

Chapter 12

Supporting Queer and Trans Students Amidst a Rise in Anti Queer and Trans Legislation and Policies

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ABSTRACT

Despite scholarship describing college campuses as becoming more affirming of queer and trans students, queer and trans people continue to be under attack legislatively, recently in growing intensity, such as Florida's "Don't Say Gay" law. These political and legal movements will have deleterious effects on these communities for years to come. However, queer and trans communities have always fought for their existence in the face of cisheterosexist violence. In this chapter, the scholars contend higher education professionals at every level have potential to be advocates of and support the holistic well-being and academic success of queer and trans students. Building off decades of traditions, theories, and strategies of activists and changemakers, namely those from multiply marginalized communities, the authors highlight three central ideas for those working in postsecondary education: 1) supporting students' positive meaning making of their identities, 2) creating and fostering counterspaces/counternarratives, and 3) collectively organizing for liberation.

Queer and trans people have and continue to be under attack (ACLED, 2022). In a society that positions queerness as other and as out of place, queer and trans people have constantly fought for their existence, creating alternative worlds and ways of being in the face of this violence (Halberstam, 2011; Muñoz, 1999). Although recent reviews of queer and trans research in higher education often describe campuses

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-2853-8.ch012

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as becoming more affirming of these groups (Lange et al., 2019; Rankin et al., 2019), these climates are constantly ebbing and flowing.

Growing concern about the impact of laws like Florida's HB 1557, referred to as the "Don't Say Gay" law banning public school teachers from discussing topics of gender and sexuality in the classroom, has started to cause alarm for the effects this legislation will have on queer and trans students experiencing these harmful sociopolitical realities (Kline et al., 2022). Though these laws have largely targeted K–12 educational settings, so too is legislation emerging that regulates the teaching of diversity, equity, and inclusion topics in higher education (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2023), including subjects that touch upon gender and sexuality. The effects of proposed and passed legislation are already damaging students' experiences. For example, Senate Bill 17, signed by Texas Governor Greg Abbott, has resulted in the closure of the University of Houston's Center for Diversity and Inclusion and its lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and queer (LGBTQ) Resource Center (Alonso, 2023), removing access to "not only essential but lifesaving" resources for queer and trans students (Harris, 2023, para. 4).

These issues continue alongside growing anti-trans legislation affecting trans students in areas of athletics, access to basic needs, and more (Trans Legislation Tracker, n.d.). These attacks will continue to impact higher education institutions and those attending them (Daniels, 2023), meaning that there need to be shifts in policies—on institutional, state, and federal levels—to better serve these populations (reference Garvey & Dolan, 2020 for a list of recommendations concerning queer and trans policies). Queer and trans students are not okay, and it is our argument that such political and legal movements will have deleterious effects on these individuals for years to come.

It is at this particular sociopolitical moment that we are writing this chapter, intending to wrestle with what higher education leaders can do to support queer and trans students in the midst of these political and legal attacks. Although thought pieces argue that some students may actively choose to no longer attend institutions that are experiencing anti-queer and -trans legislation (e.g., Horowitch, 2023), we contend that such perspectives overlook two critical points: a) they minimize the classist dynamics that shape college choice, not capturing those who come from low-income or first-generation backgrounds (Xiong, 2021), and b) they assume that states function in a good/bad binary, meaning that students will have the option to opt out of unwelcoming contexts—although this is not the case given the complexity of contemporary legislation that demonstrates that no state is a 100% safe space (Ramos et al., 2023).

In attempting to avoid this rhetoric, we compose this chapter hoping to provide educators with ideas of how to be advocates and work alongside queer and trans students. In this chapter, we highlight three central ideas: 1) supporting students' positive meaning making of their identities during these times, 2) creating and fostering counterspaces/narratives alongside students, and 3) collectively organizing for liberation. Although we are writing this text primarily for practitioner audiences, we argue that educators must mobilize these strategies by leveraging student voices (reference Catalano, 2015; Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018; Vaccaro & Miller, 2017 for approaches on how to center queer and trans student agency). We explore these three topics first by reviewing the current literature on these strategies, then by providing key considerations for those hoping to actualize them. In doing so, we refrain from presenting our considerations as supposedly unequivocal best practices, echoing those that have showcased how these sentiments often curtail nuance and jeopardize the success of trans students on college campuses (reference Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2019). Instead, we hope that our suggestions create possibilities for people to dream up more acts of advocacy and resistance in a time when students' existence is being threatened—in addition to that of staff and faculty.

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