

---

## Regional

---

# Positive news for LGBT people in science fields

In previous columns I have mentioned studies that describe discrimination against women, African-Americans and Hispanics in higher education. Now a new study provides more positive news for LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) people who teach in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

In a survey conducted of more than 1,400 LGBT individuals working in STEM fields in the U.S., researchers found that the respondents believed that their peers generally accept them. The study published in the "Journal of Homosexuality" also found that respondents in scientific fields with a high proportion of women, such as the social sciences, were more likely to be supportive of their colleagues than those in more male-intensive disciplines, such as engineering.

The survey, titled "The Queer in STEM" consisted of 58 questions in an online survey that asked about gender and sexual identity, professional expertise and whether respondents felt that their work and social communities were welcoming or hostile. The survey was followed up with one-on-one interviews with more than 100 participants over e-mail, phone and Skype. The researchers are now analyzing the transcripts from those interviews for patterns that point to other practices that could make science more LGBT-friendly.

An interesting aspect of this research is that 57 percent of the respondents said that they were "out" to half or more of their colleagues, which is higher than the 47 percent of people who said they were open about their sexuality in a 2014 survey of the gener-

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

al U.S. workforce conducted by the Human Rights Campaign Foundation.

When it came to self-identification, these researchers found a wide diversity of labels. Although most respondents identified themselves as gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer or asexual, some checked more than one box, while about five percent wrote down an identity not included in the survey's list, such as "polyamorous," "non-monogamous" or "pansexual."

In order to reach as many individuals as possible, the authors of this study made extensive use of social media and networking. By doing so their analysis of the distribution of their respondents showed that they came in the same proportion of those estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau for the LGBT population in the country. Yet, the respondents were mostly young, which suggests that they may be more open about their sexuality than older individuals.

This reveals that still there is some road to go when it comes to people's openness about their gender and sexual identities, despite greater acceptance of members of the LGBT community by the general public and the landmark decision by the U.S. Supreme Court declaring the right of people to marry regardless of their gender. Hopefully more people will become open about their sexuality since other studies have

shown that those who are not open about it are more likely to be stressed out at work and have negative attitudes toward their work and co-workers.

Another conclusion out of this study is that if we want to create a better work environment for members of the LGBT community we need to increase the number of women in academia. Women are still discriminated against in higher education. Despite the fact that 60 percent of all doctoral students (the main feeder for the educators in higher education) are women, they make up 46 percent of the assistant professors, 38 percent of the associate professors and only 23 percent of the full professors. And all the while they earn, on average, 10 percent less than their male counterparts.

A study published last January in the journal "Science" showed bias against women and African-Americans in academia is oftentimes based on the impression that they were not considered to be as "bright" as their white, male peers.

In other words, we need to break the stereotype that scientists are, for the most part, straight white men. To that end we need to become more proactive in changing the culture of academia. Despite constant criticism that higher education institutions are "too liberal" and "too politically correct," the fact of the matter is that discrimination is still a serious problem despite the fact that most of its members are highly educated individuals.

In addition to equalizing the number of women in academia, institutions of higher education can take other steps to become more welcoming of members of the LGBT community. For example, respondents of

the survey said that they felt more comfortable about their sexuality when working in places where there was formal support from their employers as well as strong and unequivocal diversity statements in the official policies of their institutions. Another suggestion is that we need to be more explicit with certain questions when it comes to recruiting students, such as if they can be open about their sexuality regardless the career they want to pursue by telling them not only "yes" but also "and you will not be alone." Kristen Renn, a social scientist at Michigan State University in East Lansing who studies LGBT college students, first proposed this idea.

For a very long time, recruitment advertisements by academic institutions have included statements regarding "equal opportunity" and even encouragement to individuals of groups underrepresented in academia to apply. Yet, surveys show that those statements are rarely followed up with appropriate action. Most academic ads do not even mention sexual orientation in their statements.

It does not help either that, according to recent studies, the proportion of minority individuals at the head of postsecondary institutions is decreasing, even at those schools whose student bodies are made up largely of minorities. And the number of those who are openly members of the LGBT community is minimal.

*Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. is a writer and college professor with leadership experience in higher education. He can be contacted through his website at: <http://www.romerojr.net>*