

*'The Library is open': creating safe working environments for LGBTQ+ library employees and marketing supportive LGBTQ+ services*

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## **Innovating for inclusion: 2SLGBTQ+ outreach and programming at the University of Toronto Libraries**

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### **Abstract:**

*This paper will present three library-based programs reflective of staff-led, student-led, and collaboratively led outreach to 2SLGBTQ+ students at the University of Toronto. First, authors will describe the climate for 2SLGBTQ+ students at the University of Toronto and introduce a sample of higher education scholarship identifying a set of needs these students report at American and Canadian university and college campuses. Next, the three outreach programs will be treated as case studies with program goals, design, implementation, outcomes, and recommendations described. Finally, each program will be critiqued considering the needs higher education scholarship has identified. The programs to be discussed include a 2SLGBTQ+ film series, an original 2SLGBTQ+ themed escape game, and a weekly student-led co-working study session for 2SLGBTQ+ students.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the acronym 2SLGBTQ+ as an umbrella term referring to people who identify as Two-Spirit (an Indigenous identity expressing people with both masculine and feminine spirits), lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer. The + symbol is intended to represent sexual and gender identities that are not represented in the acronym. In this paper, readers will also find versions of this acronym as used by cited scholars and by the authors to intentionally limit which student identities are included in any given paper or context. In some cases, reasons for the excluded identities in the acronym remain unclear.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ; inclusion; innovation; equal rights

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## UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO IN A 2SLGBTQ+ RIGHTS CONTEXT

The University of Toronto (U of T) is a public, research-intensive university with three campuses in and around Toronto. In the 2021-2022 academic year, the university had an enrollment of 97,066 students (75,582 undergraduate, 21,484 graduate). Of those, 21,923 were international students from 170 countries and regions, with China (15,671) and India (2,082) contributing the greatest numbers. The U of T does not have any publicly available data on the number of 2SLGBTQ+ students or students with diverse and intersecting identities that may be present in campus 2SLGBTQ+ communities.

U of T Libraries is the third largest academic library system in North America with 40 locations across three campuses and a print collection of more than 12 million items (University of Toronto, n.d.). Both authors work at Robarts Library, the main humanities and social sciences library, where daily in-person visitors can reach 18,000 people a day. The U of T Libraries employs a workforce of about 500 people, but one whose racial and ethnic diversity is far below the national average (Leong, 2013; TIDE, 2021). This underrepresentation is mirrored in the workforce of most Canadian academic library systems (Li, 2021).

Although discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression persist in Canada (especially for trans and nonbinary people, Black and Indigenous people, and other people of colour), within a global context Canada occupies a privileged position regarding 2SLGBTQ+ rights (Belmonte, 2019). And U of T has long been a center of activism and progress for lesbian and gay rights including the establishment in 1969 of the first gay rights organization in Canada (University of Toronto Homophile Association, 2014). In 1998, an undergraduate program in sexual diversity studies was established that included a collections librarian on the steering committee. A year later, the university-wide Sexual and Gender Diversity Office (SGDO) opened to advocate for and support LGBT+ students.

Today, U of T's campus climate for 2SLGBTQ+ students remains relatively positive when compared with reports from global regions where LGBTQ+ rights are less well established (Nduna et al., 2017; Evangelista et al., 2022). SGDO continues to serve student communities through various outreach activities including the annual week-long Queer Orientation program that welcomes new and returning 2SLGBTQ+ students.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Of 44 publications from the past 10 years that fit our search criteria of sexual or gender identities and higher education institutions, each identified using the education database ERIC, 25 studies were variously focused on the needs of student populations described as LGB, LGB+, LGBQ, LGBT, LGBTQ, LGBTQ+, LGBTIQ+, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or queer. Eight studies focused specifically on transgender or gender nonconforming student experience. And 11 focused on understanding the needs and challenges of students whose identities include 2SLGBTQ+ experience and one more additional marginalized identity including Black queer and trans students and queer and trans students of colour (Lewis & Ericksen, 2016; Garvey, et al., 2018; Mobley & Hall, 2020; Duran, et al., 2022), queer-identifying undocumented immigrants in the United States (Cisneros, 2019), Latino and Latinx men (Duran, et al., 2020;

Lu, et al., 2021), LGBTQ+ and queer disabled students (Miller, et al., 2021; Abrams & Abes, 2021), and autistic LGBTQ students (Nachman et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020).

The following list of needs is drawn from the findings and recommendation sections of each paper. This list is divided into two sections. The first speaks to the broader 2SLGBTQ+ student population. The second section speaks to transgender and gender nonconforming student experience. The needs of 2SLGBTQ+ students with intersectional identities are addressed in the paragraph following these lists.

### **2SLGBTQ+ student needs in higher education**

1. Reduction in bullying, harassment, and violence experienced by 2SLGBTQ+ students.
2. Increased access to 2SLGBTQ+ supportive mental health and wellness services.
3. Increased diversity of faculty, staff, and students in campus community.
4. Improved leadership from faculty and administrative staff in creation of supportive campus and classroom environment.
5. Campus-wide strategic plan for addressing 2SLGBTQ+ student experience.
6. Improved faculty and administrative knowledge of lived experience of sexual and gender minoritized students.
7. Strengthened community and a reduction of conflict between students with marginalized sexual and gender identities.
8. Improved administrative understanding of heterogeneous experience and needs within 2SLGBTQ+ student population.
9. Creation of new services or improved quality of services designed to support sexual and gender minoritized student success.
10. Enhanced “queer visibility” on university campuses to positively impact sexual and gender minoritized student experience.
11. Address 2SLGBTQ+ student experiences of “queer-free” versus “queer-friendly” spaces on campus.
12. Enhanced visibility of sexual and gender minoritized student identities in curriculum, in instructional approach, in course calendars, and in guest speakers.

### **Transgender and gender nonconforming student needs in higher education**

1. Improved faculty, staff, student understanding that transgender or gender nonconforming student experiences are unique and should not be conflated with the experiences of sexual minority students.
2. Enhanced visibility of trans and gender nonconforming identities in curriculum.
3. End of university practices and policies that delegitimize the experience of transgender or gender nonconforming students.
4. Fostering of gender-inclusive student activities and student communities.
5. Safe campus where ridicule or violence are rejected.
6. Reduction in misgendering by peers and faculty.

Of the 11 studies focusing on the needs and challenges of students whose identities include 2SLGBTQ+ experience and one additional marginalized identity, one paper considering the experience African American LGBTQ students attending an historically Black college or university (Lewis & Ericksen, 2016) repeated the call for greater faculty and administrative involvement in improving the campus climate, especially considering high levels of bullying reported by study participants. Reports focused on Black queer and trans students and queer and trans students of colour (Mobley & Hall, 2020; Garvey, et al., 2018;

Duran, et al., 2022) repeat the above calls for more EDI (Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion) training for faculty and administrative staff while also reporting the need for more campus spaces for queer and trans students. One report focusing on queer-identifying undocumented immigrants on US college campuses (Cisneros, 2019), communicates how the difficulty of disclosing immigration status creates service access barriers. Another report investigating the experiences of gay male Latinx students (Lu, et al., 2021) mirrored the needs described above for campus spaces that are perceived as unsafe to be addressed. And finally, studies of LGBTQ+ and queer disabled students (Miller, et al., 2021; Abrams & Abes, 2021) call for an end to systems and spaces that privilege only able-bodied LGBTQ+ students, while studies of autistic LGBTQ students (Nachman et al., 2020; Miller et al., 2020) reveal the challenges these students face in finding safety in both queer and autistic student spaces.

## **CASE STUDY 1: LGBTQ FILM SERIES**

### **Introduction**

Between 2014 and 2018, the U of T Libraries partnered with the Sexual and Gender Diversity Office (SGDO) and a rotating group of student organizations, campus offices, and academic departments to deliver an LGBT film series to the University community. The monthly film series was launched during Queer Orientation 2014.

### **Program design**

Each month, a library staff member coordinated the event which was co-hosted by a student organization, department, or campus. Initially, promotion was managed by SGDO who shared event information via their webpage, listserv, and Facebook space. Later, organizers worked with library communications staff to also promote via the library's own communications channels.

Collaboration with student organizations helped to ensure that programming themes and film selection were relevant and allowed promotion to be more targeted. It also delivered a built-in base audience for each event. One of the libraries' media archivists, a 2SLGBTQ+ film expert, supported film selection and acquisition if needed. Student attendees were also invited to submit film suggestions. Programming themes were intended to ensure broad representation of campus 2SLGBTQ+ communities. Initial themes included Indigenous Two-Spirit identity, queer women of colour, and transgender experience.

The program was a free event held on Thursday evenings in a 50-seat screening room at Robarts Library. This weeknight was chosen so as not to compete with popular Friday night events elsewhere in the city. Friday is also a day when students often leave campus for the weekend.

While principally a community-building event, the film night also showcased the strengths of the libraries' film collections and highlighted library screening room facilities.

### **Program implementation**

Each screening began with a land acknowledgement, a practice of recognizing the Indigenous peoples whose land is occupied by the University of Toronto. Next, information about washroom location and event accessibility was shared. This was followed by library staff welcoming attendees, introducing themselves, and sharing information about library services. Sexual diversity studies collections were also promoted at each event.

Each film was introduced, and a content warning was issued if it was known that a scene might cause trauma for viewers. The films screened were both feature-length and shorts.

Following each film, a discussion was led by an invited speaker or panel. In some cases, event organizers facilitated a discussion.

## **Outcomes and impact**

The film series was generally successful. It provided a new and engaged model of outreach to 2SLGBTQ+ students at the university. Attendance ranged each month with a low of five attendees to a screening for 300 guests which required the booking of a larger venue. Faculty and university staff sometimes attended as guests and other times participated as guest speakers. Guest speakers from non-university organizations were also invited to participate and these new connections brought visibility to queer communities not always visible on campus. For instance, a screening of the film *Paris is Burning* brought together members of Toronto's Black and Latinx LGBTQ+ ballroom scene to discuss the documentary as it approached its 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary.

Through successful marketing of this event, the library was able to communicate a message that the library could be a 2SLGBTQ+ positive space. That message was delivered both to event participants, but also to the broader university community whether or not they attended.

## **Lessons learned and recommendations**

Two principal challenges led to the conclusion of this program at the end of its fourth year. The first challenge relates to staff resources. This program was the result of a grassroots effort by a team of LGBTQ+ staff, but ultimately most work fell to a single pair of committed employees who took this work on in addition to their existing workload, often working late to ensure the success of the program. In the fourth year, a parallel LGBTQ+ film series offered by another campus organization drew attendance away from the library series and library staff made the choice to conclude the series rather than investing even more of their personal time to increase attendance levels once again.

The other challenge, and a perennial one when collaborating with university students, are student group leadership changes. While one student group leader may be keen to collaborate and promote events through their networks, their successor may have other priorities. The work of building and maintaining student partnerships made long-term event planning difficult.

## **CASE STUDY 2: PANIC: AN LGBTQ2S+ ESCAPE ROOM EXPERIENCE AT ROBERTS LIBRARY**

### **Introduction**

In 2018, librarians and archivists at Roberts Library collaborated in the design of "Panic: An LGBTQ2S+ Escape Room Experience." This escape room-style game expanded the conventional play area from a single sealed space to all public areas of a 96,200 m<sup>2</sup> library. The intention of this game was three-fold. First, library staff sought to continue established work that presents the library as a place where gender and sexual minority students feel welcome. Second, library staff sought to create an experience that would both introduce library spaces and services and also ease any library anxiety that new users might experience. Third, librarians and archivists used this game to surface their own 2SLGBTQ+ identities in an effort

to build community with students who may eventually need to access archivist and/or librarian support for their work.

## **Program design**

Planning began with a review of past non-LGBTQ2S+ themed escape game programming at the University of Toronto Libraries. In 2017, the Engineering and Computer Science Library collaborated with engineering faculty in the development of an original STEM-themed library orientation escape game. Over a 19-day period, 74 student teams registered and took part in play-based activities that required students to ask for help at the reference desk, use the library catalogue, find a book by call number, and use a database to locate a technical standard (Walsh & Spence, 2018). Robarts Library staff began planning a version of this game for Queer Orientation that would introduce fundamental library research skills and also locate these activities in an original LGBTQ2S+-themed story. This helped to ensure that game play brought students into contact with library collections (print books, film and video, archival fonds) that reflect LGBTQ2S+ experience and surface key contributions in the development of queer theory.

## **Program implementation**

QO week events are scheduled to overlap and take place across campuses. Library staff need to compete with other University organizations for program participants. In promotional material shared via social media, the university library's website, and official QO week marketing materials distributed by SGDO, the event was described in the following way:

Panic rises as time runs out! Join U of T Libraries for this fun and challenging escape room game. Dive into the dark corners and bright lights of our LGBTQ2S+ collection while you explore Robarts Library, solve challenging puzzles, win prizes, enjoy pizza, and work to recover the "lost" scholarship of some of our most important queer and trans theorists.

The 2-hour event took place on the first Monday of QO week, starting at 4:30pm. Fifteen students were organized into five teams. Each team was given an initial clue and allowed to open that clue at staggered start times. One hour was given for teams to complete the game. In the remaining time, teams gathered back at the starting place, enjoyed free pizza, and talked with each other about the challenges of the game.

## **Outcomes and impact**

Event assessment was ad hoc and based on casual conversation with players. Some were disappointed in not successfully completing the game. Others were excited about the challenging nature of the game. Both provided advice on ways of strengthening game design in future offerings.

Staff organizers were happy with the level of participation, recognizing that while more players could have been accommodated, the team sizes (3-4 people per team) were effective. Staff organizers were also happy to see discussions take place regarding the queer and trans theorists whose work and lives were highlighted in the game. It's noteworthy that Audre Lorde, the only racialized theorist included in the game, generated joyful responses from players when Lorde's face and name made its first appearance.

With generally positive feedback from players, this game was offered a second time later in the academic year and a new escape game, "Resist: An LGBTQ2S+ Escape Room Experience," took place during QO in September 2019.

## **Lessons learned and recommendations**

Original game development is time-consuming. One hour of game play can take dozens of hours of planning. If the game is played multiple times over many weeks, this investment might be reasonable. But for a single offering, the investment is difficult to justify. So, when developing a new game for 2019, library staff assigned game planning to an LGBTQ2S+-identifying student staff person which allowed librarians and archivist planners to maintain focus on their principal duties. While this reduced the time investment for librarians and archivists, it also had the effect of distancing full-time library staff from the game and, ultimately, from any community building opportunities with game players.

## **CASE STUDY 3: QUEER STUDY BUDDIES**

### **Introduction**

In the 2022-2023 academic year, library staff partnered with the university's Academic Success Centre to facilitate a 2SLGBTQ+ student-led study session. Called Queer Study Buddies or QSB, this program intended to meet many of goals of previous 2SLGBTQ+ outreach programs, but through a peer-led student-centered model. This was the first outreach program offered at Robarts Library where 2SLGBTQ+ students were the principal decision-makers.

### **Program design**

The QSB program was developed as a 2SLGBTQ+-only space where students could meet and study, share their academic challenges and successes, and build community. As with our previous case studies, this program was launched during September's Queer Orientation week with an initial two-hour event. Staff from the Academic Success Centre and the Libraries delivered an introductory presentation highlighting each organization's services and providing an overview of the Queer Study Buddies program including how to sign up and where to meet. The student-led model was also introduced, clarifying for students that this might be the only time library staff would be present.

Attendees were then asked to share their past study experiences and any strategies they liked to use. This set the stage for the self-reflective active-learning qualities we hoped would be present in later student-run sessions.

The program launch was promoted by SGDO as part of their Queer Orientation marketing, library staff created in-library promotional material and shared event details at the QO Information Fair, and the Academic Success Centre included the weekly program in their event calendar. Program organizers were keen to get the word out, but also aware of the need some students had to maintain privacy around their gender and/or sexual identities. So, promotion was limited and targeted.

### **Program implementation**

Initially planned to require participants to register, students appeared hesitant to sign up and the continuation of the event was in question. To address this, the student employee who had been hired to host sessions proposed a switch to a regularly scheduled drop-in session that was open both to 2SLGBTQ+ students and allies, and for which no registration required. This change in event structure was transformative.

Another student-driven change in programming saw an event structure initially focused on study skills and outcomes come to include more community-building activities like a regular queer history study break. Later, sessions were extended to three hours to build in additional social time.

### **Outcome/impact**

QSB sessions were well attended (doubling the average attendance of non-2SLGBTQ+ Academic Success Centre study programs) and feedback indicates sessions consistently provided positive student experiences in a space that felt welcoming and safe. New friendships were formed, and these social connections grew beyond the QSB space to include other library spaces and a Discord channel where participants could continue to meet.

### **Lessons learned and recommendations**

Library staff proposed the initial idea for QSB and provided space where sessions took place, but the program's success was primarily due to student-driven planning and a willingness on the part of participants to support each other throughout the school year.

To build on the program's first-year, organizers will launch a mailing list that students can subscribe to for regular program updates. Library staff have also committed to providing greater support to the program facilitator by preparing information that can be used for study-break activities or research skill development.

As an organization committed to the careful stewardship of the resources we have, this program required an investment of social capital but otherwise had limited ongoing costs. For this reason, the library will seek other partnerships to facilitate more student-led programming.

### **REFLECTION AND CONCLUSION**

Staff at the University of Toronto Libraries have engaged in outreach to the 2SLGBTQ+ student community for far longer than the three case studies directly suggest, with other programs sometimes operating simultaneously with the programs described. But the three programs described above have provided the authors with useful contexts for reflecting on how our organization's outreach work has addressed the kinds of needs described in the literature review above. In the following section we will assess the limitations of our work and the potential we see for a future where we do better to respond to the needs of the university's 2SLGBTQ+ student population.

All three programs addressed barriers between a broadly understood 2SLGBTQ+ students and library space and service in ways that are reflected in points 9 to 11 of the 2SLGBTQ+ student needs in higher education list found in the literature review above. Each program demonstrated that the library was interested in building new or improving existing services for 2SLGBTQ+ students. The marketing of each program contributed to work taking place across the three campuses to raise queer visibility and positively impact sexual and gender minoritized student experience. And each program sought to transform general purpose library space into space that was intentionally queer-friendly. While not addressing the needs described in point 12 above, a point which speaks to enhanced visibility for sexual and gender minoritized student identities in classrooms, the programs did demonstrate how library collections and resources can contribute to that desired surfacing of queer identities in the classroom. With its themed monthly program, the LGBTQ Film Series described in case study 1 best addressed needs indicated in points 13-18 which share the goal of improving the experience of transgender and gender nonconforming students at the university. However, the



program could have more directly addressed these goals had it been fully focused on trans students rather than attempting to equally serve all LGBTQ students. This same critique can be applied to the ability the film program had to surface the experience and needs of racialized 2SLGBTQ+ people and other people facing discrimination based on elements of their identities. Some of those needs are described in the paragraph following point 18. And yet, the film series offered greater potential than the escape game to make visible a wide range of 2SLGBTQ+ intersectional identities as the game was less able to be grown and learn and change. Interestingly, while program design of the Queer Study Buddies included few, if any, specific plans that would directly address the needs of racialized 2SLGBTQ+ people and other people facing discrimination based on elements of their identities, it offered perhaps the most hopeful context for library programming that can be absolutely flexible and responsive to the needs of students who decide to attend any given Friday. For that reason, it remains a model of 2SLGBTQ+ student outreach we intend to replicate in future library programming.

Reflecting on these three programs has also generated a few questions that should be answered to ensure that future library programming is responsive to 2SLGBTQ+ student needs. What impact do these programs actually have on the 2SLGBTQ+ climate at the University of Toronto? Is the library suited to do this work or should it stay focused on more traditional activities? If LGBTQ+ staff stepped back from this work to focus on their principal responsibilities, would programming cease to happen? Even if these questions are answered, there remains another question that may take years to resolve.

How can academic libraries in Canada create spaces that are safe for 2SLGBTQ+ students with intersectional identities when Canadian librarians (including queer and trans librarians) are overwhelmingly white? A more diverse library workforce could result in programming more responsive to racialized 2SLGBTQ+ students and other 2SLGBTQ+ students facing multiple forms of oppression. Without this diverse 2SLGBTQ+ workforce, we risk remaining spaces seen as queer-free rather than queer-friendly, a framing reported by Forbes (2020).

The lessons each case study provides confidently suggest academic libraries should step back from centering themselves in programming and instead allow 2SLGBTQ+ students to lead. Student leaders also need to be paid for their work. There is a danger in this approach that library organizations will neglect implementing a system-wide strategic plan to address the kinds of needs outlined above, comfortably shifting the workload from 2SLGBTQ+ staff to 2SLGBTQ+ students. To allay this worry, library administration and allied colleagues need to be enlisted to advocate for an integrated, system-wide investment in outreach to these underserved communities.

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