De Anza College

Overview of a Qualitative Exploration of LGBTQ+ Mental Health: Factors Associated with Positive Mental Health & Desired Resources

*September 2022 | **Full Report***

Introduction

In fall 2020, respondents to the De Anza College LGBTQ+ student survey mentioned they would like the Women, Gender and Sexuality Center (WGSC) to expand its services and offer psychological or mental health services and for the college to offer more mental health/emotional well-being events. The WGSC and the Office or Research and Planning (IRP) conducted focus groups to explore the factors LGBTQ+ students associate with positive mental health and what resources or events do LGBTQ+ students want at the college. A total of 27 students participated in the winter/spring 2022 focus groups. Most participants identified as male and gay (30%) or trans/non-binary and pansexual (11%), as well as were relatively new, enrolling at De Anza for the first time during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-21 or 2021-22 (N=16). The remaining 11 participants were returning students from over three years ago with some concurrently enrolled at four-year institutions or already in possession of a bachelor's degree and were continuing their education or changing careers. The majority of the participants had already experienced face-to-face/hybrid and online learning (N=18) with the remaining experiencing exclusively online (N=8) or exclusively face-to-face (N=1) learning.

Findings

The **top factors**[1] participants attributed to **positive mental health included:**

- **open-mindedness, awareness and education about LGBTQ+ community** (N=9)
- **college spaces and events where LGBTQ+ students can feel safe and welcome** (N=7)
- **not being judged or scrutinized** (N=6)
- **use of pronouns and preferred names** (N=6)
- **having LGBTQ+ specific community spaces** (N=6)

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[1] These factors were not mutually exclusive as many participants expressed how the individual factors were related and could lead to positive mental health.

How LGBTQ+ Participants Felt Supported

Support from non-LGBTQ+ community is important.

Participants provided examples of spaces, instructional and non-instructional, where employees exercised open-mindedness, awareness and inclusive approaches in helping them feel seen and heard. **One way the college could support the LGBTQ+ community is to normalize the use and practice of preferred names and pronouns.** Participants shared when preferred names/pronouns were or were not used, it had a profound impact on them. In classroom settings, when instructors encouraged all students to provide their preferred names/pronouns, participants felt relieved they did not have to initiate the request and stand out.

"That helped me a lot throughout college to know that there were professors and peers, who might not have the same exact gender identity as me or… may not be queer but for them to be able to support and validate and … stand up for LGBT rights … It's like a school mission and also like a school-wide environment of inclusive[ness]."

"As someone who's had some online classes and a lot of in-person classes, I find that teachers are usually pretty good about using preferred names and pronouns, if you tell them. But they're not usually very good at asking. And I think that's something that I think they could definitely work on because normalizing that would make it easier when it's my turn to introduce myself and I'm the first one to say anything about pronouns. I'm worried about you know people in the class giving me that 'ugh' look…. [By normalizing pronouns] it doesn't make me feel like I'm the 'other'."

Promote awareness and education about LGBTQ+ language and identities.

Educating the college on LGBTQ+ language and identities and how to address microaggressions is important. Everyone is responsible for creating a welcoming and safe college space for LGBTQ+ students. Participants recognized when they encountered microaggressions in the classroom, they give their instructors the benefit of the doubt, understanding that some instructors are not aware or ill-equipped to address the incident. While participants shared experiences of microaggression in the classroom, the onus is not on instructors alone, but rather whoever is in the position of having the most authority and influence over the space and this could be any employee of the college.

"Professors don't shut down and correct students' comments on different things…. professors will sort of like move on and not shut it down and correct it either because they don't know what's wrong with that or because they don't want to bother and so then you're sort of left sitting there like, 'well shit like I know what this person thinks of me now.' "

Spaces where participants felt welcomed and the circumstances that made the space comfortable included the following:

- Instructors who did not single out students based on identities, but rather treated them like any other student and created a setting where they felt safe and more willing to share their experience.
- A political science instructor who recognized the LGBTQ+ community and integrated LGBTQ+ community members into the course material.
- A sign language instructor who incorporated LGBTQ+ language such as ace[2] into the course material.

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[2] Shortened term for asexual.

- An academic counselor who created a supportive environment by sharing stories and modeling vulnerability.
- An advisor who guided a participant to a LGBTQ+ opportunity that led to other social justice opportunities.
- Winter 2022 online survey respondents identified the De Anza LGBTQ+ Alliance student club, IMPACT AAPI learning community and library as spaces where they felt respected and their identities were affirmed.

How LGBTQ+ Participants Felt Unsupported

Environments where it was unclear if people were open-minded and accepting of differing viewpoints or identities made participants feel anxious, guarded and unsafe.

Participants felt unwelcomed in spaces where preferred names/pronouns were not initiated by instructors or whomever was the facilitator/leader of the space (i.e., not normalized) and outright disregard for preferred names/pronouns. Examples include classroom settings where participants did not think instructors were aware of the microaggressions being made from other classmates, or instructors were aware but did not have the skills to appropriately address the disparaging comments.

Participants identified breakout rooms/groups (online and in person), administrator/staff offices and financial aid as being uncomfortable spaces.

It was noted that breakout rooms/groups were uncomfortable since participants felt a lack of engagement or the group members did not have the skills to adequately facilitate discussions they were tasked to do. Online survey respondents mentioned employees were impatient and annoyed by their inquiries and need for assistance in office spaces and in-person classes[3].

"I love to see those words [acceptance and open-mindedness] because that [lends to a] feeling of safety."

"We're [class group discussion] talking about money and … wealth distribution is greatly linked with factors like race, gender, sexuality and all that. Someone said something about, I think it was about gender, and then like a microaggression. And because of that microaggression about certain gender I just did not want to go into that direction.… Sometimes, it's like walking on eggshells because if you bring up this certain opinion in front of a person, you could potentially be putting yourself in danger. Or at the [very] least they will start acting very aggressively against you."

Desired Mental Health Resources and Events

LGBTQ+ counselors/therapists who are LGBTQ+ identified.

A need to have a professional who is within the community and could relate to their experiences reiterated the importance of LGBTQ+ representation and community building. **Other suggestions included providing strategies to cope with low familial support, offering free personal products (e.g., tampons, maxi pads, condoms, etc.) as well as assessing and revising healthcare intake forms to be more trauma-informed and gender affirming.**

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[3] These experiences did not necessarily centered on participants' LGBTQ+ identities, but rather was general feedback that surfaced from the focus groups.

"Whenever they assigned me a therapist ... it's not necessarily someone who's LGBTQ-friendly or gender affirming. It's just whoever's on their list ... And it would be really nice if the college had resources to help find gender affirming, like actual LGBT-friendly therapists, and not just people who write it in their byline."

"Having a mental health professional who is queer ... much more comfortable than like talking to cis[gender] women about my trans struggles. Someone who's queer and has actually like walked in those shoes ... maybe including some kind of training or like general understanding about what it's like to be trans or queer from a trans or queer organization."

Regular events for LGBTQ+ students to be in community with others.

Social and educational events that help students de-stress from daily happenings or midterms and exams, raises LGBTQ+ awareness on campus, or connects students with the broader, off-campus LGBTQ+ community and resources. The need to have **regular events for LGBTQ+ students to gather and be in community with peers** who lack support from their family/community outside of De Anza and those disconnected and isolated from the COVID-19 pandemic was also mentioned.

"I think having more explicitly LGBTQ space for queer students to meet would be a healthy thing to develop like a sense of community; and I think to add to the list, having queer specific mental health services of some kind ... something on campus to help guide students toward local [off- campus, community] resources that are maybe better equipped to help with LGBTQ+ specific needs. In San Jose, we have the Billy DeFrank LGBTQ Community Center ... De Anza could funnel students in their direction for specific needs if they'd be better suited to help students."

Preferred Method of Communication to Learn More about Resources and Events

Suggested platforms to communicate ranged from promotion on the first day of class, Canvas, social media (e.g., De Anza's Instagram), Discord, Reddit communities or podcast.

Locating information on De Anza's website was not user friendly. Participants relied on search engines such as Google or word of mouth to find information, resources and events. Word of mouth was usually happenstance. A few participants shared they were not aware that De Anza offered psychological services or hosted LGBTQ+ group sessions. Their sentiment is similar to results from the winter 2022 interest form.

Who Could Affect Change?

Across the main findings, areas that could affect change for the benefit of LGBTQ+ students include:

- Board policy to require the use of preferred pronouns, particularly within the classroom
- College administration to prioritize LGBTQ+ identified counselors and mental health providers
- [Pride Center](#) to provide programming on LGBTQ+ language and identities and events
- Professional development to address microaggressions
- Online education training to incorporate preferred pronouns, effectively using breakout rooms for community dialogue and collaboration, and incorporating LGBTQ+ resources
- Faculty and staff sharing events and resources specific to the LGBTQ+ community verbally, on Canvas and through other communication platforms