

To Come Out or Not to Come Out

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Career services professionals should be aware of the issues and risks LGBTQ students face, including when these students are considering the decision to come out during the job-search process.

Should a student “come out” on a resume by listing LGBTQ clubs or organizations? This is a question that can be daunting for career professionals. Many seek to help the LGBTQ population on their campus, but are not sure how to start the conversation with their students, and how to be supportive and encouraging without misadvising a student about possible risks. Simultaneously, LGBTQ-identified students are often unsure what information career services could provide them and, accordingly, will not seek out advice. Starting the conversation and being aware of the issues that LGBTQ students face and recognizing the needs of this often large—but sometimes invisible—population can be a challenge for many career services offices. To meet this challenge, it is important that career services professionals educate themselves on working with this group and offer resources that can create a safe space for students and open the door for dialogue.

There are many career questions that your students may have, now or in the future, even if they are not actively seeking guidance from your office. Coming out in the workplace can be a greater challenge with more risk than being out on a college campus. A recent study by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, *The Cost of the Closet and the Rewards of Inclusion*, found that more than half of LGBTQ employees (53 percent) nationwide are closeted on the job(1). This number is surprising considering that employers are becoming more supportive—91 percent of the Fortune 500 companies include sexual orientation in their nondiscrimination policies and 61 percent include gender identity(2).

This article will delve into some of the complexities and challenges faced by career services professionals seeking to assist their LGBTQ populations.

Terminology: Where It All Starts

Terminology is one of the most complicated topics for those working with LGBTQ students, and it is also the first thing career counselors must learn to gain confidence and trust with this group. Terminology is complex on multiple levels. One of the longest and most inclusive acronyms is “LGBTQQIP2SAA,” which stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, Intersex, Pansexual, Two-Spirit, Asexual, and Allies(3). Of course, using this term would be cumbersome. Instead, umbrella terms like “LGBT” or “Queer” are often used. For brevity and consistency, “LGBTQ” will be used throughout this article, but by no means is intended to exclude anyone.

There are differing opinions even within the LGBTQ community about appropriate labels. The word “LGBT” itself can be controversial as it is limited to only four categories. Another controversial term is “queer.” Queer was previously considered derogative because it equates to “strange” or “odd,” but has now been reclaimed as an umbrella term for many within the LGBTQ community that encompasses multiple sexual orientations and gender identity categories. However, some within the LGBTQ and ally community may still find the term offensive.

One of the most important aspects of terminology that career professionals must understand is the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. Almost half (48.4 percent) of attendees at a recent NACE webinar on LGBTQ career advising reported feeling “somewhat familiar” or “not very familiar” with the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity. Sexual orientation relates to someone’s physical and emotional attraction to another person. Gender identity relates to an individual’s personal identification as male, female, somewhere in between, or neither. Sexual orientation and gender identity operate exclusive of one another. For example, a person who is attracted to females can transition to a different gender, but that does not necessarily mean that the person will stop being attracted to females.

The LGBTQ umbrella casts a wide net. Career professionals may find that there are diverse cultures, values, and preferred language within this community on campus. Every campus is different, so it is important to work with the students at your school to learn more about their specific needs and concerns. Do not assume that all students will prefer to be identified by the same term. It is important to allow students to use their preferred language and avoid assuming that all students from this population will be the same.

Why LGBTQ Students Are Not Coming to Your Office

There are many reasons why a student, even if he or she is out to peers on campus, may not consult the career services office with LGBTQ-specific questions. Coming out is a process that often involves varying layers. A student may be out to peers, but not family—or out to family, but not out at a part-time job. There are many factors that have an effect on students coming out on campus, including their families, athletic community, native country, location of the school, religion, and workplace or campus culture. A student that comes across as extremely confident about his or her sexuality on campus may be simultaneously struggling with relationships with family members. Students may not want to admit a fear of coming out in the workplace or questions they have as it may betray their proud self-image. It is important for students to know that they can be proud of their orientation or identity and still ask questions or have concerns about their future career.

It can be difficult to quantify the number of students in the LGBTQ group on campus as many students may be questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation and may not be ready to label themselves. Others may begin school with one sexual orientation or gender identity and transition during or after school to another. Additionally, all students will not necessarily join LGBTQ groups on campus, especially if there is only one or two. As discussed previously, the diverse language and culture of these groups can make it challenging for a student-run organization to be inclusive of the vast number of different identities under the LGBTQ umbrella. Inevitably there will always be more LGBTQ students on campus than can be quantified through student groups or even self-identification. The inability to accurately count the number of LGBTQ students on a campus is the primary reason why resources must be offered regardless of turnout at events or the number of students seeking out specific resources.

How to Reach Out to Students

It's important to show students that you offer resources to this population for several reasons, including illustrating that the door is open for dialogue with someone in your office and allowing students a way to do this confidentially or anonymously. Some schools offer anonymous instant messenger chats for this reason. All staff should participate in some type of LGBTQ training, whether it be attending a session at a conference, participating in a Safe Zone training program (www.gayalliance.org/safezonet.html), or getting your office certified by Out For Work (www.outforwork.org/resources/career_center/index.asp). Placing a sign in your office that shows your support for this population will also help to start a conversation. Combining the education of career professionals and online in-person student resources will be beneficial to this student population.

Another effective method to reach these students is to partner with student groups to offer presentations on campus. It is important to connect with other campus allies as well, since this will create a network of knowledgeable people to share information with if you or they are faced with complicated questions. Using inclusive language in your office will also help students to feel more included and safe in your space. All methods of creating a public image of your office as being accepting and supporting will help open the door to communication and increase contact with this minority population.

Should You Advise Students to “Come Out”?

It is never anyone's place to tell someone else when or how to come out. This is a personal decision that will occur when a student is ready and after he or she has considered both the positive and negative outcomes. Although there are huge benefits to being out, there can also be some negative consequences; processing the decision beforehand and creating a support system is important for this process.

As discussed previously, there are many layers to coming out. It is up to the student to decide what is best for him- or herself. The most important thing to ask the student is how he or she identifies. Some students may feel that their sexual orientation or gender identity is their whole world, while others may feel that it is only one piece of their puzzle. Some might prefer to maintain their privacy about their sexual orientation or gender identity to reduce the risk of losing a job opportunity or promotion. Career counselors should be aware of their own positive and negative bias when advising a student, and should support the student's decision.

Although career counselors often want to encourage students to be themselves and be proud of who they are, there are still 29 states where a person can be fired for being gay and 33 where someone can be fired for their gender identity(4). There is currently no federal protection against workplace discrimination for sexual orientation or gender identity, which means that there are still workplaces (including colleges) that legally can and do require employees to sign "lifestyle pledges" (i.e. a promise to the employer that they will not partake in same-sex relationships) or risk being fired.

LGBTQ employees also face other types of discrimination in the workplace. A recent study by the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) found that one in four LGBTQ employees reports hearing "That's so gay" while at work(5). Although career counselors often encourage students to follow their passion and be who they are, it is important to remember the unfortunate fact that there can still be negative consequences for LGBTQ students entering the work force.

How a student identifies can influence the job-search strategy. The student may decide to target LGBTQ-friendly companies and locations, lean toward those companies while keeping other options open, or choose an environment where the student can maintain his or her privacy. There is nothing wrong with any of these decisions, and it is important to help a student navigate this process. Researching a company is a key step in any student's application process. This can be extended to LGBTQ students to include nondiscrimination policies for sexual orientation and gender identity. Students can also research if companies offer diversity trainings, gender-neutral bathrooms, insurance policies that include sex reassignment surgery, and company affinity groups. In states without marriage equality laws, students may be particularly interested to search for employers that offer domestic partner benefits. Many of the top companies rated by the HRC include such policies and benefits(6). The HRC website is a great resource for students who want to target LGBTQ-friendly employers. SimplyHired also has a job-search option that allows students to search only LGBTQ-friendly companies(7). This is important for all students, but especially for LGBTQ-identified students—one-fifth of LGBTQ workers report looking for a new job specifically because the environment wasn't accepting of LGBTQ identities, and close to one in 10 (9 percent) successfully left a job for the same reasons; they were not comfortable(8).

Resumes, Cover Letters, and Interviews

By including LGBTQ student clubs or organizations on a resume, a student will, at a minimum, identify him- or herself as an ally of this community. Helping the student identify the importance of working at an LGBTQ-friendly company will assist with the decision of whether to put this on the resume. Including this will help students to rule out organizations that are not supportive. If a student is concerned about listing group involvement, he or she could consider listing an LGBTQ group as a student affinity group or leaving it off the resume completely. As always, resumes should maximize information relevant to the job for which the student is applying. Cover letters and interviews are the same. The focus should always be on what is relevant to the job or internship.

If a student is not involved in an LGBTQ student group, but wants to come out in an interview or cover letter, it is important to ask the student the purpose and relevance to ensure that he or she has fully considered the reasons for doing so. This is similar to the typical resume or cover letter critique process where counselors remind students to focus on relevant topics. There are times when talking about overcoming adversity can be beneficial, but it has to be done in a way that is appropriate. Stating one's sexual orientation or gender identity in an interview or in a cover letter can be seen as inappropriate if there is no relevance to the job description. In an interview, the primary focus should be on the student's skills and qualifications for the job, not his or her sexual orientation or gender identity.

Career services staff should continue to educate themselves and provide LGBTQ resources to their entire student body in order to brand themselves as a supportive and welcoming environment. No matter how big or small an LGBTQ community is on a campus, it is critical that career services take the initiative and reach out to these students to support them during college and in their future careers.

Endnotes

1. "HRC Study Shows Majority of LGBT Workers Closeted at the Workplace," HRC Blog, May 7, 2014. <http://www.hrc.org/blog/entry/hrc-study-shows-majority-of-LGBTQ-workers-closeted-onthe-job>
2. "HRC Study Shows Majority of LGBT Workers Closeted at the Workplace."
3. The Genderbread Person, March 2012. <http://itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2012/03/thegenderbread-person-v2-0/>.
4. Maps of State Laws & Policies: Statewide Employment Laws & Policies. http://www.hrc.org/state_maps.
5. "HRC Study Shows Majority of LGBT Workers Closeted at the Workplace."
6. Corporate Equality Index 2015: Rating American Workplaces on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Equality. Human Rights Campaign Foundation. 2014. <http://hrc-assets.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files/documents/CEI-2015-rev.pdf>.
7. Take Pride in Your Work: Find Jobs in GLBT-Friendly Companies. SimplyHired resource page. <http://www.simplyhired.com/a/special-searches/glbtfriendly>
8. "HRC Study Shows Majority of LGBT Workers Closeted at the Workplace."

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