

LGBTQ Student Success Study

(2015-2016)

University of San Diego



STUDY OF LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER (LGBTQ) STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Research team: Esteban del Río, Ph.D.; Paula Krist, Ph.D.; Conor McLaughlin, M.A.; Lan Yang, B.A.

SUMMARY

Nationally, LGBTQ students experience depression at higher rates than the general population, which negatively influences success in college¹ or worse, higher rates of attempted or actual suicide. Students who *come out* to their guardians may also lose financial support, jeopardizing persistence toward a degree². Because we are a Catholic university, we recognize the inherent human dignity of all of our students and, as a result, are obligated to support their success. This is as true of our LGBTQ students as any other cohort. We know, however, that LGBTQ students often face unique challenges, including struggling to negotiate their sexual orientation and/or gender identity with their faith development³. At USD, dialogue with students as well as data from the 2010 Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) Survey informs our understanding that LGBTQ students experience USD differently than their peers in ways that may affect their success.

Programs, resources, and events across divisions show intentional support of LGBTQ students, although anecdotal evidence and student-centeredness largely guide existing efforts. Currently, we do not track LGBTQ students at the University of San Diego in terms of retention, persistence, and graduation so we do not know for sure whether or not they persist and graduate at different rates than their peers. This report brings together survey research, questionnaires, and in-depth interviews conducted in 2014-2015 to better understand the experience of LGBTQ students at USD to create data-driven strategies to more fully support their success.

LGBTQ STUDENT EXPERIENCE STUDY DESCRIPTION

In 2014, the Strategic Oversight Committee on Student Success (SOCSS) commissioned a targeted study of the LGBTQ student experience. During the 2014-2015 academic year, the Diverse Learning Environment (DLE) and National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) surveys yielded information about our LGBTQ student population and student attitudes about campus culture and climate. During the spring and summer of 2015, The Committee on Undergraduate Student Success (CUSS) conducted a two-stage qualitative study of our LGBTQ students.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

- An estimated **6%** of USD students self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or other than straight
- Students who took the DLE survey in 2015 have a **higher level of agreement** that USD appreciates differences in sexual orientation than students did in 2010
- USD's **Catholic identity** can be a resource and a challenge for students who identify as LGBTQ
- Currently, specific support for LGBTQ students functions **informally** rather than systematically or institutionally
- A **coherent set** of LGBTQ-focused institutional resources would help facilitate LGBTQ student success

DATA SOURCES

- 2010 and 2015 DLE Survey
- 2015 NSSE Survey
- Qualitative Survey of 51 students self-identified as LGBTQ or Allies
- Qualitative Interviews of 13 students who self-identify as LGBTQ

DLE & NSSE FINDINGS

Because we do not track LGBTQ students as a cohort beginning with admissions data, the university holds little information about the number of USD students who identify as LGBTQ. Drawing data from both NSSE and DLE, we can estimate that about 6% (339) of USD undergraduates self-identify with a sexual orientation other than straight:

Diverse Learning Environments Survey (2 nd and 3 rd year) <i>What is your sexual orientation?</i>			NSSE (1 st and graduating Seniors) <i>Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?</i> *20 respondents chose "I prefer not to respond"		
	Percent	N		Percent	N
Heterosexual/Straight	93.5%	443	Heterosexual/Straight	94.5%	572
Gay	1.9%	9	Gay	1.2%	7
Lesbian	0.4%	2	Lesbian	0.3%	2
Bisexual	2.7%	13	Bisexual	3.1%	19
Queer	0.6%	3	Questioning or unsure	0.3%	2
Other	0.8%	4	Another sexual orientation	0.5%	3

The DLE also demonstrated improvement in student response to the item "USD appreciates differences in sexual orientation" between 2010 and 2015:

"This college appreciates differences in sexual orientation"

2010: 51% strongly agree
2015: **80% strongly agree***

*p = <.001

When LGBTQ student responses are disaggregated from the general student population in the DLE, we see significant differences in the following responses:

A SENSE OF BELONGING:

"I see myself as part of this campus community"

- **79%** of all respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement
- **93%** of LGBTQ respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement

INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY:

"This college has a long-standing commitment to diversity"

- **66%** of all respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement
- **39%** of LGBTQ respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement

“This college appreciates differences in sexual orientation”

- **80%** of all respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement
- **61%** of LGBTQ respondents agree or strongly agree with this statement

DISCRIMINATION & BIAS:

“Indicate how often at this college you have heard insensitive or disparaging remarks from students”

- **47%** of all respondents indicated “seldom” or “never”
- **26%** of LGBTQ respondents indicated “seldom” or “never”

DLE & NSSE Data Note

For both the DLE and the NSSE, reporting rates more than doubled the national average, with the DLE = 23% (600 of 2580 2nd and 3rd year students) and the NSSE = 34% (746 of 2203). However, low N of self-identified LGBTQ means that data is not generalizable to the total USD population, but relevant to the respondents who took the survey. The data from the DLE presented above represents responses for campus climate related survey items for the 31 students who self-identified on the survey as LGBTQ. The confidence interval is +/-17%. The confidence interval is a measure of how well the students who took the survey reflect the invited population of students. The lower the confidence interval, the more representative the respondents are of the full group of students who identify as LGBTQ who were invited to take the survey.

CUSS QUALITATIVE STUDY FINDINGS

In the spring of 2015, CUSS initiated a mixed-methods study in which 51 undergraduate and graduate students who identified as members of the LGBTQ community or as allies to the LGBTQ community participated in a qualitative, online survey. Faculty and administrators who serve as advocates for LGBTQ students collaborated in research design. Thirteen students (9 undergraduate and 4 graduate) who identify as LGBTQ agreed to follow-up interviews.

This report focuses on four sets of responses to: 1) why students chose to attend USD; 2) why students stayed enrolled if they considered leaving USD previously; 3) the impact of USD’s Roman Catholic identity on their experience; 4) how USD can better support LGBTQ students.

Below are tables providing a **composite voice**, drawn from participant responses from both the survey and interviews. These composites reflect interpretive themes for each question, which can be found in the left column:

What Made You Choose to Attend USD? Like other students, LGBTQ respondents report that the small size and access to resources mattered when deciding to attend to USD. Other themes that emerged include proximity to family and accessibility:

What Made You Choose to Attend USD?	
Theme	Student Sentiment
Size	I liked that it was a smaller school and that I would have opportunities to get to know professors really well. I felt like I could really be part of a community here and could experience a lot of different people while also feeling like I could fit in. The small size really stood out to me.
Proximity to Family	I have family down here in San Diego so I have like a support network. I didn’t want to move really far from the area where a large portion of my family lives. I just wasn’t really ready to move away.
Financial Aid Package	I received a good scholarship and financial aid package that made it easier to go here instead of another school.

Why Did You Stay? Students reported that issues they may face coming out in contemporary U.S. culture might be the same at USD as elsewhere. They also persisted because of the quality of their academic program and the relationships built with faculty, staff, and peers at USD:

Why Did You Stay (if the student indicated they considered leaving USD)?	
Theme	Student Sentiment
Facing Challenges	I felt like the challenges that I knew I would face here would be ones that I would face in a different environment. No matter where I am, I'm still going to have issues, and I'm still going to have to work with those and encounter people with different ideologies.
Program	I could find classes that had a really strong learning environment, which was important for me. I thought about transferring to a school that had a better program in my major, but we are hiring new professors and growing our programs.
Finding Support	Having a chance to be a mentor. I often act as a role model to younger students. I also kept meeting new people, continually getting support from my friends, PRIDE, and the professors. Having professors tell me "we need you to stay. You have a great perspective to offer to class." I thought no one would ever really know me because so much of who I am I felt I had to keep a secret. Having people who really supported me and believed in me, I definitely stayed because of that.

How has the Roman Catholic Identity of USD Impacted Your Experience? Respondents expressed an appreciation for their experiences in a Catholic context, as well as some confusion about what policies and procedures were actually "Catholic." Some of this confusion arises out of comments about "red tape" where institutionally sanctioned, LGBTQ-themed programs and activities were required to adhere to Catholic moral teaching.

How has the Roman Catholic Identity of USD Impacted Your Experience?	
Theme	Student Sentiment
Appreciation	I can relate to Catholic identity and Catholic Social thought in a meaningful way. I think that there are folks in university ministry who are very strong allies of the LGBTQ community and they have a really hard job. There's a lot of support for the LGBT community at USD even with its Catholic identity.
Navigation of Administrative Oversight	I feel like USD's Catholic identity makes a lot of the other things I do more political. My experience includes having to navigate a bunch of extra stuff compared with my peers. I have to connect everything back to some sort of Catholic thought and justify everything based on some sort of Catholic teaching.
(Mis)Alignment	I've thought USD has been impeded in its progress because it has to remain true to a Catholic identity and claiming to be Changemakers. That balance, trying to walk that line has been really unclear for me, the wishy-washiness has been hard. It would be helpful to have clear communication from the university about where they stand with queer students.

What Things Could USD Do To Better Support LGBTQ Identified Students? Respondents expressed frustration with the informality of LGBTQ resources. USD has targeted resources in the Counseling Center as well as the UFMC, which provides advising for PRIDE and sponsors Rainbow Educators as well as Safe Space Ally training. However, few students mention these offices or resources in University Ministry or the Center for Inclusion and Diversity as a “center” for LGBTQ resources. Instead, the current support system emerges in respondents’ thinking as student-led, indirect, based on relationships, and lacking coherence and clarity. Respondents also spoke about the need for a “single space” on campus where students can feel “safe” and find resources. Resources include mental health support. There is also a desire to increase the number of faculty who receive Safe Space Ally training:

What Things Could USD Do To Better Support LGBTQ Identified Students?	
Theme	Student Sentiment
Current Support Systems Are Informal	The way that things are right now a lot of the LGBTQ support is student run or it’s by word of mouth, PRIDE is just a student group and there are things that PRIDE doesn’t have, there are things that a social group can’t offer. I know that there are support systems and groups for people within the spectrum of LGBTQ and they’re not well publicized; they’re hidden. If you were a trans student that was coming in for your first year there’s nothing on our website that anyone would be able to pull up just to find out what does it takes to get individual housing or who to contact.
A Need For Safe Spaces	I would say our own space on campus to meet, providing a physical space. It could be a spot where people can come any time and just be at peace, feel at home, and not have to worry. It would be nice to have a space where you know you’re actually safe that you can go back to. It would centralize a lot of USD’s LGBT stuff, I feel like it’s pretty decentralized right now.
A Need for Staff Resources	There needs to be a counselor on campus who is specially trained in LGBTQ issues because mental health is a problem in the LGBTQ community. We need someone that’s here maybe like four hours a day or maybe is like a doctoral student or something or a postdoc that has, and their title would be like LGBT student coordinator or program coordinator, something that their title makes it clear why they’re there to be a dedicated person, the point person, a liaison.
A Need for Greater Awareness	I know there are safe space ally trainings and I think that needs to continue. Every single professor should have to take a safe space allies course, to get others to understand that the level of comfort that some people have with their own identity. It is important to feel understood and supported, so that I know that this person is a person that I can come to if anything were to ever happen.
Wellness	I think there has to be some sort of wellness support, like a specific LGBT wellness-based program of some sort. We have a much higher suicide rate, depression, being even higher risk for STIs, HIV, all of these other pieces and it seems like no one is talking about it. Aspects of mental health, physical health and sexual health are all important to discuss.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. To address findings that suggest students experience an “informal” system of support: identify and implement strategies to coordinate existing resources supporting student success and belonging; develop new data-driven resources; and identify a space for students to build community around these resources. This process should begin with resources that are currently available and that could be realigned or redistributed (budget neutral), before moving to those that need to be created.
2. In order to build qualitative data on LGBTQ student success, work with the Common App and dialogue with other campuses to determine how to follow LGBTQ students as a cohort, so that we can track retention, persistence, and graduation rates relative to other student populations.
3. Because some respondents indicated confusion about our Catholic identity and Catholic Social Teaching, create a communication plan for students that clearly expresses opportunities that a Catholic context provides LGBTQ students inside and outside of class, especially in regard to advancing human dignity and belonging. This communication plan should also identify existing resources for students who experience marginalization.
4. To address responses about how USD can deepen support of LGBTQ students, analyze 2016 NCHA and 2015 NSSE and DLE survey results, disaggregating LGBTQ responses to determine if LGBTQ students report higher instances of mental and physical health issues, and whether their experiences are different than their peers.
5. To create a stronger network of student support among faculty, staff, and students, increase marketing and frequency of Safe Space Ally trainings and expand opportunities for our community to develop skills for empathy, compassion, and justice for all members of our community.

¹ See Hatzenbuehler, M. L. (2011). The social environment and suicide attempts in lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *Pediatrics*, 127(5), 896-903; Schmidt, C. K., Miles, J. R., & Welsh, A. C. (2010). Perceived discrimination and social support: The influences on career development and college adjustment of LGBT college students. *Journal of Career Development*, 0894845310372615. Paul, J. P., et al (2002). Suicide attempts among gay and bisexual men: lifetime prevalence and antecedents. *American Journal of Public Health*, 92(8), 1338-1345.

² Higa, D. et al (2014). Negative and positive factors associated with the well-being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth. *Youth & Society* 46(5), 663-687.

³ Gattis, M. N., Woodford, M. R., & Han, Y. (2014). Discrimination and depressive symptoms among sexual minority youth: Is gay-affirming religious affiliation a protective factor? *Arch Sex Behav* 43, 1589-1599.