Using Queer & Trans Culture to Prevent IPV among LGBTQ Students at Washington University in St. Louis

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BACKGROUND

LGBTQ people have a long history of resistance, resilience, & culture celebrating queerness, queer relationships, trans identities, and LGBTQ communities. At the same time, LGBTQ people have high rates of intimate partner violence (IPV). Transgender, genderqueer, and gender nonconforming university students are twice as likely to be abused as cisgender women\(^2\), while queer, bisexual, lesbian, and gay students at WashU are twice as likely to experience IPV as straight students.\(^1\)

Additionally, queer survivors have more risk of negative mental health outcomes, substance abuse, and poor academic performance than straight survivors.\(^{12-14}\) Most of these survivors experience abuse in their first relationship,\(^3\) making the college years a key time for prevention. However, rather than focusing on queerness as a risk factor, there are unique LGBTQ strengths that can be used as protective factors for prevention.

WHY ARE LGBTQ PEOPLE AT INCREASED RISK?

Homophobia and transphobia create vicious cycles where newly-out students are isolated from both LGBTQ and straight/cis support networks, making them overly dependent on their partner and putting them at risk of being abused.\(^3\) When abuse happens, students become even more isolated, both through the actions of their partner and from a reluctance to confirm negative stereotypes by disclosing their abuse.\(^3\) This increases their dependence on their partner, and puts them even more at risk.\(^3\)

Additionally, LGBTQ students may be at risk of using abuse against their partner as a way to relieve feelings of powerlessness caused by homophobia and transphobia.\(^3-8\) This cycle may be exacerbated by heightened rates of self-medicating and substance abuse caused by an overreliance on LGBTQ bar culture for access to queer/trans community.\(^3-8\)

*The term LGBTQ is used throughout this brief, rather than the more inclusive LGBTQIA, because very little research on this topic could be found that included intersex and asexual people. However, a community-owned culture-as-prevention approach should make every effort to include the history and culture of intersex and asexual people in order to reflect the full diversity of the LGBTQIA community.*

**KEY POINTS**

- LGBTQ* WashU students have twice the rate of IPV victimization as straight & cisgender students.\(^1-2\)
- LGBTQ oppression puts students at risk of isolation, feelings of powerlessness, and other factors that contribute to IPV.\(^3-9\)
- No studies were found that attempt to prevent IPV among LGBTQ people.
- Queer & trans culture, which celebrates resistance, resilience, & community, could be used to promote cultural resistance to abuse.
- WashU could partner with local LGBTQ organizations to develop a community-owned program in which queer and trans elders mentor LGBTQ students in cultural traditions that promote resilience, connection, & prosocial relationship skills.\(^10-11\)
- This program can serve as a pilot that could later be rolled out in other settings.
- WashU can be a leader in researching and developing an innovative strengths-based culture-as-prevention program\(^10-11\) that benefits both WashU students and the larger LGBTQ community.
The proposed causal framework suggests that key sites for intervention may be LGBTQ students’ isolation from queer/trans community, feelings of powerlessness, and bar culture. By creating a culture of queer/trans positivity, community, and healthy relationships, four virtuous cycles could be created that would increase connection to prosocial LGBTQ campus community, decrease feelings of powerlessness, reduce reliance on bars for community, and lessen the risk of victimization and perpetration.

Though no programs could be found that attempt to prevent IPV among LGBTQ students, previous studies have used culture as means to develop community connection, protective factors, and resilience to homophobia, transphobia, and racism.\textsuperscript{10-11, 15-16} The proposed program is adapted from the Qungasvik model, a community-designed and community-owned prevention curriculum which uses Yup’ik cultural knowledge and connection to elders to prevent suicide and substance abuse among Alaskan Native youth.\textsuperscript{10-11}

**IMPLEMENTING AN LGBTIA CULTURE-AS-PREVENTION PROGRAM AT WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY**

WashU could provide the coordination and backbone support for a community-driven project to adapt the Qungasvik model to an LGBTQ context. Following the Qungasvik model, this program would fill the gap in research by identifying protective factors for IPV already present in LGBTQ culture, use a “culture-as-prevention” approach to create a curriculum that strengthens those factors, and partner with queer/trans elders to implement the program among LGBTQ students.\textsuperscript{10-11}

Because protective factors for IPV in LGBTQ populations have not been extensively studied, this work should begin by conducting surveys and interviews to identify protective aspects of LGBTQ culture that may be strengthened through the program. In order to ensure the curriculum is culturally relevant and community-owned, a Community Planning Group (CPG) should be convened from the queer and trans community to oversee curriculum quality, queer/trans cultural fidelity, and contemporary relevance. Meanwhile, a group of queer and trans elders, students, community leaders and researchers would be convened to create a culturally-integrated curriculum that combines queer/trans culture, community, history, traditions, and structures of care with evidence-based activities\textsuperscript{17} to strengthen the identified protective factors.

This curriculum should be implemented by LGBTQ elders and, potentially LGBTQ experts in particular subject areas (e.g. LGBTQ history, emotional regulation, relationship skills, etc.) who can engage students in queer/trans cultural traditions that emphasize queer cultural history and healthy LGBTQ social norms. Critically, the members of the CPG, curriculum development group, and elders should reflect the full racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual diversity of the LGBTQ community in order to be successful.

This “culture as prevention” approach is intended to create a strengths-based, culturally-driven curriculum that could be replicated with LGBTQ youth beyond WashU. Given the gaps in the literature, this is an opportunity for WashU to not only be a leader in research, but also a leader in providing innovative, intersectional, margins-to-center prevention programming that builds on the long history of LGBTQ resilience to promote healthy, joyful, and equitable relationships at WashU.
REFERENCES


