

# A writing assignment to address gaps in the nursing curriculum regarding health issues of LGBT+ populations

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## Abstract

**Background:** Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) populations account for 4% of the US population, yet health disparities persist, which are considered a priority in health care systems. In nursing education programs, the allotment in time to cover LGBT+ health content is not mandated thus ranges from zero to several hours total in nursing curricula. Therefore, nursing students' education regarding LGBT+ health issues remains minimal and inconsistent throughout the nation's nursing programs.

**Aim:** To provide associate degree nursing students with exposure to the health disparities in LGBT+ populations through a reflective writing assignment.

**Methods:** The essays were culled from both sections of an established core course in the nursing curriculum, which was taught by both faculty. Using a retrospective content analysis approach, the essays from 61 associate degree nursing students were read and reread by both authors. Similar statements were grouped together and themes emerged for both authors.

**Results:** The content analysis from the students' essays, which exposed the students to LGBT+ health issues, yielded intriguing and encouraging data. Four themes regarding LGBT+ health emerged from the students' essays: (1) *communication*, (2) *advocacy*, (3) *increased knowledge and awareness*, and (4) *empathy development*.

**Conclusions:** Such results suggested that a reflective writing assignment was beneficial for nursing students and exposed and familiarized them with the disparities of LGBT+ populations. Through an analysis of the students' essay contents, the two faculty researchers were able to identify improved knowledge and awareness from the writing assignment.

## KEYWORDS

associate degree nursing students, health care disparities, LGBT health, LGBT populations, nursing curriculum, nursing education

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT+) populations account for 4.5% of the US population,<sup>1</sup> yet these individuals remain challenged with persistent health disparities.<sup>2-6</sup> The 13+ million LGBT+ people in the United States have a long-standing history of being stigmatized and discriminated against due to societal bias and prejudice.<sup>7-10</sup> Extensive research has exposed and highlighted the persistent disenfranchisement

perceived by LGBT+ populations in health care systems.<sup>11-13</sup> Not surprisingly, fear of self-disclosure regarding their sexual orientation and gender identity has led to avoidance and disengagement from the health care system. As a result, LGBT+ individuals have a higher incidence of both physical and mental health disparities. Collection of sexual orientation and gender identity information is key to addressing and eliminating health care disparities in LGBT+ populations.<sup>2</sup> The largest group of health care professionals, the 3.1 million registered nurses in the

United States are in strategic and key positions. They are the front lines of health care and are able to address the well-documented disenfranchisement LGBT+ populations have experienced in health care. Logic would dictate that LGBT+ health content would be included in nursing education curricula. However, such content is not mandated in health professions' educational curricula.

In nursing education programs that do include LGBT+ health content, the average time allotted was identified as 2.12 hours throughout the nursing school curricula.<sup>14</sup> However, the majority of nursing programs still remain without dedicated didactic and clinical content on LGBT+ health issues. Given the documented disparities LGBT+ populations face fueled by societal stigma and discrimination it would be sensible to incorporate LGBT+ health content into nursing curricula. Hopefully, future nurses will effect change regarding these persistent health disparities. Higher rates of substance abuse, tobacco use, psychiatric disorders, suicide, and victimization persist in LGBT+ populations, which contribute to significantly higher incidences of health problems than documented in non-LGBT+ individuals<sup>4</sup>. As societal attitudes become more accepting,<sup>1</sup> registered nurses will encounter more LGBT+ individuals in clinical practice who are open and comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation and gender identity. Unfortunately, lack of nursing students' exposure in didactic and clinical nursing education to these issues and needs of LGBT+ individuals does not help to address the existing health disparities in such populations.<sup>15</sup>

Exposure and familiarity remain the most significant educational pedagogies affecting behaviors and attitudes of bias and prejudice.<sup>16</sup> Using an existing assignment in a well-established nursing course in an associate degree nursing program, the two nurse faculty authors saw an opportunity to provide students with LGBT+ health content. The assignment involved reading Lim et al<sup>17</sup> regarding bests for health disparities in the LGBT+ populations. The writing assignment consisted of a reflective essay asking the students to describe and discuss the article's content along with implications for students' future nursing practice. The grading rubric provided guidelines, structure, and format for the assignment (see Table 1). Unlike previous writing assignments for the same course in past semesters, the students' essays revealed significant themes regarding their acquired learning, which were: (1) *communication*, (2) *advocacy*, (3) *increased awareness and knowledge*, and (4) *empathy development*. The purpose of this paper is to describe and discuss the qualitative results from the retrospective content analysis of 61 students' writing assignments from two sections of the same course in an undergraduate associate degree nursing program.

## 1.1 | Aim

The aim of this study was to provide associate degree nursing students with an exposure to the health disparities in LGBT+ populations through a reflective writing assignment. The rubric for the writing assignment is included in the appendix. This assignment was a requirement for the course; the course was a writing intensive course as a requirement of the college. After being exposed to the

Lim et al<sup>17</sup> article on the topic of LGBT+ health disparities was assigned for the assignment, the students were to write a reflective paper on the article. The researchers picked this article for the writing assignment after realizing the associate degree students had little to no exposure to this topic in the nursing curriculum. Reading this comprehensive review of best practices for health of LGBT+ populations was a good beginning.

## 1.2 | Background

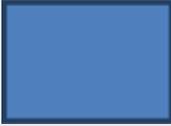
The inclusion of LGBT+ health content in the curricula of education programs in the health professions has been and remains lacking and inconsistent, especially nursing. Despite being the largest group of health care providers, revelatory research conducted by Eliason et al<sup>18</sup> revealed that from 2005 to 2009 the top 10 nursing journals' total inclusion of LGBT+ health content in the 5-year period was an average of 0.16% content. Seven of the ten journals were absent in LGBT content during the analysis period. Bonvicini<sup>19</sup> echoed the same sentiment almost a decade later pointing out little progress has been accomplished in nursing and medical educational curriculums over the past 15 years. Before Eliason et al<sup>18</sup> study, Bonvicini & Perlin<sup>20</sup> called for health professionals to receive competency training in health issues of gays and lesbians.

Since then, the nomenclature has expanded to include the terms bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex. Almost a decade later a survey of medical schools revealed that 33% of medical schools had zero LGBT+ health content.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, 67% of medical schools that identified the inclusion of LGBT+ health content had an average of just 5 hours over a 4-year curriculum. Prior in the 20th century, Tesar and Rovi<sup>22</sup> reported that 50% of medical schools lacked LGBT+ health curricular content, so this gap has been apparent for more than two decades. In the 50% where LGBT+ content was included, the average allotment time for didactic education was 2.5 hours over a 4-year curriculum. Comparatively, the increase from 50% in 1998 to 66% in 2011 of schools having content was an improvement. However, a significant gap remains.

In nursing, Sirota<sup>23</sup> surveyed 1282 faculty and educators from accredited programs and colleges, and 72% reported being unprepared to teach LGBT+ health content. Another survey of nursing just 2 years later revealed that 62% had never taught any LGBT+ health content.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, nursing textbooks lack LGBT+ health content along with the psychosocial issues for those who identify as a sexual minority.<sup>24,25</sup>

Exposure to LGBT+ health issues through didactic and clinical education remains the most significant way to impact students' knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors.<sup>16</sup> When medical students were exposed to LGBT+ health issues through the pedagogical exercise of taking a sexual history, their attitudes toward providing care for LGBT+ patients improved for the positive.<sup>26</sup> In addition, an interprofessional video learning activity focusing on LGBT health content followed with a self-reflection assignment demonstrated that 64% of 273 students improved in their cultural competence scores.<sup>27</sup> Though the sample showed a minimal average increase of 0.13 with a

**TABLE 1** Writing assignment grading rubric

 NEW YORK CITY COLLEGE OF TECHNOLOGY Grading rubric for writing assignment NURS 2110 – Spring 2017 Student name: _____		
Criteria	Total possible points	Points earned
First paragraph demonstrates understanding and synthesis of the article's <b>content and message</b> regarding LGBT+ health disparities within the context of professional nursing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Content = 10</li> <li>• Message = 10</li> </ul>	
Second paragraph demonstrates <b>understanding, thought, and creativity</b> regarding the article's content on LGBT+ health and its importance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding = 15</li> <li>• Thought = 15</li> <li>• Creativity = 15</li> </ul>	
<b>Nursing implications are:</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Clear</li> <li>• Thoughtful</li> <li>• Practical</li> <li>• Feasible</li> </ul>	15	
<b>Spelling, grammar, and APA format</b>	10	
<b>Writing flow, clarity, and style</b>	10	
<b>Total Points</b>		

Grading for this assignment is pass/fail; achieving 80 points or above is a passing grade.

standard deviation of 0.08 on a five-point Likert rating scale and failed to reach statistical significance, the slight increase nonetheless indicated improvement. Similarly, the inclusion of LGBT+ health content into health professions' curricula showed 52% of the participants had statistically significant improvements in knowledge, attitudes, and willingness to provide care for LGBT+ patients after completion of reading the assignment.<sup>28</sup>

## 2 | METHODS

### 2.1 | Study design, setting, and sample

The study population consisted of 61 associate degree third-semester nursing students. The initial intent of the writing assignment was not to do qualitative research using a content analysis method. However, during the reading and grading of the 61 essays, both authors perceived something richer embedded in the essays. After the two authors began reading and grading the assignments it became evident to both that the 61 essays had a message about the learning. Retrospective Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained from the authors' institution.

This retrospective content analysis consisted of 61 writing assignments from students currently enrolled in the two faculty authors' core nursing course. A content analysis approach was chosen because it is described by researchers as a flexible method

for analyzing text data.<sup>29</sup> The goal of the content analysis is "to provide knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study"<sup>30</sup> (p. 314). To examine content from the students' essays the selection of a conventional content analysis approach was determined.<sup>31</sup> This approach allows the researcher to gain information without imposing preconceived categories or theories.<sup>31</sup> As literature was limited with respect to LGBT education, an inductive approach was applied to allow new insights to emerge from the data. After IRB approval was obtained, the two faculty members who taught the course reread the students' deidentified assignments, which were duplicate copies minus faculty commentary and grading. The assignment included a review and critique of the Lim et al<sup>17</sup> best practice to address LGBT+ health disparities. The researchers separately read the writing assignments and looked for recurrent themes within the students' papers. The researchers then reconvened and collaborated on the statements they had collected and organized them into themes. The two researchers agreed on the four themes that emerged from the papers. Table 2 illustrates those themes.

### 2.2 | Data collection procedure

Collecting the 61 essays was a result of a standard assignment for the third semester writing-intensive core nursing course where both faculties were instructors.

**TABLE 2** Four themes from a writing assignment of LGBT+ health issues

Themes: Students' writing assignments	Selected examples: Students' statements
Communication ( <i>nurses to nurses &amp; nurses to patients</i> )	"Understanding how a patient would like to be addressed."
Advocacy ( <i>an important part of a nurse's professional responsibility to patients</i> )	"Nurses need to create an unbiased environment where LGBT feel safe and welcomed to discuss their health issues." "As future nurses, we need to support and advocate for patients who are treated unfairly."
Knowledge and increased awareness ( <i>cognitive learning &amp; affective learning</i> )	"Nurses are in the best position to bridge the health disparities and promote inclusive care." "Learning that someone would deny health services due to their sexual orientation is demoralizing." "This assignment/article was eye-opening for me as I was unaware of the fact that health care was unavailable to the LGBT community." "Thank you for adding this assignment, it is nice to know that this has been added to the nursing program."
Empathy development ( <i>nursing students for the patients' situation</i> )	"Increased self-awareness and advocacy." "Nursing students and nurses need to become aware of their own biases so they are able to address them and better care for the LGBT population."

### 2.3 | Data analysis

Hsieh and Shannon<sup>31</sup> described the seven steps for qualitative content analysis: (1) question formulation, (2) sample selection, (3) defining the categories, (4) coding process and training, (5) implementing the process, (6) determining trustworthiness, and (7) analyzing results from coding. The two researchers analyzed the essays using content analysis to identify emerging themes. The researchers individually read and reread the essays of the students looking for themes. They then met to discuss their findings. The two researchers' analysis revealed the same themes leading to a consensus.

### 2.4 | Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this retrospective research study was obtained from the university IRB where both faculty taught and the study was conducted. Since the study was a retrospective content analysis of 61 deidentified essays, neither faculty knew the student's name who wrote the essay. After the essays' grades were recorded and returned to the students, the faculty printed 61 clean copies as to be unbiased from prior reading, grading, or review. The authors asked the students in both sections at course's end if any had concern with the two faculty using their de-identified essays for a retrospective qualitative research study. None declined to have their essay included; in fact, many were thrilled by being participants in nursing research.

### 2.5 | Rigor and trustworthiness

Rigor in qualitative research differs from quantitative research. In Qualitative research trustworthiness is used to evaluate the rigor of a

study. The four concepts of trustworthiness are credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability.<sup>32</sup> To increase the rigor of the study, both researchers bracketed their own feelings and thoughts about the topic being researched (exposure and familiarity with LGBT+ health content) before reading the writing assignments of the students. Trustworthiness is a practice of working closely with the data and the colleagues working with the study. Each researcher separately read and reread the writing assignments. Grouping statements into themes, they discovered that working closely with the data increases the trustworthiness of the data. The researchers identified four recurrent themes from their readings of the writing assignments. These recurrent themes that were separately identified by each researcher then confirmed through collaborative grouping and name, which determined the credibility and confirmability of the data. The authenticity of the research was confirmed by students commenting to the researchers how much they learned through this assignment. For example, one student approached one of the faculty to say that she had had a question on her NCLEX licensure examination on the topic of LGBT+ health, which prepared her to answer the question.

## 3 | FINDINGS

An inductive qualitative content analysis approach was used to conduct this study. The researchers read and reread the writing assignments submitted by the associate degree nursing students in the third-semester course to reveal themes in the writing assignments. Each researcher separately recorded the illustrative statements from the students' essays then reviewed and discussed, which demonstrated congruence. The researchers grouped statements into themes. The researchers agreed on the four themes during their collaborative meetings.

The four themes that emerged from the data were: (1) *communication*, (2) *advocacy*, (3) *increased awareness and knowledge*, and (4) *empathy development*.

## 4 | COMMUNICATION

Patients are able to communicate their sexual orientation and gender identity to the nurses providing care, which has been proven as the key intervention for addressing LGBT+ health disparities.<sup>2</sup> One student stated that “understanding how a patient wants to be addressed” which was repeated through many of the students’ essays. Another student wrote “communication with LGBT+ patients is the most important part of fixing health disparities” while another echoed such sentiment “I’m going to consciously think how I address all patients before.” Such statements encompass communication, key in the nurse-patient relationship, as one of the themes that emerged from the students’ essays.

## 5 | ADVOCACY

The 2018 American Nurses’ Association Position Statement<sup>33</sup> entitled *Nursing Advocacy for LGBT+ Populations* validates the importance of this issue for the nursing profession and their patients. Statements from the students’ essays presented understanding the need to speak for patients, especially when they cannot or do not, as one wrote “nurses need to create an unbiased environment. Another wrote similarly “as future nurses we need to support and advocate for patients who are treated unfairly.” Both statements suggest an understanding of the need to speak up for their patients to protect them and help them. From the essays, the students’ responses suggested an enrichment of their understanding of the professional nurse’s role to advocate for patients, regardless of the circumstance.

## 6 | LIMITATIONS

There were several limitations of this study. First, the retrospective nature; second, it was a small sample from the population of nursing students within the university; and finally, these findings may not be generalizable to other groups of nursing students. The de-identification removed any demographic data that could have helped enrich understanding of the four themes from this analysis.

## 7 | DISCUSSION

Overall, the students’ essays from the writing assignment after reading Lim et al<sup>17</sup> demonstrated that the students went through a revelatory process with exposure to new information regarding LGBT+ health. Both faculty experienced a touch of surprise; despite the school’s downtown location in a major metropolitan

city, many students revealed no familiarity, exposure, or knowledge of the issues LGBT+ patients face regarding their health. This emphasized the importance of the need for inclusion in the nursing curriculum LGBT+ health content. Furthermore, another surprise for both faculty was students outside of the class sought out each faculty to thank them for including such an “important” assignment. This suggested the students wanted relevant and current information reflective of societal events. The results of this retrospective qualitative content analysis that examined 61 associate degree nursing students’ essays revealed four themes: (1) *communication*, (2) *advocacy*, (3) *increased knowledge and awareness*, and (4) *empathy development*.

These themes were encouraging to the faculty. *Communication* as a theme, though more focused on the concrete, such as pronouns, introductions, and specific query, the students stated the importance of communicating with patients and described it as part of the nurse’s role. Much like the Veteran’s Administration study exploring communication preferences of LGBT+ populations, clear and appropriate *communication* was a major desire of this population.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, the Joint Commission<sup>12</sup> has made appropriate competent *communication* as a major focus for LGBT+ populations in hospital accreditation processes. The students’ essays echoed understanding that importance. The second theme was *advocacy*, another core component of professional nursing. *Advocacy* is the promotion of doing what is in the patient’s best interests, a core component of nursing practice and the essays were reflective through their increased knowledge and awareness that LGBT+ populations may well need advocacy to get their health needs met. Though no studies have examined advocacy within the context of nursing students and the LGBT+ population, students’ essays clearly denoted their desire to be advocates for LGBT+ populations in the context of professional nursing. In the essays, many of the students commented on their surprise at what they learned about their own attitudes doing this assignment. Anecdotally, but clearly in their essays, students stated feeling better prepared to enter the clinical setting and better prepared to care for a patient from the LGBT+ population. Though only several, previous studies with the aim of increasing medical and nursing students show that such assignments do increase knowledge, improve awareness, and shift in attitudes toward the positive regarding LGBT health.<sup>26–28,35,36</sup> Despite such studies demonstrating that short-term improvement occurs, long-term retention and clinical application remain unknown. The fourth theme was *empathy development*, which is a key nursing skill that allows the nurse to understand the patient’s situation, communicate that understanding to the patient, then act on that to help the patient. Abdolrahimi et al<sup>37</sup> demonstrated that *empathy* is an important aspect of therapeutic communication between nurses and patients and can be taught. The authors suggest that skills training include *empathy development*. The students’ essays from this study reflected an evolving sense of empathy toward the LGBT+ population. Overall, the four themes that emerged from this analysis were suggestive that the students learned valuable information and experienced more positive attitudes toward the LGBT+ population.

The implications for nursing education from this retrospective qualitative content analysis are several. First, such an assignment

could be incorporated into this course as a standard assignment each semester. This would ensure that students going through the program all get exposed to the health issues specific to LGBT+ populations. Another possible implication from this research is the four themes of *communication, advocacy, increased knowledge and awareness, and empathy development* may be used as outcome measures for clinical simulations, skills laboratory assignments, or specific discussion topics for clinical seminars. In addition, a prospective examination of students' essays may reveal similar or perhaps different findings and would be of value. A limitation was the retrospective nature of this study, so prior planning for study conduct would address this aspect going forward. Overall, both faculty found the students' essays revelatory and reflective of learning deeming the assignment a worthwhile endeavor for associate degree or baccalaureate degree nursing students.

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