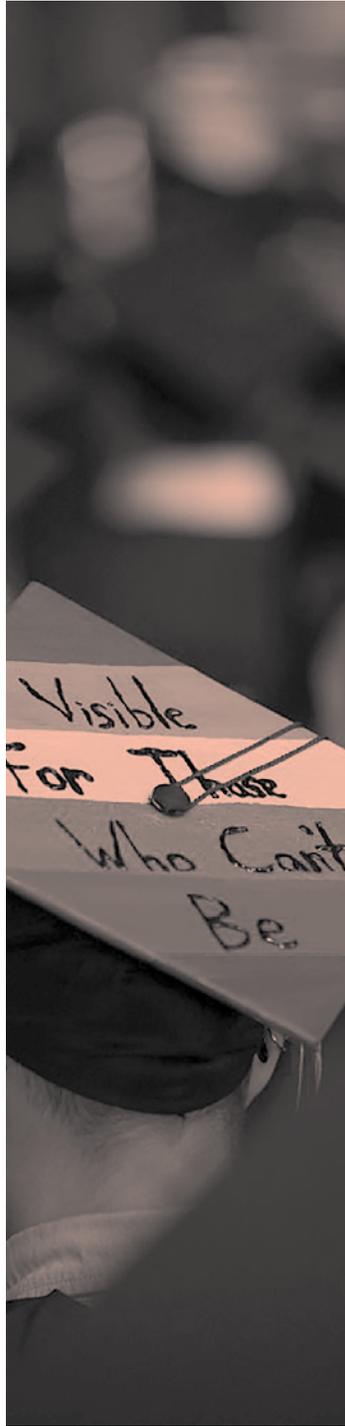


# Escaping Stigma

School Support for LGBTQ Students





Dylan Lewis was just starting to think about college options when, as a high school junior, he found himself homeless.

A few hours after introducing his first boyfriend to friends, Lewis' mother caught wind of the news that her son was gay and told him to get out. He packed as much as he could into a black trash bag and left.

"It was overwhelming," Lewis recalled. "I get kicked out, I'm working a job, and now I've got to look for colleges and figure out all this paperwork on my own."

When it came time for Lewis to leave for the University of Mississippi two years later, the rift still hadn't been repaired. Shortly after graduating from Ole Miss in spring 2017, Lewis published an essay in *The New York Times* documenting the challenges he faced as a gay student estranged from his family. From providing evidence of a significantly "broken relationship" to verify his financial aid status as an independent student to forgoing prescription medications after being dropped from his family's insurance, Lewis's college experience differed from that of many of his straight, cisgender—those whose sense of personal identity and gender correspond with their birth sex—peers.

His story also highlights why—despite recent exponential progress on the gay rights front—college access efforts aimed at LGBTQ students remain critical. It may "get better," but for a large segment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer youth, numerous hurdles remain on the path to higher education.

"It's a scary world for someone coming out of high school and going into the real world being an LGBTQ student," Lewis said. "There's a lot that goes into it. It's not just the financial challenges. It's mental, it's physical, it's emotional."

*The Journal* spoke with admission professionals, college counselors, and students about how to best support college access for LGBTQ youth. Although the college counseling community has made strides to meet the unique needs of these students, a new set of considerations has emerged in recent years.

### DISPARATE EXPERIENCES

Expect to encounter LGBTQ students who are at widely different stages in their identity development.

Although never a monolithic community, LGBTQ students enter the college exploration process with a far more diverse range of experiences than past generations. A growing portion of today's LGBTQ youth came out in high school or even middle school—and were embraced by family and friends. But the story can be much different for other students, depending on factors such as age, race, religion, geographic location, and socioeconomic status. And some international students may come from countries where it is still illegal to be gay.

"There's really an unevenness, depending on which (segment of the) population you are talking about," said Benjamin Baum, vice president of enrollment at St. John's College, which has campuses in Maryland and New Mexico. "Many of the challenges that existed 10 years ago or 20 years ago still exist today."

How students present themselves in the admission process varies widely, as does the way they interact with campus services and LGBTQ organizations once enrolled. The challenge for admission professionals is

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By Mary Stegmeir

to build supports, affirmative practices, and outreach efforts that speak to students on either end of the spectrum.

"There's one group that arrives at the admission process pretty comfortable in who they are; they write about (being LGBTQ) in their essays and they're aware of the campus LGBTQ groups—even though they may choose not to join them," Baum said. "Then you have students who really struggled throughout high school and are closeted. They aren't as secure in their ties to family and friends, and once they arrive on campus they're really looking for institutional supports in ways that other students may not need or want."

**How to respond:**

- **Be an ally.** The college search process is stressful for all students, but LGBTQ teens face an added layer of anxiety. Whether you work in a high school, community center, college, or independent office, be prepared to welcome and support LGBTQ students. "Many of these students know they want to go to college, but they also know they may be walking into a situation where other people may not 'get' them," said Chris Miller, director of college counseling at Sandy Spring Friends School (MD). "Determining how we can decrease that anxiety for students is our charge and our challenge."

- **FOR COUNSELORS: Keep the lines of communication open.** Recognize that LGBTQ students may need additional assistance finding a right-fit college. "You never want to make too many assumptions, because you don't always know where the student is in their identity development process," Miller said. "But if you keep asking questions, building trust, and learning about a student's individual situation, it becomes easier for you as a counselor to go back to the colleges on that student's list and talk to them about what they can do to support your student."
- **FOR COLLEGES: Visibility matters; so does intersectionality.** Recruit and hire diverse staff and faculty, including members of the LGBTQ community, and ensure that promotional materials and campus tours include images and content aimed at LGBTQ students. "Students—whether they came out in high school or are still closeted—are really attuned to signals that your university is going to be welcoming," Baum said. "No matter which group they fall into, they're looking for those symbols." Colleges should also acknowledge the varied identities of LGBTQ individuals and understand that the students they serve may be faced with various other oppressions, related to their race, religion, and/or socioeconomic status, he added. "Increasingly, we're seeing colleges embrace intersectionality in way

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Those experiences all too often interfere with a student's college trajectory and can color their views of higher ed. Research shows that LGBTQ students who face discrimination are more likely to receive low grades, drop out of school, report higher rates of depression, and experience homelessness—all factors that can affect their transcripts and post-high school trajectories.

that wasn't true 10 years ago," Baum said. "Those efforts, at LGBTQ centers and elsewhere, send a message."

### **PAIN AMID PROGRESS**

Survey data shows that teens and young adults are more likely than past generations to support equal rights for all LGBTQ individuals, but very real barriers continue to affect students in the community.

Many LGBTQ youth still experience negative and even hostile environments at home and at school, according to a 2018 report from the Human Rights Campaign. The advocacy group surveyed roughly 12,000 students between the ages of 13 and 17 who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer. Of those students, only 24 percent reported that they could "definitely" be themselves as an LGBTQ person at home. And 70 percent had been bullied at school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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And even though college campuses are some of the most accepting places for LGBTQ individuals, completely escaping stigma, prejudice, and discrimination can be difficult.

For Dylan Lewis, the University of Mississippi alum, the Ole Miss campus—situated in Oxford, Mississippi—was one of the first places that felt like home.

"Yet there were still times when I would go out with my friends and eat dinner in Oxford and people would look at me, and I knew what they were thinking," said Lewis, now a Teach for America corps member working in Houston. "I've been called a faggot out in public before. You still have to worry about those things."

#### **How to respond:**

- **Get students excited about higher ed early on.** According to Lambda Legal—a national nonprofit dedicated to equal rights—nearly one-third of LGBTQ students drop out of high school, a rate that is three times higher than the national average. Early college awareness activities and tours can provide a protective factor for at-risk populations, including LGBTQ students, said Cailin Asip, director of admission at Hollins University (VA). "You're planting that seed and encouraging them to reach their goals and their potential," Asip said. "You're showing them a place where they'll be welcomed and supported and offering them a bit of a safe haven."
- **FOR COUNSELORS: Share information about paying for college.** Many LGBTQ students find themselves both emotionally and fiscally estranged from their families. One-third of LGBTQ students seeking financial aid reported delaying college or graduate studies due to concerns about affordability or debt, according to a 2013 research

brief published by the Point Foundation, a national LGBTQ scholarship fund. Of those students, 41.3 percent cited a lack of family support as the reason they were unable to pay for school. And recent surveys have found that the average LGBTQ student carries more debt than their straight or cisgender peers. Check in regularly with students with the understanding that they may benefit from more face-to-face meetings and assistance as they apply for financial aid and scholarships.

- **FOR COLLEGES: Make access a priority.** Recruit students at college fairs and connect with CBOs that cater to LGBTQ teens. Ensure all admission officers—including student workers—learn about implicit bias and undergo safe space and ally training. And use student tours to show how inclusive your campus is by highlighting gender-neutral housing, the campus LGBTQ center, the ally-trained health center staff, and other attributes. In addition, if your school doesn't already use holistic review, consider its benefits. "For LGBTQ students who have experienced homelessness or bullying, test scores and grades aren't going to tell the whole story," Asip said. "Look for other ways to determine a student's will and desire to succeed."

### A 'NEW' POPULATION, WITH NEW NEEDS

Transgender students are growing in numbers and prominence within the LGBTQ community. And, in many cases, serving these students with respect and dignity requires an institutional commitment that goes beyond efforts already in place to welcome gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to campus.

"The challenges that transgender students are facing are very different," Baum said. "Some of that comes from the relative newness of transgender students and the transgender community in the public consciousness... and then there are some real roadblocks that are technical roadblocks."

Since 2016, The Common Application, the Universal College Application, and the Coalition application have included optional questions that allow transgender and gender nonconforming students to share their gender identity with college admission offices. But at many institutions, a student's birth name or sex will be entered into other university databases—increasing the chances they will be misgendered by university staff or faculty. The issue? Dated campus computer systems that don't "talk" to one another or offer only limited gender options.

Investing in new technology and updating data entry policies can help solve the issue. In the meantime, adopting other affirmative practices—such as offering gender-neutral bathrooms or residential options—can go a long way toward showing trans students your campus is safe and supportive.

When it came time to search for colleges, Wisconsin native Ashton Whitaker was looking for three things: a solid engineering program, supportive institutional policies, and an active LGBTQ campus organization that would have his back.

As a high school student, Whitaker, who is transgender, made national headlines when his school district refused to let him use the boy's bathroom. He ultimately prevailed in the matter, with a discrimination lawsuit settled in his favor following a lengthy appeals process.

"I wanted to ensure that this wasn't going to be a problem again, because, you know, once is enough," said Whitaker, now a sophomore at the University of Wisconsin—Madison.

"There's no college out there that's going to be absolutely pristine and perfect with its trans students," he added. "But you want to make sure that they are going to support you if you run into an issue."

#### How to respond:

- **Keep learning and look for teachable moments.** Learn about the community and educate yourself on the terms and pronouns that trans and gender nonconforming students use to describe themselves. Add your own pronouns to your email signature line or business card. "It will help trans students feel a connection with you," Asip explained. "And even if you're emailing with a student who might not identify (as trans), (including pronouns) allows them to open their mind and educate themselves."
- **FOR COUNSELORS: Reach out to your admission colleagues.** In some cases, transgender students may be out to their friends and teachers, but not yet out to their parents. As a result, the applications they submit may not tell the full story in terms of what they are looking for in a college and the types of supports they would benefit from. "On the college side, we want to know as much as we can about the students we're admitting," Baum said. "If there's some essential ingredient that isn't in (the student's application), on the college side we really welcome the chance to have a phone call or some other kind of conversation with the counselor." Chatting with admission officers about a student's family relationships can also help avoid accidental outings, Asip said. "If a student is not out to their family when they're going through this process but shares with us their identity and true gender (rather than legal name and sex), there's a danger that their acceptance letter (addressed to their new name) could out them to their family," she explained. "That can create challenges for the student, so the more information we have the better."
- **FOR COLLEGES: Take action.** Invest in computer systems that allow trans students to seamlessly share their name and gender identity with all campus offices. Push for policies and practices that support and affirm the identities of transgender and gender nonconforming students. Today, approximately 150 campuses offer some form of gender-neutral restrooms and over 200 provide gender-neutral housing options, according to Campus Answers, a higher education compliance training company based in Texas that provides guidance regarding Title IX, sexual harassment, diversity, and associated topics. "Like all other students in the college admission process, trans students are just looking for a place they'll belong," Miller said. 🏡

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