

## Editorial

### The Broad Lens for Healthy Academic Communities: A Focus on LGBTQIA+



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This issue of *Building Healthy Academic Communities* has a special focus on sexual and gender minority (SGM) health to promote our understanding of the needs within our LGBTQIA+ faculty, staff, and students. Certainly, within academic settings, from community colleges to R1 universities, all benefit from diverse perspectives that drive innovation. Diverse perspectives are a culmination of life experience, communities of origin, and both formal and informal networks that faculty, staff, and students bring to our environment. Stemming back to the Civil Rights movement, academic settings sought to recognize and respond to structural barriers preventing campuses from reflecting diverse perspectives. Title VII protects individuals against employment discrimination based on race and color, national origin, sex, and religion and applies to employers with 15 or more employees. Indeed, Title VII compliance is now an embedded structure within academic environments. In June 2020, sexual orientation and gender identity or expression were included in the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling on the "definition of sex" when addressing discrimination and diversity, equity, and inclusion policies and approaches (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020). However, a diverse, successful environment requires more than putting policies in place, rather it requires a culture and climate that is welcoming to all from a broad swath of backgrounds and perspectives.

Within academic environments, the advancement of sexual and gender minority (SGM) perspectives has grown in recent years, which parallels a larger societal trend towards accepting SGM individuals. The most recent Gallup poll estimates that 62% of U.S. citizens are satisfied with the acceptance of gays and lesbians in our society, the highest rate since the origin of the survey in 2001 (Saad, 2022). In addition, a growing percentage of U.S. citizens identify as LGBTQIA+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual and more), growing from 5.6% in 2020 to 7.1% in 2022. While these data suggest progress in acceptance, as academic communities we should strive to go beyond acceptance and assess how we are contributing to the ongoing success of our SGM members.



Certainly, we would be remiss if we did not remark on a much-needed broader view of SGM needs for academic and workplace success. Being in tune with some of the basic, but critical standards such as restroom availability for use consistent with the individual's gender identity or gender-neutral space is important. Similarly, some gender-nonconforming individuals use pronouns other than he/him/his or she/her/hers, such as they/them/theirs or ze/hir. Updating our lexicon respects pronouns, affirms identities, and avoids alienating the members of our academic communities. At another level, developing, funding, and building intentional mentoring and sponsorship programs and opportunities for SGM are key to building the diverse workforce pipeline. The impact of having SGM specific scholarships and financial assistance for students and continuing education and advancement for staff are not to be forgotten. Specialty scholarships and financial assistance for SGM individuals can help mitigate the financial stressors of seeking a higher degree or meeting requirements to be promoted in the workplace.

As we strive to build healthy academic communities, it is implied that all students, faculty, and staff should have the freedom and safety to learn, share their diverse perspectives, and hold space for scholarly debate. Academic environments facilitate an important network for SGM individuals to connect, educate, validate, and celebrate each other. Research has consistently documented the disproportionate mental health disparities (e.g., depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, suicide attempts) of SGM young adults (Hatzenbuehler & Pachankis, 2016). Additionally, SGM young adults are more likely to engage in behaviors with adverse health outcomes (e.g., substance use, high risk sexual activity, binge drinking; Bränström et al., 2016). Mental health services are essential to the success of SGM within academic communities, as young adults are most susceptible to the deleterious effects of discrimination and victimization. Victimization and discrimination can lead to mental health concerns (e.g., anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and attempt) but can also drive SGM individuals away from our academic communities (Crane et al., 2022). All the scholarships and healthcare options will not make academic communities healthy environments for SGM if they are not implemented within a culture of safety and acceptance. As threats of violence, both physical and sexual, are alarmingly high on academic campuses across the country, particularly in SGM, zero tolerance discrimination and victimization policies that are clear and integrated within the mission of these settings with evidence of being defended and supported are vital. Accessible mental health services, for faculty, staff, and students, can provide SGM with the support to prevent or repair the negative impacts that may be associated with a marginalized identity. We hope this issue serves as a platform to address or broaden our understanding of LGBTQIA+ concerns within academic communities as well as effective approaches to ensuring both mental, physical, and social concerns are met that facilitate their success.

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