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To: CSU Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

From: Michael C. Pratt, President, LGBTQIA2S+ Faculty & Staff Association at Chico State

Topic: Enhancing the CSU System's Programs for Supporting LGBTQIA2S+ Students' Well-being

In light of the CSU's ongoing commitment to addressing equity gaps, this memo is presented to further understand the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA2S+ students within the system. Drawing from recent studies, three pivotal areas of concern have been identified regarding the support needed for LGBTQIA2S+ students on our campuses. Firstly, while LGBTQIA2S+ student services and retention practices are gaining traction, there remains a noticeable absence of tailored basic needs services. Secondly, despite suggestions in foundational literature for a centralized body to manage wraparound services, there is no such centralized body for the CSU. This represents a weakness in the CSU's ability to recognize and address the distinct challenges the LGBTQIA2S+ student body encounters. Lastly, a consolidated and easily accessible database on the LGBTQIA2S+ student experience within the CSU is conspicuously lacking. Addressing these concerns is essential if the CSU intends to

This Knowledge Center memo is third in a series on supporting LGBTQIA2S+[1] students created by the CSU Student Success Network (Network). The Knowledge Center is an online resource created by the CSU Network that will provide curated, synthesized, and succinct information and links to support faculty, staff, and administrators in adopting equity-minded and student-centered approaches on their campus. The CSU Network was created by and for CSU faculty, staff, administrators, and students to advance equitable student learning, engagement, progression, and success. It is facilitated by the Education Insights Center (EdInsights) at Sacramento State, an independent research and policy center devoted to student success and the public benefits of education.

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[1] The Network uses the inclusive acronym "LGBTQIA2S+" in reference to both gender and sexual identities, acknowledging that the LGBTQIA2S+ population is diverse in composition and varied in affiliation. When describing a particular LGBTQIA2S+ community or portion of the LGBTQIA2S+ population, we use the naming convention that applies directly to that group.

realize its vision of an inclusive educational environment. Such proactive measures will not only champion the rights of LGBTQIA2S+ students but will also pave the way for an equitable educational system that genuinely celebrates diversity and inclusion.

Key Findings from the Literature

LGBTQIA2S+ students need more targeted help when it comes to housing and mental health services.

An overarching theme across academic studies and discussions emphasizes the necessity of addressing fundamental needs — with a specific emphasis on food, housing, and mental health services — for college students. These needs are universally acknowledged as the bedrock of an environment conducive to academic success.[i] Yet, a more in-depth dive into the literature highlights an alarming differential when it comes to LGBTQIA2S+ students.

The issue of housing insecurity looms large for many students, but for LGBTQIA2S+ individuals, it assumes a darker shade of urgency. Family rejection, stemming from prejudices related to their gender identity or sexual orientation, pushes many LGBTQIA2S+ youths into a vortex of homelessness and vulnerability.[ii] Several pieces of research delve into the nuances of this issue, presenting startling figures.[iii],[iv] Despite the LGBTQIA2S+ youth community accounting for only 7% of the total youth population in the United States, they disproportionately make up to 40% of homeless young people.[v] This stark disparity underscores the deeply entrenched biases and structural challenges they face.

Entering higher education institutions does not offer a respite from these challenges. Universities, which should serve as hubs of acceptance, learning, and personal growth, often inadvertently perpetuate the housing crisis for LGBTQIA2S+ students.[vi] For transgender and non-binary students, the disparity is particularly pronounced. The literature contains numerous firsthand accounts and studies illustrating their ordeals with on-campus housing assignments that blatantly disregard their gender identity.[vii] Such systemic oversights lead not just to logistical problems but breed feelings of isolation, exclusion, and vulnerability.[viii] Instances of bullying, microaggressions, and outright harassment within dormitory housing add to the weight of students' daily struggles.[ix]

Yet, amidst this bleak scenario, there are beacons of progressive change. A handful of universities, responsive to the needs of their diverse student population, have begun rolling out LGBTQIA2S+ inclusive housing solutions.[x] While such steps are commendable, their effectiveness within larger systems like the CSU remains negligible due to the pre-existing shortage of housing. With demand far outstripping the supply, many LGBTQIA2S+ students still find themselves grappling with the same old challenges.[xi]

Beyond the tangible realm of housing, the internal world of LGBTQIA2S+ students reveals further challenges. Consistent findings show that they face exacerbated mental health problems, with many reporting heightened levels of psychological distress vis-á-vis their heterosexual counterparts.[xii] The Minority Stress Model, a critical conceptual framework cited frequently in the literature, offers insights into this phenomenon.[xiii] It posits that the unique stressors tied to belonging to a minority group magnify mental health issues. For LGBTQIA2S+ students, the university setting, which should be a cocoon of support, often mirrors societal prejudices.[xiv] Discrimination, subtle and overt, combined with a palpable lack of representation, can chip away at their mental resilience.[xv]

Furthermore, there is a pervasive sentiment of neglect or misunderstanding within established mental health structures on campuses.[xvi] The literature is rife with testimonies and studies that reflect this troubling trend.[xvii, xviii] While mental health resources exist, there seems to be a disconnect when it comes to addressing the unique challenges faced by the LGBTQIA2S+ community, as more than 12% of this population needs services but is unable to access them.[xix]

Several challenges underlie the disconnect. They include a shortage of trained professionals who are knowledgeable about LGBTQIA2S+ issues, a lack of representation and visibility of LGBTQIA2S+ staff within mental health departments, and the prevalence of stigmatizing attitudes and microaggressions within therapeutic settings.[xx] Moreover, the fear of being outed, particularly for those not open about their gender identify or sexual orientation, can deter students from seeking help, as confidentiality concerns become paramount.[xxi] Some studies have also suggested that a lack of clearly articulated LGBTQIA2S+-specific services at the initial point of inquiry by LGBTQIA2S+ students can serve as an immediate deterrent to seeking help, even in the most severe cases of need.[xxii, xxiii]

Delving further, intersectionality emerges as a significant area of discussion. The literature is emphatic about the multiplicative challenges faced by LGBTQIA2S+ students who also identify as people of color or have disabilities.[xxiv, xxv] Their university experience is characterized by overlapping layers of discrimination, warranting an even more nuanced and sensitive support system.

Given these comprehensive findings, the CSU system stands at a crucial juncture. The literature's call to action is loud and clear. A cursory, broad-brush approach to address these challenges is not tenable. It is essential to recognize that meeting the unique needs of LGBTQIA2S+ students is not just about equity in isolation — it directly impacts their academic outcomes and overall well-being.[xxvi]

Some potential solutions emerge from the best practices already in place at select campuses. The CSU system could consider broader implementation of programs like Lavender Living for LGBTQIA2S+ students.[xxvii] Similarly, initiatives like the widespread Safe Zone Ally Training and Mental Health Distress Prevention and Early Intervention (aka Mental Health First Aid) training for faculty and staff could play pivotal roles in fostering an inclusive, supportive environment.[xxviii, xxix]

In summary, the academic literature, enriched by empirical studies, firsthand accounts, and critical analyses, paints a compelling picture. The challenges faced by LGBTQIA2S+ students, both in terms of housing and mental health, are pronounced and demand immediate, tailored interventions. The onus is on academic institutions, especially large systems like the CSU, to heed these findings and spearhead transformative changes.

LGBTQIA2S+ students need specialized affinity centers with integrated wraparound services.

Higher education institutions have long prided themselves on fostering environments that bolster both academic success and individual growth. However, the conventional infrastructure often proves inadequate for the nuanced needs of certain groups, notably the LGBTQIA2S+ student population.[xxx] Contemporary academic literature, built on empirical evidence and case studies, advocates the establishment of wraparound services situated within dedicated affinity group centers for LGBTQIA2S+ students.[xxxi] Wraparound services encompass a comprehensive range of support mechanisms such as, but not limited to, mental health services, counseling, mentorship, healthcare, academic assistance, and social inclusion programs.

At its core, the advocacy for LGBTQIA2S+ centers on university campuses emanates from a recognition of their multi-dimensional role.[xxxii] These centers are not just symbolic structures that represent inclusivity; they serve as sanctuaries, where emotional and logistical support align to cater to LGBTQIA2S+ students' specific challenges.[xxxiii] Within these walls, an LGBTQIA2S+ student can find peer-led support groups, specialized counseling sessions, academic advisory services, and even pivotal healthcare referrals.[xxxiv]

Comprehensive studies have shown a marked difference in the experiences of LGBTQIA2S+ students at institutions with such resource centers, where they report a more welcoming, understanding, and positive campus atmosphere compared to those without.[xxxv] In fact, the California Reducing Disparities Project has indicated that culturally competent resource centers are the premier option for high-impact practices among the Implementation Pilot Projects that have been established throughout the state.[xxxvi]

In light of these studies, the term "wraparound services" itself invites a deeper dive. Beyond the traditional offerings lie a spectrum of essential services: financial aid tailored to those estranged from families due to their LGBTQIA2S+ identity; housing solutions that are both sensitive and inclusive; healthcare provisions including hormone treatments for transgender students; and mental health services that resonate with LGBTQIA2S+ narratives.[xxxvii] It is crucial to understand that these services are not just value additions; they form the very foundation upon which many LGBTQIA2S+ students base their decision to continue with higher education.[xxxviii]

Central to the success of these affinity group centers is the ethos of peer support and mentorship.[xxxix] These are not empty buzzwords; they define the lived experiences of many LGBTQIA2S+ students. Having mentors and peers who have embarked on similar journeys of self-discovery, acceptance, and growth can be transformative.[xl] Such interactions instill a sense of relatability, provide genuine academic guidance, and offer emotional succor.[xli] Multiple research pieces have indicated the pronounced role of peer mentoring in such centers, identifying it as a cornerstone for many LGBTQIA2S+ students' successful navigation of university life.[xlii, xliii]

However, the bricks and mortar of an affinity center and the services within are only as effective as the people who manage and operate them.[xliv] Recommendations abound in the literature that personnel in these centers engage in continuous training.[xlv] As society progresses and dynamics within the LGBTQIA2S+ community evolve, the challenges faced by students will also undergo shifts.[xlvi] Keeping staff and faculty abreast of these changes ensures cultural competency, enhancing the center's effectiveness and contributing to a positive, inclusive campus environment.[xlvii]

Taking a broader perspective, it is imperative to address intersecting identities within the LGBTQIA2S+ community itself. For example, an LGBTQIA2S+ student of color may have some similar and some very different experiences than a white student navigating the confluence of their queer identity with a disability or socio-economic challenges.[xlviii] Such intersections magnify the complexities, necessitating an even more layered and nuanced support structure.

The overarching message from academic and sociological studies is unambiguous: to ensure that LGBTQIA2S+ students not only survive but thrive in university landscapes, there is an urgent need to recalibrate the existing support mechanisms.[xlix] By anchoring these mechanisms within dedicated affinity group centers, universities can provide an environment that harmoniously blends immediate logistical needs with a sense of community and belonging — elements that are often central to academic persistence and personal well-being.[l]

Two clear pathways lie ahead for universities aiming to bolster their support for LGBTQIA2S+ students. They can either lay the groundwork for a centralized LGBTQIA2S+ Student Resource Center or invigorate and expand the LGBTQIA2S+-tailored services within existing resource centers. Either pathway, if navigated with intent and understanding, can usher in an era of inclusivity, empathy, and holistic support for the LGBTQIA2S+ student community.[li] For more on Pride Centers in the CSU, please see the [second memo](#) in this series.

Integrating LGBTQIA2S+ Perspectives into Basic Needs Data Collection at Universities

In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, data-driven strategies are increasingly at the forefront of refining student services, optimizing resources, and shaping institutional policies.[lii] Yet, amidst this data-centric approach, a significant oversight persists: the lack of comprehensive data on LGBTQIA2S+ students' basic needs and associated services.[liii] To comprehend this gap's implications, it is crucial to engage with academic literature, which emphasizes the necessity of representing LGBTQIA2S+ students in data collection, especially concerning basic needs.

The consequences of data deficiency

The absence of specific data LGBTQIA2S+ students' basic needs means their experiences are being overlooked in policy formulations and resource allocations.[liv] If data do not encapsulate the unique challenges faced by LGBTQIA2S+ students regarding housing, mental health, and other services, it inadvertently leads to a lack of tailored solutions.[lv] This gap not only hinders inclusivity but also obstructs the creation of comprehensive support mechanisms tailored to LGBTQIA2S+ students' distinct experiences.[lvi]

Illuminating the specific challenges

Active data collection that focuses on LGBTQIA2S+ students' basic needs can shed light on pressing concerns. For instance, understanding housing insecurities specific to LGBTQIA2S+ students, such as those stemming from familial rejection or on-campus discrimination, can guide universities in developing specialized housing solutions.[lvii] Similarly, gauging their unique mental health challenges can lead to the formulation of more tailored counseling and support services.[lviii] By proactively seeking data on these issues, universities can equip themselves to offer interventions that resonate deeply with LGBTQIA2S+ students' lived experiences.

Evolving with time: The importance of continuous assessment

Striving for comprehensive data is not merely about addressing current challenges; it is also pivotal for future planning. Inclusive data collection that encompasses the basic needs of LGBTQIA2S+ students helps universities set performance metrics, which in turn allows universities to evaluate the efficacy of their support services and recalibrate them based on changing needs.[lix] With consistent tracking, universities can dynamically evolve, ensuring that their support structures align with their diverse student body's requirements.

Reaffirming the commitment to equity

Gathering specific data on LGBTQIA2S+ students' basic needs is not just a logistical imperative — it is also symbolic. It underscores a university's unwavering commitment to equity, ensuring every student, irrespective of gender identity or sexual orientation, is at the core of decision-making. Such initiatives guide resource allocation; they also foster a sense of belonging, signaling to LGBTQIA2S+ students that their challenges are acknowledged and addressed.

Ensuring sensitivity in data collection

While the emphasis on capturing specific data related to LGBTQIA2S+ students' basic needs is clear, the methodology employed warrants special attention. Given the potential sensitivities around issues such as housing insecurities or mental health challenges, universities must approach data collection with utmost care. Anonymity, confidentiality, and clear communication about data usage are paramount.[lx] Moreover, ethical practices surrounding consent should be intertwined with data collection methodologies, ensuring an environment that respects and protects student vulnerabilities.

An urgent imperative

The resounding message from academic literature is clear: if universities seek to craft an educational environment that truly celebrates diversity and inclusivity, they must prioritize gathering data on LGBTQIA2S+ students' basic needs. Such focused data collection goes beyond merely rectifying a gap; it sets the stage for tailored interventions and robust support systems. For more on data for LGBTQIA2S+ students, please see the first memo in this series.

For universities envisioning a culture of inclusivity, excellence, and holistic student welfare, this is not merely a recommended approach — it is an imperative. By weaving LGBTQIA2S+ students' experiences and challenges into the fabric of data-driven decisions, especially concerning basic needs, universities not only enhance their operational efficacy but also foster an environment where every student feels seen, heard, and supported. The task ahead is clear: integrate, understand, and act. The well-being of the LGBTQIA2S+ student community hinges on it.

Implications

The findings underscore several critical implications for the CSU system and its ongoing efforts to promote inclusivity and equity. To start, the highlighted gap in addressing the basic needs of LGBTQIA2S+ students indicates a pressing need to revisit the support framework currently in place. A more targeted approach can ensure that these students have access to the resources necessary for their holistic well-being and academic success. This could involve the creation of LGBTQIA2S+-focused housing solutions, mental health services, or other essential resources that cater specifically to the unique experiences and challenges of these students.

The suggestion from foundational literature advocating for a centralized body managing wraparound services is a valid one. However, it is imperative that this body be trained and equipped to address the unique issues LGBTQIA2S+ students face. This could manifest in the form of a Resource Center on a campus or even a department within the CSU system itself, which not only centralizes support but is also acutely tuned to the needs and challenges of the LGBTQIA2S+ community.

The lack of a consolidated and easily accessible database on the LGBTQIA2S+ student experience within the CSU suggests an area of immediate improvement. Such a database could serve multiple purposes. It could act as a repository of knowledge, providing insights for research and policymaking, and as a tool for students to share and access information pertinent to their experiences. The development of this database should be approached with a consideration for privacy and security, ensuring that students can contribute and access information without fear of retribution or outing.

Given the evolving nature of student needs and experiences, it is essential that the CSU system regularly assess the efficacy of the measures in place and remain open to feedback. This is particularly crucial for the LGBTQIA2S+ community, given its members' varied experiences. Regular feedback sessions, surveys, and open forums can ensure that the voice of the LGBTQIA2S+ student body is always at the forefront of decision-making processes.

Reflection Questions

For those interested in developing strategies to better support basic needs services for LGBTQIA2S+ students in the CSU, the following questions are offered for reflection:

- Does my institution have an LGBTQIA2S+ Student Resource/Retention Center?
- If an LGBTQIA2S+ Center exists, does it offer wraparound services?
- Does my institution collect data regarding sexuality and gender expression/identity?
- Has my institution provided adequate training for faculty and staff on LGBTQIA2S+ inclusivity and sensitivity?
- Are there ongoing collaborations between the LGBTQIA2S+ Center (if one exists) and other student services departments to ensure holistic student support?
- Does our curriculum incorporate LGBTQIA2S+ perspectives and histories?
- What protocols are in place to handle cases of discrimination or harassment targeting LGBTQIA2S+ students? Are these protocols widely publicized and easily accessible?
- How does the institution engage with LGBTQIA2S+ students to understand their unique challenges and gather feedback?
- Are there specific scholarships, grants, or financial aid options tailored for LGBTQIA2S+ students, especially those facing economic challenges due to their identity?
- Does our institution offer specialized mental health services for LGBTQ+ students?
- Are counselors trained in LGBTQIA2S+ specific concerns?
- How does the institution connect with local LGBTQIA2S+ communities and organizations for support, events, and mentorship opportunities?
- Are there housing options that are inclusive and affirming for LGBTQIA2S+ students, including gender-neutral housing?
- How frequently does the institution assess its LGBTQIA2S+ support services and make necessary improvements?

Resource List

Safe Zone Trainings offered via the links below highlight strategies referenced in this memo:

- CSU Monterey Bay
- Fresno State
- San Francisco State University
- CSU Bakersfield
- Chico State

Limitations

This memo provides a very limited overview of the existing research on this topic. It does not provide a comprehensive review of the literature, nor does it provide extensive information about the methodologies of the literature included. A search of research literature from within the CSU and other institutions of higher education in California was conducted, but when limited or no existing information was present, the search parameters were expanded to include other relevant sources.

Endnotes

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