

# **Final Report: Building Positive Spaces for LGBTQ Identities in University Continuing Education**

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Investigating lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) perspectives of University Continuing Education (UCE) provides opportunity for: (1) an elaboration on the experiences that LGBTQ students and faculty are having in higher education, (2) a positioning of social justice and equity as a fundamental value in UCE activities, rather than as an ad-hoc or silent commitment, and (3) a more comprehensive professional practice ethos that can inform the work of UCE. That said, *the overall purpose of this research project is to understand the current educational and employment experiences of LGBTQ faculty members and students of Continuing Education in Canadian universities.*

Combining student and faculty experiences in this study is purposive; these experiences may shed light on similarities in struggles with exclusion and accomplishments in inclusion, as well as, on differences based on power relations, learning goals, and professional roles. The research questions that inform this study are: *What are the struggles and accomplishments of LGBTQ faculty in UCE? What are the struggles and accomplishments of LGBTQ students in UCE?*

## **METHODOLOGY**

We approached eight UCE units to participate in this study, and, with permission from a corresponding Dean or Director, we recruited participants from five universities in Western Canada (Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta, and British Columbia). The majority of Deans or Directors whom we contacted were supportive of this research. We interviewed two stakeholder groups: six cisgender, lesbian, gay male, or queer-identified faculty members in UCE and six cisgender, gay male students in UCE (12 participants in total). One student identified as Hispanic and the remaining study participants identified as White. Selection criteria for this study were: (1) identification as being lesbian, gay male, bisexual, transgender, or queer; and (2) current or recent (<3 months) involvement in a UCE setting in a faculty or student role. Despite our efforts to diversify the sample through the participation of Director or Dean Office, snowball sampling, students, and through our activist networks, we were unable to recruit a broader representation of the LGBTQ community.

## **RESULTS**

### **Theme One: Heteronormative Orientations**

This theme appears in the data by way of how people were oriented to UCE as a new instructor or as a new student. It also represents an overall organizational orientation towards heteronormativity that limited expression of sexual identities and queer understandings.

#### *Lack of or Technical Orientation (Students and Instructors)*

Little attention is given to student and instructor orientation, which may be setting up a narrow and unsteady relationship with UCE at the start. This little attention represents a missed opportunity to introduce UCE participants to human diversity as a micro-form of Continuing Education that teaches about assumptions relating to sexual and gender diversity and to set the tone for classroom communication, values, and expectations. Four of six students received no orientation at all. Conversely, all (n=6) instructors indicated they did receive an orientation; however, it was highly technocratic in nature. Although not dominant in the data, there was one instructor and one student who mentioned that they felt welcomed when there was LGBTQ content in the orientation.

#### *Personal as Political; Personal as Pedagogical (Students and Instructors)*

Depending on the perspective, the LGBTQ identity can be either political or pedagogical, which, in relation to each other, can be considered on a spectrum. Half (n=6) of both students and instructors were affiliated with the wider LGBTQ community in some way (e.g., campus and community LGBTQ groups). One student had experience volunteering with local community organizations, while another

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instructor was comfortable sharing their involvement prior to being hired: “In my job interview I was asked ... for an example of exceptional teamwork, and I referenced experience ... [participating in] a queer arts and culture festival.” Three students and two instructors (n=5) referenced some level of heteronormativity in the curriculum. One student exclaimed that, “They [the professors] rarely will talk about the sexuality spectrum or the gender spectrum in those classes and I think a lot of teachers, it’s like a grey area for them; they don’t know how to address it in the classroom”. Four instructors identified that sexuality and gender were completely mute in their work, while another four instructors indicated withholding their sexual identity altogether from students.

### **Theme Two: Social and Safety Discourses**

Social and safety discourses emerged in the data through an exploration into how they became significant to the instructor or student, and what barriers regulated expression of sexuality. Discourses could be keeping silent, changing word patterns, changing pronouns of partners, and so forth.

#### *Social Barriers in Organizational Learning (Students and Instructors)*

The learning and work conditions stifled instructor/student identity development and awareness. Five students highlighted how the learning conditions of UCE posed a barrier to engaging with the curriculum in a personal and meaningful way to them. One student participant shared that UCE was “a different experience at night when you’re in a classroom full of older people, mostly men, mostly hydro company employees, half of them still wearing their Hi-Vis from work.” Another student described a hesitancy around sharing his sexual identity due to UCE being too heteronormative.

Four instructors also cited examples of organizational conditions as barriers. One instructor explained that “when we’re dealing with adult students we need to realize that reality and so it’s not just about sexuality, it’s about the whole picture,” and that sexuality is something that needs to be raised. Similarly, another instructor described their UCE department as “quite small and more conservative in terms of the administration,” which contrasts with other “liberal” or “progressive” faculties in the institution.

#### *Safety as Regulatory Discourse (Students Only)*

It became clear in the data that student study participants are finding their learning spaces to be unsafe, but not to a point where they are feeling threatened. They avoid risk taking (e.g., sharing sexual identity with the whole class), perceive negative consequences to coming out, and locate safe spaces through group work rather than in whole-class discussions. Five students shared experiences of intentionally avoiding potentially homophobic situations by not disclosing their sexual identities.

#### *Open LG Worker Identity as Significant (Teachers only)*

LG Instructors view themselves and their LGBTQ peers as being supportive, inspirational, and representations of safety. This data point was not significant to the students who participated in this study. Five instructors cited an open LGBTQ leader as significant in their decision to join their UCE faculty. One participant mentioned feeling “a lot more comfortable quickly ... when I found out about my boss [being LGBTQ],” which was similar to another participant indicating that knowing about a senior department official being an openly gay man also signaled to him that it was a safe working environment for LGBTQ people. Two instructors found having LGBTQ colleagues important to their sense of security as UCE staff.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Any work and learning culture should value diverse insights and contributions. In our view, there needs to be more awareness of how there are discourses of heteronormativity and safety in UCE, and that these discourses are a part of a wider web of social oppression. These discourses are not uniform across campuses, and they can be constructed differently within each department. They are shaped by and shape the perspective of educators, and students. Leaders of UCE may wish to establish some policies towards creating an LGBTQ-inclusive work and learning environment, orientate students and staff to an inclusive work culture, invite educators to share pedagogical approaches that enhance equity and respect, and consider the rich opportunity UCE has to teach about sexual and gender diversity to industry. Applying a LGBTQ-inclusion lens to UCE may make the experience more meaningful and educative, enrich the discourse around equity and social justice, and provide a creative and critical space for social dialogue. The researchers of this study welcome an opportunity to work further with UCE leaders to create this inclusive environment.