

2020 University Climate Survey Focus Group Results

OVERVIEW OF THE FOCUS GROUPS

During the Summer of 2020, we conducted focus groups, each with of up to 20 participants, to gather information to supplement the specific issues raised by respondents in the 2020 University Climate Survey.

We conducted four student focus groups, on the topic of accessibility concerns, and on issues experienced by international students, LGBTQ+ students, and students of color.

We conducted four faculty/staff focus groups, on the topic of policy consistency, and on issues experienced by faculty/staff, faculty/staff who are women of color, and faculty/staff who are women.

An additional focus group was held in January 2021 to address the concerns of LGBTQ+ Faculty/Staff.

Each focus group was conducted during a weekday afternoon and lasted up to two hours.

Moderator Information and Opening Script:

Aswad A. Allen, Ph.D., conducted the LGBTQ+ Faculty/Staff focus group. Dr. Allen is the Chief Diversity Officer at Emporia State University. He was invited to conduct the focus group by Dr. Bryan Samuel, Kansas State University's Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer. Despite being a middle-aged, straight, cisgender African American man, Dr. Allen was invited to moderate this group because the Climate Survey Team wanted a moderator who was not directly connected to the institution. Dr. Allen has been an administrator and leader in Higher Education diversity and inclusion initiatives, deeply involved and invested in advancing systemic change, and has over 30 years of working with colleges and universities, specifically in the area of institutionalizing systems in support of high impact student development and faculty development experiences.

In Dr. Allen's opening remarks, he thanked the participants for being involved and acknowledged the importance of the focus group by wanting "...to give the proper recognition to the gravity of your voice." This group was facilitated via Zoom video conferencing and the chat function was introduced as an additional method for engagement. Also Dr. Allen indicated the purpose of the dialogue is to identify patterns and trends which could determine themes for institutional improvement. He then clarified his role as a mandatory reporter by stating, "if there's any specific details or instances that come up, that specifically speak to discrimination, harassment, sexual violence, etc., I am obligated to report those to your office of institutional equity."

Questions:

The moderator asked the following questions to engage the participants:

1. How do challenges related to the K-State LGBTQ+ Community typically manifest at K-State?
2. How do these challenges hinder the success of K-Staters?
3. What are actionable steps that K-State can take to address these challenges?
4. Are there any other experiences, comments, or suggestions that you would like to share today before we conclude our discussion?

Debriefing

Dr. Allen concluding the focus group by thanking the participants.

“Thank you really for sharing your heart and for sharing your concerns, but mostly for sharing your insights and providing some really concrete examples of what a healthy community looks like. Not just (for) the LGBTQ+ population, but for K-State ...that’s really what you're describing. I'm very grateful that each of you participated. I know for some, it was difficult. And others maybe couldn't (participate). For those that weren't sure if they should (participate), or maybe were a bit discouraged for various reasons, you're still bringing the voice forward (for them). The hope is that this information will be shared in a meaningful way and it will transition into action. The results from this summary will be presented to your administration...once again thanks for contributing your voices...”

OVERVIEW OF FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Below is a summary of the major themes that emerged during the focus group in identifying the major challenges related to the issue or target group and the actionable steps suggested to resolve the issue at Kansas State University. As indicated above, the objective was to collect general experiences, and this report is written so that the experiences and comments summarized do not reveal the identities of the participants.

Focus Group: LGBTQ+ Concerns

Challenges

General experiences of hostility and discrimination. Comments discussed Kansas State University having a rapidly growing community of diverse persons identifying as non-binary, transgender, and gender fluid. Comments discussed interpersonal level challenges (e.g. “that happen daily in our interaction with other members of the K-State community”), community level (e.g. “*meso* level where there's tacit cultural practices that are sort of accepted and kind of taken for granted”), and structural level that consist of barriers that are reflected in policy, institutional practices, and “literal” physical building/facility concerns and space allocation.

Specific experiences of discrimination by gendering and mis-gendering. Comments mentioned experiences of discrimination expressed in gendered language, which is used in marketing and public relations materials, syllabi, campus communiques, and written policy (e.g.

the gendered language is pervasive in internal documents and external university messaging, as well as thinking in terms of student recruitment, communications and marketing, etc.). Comments clarified the positive results of addressing gendered language issues by further stating "...certain groups who don't identify with those pronouns, and for folks in communities that we serve..., *we want to be rather inclusive (for them) on our campus.*" Comments described how cultural practices of reinforced gendered norms, and misgendering creates an atmosphere of hostility and discrimination (e.g. ...this enforcement of white cis(gender) heteronormativity that gets routed through coded language, like professionalism or appropriate attire,... things like having people who are presumed and coded to be female, being forced to dress feminine or dress in a white cis-hetero normativity is a way that racism and settler performativity has been enforced for decades, and we're still seeing it play out). Comments described concerns raised regarding the wrong use of language and experiences perpetuating the miseducation of the broader population. (e.g. "Diversity and inclusion events and rhetoric at K-state consistently and aggressively tokenize students and faculty and ignore or misuse the concept of intersectionality. There is no space for individuals with multiple marginalized identities, and we are consistently presented with a false hierarchy of "diverse identities." Comments also suggested campus technology enforces these norms by cyber harassment being supported by digital infrastructure.

Experiences of discrimination through codes. Comments described "respectability politics" cloaked in concerns of professionalism (e.g. "I've been told I'm not dressed professionally enough...") and associated "codes" connected to how a person presents themselves. The "public facing" self, or how persons present, in terms of clothing, hair, attitude, behavior, colleagues, and partners was described as being an unreasonable psychological and financial burden. Comments stated "...so in my division there are a lot of unspoken rules... about dress codes. When I present more feminine, I get behaviors from supervisors and superiors - when I have a certain type of feminine look (which is) also connected to weight and height..., so if I don't meet the respectability politics that I'm being told I have to meet, then, I'm in feminine dress, I may be ignored when it comes to public facing stuff if..." Comments indicated these respectability codes serve to maintain the stereotypical white cisgender heteronormativity and overall status quo "routed through coded language like professionalism or appropriate attire."

Experiences of psychological harm and concerns of safety. Comments stated administration reflects a patterns of carelessness indicated by ignoring the impact of past incidents (e.g. K-State Unite was insufficiently secured to prevent disruption from outside agitators which many, many people were aware... was very likely to happen, and then the people who put on the event act surprised when that happened, ...and didn't really do anything to address the additional trauma that might have effected students faculty and staff who are LGBTQ and or people of color). Comments pointed out the contradiction between the high ranking of K-state on the Campus Pride Index Report and the actual "hostile and inhospitable environment" experienced by students, especially transgender students. Comments reflected experiences of daily microaggressions and periodic overt aggressions. (e.g. "student groups who spew homophobic and transphobic (language) toward students, faculty, and staff on

campus and on social media makes me feel unsafe”). Deeper concerns of harassment, discrimination, and serious concerns of safety were revealed in comments describing anti-gay hate crimes and “...policies that do not hold White Supremist and White Nationalist who promote unsafe classroom and campus spaces...” accountable. (e.g. Racist and homophobic harassment of students on social media was ignored for over a year and administrators acted surprised when the exact same type of harassment from the same actors occurred during K-State Unite. Students whose safety and education impacted by this were ignored and invalidated.) Comments mentioned how research shows trans people disproportionately experience sexual violence and the incompetency of specific support offices. Comments spoke to the larger national conversation of LGBTQ+ persons, particularly members of the transgender community, becoming acceptable targets for hatred and discrimination. (e.g. Buzzwords like unity and civil discourse which are incredibly invalidating and don't allow people to express the fact that they have been traumatized). Comments discussed mental health issues associated with unaccountable patterns of faculty-on-student abuse (e.g. “as a result of this I've developed multiple chronic health issues and I almost committed suicide and no one cared”).

Specific experiences regarding physical structure issues. Comments indicated policy impacts actual structural challenges such as operational gender-neutral facilities, as well as considerations regarding accessing health care, well-women exams, gynecological care, chest-feeding stations, and basic safety. (e.g. if you're trans man that just gave birth that's doing chest-feeding, you have to, as a man, walk through the women's bathroom and potentially be accosted. So there's things like that where gender stuff and our identities are constantly having to be like argued up...). Comments indicated by categorizing members of the LGBTQ+ community as gender deviant, exclusionary practices and policies send a strong signal that it is “OK (to) actually openly be biased” against persons in the LGBTQ+ community. (e.g. “Hard to feel supported when we can't safely use the bathroom in our place of work and no one cares.”; “I tried to use the gender-neutral bathroom in Leadership Studies, turned the signage to occupied, and someone came in. Never doing that again.”)

Experiences of not counting. Comments stated the absence of the data and the absence of the attempt to capture and track specific data to track LGBTQ activities prevents the university from providing the evidence necessary to properly assess the LGBTQ experience and move the institution forward. Comments indicated this experience has allowed an institutional culture to develop which communicates that LGBTQ people and LGBTQ concerns don't matter (e.g. ...the federal government requires tracking in certain populations... the federal government doesn't count LGBTQ folks, and the University therefore does not count LGBTQ folks, ...so we don't have data... so we don't count in terms of statistics collecting). Comments made also discussed an example of a past chief diversity type person (e.g. who was like yeah you don't count as diversity in terms of the larger discussions of diversity equity and inclusion). Comments stated the accepted “tacit” or implied cultural practices (and policies) embracing gendered language, misgendering persons, not tracking institutional LGBTQ+ activity, and operating from a heteronormative framework “... erases non-binary (transgender and gender fluid) people as covered by those policies and sends a message that we don't exist or matter in

the eyes of the university.” Comments indicated awareness of a disregard for the “trans-ploitation” (a term used by participants to mark the specific exploitation of transgender people) and other exploitive experiences of students, faculty, and staff who represent multiple marginalized identities were evidenced by examples of “tremendous amounts of unpaid labor.” Comments stated this to be “unpaid labor violence.”

Issues with administration and Infrastructure. Comments indicated an understanding that change emerges from social-practice and expressed an appreciation for change occurring over time. Comments realized that change must be influenced by relations of power to direct that change (or sustain its continuation). Comments acknowledged the efforts of the current Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, however recognizing the need is greater than “one person could possibly do”, and is unduly burdened, evidencing the need for more investment in the Diversity and Inclusion Office. Comments stated there is a great LGBTQ Resource Center, but incapable of being the sole source for counteracting “the hostile and un hospitable environment” (e.g. “I think that that sort of reflects a larger problem of the administration believing that they have solved the problem of homophobia and transphobia”). Comments described this as an example of an “ostensibly dedicated diversity commitment.” Comments continued to discuss the acceptance of “very low expectations for LGBTQ competency from professional leaders who are expected to have basic knowledge.” Comments stated knowledgeable and committed LGBTQ+ faculty, staff, and students typically come out of their official roles to educate and support the university resulting in “remarkable amounts of unpaid labor.” Comments discussed the challenges of communicating identity validity issues and concerns to supervisors and administration and described as “burdensome” due to “needing to “Argue-Up” these concerns. Comments described a lack of authentic effort to appropriately consider time, location, placement, and audience readiness (e.g. LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff have been intentionally excluded from many diversity initiatives and conversations, and diversity and inclusion administrators have openly displayed a blatant lack of competency and basic respect in relation to LGBTQ identities. Students, faculty and staff who are LGBTQ people of color often experience erasure and violence in all spaces on campus). Comments described concerns regarding negative and inequitable hiring and partner support practices (e.g. LGBTQ spouses are not treated the same as heterosexual spouses who are given dual career hires and those hires that are given to LGBTQ spouses are lesser tiered where they are given instructor positions rather than tenure track). Comments described exclusive access to professional networks and opportunities (e.g. I would say that being a queer employee means being treated very differently. We have had to learn how to navigate our colleagues, navigate the language that we use, navigate the people that won't shake our hand, navigate the people that refuse to talk to us because of “their freedoms,” right? *their* freedom to discriminate against us, *their* freedom to think of us as less than human, and that goes for administration as well, and also there is no room for advancement - it is so extremely cliquy - if your kids go to the same school, you become friends or if you all go to the same church, you have the in, then you get to advance, but it is all premised on white-normative-cis-hetero bonding.)

Experiences of mistreatment toward students. Comments discussed concerns about the unreasonable expectation of faculty singling out students in class by “expecting one to

speak for all”, and a cycle of institutional apathy placing a burden on students by “... exploiting a group of... students and grad student leaders.” Comments also addressed how “there is no accountability for tenured faculty no matter how badly they mistreat students.” Comments stated a need to “hold faculty and administrators accountable for discrimination and abuse of students.” Comments stated inadequate student support and poor professional development and training places an irresponsible drain on the limited time and energy of the LGBTQ+ community and allies and produces jaded students and professionals (e.g. “if students don't participate and if students don't speak to the experiences they are having, those experiences will be ignored and those identities will not be represented”). Comments discussed commitments to students and select experiences of support encouraging persistence (e.g. “One of the reasons I stay: I actually really, really like the team members that I work closely with in my program. They are incredibly supportive, thoughtful, and caring. Without them and the buffer they provide to larger institutional issues though, my life and work would be much harder. I also care a great deal about creating a space that is supportive for our students at K-State as well like others have mentioned.”; “I'm really grateful to have a job so and I agree with a lot of folks, aside, if we were not here the students would suffer right?”).

Consequences. Comments discussed concrete consequences for LGBTQ+ faculty and staff due to these issues, including difficulties in navigating workspaces, promotion and advancement, as well as basic health and safety concerns (e.g. “extremely difficult to even try and do the best job”). Comments discussed the relationship a tacit culture has on the psychological, practical, professional, and financial well-being of LGBTQ+ members. Comments described larger social patterns of disregard, particularly supported by a lack of federal and state leadership in data collection practices and how that translates to a negative sense of belonging. Comments discussed how the University's bare minimum approach to addressing these concerns places an unreasonable burden on those who actually care. Comments clarified this as an irresponsible drain on the limited time and energy of the LGBTQ+ community and allies and produces jaded students and professionals. Comments stated all challenges reinforce a “...disservice to K-State and all K-Staters as it chips away at global understandings of safety and of the potential for belonging...” It was also stated these challenges reproduce a culture of incompetence regarding diversity and inclusion. (e.g., “class after class the students and the infrastructure of our University go without true competencies in diversity and inclusion and it keeps a culture in place that continues to do harm and creates hostile climates).

Actionable Steps

Increase support and protection for LGBTQ+ faculty. Comments discussed establishing policy to hire LGBTQ+ competent faculty and staff as “a really easy solution.” Comments stated supporting the few areas on campus (e.g. “Gender Studies Department and the Ethnic Studies Department”) which are providing safe and nurturing experiences must be supported (e.g. “need to not cut the two departments that do the lion's share of the work”; “also truly invest in programs, departments, centers, and initiatives that center LGBTQ+ needs”). Comments described the impact of an exclusionary and limiting culture supported by practices and policies gravitating into broader areas of life off campus. (e.g. “if you are queer and you don't have a

family or you don't run in those same circles then you are left out, ...and you were told not to make waves, you were told that, you know, well, you shouldn't do that, you shouldn't be seen outside of the University... you can't go out with friends and have an alcoholic drink because then people are going to assume things about you...there's just so much regulating our behavior, it keeps us from getting social support because we are protecting our professional lives. We feel like we have to choose between queer community support or job security...”). Comments discussed protecting infrastructure that works and changing what does not.

Establish methods for data collection and reporting of the LGBTQ+ experience.

Comments discussed identifying and appropriately compensating paid competent professionals to develop intelligent and relevant qualitative and quantitative data collection instruments. Comments discussed identifying appropriate metrics and methods to collect accurate baseline data and institutionalize regularly scheduled Campus Culture Assessment and reports reflecting LGBTQ+ activity, challenges, and progress. Comments discussed the leadership’s response to transition from symbolic activity to transformative change has been slow and patronizing at best. Comments discussed the need to intelligently, sincerely, and consistently engage members of the LGBTQ community. Comments mentioned possible starting places like: tracking LGBTQ+ student retention metrics and what resources were the most effective in retaining students; assessing campus-wide gender neutral bathroom accessibility; establishing a LGBTQ+ competency review board that can review policies, practices, and consult with offices on campus to bring the University up to present best practices.

Recognize and reward the contributions of LGBTQ+ faculty and staff. Comments discussed unrecognized “remarkable amounts of unpaid labor” by LGBTQ+ faculty, staff, and students. Comments described this as a method for the LGBTQ+ community to meet its own needs. Comments discussed fair compensation for the additional training, education, advising, mentoring, trouble shooting, problem solving, programming, crisis intervention, and broad support bridging the experience gap. Comments noted service credit for LGBTQ+ faculty and staff should be adjusted to account for the large amount of diversity work faculty do in terms of key retention work, student support services, and other essential work that maintains both the mission of and enrollment at K-State, and this could translate to reduced research requirements or course releases to recognize and honor the work of faculty.

Review and revise policy impacting safety concerns on and off campus. Comments discussed the need for increased competency that would directly translate to improved practices and policy. Comments described a poor freedom of speech policy that does not protect the most marginalized populations and called for the University “...to have an accurate interpretation of what free speech actually entails and what it means in an academic setting...” Comments called for a change in how the University deals with gender and sexual violence. As one comment explained, the University needs to “...deal with sexual violence that fraternities... commit and [the] anti-trans and anti-gay hate crimes that happen by fraternities on off campus locations.” Comments communicated that “the violence that happens off campus adversely impacts students on campus, and the hostile learning environment that gets created when a

student has to be in proximity to their perpetrator is untenable for a community disproportionately subjected to gender and sexual violence.”

Provide and mandate focused diversity training and professional development.

Comments discussed a higher level of competency across the board required for cultural change. Comments stated training specific to pronouns, gender expression, gender identity, two-spirit identity, transgender, gender norming, presentation of self, dress codes, communication, and respectability codes is central to progress. Comments discussed the need for improved competency and for that to be modeled by administration, staff, faculty, and student leadership. Comments described the importance training has on “developing reliable allies.” Comments elaborated that appropriately informed community members produce meaningful inclusion rather than harmful “tokenization.” Comments discussed the importance of understanding intersectionality and multiple identities in training (e.g. “an understanding that students, faculty, and staff can have multiple marginalized identities and that might create a unique experience in that for the students to have a voice they have to be recognized in all of their identities”). Comments discussed the importance of educating our community on how Federal and State legislation has been used as a “tactical... mechanism” to harm the LGBTQ+ community. Comments discussed the importance of changing the broader community’s negative attitude toward transgender persons. As one comment noted: the pervasive anti-transgender culture is an “acceptable form of discrimination that is mentally violent and very harmful.”

Hold people accountable. Comments noted that training might not be enough and that concerted efforts need to be made to ensure competency of those being hired (e.g. “we shouldn’t have to be imploring people to see our collective and individual humanity. At this point, a commitment to diversity and inclusion in K-State’s job postings should actually mean that job applicants are held accountable...people need to be anti-racist, pro-student, and non-hostile to LGBTQ+ folks or they are not qualified for the job.”) Comments discussed the importance of holding those accountable that engage in hostile and harassing behaviors. Comments also noted that because LGBTQ+ graduate students are at some of the highest risk of abuse by faculty advisors, “because of the thin social support they have, and fears of discrimination on the job market,” there needs to be more robust infrastructure to protect LGBTQ+ vulnerable populations from mistreatment and abuse by those in power.