



LGBTQ at The University of Akron

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As I write this, I'm working on my fourth year teaching at The University of Akron in the Biology Department. First and foremost, I am a biologist—an educator and researcher—but I am also a part of an even smaller community. As an openly transgender man, I and others like me put the "T" in LGBTQ. While Ohio does not yet have LGBTQ-inclusive non-discrimination legislation, over twenty cities around the state have enacted non-discrimination ordinances that protect LGBTQ individuals. Akron became one of those cities in 2017, and Kent joined in that same year. These ordinances make sense because as we learn the language and share our experiences, it

becomes safer for people to live as their authentic selves, and we see more individuals coming out instead of living in the closet. They are also coming out younger, and living a larger proportion of their life honestly and openly. These are good things! I didn't come out until I was over thirty, because of my own ignorance of non-cis and non-straight identities and because of the stigma that the LGBTQ community sees yet today.

I've found the students and most of my colleagues at The University of Akron to be accepting and possessing competency on LGBTQ issues. That's not to say that it has been without speed bumps. I have been misgendered even after correcting some folks. I had a former colleague tell me that it must be nice to be able to "take up the mantle of male privilege" when I wanted to do so, and that being a man would surely help my career immensely. I have been challenged on which restroom I should be using, even when using a single-stall restroom. It was noted as a big win on campus when it was announced that single-stall restrooms were going gender neutral, but that did not apply to all single-stall restrooms, including the ones in the same building as my office, no matter how many times I requested that they be included. I've even gotten stuck in that single-stall bathroom because of a lock not working and the door becoming stuck. Even the campus "safe space" training is infrequent, inaccessible, and underutilized.

I've also seen the problems for LGBTQ students on our campus. In the time that I have taught at The University of

Akron, I have had plenty of LGBTQ students. I have helped students find housing after being kicked out by non-supportive family members. I have listened to students as they dealt with bullying and harassment in school and on the job. On a campus that provides not enough in the way of support for students who are just dealing with the stresses of college life, our students who also are a part of a marginalized community have an even larger gap in needs versus supportive structures provided.

I have also seen the University respond when pushed. It took a lot of work and a long time, but gender-neutral, single-stall restrooms now exist on campus, even if not every single-stall restroom is gender neutral. After an initial Akron PRIDE with embarrassingly low support from the University, the second year of Akron PRIDE had far more support from the University, including official sponsorships from various units. The University is now sponsoring Community AIDS Network/Akron PRIDE Initiative's primary annual fundraising event, Race at the Raffle 2019. CANAPI is an organization that provides HIV testing, housing assistance to HIV-positive individuals and LGBTQ youth, and food assistance to HIV-positive individuals. In short, it serves as a critical support in the community for individuals that the University underserves. The University of Akron has also finally signed on to Ohio Business Competes, a coalition of over six hundred organizations who would like to see Ohio adopt comprehensive non-discrimination legislation. Again, it took a lot of time and effort, but the University did it.

All of this is by no means to say that being a part of both the LGBTQ and Zip communities was hard or not worth it. On the contrary, I've found the students to be generally accepting and open, and colleagues similarly so. This disconnect between the administrative support and the day-to-day interactions is what has been consistently so difficult to navigate. I know that UA has a sizable LGBTQ population, but finding comrades here is a challenge, especially for faculty and staff. I won't be returning to The University of Akron for another year, and while I'm sad to leave my students and colleagues, I'm glad to have a reason to put less energy into trying to improve a system that doesn't seem to want to improve. Our students have so many more inclusive options in Northeast Ohio that, if The University of Akron is to stay competitive, it must improve its support for LGBTQ students faster. A staff member once told me that "Kent [State University] does the right thing because it's the right thing to do. Akron does the right thing because it makes financial sense." I hate to say it, but that seems all too accurate to me. Now if only we could realize that supporting students is both the right thing to do and it makes financial sense to do so.

As the university is looking at reorganization options over the next few months, I sincerely hope that the upper administration and Board of Trustees can remember who we are here to serve—the students. Supporting them and helping to make higher education accessible to all students is a big part of the core mission of a university. We have a chance here to

refocus our efforts on student inclusion and facilitate the movement toward equality for a population that is at higher risk for lost educational opportunity, lower financial success, increased risks of substance abuse, and mental health struggles. Let's do that and see how students respond. I truly believe doing so is the best way to push The University of Akron to be the best school that it can be.