

Creating inclusive co-op workplaces: Insights from LGBTQ+ students

REBECCA MALLOZZI

DAVID DREWERY¹

University of Waterloo, Waterloo, Canada

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the notion of inclusion from the perspective of LGBTQ+ co-op students in the context of their work term experiences, including searching for work and during the work term. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight LGBTQ+ students who had at least one previous work term experience at a Canadian university. Analyses of transcripts revealed several themes pertaining to how students navigate the recruitment process, feelings about inclusion at work, contributions of interpersonal dynamics (with supervisors and co-workers) to those feelings, and the role of co-op administrators in enhancing inclusion. The study identifies directions for future research in this area and suggests some strategies for creating inclusive co-op workplaces.

Keywords: Inclusion, employment, support, administration, grounded theory

Whether co-operative education (co-op) students feel included, safe, and welcomed is an important part of a successful work term. The focus of this study was on the notion of inclusion from the perspective of LGBTQ+ co-op students. LGBTQ+ is a term that is used to describe those individuals who self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or otherwise fall under the “queer” umbrella. Employment research (e.g., Baker & Lucas, 2017) has suggested that LGBTQ+ co-op students might experience exclusion throughout the work term, yet no research on this topic is available in the co-op literature. As inclusion becomes a growing issue across post-secondary education programs, educators, administrators, and employers are likely interested in ways of creating inclusive co-op workplaces for LGBTQ+ co-op students.

Inclusive Workplaces

Inclusive workplaces have been described as those that allow members of socially marginalized groups to be their authentic selves (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2017) and to contribute to the best of their ability (Sarkar, 2015). As such, inclusive workplaces are characterized both by a sense of participation and contribution from all members but also by an acknowledgement of diverse individuals. Inclusive workplaces embrace differences and support the expression of those differences. They provide an opportunity for each person to retain their own uniqueness while working towards organizational goals (Shore et al., 2011).

The co-op literature has referenced the notion of inclusion and seems to place value on creating inclusive work term experiences. However, the focus of that literature has been on inclusion in terms of equitable access to co-op education by marginalized populations in general (e.g., Mackaway & Winchester-Seeto, 2018). LGBTQ+ co-op students and their work term experiences have not been fully addressed in the literature. Further, while there has been a focus on policy work and its impact on inclusion of LGBTQ+ employees (e.g., Ng & Rumens, 2017), how various dynamics in the workplace influence LGBTQ+ co-op students specifically are less well understood.

¹ Corresponding author: David Drewery, dwdrewery@uwaterloo.ca

There is little doubt about the increasing diversity in today's workplace and the benefits that come from harnessing that diversity (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008). Workplaces that celebrate differences tend to be more effective because they access more engaged workers and a broader spectrum of potentially useful perspectives (Hideg & Ferris, 2014). A better understanding of inclusion from the perspective of LGBTQ+ co-op students will indeed contribute to student and organizational success.

LGBTQ+ Employment Experiences

Research suggests that many individuals identify as LGBTQ+ (Coffman, Coffman, & Marzilli Ericson, 2016; Lund, Thomas, Sias, & Bradley, 2016). Although we do not know how many of these individuals might participate in co-op, it is a fair assumption that many do and that they all hope to be included at work. Yet, LGBTQ+ individuals continue to experience stigmatization in many domains of life, including in the context of employment.

Employment research indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals face difficulties entering the labor market and maximizing employment outcomes. Employment rates are worse for LGBTQ+ job seekers than for equally qualified non-LGBTQ+ peers (Sears & Mallory, 2011) and qualified LGBTQ+ applicants are frequently turned down by employers for reasons related to their LGBTQ+ identities (Bauer et al., 2011; Sears & Mallory, 2011). When they are hired, LGBTQ+ employees often receive a lower hourly wage in comparison to other job seekers (Mallory, Herman, & Lee Badgett, 2011). These challenges are particularly notable amongst young LGBTQ+ job seekers (Laurent & Mihoubi, 2017).

The literature also details the exclusion that occurs for LGBTQ+ employees at work. In one study (Sasso & Ellard-Gray, 2014), 30 percent of LGBTQ+ employees felt discriminated against at work while only 2.9 percent of the general population felt that way. In another American study (Coffman et al., 2016), 25% of individuals reported that they would be dissatisfied with having an openly LGBTQ+ workplace supervisor. These studies clearly suggest that LGBTQ+ co-op students may feel excluded during the work term. We know, too, that the consequences of inclusion are positive, in that LGBTQ+ who feel included (versus excluded) are happier with their jobs (Pink-Harper, Burnside, & Davis, 2017) and more committed to their employer (Loren & Parini, 2017).

PURPOSE OF THIS RESEARCH

The purpose of this grounded theory study was to explore the notion of inclusion from the perspective of LGBTQ+ co-op students in the context of their work term experiences, including searching for work and during the work term. The goal was to explore how LGBTQ+ co-op students describe inclusion and the factors or processes they believed were associated with it. A better understanding of this topic will help to identify strategies that co-op stakeholders (e.g., students, employers, and administrators) can use to enhance inclusion generally and specifically for LGBTQ+ students.

METHOD

The study employed an interpretive grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 1996, 2008). This approach is useful when the researcher aims to discover 'what is going on' in a particular context or in regard to a particular phenomenon (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The goal of such an approach is to understand the meanings attached to individuals' experiences (Charmaz, 1996). In this study, the focus was on the meaning of inclusion to LGBTQ+ co-op students within the experience of the co-op work term.

LGBTQ+ co-op students' experiences were explored through semi-structured interviews. Upon institutional ethics approval (no. 22595), participants were recruited from a Canadian university via an advertisement placed in the university's center for sexual and gender diversity. Eight individuals volunteered to participate. They were in their early 20s and were from various academic programs. All of the participants identified as members of the LGBTQ+ community and had at least one previous co-op work term experience. These participants were recruited specifically because they could talk about the topic of LGBTQ+ inclusion. Since they were from multiple academic disciplines, their work experiences were not tied to any one field of study. Pseudonyms are used to represent each of the participants.

Consistent with the grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 1996), data were collected and analyzed simultaneously. That is, coding of transcripts occurred throughout the study rather than after all interviews were conducted. Interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Open-ended questions were used to explore participants' co-op work term experiences with a focus on inclusion and how it could be enhanced. Analytic notes were kept throughout the study to assist in the development of codes and themes (Charmaz, 1996). Transcripts were coded using line-by-line codes (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Each section of each transcript was assigned a code to represent the meanings participants assigned to their experiences. Codes were compared across interviews and used to form more general themes on the topic of inclusion. Data collection and analysis concluded at the point of theoretical saturation, or when no new perspectives were offered by participants. A review of the literature was also conducted throughout the data collection and analysis process (Charmaz, 1996).

FINDINGS

The findings presented below represent the themes that emerged from the interviews. Themes represented how LGBTQ+ co-op students navigated the recruitment process, what inclusion meant to them, and the role that other stakeholders played in creating inclusive co-op workplaces.

Navigating the Recruitment Process

Dynamics surrounding inclusion were apparent well before the work term began. Each student wanted to work in a space where they felt included. For instance, Tina said:

If I know a place is inclusive it [would] make it to the top of my priority list because it's important like probably my number one most important thing in co-op or a job in the future would be to feel safe.

However, participants reported that they had to navigate several issues to achieve this goal. The first issue was making sense of recruitment materials. Participants were often faced with messages about inclusion, and they had to discern which were authentic and which were not. Priya said "I usually tend to ignore it because what they say in that does not reflect their statistics as a company of how many women or how many people of color or like [...] how accessible is it?" Tina also said:

I've seen the typical job applications like the [university hiring system] posts that at the end will occasionally have like this is an inclusive opportunity like job and we like hire everybody or give everyone a hiring opportunity equally or whatever. Other than that, no not really. I think sometimes they mentioned because it was engineering, they tried to say oh we try to accept women or whatever. But it seemed forced or it seemed almost demeaning.

Corin recollected having a similar experience:

I recall in a few different co-op jobs that I applied to that's just like you know this is a like we do not discriminate based on gender, race, sexual orientation, that sort of thing. But it's a copy paste statement. I don't even read them anymore. Just like we do not discriminate. Yeah whatever. So you know it doesn't feel like people actually care. They just put that in so that they look inclusive.

As they applied for positions, participants navigated an additional issue, which was whether to express or to conceal their LGBTQ+ identity. Most were hesitant to express their identities in their application packages. Kat said that she "didn't even think about it" and Priya similarly said "I definitely tried to avoid that one." Maya, referring to a previous volunteer position said "I think it is on my resume, though I did consider taking it off at one point. I didn't necessarily always want to put that on just because I didn't feel like dealing with that." They withheld information, such as previous volunteer experiences with LGBTQ+ groups, to avoid what they perceived to be a negative response from employers.

This process of concealing identity extended into job interviews, too. Participants often removed or covered identifiers that they said were commonly associated with the LGBTQ+ community. Corin said "People assume women with short hair and tattoos are gay. And so I do my best to hide that in interviews [...] because people will assume I'm gay."

Because participants had completed at least one previous co-op job, they were also able to comment on how their experiences of inclusion and exclusion impacted future recruitment dynamics. It was clear that feelings of inclusion were a stronger predictor of a continued relationship with the employer than were other characteristics of the job. Selina said this was the case "Because if I'm going home at the end of the day just like upset from people saying things everyday then that's not somewhere I want to stay even if the job is really nice." Maya also said:

[...] my dream job wouldn't be my dream job if the people there didn't accept me for who I was. Because then it meant it would literally be me going to work pretending to be someone else, coming home being myself kinda thing. It's just yeah I don't want to repeat that in my life.

Feelings about Inclusion

The characteristics of safety and acceptance were essential to a feeling of inclusion in the workplace. Inclusive workplaces were spaces in which "you feel comfortable expressing your identity and you're not worried about how other people will react" (Selina). Evan agreed: "I guess to me inclusiveness would be in a workplace at least sort of a sense that you're not going to be treated any differently based on certain aspects of yourself that might differ from them from the majority." Kat similarly shared that:

Inclusiveness just means being open to everyone and even if it's something you haven't necessarily heard of like not overreacting, just take a step back. I mean like okay where is this person coming from and stuff like that. And just like making sure everyone feels safe.

To these students, inclusion was a sense that they got from being in the work environment. It was not something that could be easily observed but rather was a lived experience.

When asked about the indicators of inclusion, co-op students had several comments about symbols commonly associated with the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., the rainbow flag). For some students, these

symbols “say that this is a safe space, this is an inclusive space” (Corin). They welcomed these symbols because “you feel a little more like you can be yourself” (Maya). For other students, these symbols were rare and insufficient for creating an inclusive workplace. Corin added: “I have never seen them in a workplace [...] I see a lot of you know don’t be racist. I see a lot of stuff about mental illness. Nothing about LGBTQ.” Some participants were skeptical about employers using these symbols. Maya said: “I mean you could always try to have things like rainbow flags or whatever but that doesn’t really mean much if you’re not actively being vocal about it and open about it.” They instead stated that “after advertising they like have actions if need be to express that” (Selina).

What became clear was that it would be difficult to “see” inclusion. Evan told us that “it would be a bit hard to tell just by walking in because they’re often sort of subtle things” that signal inclusion. Maya also told us that inclusive workplaces and exclusive ones “wouldn’t look too different.” Instead, participants noted that inclusion was observed on an interpersonal level. Selina captured the sentiment in the following way:

Even just having a little sticker doesn’t necessarily mean it’s inclusive. And a lot of inclusivity for LGBT people happens on an interpersonal level. So it’s hard to express that with a physical thing that you’d be able to see.

Interpersonal Dynamics

Interpersonal dynamics were indeed at the heart of what made for an inclusive workplace. One interpersonal dynamic that was frequently mentioned was the use of language and pronouns that were inclusive of LGBTQ+ co-op students. Tina said:

I think a good sign which almost never happens, but a good sign would be for example if people were open asking about pronouns or somebody told you what their pronouns were. That would be a really good sign.

Corin reiterated this point and emphasized that it is easy to do and can have a profound effect on LGBTQ+ co-op students:

So you know even just like sitting down at a meeting and being like what’s your pronouns, what’s your preferred name? Just lay it on me friend, I’m not assuming anything. That [would] be the easiest thing to do at the beginning of your first meeting you know. And it takes five seconds. And you know just even if you want, just like send out an email to the other teams being like these are this person’s pronouns please be respectful.

A second dynamic with others that participants saw as conducive to inclusion was educating those who were misinformed. Kat added that inclusive workplaces do more than police exclusion of LGBTQ+ people, they also “[explain] why instead of just shutting them down, because if we’re not educating people, they won’t learn why their behaviour can be harmful.” Similarly, Tina said that inclusion is “not only being knowledgeable but also being like sensitive and open to be educated about it [...]”

Dynamics with Supervisors

As we unpacked how interpersonal dynamics were important to inclusion, it became clear that supervisors were central to creating more inclusive workplaces. Supervisors were described as “[...] the ones that are advocates” for inclusion (Tina). Selina said that “supervisors definitely have a more

important job because if like how I feel about it is it's the supervisors' job to make sure that the space itself is inclusive and has the value of inclusion at heart."

Participants further suggested that supervisors performed two main tasks to support inclusion. The first was to set a good example for others. Evan said "[...] I think it's important for them to sort of set a good example about [inclusion] because if the people who are in charge are saying those things then who else is going to." Maya agreed, stating if supervisors set a bad example, they give permission to other co-workers to be exclusive, "and that's like, that can be a really bad slopey [sic] hill if you do stuff like that." The second task was that of correcting behavior from those who are being discriminatory. Participants suggested that it was the job of the supervisor to ensure everyone follows the parameters of an inclusive workplace. Kat concurred, stating:

Supervisors have the role of like they have more of the authority role so like actually policing it like you know if someone is actually being very harmful in the workplace it's their job to take some kind of disciplinary measures that just like we can't have that here. That isn't what this workplace stands for.

Dynamics with Co-workers

To these students, co-workers in the workplace also featured prominently in assessments of inclusion. Often, the dynamic with co-workers was described as negative and had to do with co-workers making assumptions and using exclusive language. For instance, Corin shared with us that a co-worker had instructed her to "bring your boyfriend. I was like I can't. I was trying to make a joke out of it. She didn't find it funny." Corin felt excluded from this workplace social event because of the co-worker's assumption about a sexual identity or orientation and negative reaction to learning more about it.

Participants were more offended in other instances involving exclusive language. Priya said that many people in the workplace used language derogatory to LGBTQ+ people: "Yep or like gay as a negative, like 'oh that's so gay.'" Tina's perspective was that these comments were hurtful and exclusionary. Tina said: "So a lot of the time that came from this idea that being feminine or being gay is seen as a weakness." Tina later added that "there's no way somebody who's out would have been able to feel safe in that environment." Maya shared a similar experience with us. When asked how this added to the overall quality of the work term experience, Maya said:

But like just because that one person really made a lot of uncomfortable comments from time to time, it felt more like a two [out of ten] than it did anything because it's easy to let one person like overshadow everything else because the poor comments are like what are the forefront of my mind.

For some participants, dynamics with co-workers were more positive. Some participants mentioned working with other LGBTQ+ individuals, from whom there was welcomed support. Maya said "a couple of [my co-workers] also fell on the [LGBTQ+] spectrum and so it was less of an issue," and also mentioned that "both of the workplaces I worked at had LGBTQ people that were technically sort of also my supervisors." The presence of other LGBTQ+ individuals made Maya feel safe and welcomed. Kat had a similar experience. Kat shared "that workplace was pretty open, there was several LGBTQ+ people working there." For both Maya and Kat, the presence of others who identified as they did, as LGBTQ+ provided a sense of safety.

Even those who were not LGBTQ+ contributed to a more positive experience. Participants referred to supportive non-LGBTQ+ individuals as “allies.” When asked about co-workers, Kat said that “one way they can show [support is to say] like ‘hey we’re accepting of this and willing to participate and be allies of the community.’” Evan proposed this involved standing up for LGBTQ+ people in the presence of exclusionary language or behavior: “if you saw an instance of behavior that was transphobic, homophobic obviously point it out if you’re comfortable doing so.” Kat similarly shared:

For me co-workers are the ones I always tell about these things so I think their role in a way is to be inclusive and to like especially like other for co-op students if other students are being cool like maybe it’s their role as allies as they you know call them out for that. Especially for LGBTQ+ people aren’t comfortable doing that.

Co-workers could help to create an inclusive environment by acting as allies, showing solidarity with and support for LGBTQ+ co-op students.

The Role of Co-op Administrators

We sought participants’ perspectives regarding how their co-op programs could support inclusion in the co-op workplace. The theme of the responses was that co-op departments can play a larger role in training co-op stakeholders about inclusion. Corin told us “I would like to see some sort of training put in place for employers of co-op students”. When asked about how this could be achieved, Corin suggested that the department could offer “[...] free lectures or something. Come to our inclusive lecture to the employees of that the employers of the company, right?” Tina agreed with Corin, but also added that this sort of training could be embedded into broader training programs that organizations already use:

You’re doing like I know they do the safety, the HR training, all that stuff, bring it up as well. Bring up that like identities like it it’s important to respect identities and like briefly talk about like not just like I know some workplaces might just be like oh we’re LGBTQ+ inclusive but like probably talk a little more in depth about what that means.

J echoed these suggestions and provided even deeper insight. For J, what was important was buy-in to inclusion training from supervisors and that those supervisors spread a message of inclusion. J’s supervisor did attend an inclusivity training session, but mentioned that:

It’s not really sort of shared throughout the like the other co-workers [...] so like having a group of people or one person go to inclusive training or say sort of sharing ideas with the other co-workers and sort of implementing those ideas.

For J, it was important that inclusivity training start with supervisors but also that it be made available to all members of the host organization. Participants collectively told us that training and educating members of the host organization – supervisors and co-workers – was an important strategy for fostering inclusive co-op work terms.

DISCUSSION

This study is one of the first to explore dynamics surrounding LGBTQ+ employment issues in the context of co-op programs. While previous research had explored aspects of LGBTQ+ employment, co-op had been overlooked. As such, this study offers insight to co-op stakeholders and researchers on the topic of inclusion.

Challenges and Opportunities in the Recruitment Process

While the original focus of the study was on the workplace specifically, key challenges surrounding the recruitment process also emerged. LGBTQ+ co-op job seekers felt self-conscious of their LGBTQ+ identities as they applied for jobs. They felt that they might be discriminated against by employers during the recruitment stage and took active steps to avoid detection. Students also shared that recruitment efforts supportive of LGBTQ+ individuals come across as inauthentic and ineffective.

These challenges highlight several opportunities for co-op administrators to create value both for students and employers. First, administrators could advocate on behalf of students to employers by promoting the benefits of diverse workplaces. They could then work closely with students to identify workplaces that are most open and accepting of diverse individuals. Administrators could provide further support by helping students to feel more comfortable with their LGBTQ+ identities in a work context. Some research (e.g., Snapp, Watson, Russell, Diaz, & Ryan, 2015) suggests that social supports may be key in this process. Thus, co-op departments might try to connect LGBTQ+ students with others during the work term. For instance, partnerships with LGBTQ+ advocacy agencies could provide support when students are on work term. Future research may identify ways to help LGBTQ+ co-op students navigate the recruitment process. With a more theoretical focus, future research could also explore implications of inclusion in terms of LGBTQ+ co-op students' career decisions.

Administrators could also work closely with employers to improve LGBTQ+ students' experiences with recruitment. It seems that there are several organizations that actively recruit members of minority groups. They are motivated to diversify their workforce because doing so contributes to organizational success (Bowring, 2017). However, participants in this study did not respond to recruitment efforts in ways desirable to employers. The challenge is to broker more meaningful relationships that benefit both LGBTQ+ students and employers looking to hire such students. One way this could be achieved is to inform the ways in which employers communicate inclusive work opportunities. Co-op educators and students could be given more opportunity to educate recruiters on what makes inclusive workplaces.

A Perspective on Inclusion

Of central concern to the study was what inclusion means to LGBTQ+ co-op students and what could be done to support inclusion throughout the work term. Definitions of inclusion were largely consistent with those offered in the literature (e.g., Sarkar, 2015; Shore et al., 2017). Inclusion meant a chance to make a meaningful contribution without having to conceal or feel ashamed of one's LGBTQ+ identity. There were several features of the workplace that were connected to co-op students' perceptions of inclusion. Some of those were basic physical entities such as a gender-neutral washroom or other symbols associated with the LGBTQ+ community (e.g., a rainbow flag). These features were welcomed by most but considered to be largely inconsequential in creating an inclusive workplace.

More importantly, the study suggests that inclusion operates on a social level, between people, in their interactions. Participants felt included when their social interactions with co-workers and especially supervisors were supportive. Supportive interactions were those that included inclusive language (e.g., the use of terms, such as 'partner', and the correct names and pronouns). Supportive interactions in the face of misunderstandings included educational reactions, informing others about the preferred approach, rather than scolding. In short, it was in how people treated each other that provided information about inclusion at work. Administrators can make employers more aware of this insight so that organizational members are more mindful of their interactions with all co-op students.

The participants' insights are useful, despite the use of a small sample from one institution. However, future research should use a larger sample to further explore the diverse voices of LGBTQ+ individuals. Another important avenue for future research is to explore the issue of inclusion from other geographic and cultural lens. The context of this study, including the majority of its supporting literature, was North American. It is important to consider how the dynamics expressed by participants in this study may not represent those in different contexts. It could be that the experiences of LGBTQ+ students elsewhere are not represented in this study. Future research is clearly warranted.

The Central Role of the Supervisor

The study points to the role of supervisors in creating inclusion at work and the ways in which co-op administrators can support supervisors in creating inclusion. Previous research clearly suggests that workplace supervisors have important parts to play in creating inclusive work environments (e.g., Huffman, Watrous-Rodriguez, & King, 2008). As it concerns co-op administrators, there may be opportunity to work more closely with supervisors in pursuit of more inclusive work term experiences. In effect, co-op departments could 'train the trainers' to create more inclusive spaces. While participants in this study suggested workshops might be useful, we believe that digitally embedded solutions are more appropriate. For instance, co-op departments could create brief modules accessible via computers or mobile devices. The goal of the modules could be to articulate the responsibility of the supervisor in making others aware of various LGBTQ+ issues (e.g., sexual and gender identity, preferred pronouns, and inclusive language). Such modules could be co-designed by groups of students, co-op administrators, employers, and other LGBTQ+ advocates. Because supervisors are central to creating inclusive experiences, future research might explore supervisors' perspectives on inclusion and their beliefs about how to enhance inclusion at work. In general, more research is needed to better understand how institutions and employers can co-create more inclusive co-op experiences that benefit students and employers alike.

CONCLUSION

LGBTQ+ co-op students seek out work terms that they believe will be inclusive of their identities, in which they can make meaningful contributions to the employer. Participants' experiences revealed several challenges surrounding the recruitment process and, in particular, interpersonal dynamics. Stakeholders including students, host organization members (supervisors and co-workers), and co-op administrators all play interdependent roles in overcoming these challenges. In general, the study highlights three processes that may support inclusion. First, creating inclusive workplaces requires normalization of LGBTQ+ identities. Education and open discussion amongst key stakeholders may shift attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in a way which enhances inclusion. Second, management of organizational practices ranging from images and language used in the workplace may send the right signals to LGBTQ+ employees. Students, administrators, and employers can work together to inform these practices. Finally, developing close partnerships between institutions and employers (recruiters and supervisors) is imperative. Working closely together might allow for better dialogue in ways that will help employers align their practices with LGBTQ+ students' vision for more inclusive experiences. Ultimately, creating more inclusive co-op experiences will require joint effort from students, their institutions, and employers.

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