

CLGBTQE Reflects on Current Campus Climate and Recommendations for Practice

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Considering the upcoming visit to Penn State University Park of a speaker who has been widely criticized from positions across the political spectrum for propagating hate speech and inciting violence against women, children and racial, gender, and sexual minorities, it is critical that the Penn State community takes this moment to reflect on the harm caused by such events. As constituent members of the President's Commission on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Equity (CLGBTQE), we want to point out that such an event, though protected by the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment, exacerbates, and intensifies the lack of belonging and inclusion, as well as the sense of threat, that already shapes the experience of many minoritized communities across our Penn State campuses. The incendiary and harmful beliefs propagated by such speakers are antithetical to Penn State's values and serve to further marginalize and traumatize members of the University community already negatively impacted by the combined forces of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and transphobia. CLGBTQE supports the administration's [denouncing](#) of this speaker and their provocation of our community.

We want to take this opportunity to discuss the immediate and long-term impact of such events as they occur on our campuses, the broader context of limited safety, inclusion, and belonging that shapes the experience of sexual and gender minorities at Penn State, and CLGBTQE's data-informed recommendations for how to improve these experiences and foster a campus climate wherein we can all thrive.

Events organized around the dissemination of hate speech, while protected, harm our campus communities in a variety of ways. The intention of hate speech is to threaten, incite violence, and to intentionally inflict emotional distress that harasses, silences, and exacerbates hatred and prejudice. Thus, it prompts worry and anxiety among marginalized community members about experiencing actual, physical threats that are implicit in hate speech (McDowall, 2019). Researchers have found that the exposure of minority communities to hate speech results in diminished academic performance, increased stress, physical and mental health problems, and facilitates the reproduction and intensification of minority-exclusionary institutional spaces (Garces, Johnson, Ambriz & Bradley, 2021). When exposed to such events, minoritized students risk more thoroughly internalizing the derogatory messages presented. As these events will continue to arise, we are deeply concerned about their negative impact, especially given the findings of the [2020 Penn State Community Survey](#) which demonstrate that a significant majority of sexual and gender minority community members experience higher levels of prejudice, discrimination, and harassment, feel a significantly diminished sense of campus belonging, and do not trust that University administration will take

appropriate action to address these issues. These are only the highlights; the full report can be accessed [here](#).

While we cannot bar such events from occurring, we can take institutional and personal actions to mitigate their negative impact and shift campus climate towards a more robust inclusion of gender and sexual minorities. In a recent presentation to President Barron and the President's Council on how to best address the troubling findings of the 2020 Community Survey, the Commission recommended the following measures be taken to increase belonging for sexual and gender diverse communities across all Penn State campuses:

- the creation and funding of an LGBTQIA Scholarly Research Center or Consortium linking the 24 campuses with a unified fellowship program as a primary purpose.
- the hiring of a new position within the Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity (CSGD) supporting gender diverse, transgender, and non-binary education and support while also assisting in the direct buildout of services for Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC).
- an interdisciplinary cluster hire of tenure-stream faculty with specializations in research concerning transgender and gender-diverse communities.
- the creation of Employee Resource Groups/Communities of Belonging for Penn State staff, including a group dedicated to honoring sexual and gender diversity.
- robust fostering of student-led affinity/identity space outside of administrative spaces allowing students to foster their advocacy, activism, and collective community organizing.

We believe that our institutional response to these situations must actively promote the inclusion of sexual and gender minority communities, and that this means advancing policies and practices that actualize such inclusion. Such a commitment is long-term and ongoing, however, events and speakers that are meant to detract us from progress, must not prevail.

In the interim, we encourage our communities to attend the *Love is Louder* event on November 3rd from 6:00–10:00 p.m. in Heritage Hall within the HUB Robeson Center and to connect with the [Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity](#), which offers significant ongoing support for sexual and gender diverse communities at Penn State. As we move forward and engage in deeper dialogue on the community impact of these types of events, it will be critical for our communities to engage in discussions and planning that

offers trauma-informed opportunities (open forums, teach-ins, departmental programming, symbolic messaging, etc.) that support our students, faculty, and staff as we continue to further our collective commitment as a university community to equity-minded practice.

References

- Garces, L. M., Johnson, B. D., Ambriz, E., & Bradley, D. (2021). Repressive legalism: How postsecondary administrators' responses to on-campus hate speech undermine a focus on inclusion. *American Educational Research Journal*, 58(5), 1032-1069. <https://doi.org/10.3102/00028312211027586>
- McDowall, M. (2019). Hate speech on campus: Reframing the discourse. *Journal of Intellectual Freedom and Privacy*, 4(1), 14-17. doi:<http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/jifp.v4i1.6906>