

WHY LGBTQ SERVICES AT HBCUs ARE SO IMPORTANT

By Pearl Lo, University of Maryland, College Park



This past year, I had the pleasure of working with the Rutgers Center for Minority Serving Institutions and the Human Rights Campaign Foundation on the research brief, *Modeling Inclusion: HBCUs and LGBTQ+ Support*. I was excited to be a part of this project because it honed in on my interests of intersectionality, particularly related to queer people of color. This report is enlightening, because it showcases how much HBCUs are growing to accommodate their LGBTQ+ students.

My interest in intersectionality was sparked during my master's program when I conducted a case study for a final project in class. After discussing possible topics, my group decided that we wanted to interview students who identify as queer Black women because of how complex their intersectional identities are.

The women ranged from all four class years and different majors. One of the participants was born outside of the U.S.; another was a first-generation student; and another had attended the elite Exeter School before coming to Penn. With

such a diverse group of students, we expected a wide array of responses when we asked about their experiences as queer Black women at the school. However, some clear themes emerged across all of the interviews.

The women felt like they had to compartmentalize their identities based on the spaces they were involved in at the moment. When they were at the Black Cultural Center, they presented their Blackness as their most salient identity, and when they were at the LGBT Center, they most prominently exhibited their queerness. In all spaces, they could not fully and proudly identify as queer Black women because of the lack of intentionality given to intersectional programming and resources. As a result, they did not feel like the school celebrated who they were as intersectional individuals.

These complex intersecting identities are precisely why it is so important to create spaces where individuals can feel whole in their Blackness and queer identities. Institutions of higher education need to confront the white hegemonic systems that have oppressed both Black and LGBTQ folx for generations. They need to examine how these systems disproportionately affect those who identify as both Black and queer. They need to restructure their values so that celebrating the unique lived experiences of Black queer students and ensuring that they feel cared for through school policies and initiatives are priorities.

While I am not Black, I do identify as a queer woman of color. I feel very fortunate that I am a student and staff member at an institution that ranks nationally as being one of the most LGBTQ-friendly campuses. I feel comfortable in sharing who I am and partaking in the joyous community here. I am a part of a queer affinity group within my own department and another affinity group for queer Christians that spans across all student affairs departments. We often have heavy, painful conversations during our queer & Christian affinity group, but I cherish that there is a place we can claim as our own.

There is invaluable worth in knowing that I can exist in my space of scholarship and work without fear of retribution. I know that if I were an undergraduate student and needed to seek out additional resources for LGBTQ-accommodating housing, health services, or programming, my school would be able to provide all of these services.

All students should have the same opportunity to have their LGBTQ identity acknowledged and celebrated alongside and in conjunction with their race or ethnicity. HBCUs have a special opportunity as institutions who can truly change the dynamic for Black LGBTQ students in a way that PWIs cannot. This [research brief](#) highlights some HBCUs that are paving the path for LGBTQ inclusivity. They are promoting initiatives that serve a community that historically has been marginalized, and they are modeling strategies for healthier, more supportive school environments.

Pearl Lo is a Ph.D. student in the Higher Education, Student Affairs, and International Education Policy program at the University of Maryland. Her research interests are cross-racial interactions and friendship groups on college campuses, particularly how Asian American students can work with other peers of color in student activism, and the intersectional experiences of students with multiple minoritized identities, specifically queer women of color.