## LGBTQ Focus group Report: 2019

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## Overview:

In Winter semester of 2019, Kyle Felker and Elisa Salazar held a series of focus groups specifically for LGBTQ faculty and staff, with the support of the LGBTQ FSA. We scheduled two sessions a month for four months (Feb-May). We had initially hoped to recruit 50 people into the sessions, but ended up with about half that number.

Despite this, we harvested a lot of useful insights from those conversations-and we often heard about the same difficulties or issues over and over across multiple sessions.

We had three goals for the sessions:

1. To gather ideas for new programs/initiatives for the FSA that would benefit LGBTQ faculty and staff
2. To reconnect membership and the steering committee
3. To identify folks within the community that could help drive new initiatives forward (champions)

Our sessions script and supporting materials are available in the appendix.

## Section one: Causes and Initiatives Faculty and Staff are Invested in

LGBT faculty and staff are invested in a wide variety of issues, many but not all of them revolving around how that issue affects LGBT people. They also range from campus-related to national issues. This is a section of issues participants noted being invested in, as well as organizations, events, or programs that they noted participating in or giving time or other resources to.

**Causes mentioned in sessions:**

Trans-related issues, both here at GVSU and within the state of Michigan

Statewide/national LGBT-related policy and legislation

Elliot-Larsen Act

Adoption rights

Same-sex marriage

Food Justice

LGBTQ issues in primary and secondary education

Equity issues in general in primary and secondary education

LGBTQ religious minorities/queer religious inclusion

Refugee resettlement

Gentrification in Grand Rapids

Environmental issues, especially as they disproportionally affect members of racial and sexual minorities/sustainability

Intersectional issues/supporting queer people of color/queer feminism

Pay Equity

Mental health issues/advocacy

Inclusion and representation on the Young Alumni Council and in the Young Professionals of Higher education

Representation of women and LGBTQ people in politics

Ending ableism and stigma for people with disabilities (esp. for hearing impaired people)

Addressing police targeting of LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ minorities

Supporting at-risk students, both LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ, many of whom are suffering from food insecurity, family problems, or the like

**Organizations, programs, or events people give their time to:**

Kids Food Basket

Grand Rapids Trans Foundation

Cosecha: <https://www.facebook.com/cosechagr/>

Grand Rapids HQ, a shelter for teens

The Pride Center

Red Project (several people noted being involved with the Red Project)

Out at the LakeShore (LGBT community center in Holland)

Grand Rapids Pride

Milton E. Ford LGBT Center

WMEAC (Water Advocacy group)

Queer Connections

League of Enchantment

Young Alumni Council

Young Professionals of Higher Education

T3 (campus technology group)

Red Folder Training

## Section two: Short-term Recommendations:

We condensed the rest of the data into a selection of issues and gaps that were noted multiple times in several sessions. This first section are recommendations based on what we heard that we think can be addressed or implemented in the short term. “short-term” in this context, means the next six months to year out. The rest are larger or more complex issues that will take time, work, and campus partnerships to address.

**Recommendation: FSA should utilize more student support in an internship or employment capacity.**

This emerged more as a peripheral issue as Elisa and I discussed the various initiatives that needed work. It’s pretty clear that to do this work, the FSA is going to need more staff time and labor to throw at some of these things. Right now, the steering committee is consumed by managing a lot of day-to-day administrative minutia that could probably be delegated to students and interns. For example, posting the meeting minutes to the website or soliciting nominations for the PRISM award. Delegating that stuff to student labor will provide opportunities for student interns to gain valuable experience as well as free up the steering committee to work towards more of the initiatives and issues we identify below

**Goal:** Spend the next few months identifying duties in existing work that can be delegated to student labor, and work with the Milton E. Ford LGBT center and/or the Division of inclusion and Equity to find student or intern labor to handle those tasks. Design new services or programming with delegation in mind.

**Recommendation: Make the FSA Website and the Outlist more prominent for new hires. Also ensure they are more regularly updated.**

Many faculty and staff noted that they look for the existence of an organization like the FSA when they are considering GV as an employer. We should make sure that information on the FSA is visible for potential queer hires to see, as this helps with recruitment. We also need to make sure both resources are regularly updated (which the previous recommendation can help with). We may also need to include some information attached to the Out List explaining how it’s meant to be used (for example, encouraging potential new hires to use it to contact folks they can ask about campus climate for LGBT folks)

**Goal:** Work with Inclusion and Equity and Human resources to identify places where the FSA Website and/or Out List can be linked. Also include some verbiage on the Out List that explains its purpose better.

**Recommendation: Identify and use contacts within departments to help encourage people to attend events and programming.**

We heard repeatedly that departments/units often function as enclaves-people only know queer people inside their own departments and often get news about events from them. They’re also more inclined to go to events if other people they know are going. The FSA may need to work on identifying contact folks within different departments and issuing personal invitations to things through them. We used to have a departmental liaison list-it may be time to resurrect that list and use it as a “push” mechanism for information about events and programming.

**Goal:** Investigate the possibility of creating a departmental liaison list, using some of the participants form the focus groups as a starting point. See whether using this list in addition to the mailing list helps with event attendance.

**Recommendation: Create a mechanism for LGBTQ Faculty and staff to self-organize social events**

People we talked to want more social activities and opportunities to connect with others, but the kinds of activities they want, where they want them, and when are all considerably varied. Staff scheduling and locations are considerably spread out, and people voiced a variety of (sometimes conflicting) desires for where and when activities should be scheduled. We recommend looking into using an online mechanism to allow folks to self-organize their own events, with some student labor behind it to help with logistics, so that the community can organize what they want when they want it and the FSA doesn’t get swamped in the minutia of being social directors. There are other campus organizations that have done something similar we can model (such as the Parenting Network groups). Remember that these kinds of activities can be helpful in pulling folks into the deeper work the FSA does. Another potential model here are scheduled service opportunities, where people can come together to do good for the community while getting to know each other and the organization.

**Goal:** Design and pilot an online system to allow community members to create and schedule a variety of social/service events. We should also create a sort of community calendar to sit on the website that lays all these activities out. Student labor is going to be essential to making this happen in a way the steering committee can sustain.

**Recommendation: Hold a series of open forums on benefits for LGBTQ Faculty and staff**

Queer faculty and staff have a lot of questions about how their benefits work. We should look into doing some programming with HR in which people can learn more about benefits and ask their own questions. Parental leave, for example, is a good example of something that LGBTQ folks are unclear on. There’s a larger issue here about how well those benefits actually work (see the larger issues section), but in the short term, just understanding the existing benefits better is a start.

**Recommendation: Look at short-term ways to supplement LGBTQ counseling needs, fold them into the above forums**

We heard quite a bit about faculty and staff interactions with Encompass, and it was, at best, a mixed bag. Some employees are having very bad experiences with counselors who are not knowledgeable about LGBTQ issues or who are just not LGBTQ-friendly. We need to look at some short term methods to connect faculty and staff with counseling services, which many, many people in sessions either use or want to use. One approach might be to use the Thrive wellness counseling as a referrer service, or to bring in Priority Health as an alternate way to access counseling services. Longer term, the relationship with Encompass needs to be scrutinized and either improved or replaced.

**Goal:** Work with HR on ways to connect faculty and staff to counseling services, roll that into benefits forums so people can be aware of them.

**Goal:** Work with HR staff to schedule one or more open forums for queer faculty/staff to ask questions and raise concerns about benefits that can feed into the larger conversation on assessing how well our existing benefits work (see below).

**Recommendation: Create an LGBTQ-friendly service provider directory, and enlist member and student help to keep it updated**

Staff repeatedly voiced to us that they have difficulty finding LGBTQ friendly or knowledgeable services, particularly healthcare services and legal services. While there are some local organizations that do provide such a directory, many of those are opt-in by the business themselves, and they may be a less than reliable judge of whether their service is actually accessible for LGBTQ people. Recommendations from LGBTQ people who have actually used the service are a better barometer. This was an idea embraced by almost every single session we did, and it needn’t be particularly onerous to do-a simple google document might do for a start.

**Goal:** Identify a mechanism for faculty/staff to share recommendations for LGBTQ-friendly service providers. Enlist some staff and student labor to help keep it updated.

**Recommendation: Work with HR and I&E to schedule some sessions for LGBTQ faculty and staff on how to navigate unsupportive or hostile work environments**

Concerns people raised about their work environments lead us to believe that the community could use a refresher on how they can air grievances or what recourse they have if their work environment is difficult or unsupportive. There are things we can do now in terms of helping people know how and what mechanisms exist. There’s also a larger issue here centering around whether those mechanisms actually work as well as they could or should-see the larger issues section-but again, as with benefits, simply better informing people of what recourse they have now is a good first step.

**Goal:** Work with HR and/or I&E staff to schedule one or more open forums for queer faculty/staff to learn what options they have if they are dealing with a hostile or unsupportive work environment.

## Section three: Larger issues

Discussions also surfaced a number of larger, more complicated issues for whom solutions are not necessarily as clear-cut. In many cases, we are unsure of the scope or magnitude of the problem, and further assessment may be needed to determine both the parameters of the issue and what, if anything, can to be done to address it. We recommend using the champion list as a starting point to form long-term workgroups to investigate and address these issues, with the understanding that it will probably take time to both articulate the scope of the problems and formulate a solution. Most of them will also require partnerships with other campus entities in order to be effective-we’ve noted potential partners below each issue.

**Issue: Can we increase the visibility of the FSA and make contact with new Queer Faculty and staff?**

It’s hard for people to know about the FSA and difficult for the FSA to identify potential members. We heard repeatedly from faculty and staff that they had no idea the FSA existed until relatively recently, despite working at the university for years. We need help from I&E in making contact. We also know very little about the population we serve-we think there need to be more efforts like these focus groups to engage folks in affinity groups about what issues they are facing.

**Partners:** Division of Inclusion and Equity

**Issue: Are LGBTQ faculty and staff actually benefitting from benefits?**

We heard a lot from faculty and staff about benefits. There’s a lack of knowledge, but also concerns about how well many benefits, especially healthcare and counseling, are working for queer people. Trans people have an especially hard time accessing and using these services. We also heard a lot about the Encompass service specifically- queer people are having bad experiences with counselors that are either not queer friendly or are not knowledgeable about queer issues (or both). This is potentially scaring LGBTQ staff away from accessing counseling services they need. Campus needs to examine the encompass relationship specifically, as well as do some larger assessment of how accessible benefits are for queer faculty and staff and where they can be made better.

**Partners:** Inclusion and Equity, Human Resources

**Issue: How do we support GV work environments to be more LGBTQ-friendly?**

We heard from a number of people who indicated their work environment was not supportive-this included faculty and staff. Despite overall campus efforts, individual departments/units can still be closeted and/or unwelcoming. Queer staff need better knowledge of how to use existing mechanisms to get grievances addressed, and perhaps also better mechanisms to get them addressed. The idea of a faculty ombudsman or administrative liaison was brought up by a few participants as one potential way to address this. This issue could use some more work and exploration together with I&E.

**Partners:** Inclusion and Equity, Human Resources

**Issue: How do we support faculty dealing with ‘problematic pedagogy’?**

Faculty participants noted they are sometimes asked to do a kind of “LGBTQ” or “Gender issues” day in their colleagues’ classes, which is well-meaning but assumes such issues can be addressed by a “representative” member of the group doing a single class presentation. Participants also noted the construction of offensive tokenist classroom assignments, such as having straight students “observe” or “interview” a queer/trans person. How do we get instructors to recognize this as problematic and better integrate LGBTQ issues into their teaching? Are there resources or education we can work together with other campus entities to provide?

**Partners:** Faculty Teaching and Learning Center

# Short-term recommendations- at a glance:

1. Recommendation: FSA should utilize more student support in an internship or employment capacity.
2. Make the FSA Website and the Outlist more prominent for new hires. Also ensure they are more regularly updated.
3. Identify and use contacts within departments to help encourage people to attend events and programming.
4. Create a mechanism for LGBTQ Faculty and staff to self-organize social events
5. Hold a series of open forums on benefits for LGBTQ Faculty and staff.
6. Look at short-term ways to supplement LGBTQ counseling needs, fold them into the above forums.
7. Create an LGBTQ-friendly service provider directory, and enlist member and student help to keep it updated.
8. Work with HR and I&E to schedule some sessions for LGBTQ faculty and staff on how to navigate unsupportive or hostile work environments.

# Long-term issues needing a deeper dive- at a glance:

1. Can we increase the visibility of the FSA and make contact with new Queer Faculty and staff?
2. Are LGBTQ faculty and staff actually benefitting from benefits?
3. How do we support GV work environments to be more LGBTQ-friendly?
4. How do we support faculty dealing with ‘problematic pedagogy’?

# Appendix A: Testing Materials and Procedure

For this project, we scheduled two one-hour sessions a month for four months. We did sign-ups through sprout. We asked the FSA to advertise the sessions on the listserv, and we also got Inclusion and Equity to send out an all-faculty and staff email, which really helped with recruitment. We had one facilitator and one note-taker. We sent out reminder emails to everyone signed up for a session either day of or day before, to help minimize no-shows. The note-taker sent out a session summary to all the participants within a week afterwards.

At the end, the note-taker and facilitator went over all the write-ups looking for common issues-those became the basis for the action items. The note-taker then wrote up a final report.

## FSA Steering Committee focus group script

**Welcome and context:**

Write the lgbt fsa email address on the board so that folks who want to sign up for the mailing list can do so

Welcome and thank everyone for coming

Introduce the facilitators (Elisa and Kyle)

Have the participants introduce themselves (name, pronouns, position, something fun about them to help break the ice)

**What we are here to do:**

This is a series of focus groups being jointly facilitated by the FSA steering committee with some help from staff in human resources

Three objectives:

* Identify areas of need for LGBTQ faculty around which programming could be built
* Attempt to re-engage membership in the work of the FSA
* Identify champions in the community that can help us drive initiatives forward

They’ll see those objectives reflected in the questions and structure of the session.

**What will we do with this information?**

* Mine it for ideas for potential programs/initiatives
* Better understand needs/wants of the FSA membership
* Improve engagement with FSA initiatives

**Timeline**

* Complete focus groups in March of 2019
* Assess where we are over summer, perhaps carry out more focus groups to supplement
* Report done either in summer or Fall, depending
* Develop a plan of action for 2020-2021 budget year based on that report, so that it can inform budgeting, which happens in June.
* If this effort is successful, repeat it every two years.

Pause to ask for questions.

**Question Script**

What are causes/issues that are important to you and why?  These can LGBT-related or not.

How involved are you with the FSA?  How would you characterize your experience with the organization overall?

Are there barriers to participating in FSA events? If do, what are they?

What would motivate you to attend or participate in FSA events?

What campus or non-campus LGBT-related services do you make use of?  Roughly how often?

Do you see needs or gaps for services that are not currently being filled?  What are they?

**Brainstorming:** Can we brainstorm solutions to some of the gaps or needs we’ve come up with together? (this section can be dynamic, depending on what the group has come up with so far)

Are you interested in being an FSA Champion? Commitments are:

* FSA Steering committee can reach out to for feedback on programs in your identified areas of interest
* FSA can ask you to attend and invite others to attend programs in your identified areas of interest
* FSA can contact you to provide feedback on ideas for programming in your identified areas of interest

Ask about incentives!

If there’s time ask about the LGBTQIA+ name change.

**Wrap-up**

Ask for any final questions/comments

Note that session notes will be shared via email as soon as they are completed

Reiterate the project timeline

Thank everyone for coming