

# LGBT Workplace Issues for Astronomers

L. Kay (Barnard Coll.), R. Danner (Northrop Grumman Corporation), K. Sellgren (Ohio State Univ.),  
V. Dixon (Johns Hopkins Univ.) and the GLBTQastro Yahoo Discussion Group

**ABSTRACT:** While state and federal laws offer protection against discrimination on the basis of sex, race, religion, and ethnicity, there are no federal laws to protect from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) astronomers can face additional challenges at school and work. Diversity and tolerance in the workplace benefits everyone.

## The Issues

### LGBT Students on many campuses report experiences of harassment<sup>1</sup>

- ★ Including acts of intolerance, fear for their physical safety, and perceived need to conceal their sexual orientation/gender identity
- ★ Undergrad students are the most likely to have experienced harassment; faculty and students say they have concealed to avoid discrimination. Many LGBT people feel pressure to 'cover'
- ★ Lack of visible LGBT mentors affects students, postdocs, and junior faculty especially
- ★ A study of LGBT science faculty noted the difficulty for students to deal with 'clueless faculty'<sup>3</sup>
- ★ Increasingly complex issues for people who are members of multiple minorities

### Federal Equal Employment Opportunity laws and regulations do not provide protection for LGBT people

- ★ While some cities, counties, and states have statutes to protect against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity or gender expression, most states have no protections.<sup>10</sup>
- ★ There is wide variation in how states and insurance plans handle legal and medical issues for transgender people<sup>5,9</sup>

### U.S. Federal law does not acknowledge same-sex partners as family

- ★ People with legal same-sex marriages from other countries or from U.S. states are not considered married by the federal government
  - Government employees do not get benefits for partners, including health care & pension benefits
  - Even people whose institutions offer some domestic partner benefits are not eligible for the federal Family Medical Leave Act to care for sick partners, cannot sponsor their partner for visas or immigration, must pay additional taxes on healthcare benefits, etc.
  - State DOMA (Defense of Marriage Act) laws have outlawed domestic partner benefits at some public institutions

➔ Astronomers who change school or workplace may experience significant differences in their legal and marital status

## Progress

### In Industry

- ★ Over half of the Fortune 500 companies offer domestic partner benefits, ~90% prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, ~40% based on gender identity.

### In Federal Government

- ★ President Obama signed repeal of 'Don't Ask Don't Tell' (DADT)
- ★ Nondiscrimination statements and more tolerance on security clearance issues<sup>2</sup>
- ★ Paid sick leave to care for ill domestic partner

### In Academia

- ★ In a self-reported database, over 550 colleges offer protection against discrimination, including 96 which include gender identity or expression, and more than 300 provide healthcare benefits to same-sex domestic partners.<sup>2</sup>
- ★ Other institutions have non-discrimination clauses in admissions and housing, and offer benefits such as reduced tuition for partners, inclusive family leave policies, and partner health insurance, and gym and library cards.
- ★ Successful strategies include researching options, collecting data and from other similar institutions, and advocating for a 'plus one' policy which can include an elderly parent, unemployed sibling, or domestic partner.<sup>2</sup>
- ★ More LGBT scientists are out and writing about their issues in science journals.<sup>4,5,6</sup> E.g. transgender Stanford neurobiologist Barres' paper on Gender and Science and his earlier experiences as Barbara compared to how he is treated now as Ben.<sup>7,8</sup>

## What You Can Do

- ★ If this topic makes you uncomfortable, ask yourself why. It wasn't all that long ago when it was OK for a scientist to say he was personally uncomfortable working with minorities or women, or that allowing women at observatories would be "too complicated." Advancing diversity in the workplace should be about everyone.
- ★ Think about whether your department is a safe and welcoming space for LGBT people. If you aren't sure, talk to a LGBT colleague. You probably have one.
- ★ When recruiting, be prepared to answer questions about workplace climate, partner benefits, etc. At least know whom to send people to for answers.
- ★ If you lose existing staff, prospective students or employees over LGBT issues, notify your top administrators, especially if they take grant money with them.
- ★ Educate yourself about the effects of state and federal DOMA laws.

### Acknowledgments

- ★ Thanks to the members of the GLBTQastro discussion group for suggestions for this poster.
- ★ Thanks to gay rights pioneer Franklin Kameny, WWII combat veteran & Harvard Astronomy PhD, who was fired in 1957 from his job as an astronomer in the Army map service for being gay. He led a demonstration against the Pentagon in 1965, his federal lawsuit went to the Supreme Court, he co-founded one of the first gay rights organizations in the US, & he challenged the 'sloppy sleazy science' behind psychiatry's assumption of the psychopathology of homosexuality. He received a formal apology from the US government in June 2009 & attended the signing of DADT repeal in 2010.
- ★ Let us also acknowledge Denice Denton, an invited speaker at the 2003 meeting of the AAS/CSWA in Seattle. She spoke of her work to develop programs to enhance equal opportunity for women in science and engineering. Denice became the first openly gay person to serve as a Chancellor in the UC system in 2005. Her death in 2006 led to much discussion about homophobia in academia, the media, and society<sup>11</sup>.

### References

- 1) Rankin, Susan R. et al. (2010). *2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People*. Charlotte NC: Campus Pride. [ <http://www.campuspride.org> ]
- 2) Messinger, Lori. (2009). "Creating LGBTQ-Friendly Campuses". *Academe Online* [ <http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/academe/2009/SO/Feat/Mess.html> ]
- 3) Bilimoria, Diana & Stewart, Abigail. (Summer 2009). "'Don't Ask, Don't Tell': The Academic Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Faculty in Science and Engineering". *NWSA Journal*, 21, 2, 85-103. [ [http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa\\_journal/v021/21.2.bilimoria.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/nwsa_journal/v021/21.2.bilimoria.html) ]
- 4) Kurzwil, Jenny. (5 Dec. 2008). "Shattering the Glass Closet". *SCIENCE Career*. [10.1126/science.opms.r0800063]
- 5) Nelson, Bryan. (3 July 2008). "Benefits Blues". *NATURE*, 453, 132-133 [10.1038/nj7200-132a]
- 6) Oberst, Jacqueline R. (1 Oct. 2010). "Closeted Discoverers: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Scientists." *SCIENCE Career*. [10.1126/science.opms.r0900097]
- 7) Barres, Ben. (13 July 2006). "Does Gender Matter." *NATURE*, 442, 133-136 [10.1038/442133a]
- 8) McCook, Alison. (May 2010). "A Transforming Field." *The Scientist*, 24, 5, 80. [ <http://www.the-scientist.com/article/display/57365/> ]
- 9) "Tenured Radical" comments (2 Oct. 2009) that her medical insurance covers treatment for infertility but not for gender reassignment [ <http://tenured-radical.blogspot.com/2009/10/discriminating-tastes-what-people-who.html> ]
- 10) Riley, Donna M. (Jan. 2008). "LGBT-Friendly Workplaces in Engineering." *Leadership & Management in Engineering*, 8, 1, 19. [10.1061/(ASCE)1532-6748(2008)8:1(19)]
- 11) Kapp, Diana. (March 2007). "The Scandal, The Scapegoats, and the Suicide." *San Francisco Magazine*, p53, [ <http://www.sanfrancmag.com/story/scandal-scapegoats-and-suicide> ]

### Astronomy Resources

- LGBT Astronomer Outlist: <http://www.physics.ucsb.edu/~blaes/lgbtastro/>
- LGBT Astronomy Discussion Group on Yahoo: [GLBTQastro@yahoo.com](mailto:GLBTQastro@yahoo.com)
- AAS meeting dinners: usually Monday nights, check the bulletin boards
- Blog: The Astrodyke: <http://astrodyke.blogspot.com/>
- National Organization of Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Technical Professionals <http://www.noglstp.org/>