



The Importance of LGBT Allies

Camille Baker

What is an ally? Webster's dictionary defines an ally as "one that is associated with another as a helper." However, this definition is broad. A person can be an ally to a community service organization, a political organization, or a certain group of individuals such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) students. An ally can lend a helping hand in an assortment of ways through actions and words. There are people everywhere who are allies to many different groups and

individuals and Syracuse University is no different. After interviewing several students who consider themselves to be allies of the LGBT community, I found there are different ways of being allies, and these variations seem to exist along a continuum that ranges from being a "potential ally" to an "active ally." Allies exist at either extreme, but more often than not allies find themselves situated somewhere in between.

If I had to pick a potential ally out in a crowd, it would be nearly impossible,

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which is why it is important to talk about this type of ally. A potential ally might not let you know he or she is an ally, preferring to be anonymous. If someone says something derogatory or discriminating against a LGBT person, the anonymous ally may not respond, but he or she will think it's wrong. Most of the time, these allies will share their opinions only when in the company of friends or others with whom they feel comfortable. Potential allies often lack the confidence or encouragement to become more active allies. However, potential allies can become more visibly engaged if they are encouraged to speak their minds. This is why creating a classroom environment in which homophobia and heterosexism are challenged is so important; when potential allies know that their opinions are respected and supported, they will be more likely to allow their position to be heard.

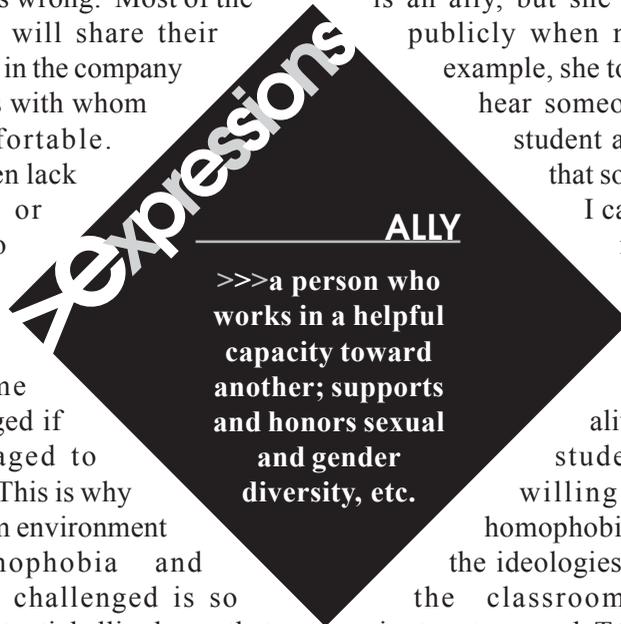
Allies who find themselves in between the potential and active ally roles are a little more recognizable because they are often comfortable enough to display their ally status through voicing their opinions, using

the "Safe Space" stickers, or participating in LGBT-related campus events. A sophomore biomedical physics major told me that she lets people know her position on LGBT issues whenever these discussions arise. She does not go out of

her way to make sure people know she is an ally, but she does speak out publicly when necessary. For example, she told me, "If I ever hear someone call another student a 'faggot' or say that something is 'gay' I call him or her on it," she said.

"That type of language just keeps the stereotypes alive." While these students may be willing to challenge homophobic comments and the ideologies behind them in the classroom, they need instructors and TAs to foster an environment that allows these discussions to take place.

At the far end of the ally continuum is the active ally. These allies are fewer in numbers, but are important in supporting LGBT students throughout the campus. The active ally is present at most LGBT-sponsored events and even helps coordinate



them. It is easy to spot active allies because they aggressively promote their LGBT-supportive position. For example, in debates about LGBT issues, such as legalizing same-sex marriage, an active ally would speak out openly, but would also contact his or her senators, write a letter to the *Syracuse University Daily Orange* or even organize campus events to raise awareness of the issues. An active ally is not afraid to speak out in support of LGBT people regardless of the situation.

It is important to know that due to widespread homophobia and heterosexism, being a LGBT ally is not easy. Allies of LGBT students are at risk of the same discrimination and hostility that members of the LGBT community face daily, often because a LGBT ally's sexuality is always put into question once it is known that the person is an ally. More disturbing, allies, as well as LGBT students, can face threats of violence. I suspect that this might be why there are more potential allies than active allies.

Allies in the Classroom

As a Black and Mexican female I understand what it is like to be marginalized in the classroom. Discussions that involve race and ethnicity often leave me feeling alienated, not because I am different from my peers, but because I am frequently the only person of color in the

classroom. In these types of situations I feel that I need to speak for all people of color, when really that is not possible. When I find myself in this position I look for students who are my allies, which (depending on the level and visibility of their activism) may be either an easy task or a difficult one. While my racial and ethnic status is easily identifiable, a person's marginalized status based on his or her sexuality or gender identity may not be as easily seen. But, every classroom in all disciplines has LGBT students and their allies who would like to broaden the understanding of diversity from the simplified black/white issue that it has been considered on this campus. Instead, we recognize the range of identities, behaviors, cultures, and abilities that exist on our campus and we work to incorporate these various forms of difference in our

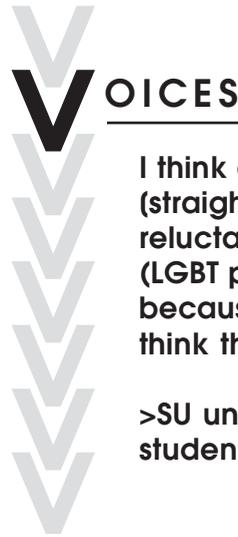


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classroom discussions of diversity. However, we need help in this endeavor from our instructors and TAs.

It was not until my second year living in residence halls that I began to encounter students who openly identified as LGBT. Since then I have found it hard to ignore the ever-present issues surrounding LGBT students on the Syracuse University campus. After knowing my new LGBT friends for no more than a month, I was forced to confront homophobia when two of them were victims of a hate-crime based on their sexuality. While this situation was worthy enough to gain front-page status in *The Daily Orange* and sparked a fire within the LGBT community to raise awareness, as allies, my friends and I were frustrated that it failed to take precedence in our classrooms. To my surprise, a course that focused on current events did not even mention this hate crime in the days and weeks following the incident. In addition, it was not until a week after the incident that the issue was finally discussed in my sociology class.

From my ally perspective, the problem with situations like this is the silence that pervades academic spaces when dialogue provoking awareness and encouraging respect should occur. Professors and teaching assistants are in a position to bring about that change. First, professors and teaching assistants need to recognize



I think a lot of (straight) people are reluctant to support (LGBT people) because people will think they're gay.

>SU undergraduate student

that diversity is incorporated into *all* aspects of life and areas of study and is therefore relevant to all disciplines. While many students understand that not everyone is going to have the same morals or values, for the students who do not understand this it is even more important to provide discussions that expose them to ideologies that differ from their own. As a person in an authoritative position, a professor or teaching assistant can act as an ally and bring the topic of diversity on campus, including a focus on LGBT issues, into the spotlight.

A major problem LGBT student allies face is lack of awareness. If professors or teaching assistants took the time to mention LGBT campus events before lecture

begins, students might begin to understand that SU's LGBT-community is vibrant, active, and supported by many allies, including faculty, throughout campus. Increasing student awareness of the LGBT and other marginalized campus communities shows that professors and teaching assistants care about all of their students. Professors and teaching assistants can improve the discussion of LGBT issues on campus by bringing up these topics in English, engineering, anthropology, public relations, advertising, the sciences, management, and all the other areas of study available on the Syracuse University campus.

When professors and teaching assistants work as allies to know more about LGBT issues on campus, they can then create classroom environments that allow for a richer discussion of diversity. If professors conceptualize sexuality and gender as an integral part of recognizing the diversity in their curriculum and classroom spaces, SU could create a more inclusive educational environment that

benefits all students. The main course of action a professor or teaching assistant should take is to show they are allies to the LGBT community by allowing their students to engage with these dialogues. However, through my discussions with student allies on campus, I learned that it is important that a professor or teaching assistant not police the discussion, but facilitate it. When the LGBT hate crime was briefly mentioned in one of her classes, a sophomore advertising major who I talked with did not know what to say. "My parents always tried to expose me to new ideas and cultures when I was growing up, so it is not hard for me to openly discuss different ideas and opinions," she explained. But, when the LGBT hate crime was briefly mentioned in one of her communications courses, she was uncomfortable because the space for her ideas seemed too controlled by the professor. "I wanted to discuss the topic more," she said, "but my professor kind of moved the conversation into a different direction



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before I could get my opinion out there.” If the professor had spent more time on the issue or allowed students to discuss it more, then maybe she wouldn’t have been so “uncomfortable” and would have been able to voice her thoughts, making her ally status more visible and inspiring other students to do the same.

If LGBT issues continue to be ignored in classrooms, no good can come from incidents like the hate crime mentioned earlier. The potential for the active participation of all levels of allies in classrooms across campus is high. A professor’s or teaching assistant’s role in the classroom is to expose students to new and different ideas. The student’s role is

to take advantage of such exposure, continue to grow, and become a responsible member of society. By incorporating LGBT issues into areas of study that do not normally address these topic, or by engaging students in conversations about the richness of campus diversity, professors and TAs help students gain a greater awareness of the world in which they live and this is likely to encourage them to actively identify as allies, thus promoting future dialogue and activism. These students will leave Syracuse University knowing that their ally identities were developed and supported while participating in classroom spaces that truly value diversity.

>>REFERENCES

“Ally.” *Merriam-Webster’s collegiate dictionary tenth edition*. (1997). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Incorporated.