UNDERSTANDING AND SUPPORTING LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, AND QUESTIONING STUDENTS

Some of the key developmental tasks for college students include identity formation, establishing mature relationships, and learning to manage emotions. During this time our students may be questioning or exploring their sexuality and/or gender identity for the first time. This can be either an exhilarating and liberating experience, or a terrifying and shame-ridden time. They may not have friends with whom they can openly discuss their sexuality or gender identity. Additionally, seeking support and validation from families may be more difficult. In fact, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students’ minority status may be completely invisible to those around them. These students can feel quite isolated and often are not sure where to find support. There are many ways to reassure a student that you are open to learning about them and who they are. Even a simple **Safe Space** or **rainbow sticker** displayed on an office window or bulletin board can help a student feel more welcomed and comfortable.

Most professionals are now quite familiar with lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues, but far fewer are well-educated about transgender issues. Transgender is an umbrella term that refers to anyone who doesn’t fit the typical, traditional, binary gender categories or roles. This includes transsexuals, cross-dressers (in the past known as transvestites), genderqueer persons (those who identify with both female and male or neither gender), and others. Gender identity comprises many dimensions— biology (chromosomes, anatomy, and hormones), brain (internal sense of self), and expression (modes of behavior, manner of dress).

Sexual attraction and gender identity, while usually linked (as in men are typically attracted to women, women are usually attracted to men) are actually separate aspects of human sexuality. The term transsexual refers to someone who internally identifies as the opposite gender to that which s/he was assigned at birth by her/his anatomy. Sophisticated animal experiments and human autopsy studies have revealed findings in the brain that show that some brains are gendered one way, while the body is gendered the other. Many transsexuals, understandably, suffer from dysphoria from this incongruence. The most appropriate course of action for such people is to “transition”—that is, to change their bodies to reflect their real gender identity. This can be accomplished in many ways, which might include hormonal treatments and/or surgery. Students who proceed with this transitional process often experience physical, social, emotional, and financial hardships. Being aware and educated about the range of identities will promote the open, tolerant, and academically supportive environment necessary for students to thrive.

**Referrals:**

Parents, Friends, and Families of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), [www.pflag.org](http://www.pflag.org/) World Professional Association of Transgender Health (WPATH), [www.wpath.org](http://www.wpath.org/)

(\*from Cornell University. Recognizing & Responding to Student in Distress: A Faculty Handbook)