



CPEC

Access and Equity for all Students: Meeting the Needs of LGBT Students

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Access and equity for all students in California colleges and universities is a high priority of the California Postsecondary Education Commission. Over the past year, CPEC staff have reviewed research, collected data, convened an advisory committee, and hosted a panel of experts, students, and advocates on the issues faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students.

LGBT students face many challenges that require additional campus services and resources for them to be successful in college, according to research and experts in the field. Compared to heterosexual students, LGBT students face higher rates of mental health problems, sexual health risks, substance abuse, and family issues leading to negative health outcomes.

Another significant issue is the lack of data and limitations in collecting that data. Data comes only from optional student surveys. Without consistent longitudinal data, it is impossible to track and assess LGBT student persistence and degree completion.

This paper outlines policy recommendations supported by research and by individuals working in advocacy for LGBT students in higher education. Because many campuses face similar challenges in creating supportive campus climates, and some have already adopted practices and policies, CPEC recommends that campuses share best practices on policies, professional development, training materials, and other resources. This repository of information can enhance the efforts of systems and individual campuses and reduce planning and implementation costs.

CPEC recognizes that limitations of the state budget make it difficult to allocate funding to initiate LGBT-specific policies and programs. At the same time, LGBT students need to feel safe on campus and protected from harassment. They should have access to appropriate support services and should feel their success is as important as that of non-LGBT students. It is critical to their success that services are available and funding for services is protected from cuts in the budget.

Faculty should have access to curriculum and professional development that enables them to serve LGBT students and deal with related classroom issues. CPEC has prioritized issues that are initially lower in cost, but some will require additional funding. Ultimately, systems and campuses should seek resources that will allow them to adopt CPEC's policy recommendations.

The recommendations in this report were adopted by the California Postsecondary Commission at its meeting on June 9, 2009.

Policy Recommendations

LGBT Student Data

There is a clear need for increased data collection and analysis on LGBT students. Consistent longitudinal data on LGBT students is essential in tracking their progress throughout their educational career. Sexual orientation and gender identity should be considered its own demographic, and colleges should collect and report LGBT data to CPEC in the same manner as gender, race, ethnicity, and disability data.

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Many LGBT students choose not to identify themselves as such in student surveys and on campus forms. However, as more surveys and forms include questions on sexual orientation and gender identity, and as campuses provide assurance that students' privacy will be protected, it is likely that more complete data will become available.

The University of California Undergraduate Experience Survey (UCUES) first included LGBT questions in 2006. Coverage of LGBT issues was expanded in 2008. In the 2008 survey, which had 63,500 respondents, 4.7% identified as LGBT, 2.7% as “questioning or unsure,” and 4.9% “decline[d] to state.” Other than UCUES, surveys often do not include questions about sexual orientation and gender identity or allow students to voluntarily identify themselves as LGBT.

The 2008 UCUES data shows some troubling signs: 33% of LGBT students identify as having serious depression concerns — 50% higher than heterosexual students. In addition, 93% of heterosexual students said they feel “respected on campus,” compared to only 73% of LGBT students. Substantially more LGBT than heterosexual students said they are aware of expressions of negative or stereotypical views about sexual orientation.

Additional recommendations for data collection:

- When appropriate, provide opportunities for all students to identify their gender identity on campus forms.
- All campuses should conduct student experience surveys that request information about gender and sexual orientation.
- CPEC, UC, CSU, the community colleges, and independent colleges and universities, should work collaboratively to convene focus groups on LGBT student needs and issues.
- Analyze the UCUES survey in order to better understand it and develop additional questions pertaining to LGBT students.
- Adapt the K-12 California Safe Schools survey on anti-gay harassment to postsecondary education, with campuses regularly reporting crimes based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Create processes for campus police departments to document, report, and disaggregate LGBT hate crimes.

Campus Climate

Success for LGBT students is affected by their feelings of safety and support, ability to make friends, feeling welcome by faculty, staff, and other students, accessibility to LGBT services, and the presence of LGBT role models on campus. On the 2008 UCUES, 39% of LGBT students said that other students have expressed negative or stereotypical views about sexual orientation. About 6% to 7% of LGBT students reported that faculty or staff has expressed these views. Creating a campus climate that is respectful of student differences may include:

- Demonstrating an institutional commitment to supporting LGBT initiatives and activities.
- Scheduling lectures, concerts, symposia, and other activities to increase LGBT participation and awareness on campus.
- Creating “safe spaces” or “safe zones” where faculty and staff can choose to make their office or department a place for mentoring, peer counseling, dialogue, and interaction with LGBT students, faculty, and staff.

- Incorporating sexual orientation and gender identity topics into student, parent, faculty, and staff orientation courses.
- Informing parents of LGBT students about resources and services available for their child.
- Encouraging openly LGBT students, faculty, and staff to join and lead university committees and organizations.
- Offering LGBT “Lavender Graduation” ceremonies in addition to traditional ceremonies.

Campus Policies

Campus policies should reinforce existing laws that forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Not all campuses have established such policies, which leaves LGBT students without many options when they experience discrimination.

Students and experts identified an issue of limited access to single-stall restrooms that can accommodate transgender and multiple gender identity students. Converting single-stall restrooms by changing the sign to “unisex” could reduce the stress of transgender and multiple gender students and make them feel more welcome on campus. Hateful graffiti in campus restrooms and stalls should also be removed.

Existing nondiscrimination laws should be supported by inclusive campus policies, such as:

- Enforce anti-discrimination laws and policies on all campuses.
- Meet needs of LGBT students in student housing, health insurance coverage for gender reassignment surgery, and recordkeeping when students or staff change gender.
- Ban discrimination in instructional materials and textbooks and encourage the use of materials that reflect gender diversity.
- Promote policy and budget priorities that protect LGBT student services from being cut in tight budget years.
- Create an LGBT resource center or designate an LGBT student advocate. A center or advocate reduces the need for students to spend time on advocacy at the expense of their education.

Professional Development

CPEC has identified a need for faculty and staff training that expands knowledge of LGBT issues as a priority for assuring access and success. Training should be required for faculty and staff, and be extended to other employees who work with students but may not usually participate in staff development. Professional development opportunities should:

- Train faculty in multiple instruction practices and an inclusive curriculum for all students.
- Include strategies on how to deal with LGBT harassment in and out of the classroom.
- Train financial aid advisors on the availability of scholarships specific to LGBT students and how to assist in filling out financial aid applications when students have same-sex parents.
- Train public safety officers and judicial affairs staff on what constitutes LGBT harassment and hate crimes.
- Incorporate LGBT content into other training.

Student Support Services

All students benefit from support services, but some LGBT students have unique needs. At a minimum, LGBT students should have access to a resource center or a designated advocate on campus.

All UC campuses but UC Merced have an LGBT center, and thirteen of 23 CSU campuses have an LGBT center. Resources at community colleges greatly vary from campus to campus. Beyond LGBT student centers and safe spaces or safe zones, support services should include:

- Counseling services, including emotional counseling and financial counseling for those disowned by their families for coming out.
- Education and counseling services to students and families to educate parents on how to help their LGBT child. Advise parents about current research that suggest negative reactions to their LGBT child's identity may negatively influence their child's health and mental health.
- Creation of a grievance system specific to LGBT issues where students can report a dispute or grievance without fear of retribution.
- Career advising to help LGBT students with concerns about interviewing and the company climate toward LGBT employees.
- Workshops or programs for residence life assistants who are responsible for ensuring that student housing is safe and welcoming to all students.
- Workshops or programs to address homophobia and heterosexism, especially with fraternities, sororities and athletic teams.

Next Steps

CPEC's limited staff and budget resources constrict its ability to follow up on the recommendations in this report. However, CPEC can:

- Provide reports online and in communications with the systems, and encourage all postsecondary institutions to consider these recommendations in developing their own policies and programs. A list of LGBT centers and other resources is available at www.cpec.ca.gov/completereports/2008reports/08-18.pdf
- Support legislative and budget initiatives that support these recommendations and provide resources for institutions to pursue them.
- Consider establishing pages on CPEC's website to gather and share best practices and other information in addressing the needs of LGBT students.
- Consider additional research and expanding data collection on LGBT students to the extent possible.