

An Examination of a Local Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA): Creating Accessible Resources for Schools

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Abstract

Having a Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) at school can have numerous benefits for students (e.g., spark a sense of belonging, provide developmentally appropriate activities, and have allied/LGBTQ+ identifying faculty support). GSAs are of critical importance, given that LGBTQ+ youth face disparate rates of victimization and mental health concerns. The current study aims to evaluate a GSA within a local public middle school. This GSA has a student-led and faculty-facilitated structure, and the students are exploring the importance of leadership roles with arms-length guidance from allied/LGBTQ+ sponsors. We will conduct interviews with faculty GSA sponsors and attend the student-led GSA meetings and events. Alongside the sponsors and students, we will co-create a model of their GSA to use as a moldable template for inactive/non-functioning middle school GSAs. Eventually, we plan to further evaluate this GSA by conducting focus groups with student participants and examining possible racial and ethnic disparities in GSA attendance and involvement. This research will create accessible resources for GSA faculty and student leaders, offer considerations for school staff to increase rates of LGBTQ+ student involvement, and raise awareness about the impactful effects of spaces-of-belonging on the lives and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth.

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About the Author: *Fynn is a senior studying Social Work and Gender & Women's Studies. Fynn is interested in examining how to improve the overall experience of LGBTQ+ individuals throughout various systems without policy intervention.*

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Hello everyone! Thank you for coming to our presentation today! My name is Fynn Levery, and today we will be looking at An Examination of a Local Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA): Creating Accessible Resources for Schools.

Ah, middle school... So many changes ensue during the ages of 11-13. Going through puberty, exploring new social situations, developing sexual and intimate feelings, and of course, going through an emo phase. All of these are pillars of the middle school experience.

Many adults would not go back to middle school if they were asked. To be frank, I wouldn't go back either! It was musty and spiteful and of course, no one in the history of the world had ever gone through what I was experiencing.

Although middle school is a treacherous time for most, developing sexual or intimate feelings and the development of puberty affect one group of tweens a bit differently. LGBTQ+ youth face disparate rates of victimization and mental health concerns in comparison to their non-LGBTQ+ counterparts.

Suicidal Ideation Among Transgender and Gender Expansive Youth: Mechanisms of Risk by Rachel Garthe highlights that transgender and gender-expansive youth experience high rates of bullying, cyberbullying and dating violence, compared to male and female youth. Experiencing victimization based on gender identity is associated with disparate rates of negative mental health outcomes (Garthe et al., 2021). Researchers also found depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation rates are also higher among transgender and gender-expansive youth.

When thinking back to our negative or uncomfortable experiences in middle school, I began to wonder: What would have helped us in middle school? What are some things that would assist LGBTQ+ 11-13 year olds now? And how could we execute assistive practices for the next generation of queer and transgender middle schoolers?

I did not have the luxury of having a Gender and Sexuality Alliance in my middle school.

The introduction of the GSA provides LGBTQ+ youth with spaces that spark a sense of belonging, have developmentally appropriate activities, and allied or LGBTQ+ identifying faculty support (Garthe et al., 2022).

This leads us to the question, what is a GSA? A Gender and Sexuality Alliance, formerly known as a Gay Straight Alliance, is an after-school organization that serves as a safe place for LGBTQ+ individuals to go and be themselves without shame. It's awesome they were able to keep the phrase "GSA", right? Funny how those things work out. The modern format is typically an hour after school, only allowing LGBTQ+ members to be in the space. The former format also ran for an hour after school but allowed anyone to attend meetings regardless of LGBTQ+ status. The Gender and Sexuality Alliance as we know it today, allows for there to be a space that LGBTQ+ individuals can see one another and meet within an in-community space.

Looking into the current study, we contacted nine local middle and high schools to try and get in touch with the sponsors and students from their schools' GSAs. These schools included Edison Middle School, Franklin STEAM Academy, Garden Hills 6-8, International Prep Academy, Jefferson Middle School, Centennial High School, Central High School, Urbana High School, and of course, Urbana Middle School (UMS).

Contacting these middle schools was our first step in evaluating local middle and high schools to pinpoint what made GSAs accepting and engaging spaces from a student's perspective.

From our contact list, four schools and the UPCenter replied to set up a meeting with us. These schools were: Jefferson Middle School, International Prep Academy or IPA, Centennial High School, and Urbana Middle School.

At UMS, we see key components of staff support, school involvement, and a shared sense of belonging. In exploring the success of UMS' GSA, we plan to further explore which elements affected LGBTQ+ students' experiences within school.

Contrarily, Centennial High School's GSA did not have much student interest or involvement, struggled to keep continual attendance, and had wavering faculty direction and leadership.

Jefferson and IPA's schedules, unfortunately, did not align with our availability, but we remained in contact to assist and volunteer with their GSAs throughout the semester.

This process led us to primarily focus on the UMS GSA. When we first began our journey with UMS' GSA, we had no idea what to expect. As students who never had the opportunity to be in a middle school GSA, our expectations were low. But fortunately, we were very pleasantly surprised by UMS' GSA.

UMS' GSA is a premiere example of a functioning middle school organization. With a student-led and faculty-facilitated structure, UMS students are exploring the importance of leadership roles with arms-length guidance from allied and LGBTQ+ sponsors.

What this means for UMS students is they have a democratically voted president who compiles icebreakers and begins their meetings. Their meetings are soon then after guided by conversation starters gifted by the faculty members who are facilitating the group. If there is an activity that the group does, it is chosen and carried out by the GSA members. Administrative tasks are taken care of by the faculty facilitators.

UMS students are served by this model because it gives them an appropriate amount of control and leadership for a larger group of 15-25 students, while allowing there to be accepted and encouraged guidance by the facilitators. UMS students were very respectful and responsive to student leadership and faculty leadership alike.

If any of you are familiar with GSAs and the average turnout and participation in them, you too are shocked at the average student involvement of UMS' GSA with 15-25 students participating in general meetings weekly.

This was something I was also incredibly shocked by. For those of you who are unfamiliar with an average turnout of GSAs, it often looks like four friends hanging out at a set of desks for 30 minutes, then going home.

UMS' GSA balanced facilitated conversation and playtime, with the first 30 minutes of their meeting being free time, and the second half of their meetings being facilitated conversation or

activities. This allowed the students to get their after-school jitters out, have some socialization time, and then feel fulfilled through thoughtful dialogue that touched on current events in the LGBTQ+ community, questions about their identity, and other assorted topics middle schoolers love to talk about. Some of my favorite meeting conversations were about favorite cheeses and hammerhead sharks.

This method of balanced play and facilitated conversation allowed the students to feel engaged and included in conversation that is oftentimes not shared with them. These conversations included heavier topics about the LGBTQ+ community including bullying and victimization, discrimination, and the realities of targeted LGBTQ+ violence.

It is incredibly important to include students in difficult conversations surrounding LGBTQ+ based discrimination and violence because more often than not, the individuals who are facing bullying and targeted LGBTQ+ violence are closer in age to the victim than their safe adult. Although important, these incidents are often incredibly difficult for adults to talk about with tweens and adolescents. Questions arise like: How do I have this conversation? and is this appropriate to share with my 11-13 year old?

All-in-all, LGBTQ+ tweens and adolescents will be exposed to media either via the 10 o'clock news, their cell phones, or through word of mouth with their peers. In sharing a hard conversation with a tween, you are showing them you listen to their feelings toward difficult subject matters, value their input, and respect them and their community enough to work through their questions together. This mutual respect and community building is a large reason for UMS' GSA success.

Conversing may still feel like a daunting task. Who *wants* to discuss violence with 11-13 year olds? It is better to have a conversation and acknowledge that harm has been done than to ignore and say nothing at all. Childhood and adolescence are enriched by hard conversations and a safe and trusting ear. In not allowing children to be curious and ask uncomfortable questions, feelings of loneliness, confusion, and shame begin to fester surrounding difficult subject matters. Moving forward, it should be a goal to center listening, honesty, and open communication to enrich childhood glee.

Once UMS students had the opportunity to share their feelings about LGBTQ+ violence and discrimination, they came back ready to discuss their favorite cheeses, song of the week, and of course, hammerhead sharks.

Throughout our research we have found the pillars of success at UMS' GSA: mutual respect, trust, and safe adult guidance. This semester, to compile our findings we attended weekly GSA meetings at UMS, bringing snacks, having conversations, and making buttons.

With our findings, we hope to work alongside the UMS GSA students and sponsors to create a moldable model GSA. In looking at the structure and effectiveness of UMS' GSA, we believe our findings, when compiled into accessible resources, could greatly help struggling, inactive, and failing GSAs continue their process of being an integral support to middle school students.

This template would include suggested structure guidelines, including information about democratic voting processes, how to facilitate that with middle schoolers, and balancing power in the role of faculty sponsor.

From UMS' GSA, I will take strategies and suggestions from educators and sponsors to inform the manual's details. Furthermore, I will use points of adjustment to educate future manual users of what was ineffective to make an educated decision on what to mold and change about GSA structure and activities.

The template would also include suggestions on how to facilitate group discussion, training on LGBTQ+ cultural competency, and tips on how to hold conversations that may be difficult for the facilitator and the tween attendees. This will assist in navigating through important and uncomfortable conversations as well as going over important LGBTQ+ knowledge and culture to further understand the ever-growing community.

Our template would also include suggestions for meeting format, possible scheduling roadblocks, and activity ideas. Meeting format, as previously mentioned, is important considering the need for social and facilitated time, and making sure there is time for both within the session is integral. For scheduling roadblocks, we found GSA attendance drastically dwindled if it was scheduled overlapping with other school organizations that had high LGBTQ+ attendance such as theater and art club. Activity suggestions are especially important throughout

this template because as important as GSA is for middle schoolers, it is also an additional responsibility for an adult. So giving suggestions that have worked previously allows the facilitator to use less energy and feel more fulfilled by a functioning event if they are in a time crunch or are having a low-energy week.

Eventually, we plan to evaluate the UMS GSA by conducting focus groups with student participants, as well as examining possible racial and ethnic disparities in GSA attendance and involvement.

With our findings, we plan to make these resources available to other local middle and high schools within the broader Champaign-Urbana area. This research has important implications for translating research findings into accessible resources for GSA faculty and student leaders, offering considerations for social workers and school staff to functionally increase rates of LGBTQ+ student involvement within their schools, and increasing awareness about the impactful effects of spaces-of-belonging on the lives and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ youth.

Looking into the future, our project has reserved a grant to continue our research and compensate those who we conduct focus groups with. We also plan to use these funds to further enhance the GSA experience of those in the community who may need our volunteering and programmatic assistance.

Using connections made through this project, I plan to create a queer mentorship Registered Student Organization at the University of Illinois. The organization would work with local LGBTQ+ middle and high school students and connect them to U of I student mentors. We are also hoping to continue this network by giving U of I LGBTQ+ student mentors community-partner mentors (aged 25+). This model is unique and showcases the importance of having a safe-adult guide throughout adolescence and into young adulthood.

Overall, the importance of a functional GSA on the LGBTQ+ middle school experience is integral. It allows students a space to explore themselves, make fellow queer and trans connections, and have important conversations that give them perspective and grace.

Thank you for attending this session today! I'd like to now open for presentation questions and comments.

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