Search for Equality

Steps being taken to educate students about LGBTQ issues, provide safer housing options

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As non-inclusive ideals and practices continue to influence various aspects of campus life, some students in the LGBTQ community said they feel constantly marginalized and put aside based on their sexual orientation and gender identity.

Student Leigh Jolivette said she has watched her friends press University of Louisiana at Lafayette officials to assess students’ comfort with the LGBTQ community to avoid run-ins with unaccepting or potentially abusive roommates.

“How do you feel about X sexual orientation or X gender identity?” isn’t a hard question,” she said. “My friend is currently going through this issue, and when they tried to press the issue with the housing community, they were basically shut down.”

Inside Higher Ed reported in 2015 that three of four college students who identify as anything other than the gender they were assigned at birth, or do not align themselves with a gender, face sexual harassment, and 25 percent face sexual assault at college. Transgender and gender-nonconforming students are susceptible to being misgendered or “deadnamed,” which means being called by the name with which they no longer associate.

Jules Breaux, director of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette Office of Housing, said he “welcomes the idea of asking questions about comfort level.” According to Breaux, the office is currently “exploring the option.”

Jolivette is a member of Giving Love, Acceptance, Safety and Support. She is also the recruitment and fundraising head for Gamma Rho Lambda, an LGBTQ-friendly multicultural sorority. These two organizations, paired with an LGBTQ support group provided by the Counseling and Testing Center, aim to be helpful on-campus resources for students in the community.

Jenica Mallory, Ph.D., UL Lafayette’s director of equity, diversity and community engagement, said she believes language is a signal that you’re inclusive and sensitive to your community needs. Mallory said that misgendering and other harmful practices are not restricted to individuals outside of the LGBTQ community.

“Transphobia in the way of calling people their dead names or purposely misgendering them happens just as much in the LGBTQ community as it does outside of it,” he said. “Minority status does not prevent or forgive people from being binned and treating other minorities, including their own.”

Richard said LGBTQ students could be forced to resort to unreliable, inaccurate resources for information because of a lack of LGBTQ-specific education.

Jolivette agreed.

“I had to teach a room of people what a dental dam was and how to use one because no one understood it,” she said. “It’s super easy to find free condoms on campus but you have to drive to a sex shop to buy dental dams.”

The UL Lafayette Health and Wellness center provides safe sex handouts that are “general purpose for all genders and orientations,” according to Dr. Chris Hayes, M.D., Student Health Services director and staff physician.

“Sexual health issues and concerns for both on and off-campus life are just some of the topics discussed among members of vital university organizations like GLASS and others.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, suicide is the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 24. Youth who identify as sexual minorities are estimated to have two to seven times greater likelihood of death by suicide than heterosexual youth. These increases in likelihood are widely attributed to feelings of isolation and scrutiny.

“Many campuses across the country are wrestling with the same issues that UL Lafayette wrestles with,” said Mallory. “I think that our population mirrors that of many campuses across the country. The LGBTQ community is becoming more empowered and voicing more loudly their needs, waking up the administration.”

Mallory and the Office for Campus Diversity run Project ALLIES, an on-campus workshop designed to teach students about how they can be an effective ally to LGBTQ students, faculty and staff. The workshop covers topics like LGBTQ vocabulary, the gender spectrum, myths about the LGBTQ community and the resources available to LGBTQ students on campus.

“We talk about the top 10 ways to be an effective ally,” Mallory said, “Things like learning how to use preferred pronouns and how to shape your environment so that you’re creating an inclusive classroom that’s not threatening for LGBTQ students.”

Students like Jolivette, Richard, Arnold and others collectively ask for the LGBTQ community to be recognized as nothing short of “normal.”

“Sometimes when my girlfriend and I are holding hands or on a date, doing obviously couple things, people ask if we’re siblings,” Arnold said. I’m an art major, and I’ve noticed in art history that a lot of people try to explain the gay away from artists and pieces of art.”

“Straight isn’t the default setting,” Jolivette said.

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Students who want to report a complaint can contact Dean of Students Margaret Perez or use EthicsPoint on UL’s site to report anonymously, according to Mallory.

A key issue facing students who do not identify with the gender binary is gender-neutral restrooms. McManus, Jolivette, GLASS President Daniel Richard and GLASS member Jes Arnold said they view the small handful of family restrooms on campus as less than accommodating. Students who wish to avoid gender-labeled restrooms are forced to travel more than other students to find a restroom they are comfortable with.

They also highlighted misgendering and inattention to common bathroom practices for the LGBTQ community. Additionally, restricted, assumption-based views on gender, masculinity, femininity and beyond feed into a lack of normalization.

"What I’ve found through interacting with our students is that if you can speak to