

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

Retention at the Intersections: A Case Study of HIV Stigma, LGBTQ+ Identity, and the Institutional Structuring of Student Persistence

By Rodney Parks

Student retention is shaped not only by academic preparation but also by the extent to which students experience safety, recognition, and belonging within institutional environments (Strayhorn 2018; Vaccaro and Newman 2020). This qualitative single case study examined the persistence experience of Lucas, a 22-year-old bisexual senior living with HIV at a private university. Drawing on intersectionality and structural stigma frameworks (Coston 2019), the study explored how institutional contexts shaped belonging and engagement for this student.

Findings indicated that persistence is influenced not only by academic integration but by the degree to which institutional environments render identities visible and recognized. Lucas's experience illustrates how identity vigilance, institutional silence, and uneven belonging constrained social integration and shaped persistence deliberations. This study advances persistence scholarship by reconceptualizing belonging as institutionally conditioned and differentially accessible across intersecting identities. It further identifies institutional silence as a mechanism of structural stigma and highlights the need for identity-responsive infrastructures in higher education.

Retention remains a central concern for higher education institutions. Traditional persistence models emphasized academic and social integration as primary mechanisms shaping retention (Tinto 1993). More recent scholarship expanded this perspective by recognizing the role institutions play in structuring conditions that support student success and completion (Tinto 2012). Contemporary research further demonstrates that retention is shaped by campus climate, identity safety, and institutional recognition (Strayhorn 2018; Vaccaro and Newman 2020).

Students navigating stigmatized identities often encounter compounding psychosocial burdens that influence engagement and belonging (Earnshaw, *et al.* 2020; Woodford, *et al.* 2018). However, many persistence frameworks treat identity categories independently and rarely account for how intersecting stigmas operate within institutional contexts (Linley, *et al.* 2021). As a result, existing models do not sufficiently explain how belonging is unevenly experienced across student populations.

This single case study addressed this gap by examining how institutional environments shape persistence for students navigating intersecting stigmatized identities. Drawing on intersectionality and structural stigma frameworks (Coston 2019), this qualitative case study explored the experience of Lucas, a bisexual student living with HIV at a private university. Through an in-depth interview, the analysis examined how institutional visibility, discourse, and support structures shape deliberations about belonging and persistence.

Findings suggest that persistence is influenced not only by integration but by the extent to which institutional environments render identities visible, recognized, and supported. Lucas's experience illustrates how identity vigilance, institutional silence, and uneven belonging constrain engagement and shape persistence decisions.

This study makes three key contributions. First, it reconceptualizes belonging as institutionally conditioned rather than solely individually achieved. Second, it identifies institutional silence as a mechanism of structural stigma operating in the absence of overt discrimination. Third, it demonstrates that belonging, and therefore persistence, is differentially accessible

across intersecting identities, challenging assumptions of uniform integration within higher education.

Literature Review

Retention scholarship has increasingly identified belonging as a central factor shaping student persistence (Strayhorn 2018; Vaccaro and Newman 2020). Students who perceive themselves as valued members of their campus communities are more likely to remain enrolled, engaged, and academically successful. Early persistence models emphasized academic and social integration as primary mechanisms through which students become connected to institutional life (Tinto 1993). These models conceptualized persistence as the result of students' successful incorporation into the institution's academic and social systems.

More recent research has challenged the assumption that integration is uniformly accessible across student populations. Researchers have demonstrated that belonging is unevenly distributed and shaped by institutional climate, representational inequities, and the responsiveness of campus environments to diverse identities (Garvey, Taylor, and Rankin 2020; Linley, *et al.* 2021). Rather than a neutral or universally attainable outcome, belonging is increasingly understood as a relational and context-dependent condition influenced by how institutions recognize and support different student populations. This shift reflects a broader movement in higher education research toward examining the role of institutions in structuring student success.

HIV-related stigma represents a significant psychosocial burden that can influence how individuals navigate social and institutional environments. Contemporary research identifies multiple mechanisms of HIV stigma, including anticipated stigma, enacted stigma, and internalized stigma, all of which shape disclosure decisions and patterns of social participation (Earnshaw, *et al.* 2020). Anticipated stigma has been shown to influence whether individuals choose to disclose their status and how they engage with others in institutional settings. In campus environments where HIV discourse is limited or absent, uncertainty surrounding disclosure may intensify identity vigilance, requiring individuals

to continuously assess potential risks associated with participation (Brennan, Ross, and Bilimoria 2021).

At the same time, LGBTQ+ students navigate institutional climates shaped by heteronormativity and varying levels of inclusion. Research indicates that bisexual students often experience erasure within both heterosexual and gay spaces, contributing to internalized stigma and psychological strain (Puckett, *et al.* 2019). LGBTQ+ students also report exposure to microaggressions and subtle forms of exclusion that influence their sense of belonging and mental health (Woodford, *et al.* 2018). Importantly, belonging for LGBTQ+ students is shaped not only by peer interactions but also by institutional signals such as diversity programming, administrative recognition, and the visibility of inclusive resources (Garvey, Taylor, and Rankin 2020; Linley, *et al.* 2021).

Current research has emphasized the importance of examining compounding marginalization within higher education. Students with intersecting stigmatized identities may experience layered forms of invisibility that are not captured by single-axis frameworks (Linley, *et al.* 2021). Intersectionality highlights how multiple systems of inequality interact to produce distinct experiences that cannot be reduced to additive identity categories. Within higher education contexts, this perspective underscores how institutional structures may recognize certain identities while obscuring others, shaping differential access to belonging.

Structural stigma scholarship further extends this analysis by examining how organizations embed normative assumptions into policies, practices, and communication systems (Coston 2019). Rather than locating stigma solely in interpersonal interactions, this perspective highlights how institutional arrangements shape whose identities are anticipated and supported. In higher education, structural stigma may operate through resource allocation, program design, and communication practices that signal inclusion for some identities while rendering others invisible.

Health service infrastructures within postsecondary settings also play a role in shaping how students living with HIV experience support and disclosure (Brennan, Ross, and Bilimoria 2021). Access to knowledgeable pro-

viders, confidential services, and inclusive communication can influence whether students feel safe seeking care and engaging with institutional resources. When such infrastructures are absent or underdeveloped, students may experience heightened uncertainty and reduced engagement.

Taken together, this body of scholarship suggests that belonging is not simply an individual psychological state, but a condition shaped by institutional recognition structures. While traditional persistence models emphasized student integration into existing environments (Tinto 1993), emerging research highlights how institutional climates and practices determine whose belonging is affirmed within those environments. However, limited research has examined how intersecting stigmas, such as HIV status and LGBTQ+ identity, operate simultaneously within institutional contexts to shape persistence.

This single case study addressed this gap by examining how institutional visibility, silence, and recognition structures influence belonging and persistence for a student navigating intersecting stigmatized identities. By integrating intersectionality and structural stigma frameworks, the study extended existing scholarship by demonstrating how belonging is differentially accessible and institutionally conditioned, rather than uniformly available across student populations.

Theoretical Framework

This single case study drew on intersectionality and structural stigma to reconceptualize student persistence as an institutionally conditioned process rather than solely an individual trajectory (Coston 2019). Intersectionality theorizes how systems of power co-constitute social positioning, producing experiences that cannot be understood through single-axis identity frameworks. Within higher education, this perspective highlights how institutional structures, classification systems, and diversity infrastructures render certain identities visible while obscuring others (Linley, *et al.* 2021). For students navigating multiple marginalized identities, belonging is not uniformly accessible but is shaped by how these identities are recognized or omitted within institutional environments.

Structural stigma extends this analysis by locating stigma within organizational arrangements rather than interpersonal hostility (Coston 2019). Universities encode normative assumptions into policies, health services, programming, and communication practices, shaping which identities are anticipated within campus life (Brennan, Ross, and Bilimoria 2021). Importantly, stigma may operate through patterned omission as much as through explicit exclusion. Institutional silence, where certain identities are absent from discourse, resources, or representation, can function as a mechanism of non-recognition, producing ambiguity about belonging.

Together, these frameworks shift the analytic focus from individual adaptation to institutional conditions. Rather than asking how students integrate into existing environments, this single study examined how institutional contexts structure the possibility of belonging itself. Persistence, therefore, is understood not simply as a function of student behavior but as an outcome shaped by how institutions distribute recognition, visibility, and support across intersecting identities.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative single-case design to examine how institutional environments shape persistence for a student navigating intersecting stigmatized identities. The case centered on Lucas, a 22-year-old senior who identifies as bisexual and was living with HIV at a private university. A single-case approach allows for in-depth exploration of mechanisms that may be obscured in broader quantitative analyses, prioritizing analytic insight over statistical generalization.

Data were collected through a 75-minute semi-structured interview. The interview protocol included open-ended questions focused on campus belonging, identity disclosure, institutional visibility, mentorship experiences, and considerations of departure. This approach enabled the participant to articulate experiences in his own terms while allowing for probing of emerging themes. The interview was audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymized to protect confidentiality.

Analysis followed a thematic approach involving iterative cycles of open coding, axial coding, and the-

oretical interpretation. Initial coding identified patterns related to disclosure, belonging, and institutional context. These codes were then grouped into broader analytic categories, with particular attention to how experiences aligned with intersectionality and structural stigma frameworks. Memo writing was used throughout the analytic process to refine interpretations and ensure coherence across themes.

To strengthen analytic rigor, the analysis prioritized depth of interpretation, internal consistency, and alignment between data and theoretical framing. The goal of the study was analytic transferability rather than representativeness, offering insight into mechanisms that may be applicable across similar institutional contexts.

Findings

Identity Vigilance and Disclosure Calculation

Lucas described his campus experience as shaped by ongoing calculation regarding identity disclosure: “Every room I entered, my status came to mind. Sadly, it also came with deciding if I could fully be myself, or did I need to hold something back?” Before entering certain spaces, he evaluated whether he would feel comfortable if his HIV status became part of the conversation. This anticipatory decision-making reflects a form of identity vigilance in which participation in routine campus activities requires continuous risk assessment. Rather than being situational, this vigilance functioned as a persistent condition shaping how he navigated both social and institutional environments.

Lucas’s use of digital platforms further illustrated this dynamic. Online spaces offered greater control over the timing and context of disclosure, allowing him to manage interactions more intentionally. However, disclosure remained emotionally taxing. He described repeated interactions in which conversations shifted following disclosure, reinforcing the need for ongoing self-monitoring. These experiences suggest that identity vigilance is sustained not only by anticipated stigma but by accumulated interactions that shape expectations of future encounters.

Institutional Silence and Invisibility

Lucas's experience highlights how institutional invisibility and structural silence shaped perceptions of belonging. When asked about institutional visibility of HIV, he noted that he could not recall it being mentioned in campus communications. This absence functioned not as neutrality but as a signal of non-recognition, suggesting that his identity was not anticipated within institutional life.

In the absence of explicit hostility, this silence produced a more diffuse sense of exclusion. As Lucas explained, "It's not that anyone's against me. It just doesn't feel like this place was thinking about someone like me." This interpretation reflects how structural stigma can operate through omission, shaping how individuals interpret their place within institutional environments.

These dynamics were reinforced through campus programming. In a diversity panel addressing race, gender, and mental health, HIV was not included. Although the event was framed as inclusive, Lucas described it as irrelevant to his experience. This absence further contributed to a sense of invisibility, suggesting that institutional inclusion efforts may still exclude certain identities through selective recognition.

Uneven Belonging and Conditional Persistence

Belonging appeared uneven across institutional contexts. Lucas described feeling academically integrated through classroom engagement and faculty recognition, while social belonging remained uncertain. His decision to occasionally skip events due to disclosure concerns indicated that participation in campus life was conditional rather than freely accessible.

This unevenness extended to his persistence deliberations. Lucas reported considering transferring during his first two years, clarifying that this consideration was not driven by academic difficulty but by feelings of isolation and uncertainty about institutional recognition. These findings suggest that persistence is shaped not only by academic integration but by whether students perceive their identities as acknowledged and supported within the institution.

At the same time, a single faculty relationship emerged as affirming. Lucas described this space as one in which he did not feel the need to filter himself, and he indicated that this mentorship likely contributed to his decision to remain enrolled. This highlights how belonging may be localized within specific relational contexts rather than distributed across the institution.

Discussion

This study reframed student persistence as a question of institutional legibility, demonstrating how belonging is structured through patterns of recognition and omission across campus environments. Lucas's experience suggests that persistence is not solely a function of academic or social integration, but of how institutional contexts signal which identities are anticipated, visible, and supported. In this way, the findings extend persistence scholarship by shifting analytic attention from student adaptation to institutional conditions.

Identity vigilance emerged as a sustained structural condition rather than a situational response. Lucas's continuous evaluation of disclosure risk illustrated how participation in campus life required ongoing cognitive and emotional labor. While prior research has emphasized anticipated stigma as an interpersonal phenomenon (Earnshaw, *et al.* 2020), this study demonstrates how institutional environments shape the conditions under which vigilance becomes necessary. The absence of explicit signals of inclusion intensified uncertainty, requiring Lucas to anticipate potential risks even in the absence of direct discrimination. This finding suggests that identity vigilance is not simply reactive but structurally produced through institutional ambiguity.

Institutional silence functioned as a mechanism of structural stigma. Rather than overt exclusion, Lucas's experience was shaped by patterned omission, where HIV was largely absent from campus discourse, programming, and communication. This absence operated as a form of non-recognition, reinforcing uncertainty about whether his identity was anticipated within institutional life. These findings extend structural stigma theory by illustrating how omission can shape perception and behavior as powerfully as explicit marginalization.

Institutional silence thus emerges as an underexamined but consequential mechanism through which inequities are reproduced in higher education contexts.

Belonging was uneven and fragmented across institutional spaces. Lucas experienced a sense of academic belonging through classroom engagement and faculty relationships, while simultaneously navigating uncertainty in broader social environments. This fragmentation challenges traditional persistence models (Tinto 1993), which assume that academic and social integration operate as complementary and mutually reinforcing processes. Instead, this case suggests that belonging may be domain-specific, with students experiencing both inclusion and exclusion simultaneously. Persistence, therefore, emerges as conditional rather than stable, shaped by the availability of affirming contexts rather than a generalized sense of institutional integration.

The role of mentorship further complicates this dynamic. Lucas's relationship with a faculty member provided a localized space of recognition that contributed to his decision to remain enrolled. However, this reliance on individual relationships highlights the uneven distribution of support across institutional contexts. While mentorship can function as a critical protective factor, it does not address the broader structural conditions that produce exclusion. This finding underscores the limitations of individualized support mechanisms in addressing systemic inequities.

Taken together, these findings reconceptualize persistence as institutionally conditioned and differentially accessible across intersecting identities. Rather than viewing persistence as an outcome of successful student integration, this study highlighted how institutional environments actively structure the possibility of belonging. This reframing calls for a shift in how retention is understood and addressed within higher education, emphasizing institutional responsibility for creating conditions in which all students can fully engage.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest that improving student persistence requires a fundamental shift in how institutions approach belonging and inclusion. Rather

than focusing primarily on student adaptation, institutions must examine how their own structures, practices, and communication strategies shape the distribution of recognition and support.

First, institutions should increase the visibility of identities that are often omitted from campus discourse, including HIV. Integrating HIV awareness into health services, diversity programming, and institutional communication can reduce uncertainty surrounding disclosure and signal that students living with HIV are recognized members of the campus community. Visibility is not merely symbolic but functions as a critical mechanism through which belonging is communicated.

Second, campus climate assessments should be expanded to capture intersecting identities. Many existing assessment tools rely on single-axis demographic categories, limiting their ability to identify layered forms of marginalization. Incorporating intersectional measures can provide a more nuanced understanding of how belonging is experienced across diverse student populations and help institutions identify gaps in recognition and support.

Third, institutions should develop structured, identity-responsive mentorship programs. While Lucas's experience highlights the importance of affirming relationships, reliance on informal mentorship produces uneven access to support. Formalizing mentorship initiatives and providing training on identity-responsive practices can help ensure that more students have access to affirming environments that support persistence.

Fourth, institutions should critically evaluate how communication practices signal inclusion. The absence of certain identities from institutional messaging, programming, and resource allocation can reinforce perceptions of exclusion. Institutions should examine whose identities are consistently represented and whose are omitted, and work to ensure that communication strategies reflect the diversity of student experiences.

Finally, these findings underscore the need to treat persistence as an institutional responsibility. Efforts to improve retention must move beyond individual-level interventions and instead focus on transforming the structural conditions that shape belonging. By address-

ing how recognition, visibility, and support are distributed, institutions can create environments in which persistence is more equitably accessible.

Limitations

This study should be considered in light of several important limitations. First, the single-case design limits the generalizability of the findings. While the purpose of this research is to provide analytic insight rather than statistical representation, the experiences of one student cannot capture the full range of perspectives among students navigating HIV stigma and LGBTQ+ identities across diverse institutional contexts. The depth of a single case allows for rich interpretation, but it also means that variation in experiences across institutions, regions, and student populations remains unexplored.

Second, the study relies on self-reported data from a single semi-structured interview. Although Lucas's account provides detailed insight into his lived experience, it reflects subjective interpretations shaped by memory, context, and personal meaning-making. These narratives are essential for understanding belonging, but they may not fully capture how institutional processes operate beyond individual perception. Incorporating additional data sources, such as longitudinal interviews, ethnographic observations, or analysis of institutional documents, would strengthen the evidentiary base and provide a more comprehensive understanding of how structural stigma manifests in practice.

Third, the study is situated within a single institutional context, which may influence the dynamics observed. Institutional characteristics such as size, mission, geographic location, available resources, and campus climate may shape the structure of recognition, visibility, and support. As a result, the findings should be interpreted with attention to contextual specificity rather than assumed universality. Comparative studies across different types of institutions would help clarify how structural stigma operates under varying organizational conditions.

Fourth, while this study is grounded in intersectionality, it does not fully examine the full range of intersecting identities that may shape student experiences. Factors

such as race, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and disability were not the primary focus of this case but may significantly influence how belonging and persistence are experienced. The absence of these dimensions limits the ability to fully understand how multiple systems of inequality interact in shaping student outcomes.

Finally, the study focused primarily on student perceptions of institutional environments rather than direct analysis of institutional policies, practices, or decision-making processes. While perceptions are central to understanding belonging and persistence, they do not fully capture how structural conditions are produced and maintained. Despite these limitations, the study offers meaningful analytical insights into how institutional recognition structures shape persistence among students navigating intersecting stigmas, highlighting mechanisms that warrant further investigation.

Future Research

This study highlights several important directions for future research on student persistence and institutional belonging. First, additional qualitative research across multiple institutional contexts is needed to examine how structural stigma operates in diverse environments. Comparative studies across public universities, private institutions, community colleges, and minority-serving institutions could reveal how organizational structures shape identity visibility, recognition, and support in different ways. Such work would help determine whether the mechanisms identified in this study are broadly applicable or context-specific.

Second, longitudinal research designs are needed to better understand how identity vigilance, belonging, and persistence evolve over time. Following students across their academic trajectories would provide insight into how experiences of institutional recognition or omission accumulate and influence decision-making at different stages of college. Longitudinal approaches would also allow researchers to examine critical moments, such as disclosure experiences or mentorship relationships, that shape persistence trajectories.

Third, future research should more fully examine the role of intersecting identities. Expanding the

scope of inquiry to include race, gender identity, socioeconomic status, and disability would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how belonging is differentially structured across student populations. Intersectionality suggests that these identities interact in complex ways, and examining these interactions is critical for understanding variation in student experiences and outcomes.

Fourth, mixed-methods research incorporating institutional data, climate surveys, and policy analysis could extend these findings beyond individual narratives. Quantitative data can help identify broader patterns in belonging and persistence, while qualitative data can provide insight into the mechanisms underlying those patterns. Additionally, analyzing institutional policies, communication strategies, and resource allocation practices would offer a more direct understanding

of how structural stigma is embedded within higher education systems.

Fifth, future research should examine institutional communication and representation more closely. Studies that analyze how identities are included or omitted in campus messaging, diversity initiatives, and health programming could provide deeper insight into how institutional silence operates as a mechanism of exclusion.

Finally, future research should evaluate the effectiveness of institutional interventions to improve belonging and persistence. This includes assessing programs such as identity-responsive mentorship initiatives, inclusive health communication strategies, and expanded diversity programming. Evaluating these interventions can help identify practices that meaningfully support students navigating intersecting stigmas and inform institutional efforts to create more inclusive environments.

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