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Heterosexism Faced by Adolescents in the Rural United States: A Case for Implementing Student-Made LGBT Programs

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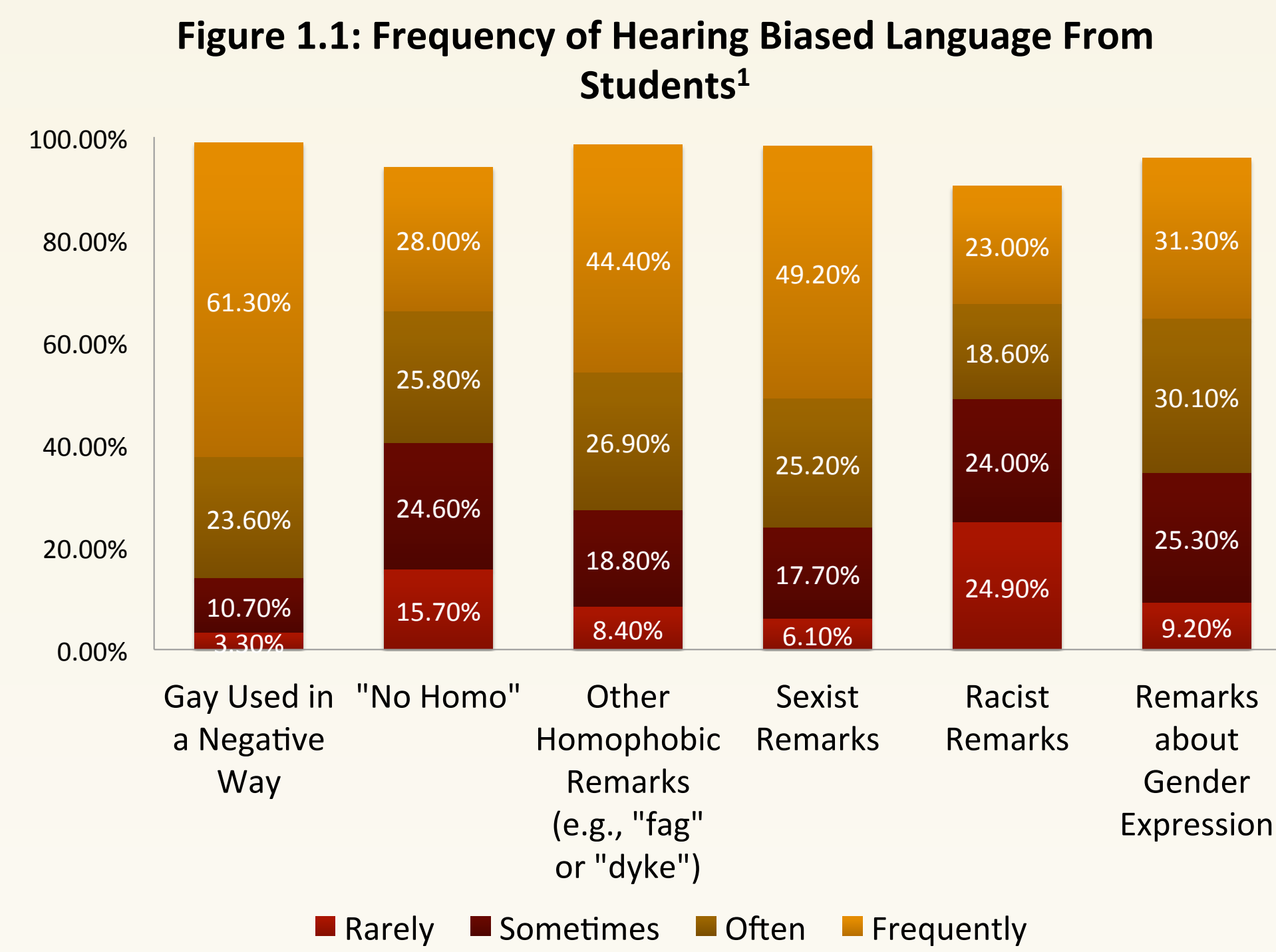
Heterosexism Faced by Adolescents in the Rural United States: A Case for Implementing Student-Made LGBT Programs

Beau Coggsdale, Mentor: Professor Mary C. Boyes

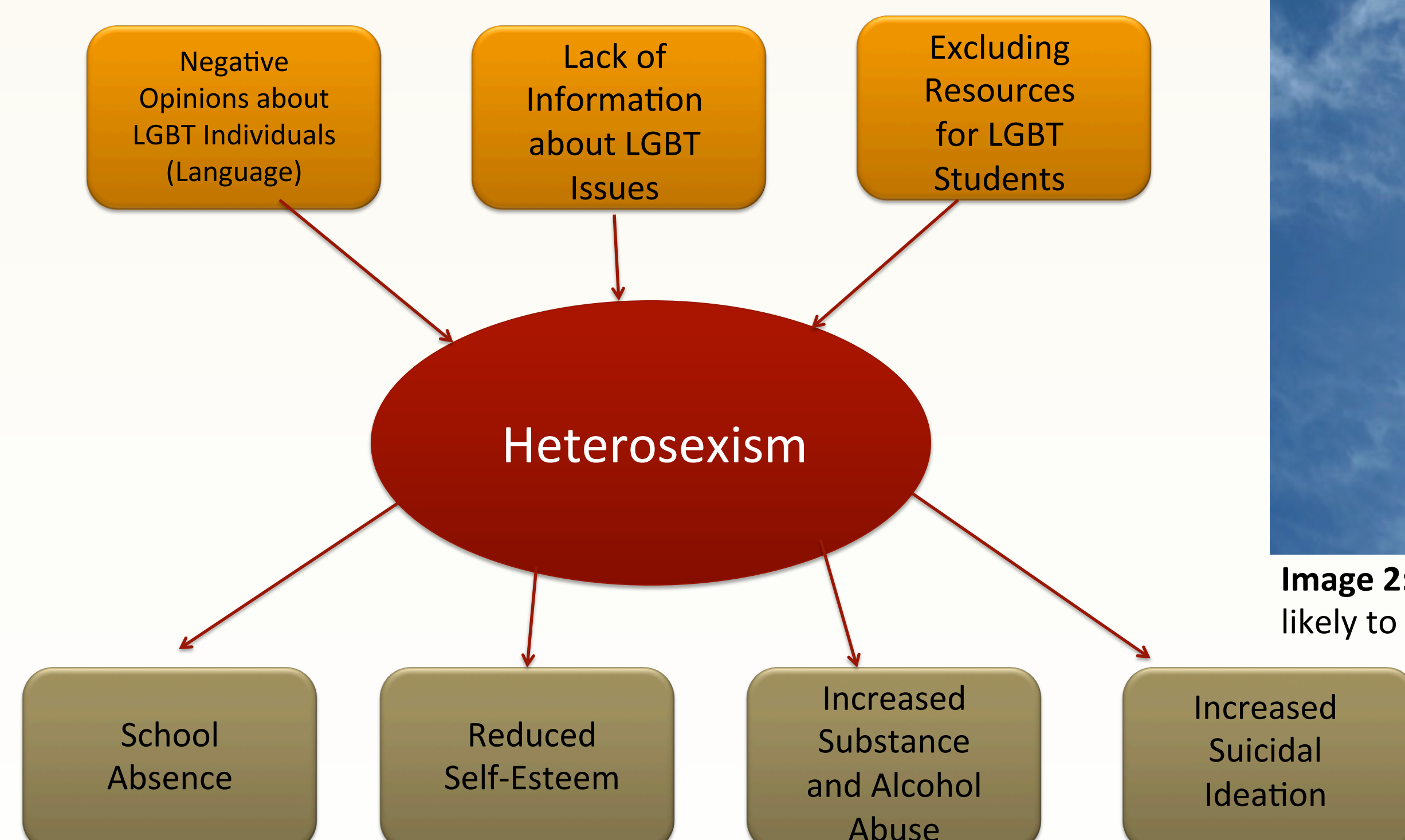
Introduction

As more research has been collected on LGBT students within school systems, it has been realized that there is a level of heterosexism within the school system that negatively impacts LGBT students. Many LGBT that are faced with a large amount of heterosexism within school systems end up feeling isolated. The isolation because of heterosexism results in decreased self-esteem, poor academic performance, and suicidal ideation. As internalized homophobia increases, there is hefty impact on the mental health of the LGBT within the schools. In order to reduce internalized homophobia, student-built organizations, such as GSAs, can be incorporated into schools in order to reduce the feeling of isolation.

The Formation of Heterosexism



Components that Contribute to Heterosexism and the Consequences of Heterosexism³



"I faced a lot of harassment being one of the only "out" students at East High School before the club. And I was terrified to go to school. I avoided going to school. I failed most of my classes my freshman through junior year. My senior year I attended regularly and held down the best GPA I've had since I've been in school."

-Anonymous

What are the Consequences of Heterosexism

Diaz, Russel, Ryan, and Toomey (2011) reported that research indicates that sexual minority youth are at a greater risk than heterosexual youth for suicidal ideation and attempts at suicide, substance abuse, and low self-esteem. The period of greatest risk for teens is during the developmental period of adolescence. (p. 175).

According to the 2011 GLSEN study, the psychological well being of high school adolescents was influenced by the amount of victimization that LGBT students experienced about their sexual orientation or gender expression.¹

Espelage, Hong, and Kral (2011) utilized a 2005 survey, which reported that 45% of LGB youth tried to commit suicide, while 8% of heterosexual students reported trying to kill themselves. It was clearly stated that sexual orientation and gender identity are not risk factors for committing suicide; however the victimization they experience is a risk factor (p. 885).

*"Sometimes participants told stories with amusement; at other times, there were tears because they were even told to change ways of dressing, gesturing, and speaking that they felt closely aligned with their personal expressions"*²

Fjelstrom (2013) stated that many of the participants reported that behavior, mannerisms and anything related to homosexuality was considered inferior to heterosexual behaviors. (p. 809).



Image 2: Feelings of isolation and lack of support leads to suicidal ideation. With more support, adolescents are less likely to develop negative habits such as substance abuse, ideation of suicide, and lack of attendance in school.

Ways GSAs Reduce Heterosexism

Feelings of Empowerment in LGBT Student

Laub et al. (2009) asserted that GSAs, Gay Straight Alliances, allow high school aged adolescents to feel empowered. The sense of empowerment leads to lower rates of victimization and suicide.

Raise Awareness of LGBT Youth in the School

GSAs, especially student made ones, provide a unique opportunity to help educate not only the student body, but the teachers and staff of the schools as well. The more educated the staff is the more likely they are to provide some intervention when sexual minority youth are being harassed (Diaz et al. 2011).

Feelings of Academic Isolation Decreased

Mayo (2013) asserted that LGBT themed discussions provide students with a chance to become actively engaged within the classroom about current civil right issues. Student made GSAs provide students with the freedom to learn about LGBT themed topics that were not mentioned in the classroom. GSAs offer a chance for students to become more aware of gender and sexual identity (p. 353-354).

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