>>glossary of LGBT-related terms

Ability: In this volume we intentionally substitute the word "ability" in place of the more common medical term "disability" in order to highlight differing physical and mental abilities as a range of variations in the ways that people negotiate their environments. It is our position that "disabilities" are constructed as abnormal and that this language continues to constitute a group of people as "less than" or "unable" as opposed to appreciating varying abilities as components of diversity on campus, such as race, gender, social class, and sexual orientation.

Ally: A person who works in a helpful capacity toward another. This book specifically discusses the role TAs can play as allies to LGBT students and colleagues by supporting and honoring sexual and gender diversity, challenging homophobic and heterosexist remarks and behaviors, and by exploring and understanding issues related to the LGBT community as part of responsible teaching.

Binary gender system: The socially constructed idea that there are two distinct, and opposite, genders in our culture: male and female. People who do not "fit" within one category or the other are erased by this understanding of gender.

Bisexual: A person who has significant emotional, sexual, and/or romantic attractions to both men and women.

Class, Social Class: "Class" usually refers to social stratum whose members share certain social, economic, and cultural characteristics. In other words, class is usually related to income, wealth, education, occupational prestige, and the privileges that accompany these hierarchical statuses. Social class standing intersects with sexuality and gender identity (as well as race, ability, religion, and nationality) in complicated ways.

Closet, Closeted, or being "in the closet:" The closet is commonly referred to by LGBT people as the state of hiding or concealing one's LGBT-identity and/or behavior from others, and sometimes even from oneself. The origin comes from an old drag phrase, "you can only tell he's gay by the female clothes in his closet."

Coming out, Coming out of the closet: The process of disclosing one's LGBT identity and/or behavior. Coming out can be a lifelong process of self-acceptance.

Coming Out Week: A week of pro-gay activities, often hosted on college campuses by LGBT student groups, to celebrate the LGBT community and increase its visibility.

Drag: The act of dressing in clothing that is commonly associated with the opposite gender. In drag shows, drag queens are men who dress and perform as women and drag kings are females who dress and perform as men.

Dyke: Once a derogatory slur for lesbians, but is now frequently reclaimed by some lesbians as a term of pride.

Fag(got): A derogatory slur for gay men, but has been reclaimed by some gay men as a term of pride.

Gay: Oftentimes "gay" is used as an adjective to refer to all people, regardless of gender, who have their primary emotional, sexual, and/or romantic attractions to people of the same sex/gender. However, when used as a noun, "gay" usually refers to gay men (i.e. men who have significant emotional, sexual and/or romantic attractions to other men).

Gender: While many people believe that the sex differences (i.e. anatomical, genetic, and hormonal differences) between men and women are biological, gender is considered the social concept by which particular characteristics construct men and women as "masculine" and "feminine." [Although, not everyone believes that sex is 100% biological, either!] People are socialized into behaving appropriately for their sex based on the culture and historical time period in which they live. Gender is often considered a social institution in our culture since it shapes our desires, behaviors, and identities so

profoundly and is intimately related to power dynamics between men and women. Please see "(Trans)Gendering the Classroom," by Rob S. Pusch, for a more complex discussion of gender.

Gender Expression: The external representation of one's gender identity, usually expressed through "feminine" or "masculine" behavior, clothing, voice inflection, body adornment, and behaviors, etc. Typically, people who identify as transgender work to make their gender expression match their gender identity and not their "biological" sex. [Many people who identify as transgender resist the two-gender binary system altogether by refusing to be categorized as either a man or woman.]

Gender Identity: One's personal sense of being a man or woman; the name one uses to refer to his/her gender. For transgender people, their "biological" sex does not match their own gender identity.

Hegemony, hegemonic: A term developed by Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci to refer to the process by which those in power secure the consent of their "subordinates" by making their position/power seem natural and normal through the use of pleasure, fascination, humor, etc. In other words, this is not a type of power that works through overt force; instead, hegemony seduces us into believing that things are the way they are because, "they're supposed to be." For example, the idea that men and women should only be attracted to members of the opposite gender is a hegemonic belief system.

Heteronormativity: A concept used to describe how many social institutions and social policies reinforce the belief that human beings fall into two distinct and complementary categories, male and female, and the subsequent belief that those genders ought to fulfill complementary roles—that is, among others, that sexual relationships ought to exist only between males and females. To describe a social institution as heteronormative means that it has visible or hidden norms, some of which are viewed as normal only for males and others which are seen as normal only for females. Its purpose, as with many critical terms, is to help identify voices that have "fallen through the cracks" and who do not feel that they have an adequate means of expressing themselves within the current social worldview. Please see "Heteronormativity and Teaching at Syracuse University," by Susan Adams, for a more complete discussion of this term.

Heterosexism: An "ism" represents a system, ideology, or theory that includes a basis for privileging, or rewarding, certain groups over others on the basis of a particular characteristic. Heterosexism refers to the dominant cultural belief that heterosexuality is the one "normal" and "right" sexuality for all people. Heterosexism, therefore, influences the fact that LGBT people often experience prejudice and discrimination in many forms, but it also impacts non-LGBT people by defining a very narrow range of acceptable behaviors and identities.

Heterosexual: A person who has significant emotional, sexual, and/or romantic attractions to members of the opposite sex/gender.

Homophobia: While a strict translation refers to the fear and hatred of "homosexuals," homophobia encompasses a much broader definition by also incorporating the discomfort and dislike that people may feel toward LGBT people, the belief that LGBT people do not deserve the same rights and opportunities as people who aren't LGBT, and any language or practice that supports these ideologies, such as using derogatory slurs (even in jest).

Homosexual: A person who has significant emotional, sexual, and/or romantic attractions to members of the same sex. This term developed out of the medical literature and is not usually the preferred way most LGBT people refer to themselves or others.

Intersex: A term used to describe the occurrence of a person born with both male and female anatomical/physiological characteristics (which can occur in various combinations), or when a person's genitalia is biologically ambiguous. This happens more than you think, but doctors usually make a decision to surgically alter a child's genitalia at a very young age. Surgical alteration of genitalia to make an individual "fit" either a male or female sex category has led some theorists to argue that sex categories are not just biological; they are, in fact, socially- as well as biologically-constructed.

LGBT: An acronym for the identities Lesbian, Gay Men, Bisexual, and Transgender. At times, "Q" is added to refer to those who identify as Queer and/or Questioning (as in questioning their sexual identity). Also, sometimes "A" is added to refer to people who identify as LGBT Allies.

Lesbian: A woman who has significant emotional, sexual, and/or romantic attractions to other women. Also, a woman who is "woman-identified."

Pass: LGB people are said to "pass" when their LGB identity is not publicly exposed, i.e., they can "pass" as straight. Transgender people are said to "pass" when they can successfully live as their chosen gender.

Queer: This word emerged in the mid-to-late 1980s in order to reclaim a pejorative term that was once used to disparage LGBT people. Today, "queer" is used in many different ways. Some people use "queer" as an all-inclusive term to refer to anyone who is not heterosexual (i.e. all LGBT people). However, the term is also used in a highly political way by some non-straights to refer to their sexuality and/or progressive ideologies that reject compulsory heterosexuality and the practices that are often associated with it, i.e. these people identify as "queer" to mark their counter-hegemonic/anti-mainstream lifestyles. Queer Theory is a body of literature that has developed from this latter definition in order to contest the widespread beliefs related to our current understandings of sexuality.

Race: Socially constructed categories often related to ethnicity and perceived skin color. Like gender, race involves a complex web of social meanings but should be understood as a social structure that is intimately related to privileges in our culture. Race intersects with sexuality and gender (as well as ability, religion, social class, and nationality) in complicated ways.

Rainbow Flag, Pride Flag: A symbol of the LGBT community that denotes the unity and diversity that is present within it. The colors red, orange, yellow, green, blue, and purple are striped across its cloth.

Sexual Identity: One's personal sense of sexual orientation; the names people use to refer to their sexual orientation, i.e. lesbian, bisexual, gay, queer, questioning, etc.

Sexual Orientation: The favored term (as opposed to "sexual preference") used when referring to an individual's emotional, sexual, and/or romantic attractions to the same and/or opposite sex/gender, including LGB and heterosexual orientations. When sexual

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orientation is used just to describe LGBT people, this makes the sexual orientation of heterosexuals invisible.

Straight: Another word for heterosexual.

Transgender: An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from the sex they were assigned at birth including, but not limited to, transsexuals, intersex people, and cross-dressers. Please see "(Trans) Gendering the Classroom, by Rob S. Pusch, for a more complex discussion of this term.

Transition: The complex process of altering one's gender. Transition often includes changing one's legal name, coming out to friends and family as transgender, and sometimes taking forms of hormone therapy and genital alteration.

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