

## Living into LGBTQ identities on campus

*Students who identify as LGBTQ want the same things their classmates enjoy. The space to learn. Not to be “othered.” How can higher education take allyship to the next level?*

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Robin Chenoweth: A lot of aspects of college life are centered around heteronormativity — the assumption that people are heterosexual and cisgender. Greek life. Most off-campus parties. The hook-up culture. Dorm posters. Music. Even class assignments and readings. For some students, it seems that nearly everyone else is hyper focused on being straight. But there are also students who aren't.

Javier Ramirez: My name is Javier Ramirez. I use he, him, his pronouns. And I am currently a second year, and final year, master's student in the higher education and student affairs program.

Robin Chenoweth: Javier has an alter ego that he sometimes brings out when he's not fully comfortable in his surroundings.

Javier Ramirez: I also joke about how I have this straight alter ego named Zeke.

Robin Chenoweth: Zeke?

Javier Ramirez: My middle name is Ezekiel, so out of my middle name, I created Zeke, this alter ego, which I use when I enter into new spaces, not knowing who I'm around.

Robin Chenoweth: Oh, I see.

Javier Ramirez: And it's ... it's really more of like a form of self-preservation. I do want to maintain a level of authenticity. But at the same time, I also need to be cognizant of my own well-being, whether it be my own mental health, my own physical health. And that's why I have so much respect for people that are able to be so open and so free. Because that's not a reality for a lot of folks. I mean, I think of some of the friends that I've talked to about this podcast topic. And it really hurts me to think that some of my closest queer friends are only recently coming out publicly. I also think about the act of coming out itself is a heteronormative act all together. Because straight people do not have to come out, ever. Because society automatically says that you're heterosexual until you say otherwise. To think about having to come out all the time, it's exhausting. It's draining. The act of disclosure — and especially for those of us who

may not pass as cisgender or heterosexual based off of perceived characteristics we have — it's one of the most mentally draining parts about being queer.

Robin Chenoweth: I'm Robin Chenoweth. In this episode of The Ohio State University Inspire Podcast, we look at what it means to be LGBTQ+ and a college student in 2021. How far have we come and where do we need to go to truly live into higher education's commitment to diversity and inclusion? Inspire is a production of the College of Education and Human Ecology. Carol Delgrosso is our audio engineer. Kyle Bucklew is our student intern. If you're watching popular culture — with queer hip-hop stars and Netflix specials with gay and trans inclusive themes — it feels like the LGBTQ-plus community has gained some support. Even on Ohio State's campus, there have never been more groups than there are now to support and serve queer and trans students. But there's a soft underbelly to that progress. The LGBTQ students we talked to are strong, resilient by necessity, but they aren't immune to being hurt.

shea martin: My pronouns are they, them, theirs. And yeah, I'm shea martin. I am getting my PhD in the teaching and learning department. And I focus on adolescent post-secondary and community literacies.

Robin Chenoweth: What are some of the challenges facing LGBTQ college students and graduate students in 2021?

shea martin: Yeah. You know, what aren't the challenges? There is just so much that the pandemic has exacerbated. And not just the pandemic, but obviously, you know, last summer and the protests for George Floyd and Black Lives Matter.

Robin Chenoweth: Do you feel like that impacted the LGBTQ community differently than it did others?

shea martin: I feel like the queer and trans Black people have always been at the forefront, both, you know, behind the scenes and out in the streets of protest of civil rights movements. And so I think, being a queer Black person who, is also non binary, I am of the full belief that every breath I take is resistance, right, is defiance. When we're out protesting last summer, for George Floyd for Brianna Taylor, for Elijah McLain, like, I feel like that was really difficult, something that we are used to. But I also think, that there is a lot of nuance and complexity in that protest in who folks usually show up for at protests. And who gets centered in movements? Who is the focal point of our efforts? It's often cisgender, heterosexual Black men. Folks tend to show up for certain folks, more so than they would show up for us. And so something I always wonder is like, you know, if I were to be a victim, of some type of harm, or violence, like who would show up for me? So it's the complicated thing that we hold. But I think that as a community, we hold it very closely and show up regardless.

Robin Chenoweth: LGBTQ-plus students, especially those of color, carry the conviction born of their own experiences. All the students who agreed to be in this podcast are students of color, but they also have many other identities. They find themselves at the intersection of being

Black, or LatinX, being non-binary, queer, female. Low-income. First-generation college student. Second generation immigrant.

Neal McKinney: My name is Neal McKinney, my pronouns are he, him his, and I'm a second-year PhD student in the higher education and student affairs program at the College Education and Human Ecology. I believe that there's so many different ways you can exist and live. And so I know in queer theory, particularly in relation to theories that help generate space and belonging for a trans community, that is something that's very important to acknowledge — that we do live in a world of binaries. And so because I am perceived in a lots of different ways, as far as binary between gay, straight, Black, or not Black enough, or, you know, being gay, but not too gay — all these different ways that show up in my life. It's very exhausting to be in the intersections of that, and just wanting to exist.

Robin Chenoweth: It's not unusual for students of color to feel isolated in a PhD program. Throughout the United States, only 839 of people identifying as Black men earned PhDs in 2019, according to the National Science Foundation. They account for just 1.5% of the total number of doctoral candidates that year. It's likely that only a small percentage of those identify as LGBTQ. The pandemic only intensified the isolation.

Neal McKinney: In some ways, it's like, well, you have to chart your own path, because a lot of doctoral students have to do that. Because, we are so few in the population to be this far along in our journey. It's been really isolating, to be completely honest, and very lonely, because I just kept wanting to reach out and find somebody who looks like me, who understands sort of the ways that I'm experiencing things. Because when I talk to any of my classmates or even, you know, my advisors, everyone gives support, but it's just like, it's like you don't see things the way that I do. And I'm trying and been trying very hard just to be okay with being the only but it's just it's so, so hard because this journey in and of itself already demands everything of you.

Robin Chenoweth: Because of those intersections of race, gender-identity, class and religion, most LGBTQ students are mindful of oppression in its many forms. And they work hard to be a part of the solution.

Maria Hernandez: My name is Maria Hernandez. My pronouns are she, her/they, them. My major is early childhood education. I am a fourth year. My final year. You're adding on another label to yourself, which is I guess, in this world, in the society that we live in is just more problematic. You know, not only am I a woman, that's the first thing they see. They might not know that I am also Hispanic because I am white passing. And then there's another one, me being in the LGBT community. I am the co-president of Shades, an LGBT organization dedicated for people of color. We try to make it a home for many students, where they can come and bring their experiences on campus and just talk and have open discussions.

Robin Chenoweth: Hernandez and the other co-leader run an online chat for student members seeking advice, like how to get a professor to not dead-name them— or use the gendered name on the roster instead of the name they have chosen. They offer presentations on queer

sex ed, or celebrating popular LGBTQ artists. Society is making headway, Hernandez thinks, but the LGBTQ community still takes attacks to heart.

Maria Hernandez: Social media makes things so much worse.

Robin Chenoweth: In what way?

Maria Hernandez: We have known singers just like Lil NAS X, who is still being discriminated against for the way he presents himself. We use his examples of music, of his art, of his creativity, the way he lives his life. And we end up presenting some of these actors and singers to our group, saying this is someone who is authentically representing the community in a different way. And if he is rich, and he's famous and getting called the F word and stuff and being told to kill himself, this is something that can be translated to us as well. It can be so toxic to the community. These are conversations that we have in my Shades organization, talking about our history, with coming out, and so many other things that they dealt with. And how are they dealing with it currently at Ohio State as well?

Robin Chenoweth: Research shows that support groups like Shades are crucial to creating a sense of belonging on campuses and especially in high schools, when young students are often coming out. In fact, gay-straight alliances in schools have been shown to curb suicidal thoughts and attempts among LGB youth. But it's not enough to just have LGBTQ student voices on the margins. To be truly inclusive, change must affect all levels of systems within higher education. For Javier Ramirez, the need for representation can present itself very near to campus.

Javier Ramirez: Heterosexism is the cultural foundation of our society and of higher education. Just to tie back like a social issue to the institutional level, until we dismantle heterosexism in as many places as possible on the college campuses, then the work is never going to be done.

Robin Chenoweth: When entertainers, politicians and even religious groups pit one marginalized community against another, the effect is especially damaging for those who identify with both groups. Compound that with rejection from family members and others, and the emotional cost can be great.

Ashley Hicks: Those things really impact people's overall well-being. My name is Dr. Ashley Hicks. My pronouns are she, her, hers. And I am a clinical associate professor in the Department of Human Sciences and I'm the director of The Ohio State University Couple and Family Therapy Clinic. We know that relationships and support matter for our overall health as humans. And so when we're in situations in which we are seen as the other or we are ostracized or maybe even harassed. We know there are high rates of things like harassment and bullying, that adolescents and young adults face who are members of the LGBTQ plus community. I think those stressors really take a toll on their well-being. And then when we think about that in relationship to COVID-19, the time we're currently in, a lot of the stressors that people face, overall, intensify.

Robin Chenoweth: The Trevor Project, a national survey of 35,000 LGBTQ youth from 13 to 24 years old, found that 70% surveyed felt their mental health has been poor during the pandemic.

Ashley Hicks: Half of LGBTQ youth in the United States, said that COVID impacted their ability to express their sexual orientation and gender identity. And so those things really matter when we're thinking about how you're feeling on a day-to-day basis. There's a significant difference between rates for suicidality for LGBTQ persons, youth, young adults and adults, than those who are straight or cisgender. I think that emotional pain of rejection, or just isolation, can definitely lead to significant distress, even if you haven't experienced it directly. So maybe no one in your family has rejected you. But knowing you live in a world where you're not accepted or a good chunk of people might not accept you in your context, even having that awareness causes significant distress.

Robin Chenoweth: And, so, what can be done? We can attack the problem early. The College of Education and Human Ecology has for years led research into how inclusive literature and classroom discussions can reduce the isolation experienced by middle and high school LGBTQ+ youth. Professor Mollie Blackburn studied how queer teens responded to a focused curriculum in an inclusive school.

Mollie Blackburn: If you have really open assignments, if you have time allocated for talking about not only the literature, but their lives in relationship to the literature, then they'll go there. And they'll go so deep when they have the chance. I'm really looking at the way students used talk and talk about literature in particular to move across differences, right. And it's not only with the kids and supporting the kids but also helping their teachers reflect on some of their own curriculum and pedagogy that could be more inclusive. There's a tremendous amount of work that can be done to make the school lives and lives beyond better.

Robin Chenoweth: We will hear more from Dr. Blackburn in our January episode, when we discuss LGBTQ youth and their families' response to their coming out. But many Ohio State students are also passionately striving to create the inclusive environments that they might have missed in education. shea martin is Blackburn's advisee, as well as Elaine Richardson's.

shea martin: The work that I do is primarily working with teachers and parents and guardians, caregivers, and also students, not only reading LGBTQ-plus texts, and trying to learn from them, but also thinking about how we can make classrooms more inclusive. How we read literature, the assignments that we give to students, the way that we build relationships, what advocacy looks like, both inside and outside of the classroom. Do I think that we can change a kid's life and make kids less afraid, make them feel more affirmed through literature? The short answer is, yes. The books that we put into the hands of kids, and the narratives that we explore in classrooms have a direct impact on how kids treat each other.

Robin Chenoweth: Worried that kids were isolated during the pandemic shutdown, martin and a friend launched an online book club for LGBTQ youth in 2020. They expected 25 or so participants.

shea martin: Throughout the year we had 180 kids who joined us from all across the country and actually a couple of them in a couple of different countries, too.

Robin Chenoweth: Neal McKinney's doctoral research considers how college administrators are socialized about race and racism in their advising practices, and the effects this has on degree completion for students of color, including LGBTQ students.

Neal McKinney: I want to be hopeful that one day, people would just wake up and realize that, oh, wow, we have all these brilliant minds, no matter what identities that they have. If we're so focused on just trying to get through a class without being either misgendered or dead-named, or, having to be the exemplar about something queer, those are real experiences that for students who are in the community. That's what we are dealing with, in a classroom space, trying to be able to create a space that's safe enough for those students to just actually be able to focus on the learning. It's such a task that really does require, faculty and staff to really recognize that we are complicit in the work environment of a higher education institution that isn't created to make our students feel like that they can belong. Fighting for equal rights, even on a college campus, really does require that we put ourselves on the line. And so I don't expect everybody to do that. But I do know that without being willing to put something on the line, on behalf of trying to make a change happen, that change can't actually happen. If I have nothing else to leave behind as a legacy everybody will have known that I was here to fight to make sure that students could be free to exist however they want.

Robin Chenoweth: When Javier Ramirez was an undergrad at University of Oklahoma, he joined a fraternity and a Christian organization, whose members were mostly white, conservative, wealthy and straight. And he — a gay son of Mexican immigrants — fit in by being homonormative, he says.

Javier Ramirez: Homonormative, I would define as being the socially acceptable version of what people will tolerate out of queer folks. So to think about how we look at Ellen DeGeneres, we think about Neil Patrick Harris, we think of those two individuals as very homonormative, because they assimilated into heterosexual culture, while still maintaining aspects of their queer identity.

Robin Chenoweth: He eventually was kicked out of the Christian organization after he refused to renounce his gay identity.

Javier Ramirez: I wanted that community. I wanted, I guess, essentially the power that came with it, because it felt good in the moment. Reflecting back on it, I neglected so much of my queer identity, because I put myself in those positions. There are times where I had such internalized homophobia, internalized femme phobia. But now I'm unlearning all of that. I feel more free and able to be authentically and unapologetically myself, despite everything that I did to myself and put myself through.

Robin Chenoweth: Ramirez now focuses his master's studies on LGBTQ identities within college sororities and fraternities. He also wants to pursue a PhD in educational policy, to consider ways higher education can bring more diversity to the table.

Javier Ramirez: How can we promote true inclusivity of LGBTQ students? What type of policies do we need to enact at the institutional level that prevent discrimination against LGBTQ students?

Robin Chenoweth: While they're moving toward better university environments for queer and trans students, most LGBTQ students are quick to point out that college gave them something they desperately needed. The chance to become their authentic selves. To find community and mentorship. To know what it means to belong. shea martin.

shea martin: Moving to a new place and starting a new journey allows one to reinvent yourself. And so I think that it happens a lot. People, go to school, and they meet new people, have new experiences There's no predetermined narrative of you. Ohio State is very big and so you can be whoever you want to be. And you can reinvent yourself over and over again. And something I really appreciate about queerness and about transness is the fluidity and the expansiveness of identity. That says that there are no boxes; there are no like finite limits. You can be whoever you want, and that can change moment to moment.

Javier Ramirez: You know the concept of the little kid who's so, free and like, a little bit flamboyant. And some people may be like, 'Oh, he may be a little fruity.' But then they grow up and become way more enclosed, and closed off, because maybe they're dealing with certain things. I feel like after I hit 2018 I reverted back into that younger, carefree, kind of flamboyant, definitely fruity boy.

Robin Chenoweth: It was freeing. You were freed.

Javier Ramirez: I kind of feel like in some degree, it kind of sucks being straight now. Not to say that, sexuality is what is limiting about it. But the social constraints that a lot of straight folks have on them, on how they're expected to behave, queerness just like, relinquishes all of that. You don't have to live behind those barriers anymore. And it's, it's freeing. It's, it's a new state of mind.

Robin Chenoweth: To find out more about Shades, the organization for LGBTQ students of color, and other LGBTQ-plus support groups at Ohio State, check out the student organizations page on Ohio State's website. Join us for our next episode January 19th, when we look at how parents' reactions affect their children when they come out as LGBTQ.

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