



# THRIVING On Campus

## 2SLGBTQ+ Campus Climate: Students' Experiences on & Perceptions of Campus

Thriving on Campus is an Ontario-wide campus climate study for 2SLGBTQ+ university students. The project explored students' experiences, perceptions, wellbeing, and academic success. Nearly 3900 2SLGBTQ+ students participated in an online survey and 50 students participated in follow-up interviews. Surveys were administered in Winter 2019 and interviews took place from Fall 2019 to Summer 2020. For more information about the study and those who participated, please see "Study Overview and Participants' Demographics."

### **This report presents:**

- Findings about students' experiences of blatant victimization and subtle microaggressions, and their perceptions of campus climate in terms of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion and safety.
- Findings about how discrimination and perceptions of campus climate affect students' mental health, social wellbeing, and academics.
- Recommendations for campuses to consider as they work to foster the belonging, wellbeing, and academic success of 2SLGBTQ+ students.

**Methodological Notes:** Because it is not possible to randomly sample 2SLGBTQ+ university students in Ontario, we cannot know with certainty if our findings represent the population of 2SLGBTQ+ students at Ontario universities. However, given the size and diversity of our survey and interview samples, our findings offer important insights to support policies and programs that are responsive to the needs, strengths, and experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ students. Reported percentages are based on those who responded to the specific survey question, which may not reflect the full sample when data are missing. Given the survey's cross-sectional design, reported statistical relationships between variables reflect correlation and do not meet the criteria of cause-and-effect.

# In Students' Words: Facing Discrimination on Campus

The following quotations provide examples of the types of discrimination 2SLGBTQ+ students face on campus. These examples resemble everyday microaggressions: microaggressions involve subtle forms of discrimination which often are unintentionally perpetuated but are still harmful. Microaggressions can occur interpersonally, such as through a comment, or environmentally, such as through campus policies, practices, and norms. Some of the illustrations below are related only to students' 2SLGBTQ+ identities and others are connected to their race and disability status.

*"I had introduced myself and my pronouns... and consistently over the semester, [the professor] mis-pronounced me in class in front of everyone."*

—Two-spirit, asexual, Indigenous, graduate student

*"They know I'm a woman, but my disability is not visible, so that's something else I have to out, and my sexuality I have to out. So, it's just like all these identities where I don't know how [people] are going to react."*

—Cisgender woman, bisexual, white, neurocognitive disability, graduate student

*"The building I work in normally doesn't have a gender-neutral washroom in it, so that's difficult. And those days at work, in general, are hard."*

—Nonbinary, queer, white undergraduate student

*"Someone I didn't even recognize told me, 'Hey, you should get a haircut.' And that just was really discomforting because part of the reason why I grow my hair long is so that I could feel more valid [as transfemme]. Also being mixed race, it's my natural hair... So, that's the current thing... Black people get told that if you're growing your hair naturally, you shouldn't do that, you need to straighten it."*

—Transfemme, queer, mixed race, undergraduate student

*"In psychology class, we were going over the LGBTQ topic, and essentially one of the girls became very uncomfortable and started joking, 'oh, well, no one here is that anyway' ... then I voiced out that I am bisexual... then she got very uncomfortable and started to kind of very obviously start to scoot away from me even though she was well over like five seats away from me."*

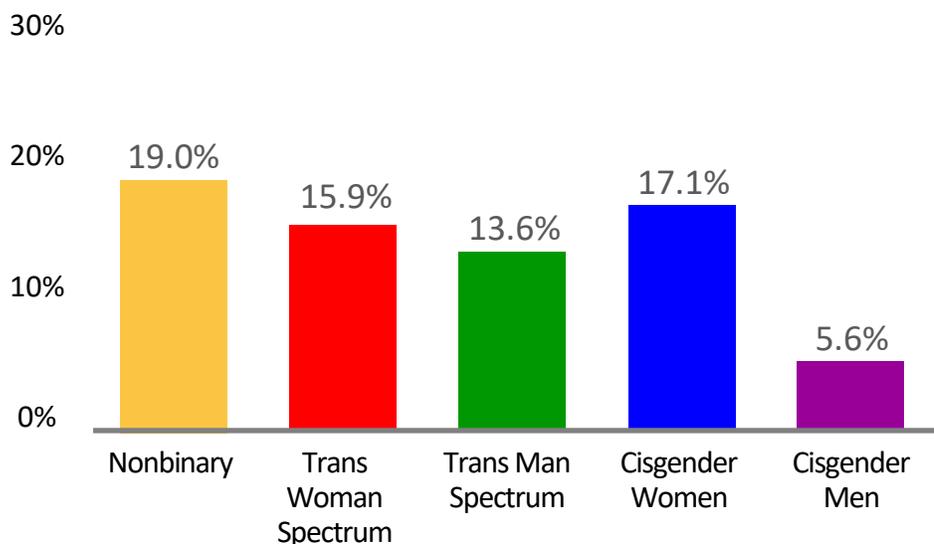
—Agender, bisexual, student of colour, undergraduate student

# Experiences of Discrimination on Campus

## Victimization

Survey participants were asked if they experienced various incidents of blatant victimization on campus during the past year. Below we report findings for three commonly experienced forms of victimization, with findings reported in the graph for respondents by gender identity.<sup>1</sup>

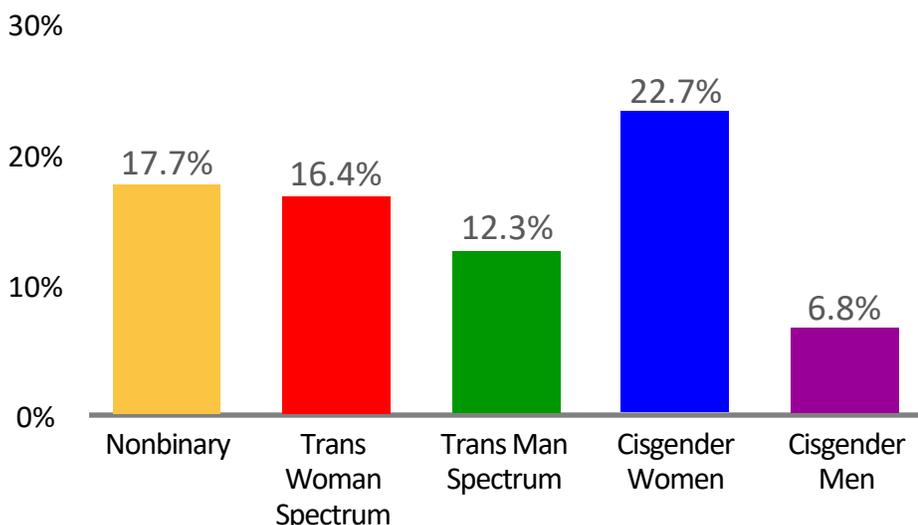
### Rates of Being Followed in a Threatening Manner Across Gender Identities



12% of students overall reported being followed in a threatening manner.

Rates were highest among nonbinary and cisgender women students, and lowest among cisgender men.

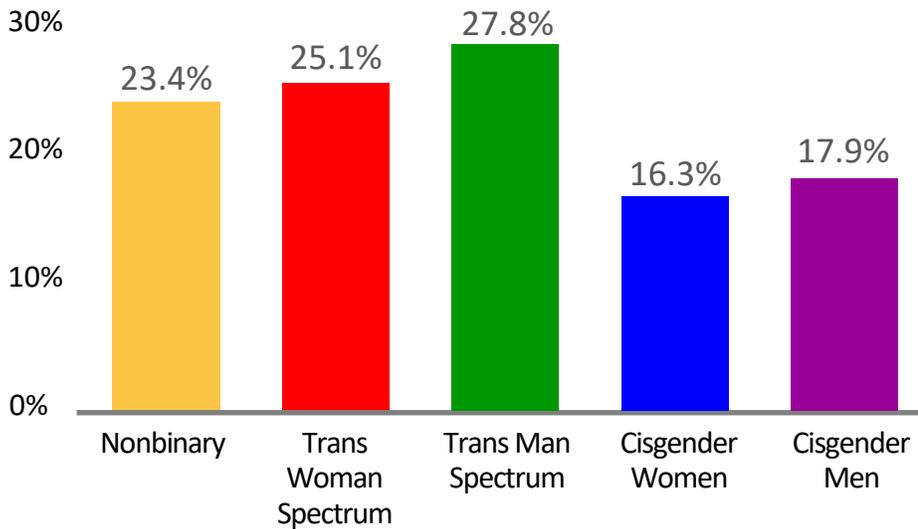
### Rates of Sexual Harassment/Assault Across Gender Identities



14% of students overall reported being sexually harassed or assaulted.

Rates were highest among cisgender women students followed by transwoman spectrum and nonbinary students.

## Rates of Verbal Threats/Bullying/Intimidation Across Gender Identities



17% of students overall reported being verbally threatened, bullied, or intimidated.

Compared to the cisgender students, rates were considerably higher for students belonging to the trans community, with trans man spectrum students being at the highest risk.

Across the 6 different types of victimization included in the survey, disabled students reported experiencing more than 2X as many types of victimization as students who did not identify as disabled.

*“I know a student who transferred from the local college who was physically assaulted for using the washroom of their choosing.”*

– Cisgender queer woman, white undergraduate student  
(Coordinator of their university’s 2SLGBTQ+ student group)

<sup>1</sup> These 5 gender identity groups were significantly different for several demographics (e.g., age, family income). To ensure these demographic differences did not affect our comparison of victimization rates, we controlled for them in all our analyses.

## Trans Microaggressions

Trans students were asked how often they encountered trans microaggressions on campus during the past year, selecting from *never*, *very rarely*, *rarely*, *occasionally*, *frequently*, and *very frequently*.

Below we present the most commonly experienced ones. They reflect interpersonal incidents, such as being misgendered through the incorrect pronoun, and environmental incidents, for example encountering forms that asked about binary (male/female) sex for gender or sex, rather than using questions inclusive of trans students.

Participants who encountered **5 or more** different incidents of trans microaggressions either **frequently** or **very frequently** included...

Trans microaggressions experienced either <b>frequently</b> or <b>very frequently</b>	%
Forms or documentation asked about gender/sex and	<b>55%</b>
Someone used the incorrect pronouns when referring	<b>43%</b>
I received information about sexual health that was limited to cisgender bodies.	<b>40%</b>
I saw negative messages and/or advertisements about trans people on social media (i.e., Facebook, Twitter,	<b>36%</b>
I did not have access to bathrooms where I felt comfortable as a trans person.	<b>32%</b>
People said or implied that my birth sex is my “real” sex/gender.	<b>24%</b>

**50%**  
Trans Man Spectrum

**43%**  
Trans Woman Spectrum

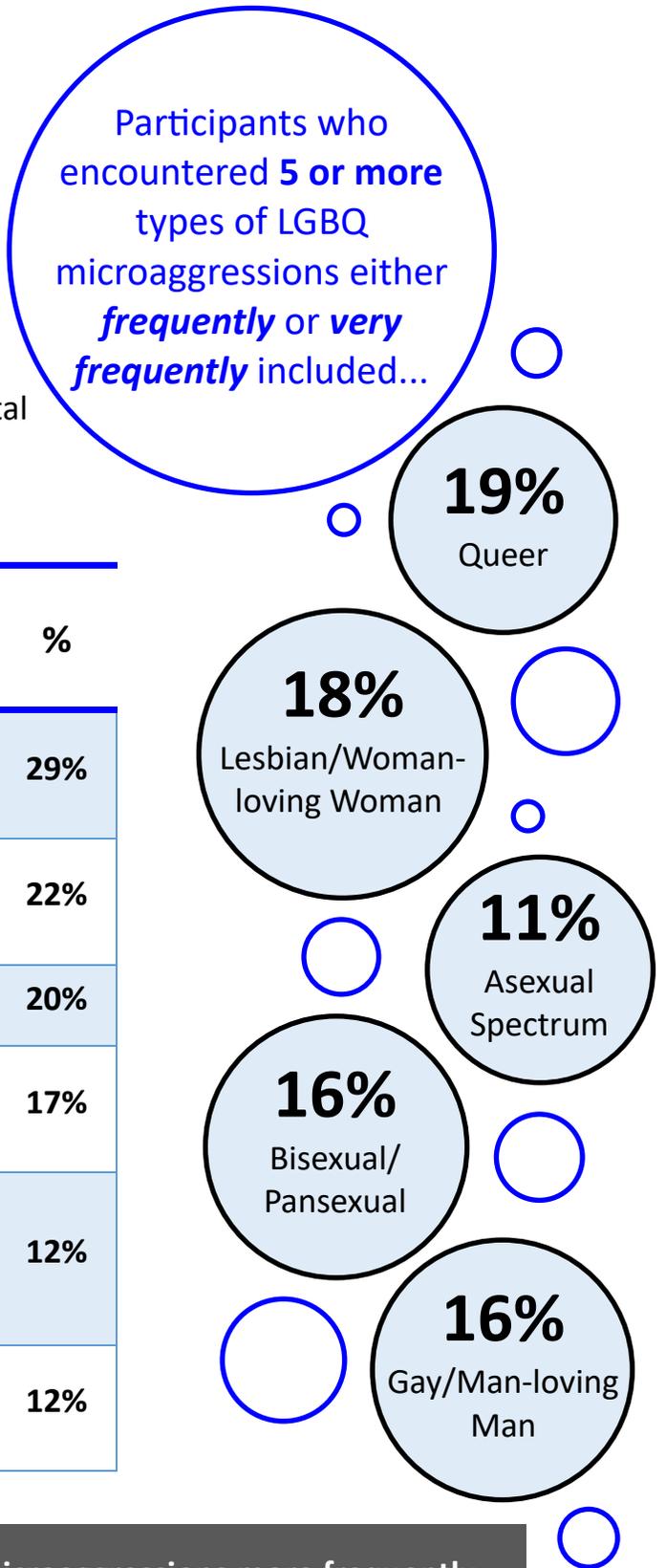
**31%**  
Nonbinary

**Trans disabled students experienced trans microaggressions more frequently than trans students who did not identify as disabled.**

## LGBQ Microaggressions

LGBQ students were asked how frequently they experienced sexual orientation-based microaggressions on campus within the past year, selecting from *never, very rarely, rarely, occasionally, frequently, and very frequently.*

Below we present the most commonly experienced ones, reflecting both interpersonal and environmental incidents. Respondents included trans students who also identified as sexual minorities (i.e., LGBQ).



### LGBQ microaggressions experienced either frequently or very frequently %

I received information about sexual health that was limited to heterosexual sex.	29%
I heard someone say “that’s so gay” to describe something as negative, stupid, or uncool.	22%
I heard the phrase “no homo.”	20%
People seemed willing to tolerate my LGBQ identity but were not willing to talk about it.	17%
Someone said they couldn't be homophobic because they have (a) lesbian, gay, bisexual or queer friend(s).	12%
People assume I have a lot of sex because of my sexual orientation.	12%

**BIPOC LGBQ students experienced LGBQ microaggressions more frequently than white LGBQ students.**

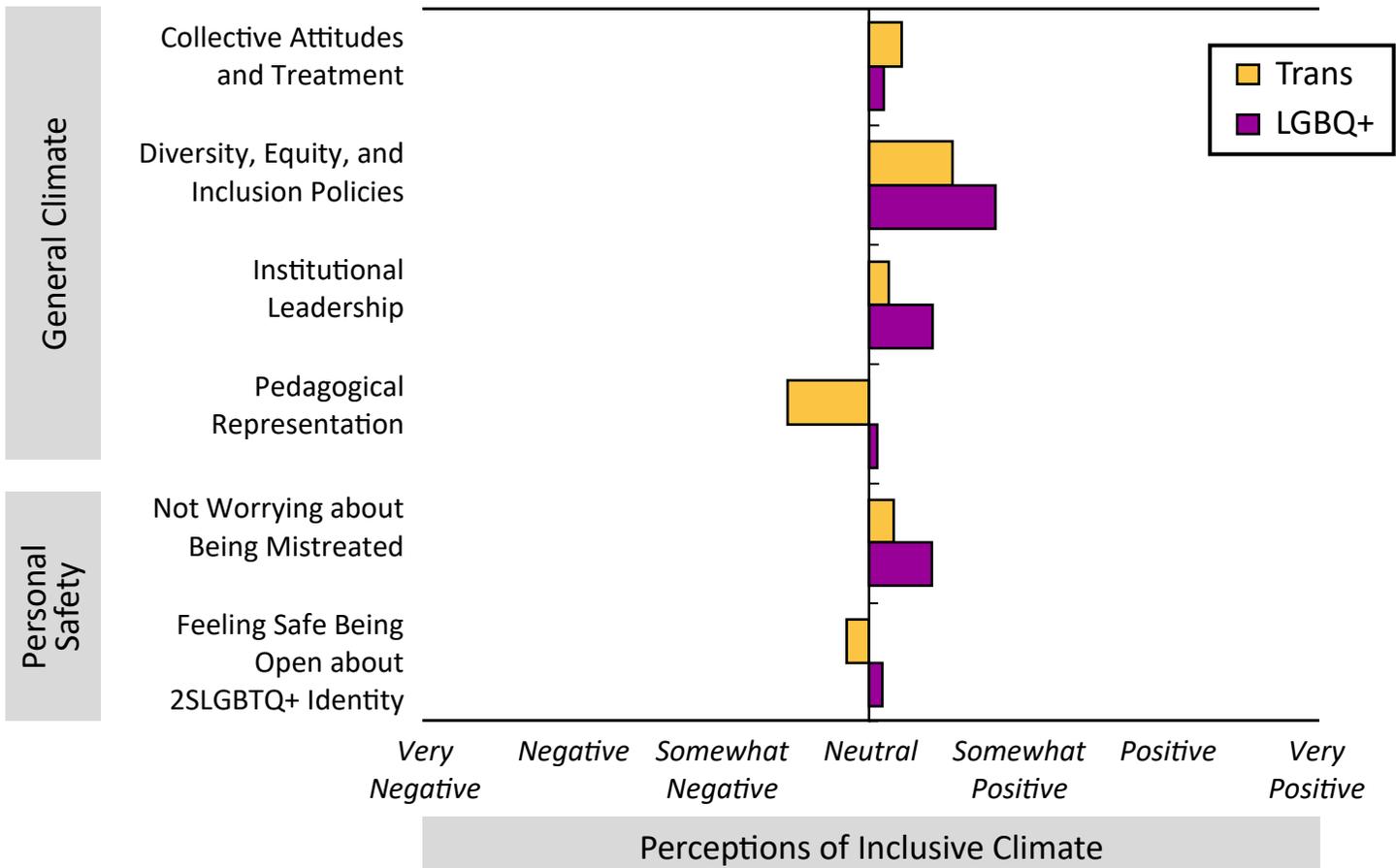
**LGBQ disabled students experienced LGBQ microaggressions more frequently than LGBQ students who did not identify as disabled.**

# Perceptions of Inclusion on Campus for 2SLGBTQ+ Students

Survey participants were asked about their perceptions of the campus climate for 2SLGBTQ+ students across various aspects, such as how the campus community views and treats trans or LGBQ students. They were also asked about their perceptions concerning their personal safety. Trans

students answered questions about the trans climate and LGBQ students answered questions about the LGBQ climate (see the following page for more information about the scale). Trans students who identified as LGBQ were invited to answer both sets of questions.

## Inclusive Campus Climate for 2SLGBTQ+ Students



For most aspects of the perceived climate, students’ reported perceptions on the positive side of the scale, however these perceptions remained very close to “neutral.”

Students’ perceptions of the inclusivity of each aspect of campus climate were statistically significantly poorer for trans students than LGBQ students, except for collective attitudes and treatment.

## The Six Aspects of the Inclusive Campus Climate Scale for 2SLGBTQ+ Students

### Perceptions of the general climate

- **Collective attitudes and treatment** – perceptions of how students, instructors, staff, and administrators on their campus view and treat trans/LGBQ students in general, such as trans/LGBQ students being accepted on campus and educators creating a supportive learning environment for these students.
- **Diversity, equity, and inclusion (EDI) policies** – perceptions about EDI-related policies and practices concerning 2SLGBTQ+ issues at their university. For example, the university prohibiting trans/LGBQ discrimination through anti-discrimination/harassment policies.
- **Institutional leadership** – perceptions about the university's commitment to fostering 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion through action, such as administrators supporting trans/LGBQ issues and concerns by sending institution-wide emails as well as displaying symbols of support.
- **Pedagogical representation** – perceptions of the inclusion of trans/LGBQ content in courses, such as portraying the respective community accurately and engaging in respectful classroom discussions about trans/LGBQ issues. Questions about pedagogy were only asked of students who expected there to be 2SLGBTQ+ content included in their courses.

### Perceptions of safety for the student

- **Not worrying about being mistreated** – feeling personally safe in terms of not worrying about being discriminated against (e.g., stared at/whispered about, verbally assaulted/threatened) on campus because of their trans/LGBQ identity.
- **Feeling safe being open about 2SLGBTQ identity** – feeling personally safe to be open and not hide their trans/LGBQ identity on campus.

# The Connection between Campus Climate and Students' Mental Health and Academic Development: Climate Matters

Students' experiences on campus and their perceptions of the climate matter for their mental health as well as academic development. Existing research indicates that being discriminated against and feeling unwelcomed, excluded, and not supported as a 2SLGBTQ+ student can put students at risk for poor mental health and interfere with their academics. Below are examples of these connections found among our survey respondents.

## Experiences of Discrimination

Students who faced greater discrimination on campus (i.e., victimization, trans microaggressions, LGBTQ microaggressions) reported

- Greater psychological distress and lower positive mental health
- Lower feelings of connectedness to their university and lower satisfaction with their academic experience
- Greater disengagement with their studies, such as missing class, and greater academic stress, for instance receiving lower grades than one hoped for
- Greater likelihood to seriously consider leaving their university

**Victimization:** Compared to trans and LGBTQ students who did not experience any victimization incidents:

Trans students who experienced 1 type of victimization were **1.8X** more likely to seriously consider leaving their university

Trans students who experienced 2 types of victimization were **3.1X** more likely to seriously consider leaving their university

Cisgender LGBTQ who experience 1 type of victimization were **1.6 X** more likely to seriously consider leaving their university

Cisgender LGBTQ who experience 2 types of victimization were **2.5X** more likely to seriously consider leaving their university

**Microaggressions:** Compared to peers who *rarely* encountered trans/LGBTQ microaggressions:

Trans students who *frequently* experienced trans microaggressions were **3.3X** more likely to seriously consider leaving their university

Cisgender LGBTQ students who *frequently* experienced LGBTQ microaggressions were **2.7X** more likely to seriously consider leaving their university

Trans LGBTQ students who frequently experienced LGBTQ microaggressions were **3.0X** more likely to seriously consider leaving their university

# Perceptions of Inclusion

Students who perceived the campus climate to be less inclusive for 2SLGBTQ+ students generally reported poor mental health and academic outcomes. Below are selected examples related to trans climate and LGBQ climate.

## Perceptions of the General Campus Climate

For both trans and LGBQ climate, students who had lower perceptions of university diversity, equity, and inclusion policies in terms of trans/LGBQ inclusion reported

- Greater psychological distress and lower positive mental health
- Lower feelings of connectedness to their university and lower satisfaction with their academic experience
- Greater likelihood to seriously consider leaving their university

For both trans and LGBQ climate, students who had lower perceptions of the inclusion of trans/LGBTQ content in courses reported

- Greater psychological distress and lower positive mental health
- Lower feelings of connectedness to their university and lower satisfaction with their academic experience
- Greater disengagement with their studies and greater academic stress

## Perceptions of Safety for the Student

For both trans and LGBQ students, students who felt less safe on campus in terms of worrying about being mistreated because of their trans and/or LGBQ identities reported:

- Greater psychological distress and lower positive mental health
- Lower feelings of connectedness to their university and lower satisfaction with their academic experience
- Greater likelihood to seriously consider leaving their university

# Recommendations for Promoting 2SLGBTQ+ Inclusive Campuses

To promote 2SLGBTQ+ students' belonging, wellbeing, and academic development, universities need to continue to work to eliminate 2SLGBTQ+ discrimination, including microaggressions and foster broader acceptance and inclusion of diverse 2SLGBTQ students, while ensuring responsive support services are available to students who experience discrimination. We recommend engaging 2SLGBTQ+ students and community groups when reviewing current initiatives and establishing new ones.

- Create campus climate programs to raise awareness about 2SLGBTQ+ microaggressions and their negative effects. Include content on microaggressions in bystander training programs and develop intervention programs to enable participants to safely respond to microaggressions.
- Establish safe space programs to create a network of 2SLGBTQ+ allies committed to advancing 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion.
- Review gender violence and campus climate policies and initiatives to ensure the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ students are addressed. It is particularly important these initiatives are responsive to the needs of trans students.
- Review academic and institutional forms that ask about sex/gender to ensure they are trans-inclusive.
- Review health information provided by health services to ensure it is inclusive of the experiences and identities of 2SLGBTQ+ students.
- Review equity, diversity, and inclusion-related policies and strategies, including communication strategies, and identify ways to enhance commitments to fostering 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, especially trans inclusion.
- Develop training programs through teaching and learning centres to prepare teaching assistants, instructors, and faculty to foster 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion in the classroom, ranging from course materials to how to respond to microaggressions when they occur.
- Ensure mental health services, academic counselling and other services, are responsive to the needs and identities of 2SLGBTQ+ students.

In responding to the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ students, it is crucial to offer holistic support that address students' intersecting identities beyond gender and sexuality. For information about the experiences of BIPOC and disabled 2SLGBTQ+ and recommendations for offering holistic supports, see "The Experiences of BIPOC 2SLGBTQ+ Students" and "The Role of Disability in 2SLGBTQ+ Students' Campus Experiences."



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