

**Some Key Take-Aways from SAS OUE's April 1, 2022 panel
*LGBTQ+ Student Stories***

On April 1, the SAS Office of Undergraduate Education hosted the fourth and final panel in this year's *Voices of Diversity: Rutgers Student Stories* series. The program was initiated in 2020-21 with support from a RU-NB Diversity, Inclusion, and Community Engagement grant, and is designed to provide students with a platform to share with faculty their perspectives as students with diverse and intersectional identities. The Student Advisory Board – a team of 17 undergraduate students that represent the breadth and richness of the SAS community, including a range of majors and class years – develops the panel topics for the year, selects panelists based on the essays of de-identified applicants, and composes the questions for the panels.

Thank you to the Student Advisory Board and the volunteer panelists for the tremendous amount of time, energy, and mental and emotional labor that went into designing, preparing for, and participating in *Voices of Diversity*. We are also grateful to the SAS-OUE team for their work on this initiative, and especially to Jenevieve DeLosSantos for organizing this panel and serving as an advisor to the Student Advisory Board members and Nicole Gangino for her extensive support and assistance throughout the entire process of creating and hosting this event. Finally, thank you to Keywuan Caulk, Director of the Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities, for moderating this panel.

The students shared many varied experiences and perspectives during the panel. Unfortunately, it is not possible to include all of the helpful and insightful contributions by the panelists in a brief document. Below, however, we have summarized a few common themes that emerged from the students' comments.

Please plan to join us in Fall 2022 for our third year of *Voices of Diversity* panels!

Voices of Diversity: LGBTQ+ Student Stories

Several common themes emerged during the panel:

Rutgers can be both a welcoming and exclusionary place for LGBTQ+ students.

- Several panelists expressed and appreciated that Rutgers is a very open and diverse space.
“Rutgers is definitely a very queer space. It’s a very liberal college that gives a lot of students the freedom when coming from their homes to explore and grow into their identities; I did [during] my first year, and I see it all the time.”
- Some students may be visibly queer, and others may not. It is important not to make assumptions based on how people appear/present in a classroom.
“There are a lot of people who are not visibly queer or are in the closet or not out about their identity. For those students, it’s a little more important to understand the nuances there and that there’s no way of certainly knowing if someone is queer. So, extend that inclusivity to everyone... For me, in the beginning of college, I did not necessarily present myself in a more gender-neutral/masculine way because it was a new environment, and I didn’t know if I was comfortable doing that. It’s important to keep in mind that a lot of people may still be in the closet after coming to college because of their circumstances.”
- It can be difficult and daunting to be the only (visibly) queer person in a classroom.
“Often, I personally have been the only queer person in a classroom. A lot of that work and queer exploration/perspective falls to us as students. It can be daunting to be queer in a new space and also exploring who you are as a person.”

Panelists’ intersecting identities significantly affect their experiences and well-being.

- Several panelists explored how race intersects with their experience of gender and sexuality.
“Intersectionality really matters. At least for me, I am an Asian-American and part of the LGBTQ community. This semester has been stressful for me. There has been anti-LGBT legislation, hate crimes in NYC.... This has impacted me quite heavily, and I’ve struggled to keep up academically in some cases. It’s been mentally very difficult for me. I don’t want special treatment, but I hope faculty can be aware that some students in these communities go through these struggles and be aware of problems we’re facing.”

“I’m a trans-man, and I’ve been out for six years and transitioning for six years. I’m also Asian - American, specifically Korean-American. The Korean community isn’t very accepting of LGBT cultures. I have family in South Korea I don’t talk with anymore; I’ve been disowned and have no connection. It was awful, but I’m still here and okay. Interacting with other Koreans in the U.S. is also difficult for me. It’s not like you forget about your culture just because you live in a different country. It’s difficult to interact with other Korean-Americans even at Rutgers. However, I do find Rutgers to be a safe space because it’s so diverse, with lots of organizations, and I’ve had positive interactions with faculty. But if I venture out into different parts of the world as trans and Korean-American, it’s stressful in multiple ways. I’m still working through it.”

“There are a few aspects of my identity. I identify as trans-masculine and/or non-binary. In terms of sexuality, I’m pansexual or bisexual. Besides that, I’m also a South Indian, brown person, and a Dalit (the lowest caste in the Indian caste system). I bring these in because in terms of being queer/trans, my experience has been positive because I’ve been able to find my space and in fact create that space for me and people like me by running the student organization I run. That’s really changed things for me and hopefully for other people... Being a South Indian and Dalit individual, those two things have slightly different implications. In terms of my South Indian identity, I’m actually right now in the process of figuring out when I can start hormone therapy and stuff like that. My family back home, like my grandma, cannot know. We’re still figuring out how that will work. Will I still talk with her on the phone? If my voice will be different, that will be a problem. Being Dalit definitely isolates me from being able to connect with the Indian community on campus, even though we have a huge Indian community on campus. That still isolates me from feeling fully connected because of the way the caste system works, and it could still be ingrained in Indian individuals here. All of those things definitely create a sense of isolation at times even if we’re on this huge Rutgers campus.”

- Students also explored how body image and other facets of their identities shape their experiences.

[Following on the previous student’s statement] “I’m a white woman, so I don’t experience that aspect of intersectionality. A different aspect is my fatness... I am a fat feminist. Without giving the whole body of nuance of fat politics because I’d be here forever, a major part in growing up is the socialization that if you are not a sexually viable woman, you are not counted as a woman. Fat women are constantly denigrated as less of a woman. That’s shaped my identity. I call myself queer but might label myself as non-binary.... In terms of how it shapes my experience on campus, I’ve never had a class that has brought up fat phobia without me having to bring it up. It’s not talked about. It’s very frustrating as this area of marginalization and institutionalized oppression that’s still like in academia... I am the fat student, and I want to hear myself heard and no one else will say anything... Maybe professors should keep that in mind in terms of not having their students have to bring these things to the table.”

Suggestions for instructors:

- Be mindful of intersectional identities and avoid making assumptions about a singular queer experience.
- Make space for students to be authentic through developing discussion guidelines or class norms.

Multiple panelists described exclusionary cultures and practices within some majors—and more broadly, within some career fields—that led them to leave particular majors and avoid career paths they would have otherwise pursued.

“Looking back, part [of what made me decide on my school and major] was because I was terrified of the rigidity in those [other] environments, and that it would simply be too hard for me to navigate as an already queer/trans person who was going to be more out in college.”

- Students shared stories of changing majors and plans for their career paths because of feeling unrepresented, excluded, and sometimes unsafe in particular majors, departments/schools, and careers.
"I have also changed my major.... because I felt so left out of the narrative of what was being taught in the classes. So gendered, behind, binary.... It felt so wrong and forced and I felt so left out of the narrative that I switched everything because of my identity as a queer person."
- Exclusionary practices extend beyond course content to policies and the general culture in some environments. For example, panelists reported being in some academic situations where rather than simply noting that conservative professional attire was required, specific prescriptions were made for women versus men. The requirements were very outdated and very much reflected traditional gender norms. There was not space for those that identify as trans or non-binary.
- Students face challenges with things like requesting letters of recommendation when they are not sure which instructors will be accepting of their identities.

From a student in a STEM major who became interested in a career in nursing after witnessing so many disparities in the health care field, particularly for LGBTQ patients:

"When approaching professors for letters of recommendation, I can't do it easily because I can't tell who I should approach... professors ask for statements of self, but I can't tell if I should include what my true passion is behind what I really want to do because I can't gauge what their reactions would be ... I can't easily ask a professor to write my recommendations, even in a really great class, because I don't feel safe... Not just at Rutgers, but overall everywhere, we need more representation and awareness in STEM education and fields."

Panelists report regularly being mis-gendered and point to the importance of pronouns.

"I look like I'm fem-presenting, but I consider myself non-binary. Even though I use she/they, I've never had a professor use they. It's easier for them to take the 'Well, that's a she and she looks fem' approach. Refusing to accept the queerness is frustrating."

Suggestions for instructors (as well as advisors):

- At the beginning of each semester, provide your own preferred pronouns and invite students to share theirs in a way that is flexible and normalizes sharing pronouns, but does not force anyone to do so.
"In classes where instructors have pronouns in their Canvas profile, I take from that that a person is an ally and I overall have a better sense of connection to them [the instructor] right away. That makes my experience in the whole course better, and it makes me more comfortable interacting and talking with them."
- Add your own pronouns next to your name in your email signature, and perhaps include a link to a resource that explains why pronouns are important/what they mean.
 - Suggested resources about pronouns:
 - [Mypronouns.org](https://mypronouns.org)

- Type “pronouns” into YouTube
 - Sign up to attend or request a Safe(R) Space Workshop at SJE to learn about pronouns and other related issues.
<http://socialjustice.rutgers.edu/safer-space-training-program/>
- Making mistakes is okay. When this happens, acknowledge it and apologize, and move forward. *“If you mis-gender a student or make a point that hurts someone and want to apologize, please don’t make it a big deal. Then it becomes on the person you hurt and becomes their burden to make you feel better. Now it’s their job to reassure you that you’re not a bad person, instead of what should be a burden off of their shoulders.”*

“It’s fine if you mis-gender or make a mistake. It happens to all of us and is not a big deal. Set an example that it’s okay to make mistakes, but we apologize and move on and continue with our learning and growing. Say you’re sorry, correct the pronoun, and then move on.”

- Advisors also play an important role in supporting students and can take many of the same approaches for doing so, such as: sharing their own pronouns and inviting students to share theirs if they want to do so; attending trainings to increase their own awareness and knowledge; and finding other ways to make their spaces inclusive. These can include things like putting up an LGBT flag in your office, putting a heart rainbow R on your computer, or putting up queer art to spark conversation.

From moderator: *“There are lots of little things we can do in our spaces to be inclusive without having to say explicitly ‘I am an inclusive person.’”*

Course content and discussions often exclude LGBTQ+ individuals and topics and put unfair expectations on LGBTQ+ students to prompt or lead those types of discussions when they do occur.

- Trans identities are especially likely to be excluded in course content and discussion *“I am a [Humanities department] major, and a lot of courses have allowed for discussion of gay and lesbian identities, but trans identities are often overlooked. The awkwardness of outing myself makes it hard to bring up issues of trans identities in class... It’s often as a field not really discussed, but it would be nice if professors could even hint at the possibility that someone might be trans.”*

Suggestions for instructors:

- Incorporate broader material into course content and assignments when possible and acknowledge its absence when it’s not possible to include. *“Expand your curriculum as much as possible to include people and groups that are often left out—LGBT communities, people of color, people with disabilities, and others. If you can expand your syllabus to include people often left out, it helps everyone.”*

- In facilitating discussions relating to these topics, be careful to avoid asking questions like, "Has this ever happened to you?" because it singles out students and can lead to very uncomfortable situations. Try making questions more general, such as "Has anyone *heard* of this happening?"
- Don't expect LGBTQ+ students to take the lead in these conversations.
"When gender and sexuality come up [in the classroom], don't rely on students to lead and be educated. If a student wants to lead the conversation, that's wonderful, but it shouldn't be expected of visibly queer students to be the only one expected to discuss LGBTQ issues in the classroom."
- Share LGBTQ+ resources, and make sure they are included alongside other resources for students (e.g., in course syllabi); do not isolate them from other resources.
 - Examples of suggested resources to include, in addition to those that are already commonly included (such as food pantry, CAPS, Office of Disability Services, etc):
 - [Cultural Center Collaborative](#)
 - Diversity statements
- Establish boundaries/course expectations; Take time at the beginning of the semester to establish something like a class constitution or shared norms that sets up expectations and things that should and should not occur. For example, the course should foster discussion and should not silence voices. Instructors should actively monitor discussions as much as possible.

The panel concluded with the students sharing messages that they would want to say to either an incoming Rutgers student or to themselves when they were younger:

"Get involved in everything you love—clubs, organizations, groups here. If you do that, you'll meet like-minded people and make the best friends you've ever had. Rutgers is such a large school; getting involved will help you become the person you're gonna be."

"Force yourself to get comfortable with being loud and odd. Being a queer student, some students aren't going to like you and they're going to be mean and think you're a blue-haired, man-hating feminist liberal—get okay with being weird and not liked. That's empowering in itself. Get comfortable with being uncomfortable; that leaves a lot of room for personal growth."

"Getting involved makes Rutgers feel really small, despite being such a big school. Carve out your community and find like-minded individuals [because] it will make Rutgers less daunting and more inclusive... I definitely agree that being loud and your honest self despite who may or may not like you for that is huge."

"I was going to say that a lot of finding community, forums, and friend groups—especially at Rutgers—will be very trial and error. Go to things! If you don't feel like that's your space, don't go afterwards. You have a lot of choices to pick from. There are 12-13 organizations under SJE [[Center for Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities](#)]. That kind of goes to say that there also multiple opportunities in these spaces specifically tailored for you, whoever you are.... In high school in India, if you'd told me I'd

be president of [a student organization], I'd be like 'What?' I'd be confused and in disbelief. I experienced a big shift from moving from a small town in India to here. The main thing is flesh it out over time—it will take time. Giving it time and a few different attempts is the best way to navigate Rutgers."

"I think I would like to tell my younger self—because I went through a lot—that there is a place for people like us in this society. Queer people have always existed and continue to exist. Our voices are being heard and represented more and more as time progresses. 14-15 year-old me would never think I'd be in a place with a platform to talk like this because I never thought about college. I didn't think I would be alive to make it to this point. I'm 22 now, but [when younger] I was like high school is it, I'm not going to come out of it alive. But life is wonderful, and many great things happen and the fact that Rutgers is hosting so many programs like this one is very wonderful. I would tell my younger self to keep on going and working toward this future because he is being loved and heard in the future."