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Commentary

Transgender students in pharmacy school part 2: How faculty advisors can support their advisees

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ABSTRACT

Faculty advisors serve a critical role in the success of pharmacy students during their academic careers, frequently serving as a problem-solver or sounding board during times of both triumph and struggle. Additionally, faculty advisors help students overcome barriers along their journey to ensure a successful progression through pharmacy school. This role is particularly important to transgender students, given the additional barriers they may face, which were highlighted in Part One of the commentary on transgender students in pharmacy school. To help faculty serve as a successful mentor to transgender advisees, Part Two of the commentary provides resources and insights into advising transgender students, including those actively undergoing gender transition.

Background

An advisor is defined as a person who gives advice, and typically an expert in a field.¹ Faculty members within a pharmacy program are often considered experts within their selected field, ranging from pharmaceutical sciences to varying pharmacy practice areas. Schooling and post-graduate training help faculty members develop specific skills that complement one another and can be shared across the curriculum to advance students' learning. Another important aspect of the job of a faculty member is student advisement, which can help ensure student success. As an advisor to students, faculty will likely encounter many scenarios through which they must guide students, from academic difficulties to personal life stressors. Often faculty can feel unprepared, inexperienced, and overwhelmed as to how to address each student's situation, simply because this was an area not taught during previous training. One situation where an advisor may feel particularly unprepared is in the advising of a transgender student. Advising a transgender student is no different than advising any other student, as faculty are attempting to ensure the success of all students. However, if a faculty member has never encountered a transgender person in their lives, they may feel uncomfortable with them. When advising a transgender student, it is important to address items pointed out in part one of the commentary (such as providing of a discrimination-free environment and federal regulations that protect their rights), and understand that avoiding the topic altogether can often lead to student alienation or the student feeling unwelcome. This commentary will offer recommendations as to how to advise transgender students in a way that makes them feel welcome in the school.

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Table 1
Educational resources for pharmacy transgender students and allies.²

Name	Website	Description
Campus Pride	https://www.campuspride.org/	Student led organization dedicated to providing resources and services to promote more LGBTQ-friendly college campuses.
Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals	http://www.lgbtcampus.org/	Research and resource organization committed to helping professionally advance higher education LGBT environments.
Coalition for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Awareness	http://www.myacpa.org/scglbta	Group within the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) charged with increasing awareness, eliminating oppression, and providing support for LGBT students, faculty, and staff within higher education.
Trans Student Educational Resources (TSER)	http://www.transstudent.org/	Youth-led organization aimed at creating a more trans-friendly education system via advocacy and public education.
Point Foundation	https://www.pointfoundation.org/	Scholarship-granting organization specifically for LGBTQ students of merit in undergraduate or graduate/doctoral programs, which also provides leadership development and mentorship.
Out for Work	http://www.outforwork.org/	Organization dedicated to helping LGBTQ college students find work and internships both while in school and after graduation.
National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals (NOGLSTP)	http://www.noglstp.org/	Organization committed to empowering LGBTQ professionals working in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics via education, professional development, networking and peer support.
Lambda Legal	http://www.lambdalegal.org/	Legal organization dedicated to advocating for civil rights of LGBT people and those with HIV through expanding and defending protections under federal, state, and local laws and policies.
National Center for Transgender Equality	http://www.transequality.org/	Leading national organization devoted to ending transgender violence and discrimination through education and advocacy.
The Trevor Project	http://www.thetrevorproject.org/	Organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services for LGBTQ youth.
Patients, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)	https://www.pflag.org/	Family and ally organization dedicated to advancing equality of LGBTQ individuals through support, education, and advocacy.
National LGBTQ Task Force	http://www.thetaskforce.org/	Advocacy group committed to advancing full freedom, justice, and equality for LGBTQ people via activist training and mobilization.
Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD)	http://www.glaad.org/	Leading LGBT media advocacy organization devoted to accelerating acceptance for the LGBT community by promoting cultural change.

LGBT = lesbian gay bisexual transgender; LGBTQ = lesbian gay bisexual transgender queer/questioning; HIV = human immunodeficiency virus.

Commentary

What resources are available for both myself and transgender students?

As many faculty have minimal experience with the transgender population, it may be hard to understand or provide advice regarding certain questions or issues an advisee may have. Therefore, it is important to be knowledgeable of resources that are available to both advisors and students. One invaluable asset is the local student affairs office, as they often have a plethora of student resources available, and know the best places to find others. Student affairs faculty may also be able to enlighten advisors on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) student organizations or events within the university or the community at large that advisees may be interested in becoming involved with for extracurricular activities. Involvement in these organizations and events can be a vital resource to help a transgender student develop a strong support network among their peers. Many resources can also be accessed online, summarized in Table 1.² While not a comprehensive list, this selection of resources may be particularly beneficial to transgender higher education students. Resources range from LGBTQ higher education student organizations and professional/leadership development organizations to national advocacy groups, with many educational and involvement opportunities for both transgender students and allies included in each. Finally, an initial meeting with administrators prior to meeting with the advisee would be beneficial for all advisors. This meeting can help relay crucial information that has previously been discussed with the student such as preferred name and pronoun for student records or special accommodations made on behalf of the student. While it is still wise to verify this information with the advisee in case something has changed, this meeting can help the advisor feel more informed for the initial meeting with the advisee. The team of administrators may also be able to help provide additional support such as LGBTQ sensitivity or cultural competency training if needed. Advisors should not be afraid to ask that this training be extended to the entire department or even the school if it is felt that the current culture is not fostering an appropriate learning environment based upon feedback from advisees. Ultimately, the experience gained from navigating appropriate resources will be an invaluable asset to the department in not only developing an all-inclusive environment, but as a personal resource for future faculty who have transgender advisees as well.

How can I best support the student during their pharmacy school career?

Supporting a transgender student through their time in the program is much like any other student advisee, frequently serving as both a mentor and a sounding board. As an advisor, it is crucial to ensure students remain on track and no issues arise along the way.

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