

Best Practices for Advising LGBTQ Pre-Health Students

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While health professions programs have long strived to enroll diverse classes of students each year, momentum continues to grow around recruiting and supporting LGBTQ students in particular. Accordingly, it is critical health professions advisors be prepared to advise and support LGBTQ students. However, some advisors – both new and experienced – may not feel fully equipped yet for this kind of advising. The learning process is never complete, but this resource aims to give health professions advisors somewhere to start.

First, evaluate your own preparedness to advise LGBTQ pre-health students and consider the following steps:

- **Get comfortable with terms and concepts relevant to the LGBTQ community**
Effectively advising LGBTQ students requires, at minimum, a baseline level of knowledge around key terms and concepts. Take the time to get familiar with common LGBTQ vocabulary – especially various identities – and major concepts, such as the difference between sexual orientation and gender identity or personal pronoun use. A few resources are included below.
- **Consider the depth of your relationship with the student**
How well do you know this student? Well enough to advise on matters related to their identity? First, it can be meaningful to thank a student for sharing their LGBTQ identity with you – a sign of trust. If welcomed, take the time to get to know the student better before jumping into an advisory role; explore topics such as their comfort with their identity, motivation, and support systems.
- **Assess how comfortable a student is with their/his/her identity**
Private concerns placed in a public forum can be difficult for students who are not truly prepared to discuss them. The application process may not be the right time for a student to go through very personal identity development. Keep this in mind when advising students who are considering sharing an LGBTQ identity on their applications.
- **Consider if you are making any assumptions and work to eliminate biases**
LGBTQ people are not a monolith. One student's experience with an LGBTQ identity may be very different than another's, particularly in combination with other identities such as race/ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Be mindful of intersectional identities and try to check any implicit biases you might have. Recognizing where you might be making assumptions or have blind spots is key to eliminating any biases in your advising.
- **Assess how a student's LGBTQ identity may be connected to their/his/her educational and professional goals**
If a student's LGBTQ identity is central to their motivation to pursue their health profession of choice, there is a natural frame in which they might discuss it. A student may have also been very involved in a student group or research relevant to their identity. In some cases, though, a student's LGBTQ identity may be unrelated to their educational or professional goals. Help students explore these connections to determine how or where

it might be appropriate to share an identity if they so choose.

- **Consider how or where a student may share an LGBTQ identity during application**
Application processes present many opportunities for a student to share an LGBTQ identity, and what is right for each student will vary. Some might be prepared to discuss an identity on their primary application, such as in a personal statement, particularly if it is central to their motivation. Others might prefer to be more selective, sharing their identity only with certain schools, such as on a secondary application. Still others may prefer to discuss their identity during an interview, where they are better able to control their narrative by getting to know their interviewer a bit before opening up. Encourage students to explore what might be most comfortable for them.
- **Explore the ways you can support LGBTQ students**
It is important not to assume LGBTQ students need a certain kind of support. Rather, consider the ways you might be able to support LGBTQ students and ask them what kind of support they need, if any. A few ways an advisor might support an LGBTQ student: Connect them with an LGBTQ student group or a similarly-identified mentor, direct them to additional relevant information or resources, show willingness to learn with them.

Common Questions LGBTQ Students May Have

- Should I be “out” on my application?
- If I decide to be “out,” how should I share my identity during application?
- If I decide to share my identity, how will schools use that information?
- Could I be discriminated against if I am out on my application?
- What resources are available to me as an LGBTQ applicant?
- How can I tell if a school will be supportive of my identity?

Three Key Pieces of Advice for LGBTQ Applicants

1. Being “out” on an application is a personal decision, and there is no right or wrong decision. You should feel good about the decision you reach.
2. If you decide to share your LGBTQ identity on an application, carefully consider the extent to which you will discuss it and in what context.
3. Find a school where you will be comfortable, embraced, and supported living and learning in whatever degree of “out” you want to be during your training.

Other Considerations

- **Inclusive message and environment**
Have you and/or your office been intentional about creating a diverse and inclusive environment in which LGBTQ students would feel comfortable being themselves? Does your mission convey a message welcoming and acknowledging students of all identities?
- **Physical space**
Is your physical office a space where a student might feel comfortable discussing their identity with you? Is it private enough? Could you add a symbol of inclusivity and

openness to such conversations, such as an Ally sticker?

- **Digital resources**

Evaluate your office's online presence and see if there are opportunities to add your own resources for LGBTQ students or link to external resources.

Additional Resources

- [LGBTQ + Pre-Med \(Northwestern University\)](#) – The Health Professions Advising office at Northwestern has developed a centralized resource hub for LGBTQ pre-medical students. The site includes discussion of common questions and guidance on finding the right fit in a medical school, among other resources.
- [Glossary of terms \(Human Rights Campaign\)](#)
- [What are personal pronouns and why do they matter?](#)

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