

Issues in Education:  
Guidance Counselors' Perceptions on Effectiveness of  
Gay/Straight Alliances in Schools

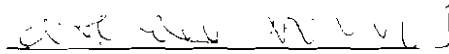
by

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A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree  
in

Guidance and Counseling

Approved: 2 Semester Credits



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December, 2008

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**Title:** *Issues in Education: Guidance Counselors' Perceptions  
on Effectiveness of Gay/Straight Alliances in Schools*  
**Graduate Degree/ Major:** MS Guidance and Counseling  
**Research Adviser:** Kathleen Thomas, Ph.D.  
**Month/Year:** December, 2008  
**Number of Pages:** 45  
**Style Manual Used:** American Psychological Association, 5<sup>th</sup> edition

**ABSTRACT**

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students face many unique challenges in today's schools. Some will face the everyday stressors of being an adolescent, while others will experience homophobia, isolation, victimization, and harassment both at home and at school. Educators have the unique opportunity to assist these students by creating opportunities for organizations or groups in school that can support and educate all students. One type of group that has been on the rise is Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs). The purpose of this study is to determine if schools in Wisconsin have such programs and whether or not school counselors think they are effective.

Participants completed a survey consisting of Likert scale, yes/no, and multiple choice questions. Results from this survey suggest that not many schools have GSAs. Those that did not reported that there was not a need or students were not interested. Of those that did have a GSA, a majority thought they were

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effective ways to educate LGBTQ students as well as heterosexual students.

These findings show that GSAs can be beneficial to all students when students, faculty, and administration are willing to create a GSA.

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Acknowledgments

I would first like to thank my parents and my siblings for believing in me and encouraging me during the challenging years that I spent in graduate school.

I would also like to thank my research advisor, Dr. Kathleen Thomas, as well as all of the counselors who took time out of their day to fill out my online survey. Without any of these people, this research would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to thank my close friends for supporting me emotionally and helping me in any way that they could, to ease my frustrations and to make my research endeavors as positive as possible.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

Adolescence can be a rocky road for many individuals. Hormonal changes, more responsibility at home and at school, the need to be treated as an adult, and relationship navigation, can make anyone feel a little confused, angry, insecure, and alone. The LGBTQ student feels all of these things as well; however, they have the added stressor of facing rejection not only from their friends and peers but from their parents as well due to homophobia and lack of understanding. These students must navigate through their friends and family to see with whom it is safe to share their identity, free from judgment and discrimination. Because of fear of rejection, harassment, homophobia, and isolation, sexual minorities are at a greater risk for a variety of developmental and psychological issues (Tharinger & Wells, 2000).

Research shows that students first become cognizant of their sexual attraction to the same sex between the ages of 10 and 12 (Tharinger & Wells, 2001). Students then start to label their attraction as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning around the age of 15. Around the age of 16, students may disclose to someone close to them their sexual identity for the very first time. While the age at which students “come out” will vary from individual to individual, it is important for teachers and professionals to realize that students are coming out earlier and earlier in their development than others have in previous years (Tharinger & Wells, 2001). Adolescents are still developing and searching for identity as people, as well as exploring their sexual identity, making them psychologically vulnerable to the homophobia and heterosexism that still takes place in U.S. schools today.

Among the research available, there is disagreement concerning the percentage of the U.S. population who identify themselves as homosexual. Despite their divergences, researchers assert that between 2% and 10% of the U.S. population describe themselves as homosexual (McFarland, 2001). Ginsberg (1998) suggests, using the midpoint, 6%, to

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calculate the national gay/lesbian population to be about 15,000,000 people, 2,620,515 of those being gay or lesbian students. It could be estimated then that about one in 20 adolescents in public schools identify themselves as homosexuals. As a result, a middle or high school teacher could have at least one gay or lesbian student in each of their classes.

Adolescence is such a critical time in a person's life, that experiencing rejection, harassment, and isolation can be much more traumatic for sexual minorities, increasing the likelihood that they will be at risk of depression, substance abuse, and victimization. Russell and Joyner (2001) used national data to learn that homosexual youth report more alcohol abuse and depression than their peers. They also discovered a high rate of victimization, especially among the males in the survey. Anxiety, substance use and abuse, and depression can all play a role in sexual minority's suicide risk.

Russell and Joyner (2001) also found that homosexual youth are at much higher risk of committing suicide. Homosexual students are almost twice as likely to attempt suicide as their heterosexual peers. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth make up about 1,500 of the 5,000 suicide deaths in this country each year (McFarland, 1998). It is worth noting that LGBTQ individuals make up anywhere from 2%-10% of the population, while in the past it had been believed that their suicide rates make up about 30% of the suicide population. These high suicide rates called attention to the issues that face many of our LGBTQ youth. While these numbers are now suspected to be lower (Sweat 2004), concerns remain. The research that is available tends to focus more on resiliency of youth to cope with discrimination and intolerance (Savin-Williams as cited in MacGillivray 2007).

Many of the problems that LGBTQ students face happen while they are in school. While schools and school districts may not be able to control what happens at home when students "come out" to their parents, the environment at school can be made a safer place

for these students to learn and develop. It is the job of teachers, school counselors, and administrators, to maintain a zero tolerance policy when it comes to the victimization of any student, especially those at risk. Educators do not have to like or agree with the identity, but they have the power and the obligation to create a culture of at least tolerance if not an atmosphere of empathy and support. According to the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (2004), school counselors have a professional responsibility to ensure that:

. . .each person has the right to be respected, be treated with dignity and have access to a comprehensive school counseling program that advocates and affirms all students from diverse populations regardless of ethnic/racial status, age, economic status, special needs, English as a second language or other language group, immigration status, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity/expression, family type, religious/spiritual identity, and appearance ( ASCA).

The current rates of depression, suicide, harassment, and violence against LGBTQ youth clearly indicate a need for intervention by schools and faculty. Because adolescents spend most of their day in school, educators have the ability to provide a safe and supportive place for these students to be, especially when it may not be safe for them once they go home. Educators have the opportunity to not only provide a supportive environment among staff, but they also have the power to educate heterosexual peers about what it means to be a LGBTQ students to create a culture of understanding and tolerance, and to demonstrate what will and will not be acceptable.

One of the ways in which some institutions including universities and some high schools, have chosen to create a safe place, is by developing Straight/Gay Alliances or Safe Space programs. A Gay/Straight Alliance is a student club that is supposed to be a safe space for students to express issues and meet others with similar interests and struggles (Macgillivray, 2007).



*Statement of the Problem*

LGBTQ students face many challenges in today's schools. As students become aware of their same-sex sexual orientation and come out to their friends and family, they are faced with the realization that many people will be intolerant of the way in which they live their lives. Many of these students will face homophobia, biphobia, heterosexism, and victimization, all while trying to navigate through the trials and tribulations of being an adolescent.

The heterosexual students also face challenges when their homosexual classmates come out. They could be unsure of what it means to be gay, or bisexual, or transgender. In a time when they are learning about the opposite sex and becoming aware of their sexuality, it may be difficult for them to discern exactly how they should feel about their friends coming out, or how they should act around them. Students often use terms such as "that's so gay" when they are referencing something they think is "stupid" or unfair. They do not have the education or the understanding to realize how that feels to their gay classmates. Students without knowledge of the struggles that LGBTQ students face will be less likely to be tolerant and supportive of their classmates.

Finally, there are challenges faced by educators as well. Educators are provided with the tools to teach about their specific subjects, to be aware of diversity issues such as race, religion, ethnicity, etc., but very little preparation is offered for them when it comes to LGBTQ students, as well as families. Educators need to be made aware of their personal biases while still providing a safe place for all students to learn. School counselors in particular need to realize that there will be LGBTQ students in their school, and despite the fact that parents may disagree, professionals need to address some of the issues that those students face.

The real issue is that schools need to provide some kind of support for LGBTQ students. They can do this by offering such programs as Safe Space or Gay/Straight

Alliances. Perhaps some schools do not have such programs because of the possible resistance from other educators, parents or heterosexual students. There needs to be a study, particularly in Wisconsin, to find out how many schools offer such programs, if they do not why not, and if they do, are they effective?

#### *Research Questions*

This study will attempt to address the following research questions:

1. Do high schools offer Gay/Straight or Safe Space Ally programs?
2. Of the schools that do offer these programs, how effective do school counselors think they are?
3. If schools do not offer them, why not?

#### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this study is to produce a literature review that discusses the struggles of LGBTQ students in schools, then to examine the need for and effectiveness of Gay/Straight Alliance programs in Wisconsin high schools. Furthermore, not only will this study determine need, but it will also examine if these programs are being offered at local high schools and whether not they are effective. The study will determine the percentage of high schools in Wisconsin that have a Gay/Straight Alliance. It will also examine school counselors' perceptions of whether or not they feel these programs are effective. This research could help school counselors when working with LGBTQ students, and provide them with ideas and tools that will be effective in dealing with the needs of this population. It will get them thinking about how the group in their school can improve, so that it can better serve the needs of both its LGBTQ students as well as the heterosexual students in the school.

#### *Limitations of the Study*

One of the limitations of this study is that it assumes that school counselors would lead these programs and are able to assess whether GSAs work for both the LGBTQ and heterosexual students. Another limitation could be that this study does not take into consideration other demographic factors such as race, or socioeconomic status of the district. Furthermore, it assumes that counselors will have access to computers so that they may be able to respond to the survey. Moreover, it is the assumption of this study that the participants will answer the survey honestly, from their point of view, but also able to answer for students themselves.

Another limitation is that the information from some of the articles was originally published ten or more years ago. Much of the information found can be traced back to a handful of studies, which suggests that new information on many of the different topics discussed in this paper have not been revisited in the same capacity for quite some time. Another limitation that must be considered is that there is limited research on the specific interventions of Gay/Straight Alliances and Safe Space programs. Finally, this research is written from the perspective of a straight ally. The research approach from this perspective could be limiting and may not provide the same insight into GLBTQ issues that a researcher who is part of the GLBTQ community could possibly provide.

Further limitations are that the data was collected from a select geographical location, the state of Wisconsin. These school counselors may not be representative of all schools in the state, let alone the country, especially those with larger, more diverse populations. Also, because of the time of year that this survey will be released, many school counselors may not have the time to respond. Finally, and potentially the most significant limitation, is the personal bias of the counselor which may or may not be tolerant or accepting, and could inhibit them from filling out the questionnaire.

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### *Definition of Terms*

For the purposes of this study the following terms will be defined for clarity and understanding.

*Ally:* Non-LGBTQ individuals who are supportive of LGBTQ rights (Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

*Bisexual:* A person sexually attracted to both sexes (Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

*Coming out:* Disclosing the nature of one's LGBTQ identity to another (Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

*Discrimination:* "treatment or consideration of, or making a distinction in favor of or against, a person or thing based on the group, class, or category to which that person or thing belongs rather than on individual merit" (dictionary.com)

*Gay:* An individual with a sexual orientation to the same sex or a male with a sexual orientation toward men (Fletcher & Russell, 2001)

*Gay/Straight Alliance:* A gay-straight alliance (GSA) is a student club that provides a safe place where students can discuss issues that are important to them, meet others with similar interests, and to get support from one another and from caring adults (Macgillivray, 2007).

*Homophobia:* The fear or discrimination against homosexuality or homosexuals (Fletcher & Russell, 2001)

*Homosexual:* An individual with a sexual orientation toward the same sex (Fletcher & Russell, 2001)

*Lesbian:* A female with a sexual orientation toward women (Fletcher & Russell, 2001)

*LGBTQ:* Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning

*Sexual Identity:* Personally and outwardly identifying oneself as heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, and so forth. A consistent, enduring

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sense of meaning that sexual orientation and sexual behavior have for a person (Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

*Sexual Minority:* Members of sex groups that do not fall into the majority category of heterosexual, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

*Sexual Orientation:* “A person’s self concept as based on sexual or emotional attractions to other persons who are of the same sex (a homosexual orientation), the other sex (a heterosexual orientation), or both (a bisexual orientation)” (Fletcher & Russell, 2001).

*Transgender:* Displaying the appearance and behavioral characteristics of the opposite sex or having undergone surgery to become a member of the opposite sex.

*Questioning:* Individuals who are questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity.

## Chapter II: Literature Review

This chapter will review a wide range of literature about the issues LGBTQ students face, and the interventions available to them. It will include information about the psychological distress LGBTQ students' experience, the factors that contribute to that distress, the obligations of school professionals to keep these students safe, and the interventions that have been implemented.

### *Psychological Distress*

There is a substantial amount of research that shows that LGBTQ students are at a higher risk of psychological distress, including depression and suicide (Russell & Joyner, 2001). The issue of suicide among LGBTQ youth is part of the broader picture, of suicidal youth. According to the Centers for Disease Control (2007), 142,000 youth between the ages of 10 and 24, receive medical care each year for self inflicted injuries. Each year about 4,600 youth are successful in their attempts to commit suicide. According to national and regional studies that took place over more than a decade, of the 4,600 youth suicide deaths, about 30% of them are LGBTQ youth. Ramefeldt, Farrow, and Deischer (as cited in McFarland, 1998) surveyed 137 gay and lesbian youth and found that 30% had tried to commit suicide, and half of those had attempted more than once. The average age of the participants at the time they had tried to commit suicide was 15.5 years of age. Of the reasons provided for trying to commit suicide, loss of friendship, discrimination, violence, sexual abuse, running away from home, or their personal beliefs about homosexuality, were not predictors for suicide attempts. The two factors that were indicative of possible suicide attempts were "precocious" psychosexual development, and gender nonconformity. Those that did attempt suicide became aware of their same-sex attractions and told someone about them at a younger age than those who did not attempt suicide. Also, they experienced their first sexual encounter with girls or boys at an earlier age as well. According to the authors, younger adolescents may

be less able to cope with the stigma and isolation of being identified as homosexual. For each year older a person gets before coming out, the less likely they are to attempt suicide.

According to McFarland, the data reviewed would suggest that students who are gender non-conforming at an earlier age are more likely to attempt suicide. The difference between these students and those that develop their sexual identity at a later age is that these students must deal with how people and society will treat them before they have the chance to fully develop their ability to cope and protect their self-identity. Basically, it is not sexual orientation in and of itself that causes these youth to commit suicide, but it is what they have to deal with from other people and society combined with their inability to deal with it that puts them more at risk.

The National Gay Task Force lists 12 risk factors that gay youth are exposed to while developing their sexual identity (Gibson, 1989). For the purposes of this review, the following will be discussed:

1. Society: Gay youth are especially sensitive to the hostile reactions of society towards homosexuals.
2. Self-Esteem: Gay youth tend to internalize negativity or being bad because of their sexual identity based on the stereotypes and myths society believes about homosexuals.
3. School: Schools fail to not only protect gay and lesbian students from verbal and physical abuse, but there is also a lack of education about homosexuality.
4. Social isolation: Gay youth that are open about their sexual orientation can be rejected by their non-gay peers and rarely have contact with other gay students or adults for support.
5. Professional Help: Some mental health professionals still refuse to believe homosexuality is anything more than a mental illness or stage in development.

The other seven factors included in the report were: family, religion, substance abuse, youth programs, and relationships with significant others, independent living, and AIDS. These factors are not discussed at length because many of these things are out of the realm of school involvement and intervention especially family reactions and religion.

According to a study done by Russell and Joyner (2001), "boys and girls with same-sex sexual orientation reported significantly more alcohol abuse and depression." Alcohol abuse and depression are risk factors for all youth, but the risk is heightened for homosexual youth. The study also found that boys experience more instances of victimization than girls. Homosexual girls were also more likely than heterosexual girls to experience victimization (Russell & Joyner, 2001). It is important to note Russell & Joyner found although it can be very difficult for adolescents to come out to their family and peers, girls who identified themselves as lesbian or bisexual benefited from their sexual identity because they are then able to find support and comfort from others that identify as lesbian or bisexual as well. The reciprocal of this is that girls with same-sex sexual orientation who did not identify themselves as lesbian are at greatest risk for suicide.

Finally, Russell & Joyner go on to point out that much of the research done involving LGBTQ youth often involves the psychopathologic effects of their same sex sexual orientation, but very little about how curriculum and programming address this issue or that the concern should be placed on the dysfunctional reactions of society. Very little research looks at what can be done in schools, or what is being done in schools, to discourage homophobia, prejudice, and harassment, not mention how well-adjusted LGBTQ youth cope.

### *Coming Out*

D'Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998) conducted a study in which they asked LGBTQ youths 21 and under about how their families reacted to the disclosure of



their gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender orientation. In order to really get a handle on how families react to this type of disclosure, only youths who still lived at home were selected for the study. One hundred and ninety four participants who were gay, lesbian, or bisexual between the ages of 14 and 21 were selected, and the study focused on those that were still living at home, which was 105, 30 of which were female and 75 were male. Results showed that the average age at which they became aware of their orientation was ten. Youth labeled themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual about four years later. They first told anyone at about age 16. About 75% of the participants told a friend first.

When youth did disclose to family, they were more likely to disclose to their mothers first. Of those that did tell a parent, 51% of the mothers were accepting, along with 27% of fathers and 57% of siblings. Negative reactions were twice as likely with fathers with 26% rejecting their children, while only 10% of mothers rejecting. Those who had not told a parent did not feel that their parents would respond positively. Most assumed their parents would reject them outright, some thought that their parents would be tolerant, while a small amount thought that they would be accepted.

### *Homophobia*

According to Tharinger (2008) homophobia is the last mainstay of prejudice. Efforts are still needed on the individual, family, peer, school, community, societal, and legal levels in order to create a safe and healthy environment to promote the best development possible for LGBTQ youth. Much of the homophobia that some may feel toward LGBTQ youth could stem from the idea that many students understanding of sexual minorities is obtained from conversations that they have had with family and friends, as well as the often stereotyped depictions of sexual minorities in the media (Fletcher & Russell, 2001). "Though social sanctions prevent students from making inappropriate comments in class concerning race and ethnicity, social class, or religious beliefs, it is perceived by many students to be acceptable to make inappropriate remarks

regarding sexual orientation” (Fletcher & Russell, 2001). Clearly, a culture of tolerance for heterosexism and homophobia has been set by school faculty and staff, whether they realize it or not.

### *Victimization*

Harassment of LGBTQ students is very real problem in our schools, and has been for quite sometime. The Safe School Coalition of Washington state is a public-private partnership between 84 agencies and several individuals. The Safe School Coalition performed a five year Anti-Violence Research Project about Anti-Gay Harassment and Violence in schools in 1999 (Reis, 1999). The study was statewide and qualitative and looked at anti gay harassment and violence in Kindergarten through grade 12. During those five years, 111 incidents were reported that the coalition determined fit the criteria for school based anti-gay harassment and violence in 73 schools, including seven elementary schools, 15 junior high schools, 40 high schools, and 11 other schools (such as alternative schools, private schools, etc). Eleven of the incidents occurred with no particular person targeted. The 100 others incidents included 148 people who were harassed or attacked, eight in which adults were the targets, 92 in which students were attacked or harassed, in seven cases by adults, 18 others in which adults were not the attackers, but contributed to a student’s feeling attacked. Also included in the report is a list the offenses: eight gang rape incidents, 22 other physical assaults, 17 cases of physical harassment and/or sexual assault, 38 cases of on-going verbal and other harassment, and 26 one time climate-setting incidents (Reis, 1999).

The report goes on to discuss why the offenders may have thought that their victims were members of the LGBTQ community. The breakdown is as follows: 38 of the targets had defended the civil rights of LGBTQ minorities, or had friends that were gay or lesbian, 34 were openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, 31 people were perceived to fit LGBTQ stereotypes, 23 were attacked for no apparent reason, 15 had

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come out privately, five people were “found out”, and two people were attacked because they had HIV. It also goes on to discuss in detail each incident, who was involved, how they determined if people were being targeted by their perceived sexual orientation.

Interestingly, not all victims were a sexual minority. Sadly, there were serious consequences to some of these incidents. Some children changed schools, some dropped out of school altogether, some tried to commit suicide, and some did.

Victimization also occurs within the families of LGBTQ students. According to a study done by D’Augelli, Hershberger, and Pilkington (1998), those students that disclose their sexual orientation to their families run the risk of being verbally abused or threatened with physical attacks. One quarter of males surveyed and one third of females said that their mothers verbally abused them because of their sexual orientation, while 20% of fathers and brothers were verbally abusive, and sisters were the least.

Interestingly, lesbians reported to be more often threatened with physical attacks, and were more often victims of attacks, most often by their mothers. Brothers of gay males were the most threatening and usually the assailants of attacks on gay males. Very few of the respondents reported that their family members protected them from anti-gay attacks. However, of those that were protected 43% of gay males reported receiving protection from their mothers.

The results of these two studies are a testament to the hostile world in which LGBTQ students are learning and growing. When they are at school they are bombarded with anti-gay harassment and violence, and when they go home, they are at risk of experiencing more of the same. It is important for professionals in the school setting to recognize these risks, to work to provide an environment in which it is safe for this population to learn and grow as a person.

### *Professional Obligations*

Pupil discrimination prohibited

“(1) No person may be denied admission to any public school or be denied participation in, be denied the benefits of or be discriminated against in any curricular, extracurricular, pupil services, recreational or other program or activity because of the person's gender, race, religion, national origin, ancestry, creed, pregnancy, marital or parental status, sexual orientation or physical, mental, emotional or learning disability (Wis. Stat. 118.13).”

This passage refers to the legal duty of all professionals within the educational system not to discriminate against any child, and specifically lists sexual orientation, an orientation that not everyone may agree with or understand. Young and Middleton (1999) discuss the notion that whether educators realize it or not, their own personal biases and beliefs are present in the classroom no matter how hard they try to keep them separate. How educators deal with certain students and situations can affect the classroom climate and shows students that treating others differently or with bias is acceptable. They also discuss the idea that if teachers are not provided with information about different groups of people, they may be unable to properly handle the situations as they arise. Therefore, their study looked at the multicultural education courses that educators are required to take, and how well these courses discuss sexual orientation and homosexuality.

Their study found that although there are attempts to address LGBTQ issues, there are still limitations in how the subject matter, including LGBTQ families and relationships are addressed. While texts do discuss the LGBTQ issues in relation to the developmental continuum, they are often brought up as opposition to the norm (Young & Middleton, 1999). They also found that the faculty was willing to address the issue, but they were not able to effect how the same issues were represented elsewhere in the curriculum. Furthermore, it was discussed that the faculty which prepares teachers for

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the classroom also may not have had a course that addressed LGBTQ issues, and they may not also be prepared to provide teachers in training with the information that they need. The important thing to glean from this research is that an understanding of LGBTQ issues starts in the classroom, but not at the elementary or high school level. It starts in teacher preparation courses, in universities, where a commitment to addressing LGBTQ is prevalent, and extends through the texts, the faculty, and helps teachers in training to learn to deal with issues that may arise in their schools and classrooms.

Another issue that may hinder how effectively teachers are able to address LGBTQ issues in their classroom is the obstacles that affect it from the outside. There are many societal obstacles that trickle down into the schools (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Some of these obstacles include: homophobia, prejudice, and taboos about sexuality including LGBTQ stereotypes, myths about LGBTQ individuals, and avoidance of discussing sexuality and sexual diversity within the school curriculum (Jeltova & Fish).

Jeltova and Fish (2005) go on to discuss that creating a climate of understanding and support of LGBTQ families within the school system involves systemic change. While their article refers to the struggle of LGBTQ families, in which parents are in homosexual relationships, this can also apply to LGBTQ students as well. They suggest having a team in the school that would be responsible for coordinating this change. They also talk about dealing with the issue at the small group level (psychological, behavioral level).

#### *Interventions*

While there is limited research on Gay/Straight Alliances in high schools, there is some literature on similar programs in universities, as well as on programs called Ally programs. Henquist, Phibbs, and Skoglund (2000) discuss supporting LGBTQ youth in the university setting, namely Metropolitan State University. The university started a

LGBTQ student organization in 1991 to support and hold social activities for LGBTQ students, called Lavender Bridge. However, what would happen if a student had a same sex partner in the hospital, and wanted to take an incomplete in the class, but was too afraid to ask? Or if one of their peers made an inappropriate comment about sexual minorities and the professor handled it badly, or not at all? These questions led the Lavender Bridge organization and the student activities office decided to create the Ally program.

The goal of the Ally program was to be proactive in addressing the classroom concerns of LGBTQ students, and also to act as a catalyst for wider institutional change by creating a supportive learning environment for LGBTQ students (Henquinet, Phibbs & Skoglund, 2000). The Ally program is a voluntary two-session (four hour) workshop for members of the university community who would like to be known as allies of LGBTQ students. It educates faculty and staff about LGBTQ issues, and provides them with a rainbow decal that is used as a symbol of a “safe space” for this population. Another goal of the program is to directly address homophobia, biphobia or the fear of bisexuals, and heterosexism.

Addressing such issues as homophobia, biphobia, and heterosexism, and heterosexual privilege can be difficult (Henquinet, Phibbs, & Skoglund, 2000). Challenges also lie in discussing the contention of religion and homosexuality. No matter the subject, the program strives to keep the perception of their program to be accommodating and non-threatening. The feedback that the program received is positive, and the hope of the program is that through increased visibility, those who are hesitant to be associated with the program, may be more willing to accept it.

#### *What is a Gay-Straight Alliance*

A Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is a student club that is meant to be a safe space for students to express issues that are important to them, to meet others with similar

interests, and to support each other, and gain support from a caring adult (Macgillivray, 2007). The very first GSA was actually the idea of a straight student, was formed in 1988 by a group of students advised by Kevin Jennings, who was then a history teacher, and is now the Executive Director of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN).

GSA's are open to all students and are of increased importance to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, children of LGBTQ parents, and straight student allies (Macgillivray, 2007). GSAs are started by students, for students, just like any other club. Teachers and other personnel are permitted to supervise student clubs, but the agendas are set by the students and students lead the meetings. GSA's are entitled to be treated like any other club in school, with the same access to funding, school newspapers, yearbook photos, meeting space, bulletin boards, and the public address system. GSAs tend to participate in some of the same activities other clubs do, including fund-raisers, social events, peer education and support, community service, and political activism.

Students' start GSAs for a number of reasons, but more often than not their purposes are social, educational, political, service to the community, or the need for support (Macgillivray, 2007). LGBTQ students, students who are thought to be LGBTQ, and students with LGBTQ parents are often the targets of bullying and ridicule by their peers. Coping with this harassment from classmates can be more difficult for LGBTQ students, because they are often too scared to talk to their parents, for fear of their reactions. Although LGBTQ youth tend to have more difficulty coping and can sometimes turn to drugs or alcohol, the majority are happy, well-adjusted, and do not attempt suicide or engage in risk taking behaviors (Savin-Williams, 2005 as cited in Macgillivray, 2007). Russell (as cited in Sweat, 2004) contends that GSA's provide LGBTQ students a place to "explore their identities, develop community, and create social change" within the schools. It could be argued that GSA's offset some of the

negative circumstances that students find themselves in by providing opportunities for civic engagement and community-building among the LGBTQ population within the school.

Despite the obvious importance of interventions, including GSA's, the current body of literature ignores the significance of GSAs beyond their social support function and in their struggles over school policy and legal battles (Sweat 2004). GSAs should get more attention as a fast growing movement, since they are quickly becoming the focal point of politics for LGBTQ students and their allies, and for promoting diversity, multiculturalism, and tolerance in schools. GSAs can teach everyone involved in the education system about the issues, pitfalls, and possibilities for alliance between people of differing sexual identities, by including those who are victimized, and those who are not (Sweat, 2004). This study will examine whether or not schools are offering these groups so that they may teach all students, and if they are doing the job.

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### Chapter III: Methodology

This chapter will begin by giving an overview of the subject selection process and describing the participants. Immediately following will be a section on how the survey was constructed. Also, data collection procedures will be addressed, followed by a review of the data analysis techniques. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the limitations in the methodology of the research conducted.

#### *Subject Selection and Description*

High school counselors all over Wisconsin were asked to participate in this study. Schools were chosen randomly and high school counselors were e-mailed the survey. This population of individuals was asked questions about their high school and the types of LGBTQ programs they offer, if any. The schools from which they work varied in size, location, and student population.

#### *Instrumentation*

In order to accurately measure the perceptions of high school guidance counselors on the effectiveness of the Gay/Straight Alliances in their schools, a survey was created. The survey had a cover letter with an implied consent form which had a description of the study, time commitment, risks and benefits, confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the researchers contact information, as well as her adviser, and instructions on how to complete the survey. (A copy of the implied consent form is included in Appendix A.)

The survey starts by asking participants if there is a Gay/Straight Alliance in their school. If their answer was no, participants were asked why this was so, using a set of multiple choice questions. They then answered two demographic questions relating to school and town population. If their answer was yes, participants were given 5 close-ended statements based on a 5-point Likert scale which measured the intensity of the respondents' perceptions ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Questions were based on the literature regarding the psychological distress LGBTQ

students face in schools, and the interventions that could be used with them as well as their classmates. They were then asked the same two demographic questions.

The survey instrument has both face validity and content validity. Face validity refers to the instrument questions having a logical connection to the concept and research question. The questions were based on the literature and therefore were connected to what a group would logically do in the school to help educate its members and others. Content validity refers to the instrument statements' coverage of the full range of concepts under the larger topic. Each question was directly related to a facet of Gay/Straight Alliances, and what guidance counselors perceive as effective. This researcher did not pilot the study due to the fast paced nature of the project. (A copy of the survey is included in Appendix B.)

#### *Data Collection Procedures*

To collect data for this study, this researcher obtained a directory of all of the public schools in Wisconsin. The sampling design for this study was random purposive, schools were chosen by selecting 10 schools from each Cooperative Educational Service Agency (CESA) district in the state. The counselor's name was then located by going to the school's website. Of the 120 schools that were selected, only 110 counselors e-mail addresses could be located, so these counselors were the ones used in this study. An introductory e-mail was sent to each counselor to let them know that this researcher would be sending them a survey in the near future. A second e-mail was sent out and a link to the survey instrument was provided. Some counselors e-mail addresses could not be located or were returned invalid. A phone call was made to each of their schools to obtain their e-mail address, and then the two e-mails were re-sent to those counselors in succession.

### *Data Analysis*

Susan Greene, statistical consultant at the University of Wisconsin-Stout, helped facilitate data analysis by assisting in the cleaning of data and providing insight into the types of analysis to be used. To analyze the data, the statistical program called *Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS)*, was used. Data analysis of this survey included frequencies, cross tabulations, and a reliability analysis: Chronbach's Alpha.

### *Limitations*

There are a number of methodological limitations to this research study in sample selection, data collection, and instrumentation. In terms of sample selection, participants involved in the study were chosen assuming that they would know something about the GSA in their school. The case may be that the guidance counselor is not the person that is the advisor for the group in their school. Also, this study was limited to public schools in Wisconsin.

Furthermore, the data collection procedures used in this study lend to other limitations. Because email was used rather than U.S. mail, some counselors were unable to get a working link to the online survey. Some of them may have not had the information that was requested and so consequently did not bother to fill out the survey. Finally, although participants were informed that their involvement in the study is anonymous, individuals may have failed to complete the survey honestly.

## Chapter IV: Results

Results of this study were fairly close to what was expected. First, frequencies of schools with GSAs were analyzed. Next, the frequency of GSA's by size of town and size of school were compared. Then an item analysis was done for the Likert items as well as reliability analysis. The chapter concludes with a presentation of answers given for the multiple answer questions, including the "other" option.

### *Schools with GSA's*

Surveys were distributed to high schools all over the state of Wisconsin. The population for this study included about 110 guidance counselors. Of the distributed surveys, 59 counselors reported back, a response rate of 53.6%. Due to the completely anonymous nature of this study, it would be impossible to determine if the unresponsive schools were large, small, in small towns, or large towns. The survey instrument began with a question that determined the nature of the survey for each participant. The following will be a discussion of this information.

Of the 59 participants who returned surveys, 21 counselors (35.6%) reported having a GSA in their school, while 38 counselors (64.4%) reported not having one. Cross tabulations were then made between whether or not the school had a GSA and the school's size. In the 50-150 student population range seven schools reported not having a GSA and zero reported having one. In the 151-250 range six schools reported not having a GSA, and zero reported having one. Next, in the 251-350 range six reported not having a GSA, and zero reported having a GSA. In the 351-450, five reported not having a GSA while one school reported having a GSA. Finally, in the 450 and greater ranger 17 schools reported not having a GSA and 17 reported having one. Three of the respondents reported having a GSA, but did not report the size of their school.

Cross tabulations were then made between whether or not the school had a GSA and the size of the town their school was in. In the town populations 10,000 or less

range, 31 schools reported not having a GSA and three reported having one. In the 10,000-25,000 range, six reported not having a GSA, and five reported having one. In the 25,001-40,000 range zero reported not having a GSA, and five reported having a group. In the 40,001-55,000 zero reported not having a GSA and two reported having one. In the 55,000 or more range zero schools reported not having a GSA and three reported having one. Finally, three respondents reported having a GSA but did indicate the size of their town.

The survey was formatted so that if a counselor indicated that they did have a GSA in their school, they would then indicate how many students were in the group. Of the 21 that did have a GSA, only 15 gave a response. Their responses ranged from about 10 to about 30.

*Item Analysis: Survey Items 3-7*

Of the 21 respondents, 18 answered items 3-7. Descriptive statistics were done on these items including mean and standard deviation. Item 3-*The club educates its members on current GLBTQ issues* have five respondents (8.5%) report being neutral, 10 (16.9%) agreed, and 3 (5.1%) strongly agreed with this statement. The mean response for item three was 3.89 with a standard deviation of .676. The mean response for item four was 3.44 with a standard deviation of .922. Survey item five-*The club is well received by faculty and staff*- was answered by 18 of 21 participants. One participant (5.6%) strongly disagreed. Nine of the participants (50%) were neutral, seven (38.9%) agreed, and one respondent (5.6%) strongly agreed with the statement. For item five the mean response was 3.39 with a standard deviation of .850. Survey item six-*The club is well received by the student population*- was again answered by 18 of 21 respondents. One participant (5.6%) strongly disagreed. Three participants (16.7%) disagree, eleven (61.1%) were neutral, and one (5.6%) agreed. Two participants strongly agreed with the statement. The mean response for item six was 3.00 with a standard deviation of .970. Survey item

seven-*The club is an effective way of educating all students about the struggles and rights of the GLBTQ community*-was also responded to by 18 of 21 participants. Four participants (22.2%) disagreed with the statement, 8 (44.4%) were neutral, and 6 (33.3%) agreed. Finally, the mean response for item 7 was 3.11 with a standard deviation of .758.

A reliability analysis was run to indicate if items using the Likert scale were a reliable index to measure the effectiveness of GSAs. Cronbach's Alpha is a measure of reliability determining how well these items related to each other. The value in this analysis was .698. This value indicates that the survey items are a reliable measure of the major concept.

If the counselors said "no" to the question asking if their school had a Gay/Straight Alliance, they were routed to a question asking why they thought this was. They were given six options, the first being "Because there is not a need for such an organization". Four respondents (6.8%) chose this answer. The second option "There is a need, but the students are not interested in forming the group" was chosen by seven participants (11.9%). The third option "There is a need, but faculty is not interested in advising the club", was chosen by two participants (3.4%). The fourth option "There is a need, but administration is not interested" was chosen by three respondents. The fifth option was "I prefer not to respond" and four (6.8%) chose that answer. The sixth option was "other" and some of the comments that counselors included are as follows:

- "I do not know of a request to begin a club"
- "I haven't heard of students interested in organizing a group"
- "Lack of community support"
- "Not feasible for a school our size. Students seek each other out automatically anyway"
- "Time constraints"

- “We are in the process of developing school policy that would cover all types of organization to avoid a backlash if at all possible”

Other comments that were made were similar in sentiment.

## Chapter V: Discussion

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the results of the study. Following this will be a summary of conclusions drawn from the research. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for further research in this area.

### *Discussion*

The findings of this study indicate that the majority (64.4%) of schools do not have a Gay/Straight Alliance in Wisconsin. When examining the reasons why school counselors believe that such groups are not formed at their schools, the counselors cited such reasons as; the students, in some capacity, are not interested in starting the group. Some reported that administration was not interested, or that faculty was not interested in advising such a group. Still others believed that there was not a need for such an organization. These findings could indicate a variety of things. Gay students in the state of Wisconsin are still very “closeted” and do not want to seek out such an organization. Also, it could be suggested that students are not actively seeking a group because they do not have an issue in their schools. However, the converse of this would be that students understand that such an organization would not be encouraged or supported by faculty, staff, or administration, so they are not willing to take a chance for fear of adverse reactions.

When examining those schools that reported having a GSA, a few factors were taken into consideration. First cross tabulations were done between those that reported having a GSA and the size of the school. The results show that the larger the school population, the more likely the school was to have a GSA in Wisconsin. The second cross tabulation looked at whether or not the school had a GSA and the size of the town the school was in. Results in this category were not so cut and dry. The respondents were spread out across the board when it came to the size of the town and whether they had a GSA. Each grouping of population size had at least two respondents, if not more,



indicating that population of the town was not significant in determining the likelihood of a GSA being in their school.

When analyzing the effectiveness of the GSA's that have been formed, the results were unclear. When asked if the club educates its member, the majority of respondents (72.3%) agreed or strongly agreed with that statement, indicating that somehow counselors are measuring the change in students once they enter the group. In response to the question of whether or not the club educates the student population as a whole, the majority of the responses (55.6%) indicated that counselors believe that it does. Interestingly, at least 27.8% of respondents for the first question and 33.3% of respondents for the second question were neutral. In fact, in the next three questions over 40% of counselors were neutral when it came to determining the effectiveness of their GSA's. Looking at the item referring to faculty and staff being on board showed that a little less than half agreed or strongly disagreed with this statement, with the majority being neutral or disagreeing.

When counselors were asked why their school did not have a GSA, there a number of responses. Some, (6.8%) cited that there was not a need in there school, while others stated students were not interested in starting a group (11.9%). Other answers included things like "not sure", "school is too small", "gay population is small".

### *Conclusions*

The results indicated a majority of schools in Wisconsin do not have a Gay/Straight Alliance. When examining why this is so, the majority indicate that it is because the students have not expressed an interest in starting the group or that the school population or gay population was too small for a group. However, because the sample used in this study was not that large, results were not easily generalizable to other school districts across the United States. The results, especially those written in by the counselors shows that counselors have a preconceived notion that the only students who

would want to be in the group are LGBTQ students. Also, small schools are limited in the organizations that they can provide to their students at one time, making students choices limited.

This study shows that it is not one overwhelming factor that keeping GSA's from forming in high schools. Results showed about 20.4% of counselors believed that students were not interested in starting a club. It was also mentioned by one counselor that the LGBTQ student population is very small. Therefore, it could be that it is a combination of no student interest and a very small LGBTQ population in the school. It could also be inferred that students, understanding that administration, faculty, or community are not interested, and therefore do not further seek to start such a club, because they are not prepared to deal with the possible backlash.

Of the schools that did have a GSA, it was difficult to clearly discern if they are perceived as effective or not. Anywhere from 25-60% of responses to any given item were neutral. This could be for a number of reasons. Although counselors were informed that their responses would be confidential, they were not able to provide accurate answers. Another possibility is that the counselors themselves are not the advisors of these groups, and therefore have no knowledge of whether or not the club is educating its members, educating the student population, or is effective in educating others on the rights and struggles of the LGBTQ population.

Also, 33.3% of counselors believe that the GSAs in their school are an effective way of educating all students in their schools about LGBTQ issues. This could indicate that these particular counselors may work with the group, or work with the advisor of the group. Interestingly, when asked if the group is well received by faculty and staff, and students, the majority (45.5%) perceived faculty and staff to be more open to the idea of the group than students. However, at this stage in a students' life they are very insecure

about themselves and their sexuality, making it hard to know if they are uncomfortable with the idea of a Gay/Straight Alliance, or just uncomfortable with themselves.

There are people that believe groups in school should be formed to help LGBTQ families, still others believe that Gay, Straight Alliances in school for students is inappropriate. In Okeechobee, Florida a principal denied students the right to allow their Gay/Straight Alliance to meet on campus ([www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org), 2008). The members of the group then took their case to the American Civil Liberties Union to plead their case. After several failed attempts by the ACLU to convince the school to abide by the Federal Equal Access Act, a law suit was filed. One student and GSA president, 17 year old Brittany Martin was quoted as saying "All we've ever wanted was to have a club to talk about tolerance and harassment so we can try to make our school a better place for all students". Some respondents to this survey reported that administration was not interested in having a GSA, and this article points out that regardless of administrations interest, students can and should be allowed to form such groups.

The Florida federal court ruled that school officials in Okeechobee, Florida must allow Gay/Straight Alliances to meet at their school ([www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org), 2008). The judge, Michael K. Moore also upheld his earlier decision that GSA's do not interfere with abstinence-only education. He also held that schools must provide for the well being of students. The ACLU prevailed under the First Amendment and the Federal Equal Access Act, in which schools are required to "allow any extracurricular activities to meet on campus and allow all extracurricular student groups to do so, and to treat every club equally" ([www.aclu.org](http://www.aclu.org)). The only way the school board could have won this suit was if they could prove that their refusal to recognize the GSA as an organization, was caused by something more than their need to avoid and uncomfortable and controversial topic.

GSA's in Florida and across the country have been shown to help gay and straight students feel safer at school, and provides a safe space for students to address their fears, hopes, and challenges. The Federal Equal Access Act requires schools to treat gay-straight alliances as they would any other organization. Federal courts have ruled in favor of GSA's where schools have tried to block their formation time and time again, citing students' right to form groups.

Interestingly, at the college level, there is a dedication to addressing diversity as well as a sense of obligation, to present students with the issues that face sexual minority individuals, especially now, at a time when legal, political, religious, and social issues related to same-sex sexual orientation are so prevalent in the media (Fletcher & Russell, 2001). Fletcher and Russell specifically address family studies faculty at the college level when they talk about incorporating LGBTQ topics into the classroom. The idea is to expose students to the life experiences of LGBTQ individuals, for several important reasons. The first is that attention to the issues faced by this population will address a philosophy that focuses on the overall diversity of human experience. Also, it could be argued that, sexual orientation should be considered equivalent to other minority statuses such as race, ethnicity, social class, or family structure. Furthermore, most individuals, at some point in their lives will interact with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender individuals.

### *Recommendations*

Results from this study provided some insight into counselors' perceptions of the effectiveness of GSA's in their schools or why they did not have one. However, there are ways in which this research could be supplemented by future research. First, only a small sample of counselors was used in this research. Within this factor it should be considered that perhaps counselors are not the advisors to the GSA, and that in order to get a more

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accurate reading on the GSA, it would be more beneficial to seek out the actual advisor.

An open-ended survey would help specify answers, which could then be standardized for a nation-wide survey.

Also, the data collection procedure in this survey had its own set of challenges. It seemed that counselors in the sample group were unwilling to open e-mails from people they did not know, thus hindering the amount of surveys that were taken. Also, of those that were willing to fill out the survey, some were unable to do so due to technological issues such as district spam filters and the survey link not working, which neither this researcher nor the participant were able to discern.

Finally, this survey asked individuals to be honest in assessing why their school did not have a GSA. Self or school assessment is not always easy for participants to do, and they may be concerned with how their school is then viewed by the researcher or represented in the results. They were also asked to determine the effectiveness of a group whose effectiveness has most likely not been measured before. Also, perceptions of every counselor are different. Some may define the effectiveness of a GSA by how well it educates its members or students, or on other factors such as how well it supports LGBTQ students. However, as more and more research is done on GSAs and their effectiveness, it will become easier for advisors of such groups to measure the success, or effectiveness of their groups.

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## Appendix A: Implied Consent

**Implied Consent to Participate in UW-Stout Approved Research**

**Title:** Issues in Education: Guidance Counselors' Perceptions on Effectiveness of Gay/Straight Alliances in Schools.

**Investigator:**

Natasha Rasmussen                      [rasmussenn@uwstout.edu](mailto:rasmussenn@uwstout.edu)

**Description:**

I am currently a student in the Guidance and Counseling Program at UW-Stout, advised by Dr. Denise Zirkle-Brouillard. My research study advisor is Dr. Kathleen Thomas. As part of my degree requirement I am doing a research study on the perceptions of high school guidance counselors on the effectiveness of Gay/Straight Alliances in schools. My purpose is to determine if schools are instituting such organizations, and if they are, whether or not they are making a difference in schools from the point of view of the counselors.

**Risks and Benefits:**

The risks in participating in this survey are minimal, you may experience some discomfort in examining whether your school has a need for a Gay/Straight Alliance, and if the school does, whether or not it is effective. You may withdraw from participating in this survey at any time.

In participating in this study you would be contributing to the body of research on the LGBTQ population, and the needs that they have in the school setting. However, even if your values make it uncomfortable for you to discuss the need for an alliance, you will still benefit from participating in this survey. There is a great benefit in contributing to this subject because if professionals are able to address the needs of this population, these students will experience less psychological stressors and perform better in school.

**Time Commitment:**

This survey should take no more than 10-15 minutes of your time.

**Confidentiality:**

Your name will not be included on any documents; each survey has a number only. We do not believe that you can be identified from any of the information that is obtained.

**Right to Withdraw:**

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. However, should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, there is no way to identify your anonymous document.

**IRB Approval:**

**This research has been approved by the UW-Stout IRB as required by the Code of Federal Regulations Title 45 Part 46.**

**Statement of Consent:**

By completing the following survey, I am agreeing to participate in the study entitled:  
**Issues in Education: Guidance Counselors' Perceptions on Effectiveness of  
Gay/Straight Alliances in Schools.**

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Appendix B: *Survey*

Do you have a Gay/Straight Alliance or similar club in your school? Yes No

If yes:

How many members are there? If membership is anonymous, approximately how many students do you guess show up to meetings regularly?

Please respond to the following statements by circling the number that BEST represents your perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the Straight/Gay Alliance at your school.

**Strongly Disagree-1 Disagree-2 Undecided-3 Agree-4 Strongly Agree-5**

The club educates its members on current LGBTQ issues.

1 2 3 4 5

The club provides educational activities about LGBTQ issues for the students that attend your school.

1 2 3 4 5

The club is well received by faculty and staff

1 2 3 4 5

The club is well received by the student population

1 2 3 4 5

The club is an effective way of educating all students about the struggles and rights of the LGBTQ community

1 2 3 4 5

If no:

Why do you feel your school does not have a Gay/Straight Alliance or similar club?  
Choose any that apply:

- a. Because there is not a need for such an organization
- b. There is a need, but the students are not interested in forming the group.
- c. There is a need, but faculty are not interested in advising the club.
- d. There is a need, but administration is not interested.
- e. Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

School Population: \_\_\_\_\_ (50-150)      \_\_\_\_\_ (251-350)      \_\_\_\_\_ (>450)  
                                 \_\_\_\_\_ (151-250)      \_\_\_\_\_ (351-450)

Town Population: \_\_\_\_\_ (<10,000)      \_\_\_\_\_ (25,001-40,000)  
                                 \_\_\_\_\_ (10,001-25,000)      \_\_\_\_\_ (40,001-55,000)      \_\_\_\_\_ (>55,000)

## Appendix C: Cover Letter

Dear High School Guidance Counselors:

My name is Natasha Rasmussen and I am currently a student at UW-Stout working to complete my M.S. in Guidance and Counseling.

I am writing this e-mail to inform you of a survey that I am sending out for my thesis "Issues in Education: Guidance Counselors' Perceptions on Effectiveness of Gay/Straight Alliances in Schools." Your school may not have such a group, but please take the time to indicate that on the survey, as it will help me with my data collection.

A link to the survey will be e-mailed to you along with an implied consent form that you must read before completing the survey. The survey is totally anonymous and is only being sent to randomly selected counselors in Wisconsin.

Any assistance you could give me with this project would be greatly appreciated.

Thank you for your time,

Natasha Rasmussen

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