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Empowering LGBT Scientists: Mentoring and Beyond

Though he is now one of the most visible gay professors at Northwestern University, Owen Priest has been in and out of the closet throughout his professional career. While completing his Ph.D. in organic chemistry at University of Minnesota, he was out to both his lab and his advisor. But when searching for an assistant professorship, he had to confront the reality of his profession.

“Chemistry is dominated by white, heterosexual men, and I can look that part,” he admits. “I took out all my earrings” – he regularly wears four – “interviewed and got the job.”

But when he found out his department chair was homophobic, Priest made a conscious choice for the rest of his career. “If people don’t want to hire me because they’re uncomfortable with me being gay, I’d rather they don’t.”

BASIC MENTORSHIP

Charles Rubert, a postdoctoral researcher at the Institute for BioNanotechnology in Medicine (IBNAM), came to the same conclusion 13 years later. After being closeted for much of his time in graduate school at Purdue University, he applied to IBNAM with no attempt to hide his gayness. “If a lab isn’t fine with that, I’m going to another lab.”

Rubert found the support to come out and stay out not only through a close group of friends. At a meeting of the American Chemical Society (ACS), he attended an LGBT-focused seminar led by James Nowick, a gay chemist at the University of California, Irvine. “I saw this professor who was very proud to be out, and he was successful,” Rubert recalls. “If he can make it, I can make it.”

Nowick’s seminar arose in part from the National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals (NOGLSTP), a blanket organization across all STEM fields – science, technology, engineering and mathematics. Four years ago, NOGLSTP and a group of interested members of the ACS began developing an LGBT subdivision within the ACS.

Priest was one of the founding members of this subdivision, and three years later is its chair. He particularly appreciates the need for mentorship within the gay chemical community. Early in his teaching career, he recloseted himself because he did not see a welcoming environment. “There were no out faculty that I could look to as a role model and say ‘Oh, it’s okay.’”

But at his first assistant professorship at Grinnell College some years later, the situation was drastically different. The department chair there at the time was gay, and through example and support, Priest was out to the student body. “Everybody knew Professor Priest lived just off-

campus and had a male partner,” Priest said. At Northwestern, Priest has a similar reputation. “I’ve been out since the day I got here.”

MENTORING ON A BROADER SCALE

The mentoring available to Priest was fortuitous, but Rubert’s was not. While the need has been present long since its inception, NOGLSTP has worked to support mentoring relationships like Rubert’s within its membership and the LGBT in STEM community at large, among its other programs.

Sacha Patera earned a Ph.D. in biochemistry and structural biology from Brandeis University, but she has held a corporate relations position at Northwestern for the last three years. Prior to that, she served as the assistant director of the Interdepartmental Biological Sciences (IBIS) Program and as a bench scientist and assistant professor. Though she no longer works strictly within STEM, it remains a strong part of her identity.

“I feel an obligation to take on a mentorship role,” she said. “If there’s a need from the LGBT community for a mentor, I’m happy to participate.”

Patera, a lesbian, was connected to her current mentee, who identifies as a queer female, through the Point Foundation, a general LGBT academic empowerment organization. She said that her membership in NOGLSTP led the Point Foundation to reach out to her.

Patera said that most mentors through the Point Foundation could meet in person with their mentees, but not in her case. “I would really enjoy it if we were in the same geographic area, but I think they just didn’t have a lot of mentors who are in the sciences,” she said. The two keep in contact primarily by email.

Jose Juncosa, a gay postdoctoral researcher in the Silverman Group at Northwestern, also fosters a desire to mentor younger LGBT individuals coming up in STEM.

“I don’t want them to have any missed opportunities, so I try to encourage minority people that might feel that they wouldn’t be as accepted,” he said.

Juncosa is no stranger to exclusion. Like Rubert, Juncosa attended Purdue and was similarly hesitant to come out. But in his third year of graduate school, enough was enough. “I was thinking, ‘Why am I still beating myself up over this? I’m just going to put it out there.’”

BEYOND MENTORING

It was more difficult for Jonathan Dell to get involved. A gay mechanical engineer, Dell works for an aerospace firm in Chicago.

“I worked at a large company and I didn’t know any other gays and lesbians in engineering. Surely there must be other people out there.” He located NOGLSTP through Internet research and started emailing board members to get involved.

In 2012, Dell helped leverage social media for NOGLSTP's biennial Out to Innovate conference. Not tied to any professional organization in particular, Out to Innovate seeks to bring together LGBT individuals interested in STEM fields from high schoolers to professors emeriti. Dell relished the opportunity to interact socially and professionally in the context of the conference. "It's neat to meet those people and hear how being gay or lesbian has affected their approach to STEM."

But not every LGBT person in STEM is drawn to broad conferences and concerted mentoring. A gay professor of mathematics at Northwestern, who preferred to remain nameless, did not feel kinship with the larger STEM community. "Pure mathematicians tend to affiliate with mathematicians. They largely are going to feel it's sort of irrelevant to them."

In his experience, coming out was no longer a problem. "The most important role of an advisor is to professionalize someone. Sexual orientation absolutely doesn't come up." Further, he doubted his place in the conversation. "I'm actually unsure to what extent it's appropriate to talk with an undergraduate as a faculty member here about sexual orientation. I'm here to teach mathematics."

NO ONE SOLUTION

This gay mathematician still saw the necessity of an LGBT subdivision within the American Mathematical Society (AMS), the mathematician's analog to the ACS. Because he believes that LGBT individuals are well protected in the professional world in general, the central focus should be on same-sex partner benefits, which are not protected in states like Ohio.

"I sent an email to the president of the AMS and received no reply. It would be better to have a more direct email." However, he had no idea why such there was not already such a subdivision.

When he was elected as chair of the ACS LGBT subdivision, Priest laid out a clear plan to increase membership through amplified visibility. At the ACS meeting at New Orleans, Priest gave out 250 business cards with easy instructions on how to join the subdivision and 300 rainbow lanyards so that LGBT chemists could show their colors.

He is also seeking representation on the annual ACS demographic survey.

"But there's a lot of political baggage that comes with trying to get that done," he said. Priest hopes that the presence of LGBT identity on the survey will draw in ACS members to seek out LGBT resources within the organization.

While this tactic works for Priest and the ACS, it would certainly not work for Dell. "Engineer types tend to be introverted," Dell said.

Additionally, LGBT resources are not abundant in his line of work with corporations. "Engineering and technical fields have lagged. Maybe employers might feel it's not relevant," Dell proposes.

The size of the companies presents yet another barrier. “The last job I worked at was a company of about 1200 people, maybe five or six were visible and out.”

SOME UNITY IN STEM

Though each field approached LGBT visibility in their discipline with a unique lens, each has a common element. Rubert tried to stay involved at his local chapter of NOGLSTP but found that graduate school was too taxing. “I had to be in the lab and had no time for extracurricular activities,” he says.

Juncosa said that for NOGLSTP to be effective, they would need to expand. “They need to get people more interested in forming chapters and making meetings.”

Dell said that moving Out to Innovate to an annual conference would be greatly beneficial to the larger NOGLSTP community. But that requires human capital. “It takes someone willing to a) have that time commitment and b) to promote the group or the cause.”

This clashes with a second universal belief of LGBT people in STEM. “You identify yourself as a scientist. That’s your identity. The sexuality component is secondary,” Patera states. The majority of his decisions, Juncosa says, are driven by his research, not his desire for a gay community in his workplace.

As a result, sentiments run similar to Rubert’s. “I’m not in a position of power right now, but when I’m a professor, I can do something about it.” Fortunately for those members of NOGLSTP not yet advanced in their careers, professors like Priest are willing to take the little afforded them and going the extra mile to establish a strong base within their field. The active LGBT scientists and engineers of today will pass on their experience and passion to the next generation to perpetuate “people who have the time, who have the energy, who have the willingness,” as Priest puts it, to improve the standing of LGBT individuals in STEM.