



CLASSROOM CLIMATE FOR GLBTA STUDENTS

Examples of bias in the classroom

Sexual orientation and/or gender identity discrimination in the classroom can take two basic forms: discrimination against GLBTA people in general terms and discrimination against individuals or a classroom group. Examples of discrimination against GLBTA people in general terms include the following:

- Explicit use of derogatory terms or stereotypic generalizations;
- Use of perceived "humorous" images or statements that demean or trivialize GLBTA people;
- Reinforcement of stereotypes through subtle, often unintentional means, such as by using:
- Unexamined use of classroom examples in which GLBTA people are portrayed in stereotypical occupations;
- Refusal to allow GLBTA issues or people to be discussed regardless of relevance to topic;
- Continuous use of heterosexist terms that foster the assumption that all people are heterosexual. Such assumptions effectively eliminate GLBTA people as subjects of discourse. Even if the elimination is unintentional, it nonetheless renders GLBTA people peripheral or invisible;
- Refusal to use correct words, name and pronouns that individuals want to be used.

Although much discrimination against GLBTA people is intangible or unconscious it is critically important that it not be dismissed or ignored. If bias goes unaddressed it not only puts GLBTA students at an educational disadvantage, it reinforces the feeling that the classroom and the campus are unsafe, and it may have other lasting effects. Such actions may discourage both classroom participation and the seeking of help outside of class or cause GLBTA students to avoid or drop classes or to change majors, undermining their scholarly and career aspirations. In the worst case scenario, unintended actions can add to a sexual minority student's despair and feelings of hopelessness that can result in self-harming choices and actions.

What Individual Faculty Members Can Do To Improve Classroom Climate

GLBTA students seek a "safe learning environment," i.e. a classroom environment where they know they can "come out" without facing discrimination from the instructor or unfettered harassment by fellow students. The following are some ways individuals can be proactive in creating a classroom environment respectful of all students regardless of their sexual orientation or identity.

1. Consider including the AU non-discrimination statement in your syllabus:
www.american.edu/ocl/glbtarc/Resources-AU-Policies.cfm
2. Don't assume that everyone in the classroom is heterosexual or traditionally gendered. GLBTA people as a whole are not easily identifiable. As a result, heterosexual students often erroneously believe that they do not personally know any GLBTA people, so feel free to make anti-GLBTA remarks. GLBTA individuals are present in all segments of society, which means



that in any given class, there will likely be a significant number of GLBTA undergraduates. Since the DC area is known for its generally supportive GLBTA community, the number of GLBTA students at AU may be higher than at some state universities.

3. Use inclusive language (for example when referring to relationships, families, sex, gender, health, literature, history, art, etc.) in your syllabus and in your class presentations. Specific examples include: instead of mother and father, consider using parents; if discussing marriage as a social institution, also discuss civil unions; if discussing women's health, gender, sexuality, femininity, masculinity, etc., include relevant information pertinent to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender health and sexuality.
4. Don't rely on GLBTA students to initiate discussions on GLBTA topics. Often students will not bring up GLBTA issues if they are unsure if it is safe to do so. Following the other guidelines listed here will help establish an atmosphere where students feel comfortable initiating discussions on this topic. But don't hesitate to raise GLBT issues yourself first, for that is generally the signal students need in order to feel safe contributing to the discussion.
5. If a student in class makes negative remarks or tells jokes that "put down" GLBTA persons, model how to respond with civility and mutual respect and in a manner that enhances the learning of all students. These can be treated as excellent "educational moments." If you encounter a biased remark, you might:
 - a. Express your own discomfort with the comment and explain why.
 - b. Encourage discussion about stereotypes in general and the ways that they can be harmful.
 - c. Supply the class with information that helps dispel myths about GLBTA individuals.
6. Be prepared to respond to a transgender students' requests to use their chosen name and pronoun when addressing them. Transgender students had begun approaching faculty members at AU (often prior to the first class) asking them to use their chosen name, and pronouns consistent with their chosen gender. They also may present a letter from the GLBTA Resource Center requesting that their identity, chosen name and pronouns be respected. Understanding this request can be challenging if you are unfamiliar with transgender identity issues, but it is of paramount importance to the student's feelings of safety and inclusion. Learning more about transgender issues and identities can greatly help you be more successful at supporting these students in your classroom. The GLBTA Resource Center has trained staff members who are available to provide a briefing on gender identity and expression to any group who requests it.
7. Pass around a sign in sheet asking for their preferred name or "nickname" and preferred pronoun at the beginning of class. Try not to call the roll or read the roster aloud until you have given them a chance to state what they prefer to be called, in case the roster represents a prior name.
8. If a student has an old name they do not use that you are aware of because you knew them before they changed it or because it is on the roster, do not use it or reveal it to others. Well



meaning comments like “I knew Gina when she was Bill,” even if meant supportively, reveal what might feel like personal information to the student, and unnecessarily draw attention to their identity.

9. If you make a mistake about someone’s pronoun, correct yourself. Going on as if it did not happen is actually less respectful than making the correction. This also saves the person who was misidentified from having to correct an incorrect pronoun assumption that has now been planted in the minds of classmates or anyone else who heard the mistake. As professors, especially, it is essential that we model respectful behavior.
10. If you meet a student and you are not sure of the proper pronoun for them, ask. One way to do this is by sharing your own. “I use masculine pronouns. I want to make sure to address you correctly, how do you like to be addressed?” This may seem like a strange thing to do but a person who often experiences being addressed incorrectly may see it as a sign of respect that you are interested in getting it right rather than making assumptions.
11. If appropriate to your course content, note the existence of GLBTA related programs on campus just as you might mention other lectures, forums, or events on campus.
12. Discuss the stereotypes in textbooks. Students should be encouraged to note when assigned texts contain biased or erroneous information. This contributes to the development of critical thinking skills, which are vital to the educational process. Point out these stereotypes to other instructors.
13. If you provide information to students about campus resources, be sure to include GLBTA resources like the GLBTA Resource Center and Queers and Allies, the GLBTA student organization.

Ways to incorporate GLBT Material into the Curriculum

1. Examine the course text and materials to assure that they don’t unjustifiably ignore or marginalize topics and perspectives associated with sexual orientation and identity.
2. Make explicit reference to the appropriateness of GLBT topics for discussions and for course assignments such as term papers, reports, and presentations. Citing examples of papers, projects, or reports from past semesters and a verbal presentation by the course instructor at the beginning of the semester can reinforce whatever is written in the syllabus.
3. Find out what famous GLBTA people have contributed to your area of study.
4. Incorporate information about GLBTA professionals and their contributions to your discipline into your materials.
5. Find out what professional associations related to your discipline have GLBTA committees, working groups, organizations, or interest groups.



6. Collect resource materials (people to contact, books dealing with GLBT issues & topics and/or by GLBTA authors).
7. Use research that deals with GLBT issues in your course content.
8. Stay informed about GLBT issues and concerns in your area.
9. Include a journal or book reference in your syllabus that relates to GLBT history, culture, and concerns that is pertinent to the content of the course. Of course GLBTA students don't expect such references to be pertinent for every course but do see them as relevant and important in many social science, humanities, arts, and literature courses.
10. Encourage students to do research on GLBTA topics. If a student approaches you with a proposal to conduct research on a topic in GLBTA studies that is relevant to the course, do not discourage the student from doing so. Until the past two decades, very little research had been done on GLBTA topics, so there are great opportunities for both you and your students to do groundbreaking work in this area.

Example of a faculty letter from the GLBTA Resource Center

Dear Professor:

I am writing to you at the request of _____ who is a student in your class this semester. On your roster this student is listed as _____. (Student name) ___ has asked me to confidentially share with you that he is transgender and would prefer to be called _____ and prefers the use of male pronouns. _____ has experienced reluctance from some of his professors in the past to honor his wish to be referred to as _____ and in turn has experienced chastisement from his peers. I truly appreciate your honoring this student's request by using his preferred name and male pronouns.

Thank you in advance for your support of an inclusiveness classroom. Please feel free to call or e-mail me if you have questions or need additional information. I can be reached at 202-885-3372 or via email at sara.bendoraitis@american.edu.

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