBTQ youth and allies, and attending these events often means a great deal to them, since the distance between Oberlin and Cleveland means that they often cannot attend every event. And yet, once we arrive, the students are left with very little time to actually make friends or even have conversations with the youth around them.

Despite the relative increase in LGBTQ-specific resources in Cleveland due to the presence of GLSEN, when QAAC does attend events in the Cleveland area, they usually find that the events are not designed to be useful to students without a well-established GSA presence in their school or without the ability to attend more frequent gatherings in the city. One student mentioned to me on the way home from the annual GLSEN conference that she wished there had been much more time for socializing, since she doesn't often have the opportunity to meet other

LGBTQ youth. Another student expressed frustration because many of the organizing tips they'd been given by the event planners required much larger GSAs that are already recognized widely by students and administrators. One of the speakers, who had recently graduated from high school, told the conference attendees that her group spread information about their organization via word of mouth and had over 50 students attend their first meeting. They also encouraged students to take advantage of institutional memory because they didn't have to start their club; somebody started it for them. For QAAC, whose most populated meetings draw 10-15 students and whose founding members<sup>2</sup> still attend high school, this is interesting but ultimately irrelevant information. While certain activities proved useful to QAAC members, much of the advice and organizing strategies were aimed at much larger and more institutionally recognized groups.

With limited access to non-mainstream media, support groups, and positive real-life LGBTQ role models, non-urban youth are left with the common discourse of violence, solitude, and despair or the idea that the ultimate goal, and the ultimate sign of success and queer liberation, is "getting out." However, some youth subvert this idea in interesting ways, mainly through the use of new media and online social formations. In the absence of in-person activities that cater to their specific needs as non-urban youth, the students I've met tend to rely heavily on the Internet to connect them to information and community. By decentralizing overly metropolitan notions of queerness and access, youth advocates and educators can more effectively serve non-urban youth by recognizing that queer experiences in rural spaces expand beyond the tropes of tragedy or escape and prioritizing the creation of resources that are easily accessible to youth in rural communities.

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<sup>2</sup> While the first Oberlin High School GSA began earlier, there had not been an active GSA presence in the school for several years before the current iteration of the group.

## Chapter 2: School Climate and the Rhetoric of Safety

### **LGBTQ Curricular Content**

The Oberlin High School Queers and Allies Club meets in a classroom once a week after school. Amy and I arrive as the school day ends and meet the students in the classroom. Often, conversations are already happening by the time we arrive, usually centering on what had happened during the school day. Oberlin High is a small school, and members of the group in the same grade generally have at least one class together. Either by accident or because of one of Amy's discussion prompts, the conversation frequently turns to how LGBTQ topics are handled in classrooms. The students have had mixed experiences with teachers covering moments in LGBTQ history and including specifically LGBTQ examples in classroom lessons.

The need for LGBTQ content in schools is not simply about providing a multifaceted education to all students, but about aiding LGBTQ students in the development of their identities and ensuring that they are represented in their history and health lessons. Peter McLaren, a well-known critical education studies scholar, identifies one important aspect of school as aiding in the construction of self (McLaren). Mary L. Gray also works from a similar notion of identity formation, writing that "youth identities are cultural assemblages that work with the materials on hand" (Gray 19). Without a doubt, schools are one of the places in which young people spend the most time, and they are vital to the identity process of students. However, without the proper strategies in place to support all students, schools can also become harmful to youth who do not fit into a specific "normal" (ie, heteronormative and cisnormative, as well as white, English-speaking and able-bodied) standard.



The 2013 GLSEN Climate Survey identifies four areas that indicate a “positive school climate” for LGBTQ students: supportive school staff, access to GSAs or similar groups, anti bullying/harassment policies, and curricula that discusses LGBTQ-related topics. According to the survey:

Students in rural/small town schools reported the highest frequency of hearing anti-LGBT language at school. Students in rural/small town schools experienced higher frequencies of victimization in school based on sexual orientation and gender expression. Students in rural/small town schools were least likely to have LGBT-related school resources or supports, particularly GSAs and supportive school personnel. (Kosciw et al)

Throughout the report, the words “safe” and “safety” are frequently used but never defined as a specific feeling or action, particularly in regards specifically to non-urban youth. The idea of “feeling safe” is considered universally understandable as a general sense of security. But what does it mean to be a queer student and feel “safe” in school?

### **Next Steps for Schools**

The purpose of this section is not to critique the specific practices of Oberlin High or any other particular school. Instead, I aim to highlight a national trend toward a practice of security rather than equity for LGBTQ students that ends up failing to support them in certain important ways. It is becoming increasingly apparent that the initiatives set up to support LGBTQ students are inaccurately conceptualizing their struggle. The focus on anti-harassment policies, while helpful in some cases to demonstrate intolerance towards cruelty, does not address deeper notions of queer difference. When educators conceptualize safety as measures of control rather than equality, they do not recognize the different ways in which students can be alienated not only by their peers, but also by the structure of their education and the ways in which queer perspectives are left out of conversations about history and identity (Short 108). Anti-bullying

rhetoric often only focuses on isolated incidents of violent or aggressive one-on-one interactions between students. While some schools and organizations do often characterize the victims of bullying as queer students, their response to this targeting is never to normalize queerness or recognize the predominance of heteropatriarchy in all spaces. Instead, it is to instruct all students not to be cruel to each other. For example, when I was in high school, the administration often touted their “zero tolerance” policies toward bullying, but when students made comments about AIDS being a “gay plague” during health class, my teacher did not know how to respond and there was no recourse for those students, and the LGBTQ students in class, including myself, did not feel supported enough to speak up. By ignoring the social structures present in schools, administrators create incomplete and often unhelpful solutions for students whose experience of isolation in school extends far beyond their experiences with openly homophobic or transphobic classmates.

The students in QAAC often talk about microaggressions they experience in school, including the minimal LGBTQ history and literature they’ve studied in their years at the various schools they’ve attended as well as the times when teachers share examples that are inadvertently heteronormative. One student described an incident in which a teacher, in explaining some romantic entanglement in a novel, asked the boys a question about girlfriends and asked the girls a question about boyfriends. The student to whom I was speaking said that when she attempted to correct the teacher’s assumption that everyone in the room was straight, he rolled his eyes in obvious annoyance before correcting the example.

While a teacher’s lack of LGBTQ recognition does not indicate a threat of bodily harm, the reliance on students to remind teachers of LGBTQ identities as well as the lack of policy about LGBTQ history and literature in school serves to place all of the focus on physical safety

rather than validation and normalization of LGBTQ identities. This means that students are “safe” in a basic physical sense due to these policies, but they are left with the responsibility of finding their own information about their identity and correcting teachers if they feel comfortable doing so.

### **“Safety Rhetoric” and Potential for Harm**

This nebulous understanding of “safety” as a concept is apparent in the use of the term “safe space” by national LGBTQ education organizations. Several of these organizations, including GLSEN and Everyone is Gay, offer “Safe Space” stickers for purchase through their website that are meant for the doors of school staff and administrators. The stickers, which serve to indicate support for LGBTQ students and often say “This is a Safe Space” or something equivalent, allow faculty and staff to demonstrate their support for LGBTQ people. However, there is no way to require that these teachers are enacting support, or that their understanding of support is the same as that of their students, meaning that the stickers do not ensure any level of understanding from the people who use them. Furthermore, the sale of the stickers encourages the neoliberal notion that one can simply buy safety through the act of purchasing and displaying a sticker. The stickers allow users to adopt a specific rhetoric of safety without any level of education about how LGBTQ students experience and understand safety, or the lack thereof, in school.

I have encountered these stickers on the doors of coffee shops, public restrooms, and random walls, suggesting that the stickers do not often mark an actual space in which LGBTQ individuals are supported. These stickers offer a possibility for already-supportive teachers and administrators to demonstrate that support, but they don’t do anything to actively create inclusive

space for LGBTQ people and can actually cause harm to students who rely on the stickers to indicate helpful adults. For example, teachers who wish to be supportive may use the stickers, only to find themselves ill-equipped to actually help the students who may come to them seeking support, opening up the potential to propagate harmful information in their attempt to comfort or reason with students.

By suggesting that any location displaying one of these stickers is safe, organizations neglect to identify all of the different types of harm that well-meaning adults can enact on LGBTQ youth. Even within LGBTQ spaces, such as the GLSEN NEO Conference, a complete lack of information about the contributions of LGBTQ people of color during the LGBTQ history presentation constituted a moment in which a student of color in that space may feel erased and minimized and therefore unsafe, despite assurances during the initial community standards discussion that the conference space was, in fact, “safe.” While the stickers and other indicators of “safe space” may represent an elevated understanding of LGBTQ youth issues, they cannot guarantee safety or understanding for all young LGBTQ people.

The “safe space” concept is among many strategies schools are employing to indicate their recognition of LGBTQ students. While this may be a useful tool for some faculty and staff who understand the specific experiences of LGBTQ youth and wish to demonstrate that understanding, the use of “safe space” ideology can often result in inadvertent erasure of students whose identities often go unrecognized in LGBTQ-specific places. Furthermore, the misconception about what safety looks like means that “safe space” may indicate spaces that are under more intense surveillance by authority figures. In practice, this emphasis on safety often comes in the form of stricter punishments for bullies and more comprehensive responses to harassment rather than a significant increase in LGBTQ content in school lessons.

## **Content Standards**

In 2011, California became the only state to mandate that social studies classes address “the role and contributions of...lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans.” However, the FAQ about the legislation states, “it is up to local districts to determine how the instructional content is included. That section applies to the course of study in grades one through twelve, but again it falls to the teacher and the local school and district administration to determine how the content is covered and at which grade level” (“Frequently Asked Questions: Senate Bill 48”). Though the law makes it necessary for school districts to discuss LGBTQ themes in some capacity, there’s no requirement that the subject be sustained throughout multiple grade levels or address specific historical figures or events. LGBTQ contributions may be relegated to a single lesson in a single classroom depending on the district or the teacher. While the legislation itself as well as the media around it contributes to a conversation about LGBTQ curriculum, the law itself does not change much about the way social studies teachers discuss LGBTQ issues and people.

Currently, Oberlin High School has one specific Social Studies class focused on the historical struggles of marginalized people. The class, called Race, Gender, and Oppression In American and World History, which is now in its third year, is a one-semester course that covers the history of racism and sexism in the US as well as the struggle of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender activists in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The class is highly popular among members of QAAC, and the topics discussed in class often come up in group meetings. This indicates that the class is one of the few places where students may openly discuss sexuality and gender, as well as other elements of their identity, including race, class, and ability. While this class is vitally

important, its existence suggests that these topics are not adequately covered in other classes, meaning that students have the opportunity to discuss these issues extensively for just one semester of their high school career. While the class equips students with the analytical tools to continue learning about their histories and the structural oppression in place in U.S. society, they may not have the opportunity to practice those skills again in school.

While Race, Gender, and Oppression is a place for discussions of identity in a historical and sociocultural context in Oberlin High School, the students in QAAC have expressed some dissatisfaction with the fact that specific health concerns within the LGBTQ community are not addressed in their health curriculum. One student, who has done some research on health education policies in the state of Ohio, suggested that because there is no state-mandated LGBTQ health curriculum, there is no reason for health teachers to spend too much time focusing on the topic.

Ohio and Iowa are the only two states without state-mandated content standards of health education, meaning that there are no enforced benchmarks of learning or skill development in health education for Ohio students (“Comprehensive Sexuality Education”). However, even in the states with content standards, individual districts have the power to determine the content areas covered in health classes, meaning that there are no federal laws requiring that the health of students who are not heterosexual or cisgender be discussed.

Because of this lack of regulation, over half of schools in the U.S. do not address LGBTQ-specific issues in health classes. According to a recent study by the Center for Disease Control’s Division of Adolescents and Health,

48% of schools taught about sexual identity and sexual orientation. In comparison 86% of all high schools that taught about abstinence as the most effective way to avoid pregnancy and STDs, 69% taught about marriage and commitment, 65% taught about

condom efficacy, and 39% taught students how to correctly use a condom. (Questions and Answers)

And, although there are no available statistics on the issue, it is likely that health classes that do not address LGBTQ sexual health also do not address emotional and mental health for LGBTQ people, further alienating LGBTQ students in classroom settings. Without family members or guardians who are willing to discuss issues of health and sexuality, health classes are sometimes the only place in which students can learn about their physical and mental health needs and how they can fulfill them. When a discussion of queer issues is left out of this space, LGBTQ students may not know where they can access such information.

### **Political Influences on Education Policy**

In Oberlin City Schools as well as almost all public schools nationwide, the curriculum is determined by the local Board of Education and funded through taxes on residents. Because of this, public schools are not solitary entities that can stand on their own, and are always influenced by the communities in which they exist. For example, in 2014, parents protested the formation of a GSA-type group (called Allies) at Elyria High School, which is less than twenty minutes away from Oberlin. The group of dissenting parents, who described Allies as a “sex club,” fought the formation of the club by urging parents to vote against a tax levy that would increase the district’s budget by twelve million dollars (Roberson).

Though the effort against Allies was small in comparison to the level of support that Allies received from other parents and staff, it garnered significant local media attention, prompting several discussions in QAAC about how to support the Elyria group as well as how to protect QAAC from such issues in the future. These conversations, as well as the news stories surrounding the Elyria group, prompted Amy to reach out to the faculty advisors of the Allies

group to see if she could help. Legally, there is no way for the parents to prevent GSA-style organizations from forming; under the Federal Equal Access Act, schools with other types of extracurricular clubs must also allow students to form GSAs (“Legal Resources”). However, the level of attention that the dissenting Elyria parents received indicates that while students have a legal right to GSAs in public schools, it is still possible for parents, teachers, and other community members to make their opinions heard and work to prevent such groups from forming—or, at the very least, prevent the members of the group from feeling supported by their local community.

The example of Elyria High School makes it clear that while there is federal legislation and national organizing efforts to support LGBTQ youth, in non-urban areas the voice of the local community, even if it is just a small percentage of members, also plays a large role in how safe students feel participating in GSAs. However, particularly for students in these areas, GSAs serve a vital purpose to promote discussion around issues of identity as well as to bring students together to organize events and promote local knowledge about LGBTQ issues. Currently, QAAC is discussing the possibility of a week of LGBTQ-themed assemblies leading up to GLSEN’s annual Day of Silence, which is a complicated and intensive process of finding speakers, reserving space, and garnering the support of the administration. Doing this work through QAAC instead of as individuals means that the students have a dedicated time each week to discuss the plans, as well as the support of Amy and me as the group advisors.

### **The Importance of GSAs**

In the absence of LGBTQ-focused curricula during the school day, the presence of GSAs give students the time and space to talk and organize among themselves and, while doing so,



offer a level of anonymity that other types of LGBTQ organizations do not. Though the inclusion of allies is often criticized as assimilationist or unnecessary, for LGBTQ youth in small towns, the inclusion of straight students allows members to feel more comfortable attending meetings if they do not wish to share their sexual orientation with other students. As Mary Gray writes, “[rural youth] bear the weight of a politics of visibility that...was built for city living” (Gray 21). Community support and resources, such as support groups as well as LGBTQ-focused shelters and community centers, temper the risks of “being out” in the city. Though of course there are still plenty of dangers attached to visibility, these dangers are compounded in rural areas, where youth have less opportunity to avoid hostile environments and do not have access to the LGBTQ community spaces and events that happen in metropolitan areas.

In small towns like Oberlin, many students may feel too scared to come out as LGBTQ because of the individual attention it may draw as well as the possibility of the information getting to unsupportive family members. This burden of individual visibility is mitigated by group visibility. This became apparent when the Oberlin group discussed changing the name of the club from the unofficial “Gay/Straight Alliance” label they’d been using for years. Many students were adamant that the club name include the word “queer,” surprising to me because of the unequivocal visibility such a word would bring, and surprising to the older advisors because of the word’s history as a slur. Later in the school year, when we were discussing the design for group t-shirts, I asked if the students felt comfortable with t-shirts that said “Queers and Allies Club” on them. They unanimously agreed that they wanted the full group name on the shirts rather than the more ambiguous acronym. The group identity as a space for all people, LGBTQ or not, protects members from individual scrutiny and allows them to be more open than they might be if they were alone.

While legislators and educators are taking steps to highlight and normalize queerness in schools through curriculum changes and training for educators, the conversations in Oberlin's Queers and Allies Club indicate that there is definitely still more work to be done to make schools comfortable places for LGBTQ students. For now, groups like QAAC create an important social and discussion space for youth who may feel isolated or silenced in the classroom, or who need help to identify supportive peers and teachers. Particularly for smaller schools in non-urban areas, GSAs offer a space for LGBTQ students to surround themselves with people who will affirm their identity (if the students choose to identify themselves as LGBTQ).

Despite the important role of QAAC and other groups like it, there are some queer scholars and activists who see GSAs as unnecessary or even harmful to LGBTQ people. In the recent article "You Are Triggering Me! The Neoliberal Rhetoric of Harm, Danger, and Trauma," queer theorist Jack Halberstam writes, "Queer youth groups...install a narrative of trauma and encourage LGBT youth to see themselves as 'endangered' and 'precarious' whether or not they actually feel that way" (Halberstam). Halberstam is referencing initiatives such as the *It Gets Better Project*, a YouTube-based suicide prevention campaign in which LGBTQ people, including many out celebrities, assure younger LGBTQ people that their lives will someday improve. While it's true that the *It Gets Better Project* often communicates a deeply flawed message of passivity to youth, it nonetheless can be an important resource for people who do not feel as if they have any power over their circumstances and cannot remove themselves from emotionally taxing or abusively homophobic or transphobic environments. However, it also projects a narrative of "precarity," as Halberstam calls it, onto every LGBTQ person who

watches the video, which can be harmful for youth who may not have previously thought of themselves that way.

In critiquing messages like “it gets better” and the organizations that proclaim them, Halberstam raises a vitally important question, one that I attempt to answer in this paper: how do our current methods of support fail LGBTQ youth? However, his conclusions in this piece diverge significantly from my own. Halberstam goes on to say that youth, who benefit from the activism of elders who did not have youth groups or any measure of institutional support, call for “safe spaces” because they are ill-equipped to handle the realities of adult life, and, by supporting safety as a key issue of LGBTQ activism, support neoliberal structures of individualism and militarism. In naming Gay-Straight Alliances as products of a “weepy, self-serving” generation, Halberstam confuses small-scale organizations focused on collective support with tools of national control. Additionally, Halberstam conflates the concepts of equity and security; it is apparent that the legal idea of safety (freedom from physical harm or verbal abuse) is not the sole or even the main goal of GSA-type organizations. Instead, QAAC and groups like it exist to provide students with a collective identity, friends who share a similar understanding of LGBTQ equality, and an opportunity to discuss potential opportunities for change within their schools. It is a space for emotional support, identity-building, planning events, and proposing possible changes to the way the school handles LGBTQ-related issues.

This characterization of GSAs as “unproductive,” in the context of Halberstam’s overall argument that queer activism has been derailed by personal concerns as well as the harmful effects of trigger warnings and other methods of handling trauma, serves to erase and render meaningless the important role of small group discussion in the lives of LGBTQ youth. Furthermore, the claim that students are inventing or vicariously experiencing the harassment

that they talk about in Gay/Straight Alliance meetings (one small component of the purpose of the group) minimizes the daily experiences of youth who often feel unsafe talking about their experiences or who feel that they cannot speak to administrators because of potential homophobia or transphobia. While it's true that the one-size-fits-all model of some national youth-oriented groups may assume that all youth experience the same level of trauma in their every day lives, the function of GSAs is ideally to support a small group of students and individualize the group activities to whatever their needs may be. While Halberstam groups GSAs with all other youth-oriented LGBTQ organizations, GSAs serve a locally specific and highly personalized purpose that is unique to each school. While it's true that GSAs exist to provide emotional support to members, they also provide a space to organize, spread knowledge, and promote coalition among young people. While perhaps not "productive" in the sense of constantly producing quantifiable results, GSAs serve an important developmental purpose for LGBTQ youth while also giving them the space to promote change within their schools or local communities if they see fit.

In the context of current activism around issues of gender and sexuality, questions about the efficacy and importance of GSAs are more relevant than ever. Like Halberstam, some activists and scholars are fed up with "individualistic" notions of self-care and community healing and feel certain that focusing on these issues will prevent the next generation of queer adults from engaging with challenging topics and other types of "hard work." Currently, this conversation centers on the issue of trigger warnings in academic spaces. While specifically focused on how professors handle potentially traumatic material in college courses, this debate also reveals how scholars conceive of trauma in general, and what they see as the proper level of institutional support for individuals who have experienced trauma. Scholars like Sarah

Schulman<sup>3</sup> argue that support in this form “encourages” both triggered responses and institutional censorship, suggesting that institutions who provide some measure of support to students who may have experienced trauma is too political, which is dangerous to the freedom of academia. While this argument is about college classrooms rather than high school clubs, the message is that young people should be able to moderate their own responses to trauma and should not be given advance warning of potentially triggering material.

This critique of how college-age people react to being triggered leads back to Halberstam, who concluded that young people now have no skills to deal with abuse or trauma because they have been sheltered and coddled by the supportive adults in their lives. GSAs, he argues, detract from the purpose of queer activism by giving in to individual needs rather than working toward a “greater good.” However, it is clear that GSAs address needs that have not yet been filled by inclusive curriculums or comprehensive approaches to equity for LGBTQ students in schools. Until schools become places where LGBTQ history and identity are addressed fully and thoughtfully, GSAs offer a place for students and supportive staff members to fill that need themselves.

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<sup>3</sup> Sarah Schulman, during a roundtable for *Entropy Magazine*: “The worst, most detrimental thing a friend or family can do with a triggered person is to feed the runaway train, i.e., re-enforce the delusion that they are being violated when the triggeredness is by definition an over-reaction” (Milks).

## Chapter 3: National Organizations and Local Support

### **Urban Resources, Urban Funding**

In *Exile and Pride*, rural queer activist Eli Clare poses the question: “[w]hy does the money stay urban? What about AIDS prevention programs, LGBT youth services, hate-crime monitoring, queer theater in the mountains of rural Oregon, the cornfields of rural Nebraska, the lowlands of rural South Carolina?” (Clare 43). The efforts of national organizations to advance the rights of LGBTQ people often focus primarily on major metropolitan areas, increasing the invisibility placed upon non-urban LGBTQ people and perpetuating the idea that queerness in rural areas is alien, unreachable, or nonexistent. I will be using GLSEN as an example of how this plays out in the local area and the ways in which the LGBTQ youth in Oberlin and places like it, as well as places that are in more rural areas, are often left out of the organizing efforts of national organizations.

The local chapter of GLSEN is called GLSEN Northeast Ohio, or GLSEN NEO, which operates primarily out of the LGBT Center of Greater Cleveland. In Ohio, there are two other GLSEN chapters, GLSEN Greater Dayton and GLSEN Greater Cincinnati. Each chapter is responsible for organizing events and providing materials for teachers, group advisors, and young people. GLSEN-sponsored events often have a goal or pre-imposed structure that exist to help students plan events for their schools and get information from the staff. Regional chapters allow GLSEN to “serve” populations without extending themselves beyond the metropolis. GLSEN Northeast Ohio is based in Cleveland, quite a trek for students even in neighboring counties because of the lack of public transportation and overall logistical difficulties of getting to a city 45 minutes away. GLSEN also uses their online presence serves to fill the gaps between

the local chapters, giving the illusion that the organization covers the U.S. more completely. GLSEN.org provides visitors with the organization's calendar of events and free print-outs to help groups plan their own activities for those days. There is a section of the website devoted to the research GLSEN has collected on school climate as well as links to the websites for regional GLSEN chapters in each state, though many of those sites go unused by regional representatives. Though the GLSEN website gives any person with an Internet connection access to their resources, the location of GLSEN chapters and the lack of forums or other online networking tools makes it challenging for students in non-urban spaces to use GLSEN as their primary source of social events.

GLSEN attempts to offset their urban bias with easily accessible online resources. Anyone can request free sticker and button packs for Day of Silence, download and print the toolkits, or register their GSA to be listed in the GLSEN GSA registry. However, while this is certainly useful for many groups, it still lacks the personal, interactive component that is more readily available in GLSEN-supported cities, which generally have frequent social gatherings planned by the GLSEN chapter officials. The GLSEN website does not have a community forum or other social media platform, making it impossible for young people to use their site to connect to each other. They also don't host "webinars" for students who cannot travel to conferences or workshops or scheduled live chats for students to speak with each other or GLSEN staff. Essentially, the GLSEN site has one function: to hand resources down from the national organization to individuals, with very little opportunity for those individuals to communicate with the organization about the services they provide.

## **The GLSEN NEO Conference**

In the case of GLSEN NEO, the most widely publicized event is their annual youth conference, which I had the opportunity to attend in October 2014. The chapter held the event in a Cleveland LGBTQ-focused community center. There were approximately thirty teenagers from the Cleveland area in attendance, most of whom, I found out later, had a parent or guardian drop them off for the event. Only three advisors other than my supervisor and myself were there, and we were the only group who had arranged transportation for our students rather than ask that they rely on their own families.

Throughout the conference, which lasted for seven hours, students and advisors followed a set schedule that shuffled one workshop leader after another in and out of the room. The attendees spent much of the day in one particular windowless conference space, sitting in a single large group around a table. The only opportunity they had to network with one another was during lunch, a 20-minute break for pizza between workshop sessions. Though the students were able to interact with one another through the structured discussions, they had almost no time to talk on a more casual level. At the end of the conference, there was a frenzy of activity as students ran from one person to the next, frantically writing down each other's phone numbers, Tumblr URLs, and full names to search later on Facebook. The students had the opportunity to share organizational strategies, describe their success with GLSEN-sponsored events such as Ally Week and the Day of Silence, and answer specific questions asked by facilitators, but they barely had any opportunity to engage in casual conversations with one another one-on-one or in small groups.

Though GLSEN NEO billed the conference as a "great social event" ("GLSEN NEO Youth Conference 2014") in the advertising materials on the website, the reality bore a much



closer resemblance to a school day than a day of connection and socializing. Each workshop facilitator stood at the front of the room and used prepared materials and activities to engage the students. From the beginning, the agenda was firm and the “people in charge” were apparent. After spending all week in school, the students arrived at the conference on Saturday and spent an additional seven hours in “GLSEN School.” Additionally, though the chapter is meant to serve Northeast Ohio as a whole, the lack of public transportation from Akron to Cleveland, for example, as well as the lack of transportation provided by GLSEN meant that the students had to rely on club advisors, family members, or friends to drive them to the event. After listening to each student introduce themselves and name their school and town, I realized that no attendee had traveled from more than one county away, and nearly all were from the more affluent suburbs of Cleveland.

Despite these constraints, the conference did offer a valuable space for students to see that other LGBTQ students (and allies) exist in their region. Though to my knowledge no one made concrete plans to reunite the attendees, students present spoke to me and to each other about the possibility of organizing dances, joint meetings, and other social events to bring the students together once more. It also gave attendees the opportunity to meet GLSEN officials and other openly LGBTQ adults from the greater Cleveland community. Because GLSEN is one of the most recognizable and well-funded LGBTQ organizations, the conference drew a sizeable crowd compared to other local meet-ups run by single GSAs or community libraries, which tend to draw between 10 and 20 participants.

## **Social Alternatives**

Library meet-ups specifically serve as a compelling contrast to the rigid structure of the GLSEN NEO conference. A particular library in a nearby city holds LGBTQ youth meet-ups a few times a year, which the Oberlin GSA regularly attends. The meet-ups are built around team-building games and large periods of free socialization, in which students are encouraged to make conversation with one another. The event takes place in the library's community room, which is an open space with lots of chairs and tables, a sound system for playing music, and a kitchen for snacks and drinks. Though the layout is perfectly suited to socialization and community-building, the meet-ups are not widely publicized, have very little funding and mainly draw youth from that city alone. The Oberlin students were among the few who were not local, and they became aware of the event because Amy had been sent a flyer by the event organizers.

Balancing the convenience and brand recognition of GLSEN with the need for independent, locally-tailored organizations is a delicate task. I don't wish to diminish the resources that GLSEN provides to people who don't know how to organize a club or event; GLSEN has several different toolkits for teachers, librarians, and students to help them start a school or community GSA, publicize for Day of Silence, or even help educate children as young as elementary school on concepts such as family diversity, gender variance, and bullying (Ready, Set, Respect). However, all of GLSEN's chapters are centered on major metropolitan areas in each state, thus forcing people who wish to take advantage of their in-person conferences, support groups, and social events to travel into a city that may be hours away from home, only to encounter spaces that are dominated by residents of that city, who did not have to travel far to attend.

## **Beyond GLSEN NEO**

GLSEN's position as a widely recognized national organization means that it must maintain a number of corporate sponsorships and widespread support from educators and legislators in order to continue functioning. GLSEN is funded by the likes of IBM, PepsiCo, and Time Warner ("Financial Sponsors") and has been endorsed by celebrity spokespeople, including Hilary Duff, Lady Gaga, and President Barack Obama ("GLSEN: Celebrity Supporters"). Other national organizations have similarly high-profile supporters; campaigns like NO H8 rely on celebrity support and highly recognizable visual cues that link the message to a famous face. The popular NO H8 posters, for example, which follow a standard format involving a well-known public figure with duct tape covering their mouth and "NO H8" written in ink on their cheek ("NOH8.org"). While the campaign originally existed to combat California's marriage equality ban, Proposition 8, NOH8 now operates as a generalized LGBTQ organization promoting marriage equality. On the "Familiar Faces" section of their website, NO H8 showcases photoshoots with well-known pop culture icons, including the Kardashian sisters, Pete Wentz, and the members of boy band One Direction.

Much like any other company, these organizations use glossy ad campaigns to solicit money, though it primarily comes through private donations rather than purchases. Most organizations, including GLSEN and NO H8, have a "store" section on their website where visitors can purchase t-shirts, tote bags, and mugs with the organization's logo. Neoliberal ideals of corporate growth as well as the lack of funding for small nonprofit enterprises means that successful organizations have to operate on a highly corporate level in order to survive and garner financial support. While slick visuals and brand merchandise don't necessarily mean these

organizations cannot serve youth, the focus on maximizing profit, ever-increasing growth, and de-politicizing the subject matter using words like “equality” means that organizations like GLSEN must apply a “one size fits all” model to their activism.

In particular, the use of vague language obscures the realities of LGBTQ people from diverse backgrounds and geographies. Of the top 19 LGBT organizations chosen by GuideStar,<sup>4</sup> only three (National Center for Transgender Equality, Transgender Law Center, and the Sylvia Rivera Law Project) purported to serve a population more specific than “the LGBT community” (Philanthropedia.org). Though each of the remaining organizations approaches the issue of “LGBT equality” in different ways—through legal means, school initiatives, and so on—none prioritize self-definition among local communities, and none address other intersecting aspects of identity within the general LGBTQ community that affect how individuals experience their gender identity and sexual orientation.

While this approach allows the organizations to represent a wide variety of LGBTQ people, it minimizes differences among those people. At the GLSEN NEO youth conference, for example, none of the workshops mentioned how other aspects of identity inform gender and sexuality or change how people experience being LGBTQ. Particularly for the visiting Oberlin contingent, which was made up primarily of students of color, this was a massive oversight. One student mentioned on the car ride home that she would have liked to see a workshop on privilege and oppression at some point during the day, and felt like the GLSEN officials who ran the event should have focused more on inequalities within the LGBTQ community. This demonstrates that GLSEN’s focus on a broad message of tolerance and understanding for LGBTQ youth cannot

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<sup>4</sup> from their website, [guidestar.org](http://guidestar.org): “Here at GuideStar we gather and disseminate information about every single IRS-registered nonprofit organization. We provide as much information as we can about each nonprofit's mission, legitimacy, impact, reputation, finances, programs, transparency, governance, and so much more. We do that so you can take the information and make the best decisions possible.”

function properly on this regional level, because the concept of an “LGBTQ community” becomes more complex and specific to that geographic area. The students’ experiences of queerness cannot be separated from their experiences of family, culture, and local community, and they cannot fully benefit from this “one size fits all” model of activism that obscures those realities.

### **Day of Silence and Competing Agendas**

Much like the way a McDonald’s hamburger is the same everywhere, each school holding a GLSEN Day of Silence event, for example, is expected to look much the same and go through an exact process proscribed by the national headquarters. QAAC’s most recent experience with Day of Silence demonstrates how this structure can hamper local organizing among youth. On a particular day in April chosen by national headquarters each year, students distribute stickers or, budget permitting, t-shirts with the red and black Day of Silence logo to interested students in their school. The group then remains silent for the duration of the day in order to protest harassment and mistreatment of LGBTQ students in schools. While there is an element of solidarity to the nationally-set date for Day of Silence, it is not possible for the date to work for everyone. At Oberlin High School this year, for example, the Day of Silence coincides with an orchestra trip, taking many students away from school that day. It wasn’t until a week before the scheduled date that the students considered the possibility of shifting the event to the following week, significantly impacting their planning.

The decision to shift the local Day of Silence risks leaving out students who did not get the information and choose to participate on the national day, potentially isolating them. It also means that any students who participate the following week are excluded from GLSEN NEO’s

annual “Break the Silence” event, in which youth gather at the LGBTQ community center in Cleveland and discuss their experiences during the day. Additionally, five days before the nationally scheduled Day of Silence, GLSEN NEO sent an email to its mailing list urging student to “make sure [their] participation is counted” by registering for Day of Silence and filling out a demographic survey (“GLSEN’s Day of Silence”). For QAAC, their decision to design their own Day of Silence precludes them from being “counted” by GLSEN and further removes them from the students who do “count.”

This example demonstrates how national organizations have a large influence on small-scale, local activism and organizing even as they represent the most visible tier of support. Larger organizations easily draw in local groups, gaining the support of the members by promising a great deal of institutional support and a level of brand recognition that the group could not have achieved alone. While some groups remain independent, running an organization is made a great deal easier using the tools of the national organizations, and I’ve yet to encounter a youth organization that has not implemented GLSEN-issued materials in their meetings and events. Though they primarily function as a resource-providing and policy-changing organization, it’s clear that their implicit goal is to create social spaces for LGBTQ youth, as well, and this is the primary interest of the students with whom I work.

Mary L. Gray eloquently summarizes the inherent tension between the goals of GLSEN and the individual needs of LGBTQ teenagers by describing that GLSEN’s “national focus on advocacy for policy change rather than individual LGBTQ students’ needs did not fit into [students’] realities and community priorities...the constraints they faced in the fight for visibility had never been considered important enough to recast national agendas” (Gray 72). This concisely describes the dysfunction at the core of most national campaigns meant to

represent young LGBTQ people. Though GLSEN is a notable example, all large national organizations employ similar models of mass fundraising, celebrity and corporate endorsement, and expensive ad campaigns to increase the organization's reach in the name of a particular political agenda related to the vague concepts of "awareness" or "visibility." Groups like QAAC often become dependent on GLSEN materials because there is no foundation of local support and rarely any encouragement to develop their own events. Even for groups with capable and involved advisors like Amy, who has decades of experience in LGBTQ activism, the lack of funding and infrastructure for hyper-local workshops, socials, and meetings means that even the most functional and enthusiastic clubs often cannot create the successful events they envision.

## Chapter 4: Media, Fan Culture, and Online Identities

I had the opportunity to attend a meet-up for LGBTQ high school students and allies in a nearby city's public library with some of the students with whom I work regularly. This meet-up was meant to be an informal socializing space for the attendees and involved over two hours of unstructured time after introductions and icebreaker games.

After the icebreaker, while the students were snacking or talking in their small groups, I sat alone at one of the large unused tables around the perimeter, finishing up some notes before I joined into a conversation. Before I had the opportunity to do so, however, a student approached me.

“Do you watch *Supernatural*?” she asked, after introducing herself to me. She was referring to the popular fantasy TV show about a pair of ghost-hunters, Sam and Dean Winchester, which is now in its 11<sup>th</sup> season. I told her yes, having seen the first several seasons while in high school, but admitted that I hadn't kept up with it in college.

“Then I have to show you something!” she responded in excitement, pulling out her smartphone. Another student, hearing her mention *Supernatural*, urged her own group to join ours, and soon every attendee of the event was crowded around this student's phone, discussing the intricacies of different popular fan theories about the show and exclaiming over “Destiel,” the portmanteau of Dean and Castiel, two main characters of the show whom many of the students wish to see involved romantically. The discussion of *Supernatural* relied heavily on the use of students' smartphones in order to pull up their favorite examples of fan-made art related to the show or conduct research to fortify arguments about certain predictions or theories. This discussion of *Supernatural* was the only point in the entire evening when all of the students were involved in the same conversation.



Supernatural, while massively popular among young people in general, is particularly popular within the young LGBTQ demographic because of the frequent implications of a relationship between Dean and Castiel. “Destiel” is a popular and well-known fan pairing on which LGBTQ youth, and teenage girls in particular, are fixated. Dean Winchester is a hyper-masculine character who often has quick romantic flings with minor female characters, but his most enduring non-familial relationship is with Castiel, a soft-spoken angel sent by God to act as an assistant and guide to the brothers. The implication of romance between Dean and Castiel is so obvious, in fact, that fans often accuse the creators of *Supernatural* of “queer-baiting,” a practice in which the executives in charge of certain TV shows and movies “hint at possible same-sex relationships, generally to appease their LGBT fans, without ever actually developing that relationship on-screen” (Cruz). Dean and Castiel’s relationship is obviously intense and extremely close, but the writers and directors of the show have not acknowledged the possibility of a queer relationship. In the case of *Supernatural*, the teens with whom I spoke were highly invested in the few moments of screen time that Dean and Castiel shared with one another, though none seemed to expect that the relationship would ever become explicitly romantic or sexual on-screen.

In lieu of actual queer representation in *Supernatural*, a massive fan community of content-creators has emerged, creating thousands of fanfiction stories that not only describe a relationship between Castiel and Dean, but also deal with all manner of issues relating to gender and sexuality in the show, building an improvised community around their shared investment in the relationship. Many stories conceive of some or all of the characters as non-heterosexual and many deal with issues of coming out to friends and communities. At the meet-up, the teens discussed particularly popular fanfiction stories that many of them had read, and they showed

each other popular photo manipulations that depicted the characters kissing or holding hands. One student read a poem she'd found on Tumblr that a blogger had written about the relationship between Dean and Castiel, and the group discussed at length their feeling about the piece.

Many writers have engaged with the gendered division of fan fiction communities, noting that fan-fiction writers and readers are primarily women. In *Textual Poachers*, Henry Jenkins writes, "Both fan and academic writers characterize slash [fanfiction involving two gay male characters] as a projection of female sexual fantasies, desires, and experiences onto the male bodies of series characters" (Jenkins 191). He goes on to say that women write an estimated 90 percent of all fan fiction. It is interesting to see how this conception of gender in fan communities, which Jenkins developed doing research in the 1980s and 90s on the Star Trek fandom, applies to current-day fan interactions with shows like *Supernatural*, which involves a male/male relationship similar to that of Kirk and Spock. Many of the *Supernatural* fans I came into contact with at this library meet-up and through my own forays into *Supernatural* online fan communities were primarily young queer women, for whom the relationship between Dean and Castiel functioned less as an opportunity to map their own desires onto male bodies but rather as an example of a potential queer reality, an opportunity to explore a multi-year, emotionally involved relationship between two characters of the same gender, the romantic details of which are primarily built through fan collaboration through writing and art.

Throughout this meetup, the conversation went beyond simply "Favorite TV shows"—*Supernatural* became a familiar and comfortable outlet through which the attendees could discuss queerness in a context that nearly all of them understood. Though most of the students did not get into the specifics of their relationship history or queer identity formation process during the meet-up, they did have the opportunity to express their convictions about Dean and Castiel,

thereby discussing and exploring identity together in a way that felt shared, but not too overwhelmingly personal. One student asked another if she thought Dean was gay. “It doesn’t matter if he’s gay,” she responded. “He could be anything. I think if you love someone, you love them, regardless of gender.” Using *Supernatural* as an example and icebreaker allowed the students to talk about gender and sexuality in ways they may not have felt comfortable discussing if they did not have fictional characters to work with. In *Queering Surveillance Research*, Phillips and Cunningham write, “queer, subversive or playful performances of common ideals are only effective if someone is there to get the joke” (eds. O’Riordan and Phillips 35). In this case, the joke is shared both by the students in the room as well as the many LGBTQ *Supernatural* fans producing the content the students shared amongst themselves. The few students in the room who were not as familiar with *Supernatural* were welcomed into the conversation; the rest of the group seemed to take pleasure in explaining the characters and fan theories to them, thus inviting everyone in the room to be “in on the joke.”

The relevance of fan-produced content to queer youth is enormous and readily apparent in this conversation about *Supernatural* as well as many others I’ve had with students throughout the research process. Through websites like [fanfiction.net](http://fanfiction.net) and [archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org), writers can post their fanfiction stories, complete with tags that name the specific pairing and genre of the piece as well as its maturity rating, and receive feedback from readers. Fanfiction and fan art “consists, to a significant extent of works in progress...fan fiction writers/readers tend to conceptualize fan fiction as open and future-oriented” (O’Riordan and Phillips 129). This means that as each update goes live, reviewers have the opportunity to influence the story and engage in dialogue with the writer. Readers and writers are in constant communication with each other, both encouraging and critiquing the stories and building friendships and writing partnerships.

Longer works of fanfiction are generally written and published in chapters rather than finished stories, giving the authors a chance to engage with feedback and incorporate audience opinions and their own new ideas as they go along. These stories are shaped by community and collaboration and give young writers the opportunity to participate, on some level, in creating the material that they consume.

Additionally, fan-made content that involves some element of queerness generally “present[s] sexual identity as fluid and non-binary...[fanfiction] disrupts the notion of sexual identity as stable since each time these characters’ sexualities are told, they are told differently” (127-8). This constant renegotiation of sexuality invites playfulness, a constant remaking of identity, without repercussions that allows students to explore sexuality through Dean and Castiel and relate to other LGBTQ young people through the fan community.

### **Television in the Internet Age**

The students’ investment in *Supernatural* indicates that young people still have a strong connection to older forms of media, such as television, but often interact with them in new and unexpected ways. Now more than ever, the prevalence of social media allows young people to react to what they see on television in ways that, while perhaps not immediately visible to network executives, are visible to other young people. While networks attempt to create shows that appeal to a new generation of viewers, young people seem most invested in the shows which have the most potential for fan involvement through fanfiction.

One example of this new genre of youth-focused TV is MTV’s *Faking It*, which premiered in 2014. The show centers around two teenage girls in “liberal utopia” Austin, TX who pretend to be in a relationship in order to gain popularity and attention from their peers.

While interesting on a conceptual level and relatively sensitive to LGBTQ issues, *Faking It* also relies heavily on place to normalize and celebrate queerness. Austin is continuously positioned as unique and special because it welcomes LGBTQ people (and vegetarians, and Democrats, and so on). The show creates multi-dimensional queer subjects, but seems to say that they could not exist anywhere outside of this progressive metropolis. Another example is *Glee*, a once-popular musical comedy-drama television show, which involves an explicitly gay character, Kurt Hummel. Though stereotypically fashionable and “sassy,” Kurt’s character drew a great deal of attention from both straight and gay media, as did the multiple other queer characters that *Glee* eventually introduced. However, while I’ve found that some young adults still watch *Glee* out of loyalty and nostalgia, almost none of the teenagers I have met watch it. Other shows, like the CW’s *Pretty Little Liars* and ABC Family’s *The Fosters*, have prominent LGBTQ characters whose sexual orientation is secondary to the overall plot of the series. These shows arguably do more for LGBTQ youth by normalizing queer people and incorporating them into a recognizable family drama or mystery story.

However, none of these explicitly queer youth-oriented shows garner the same amount of attention from young content-creators as *Supernatural*. For the youth with whom I work, it’s possible that this is because *Supernatural* takes place primarily in remote Southern and Midwestern locations to which the brothers travel for ghost-hunting purposes and hardly ever involve urban spaces at all. However, I believe it is more generally because *Supernatural* provides fans with ample fodder for creating their own understanding of the characters that overtakes the canonical features of the show itself. While television content creators are doing more to cater to the interests of LGBTQ populations, no one can create better or more useful material than the youth themselves.

With the exception of meet-ups like the one I attended, the vast majority of interactions about *Supernatural* happen online, where young people have much more freedom to talk openly about queerness with their peers. For LGBTQ teens growing up in the age of the Internet, online spaces for gathering information and building community are indispensable. The Internet offers young people the opportunity to explore their identities without the same pressures they would face in the offline world. According to a GLSEN study, LGBTQ teens spend almost an hour longer on the Internet per day than straight teens (GLSEN et al). Unlike Facebook, Tumblr does not require its users to place their real name or photos on their page; Tumblr users are able to build blogs that have no identifiable information available to their followers. This level of allowed anonymity affords young Tumblr users the opportunity to “try out” names, pronouns, and other markers of identity within their circle of online friends without having to do so at school or among friends or family members in the offline world. Additionally, for the young people who do wish to use pictures and descriptions of themselves on Tumblr, the site “has fostered cultural exchange among people who identify as queer and transgender. The image-oriented pages...have created intricate networks of digital self-representation” (Fink & Miller). This network makes it relatively simple for Tumblr users to find one another using particular tags and messages to other users’ accounts, and it also allows young people to post pictures of themselves with tags such as *#queer* or *#transgender* that indicate how they identify, and groups their post in with other posts tagged similarly.

This use of the Internet is apparent among QAAC members. None of the members of the group have mentioned restrictions on their Internet use at home, indicating that, for the most part, they have the freedom to use the Internet as they see fit, without parental surveillance. At least four QAAC members frequently visit Tumblr, and they often bring up information they found on

Tumblr in meetings. On several occasions, our discussions centered on current events and news stories, including the grand jury decision in the case of Darren Wilson; sexual assault on college campuses; and the death of Brittany Stergis, a trans woman who lived in Cleveland. Each time we discussed these intense and tragic topics, members of the group would cite things they'd seen on Tumblr, explaining that the posts they'd read helped them understand and form an opinion on the issues. Tumblr exists not only as a social space, but a place in which users can quickly spread news stories and their associated commentary, allowing young people to share and discuss current events amongst themselves in a way that is more engaging and interactive than simply reading or watching a news bulletin. The existence of Tumblr also serves an important political purpose for students who may not be able to discuss issues of identity with their families, or who may not have access to comprehensive information about being LGBTQ at home. Subverting the usual idea of the Internet as anti-social or unproductive, the use of social aspects of Tumblr to share stories, artwork, and news demonstrates the important role of social media as an educational and community-building tool.

The four to five students who regularly attend QAAC meetings as straight allies also highlight the importance of Tumblr in the lives of youth more generally. One student raised her hand during a discussion about LGBTQ harassment in school, but hesitated when it was her turn to speak. Eventually she said, "I've been learning a lot on Tumblr about being an ally, and I'm realizing is that my voice, as a straight person, is not always needed in every conversation." Tumblr not only connects LGBTQ young people with one another, but also spreads information within and outside of that network about good practices for straight allies, creating a space for virtual consciousness-raising that offers more opportunities to have discussions and ask and answer questions than most offline spaces. This not only allows allies to improve their presence

within the group, but also demonstrates to the LGBTQ youth what “ally behavior” should look like.

Even in offline social situations, in which the young people have the opportunity to make face-to-face connections with one another, media (and Tumblr specifically) provides a shared platform on which the students can relate to one another. While many teenagers connect over favorite TV shows and websites, the points of relation are specific and nuanced for LGBTQ youth.

Many of the students with whom I have spoken derive much of their information and support from television shows and the Internet. They speak infrequently about movies; this may be because the queer movies that end happily are often deemed explicit and are therefore challenging to find as a minor. While they are interested in meeting other LGBTQ people in person, the nature of fan communities on the Internet allow young people to discover and develop their identities along with their favorite characters. For young people in non-urban environments, particularly those whose parents are not supportive of their identity, the Internet offers a means of community and identity formation that has never been available before in history. The sheer enormity of the Internet allows each person to seek out information in a variety of contexts and discover other individuals who share their interests. Young people who cannot travel to metropolitan meet-ups or for whom the conferences and dances seem too intimidating or unhelpful, the Internet offers a great deal more opportunity to construct an individualized presence.



## Conclusion

At a meeting in the middle of the year, one student, who holds an officer position in QAAC, raised her hand. She said that a GSA advisor in a different state had been killed, and she wanted to recognize the risks that the adult advisors faced by coming to the school and talking about issues of gender and sexuality. As I struggled to respond, Amy said simply, “I think you all are the brave ones.”

This bravery is evident not only in the moments in which the students speak up about the injustices they’ve witnessed or experienced, but is also present in every moment they exist in a system that has not yet learned how to support them. Though Oberlin is a largely LGBTQ-friendly environment, the very nature of resource allocation among large LGBTQ organizations means that students in places like Oberlin almost never have their needs as young LGBTQ people taken into account.

Non-urban LGBTQ youth in the U.S. have specific priorities and interests that cannot be met by urban-focused LGBTQ organizations or current national or state school policies, despite the best intentions of these entities. In Oberlin and the surrounding area, students rely on one another and some supportive adults to help them build their own community using the resources available to them. In some cases, this requires driving into Cleveland to attempt to make connections with other groups, but also involves discussions after school each week as well as constant exploration online. While local library meet-ups offer students the opportunity to meet one another and mingle in a setting that is less formal than the GLSEN meet-ups in Cleveland, the students use the space to also bring their online identity-building work into the offline world using *Supernatural* as their common thread. To them, *community* is something that may translate

easily between offline and online spaces under the right conditions, and they use the physical spaces given to them to draw those connections and unite in mutual understanding of the importance of the work they're doing to interpret queerness, as they'd like to see it, in the media available to them.

Thought my time working with QAAC, I have worked to determine what their ideal community looks like, and whether the political conception of the "LGBTQ community" is functional or helpful for them. As is evident in the national campaigns discussed earlier in this paper, the generalization of "LGBTQ community" often serves to erase the differing needs of individuals whose identities are more complex and whose understanding of gender and sexuality are informed by other aspects of their experience, including race and class.

### **Envisioning a World Beyond GLSEN**

Eli Clare writes that is possible to understand "[t]he body as home, but only if it is understood that place and community and culture burrow deep into our bones" (Clare 11). The de-emphasis on local organizing among the most well-funded organizations means that the importance of place, and therefore the importance of local community, is often downplayed by the large organizations with the greatest ability to fund and provide services to smaller local groups. Currently, in order to participate in LGBTQ events, students in QAAC and groups like it must adapt to meet-ups and conferences that haven't been built with them in mind. They cannot participate locally because there is not enough support for local initiatives in order to make them sustainable.

Ideally, organizations like GLSEN exist to support young LGBTQ people by providing them with ready-made events and information. However, GLSEN could vastly improve its

ability to serve youth by changing how its events function. If GLSEN, or another organization like it, used its influence to send recognizable and diverse speakers and trainers to small towns to work with the youth and advisors there, they would be offering communities a chance to participate in local organizing and learning initiatives without forcing them to come to urban events or placing a specific timeline of “holidays” and public actions onto them.

The potential usefulness of such a resource became apparent when QAAC members were discussing the Day of Silence earlier in the school year and expressing dissatisfaction with the very concept of the event. Amy suggested that a “week of speech” might be a preferable alternative, in which the group would arrange for school assemblies that focused on LGBTQ issues and experiences. We discussed the possibility of finding speakers and the logistics of getting approval for the event; the students seemed confident that the OHS administration would be on board for an event of that type.

However, Amy and I realized that we knew few local speakers who were both willing and available to give presentations, and the group did not have the funding to bring bigger-name acts to town. The idea, which would have allowed QAAC to make their own event schedule and push back against the GLSEN-mandated silence, fell apart because there wasn’t any outside support for such an event. This led QAAC to host a traditional Day of Silence event despite their initial misgivings.

Despite the possibilities for collaboration and support for school GSAs from GLSEN, GLSEN NEO seems disinterested or wary of engaging at a local level. At the conference, someone suggested that GLSEN officials could give presentations to high school sports teams or run trainings with student leaders at local schools. The organizers seemed hesitant in their

answers, suggesting instead that each school send its students to GLSEN events by bus, avoiding discussion of the logistic and economic intricacies of such an action.

Furthermore, any organization working on a local scale to support LGBTQ youth must recognize the importance of supporting young people in ways that extend beyond gender and sexual identity, something it seems GLSEN does not always prioritize. During the same final discussion at the GLSEN NEO conference, an official suggested that the attendees demonstrate an interest in non-LGBTQ social causes because it will make those people more likely to be invested in LGBTQ causes. While logical in its approach, this suggestion fails to take into account the students in the room whose “cause” cannot be condensed into a single identity category, but rather exists at the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, class, ability, and so on. In order to fully support the needs of these students, it is imperative that any organization or individual looking to support LGBTQ youth must understand the complexities of identity and, ideally, experience those complexities themselves.

An organization, or collective of organizations, with the resources available to send speakers to local schools and community centers, assist LGBTQ youth groups with planning their own events, and facilitating and maintaining connections between groups in neighboring towns could emphasize the development of small, local support structures without overtaking those groups and implementing their own agenda. Such a shift in priorities could fundamentally improve the freedom of a group like QAAC and give them the opportunity to organize the events they would most like to see, including their “week of speech.”

### **Further Research**

I hope that future researchers continue to explore the needs of non-urban communities in the context of youth services, education reform, and LGBTQ activism. If I were to take on this project again, I would make full use of the historical documents and institutional memory that Amy possesses in order to determine the evolving purpose of QAAC (then known as the Oberlin High School Gay/Straight Alliance) and its role in the school.

My ability to work with students was encumbered by the need for parental consent forms. While consent from students would have been imperative to my work, needing consent from parents meant that none of the students who did not feel safe discussing their involvement in the GSA with their parents could participate in this research. This significantly impacted my ability to include the voices of specific students and required that I shape this paper solely around my own observations rather than those of the youth whose lived experiences I am writing about. Though I was transparent with the students about this hurdle and worked to include their thoughts and opinions in other ways, I would not advise another researcher to approach this topic in the same way.

### **Looking Forward**

Though groups like QAAC often face restrictions and roadblocks from communities, such as schools and LGBTQ centers, that are not designed to serve them, they still manage to do meaningful work through the emotional support they offer one another and the awareness they raise among their peers and teachers. They also manage to build friendships and collaborative connections with other LGBTQ youth using the Internet and all of the queer possibilities it offers. The Oberlin students are envisioning and enacting the type of community they'd like to see. In late April 2015, they organized a week of action, including fundraisers, hallway displays,

and an Ally Pledge which they will encourage their friends and classmates to sign. They are also planning a regional LGBTQ-friendly dance, which will occur in mid-May in the midst of prom season.

At the same time, they are also building their understanding of themselves and connecting with others through the Internet. Sometimes during check-ins at the beginning of meetings, they will ask to watch popular YouTube videos of people shaming anti-LGBTQ protestors. They incorporate what they've learned on Tumblr and Twitter into discussions every week and talk about the people they've met at events, who they still speak with via social media.

In the wake of television shows and movies championing the myth of the urban queer community and mourning the tragedy of rural queer life, young people in the spaces between urban and rural are carving out their own narratives. They find each other at meetings, online, or in classrooms, and they build coalitions of support and wellbeing among themselves. Though they manage on their own, it is imperative that LGBTQ adults step up to provide them with ways to enact the changes they want to see.

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