

# TIPS FOR TEACHERS:

University of Vermont, LGBTQA Services  
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## CLASSROOM CLIMATE FOR LGBTQ STUDENTS

### Introduction

A faculty member who wishes to be respectful and inclusive of sexual and gender minorities in their classroom often does so without any certain knowledge of the sexual orientations of their students. While a person's gender identity might be assumed to be more visually discernible than sexual orientation, more teachers every year are surprised by students' requests regarding use of gendered pronouns and inclusion of transgender experiences and perspectives in course curriculum.

This difficult situation is made even harder by the fact that our larger culture continues to celebrate humor full of negative images of sexual minority people. Many institutions provide little or no guidance on inclusiveness and religious institutions aren't alone in tolerating bigotry and discrimination against sexual minority people. It is still legal in 33 states to fire someone based on his or her sexual orientation and legal in 43 to fire someone based on gender identity or expression. None of this helps faculty members, even those with the best intentions, to establish a classroom culture that must considerably exceed standards of civility set in our larger society. It is no wonder then that a college or university classroom where information and knowledge are dispensed equitably to LGBTQ students continues to be the exception.

Students frequently report that comments or behaviors of a faculty member, or of other students demean LGBTQ people or exclude them from full participation in the classroom. Occasionally these comments are intentional, but most of the time they result from a lack of information. Sometimes a professor allows comments or actions by students that single out or ignore lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) issues or people to go unchallenged. This kind of often-inadvertent behavior can contribute to LGBTQ students feeling unsafe in the classroom and interfere with them reaching their full academic potential.

While many of our society's institutions have remained biased against sexual and gender minority people, much of the popular media available to young adults has become more inclusive and young people are coming out at much younger ages. LGBTQ culture, language, and politics have changed dramatically during recent decades and continue to change at a rapid pace. Attention to bullying in K-12 schools is increasing and at least some students are arriving on campus more knowledgeable about sexual minority people and issues than previous generations in our society were permitted to be. It can be difficult for an undergraduate student who is aware of LGBTQ people and issues to understand e.g., how a psychologist could do research on romantic relationships, but exclude same-sex relationships from that research. That

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student might be equally shocked by a political science, sociology, or history class that studies the issue of civil rights without mentioning the civil rights battles being waged across the country at this very moment regarding gay marriage and the right for LGBTQ people to live free from discrimination.

Classroom teachers today struggle to respond to the issues raised by students who are knowledgeable about LGBTQ issues, and also to students who take their cues from a larger culture that continues to accept open expression of stigma and bias about homosexuality non-normative gender identity. It is not uncommon for a teacher to be confronted on the one hand for not being inclusive enough of LGBTQ perspectives and experiences, only to be confronted by other students for discussing LGBTQ issues too much. In fact, what many teachers who work at inclusiveness report is that even a few sporadic mentions of LGBTQ issues will sometimes elicit negative comments on evaluations from a vocal minority of students who remain uncomfortable with LGBTQ issues. It is because of all of these challenges that we have compiled this guide to assist UVM's classroom teachers in making our classrooms more conducive learning environments for LGBTQ students and the majority of their heterosexual peers, and to assist teachers in managing the controversy that can arise regarding a student's right to not be exposed to information about LGBTQ people.

## **The Role of Faculty**

Faculty members have the power to control many events and interactions in their classrooms, and in doing so they transmit not only objective information but also attitudes and emotions. Much discriminatory behavior is not deliberate since most teachers consciously wish to treat all students fairly. Information and attitudes are conveyed or implied via what is said and what is not said, what is included in the course curriculum and what is not. Students will assume an attitude at times erroneously, simply because a teacher was not in the best of moods on a day that a particular topic was being discussed. A faculty member is the architect of the student's learning experience, when she creates the structure and content of a course. She is the facilitator of the dynamic learning process in the classroom, when guiding discussion, and when providing mentoring that guides individual students' learning processes. This intense intellectual exchange is also a personal, human exchange, that conveys to students implicit and explicit values and assumptions that underlie all of the teacher's choices, even those the teacher has not examined herself.

The challenge of achieving inclusiveness for LGBTQ perspectives and experiences begins with the use of language and assumptions that are the very fabric of our heteronormative (the assumption that all intimacy is based in heterosexual pairings, and the ritualizing and exclusive focus on everything associated with heterosexual pairing) culture, along with language and assumptions built on a presumption of a gender binary (i.e. he/she, his/hers, man/woman). It is virtually impossible to have even a basic conversation without introducing one or both of these sets of related cultural constructs. A well-intentioned classroom teacher, for the most part unintentionally, risks actively engaging in perpetuating these very social constructs that contribute to the oppression of LGBTQ individuals in society simply in the way he or she attempts to set a friendly tone on the first day of class, chatting casually with each student in an attempt to get to know them while reading names off the class roster.

While this scenario could sound hopelessly daunting, our hope is that members of our faculty will embrace these challenges and read on in this guide in order to begin, or continue, to learn how to make UVM's classrooms places where students feel free to explore gender and sexual orientation constructs, issues, and ideas fully.

Because bias regarding gender variant people and non-heterosexual people is the norm in our society, we felt it might be helpful to start by providing some basic examples of how bias might be perceived or assumed by students in the classroom.

### **Examples of bias in the classroom**

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

Examples of discrimination against LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ people;
- Reinforcement of stereotypes through subtle, often unintentional means, such as by using:
  - unexamined use of classroom examples in which LGBTQ people are portrayed in stereotypical occupations;
  - refusal to allow LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ people as subjects of discourse. Even if the elimination is unintentional, it nonetheless renders LGBTQ people peripheral or invisible.

Although much discrimination against LGBTQ people is intangible or unconscious it is critically important that it not be dismissed or ignored. If bias goes unaddressed it not only puts LGBTQ 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, cause LGBTQ 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.

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## What Individual Faculty Members Can Do To Improve Classroom Climate

LGBTQ 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 any or all of the following in your syllabus:***
  - a. The UVM non-discrimination statement  
[http://www.uvm.edu/%7Euvmpg/ppg/general\\_html/nondisc.html](http://www.uvm.edu/%7Euvmpg/ppg/general_html/nondisc.html)
  - b. The UVM Common Ground statement  
<http://www.uvm.edu/president/?Page=miscellaneous/commonground.html>
  - c. A statement about the Vermont State Law regarding student-on-student harassment  
<http://www.leg.state.vt.us/docs/legdoc.cfm?URL=/docs/2004/acts/ACT117.HTM>
  - d. A policy statement in your syllabus regarding how harassment of a student in class, i.e., a pattern of behavior directed against a particular student with the intent of humiliating or intimidating that student, will be handled. You can make it clear that the mere expression of one's ideas is not harassment and is fully protected by academic freedom, but that personal harassment of individual students is not permitted.
2. ***Don't assume that everyone in the classroom is heterosexual or traditionally gendered. LGBTQ people as a whole are not easily identifiable. As a result, heterosexual students often erroneously believe that they do not personally know any LGBTQ people, so feel free to make anti-LGBTQ remarks. This alleged absence, however, is only imaginary. LGBTQ individuals are present in all segments of society, which means that in any given class, there will likely be a significant number of LGBTQ undergraduates. Since Burlington is known for its generally supportive LGBTQ community, the number of LGBTQ students at UVM 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 LGBTQ students to initiate discussions on LGBTQ topics. Often students will not bring up LGBTQ 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. *Avoid making negative remarks or telling jokes that “put down” LGBTQ persons.*
6. *If a student in class makes negative remarks or tells jokes that “put down” LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ individuals.
7. *If appropriate to your course content, note the existence of LGBTQ related programs on campus just as you might mention other lectures, forums, or events on campus.*
8. *If you provide information to students about campus resources, be sure to include LGBTQ resources like the LGBTQA Services office, the President’s Commission on LGBTQ Equity, and the Free to Be student club.*
9. *Be prepared to respond to a transgender students’ requests to use their chosen name and pronoun when addressing them. In May of 2005 UVM’s Board of Trustees voted unanimously to include “gender identity and expression” to our non-discrimination clause. Even before that transgender students had begun approaching faculty members at UVM (often prior to the first class) asking them to use their chosen name, and pronouns consistent with their chosen gender. 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 university’s office of Affirmative Action has trained a team of staff members who are available to provide a briefing on gender identity and expression to any group who requests it.*
10. *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.*

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## **Ways to incorporate Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender (LGBTQ) 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 LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ people have contributed to your area of study.*
- 4. Incorporate information about LGBTQ professionals and their contributions to your discipline into your materials.*
- 5. Find out what professional associations related to your discipline have LGBTQ committees, working groups, organizations, or interest groups.*
- 6. Collect resource materials (people to contact, books dealing with LGBTQ issues & topics and/or by LGBTQ authors).*
- 7. Use research that deals with LGBTQ issues in your course content.*
- 8. Stay informed about LGBTQ issues and concerns in your area.*
- 9. Include a journal or book reference in your syllabus that relates to LGBTQ history, culture, and concerns that is pertinent to the content of the course. Of course LGBTQ students don't expect such references to be pertinent for every course (e.g., a mathematics course, perhaps) but do see them as relevant and important in many social science, humanities, arts, and literature courses.*
- 10. Encourage students to do research on LGBTQ topics.  
If a student approaches you with a proposal to conduct research on a topic in LGBTQ 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 LGBTQ topics, so there are great opportunities for both you and your students to do groundbreaking work in this area.*

## **What Departments Can Do**

***Encourage a departmental forum on issues related to homophobia and academic freedom as they pertain to your department's courses. Possible topics might include:***

- Responding effectively to a student's use of offensive language, while respecting that student's right to share his or her own beliefs and preserving the instructor's academic freedom. This exploration might include instances when a student holding conservative religious beliefs says he or she is offended by the course content and discussion, or when incorrect information about sexual orientation or gender identity is presented by a student in class.
- Developing principles or guidelines for the department that can assist individual faculty members in responding to these and other classroom situations.

Professor David Moshman of University of Nevada-Las Vegas has published an excellent article that could provide the starting point for such a discussion. See Moshman, D. (2002). "Homophobia and academic freedom." *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 3/4, pp. 147-161. This article also appears in Elizabeth P. Cramer (Ed.), *Addressing Homophobia and Heterosexism on College Campuses* (pp. 147-161). Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press.

## **Other Actions You Could Pursue To Educate Yourself:**

1. ***Learn about the LGBTQ & Ally resources available on campus. See detailed listings and contact information below.***
2. ***Visit the LGBTQA Services Office, (Allen House, 461 Main Street, Rm 101). The phone number is 656-8637.***
3. ***Attend a program/workshop related to LGBTQ history, culture, and issues.***
4. ***Invite members LGBTQA Services staff or the President's Commission on LGBT Equity to a departmental faculty discussion about how to include LGBTQ history and resources in your courses. Contact Eli Clare at LGBTQA Services by calling 656-8637 or the Chair of the President's Commission on LGBT Equity (see <http://www.uvm.edu/president/?Page=commissions/lgbt/lgbtclimate.html&SM=submenu5.html>).***
5. ***Invite the staff of LGBTQA Services to provide ally training for your department or classroom, by contacting Eli Clare at 656-8367 or emailing [eclare@uvm.edu](mailto:eclare@uvm.edu).***
6. ***Invite students from Free to Be, the LGBTQQIA (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, intersex, and ally) student organization, to participate in a discussion with your department's faculty and staff about improving the climate for LGBTQ students.***

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7. *Attend one of the monthly meetings of the President's Commission on LGBT Equity. Check the website <http://www.uvm.edu/president/?Page=commissions/lgbt/lgbtclimate.html&SM=submenu5.html> for dates and times. Allies are always welcome at these meetings.*
8. *Attend one of the monthly ally trainings run by the LGBTQA Services office. To receive direct notification of these trainings contact Eli Clare at 656-8637 or via email at [eclare@uvm.edu](mailto:eclare@uvm.edu).*

### **On Campus LGBTQA Resources include:**

- LGBTQA Services, 461 Main St., Allen House, 656-8637, [lgbtqa@uvm.edu](mailto:lgbtqa@uvm.edu)
- President's Commission on LGBT Equity. For current Chair call LGBTQA Services or the office of the President or see: <http://www.uvm.edu/president/?Page=commissions/lgbt/lgbtclimate.html&SM=submenu5.html>
- Sexuality & Gender Identity Studies Minor, administered by Women's & Gender Studies, 228 Old Mill, 656-2282, [wmst@uvm.edu](mailto:wmst@uvm.edu)
- Free to Be Student Club, Billings, B-163, 656-0699, [free2b@uvm.edu](mailto:free2b@uvm.edu)

### **Resources available on the LGBTQA Services Web Site include:**

- New Student Info FAQ  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=newstudent.html&SM=generalmenu.html>
- Guide to LGBTQ Symbols  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=symbols.html&SM=generalmenu.html>
- Definitions of LGBTQ Terms  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=definitions.html&SM=generalmenu.html>
- Bias Incident Information  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=bias.html&SM=generalmenu.html>
- History of LGBTQ Activism at UVM  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=history.html&SM=generalmenu.html>
- Ally Resources  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=ally.html>
- LGBT Faculty and Staff Directory  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=lgbtstafffaculty.html>
- Workplace Information for LGBTQ Staff and Faculty  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=staffpolicies.html>
- Gender Neutral Restrooms Guide for Main Campus  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=transpolicies.html>
- LGBTQA Campus Events Calendar  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=currentprograms.html&SM=programsmenu.html>

- Resource Library Catalogue  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=library.html&SM=librarymenu.html>
- Sexuality & Gender Identity Studies Minor information  
<http://www.uvm.edu/~lgbtqa/?Page=sagis.html>

### **Additional Resources available through LGBTQA Services include:**

- Ally Trainings on a variety of topics including:
  - Being an Ally to Transgender People
  - Being an Ally to Bisexual People
  - Being an Ally to Queer People of Color
  - Gender Identity and Expression 101
- Printed copies of
  - New Student Info FAQ
  - Campus and Local LGBTQ Internet Resources
  - Gender Neutral Bathroom Map
  - LGBTQA Services brochures
  - “Gender Identity 101” handout
  - “FYI LGBTQA @ UVM”: a guide to LGBTQ related campus organizations

### **Burlington Area Resources include:**

- R.U.1.2? Queer Community Center, 34 Elmwood, Burlington, VT, 860-7812
- Out in the Mountains, Vermont’s monthly LGBTQ newspaper, 860-0705
- Outright Vermont, Queer youth organization, 865-9677
- First Unitarian Universalist Society Welcoming Congregation Committee, 152 Pearl Street, Burlington, 862-5630
- VT CARES, AIDS service organization, 361 Pearl Street, Burlington, 863-2437

### **Published resources include:**

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**Note:**

This document is adapted from portions of the following previously published resources:

- “Discrimination in the Classroom,” Ronni Sanlo, UCLA
- “Resources for Integrating Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Into a Multicultural Curriculum,” Northern Illinois University Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Resource Center
- “What Can an Individual Faculty Member and an Academic Department do to Improve the Campus Climate for GLBT Students,” University Nebraska/Lincoln, Committee on GLBT Concerns
- “Overcoming Bias Against GLBT Students: What Every TA Needs to Know,” Ohio State University, GLBT Student Services

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