

LGBTQ Students on Campus: Issues and Opportunities for Higher Education Leaders

April 10, 2017

By Kristen Renn

This post is the first in a new series, *Beyond the Margins: Meeting the Needs of Underserved Students* (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/meeting-needs-underserved-students/>).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students are more visible than ever on U.S. college campuses. Yet they remain both sexual-orientation and gender-identity minorities (that is, as a numerical proportion of the student body) and minoritized (that is, targets of discrimination and oppression by those in power). Referring to these students as minoritized on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity highlights the role of societal heterosexism, which privileges heterosexuals, and cisgenderism, which privileges people whose gender identity aligns as society expects with the sex they were assigned at birth. Although it is common on campus to conflate people with these minoritized identities into one “LGBTQ” group, in reality, sexual orientation and gender identity are different concepts.

In the last decade, LGBTQ people in the United States—particularly in K-12 and higher education—have gained increasing visibility and some civil rights, including open service in the U.S. military, marriage equality, and some state- or local-level protection against bullying and hate crimes. Yet problems remain. There are no federally protected rights to employment non-discrimination, and the application of Title IX protection against discrimination for transgender students is currently under review in the U.S. court system. In higher education, we face a particular challenge in understanding our needs and progress vis-à-vis LGBTQ students because we lack accurate institutional and national data on student sexual orientation and gender identity.

Key Issues for Higher Education Leaders

Of the many important concerns higher education leaders need to be aware of regarding LGBTQ students, three core issues are 1) identity development, 2) campus climate, and 3) state and national social and policy contexts.

First, higher education has historically been and remains a positive location for students’ identity development (<https://msu.edu/~renn/TorresJonesRenn2009.pdf>). For some students, increased independence from their home community and family creates a space for exploring sexuality and gender in privacy and safety. For others, college may provide academic opportunities to learn about LGBTQ history, culture and people. Meeting peers, faculty and staff who are openly LGBTQ provides additional opportunities to explore identity, and student organizations and LGBT resource centers create spaces to interact with others.

Abundant literature (<https://msu.edu/~renn/BilodeauRennNDSS.pdf>) supports the positive value of postsecondary curriculum, role models and communities in facilitating LGBTQ identity development. It also is important to remember that for some LGBTQ students, sexual orientation or gender identity are not the most salient identities during their time in college; racial, political, religious or other identities (e.g., veteran status, parenting situation, social class) may draw more of their attention. Acknowledging such diversity within the LGBTQ community is as important as recognizing sexual orientation and gender diversity within the campus community as a whole.

A second key issue is LGBTQ campus climate. Most LGBTQ students report that the climate—their feelings of belonging, safety and inclusion—in college is better than the one they experienced in high school. And evidence exists that overall, campus climate has improved over the last 15 years.

Yet this progress is not consistent across institutions. Reports of harassment and discrimination (http://www.thetaskforce.org/static_html/downloads/reports/reports/CampusClimate.pdf), especially for transgender students, remain a problem at a time when student learning and persistence are central issues for higher education leaders. Of particular concern are student reports of harassment in classrooms and other learning contexts, of widespread cyber bullying (<http://www.pewinternet.org/2014/10/22/online-harassment/>), and of the amplification of racism and sexism through homophobic and transphobic harassment. Research on campus climate (<https://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/surveyAdmin/dle/JDHE.Hurtadoetal2008.pdf>) generally and LGBTQ climate specifically points to the negative consequences of hostile climates for student learning, persistence in college and mental health and wellness.

A third issue is the state and national social and policy context for individuals with minoritized sexual orientations and/or gender identities. No federal laws protect students or employees against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, though some states (http://www.hrc.org/state_maps) include one or both categories in state law. The application of Title IX, which prohibits discrimination based on sex, to include transgender students is unfolding at the time of this writing. A few states (<https://www.aclu.org/news/aclu-lambda-legal-file-brief-protect-all-transgender-people-harmed-discriminatory-hb-2>) are enacting laws specifically to deny protections to transgender students, though these laws are likely to face legal challenges (<https://www.aclu.org/know-your-rights/transgender-people-and-law>).

Campus leaders have an opportunity and obligation to act to maintain higher education as a location for LGBTQ student development and learning, as well as to improve campus climate and increase inclusion. To that end, I offer recommendations in the areas of policy, practice, programing and pedagogy.

Campus Policies: Don’t Wait for Government Mandates

Given uneven legal protections for LGBTQ students it is incumbent on institutions to create and maintain policy environments that ensure full inclusion and prohibit discrimination.

- Include sexual orientation and gender identity in institutional policy, whether or not federal or state law mandates against discrimination. The policies at Georgetown University (<https://georgetown.box.com/s/lnwhzis00g4o8eksuh6>), Purdue University (http://www.purdue.edu/purdue/ea_eou_statement.html) and Santa Ana College (<https://www.sac.edu/AboutSAC/Pages/nondiscrimination.aspx>) offer examples. Policies provide direction for institutional actors as

<https://www.gas.edu/news/1371085/trans-institutional-practices> offer examples. Policies provide direction for institutional actors as well as signal to prospective and current students that campus leaders stand against discrimination.

- Ensure that non-discrimination policies include admissions, employment, educational programs, athletics, student health insurance, gender-inclusive facilities (e.g., locker rooms, restrooms, residence hall rooms) and prohibition of harassment. Recent [studies of transgender college students](https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/24/author-discusses-new-book-about-transgender-college-students) (<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/01/24/author-discusses-new-book-about-transgender-college-students>) show that gender-inclusive policies are a critical facilitator for their success in college.
- Conduct an audit of gender inclusion in policies and a [process mapping exercise](http://consulting.aacrao.org/publications-events/publications/building-student-centric-processes/) (<http://consulting.aacrao.org/publications-events/publications/building-student-centric-processes/>) to illuminate additional policy obstacles to transgender inclusion. For example, walk through the process of a student changing their name and gender on institutional documents or obtaining trans-inclusive healthcare. There may be some simple adjustments in administrative processes that would eliminate substantial obstacles for individual students.
- Establish a campus-wide steering committee or commission to oversee LGBTQ issues across student and employee policies. Engaging stakeholders from multiple communities increases the likelihood that the institution will stay ahead of emergent matters of equity and inclusion.

Good Practices for an Inclusive Community

Institutional activities and services, from admissions through alumni/ae relations and communications, should routinely include LGBTQ students and graduates.

- [Collect sexual orientation and gender identity information](http://www.lgbtcampus.org/assets/docs/suggested%20best%20practices%20for%20asking%20sexual%20orientation%20and%20gender%20on%20college%20applications.pdf) (<http://www.lgbtcampus.org/assets/docs/suggested%20best%20practices%20for%20asking%20sexual%20orientation%20and%20gender%20on%20college%20applications.pdf>) in a systematic way. A small but increasing number of institutions, including the [California State University](https://www.calstate.edu/sas/documents/applicationform-undergraduate.pdf) (<https://www.calstate.edu/sas/documents/applicationform-undergraduate.pdf>) and [Northeastern Illinois University](http://www.neiu.edu/future-students/sites/neiu.edu/future-students/files/documents/sapaia2/Undergraduate%20Application_0.pdf) (http://www.neiu.edu/future-students/sites/neiu.edu/future-students/files/documents/sapaia2/Undergraduate%20Application_0.pdf), do so on applications for admission. Others provide optional opportunities after admission. Institutions can provide direct outreach to students who self-identify as LGBTQ and can use this information to understand the progress of these students through the institution.
- Women's and men's colleges should develop clear and inclusive policies for admission of, and support for transgender students and graduates. [Mount Holyoke](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/policies/admission-transgender-students) (<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/policies/admission-transgender-students>) and [Barnard College](https://barnard.edu/admissions/transgender-policy) (<https://barnard.edu/admissions/transgender-policy>), [College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University](https://www.csbsju.edu/human-rights/policies-violations-forms/transgender-students) (<https://www.csbsju.edu/human-rights/policies-violations-forms/transgender-students>) offer examples. Formerly single-sex colleges should develop gender inclusive communications and programming for graduates, such as reunions and alumni/ae associations.
- Advocate that campus healthcare and counseling be inclusive of students of all sexual orientations and include coverage for the needs of transgender students. Student health insurance should specifically include transgender healthcare and not exclude transgender-related treatment. Equitable access to healthcare increases student success by decreasing time lost to chronic or acute physical and mental health needs. The American College Health Association provides [guidelines](https://www.acha.org/documents/Resources/Guidelines/Trans-Inclusive_College_Health_Programs.pdf) (https://www.acha.org/documents/Resources/Guidelines/Trans-Inclusive_College_Health_Programs.pdf) for transgender inclusion.
- Offer information on LGBTQ students in orientations for new faculty and staff and discuss [best practices](https://equity.ucla.edu/programs-resources/educational-materials/classroom-climate/) (<https://equity.ucla.edu/programs-resources/educational-materials/classroom-climate/>) for creating equitable learning environments. Lambda Legal provides a set of [best practices](http://www.lambdalegal.org/know-your-rights/article/trans-supporting-students) (<http://www.lambdalegal.org/know-your-rights/article/trans-supporting-students>) for supporting transgender students, and the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals offers [recommendations](https://lgbtcampus.memberclicks.net/assets/tqsoc%20support%202016.pdf) (<https://lgbtcampus.memberclicks.net/assets/tqsoc%20support%202016.pdf>) for supporting trans and queer students of color. Their recommendations include approaching LGBTQ student support through an intersectional lens that accounts for students' multiple identities (e.g., race, SES, age, veteran status); collaborating with resource providers for students of color; and providing leadership development opportunities specifically for LGBTQ students of color that do not require them to prioritize one identity over another.

Programs That Work

In addition to including LGBTQ issues with other diversity-related programming on campus, there is some specific programming that can increase inclusion and improve campus climate.

- Take administrative responsibility for providing support and education. Hundreds of institutions now have [LGBTQ campus resource centers](http://www.lgbtcampus.org) (<http://www.lgbtcampus.org>) staffed by professionals or graduate students, and the kinds of programs and services these centers offer can be provided in other ways even when a stand-alone resource center is not available. Graduate students, faculty and staff can be assigned responsibility for LGBTQ programs, services and student organization advising. Although there can be value for LGBTQ students in providing student leadership in this area, relying on LGBTQ students themselves to provide professional-level services at scale is an untenable and irresponsible stance.
- Design and fund co-curricular campus programming, such as [new student orientation](http://lbgtrc.msu.edu/programs-and-services/new2u/) (<http://lbgtrc.msu.edu/programs-and-services/new2u/>), diversity education and ongoing student activities to support LGBTQ students and educate others on campus about LGBTQ inclusion. A comprehensive programming effort includes both support for LGBTQ students and education for others about LGBTQ students.
- Include LGBTQ topics among other multicultural diversity and equity efforts on campus and offer stand-alone educational programs to provide opportunities for deeper exploration. Common offerings such as LGBTQ Speakers Bureaus (for example, the longstanding one at the [University of Massachusetts Amherst](https://www.umass.edu/stonewall/services/speakers-bureau)) (<https://www.umass.edu/stonewall/services/speakers-bureau>) and [Safe Zone](http://thesafezoneproject.com/) (<http://thesafezoneproject.com/>) programs educate the campus community broadly and aim to increase support for LGBTQ students.

Bringing LGBTQ Inclusion Into the Classroom

The core of LGBTQ college students' experience is the curriculum. Bringing LGBTQ topics and LGBTQ-sensitive pedagogy into the curriculum increases inclusion.

- Make LGBTQ topics visible in the curriculum. Inclusive instruction and curriculum offer LGBTQ students and others the opportunity to engage intellectually across academic fields with topics related to their identities. Minoritized students report that they are motivated to learn when their identities are affirmed and included in the curriculum. Such curriculum has been available in the humanities and social sciences for several years, but even an introductory statistics course could [incorporate LGBTQ material](https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/diversity-content-gateway-deeper-learning-statistics-sexual) (<https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/diversity-content-gateway-deeper-learning-statistics-sexual>).
- Encourage faculty, staff and departments to become an information clearinghouse for areas of interest to students and scholars. John Younger, a scholar at the University of Kansas, has since 1997 maintained a [list of LGBT/queer studies programs](http://www.people.ku.edu/~jyounger/lgbtqprogs.html) (<http://www.people.ku.edu/~jyounger/lgbtqprogs.html>), including study abroad opportunities. This is a valuable starting point for faculty interested in developing an LGBTQ major, minor or academic program.
- Offer faculty development focused on [improving classroom climate](https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/applying-improving-classroom-climate) ([https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/applying-](https://www.aacu.org/publications-research/periodicals/applying-improving-classroom-climate)

[seven-learning-principles-creating-lgbt-inclusive](#)) for LGBTQ and other minoritized students. For example, the Center for Ethics Education at Fordham hosted a discussion with faculty and teaching fellows on [creating LGBTQ inclusive classroom experiences](#). (https://www.fordham.edu/info/25663/education_and_research_ethics_resources/6346/lgbtq_inclusive_curriculum_and_classroom_climate)

Conclusion

There is little question that life on campus has generally improved for LGBTQ students since the days of [secret and immediate expulsion](#) (http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A57942-2002Nov30_2.html) of students suspected of same-sex attraction. Yet students still face harassment, discrimination and other obstacles to full inclusion. At the same time, students explore and develop LGBTQ identities through leadership, involvement, coursework and activism. Aligning policy, practice, programming and pedagogy to support LGBTQ students remains a challenge and an opportunity for higher education leaders.

Tags: [diversity & inclusion \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/tag/diversity-in-higher-ed/\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/tag/diversity-in-higher-ed/) [leadership \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/tag/leadership/\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/tag/leadership/)
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Responses to "LGBTQ Students on Campus: Issues and Opportunities for Higher Education Leaders"

Cindi Love (<http://www.myacpa.org>)

Thank you for this excellent and timely publication.

April 11th, 2017 (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/#comment-14762>) [Reply \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=14762#respond\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=14762#respond)

Kristen Renn

Thank you, Dr. Love. Your career in advocating for social justice and your leadership of ACPA remain models for the rest of us in higher education to emulate.

May 25th, 2017 (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/#comment-15876>) [Reply \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=15876#respond\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=15876#respond)

Xwpis ONOMA

Great article, I am a white heterosexual male in my 50s teaching IT classes at a local community college. I fully support the LGBTQ+ community, understand their challenges and respect their cause. I disagree however with the premise "Yet students still face harassment, discrimination and other obstacles to full inclusion.". On the contrary the majority of higher education people (administrators, educators, students) are on the same side with the LGBTQ+ movement and as far as I know, willing to stand by, for and with them. My humble opinion is that the post-modern idea of "omnipresent oppression" and how to combat it, is a great virtue in danger of becoming a vice, since it has been taken to the extreme where simple life "mishaps" are blown out of proportion. In the long run, this "victimhood" stance will prove detrimental for the LGBTQ+ movement. Remember, the world is NOT rampant with racism, bigotry and oppression. It is the few and far between holdovers of an old era that create the occasional problems and present the main but meager issue. Everything is OK, still we have to remain vigilant; it is the few, minor exceptions that confirm the rule. Thank you!

May 3rd, 2017 (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/#comment-15175>) [Reply \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=15175#respond\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=15175#respond)

Kristen Renn

First, I commend you for your support of the LGBTQ+ community on your campus and off. Your students, colleagues, and larger community are fortunate to have you as an ally.

Sadly, however, it's true that even in higher education - and I agree that often colleges and universities are more inclusive than other spaces in the lives of LGBTQ+ people - students do indeed experience harassment, discrimination, and other obstacles to full inclusion. Evidence from individual campus climate studies and from national research studies of campus climate continue to demonstrate that LGBTQ+ people experience physical harassment and violence, verbal harassment, and a host of other behaviors (e.g., employment discrimination, discrimination in the use of public facilities) that rise above what might be considered "mishaps" (as you call them), mistakes, or microaggressions. Yes, it is important to focus on progress and positive climates, but discrimination against LGBTQ+ people is still legal in many states - and possibly about to become more pervasive with the so-called "religious freedom" now getting support from the highest levels of the federal government. Helping our students - minoritized and majoritized - connect with supportive people and become, themselves, better allies to others remains an important goal.

Again, thank you for being an ally to this community - keep it up, for the sake of all!

May 25th, 2017 (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/#comment-15874>) [Reply \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=15874#respond\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=15874#respond)

Beth Monkarsh Morgan

Thank you for this wonderful article. I am currently in school to become a college counselor and my goal is to have a private practice that focuses on working with LGBTQ students and their families. I'm always pleased to see the efforts of various colleges and programs to become more inclusive and affirmative but as you said, there is still a long way to go.

November 28th, 2017 (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/#comment-22210>) [Reply \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=22210#respond\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=22210#respond)

Sarah Linz

Thank you for this excellent article. I offer safe zone trainings at the community college down the road and this is a helpful piece to support our efforts.

February 1st, 2018 (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/#comment-24045>) [Reply \(https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=24045#respond\)](https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/?replytocom=24045#respond)

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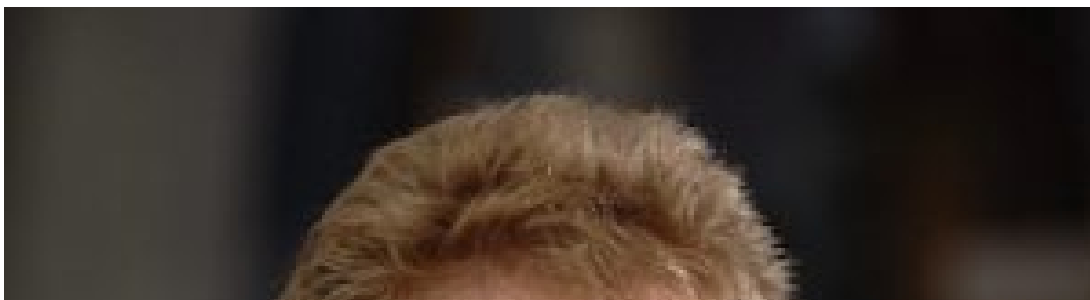
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-  ([HTTP://WWW.LINKEDIN.COM/SHAREARTICLE?MINI=TRUE&URL=HTTPS://WWW.HIGHEREDTODAY.ORG/2017/04/10/LGBTQ-STUDENTS-HIGHER-EDUCATION/](http://www.linkedin.com/sharearticle?mini=true&url=https://www.higheredtoday.org/2017/04/10/lgbtq-students-higher-education/))

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Kristen Renn is professor of Higher, Adult, & Lifelong Education at Michigan State University. Her research focuses on the experiences, learning, and development of minoritized students in higher education. She also studies student success, with a particular focus on low-income students and racially minoritized students. Follow her on Twitter @KrisRenn (<https://twitter.com/KrisRenn>).





MORE INFORMATION

Beyond the Margins: Meeting the Needs of Underserved Students (<https://www.higheredtoday.org/meeting-needs-underserved-students/>)

Identity Development Theories in Student Affairs: Origins, Current Status, and New Approaches (<https://msu.edu/~renn/TorresJonesRenn2009.pdf>)
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LGBTQ Inclusive Curriculum and Classroom Climate
(https://www.fordham.edu/info/25663/education_and_research_ethics_resources/6346/lgbtq_inclusive_curriculum_and_classroom_climate)
Fordham University Center for Ethics Education

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