Best Practices for Working with LGBTQ+ Individuals on Campus

Education

We all strive to be respectful and appropriate in our communications. To do so, we must continually educate ourselves on a broad spectrum of issues and terminology. Below are just a few ways you can enhance your knowledge of LGBTQ+ topics.

1. Be sure to familiarize yourself with LGBTQ+ terminology. LGBTQ+ is an acronym that stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer. The plus is used to include all identities not represented by “LGBTQ.” Some individuals may not have their identity recognized in some versions of the acronym, and some may not be sure of their identity at all. Including the plus shows that all identities are valid and recognized. If you are unsure of the meaning of certain terms or would like to learn what words are most inclusive, please refer to this terminology list provided by the Diversity & Inclusion Student Commons at http://www.montana.edu/safezone/documents/Terminology.pdf

2. Attend a Safe Zone Training. MSU’s Diversity & Inclusion Student Commons and Counseling and Psychological Services offer Safe Zone training workshops which provide education on LGBTQ+ identities and issues. They also offer more advanced workshops on developing skills as an ally and examining personal biases. For more information about the Safe Zone program, visit http://www.montana.edu/safezone/.

Inclusive Language

Increasing the inclusiveness of our language means working to understand the ways that language can unconsciously perpetuate assumptions about gender, sexual orientation, race, class, ability/disability, age, and other identities and experiences.

As important as using the “right” words can be, it is equally important to foster a climate of open, effective communication and demonstrate a willingness to learn. Language is constantly evolving, so you may need advice or continued education to keep your language inclusive (HR Council for the Nonprofit Sector, Canada). Please note this section contains sensitive and possibly triggering language.

1. Words and phrases like, “fag,” “dyke,” or “that’s so gay” are harmful to LGBTQ+ individuals and those who care about them. Interrupting and addressing this kind of language in your classroom or workplace is important for making people feel safe. Rather than simply telling people not to use those words, try explaining the impacts of their language and illustrating how inappropriate language can reinforce stereotypes toward LGBTQ+ individuals.

2. Try including a diversity or inclusion statement in your syllabus to set a respectful, inclusive tone for your class. If you have these guidelines in place from the beginning of the semester, it is easier to intervene during tricky
situations. Examples of diversity statements can be found at [http://www.montana.edu/diversity/faculty_resources.html](http://www.montana.edu/diversity/faculty_resources.html)

3. Using gender neutral language can help to avoid assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation. For example, if you use the gender neutral term “partner” in place of “husband” or “wife,” you avoid making assumptions about the gender of someone’s significant other. When it comes to gender neutral language, “they, them, and their” are commonly used as singular, gender neutral pronouns. For example, when referring to your attendance policy on a syllabus, you could write “If a student misses more than 30% of classes, their grade will be negatively impacted.” This shows respect toward all genders and avoids the awkwardness and binary nature of saying “him/her.”

**Tips and Strategies**

1. It is important to recognize that we all make mistakes when it comes to language and identity, and that is okay. If you make a mistake, briefly apologize, correct the mistake, and move on. Try to do your own research on being respectful with pronouns and other identity-related language to improve your skills.

2. It is okay to ask about pronouns and chosen names. We cannot know a person’s pronouns or chosen name without asking them. If you’re unsure and need to know someone’s pronouns, politely pull them aside and ask, “What pronouns do you use?” or, “By what name would you like me to refer to you?” Some people may not feel comfortable sharing their pronouns, and especially not in large groups. Let people know that it is okay to not speak to any part of their identity they do not feel comfortable sharing.

3. An individual will often use pronouns that align with their gender identity. Even if the person is not present, use their correct personal pronouns. This shows respect for the person’s identity and will help you to become more confident using them when the person is present. It helps to practice unfamiliar pronouns so that using them in conversation will grow easier and more natural.

4. Avoid using the term “preferred pronouns.” An individual’s pronouns are not “preferred,” nor is their identity. Instead, use the term “personal pronouns” or simply “pronouns.”

5. Respect the privacy of people with LGBTQ+ identities. If an individual shares an aspect of their identity with you, avoid sharing that information with anyone else (“outing” them) without the express consent of that individual. “Outing” takes the decision-making out of the individual’s hands, which can be painful, uncomfortable, and unsafe.

6. Be sure to use care when taking attendance. Instructors often read off the official class roster provided by the Registrar’s Office to take attendance. For students who do not go by their legal name, and particularly for transgender students, this practice can be challenging and very uncomfortable. One suggested method for making your classroom more inclusive is providing students with note cards during the first class session. Ask students to write the name they go by, personal pronouns, and any other information they need you to know to be successful in your class. In order to make it easier for you to identify a student, you can have
them write the last four digits of their GID as well. This practice is easy to implement, prevents outing, and is a positive way to normalize all gender identities. It is inclusive for students who, for a variety of reasons, use a name other than their legal name.

This list of best practices was developed under the guidance of the Diversity & Inclusion Student Commons in 2016 with assistance from a steering committee made up of students and faculty. This document was most recently updated in January, 2021. This list is meant to guide faculty, staff, and students in creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment on campus. If you have questions about this list or related issues, please contact the Diversity & Inclusion Student Commons at diversity@montana.edu or (406) 994-5801.