

Learning How to Best Serve LGBTQ Victims and Survivors

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Abstract

While the needs of sexual violence victims and survivors have come to the forefront in recent years, thanks to increased Title IX guidance and enforcement, working with victims and survivors who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ), or who were assaulted by a member of the same sex or gender, regardless of their own sexual orientation, continues to pose a challenge for some campus Title IX practitioners. This article outlines critical knowledge and best practices for adequately serving this population.

Introduction

The last few years in higher education have brought greater awareness than ever before to the needs of sexual violence victims and survivors, from equitable policies and procedures, to trauma-informed interviewing, to expanded accommodations. One arena in which Title IX practitioners need to continue to grow their knowledge is in working with victims and survivors who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning (LGBTQ), or who were assaulted by a member of the same sex or gender, regardless of their own sexual orientation.

Many of our societal and institutional responses may be heteronormative, or even homophobic, whether intentionally or inadvertently. Administrators working with victims and survivors may have unconscious biases toward those who identify as LGBTQ, or a lack of education regarding unique considerations that should be taken into account in working with members of this community. Our campuses and schools are refocusing their efforts and renewing their commitment to both prevention and Title IX education. However, addressing special populations, including the LGBTQ community, in our response work may be challenging. With a greater understanding of the specific concerns facing the LGBTQ community, Coordinators, Investigators, Advocates, and Prevention Educators can all improve the path to access and support.

Understanding and Addressing Myths

Just as there are myths that pervade the culture around sexual violence in general, there are myths specific to LGBTQ individuals and sexual violence within the LGBTQ community. With no intention of reinforcing such inaccuracies, there is value in recognizing and deconstructing what may come up in all of our work with LGBTQ victims and survivors. Some falsely believe that childhood sexual abuse can cause individuals to “become” LGBTQ. Others may think that LGBTQ relationships are “abnormal” and view abuse as a symptom of what they wrongly consider to be unhealthy from the outset. They may harbor homophobic notions, such as finding LGBTQ people sexually deviant, promiscuous, and more likely to commit sexual offenses. Studies have indicated that sexual violence can be a dimension of hate or bias-motivated crimes against adults who identify — or are perceived to be — LGBTQ. Some feel that women cannot be abusive, or misunderstand how women are physically capable of committing sexual assault. There are those who think

abuse does not exist in LGBTQ relationships. People may inaccurately assume that gay men cannot be sexually assaulted due to the impression that sex is always desired. Individuals with transphobic attitudes might believe that transgender people who do not “out” themselves to a sexual partner are deceptive and somehow opening themselves up to some level of violence or assault.

In reality, half of all transgender people have experienced assault. Research shows that almost half of lesbians and almost a third of gay men have been victimized by a same-sex partner. Only one in five victims/survivors in same-gender assault or intimate partner violence receive services. Further study is sorely needed, but it is clear that we cannot afford to remain uneducated and unresponsive to the needs of LGBTQ victims and survivors. Acknowledging the existence of myths, discussing biases, and training team members on special considerations for working with this population can inform response and support efforts on and off campus.

Removing Reporting Barriers

Additionally, layers of barriers to reporting exist for LGBTQ individuals. Imagine having to educate your service provider on basic knowledge regarding your identity and/or sexuality. Picture facing bias by police, medical personnel, advocacy organizations, campus administrators, and more. There is a history of negative experiences that can color the decision of whether or not to come forward. LGBTQ victims and survivors face having to explain assaults in more detail than others, and even being asked inappropriate questions or mistakenly being viewed as the assailant. There is the very real fear of being outed when reporting, which takes autonomy away from the individuals and may be of concern to their safety, support system, academic pursuit, financial stability, and more, depending upon their unique circumstances. Some LGBTQ victims and survivors may want to avoid reinforcing negative stereotypes and hate in choosing not to report.

As you look to best serve victims and survivors of the LGBT community, start from a place of education and training. It’s imperative that your Coordinators, Investigators, Advocates, and Prevention Educators all serve as vehicles of access and support for these students. Language is the most basic level of demonstrating acceptance. While much of the population may be able to define the terms included in LGB, the public’s grasp of T

and Q is still evolving. “Transgender” is a self-identifying term for someone whose identity or expression differs from traditional gender roles. It is also an umbrella term referring to anyone who crosses gender roles in one way or another, including individuals who complete gender reassignment surgery, drag queens, those who cross-dress, or individuals who may identify as being gender non-conforming. Historically, “queer” has been used as a slur against members of the LGBTQ community, but has since been reclaimed in many circles as a positive or neutral descriptor for all who fall along the sexual orientation and/or gender identity continuum.

Acknowledging Gains

Recent years have seen a sea change in legislation, guidance, and popular media representations of LGBTQ people. Today’s generation reflects social media mega-stars who identify as LGBTQ, and reality television shows that depict a snapshot of the challenges of growing up as different, and there may be some comfort in mainstream media acknowledging these experiences. Additionally, the LGBTQ community can point to legislative gains that specifically address years of ongoing discrimination. For example, the Equality Act of 2015 is a bill before the House of Representatives and the Senate that, if passed, would amend the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and would ban discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and sex in the areas of employment, housing, public accommodations, public education, federal funding, credit, and the jury system. In May 2016, the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education released joint guidance (www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201605-title-ix-transgender.pdf) to provide educators with information to ensure that all students, including transgender students, can attend school in an environment that is free from discrimination based on sex. Our government is explicitly stating that, if a student is transgender, schools are to treat them consistent with the student’s gender identity.

Meeting Service Needs

Survivors who identify as LGBTQ may struggle not only with the aftermath of sexual assault, but also with systematic oppression and discrimination that exists in our communities and on our campuses. Thus, culturally competent, LGBTQ-safe services are critical. It is imperative that our terminology reflect inclusivity, including our websites, our intake forms, and our policies. LGBTQ victims and survivors may choose not to report or seek help

if they feel marginalized, discriminated against, or made invisible. Start from the outset with inclusive admission forms and employment applications, ensuring that your community members see themselves represented. Develop your intake, response, and reporting forms to reflect similar levels of inclusivity. Additionally, your policies should clearly identify sex- and gender-based discrimination, harassment, and stalking. Recognize that members of the LGBTQ community can be targeted simply because of how they identify. Websites, directions on how to report, and ways in which victims can receive support should reflect specifically chosen resources that support the LGBTQ community.

Institutions are tasked with ensuring that campus constituencies feel supported and represented. Choosing how to best infuse gender inclusivity in policies, forms, and applications can be a great place to start. First, remember that sex and gender are not interchangeable. Male, female, and intersex are terms for sex assigned at birth. Terms commonly used to define gender identity are woman, man, and transgender. For some, more than one of these identities may apply, and having alternative terms available can be helpful. Genderqueer and gender-variant are helpful options. Additionally, using gender-inclusive language is a best practice that allows us to reach another population of victims and survivors who may not feel safe coming forward: men. Self-reported demographic information should be voluntary whenever possible. Consider whether sex and gender data is, in fact, necessary to collect in every instance. It can be helpful for listed options to be diverse and to focus on gender as opposed to sex (e.g., man, woman, trans, and intersex). Forms should offer respectful, open-ended options (e.g., prefer not to disclose, or fill in the blank), as compared to “othering” by listing “other” as a response choice.

Common mistakes can often be prevented with some forethought. Outreach efforts should demonstrate inclusivity of diverse individuals and relationships. As you create presentations, design brochures, and develop websites, be cognizant of the LGBT community and partner with local and on-campus organizations to help demonstrate your commitment to inclusion. Note that Title IX guidance and the Violence Against Women Act’s Section 304 mandate that policies and websites include references LGBTQ sexual violence, such as definitions and scenarios, so that victims and

survivors are appropriately made aware of their rights under Title IX.

Make it a priority to provide regular training for all those who work with victims and survivors on issues specific to the LGBTQ community. Keep abreast of the ever-changing political and legislative landscape, as it can impact your response efforts and policy development. Build a network of LGBTQ-friendly advocates, service providers, and referrals. Use this network in continually assessing your prevention and response efforts. Create partnerships that share your commitment to supporting victims and survivors, as well as opening access to reporting and services. If you have an LGBTQ resource center on your campus or in your community, request introductions and suggestions for additional partners.

Be visible in your support of LGBTQ events, community organizations, and press. View your education and relationship-building as an ongoing process. Consider promoting violence prevention efforts, LGBTQ anti-discrimination policies, and public awareness of transphobic discrimination. Prevention programs intended to address sexual assault should also include information about homophobia, transphobia, and sexual assault as hate crimes.

As you look to build upon your office's intake and response skills, be open to learning from others. Ask open-ended and respectful questions, rather than making assumptions. Allow for self-identification and mirror the language that an individual uses. Continuously assess what LGBTQ victims and survivors are experiencing and ensure your prevention efforts are reflecting evolving patterns and changes. Remain aware of the importance of confidentiality, even more so for some LGBTQ individuals.

As you look to continue to grow your knowledge base in working with victims and survivors who identify as LGBTQ, recognize that intolerance around LGBTQ issues intersect with sexism, racism, ableism, and classism. These are additional areas to consider as you build training efforts, discuss best practices in support, and work to improve and assess current practices. Turn to your students, community leaders, advocates, and educators to help you grow. Be open to feedback, so you can continually improve.

Resources

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5. Trauma-Informed Approaches for LGBTQ Survivors of Intimate Partner Violence. A Review of Literature and a Set of Practice Observations (2016). Retrieved Sept. 2, 2016 from www.glbtqadvp.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/TIP-for-LGBTQ-Survivors_LitReview.pdf.