



LGBTQ+ STUDENTS BRIEF

BACKGROUND

On university campuses across Ontario, students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, trans, two-spirit, non-binary, questioning, or who otherwise identify as Queer (LGBTQ+) face varying levels of discrimination, harassment, and exclusion. Without pathologizing being LGBTQ+, it is important to recognize the increased mental and physical health concerns associated with the marginalization these students routinely face.

In the Fall of 2014, OUSA conducted a small series of focus groups, interviews, and an online survey designed to gain insight into some of the campus experiences of LGBTQ+ students, and to learn what changes are felt to be most necessary. Guided by these student voices - and informed by best practices highlighted in existing literature - this paper offers recommendations to improve equity, safety, and inclusion.

Though the deep-seated structural and societal factors are the root causes of the discrimination, homophobia, and transphobia that students can face, it is not in the scope of this paper to offer an academic exploration of these topics. Rather, this paper maintains a problem-solving focus, connected closely to primary research, and offers short-term prescriptions intended to improve the student experiences for LGBTQ+ students.

CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Resources

Resource allocation refers to ensuring that LGBTQ+ community and campus life are adequately funded and staffed. Many students who are LGBTQ+ encounter situations on campus that make them feel isolated, so resources, services, and campus programming to support and promote Queer communities are essential. When asked in OUSA's November 2014 survey what institutions could do to improve the university experience for LGBTQ+ students, over 22% of respondents expressed this

desire, making it one of the most common suggestions.

Currently, students and student groups are at the forefront of this effort. While student involvement is critical, it can mean limited resources. Moreover, it is important that institutions themselves - not just students - send a strong message of inclusion and support by hosting events as well as recognizing significant days, such as Trans Day of Remembrance.

Both the government and universities should increase the financial support available to supporting Queer communities on campus. The government should offer funding envelopes similar to those it currently offers some schools for goals such as first-generation students supports or French language supports. Additionally, universities should contribute to the promotion and advertising of student-led LGBTQ+ and pride events and programming, possibly developing a process by which funds can be requested for this purpose on an ad-hoc basis.

Furthermore, staff and human resources issues should be addressed. While acknowledging the value of student-led initiatives, when the strongest or sole source of LGBTQ+ community or programming on campus is run by students, long-term planning, committee work, and logistics can be difficult. There should be full-time positions within university administration that liaise with and support LGBTQ+ student groups. These employees should work closely with students so that their efforts can retain some institutional memory, and their operations can benefit from a reliable avenue of communication with the school.

Lastly, universities need to turn to infrastructure to help improve the student experience for LGBTQ+ students. Permanent LGBTQ+ student space is not present at every campus, despite its benefits for community, comfort, and safety. In addition, gender-neutral bathrooms are essential for the safety and human rights of students who identify as trans and non-binary.

Housing arrangements can be a profound concern for some LGBTQ+ students in particular. OUSA's focus groups and survey have revealed a demand for LGBTQ+ designated living spaces as an option for students who are concerned with living among potentially homophobic or transphobic individuals, who might face discrimination or violence, or who otherwise would like the opportunity to live in a climate removed from the influence of a dominant privileged group.

Policies

University policy-making refers to the explicit rules, protections, and procedures that the university has in place to ensure that LGBTQ+ students' rights are protected and that their needs are accommodated.

Names and perceptions can have significant impacts on a student's sense of comfort in certain situations as well as a student's overall sense of self. For students undergoing a sex or gender transition, identity and identifying records assume both a practical and symbolic significance. However, some universities do not have reliable processes to for students to choose a preferred name or gender in their class listings, student cards, etc. Universities must adopt policies along these lines that allow the change to be reflected throughout all the services and staff that students might interact with.

Additionally, athletics and recreation is an area that can be particularly challenging to students who identify as Queer. Athletics and recreation participation has been shown to have a host of positive effects in students' mental health and overall well-being. However, there is resistance to the inclusion of trans and intersex identities in sport. Participation in many sports and activities – as well as many spaces – are strongly divided along a binary understanding of biological sex, conflated with gender and with notions of gendered bodies. Universities must strive to implement policies that promote inclusion and allow for gender non-conforming and intersex students to participate without barriers.

All of this should be capped with institutional equity statements recognizing LGBTQ+ students and asserting their rights. By making a clear and institution-wide statement that addresses equity for LGBTQ+ identities, universities can better express their commitment to inclusion, and send a positive message to Queer students and campuses as a whole.

Training and Education

Education involves raising the level of understanding and knowledge possessed by individuals when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues. This includes basic awareness of the diverse genders, sexes, and orientations that exist on campus, but also includes the ability to recognize and combat discrimination.

Students who are LGBTQ+ are at increased risk for mental health concerns. Additionally, they may have unique mental and physical health concerns more generally. However, a number of respondents to OUSA's survey indicated that campus health practitioners lacked the sufficient knowledge to engage with them adequately or provide service; some even noted physicians who were dismissive, skeptical, or rude regarding their gender identities or sexual orientations.

Additionally, OUSA's research corresponds with a growing body of literature on the negative effects of non-inclusive language and the invisibility of LGBTQ+ themes and issues in class. Classroom instructors often – unknowingly – promote an exclusionary environment by failing to use gender neutral language and ignoring queer identities and figures in courses where such topics could be explored. Research indicates that the climate of invisibility these practices create can have deleterious effects on students' engagement, academic success, and satisfaction with their education.

Education and training can solve many of these issues. Growing research demonstrates how effective education in LGBTQ+ issues and identities can be. Additionally, a significant number of respondents to OUSA's survey highlighted increased levels of education and training as an urgent need.

Campus service providers – particularly healthcare practitioners but professors and teaching assistants as well - should participate in such training to gain a better understanding of the diverse identities among the student body. This training can educate service providers on the needs and concerns of students with whom they will be engaging, and can allow course instructors to make classroom environments more inclusive, while equipping them to recognize and prevent heterosexism and cissexism in class.