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# SUPPORTING LGBTQ+ STUDENTS' COLLEGE SEARCH

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## Introduction

All students seeking higher education look at multiple factors in finding the “right fit.” These can include cost and financial aid opportunities, distance from family and home, education opportunities and majors, athletics and extracurricular activities, and much more. For lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) students, and particularly Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) who are LGBTQ+, their identities are a major factor in finding the “right fit.” The college search process can look a little different as these students and their families navigate varying levels of LGBTQ+ inclusiveness as well as acceptance and celebration of BIPOC identities, in addition to pro-LGBTQ+ and anti-LGBTQ+ state laws across the country.

According to [HRC's 2023 Youth Report](#), 80.7% of LGBTQ+ youth stated they wanted to attend college. However, 29.2% of LGBTQ+ youth reported their fear that their sexual orientation and/or gender identity would negatively impact their college opportunities. Additionally, 93.8% of LGBTQ+ youth reported that it would be important that the college they attend has an LGBTQ+ inclusive non-discrimination policy and/or an LGBTQ+ resource center on campus for students. LGBTQ+ students are looking for a college environment that will not only affirm their identities, but celebrate them, provide them with inclusive services and resources, and ensure they have a positive experience in the surrounding community outside of campus. For some LGBTQ+ students, college provides a potential opportunity to be more out and public about their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. This includes students who are not publicly out at school and/or to their family where college may be the place where they come out to others including their families back home. The following guide provides information and resources for college counselors supporting students in their college search process.

## EVALUATING COLLEGE LGBTQ+ INCLUSIVENESS

While there is no federal law that explicitly protects LGBTQ+ people from discrimination in education, numerous federal courts, the United States Department of Justice, and the United States Department of Education have interpreted Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1974 (Title IX) to prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. This interpretation is consistent with the Supreme Court of the United States 2020 decision in *Bostock v. Clayton County* that a federal employment law prohibiting sex discrimination also protects employees from sexual orientation and gender identity discrimination. Title IX applies to all educational institutions that accept federal funding. Virtually all colleges and universities take federal funds such as federal

student aid. Counselors should note that Title IX contains a religious exemption that allows religious schools to enforce policies or take actions that would otherwise be considered discriminatory if those policies or actions are related to the religious tenets of the organization. Numerous religious colleges have taken the position that being LGBTQ+ is inconsistent with the tenets of their faith. The Department of Education maintains a public record of correspondence with colleges that have notified the Department of their intent to claim an exemption. That record can be viewed at <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/correspondence/other.html>. Importantly, not all religious colleges inform the Department about their intentions.

When evaluating a college campus's LGBTQ+ inclusiveness it's important to understand what is most important to the student. Here are some examples of college policies and practices that LGBTQ+ students are looking for when searching for the "right fit" college:

- + **Student Housing** - LGBTQ+ students, and specifically transgender and non-binary students, are often looking at student housing that includes Gender-Inclusive options that affirm students' gender identities regardless of their legal gender marker.



According to Campus Pride, over 450 college campuses provide gender-inclusive housing, which allow students to live in residence halls beyond assignments based on sex assigned at birth. Not all of these housing options are available to first-year students, and prospective students interested in this type of housing should connect with prospective colleges to learn the particular policies. See the full list here - <https://www.campuspride.org/tpc/gender-inclusive-housing/>.

Further, many schools are now offering LGBTQ+ housing options that create dorms and living spaces that are majorly or exclusively occupied by LGBTQ+ students and their allies. Notable colleges and universities include [Cornell University](#), [George Mason University](#), and [Dartmouth College](#) and many more across the country. Though there is not a full directory of schools that offer LGBTQ+ housing, [BestColleges](#) has created a list highlighting several. If students are interested in these housing opportunities, research can be done through web searches or by connecting with the schools directly through emails, phone calls, and in-person visits.

- + **Lived or Chosen Name & Pronouns** - Many transgender and non-binary students want the ability to use their lived or chosen name on class rosters, email addresses, student ID cards, diplomas, and more without having to legally change their name. Additionally, many transgender and non-binary students want their pronouns respected on campus and look for colleges that include pronouns on class rosters and student directories and allow students to update the pronouns they go by without having to legally change their gender marker.
- + **LGBTQ+ Student Groups and/or LGBTQ+ Centers** - Many LGBTQ+ students want a college campus that has programs, resources, and an on-campus social life that affirms and celebrates their identities. They therefore look for colleges that have active LGBTQ+ student groups and/or LGBTQ+ Centers/Spaces.



### The Spectrum Center at the University of Michigan

Founded in 1971, the Spectrum Center at the University of Michigan was the first LGBTQ+ resource center on a college campus. The center provides support and resources to LGBTQ+ students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The center puts on educational programs such as Transgender Awareness Week and LGBTQ+ History Month.

Learn more about this center - <https://spectrumcenter.umich.edu/>.

- + **LGBTQ+ Studies & Courses** - Some LGBTQ+ students are interested in learning more about their identities and community and possibly even majoring in LGBTQ+ studies. Even if students are not interested in majoring in LGBTQ+ studies, some may be looking for LGBTQ+ courses as part of their overall course of study.
- + **Access to LGBTQ+ and Allied Faculty and Staff** - Some LGBTQ+ students want to engage and learn from LGBTQ+ faculty and staff and are looking for LGBTQ+ faculty and staff organizations on college campuses. Additionally, many LGBTQ+ students appreciate programs like Safe Zone or Safe Space that provide training and resources to faculty and staff and identify allied faculty and staff with stickers and ally lists.
- + **Emergency Financial Support & Basic Needs** - Unfortunately, LGBTQ+ students are sometimes disconnected from their family and/or the financial support from their family. These students may not be out to their family yet and plan to come out once they go to college and for others they may already be disconnected from family during or prior to the application process. Either way, some LGBTQ+ students are looking for colleges that provide emergency financial support for students in these situations. Additionally, some are looking for colleges that assist with meeting students' basic needs including food pantries, clothing closets, and more.

### LGBTQ+ Scholarship Database

For LGBTQ+ students seeking scholarship support, HRC maintains an LGBTQ+ Student Scholarship Database with hundreds of scholarships designed to support LGBTQ+ youth. Learn more here - <https://www.hrc.org/resources/scholarships>.

- + **LGBTQ+ Inclusive Healthcare** - Many college campuses provide on-campus health care and LGBTQ+ students often want to ensure these resources are inclusive of LGBTQ+ experiences and needs. This can include access to gender-affirming care as well as inclusive sexual health services including PrEP to prevent HIV.

### HRC's HBCU PrEP Ambassador Program



**HBCU**  
PrEP Peer Educator Initiative

A perfect example of LGBTQ+ inclusive healthcare services available on college campuses is the HRC HBCU PrEP Peer Educator Initiative. The program was launched in 2022 with 11 student ambassadors representing seven HBCU campuses. The student hosted presentations, parties, and workshops to educate students about their sexual health, destigmatize sex, and link students to at-home STI testing, reproductive care, and PrEP. Each successive cohort focuses on a new selection of HBCUs with the 2023 cohort once again representing seven colleges including two new campuses.

Learn more about the program here – <https://www.hrc.org/resources/hbcu-prep-ambassadors>

Here are some strategies and resources for finding the LGBTQ+ inclusiveness of a college campus:

- + **Utilize the College Website** - Simply searching a college's website for key terms such as "gay" or "transgender" can often be helpful in identifying resources and policies for LGBTQ+ students on a particular campus.
- + **Campus Pride Index** - The Campus Pride Index is an assessment tool that measures the policies, practices, and resources for LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff of college campuses. Colleges submit their information and receive a rating of 0-5 stars from Campus Pride. The tool is helpful in not only identifying LGBTQ+ inclusive campuses but also in comparing the LGBTQ+ inclusiveness of multiple campuses. It's important to note that not all colleges participate in the index, but it does give prospective students a good sense of what a campus can offer.

- + **HRC's HBCU Program** - As of 2023, HRC has worked with 1 / 3 of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Prospective students looking to attend an HBCU should review the campuses that have pledged to support LGBTQ+ students and work with HRC.
- + **Connect with LGBTQ+ Resource Center and/or Student Organization** - Utilizing a college's website or reviewing assessment tools like the Campus Pride Index and HRC's HBCU Program can provide a good sense of LGBTQ+ resources as well as policies and practices. However, these tools don't necessarily give prospective students a sense of the campus climate and what it means to be an LGBTQ+ student on that campus. Thus, it can be helpful for prospective students to connect with a college's LGBTQ+ Resource Center and/or an LGBTQ+ Student Organization to talk with and ask questions of LGBTQ+ people who are already on that college campus.

## AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

As multiple-marginalized LGBTQ+ students navigate their college search, they are often forced to choose between different parts of their identities. When looking for the "right fit" college, counselors should take an intersectional approach and consider the entirety of a student's identity including, but not limited to, their race and ethnicity, socio-economic status and/or ability to pay, and faith or religion. Every college and university approaches LGBTQ+ inclusion differently, however, counselors should not discount Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), and faith-based institutions because of the assumption that they are not LGBTQ+ inclusive. For BIPOC LGBTQ+ students and LGBTQ+ students of faith, finding a college that centers, even only in part, their identity, can be very affirming and provide a better fit.

When attending predominantly white institutions, private and traditional schools, or secular schools some students mask parts of their identities in order to fit in. This can cause increased anxiety and leave some students struggling in classes and social settings as they try to grapple with intersectional aspects of their identities. On the other hand, when they are able to express all parts of themselves, many students are able to prosper in collegiate settings far better. There is less emphasis put on worrying about safety and fewer students feel the need to code switch allowing them to develop self-confidence and be successful in their academic, professional, and personal endeavors.

## Historically Black Colleges and Universities

HBCUs strive to create inclusive environments that cater to the diverse needs of Black LGBTQ+ students. These institutions often foster a sense of community and acceptance through support groups, resource centers, and inclusive policies that speak to both the Black and LGBTQ+ identities. Additionally, many HBCUs offer educational initiatives and events that promote understanding, awareness, and advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights, ensuring that these students feel respected and supported in expressing themselves while receiving the academic and social support they need to thrive within the HBCU community. A perfect example of this is that attending

an HBCU allows many Black youth to begin building out their network by meeting established Black professionals.

“When it came to picking a university, comfort was a main factor. I wanted a college where, for the first time in my life, I wouldn't be the only black girl in the classroom. Additionally, I wanted a university where I could openly express my queer identity and feel safe. Prairie View A&M University was not only a HBCU I knew would have a diverse student population, but I was also informed about the campus culture by fellow students of an LGBTQ+ organization called Spectrum. They assured me that I would fit right in if I chose to make this my home away from home.

-Alise, Youth Ambassador Alum

### Minority Serving Institutions

Minority-serving institutions (MSIs) are dedicated to meeting the unique needs of students from diverse backgrounds. These institutions prioritize inclusive environments, providing tailored support systems, culturally sensitive resources, and programs that celebrate diversity. MSIs often offer mentorship opportunities, specialized services, and a strong sense of community to empower students, ensuring they feel valued, supported, and equipped to succeed academically and personally within the university setting. Though many would conflate HBCUs with MSIs due their connections to marginalized communities, they are not synonymous. MSIs represent a large variety of ethnicities including Indigenous Americans, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, and Latiné people with each group offered culturally relevant support by their schools.

### Community Colleges

Community colleges offer many students the opportunity to access higher education at reduced costs. For LGBTQ+ students who have lower socioeconomic backgrounds or who may be financially independent from their family of origin, community colleges can provide a quality higher education at a fraction of the cost. For some LGBTQ+ students who have a strong relationship with their families, community colleges can also allow students to stay with their affirming family and attend classes instead of attending a traditional institution with housing that may not affirm a students' gender identity. Further, those students who are looking to jumpstart their careers are able to forego the expenses of traditional colleges or universities by getting associate degrees or certifications. As many students weigh the costs of education, community college offers a far more affordable alternative.

### Faith-Based Institutions

Faith-based institutions are campuses where students learn about their faith and practice it safely while getting all the benefits of a traditional college or university. Often, religious schools integrate faith with academic life, social events, and other activities. Though there is a tense history

between organized religion and the LGBTQ+ movement, many faith based institutions have made a concerted effort to make their campuses as inclusive as possible through LGBTQ+ affirming policies and initiatives. Many LGBTQ+ students may choose to go to a religious school due to deeply held personal beliefs they want to express freely without fear of persecution.

## TAKING INTO ACCOUNT STATE & LOCAL LAWS

In 2023, over 570 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in state houses across the country and 80 of those bills became law. This prompted HRC to issue its first ever [National State of Emergency for LGBTQ+ Americans](#) noting the dangerous laws stripping rights and dignity away from LGBTQ+ people. Many of these laws target transgender youth through bans on medically necessary and age-appropriate gender-affirming care, curriculum censorship (including removal of LGBTQ+ studies and African-American studies) in K-12 schools, but also in higher education, and the forced shuttering of identity-based resource centers (such as LGBTQ+ centers) on college campuses.

Given the hostile environment in many states, LGBTQ+ students and their families often must take into account state and local laws when searching for the “right fit” college. Counselors should encourage LGBTQ+ students and their families to consider how state and local laws will impact the student’s college experience and provide resources to research these laws. [HRC’s National State of Emergency for LGBTQ+ Americans](#) provides an overview of some of the most heinous anti-LGBTQ+ laws across the country adopted in 2023. HRC’s [State Equality Index](#) provides information about state laws that benefit or harm LGBTQ+ people. Additionally, HRC’s [Municipal Equality Index](#) provides insights into local laws and policies for over 500 cities across the US including all state capitals and the most populous cities.

Here are some key anti-LGBTQ+ laws to consider when LGBTQ+ students and their families are searching for the “right fit” college:

- + **Gender-Affirming Care** - Unfortunately, some states have worked to ban gender-affirming care for those under 18 and some states have even extended that ban to adults as well. If your student is currently accessing gender-affirming care or has plans to start accessing this care, they should take these bans into consideration. To learn more about gender-affirming care, check out HRC’s “Get the Facts on Gender Affirming Care,” - <https://www.hrc.org/resources/get-the-facts-on-gender-affirming-care>.
- + **Access to Appropriate Restrooms** - Transgender students should have access to restrooms that align with their gender identity. Additionally, non-binary students may feel more comfortable using all-gender restrooms. Sadly, some states have put in place discriminatory laws that require people to use restroom facilities that align with their sex assigned at birth and not their identity. Transgender and non-binary students should consider restroom laws in addition to campus policies and accommodations when finding the right college.
- + **LGBTQ+ and Ethnic Studies** - Some LGBTQ+ students may be interested in studying more about the community and its culture or may want to learn more about their racial and/

or ethnic identity. Unfortunately, higher education has come under attack and some states are moving to ban LGBTQ+ and Ethnic Studies from college campuses.

In addition to navigating the legal landscape of the state and city/town a college is located in, LGBTQ+ students and their families should also consider local LGBTQ+ affirming resources. Here are some key resources to consider:

- + LGBTQ+ Community Centers & Programs** - While some college campuses have LGBTQ+ resource centers or programs, there are also LGBTQ+ community centers throughout the United States. These centers can vary in size, resources, and programming offered. Visit CenterLink's database of LGBTQ+ community centers to see what options are available near campuses of interest - <https://www.lgbtqcenters.org/LGBTCenters>.
  
- + LGBTQ+ Local Businesses** - Some LGBTQ+ students may be looking for local LGBTQ+ businesses in their future college towns. From bookstores to coffee shops, LGBTQ+ businesses provide safe places for LGBTQ+ and allied people to shop and hangout. There are several directories for finding LGBTQ+ local businesses:
  - National LGBT Chamber of Commerce - <https://nglcc.org/>
  - GL Pages - <https://www.gayandlesbianpages.com/>
  - The Pink Pages - <https://thepinkpagesdirectory.com/>
  
- + LGBTQ+ Nightlife** - LGBTQ+ students will likely be interested in finding LGBTQ+ or allied nightlife in their future college town. LGBTQ+ clubs and bars have significance within the LGBTQ+ community as they are often sites for community beyond simple revelry.
  - Gay Bar Maps has listings of many LGBTQ+ nightlife options - <https://www.gaybarmaps.com/>
  - *Out Traveler* has a list of Lesbian bars chronicled with *The Lesbian Bar Project* - <https://www.outtraveler.com/nightlife/2022/11/01/here-are-final-27-surviving-lesbian-bars-us#rebelltitem5>.

## NAVIGATING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION PROCESS

During the college application process, students are often asked to share their extracurricular activities as well as share a personal statement as part of their application package. This provides LGBTQ+ students with the opportunity to highlight their identity and potentially their leadership within the community. At the same time sharing their LGBTQ+ identity in their college application will out them or share their identity with the admissions office and possibly their family if their family is helping with the application. Counselors should have a meaningful conversation with LGBTQ+ students about their comfort level being out prior to including their identity in their personal statement and/or including LGBTQ+-related extracurricular activities on their application.



**Proceed with Caution** - Unfortunately, some states have laws that require school counselors and other staff to “out” students to their families. In other words, school staff are required to share if a student is LGBTQ+, going by a different name, or requests to use a different pronoun. It is best practice to have youth lead conversations when coming out to their family and “outing” students without their permission can lead to harm, including violence. It is paramount that counselors in these states disclose this “outing requirement” to students prior to engaging in conversations about identity, so they student can make a more informed decision on what they wish to share with school staff.

The college application process can also be tricky for transgender and gender expansive students who may go by a different name or gender marker that does not align with their current legal name or gender marker. To ensure consistency and alignment with legal school transcripts and other documents, students should apply with their legal name and gender marker. However, some colleges do allow for a “nickname” or “chosen name” field, where a student can share their correct name. Additionally, they can share their correct name in their personal statement. The student should also ensure any letters of recommendation use their legal name AND their chosen name to not cause confusion.

Some transgender and gender expansive students may have already legally changed their name and/or gender marker. This can be helpful in aligning the student’s correct name and gender with their adult records. However, students and their families should work to ensure they change their legal name and gender marker not only on their driver’s license and birth certificate but also on their passport and with the Social Security Administration. Note that some states prohibit transgender people from updating their gender markers on legal documents. If the student is an immigrant they should ensure their name and gender marker is legally up to date on all immigration paperwork. Sometimes transgender and gender expansive students run into issues when their legal name and/or gender marker changes aren’t fully updated as federal loans and scholarships may use the Social Security database to verify the student’s identity.

## Conclusion

College admissions counselors play an important role in assisting students find the right college fit and this is particularly true for marginalized students such as LGBTQ+ students. Every student deserves a college experience that affirms, supports, and celebrates the fullness of their identities and college admissions counselors can help ensure that happens by taking extra time in considering a prospective student's identities in the search process.

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Project THRIVE is a collaborative effort of many national organizations, each committed to identifying opportunities within their own sphere of influence to increase awareness about and provide resources to address the unmet needs of LGBTQ+ youth, and to highlight best practices and success stories from their respective professional fields. Project THRIVE is committed to an intersectional approach in the work, and to ensure that BIPOC LGBTQ+ youth and those who are system-involved or have a history of homelessness are a priority focus. This show of force across professions is supported by leaders from the nation's largest health, education, child welfare, legal, and juvenile justice organizations and are aimed at consolidating work to address, with singular focus, the persistent challenges and barriers that not only prevent LGBTQ+ young people from thriving, but continue to compromise their health, safety, and well-being. Learn more about Project THRIVE - <https://www.hrc.org/campaigns/project-thrive>.