

Proceeding with Justice as an Institution with LGBTQ Students¹

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Abstract

This talk presents a narrative account of what it is really like to be doing research and justice work with and for LGBTQ students at a Jesuit university. Lockhart goes beyond the neatly packaged accounts presented in published research on LGBTQ students to talk candidly about the challenges and unique opportunities for proceeding with justice in one's research and advocacy at Jesuit institutions. Drawing on behind-the-scenes experiences, this paper addresses key questions about how to integrate justice work and research, and how to support the efforts of others seeking to do so.

Preserving confidence, not silence

There are things I cannot tell you. I cannot tell you because they are not mine to tell. I cannot tell you because the suffering of others is deeply upsetting; to share it is to inflict harm on one's audience. But I am struck also by the feeling that, *if only you knew*, you would be moved—inexorably—to action. In his address to this very conference 17 years ago, Superior General Fr. Peter-Hans Kolvenbach put it much more elegantly. A core component of Jesuit education and *cura personalis* is “personal involvement ... with the injustice others suffer” because it is a “catalyst for solidarity.” Everyone who does justice work with LGBTQ people eventually comes into personal knowledge of the suffering of others and faces an internal conflict. I cannot share with you the details or even slightly graphic descriptions of the grievously, crushingly abhorrent sin known as “corrective rape.” Yet I cannot allow you to believe “it doesn't happen here, not among our students.” I need you to trust me. It does. Nor can I share with you the details of how

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a sunny, outgoing student leader—who said on a survey of LGBTQ students that he never had problems on campus—ended up in my arms, his whole body trembling as he recounted the numerous ways his roommate terrorized him in his own dorm room for nine months. I can say very little about the student who tearfully begged her friends to “let it go” because her school’s administration threatened to expel her if she pursued hate crime charges against another student. Or about the time I needed new sheets because mine were stained with the blood of a student assaulted by his peer for being gay, who did not return to campus or report the assault because he had been drinking underage when it happened.

In this line of justice work, keeping confidence is essential. Underreporting is endemic among LGBTQ students. For some, reporting would require coming out. Others fear the stigma of being a ‘victim,’ or that they will not be believed, that they will be blamed for what happened to them, that their concerns will be ignored, that they are vulnerable to retaliation. Hopefully, these seem absurd; no one’s suffering should be met these ways. Unfortunately, these concerns are often well founded (Lockhart 2013). Some students are so upset that they quite literally cannot communicate what happened; others suppress and forget as a means of coping. Further, LGBTQ students generally don’t trust authorities. Many have had negative experiences with them in their K-12 education (GLSEN 2013; Kosciw et al. 2014). Moreover, uncertainty is structurally inherent. Once a student comes out or shares an experience, they cannot go back in time and un-share it if the response is negative. We must decide in advance, often with little information, whether to trust someone with our story. In the absence of overt, positive signs, we often error on the side of caution and silence. Thus, it is not enough to simply respond well to students; we must signal in advance that we would respond well.

Despite the difficulties in gathering knowledge about LGBTQ injustice, we need some knowledge of it in order to improve our communities. Researchers, LGBTQ community leaders, and LGBTQ staff can play an important role in bridging this gap. We work to establish rapport and trust with students, and we are often entrusted with their experiences. Our access is contingent on keeping students’ confidence. Often, we do this by deliberately avoiding details and names and by promising to keep information confidential. We are bound by ethics, and often by law and professional review boards, not to share details of students’ stories without their consent. Fortunately, this is not unfamiliar territory in the Jesuit context. I expect that at every one of our institutions,

priests occasionally approach administrators requesting something be done and unable to say why. Although their reasons are rooted in the sacrament of confession, we share with them an awareness of both the need to keep our subjects' confidence and the need to be sure that confidence does not become silence.

At many of our institutions, there is a formal policy *not* to count incidents unless and until a full investigation has returned a verdict. Such incidents do not count both in the sense that they rarely appear in Clery Act statistics and in the sense that they are met with skepticism and inaction. This is actually where my story begins.

A very particular set of skills

Some background about me: I attended an excellent Jesuit high school (Brophy). There was one openly gay boy at Brophy in those days, and we did not speak well of him. There are now many more out students—but when I arrived at Fordham University in 2009, I came with both a penchant for research and intimate knowledge of closeted life at Jesuit schools. I became heavily involved in student leadership and activism, particularly with Fordham's LGBTQ community.

By my junior year, one refrain was all too familiar: “there’s no evidence to support your concerns.” As students, we routinely heard that our concerns were isolated or unsubstantiated. This is the result of what we in sociology call a “structural problem.” People in administrative and policy roles generally expect a different kind of evidence than “because Jeff said so” when making decisions. Especially if Jeff is an uncredentialed 21 year old with cotton-candy pink hair. Yet that is the primary way students can approach them: with their own experience. Unless students stage a large-scale protest, they are necessarily a “vocal minority” when they speak up. Most students lack the time, money, knowledge, documented evidence, and courage to sue their schools like the brave few bringing recent Title IX cases. Even if they did, most climate issues aren’t right for litigation. It was clear to me that we needed detailed, local data about the experiences of LGBTQ students at Fordham. Such data could facilitate discussions between students, faculty, and administrators, who often disagreed about the nature of problems. It could be used to inform policy and focus activism, which had hitherto been guided only by the perspectives and best intentions of the relatively few individuals who happened to be involved in decisionmaking.

Thus it came to pass that throughout 2012 and 2013, I researched, designed, tested, and then fielded a large survey of LGBTQ student experiences at Fordham. Dubbed the Que(e)ry³, the survey was funded by a grant from the academic Dean's Office and went through multiple rounds of IRB approval. It had several faculty advisors, and counted as an independent study in sociology. The study needed to be done in a rigorous, academic fashion in order to be taken seriously. And, for my own career as a budding academic, the data needed to be sound enough for peer reviewed publications. It worked: the data has appeared in multiple academic conferences (Abraham et al. 2014; Lockhart 2016a, 2016b, 2017), and the Que(e)ry has spread to a dozen other campuses, some of them Jesuit.

But the Que(e)ry was never only or even primarily about academic achievement. It is an embodiment of the values of Jesuit education: research *in participation with* and *in service of* the community. The questions and recruiting were deliberately designed to address concerns held by students and administrators and to yield actionable insights. As a result, many of the findings are “not interesting” from an academic perspective, because they mirror findings others have published previously. Yet it was essential to the Que(e)ry mission to include them. The very first document to come out of the survey was a report to the Fordham community describing students' experiences, lauding our strengths, and suggesting specific actions people in each part of the university could take to improve the climate. I organized town hall meetings to share my findings with standing room only crowds of students, faculty, clergy, and staff. I gave interviews to student papers. I arranged meetings with as many offices as I could to discuss how my findings pertained specifically to their work, and I conducted additional analyses to answer their questions. I worked with Fordham's Center for Ethics Education to produce resources for developing more LGBTQ inclusive curriculum and classrooms. I give talks about it at conferences like this. I put all of these materials on a website (FordhamQueery.org) so that they could be easily shared and referenced. The has been updated for this conference with a host of resources for understanding campus climate and taking action to improve it.

I also helped co-found IgnatianQ, which some of you know is the student-run, LGBTQIA+ conference that rotates between Jesuit schools each year, including Fordham, Georgetown, Seattle University, and most recently Santa Clara. This conference provides

³ A delightful wordplay inspired by my friend, Dorie.

an essential forum for LGBTQ students at Jesuit colleges and universities to share ideas and practices, to learn from each other and the generations before them how to build loving, justice-oriented communities in the Jesuit tradition. It is worth noting, then, that the examples I give today are not only from Fordham. But my focus today is less on accomplishments than on *how* they were accomplished, what we can learn from that, and how you can support similar efforts.

Responding to LGBTQ advocacy

I have already made my first two points about process: One, that LGBTQ justice work leaves those of us who do it with necessary secrets, and two, that we must nevertheless engage the community with what we have learned. For the people around us, this implies a third point: you must resist the temptation to doubt our claims, even when we are ethically, professionally, and legally bound not to share the details that support them. Doubt can take many forms. For example, when I met with a student affairs administrator from a Jesuit school to discuss the situation of LGBTQ students on his campus, he came to the meeting with a rebuttal prepared. He had charts from the school's senior exit survey showing that only 3.9% of students "strongly disagree" with the statement "I feel that the community here ... welcomes everyone regardless of their sexual identity." To him, this showed that there were no widespread problems. But closer examination of those numbers doesn't support that conclusion. Another 10% of those who responded said they "moderately disagree." Most concerning of all is that the proportion of students who gave the worst climate rating (3.9%) is statistically indistinguishable from the fraction of students who typically self-identify as LGBTQ on anonymous surveys like this at US colleges. They did not ask students' identities, so we cannot say for sure that these are the same students. But if the number of people who say they strongly feel sexual minorities are unwelcome is the same as the estimated number of sexual minorities, we should be concerned. Indeed, research—including my own—has shown time and again that heterosexual students are much less likely to see sexuality-related climate problems than their LGBQ peers, and that cisgender students are much less likely to see climate problems for trans students than their trans peers (Lockhart 2013).

As this begins to demonstrate, students have diverse experiences, and that diversity, as well as how we interpret it, is important. There are some axes of diversity that are hopefully familiar by now. Trans, bisexual, and lesbian students often feel marginalized—in different ways and to different extents—by groups and events centered around cisgender gay men. People of color experience sexual and gender identity discrimination and culture differently than White people do. The student who is coming out in college has different concerns than the lavender-haired activist leading marches. This diversity is why research suggests campuses should develop multiple LGBTQ groups to serve diverse and at times conflicting interests (Ghaziani 2011; Wedow 2017). As we are reminded in the call to *cura personalis*, our LGBTQ students are whole persons, not unidimensional labels. But there is more diversity of experience still. In data from the Que(e)ry, there is no single question on which all LGBTQ students agreed. Most, but not all, heard derogatory remarks from peers. Some, but not most, experienced physical threats. Many felt welcome in dorms or classrooms, but for many that welcome felt tenuous and contingent. It would be cruel to simply throw up our hands and say “there is no consensus; we cannot do anything” and crueler still to pit these students against one another, to respond to one’s concerns by pointing out that someone else had a different experience.

The students themselves recognise this. While it was not uncommon for cisgender, heterosexual students to insist—often aggressively—that campus climate for LGBTQ people was fine, not a single one of their LGBTQ peers expressed that sentiment. The ones who had nothing but positive experience to recount were always careful to qualify their remarks: “things have been good *for me*.” They did not want their experience to discount the experience of others. This is an area where larger scale research can help. Numerous studies link negative campus climate to poor academic performance, negative health outcomes, increases in substance use, decreases in student retention, withdraw from extracurriculars and resources like career development, and more (for an overview, see Lockhart 2013 or the FordhamQueery.org website). Does every student have all of these outcomes? Of course not. But on average, LGBTQ students experiencing poor campus climate are more likely to experience these outcomes. Those relationships are strong, compelling motivation for action.

Supporting LGBTQ research

But how do we get data like that in the first place? Research like the Que(e)ry is dangerous. Thanks to the Clery Act, every university has official, public statistics about crime. As I mentioned, these statistics are subject to severe underreporting, a condition exacerbated by schools' decisions not to count most claims. A study like the Que(e)ry has the potential to uncover many more incidents than are listed in official reports, a discrepancy that could reflect poorly on a school's reputation. Moreover, findings of a hostile climate or mishandling of incidents both could trigger Title IX obligations or even sanctions. It is certainly *easier* not knowing, because knowing about injustice obligates us, morally and often legally, to act. Of course, this is not news to Jesuit educators. As Fr. Kolvenbach said in his speech here 17 years ago, we are called at Jesuit universities to "tirelessly seek truth" through research, and this "entails risks." To keep ourselves on track, he follows in the tradition of St. Ignatius of Loyola and offers a question to reflect on: "when researching..., where and with whom is my heart?" We live out the Jesuit mission by keeping these words of wisdom in mind when others present us with the uncomfortable knowledge of injustice.

I have said a dozen ways by now that we must trust and support the members of our communities working to bring about justice for LGBTQ students. Perhaps some of you in the audience have begun to find me repetitive. As I have put it, I hope the point seems obvious. Nevertheless, I belabor the point because it is not, in practice, obvious. Despite widespread support for the Que(e)ry, it faced sustained opposition from its inception at Fordham and other Jesuit campuses. There have been efforts to prevent it, limit participation, end it early, and discredit its findings. The Que(e)ry is far from a perfect study—I've had five years to find and regret its shortcomings—but these efforts were aimed at silencing rather than improving the project.

Even when we aim to promote knowledge of suffering and thus solidarity, we must be cautious. For example, I spoke once with a Jesuit who was outraged that gay student leaders would distribute pink triangles: did they not know those symbols marked gays in Nazi concentration camps? But the students did know that, and a great deal more. They were aware of the decades-long tradition of pink-triangle symbols in US LGBTQ and AIDS activism. They had seen the heartbreaking concentration camp drama

Bent by Martin Sherman, an openly gay Jew, which centers on the meaning of the triangle. This story highlights how passion for LGBTQ justice alone is insufficient. With dialogue and reflection, his understanding of the symbol changed. We must listen to LGBTQ people's experiences and needs with open hearts. We must let *them* guide *us*.

That is why I have not given you a how-to manual for going about LGBTQ justice work on your campus. Right now, each of our campuses has LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff who know the challenges they face and have ideas for making our communities more just places. Enable them. Give them the time and resources to more thoroughly investigate your own campuses' needs and to sift through the enormous amount of knowledge already out there. Give them platforms to share this knowledge. Most importantly: prove to them that their concerns and suggestions will be trusted, and follow through. There is no shame in admitting we live in a fallen world, and there is no relief from injustices that remain hidden. Thank you.

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Most of all, I would like to thank the thousands of students who have shared their stories with me, in person, at IgnatianQ, by running the Que(e)ry at their campus, and through taking the Que(e)ry survey. They often gave hours of their time and entrusted me with deeply personal experiences. This is for them, and all those who come after.

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