



CHALLENGING SCHOOL POLICIES & DECISIONS

Updated October 2023

Despite great strides in LGBTQ inclusion in recent years at college campuses, nearly one-third of LGBTQ students still experience bullying, harassment, or assault at college, according to our [report](#). Less than half of LGBTQ students say that their universities have resources for LGBTQ students, in particular, transgender students' resources such as all-gender bathrooms.

If you are a student, seeking to take action to make your school a better place for LGBTQ students, you may face opposition from peers, faculty, or university leadership. See below for tips and stories from LGBTQ students who have made an impact by challenging school policies and decisions.

KNOW YOUR RIGHTS

The First Amendment protects people's rights to free speech, expression, press, and assembly, as well as the right to petition the government. However, public and private colleges and universities are held to different legal standards when setting internal regulations for First Amendment rights on campus.

Here are some guides to LGBTQ student rights on campus. Remember that it is **essential to know your school's specific free speech policies**, usually found on your university's website.

- [Campus Free Speech Guide | PEN America](#)
- [Transgender Students at Colleges and Universities | Lambda Legal](#)
- [LGBTQ Youth Rights | Southern Poverty Law Center](#)

Responding to Permitted Discriminatory Hate Speech

- You may come across anti-LGBTQ speech on campus that university leaders have not interpreted as hate speech. It's important for students to understand how leadership differentiates between hate and discrimination and think creatively about how they can use **those same protections to advance their cause**. Take, for example, the following case study:

ISSUE	STUDENT RESPONSE
<p>In 2017, Elgin Community College allowed the anti-gay organization Heterosexuals Organized for a Moral Environment (HOME) to set up an informational table about conversion therapy in their Free Speech Zone. Elgin publicly stated its disagreements with HOME but will not ban the organization from campus because of its commitment to free speech.</p>	<p>Students responded with a counter-event to drown them out which led them to move their table. When HOME tabled for the next two years, students continued their counter-protest annually. Read the full case study at PEN America.</p>

BUILD COMMUNITY

- Building an LGBTQ student group can help LGBTQ students feel supported and empowered to make change on campus. [Read our Building LGBTQ Community resource for tips to help guide your community-building journey.](#)
 - Go to community events, make friends with other LGBTQ students, and be involved with affinity groups. The more connected you are to the community, the bigger your voice becomes when you seek to improve your school.
- Focus on what your specific community needs. Make sure your decisions to challenge school policy are based on issues agreed upon by a diverse and intersectional group of LGBTQ students.
 - Volunteering at your school or community LGBTQ or diversity center is a great way to see what programs, organizations, and services you can utilize or be involved in to help better your campus and QT community.
 - [Find an LGBTQ center at your school](#) via the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals.
- Strengthen your network of advocates by building coalitions with student organizations that may serve different communities but share your values.
 - See [the Campaign Workshop's guide to building coalitions](#) for more information.

“Build a team. I owe everything to the people I have had the privilege of working with.... Their insight and diversity of perspective enriched our work in incredibly meaningful ways that also helped us ensure that our work honored intersectionality and the needs of the student body.” - Sofia Lawskey, Point Flagship Scholar

FIND ALLIED FACULTY AND UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP

- Find and recruit faculty who are allies and are willing to open a dialogue with university administration on issues.
- Ask supportive faculty and administrators about how university context, history, or other factors could affect your goals. Have past student organizations lobbied for the same thing? Are university leaders' decisions constrained by state laws? Which university offices might want to support your ideas and why?
 - Read how faculty, staff, and students can work together in PEN America's [Campus Free Speech Guide](#) and Rutgers [toolkit for campus organizers](#).

"There are always teachers who feel strongly about the same causes as you. Talk to those people about opportunities at school where you can bring awareness." - Emily Odenkirk, Point BIPOC Scholar

- Network with university leadership through informational interviews – have friends in power before you need to challenge a policy, decision, or mandate.
 - Read the [Yale Office of Career Strategy's guide to informational interviewing](#) for tips.
- Get the support of your student government. Make sure student government leaders are briefed on your issues and ready to advocate when they next meet with university leaders like the president, provost, or dean of students.
- Have tough conversations with university staff and leadership constructively. Learn how to engage in constructive conversations with someone whose beliefs differ from your own.
 - Learning how to articulate your goals for making your school a safer place for LGBTQ students and positioning yourself as a knowledgeable resource within the community goes a long way towards beginning to dismantle bias and prejudice within a school space.

“During an era characterized by polarization, where visceral reactions and antagonism have become the norm, the capacity to avoid disputation and, instead, achieve tangible growth has grown rarer and rarer. People with this skill have learned, through difficult practice, how to listen and draw insight even from arguments they disagree with. They can recognize that a conversation ending in dissension simply means more time to accumulate further rationales for the next encounter. Soon enough, you will find educating others in your everyday life, while continuously gathering diverse perspectives to modify and reinforce their own, to be an effortless act.” - Ari Pero, Point Flagship Scholar

SPEAK OUT

- Write op-eds in your school newspaper to influence public opinion and advocate for a proposed change with actionable steps.
 - See [How to Write an Op-Ed](#) from the National Organization for Women for a few ideas to get started.
- Attend university town halls at any given opportunity to ask questions and broadcast your ideas.
- Plan events, share ideas, and promote petitions via social media.
 - Read [Maryville University's guide to activism](#) on social media.
- Once you have become politically engaged, encourage others to do the same: utilize your knowledge and platforms to make issue advocacy accessible to everyone.
 - Leaders are those who are just as determined to mobilize and empower their peers to fight for change as they are determined to make that change themselves: “pay it forward and pay it back.” Pass down those opportunities which you found valuable in order to continue this critical cycle of growth, empowerment, and action.

“Never underestimate the power of your voice. Whatever you say, chances are someone will listen to you. And even if they don't, you may instill an idea or concept in their mind and plant the seeds for understanding.”- Felix Kiene-Gualtieri, Flagship Scholar

SELF-CARE

- Advocating for yourself and your community can be exhausting and lead to burnout. Make self-care a priority. Here are a few resources about how to take care of yourself as an activist:

- [Activist Self Care](#)
- [Rest for Resistance](#)
- [Self-care and prevention of burn out among activists -tools for everyday life](#)

"It's easy to get overwhelmed by social media and the onslaught of bad news. Try to focus on cultivating your own garden and doing something in your community that uses your unique gifts to make an impact. Change starts in ourselves, then our families, then our communities, then the world!" - Sydney Rinehart, Point Flagship Scholar

"Love yourself! This is my favorite motto and what helped me carry myself on despite the adversity. The moment students learn how to practice self-love will be the moment they will naturally make a difference at their schools for themselves and the different communities in their surroundings. " - Luis Paulino, Point BIPOC Scholar

LGBTQ STUDENT ADVOCATE STORIES FROM POINT SCHOLARS

"As part of the student government, I pushed our administration to recoup our Diversity space on campus." - Pau Brunet-Fuertes, Los Angeles Community College

"This past year I served as my university Student Body President. I was able to utilize an endowment fund dedicated to my position to give money to our Center for Sexuality and Gender Diversity to help fund the newly created Trans Closet and other QT student services." - Niya McAdoo, University of Hawaii at Manoa

"I got my university to put students' preferred names on their degrees instead of defaulting to their birth names to ensure that students who haven't been able to go through the name change process can still have the correct name read and printed. I went through my Registrar's office and went through multiple meetings over the course of a few months to enact this change in time for graduation this past May!" - Jo Lew, University of Michigan

"After a few conversations, my professors for Health Assessment and Maternity have considered the language they use when talking about genitals, gender, and childbirth. After advocating with the GSA and student accessibility services (a great ally on our campus!), the school is looking at increasing the number of gender-neutral restrooms." - Shayn Ember, University of Bridgeport

"It is important to remember what we are fighting for whenever we need to make sacrifices. My proudest achievement was creating a student group that fought for equity and justice in my school directly against our administration. This resulted in

dozens of meetings that under the guise of conversation, boiled down to scolding. But when the prize is a community where even one person feels safer at school, I was willing to sit through hours of those meetings. In the fight for queer safety and happiness, our victories will be worth more than almost any cost.” - Lukas Borja, The University of Chicago

“I’ve had many conversations with teachers about how to support and highlight LGBT+ voices and identities. These conversations are often initiated by faculty once you show yourself to be open, kind, and growth-oriented. I’ve helped teachers understand, navigate, and use neo-pronouns within the classroom, helped get more access to gender neutral restrooms, and increased in-school access to sexual health aids all by engaging in respectful conversations with teachers and admin. Sometimes all it takes is confidence, and faith in the good intention of my community” - Cara Weathers, Pacific University

“After months of frustration at seeing my friends deadnamed and having my own pronouns disregarded in classrooms, I put forward a proposal to G@MIT on implementing consequences for the repeated misgendering of students by faculty and staff. I was subsequently appointed to the executive board of G@MIT (MIT’s LGBTQ cultural organization), where I have continued to research precedents and prepare our recommendations to MIT’s DEI Office.” - Ari Pero, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

“I am the former executive board officer at my previous college’s (Austin Community College) student government and after being elected as President I started creating legislation to go into the next year’s administration and hopeful to amend our constitution to become more inclusive. I created a policy for everyone to list their pronouns if joining via Zoom for it to be mandatory and in person to have name tags that listed every members pronouns. Myself and a another Point Foundation BIPOC Scholar Kay Trent who is my wonderful friend and colleague have has started on the creation of a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Officer for our student government who would be responsible for overseeing all student organizations and ensuring that they are meeting DEI initiatives every semester.” - Justin Parker, University of Connecticut