

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students



United States Student Association

Barriers to Higher Education

LGBT students face multiple barriers to getting an education. These barriers come in the form of financial instability, unsafe living conditions, homophobic classmates and professors, institutional heterosexism, and an overall lack of university support. The lack of resources for LGBT student organizations and retention centers, turning a blind eye to repeated incidents of harassment and violence against LGBT students, and insufficient training for residence hall staff and key administrators limit LGBT students' access to higher education and threaten their ability to earn a degree.

Harassment on Campus

LGBT students on college campuses face harassment ranging from verbal abuse and homophobic graffiti to physical violence. Unfortunately, these incidents of hate are not often reported to the university or law enforcement. LGBT people do not always report anti-gay and anti-trans abuse for fear of being "outed" or of being further harassed by police. Most college campuses do not provide LGBT sensitivity trainings to their campus police. When police do not have the training on how to properly identify and deal with anti-gay hate crimes, they are less likely to pursue an investigation. Because these crimes either aren't reported or are ignored, statistics on anti-gay crimes may not be collected and every new case is seen as an "isolated incident".

Tracking queer students is difficult because universities rarely ask for information regarding a person's sexual orientation or gender identity. Even if universities attempt to gather this information, many students would be reluctant to answer honestly for fear of harassment and discrimination.

Many queer people do not use the terminology gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender to identify their sexual orientation and gender identity. This presents further difficulty when attempting to gather information on queer students.

Of the over 3,000 institutions of higher learning in the United States, only about 347 include sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policies. Human Rights Campaign, www.hrc.org

Homophobia in the Residence Halls

Many schools require new students to live on campus and most colleges and universities randomly match roommates for first year students. LGBT students placed with homophobic or transphobic roommates face uncomfortable and unsafe living conditions. Residence hall staff that have not been trained in how to deal with homophobia or transphobia in residence halls cannot properly handle these situations, leaving LGBT students with no way out.

Homophobia in the Classroom

The homophobia that LGBT students face in the classroom can come from classmates, professors, and the curriculum. Professors can turn the classroom into a hostile place by making derogatory jokes, silencing LGBT students, or by assuming that a single LGBT student can speak for the entire community. The curriculum used in some classes is heterosexist and biased. For example, a class on civil rights movements that does not address the importance of LGBT civil rights ignores the contribution and historical importance of this community. A psychology class that discusses transgender people as have a gender identity disorder that requires a cure, often including psychological treatment for young children, reinforces transphobic attitudes and behavior.

Transgender Students

As a result of the inability of universities and colleges to deal with transgender issues, trans students on college campuses face many challenges. Some of these include:

- Not being placed in safe and comfortable housing
- Inexperienced and insensitive mental and physical health clinics
- Inaccessible restrooms and locker rooms
- Lack of staff trained around issues of gender identity
- Queer Resource Centers that do not include resources on transgender issues
- Lack of institutional support or protection
- Identification cards, transcripts, and other university documentation that do not list the name or gender presented by the student

Queer Students of Color

Due to racism in the LGBT community and a general lack of funds for programs focused on the recruitment and retention of queer students and students of color in higher education, resources for queer students of color are limited, or even nonexistent, at most universities.

- LGBT Resource Centers often do not have resources for queer students of color
- Student groups and other programming that specifically focus on queer students of color continually struggle due to lack of funding, limited support, and the inability to guarantee safety and confidentiality.
- Because these resources are not seen as being “frequently utilized” an assumption is made that they are not wanted or needed, which further cuts the amount of time and energy put into them
- Due to racism in the LGBT community and homophobia in some communities of color, queer students of color are forced to choose one identity over the other
- Queer students of color are often forced into the role of spokespeople for queer issues or issues of race which leads to them being tokenized and overextended

LGBT as an *Unprotected* Group

Most college campuses in the United States do not include sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policy. Only a handful of universities include gender identity in these policies. When schools do not include this language in their nondiscrimination policies they are condoning the discrimination of LGBT people on their campuses and leaving LGBT students, faculty, and staff open to harassment without protection.

Only a handful of universities explicitly protect transgender people in their non-discrimination policies; Depauw University, University of Iowa, Rutgers University, and all colleges and universities in Minnesota and Rhode Island due to state law.
Transgender Law and Policy Institute
www.transgenderlaw.org/college/index.htm

Suggested Goals for Campus Organizing

Inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in the nondiscrimination policy

Funding, space, and staff for an LGBT Retention Center

Creation of a diversity requirement for mandatory classes which includes subjects on sexual orientation and gender identity

Designation of accessible restrooms and housing for transgender students

Creation of a committee committed to reviewing the campus climate for LGBT students

Suggested Programs

Work with LGBT Retention Centers to create more resources for transgender and queer students of color

Work with queer student organizations on racism and transphobia

Organize a speakers bureau and other educational presentations and materials

Create a safe space program and other forms of queer ally development

Conduct trainings for campus safety, residence hall staff, and key administrators