

COMING-OUT AT CALTECH

Coming Out at Caltech

Most people understand coming out as one person telling someone else they are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. But the process of coming out is more than just telling other people. Coming out is a deeply personal process of self-awareness and the acceptance of one's sexual identity in addition to telling other people. Coming out is also part of a larger process that everyone goes through, gay or straight, the process of coming to terms with who they are, what they believe, their values, likes and dislikes, and their sexuality. It's a process of establishing one's own personal identity, influenced by, but separate from cultural expectations, or parents and friends ideas or wishes for the person. To be clear, sexuality is about more than sex or sexual orientation, sexuality is all that is attached to being a sexual person; thoughts, feelings, behaviors, orientation and beliefs connected with sexuality.

At Caltech some students are just beginning to explore their sexuality for the first time. That exploration can take various forms. For some it is an awakening sense of romantic or sexual interest in others, for some it involves the actual expression of that interest including having sex. Because sexuality is more than just whether a person is sexually active or not, the challenge of integrating sexuality into a personal identity is a challenge everyone faces.

For gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students, this process of defining oneself as a sexual being has the added facet of having to consider sexual orientation. Few people who are heterosexual really think about when they knew they were straight. They may think about their first crush or sexual interest in someone of the opposite sex but usually not about their heterosexuality per se, a heterosexual orientation is assumed for most people. The result of this presumption of heterosexuality is that someone who is GLB has to come to an awareness of his or her sexual orientation. Some GLB people start becoming aware of their sexual orientation as a vague, sometimes poignant sense of feeling different that only later gets connected with sexual orientation. Other people begin the process of coming out when they become aware of an interest in or deep connection to someone of the same sex.

Along with the challenge of awareness of one's sexuality, comes the challenge of self acceptance and acceptance by others. Culture, religion, and the beliefs held by parents can be strong influences on how a person views their sexuality whether heterosexual or homosexual. If someone grows up with strong prohibitions against homosexuality the GLB person may have to go through a process of denial in which they have difficulty believing that they could possibly be interested in someone of the same sex. They may grapple with this process of defining and accepting themselves for quite awhile. Yet for other GLB students they have had enough affirmation of themselves as individuals by parents and family to make the process of coming out and self-acceptance easier.

Another part of the coming out process is sharing a person's sexual orientation with those they care about. This part of the coming out process is also influenced by the culture, environment, and the people around the person who is coming out. Many GLB students at Caltech view the environment here as one that is safe for them. GLB students aren't

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generally harassed or assaulted here as they can be at other schools. The challenge really comes from how accepting the individual's friends are and the unique Caltech culture that is so shaped by the skewed ratio of men and women. With a ratio of men to women so unbalanced quite a lot of attention goes to sexuality, directly and indirectly. Lesbian students not only have a smaller number of other Lesbian women to connect with but because of the ratio they may also have a number of men who may be expressing unwanted attention. The numbers work for gay men in one way but the environment is still one where so many men are preoccupied with being able to have a girlfriend, the presumption of heterosexuality can be strong and gay men can feel on the outside of many conversations and the mainstream.

And as much as Caltech students view their world as Caltech specific GLB students know they are a part of a larger world where the views about them can range from acceptance/affirmation to simple prejudice or hate and violence. We all look to be a part of a world that is accepting and validating for us as individuals, for who we are, what we believe and how we behave and that is certainly true for GLB students.

Where can a student turn to receive support for this internal struggle? Hopefully to friends and families who understand their challenge. There are also other individuals and resources available on campus so that people do not have to go through this process alone. One such resource is the Caltech Counseling Center where staff is not only trained to deal with issues of sexual identity and the coming out process but are gay affirming as well. Students can talk with individual counselors and/or can participate in a group that provides a supportive environment where students can share their experiences, get support and advice from other students and feel validated and affirmed. The LGBT group meets on the 1st and 3rd Tuesday of every month in the Health Center conference room and is open to GLB and straight students who want to support them. For more information about the group or to talk with someone at the Counseling Center call x 8331 or check out the Counseling Centers web site at.....

The Center for Student Services has a rapidly growing GLBT library on the second level in the lobby between the International Student, Minority Student and Women's Centers. Students can get information for themselves or learn more about how to help a friend or family member with coming out. Other sources of support on campus include the Health Education program (x 2961), or the staff of the Women's Center (x 3221). There are actually lots of individuals, gay and straight that serve as support to GLB students, here at Caltech, including faculty. You may want to check out the Pride website for a list of out faculty, staff and students who are openly gay and For a supportive environment away from the Caltech community there is the LA Gay & Lesbian Center (LAGLC) in Hollywood. For information on any of the center's services go to www.laglc.org.

Finally the hope is that every person will integrate his or her sexuality into a complete, cohesive, whole identity. It makes sense that people living truly authentic lives; accepting themselves, for all of who they are including their sexual identity, have the potential to lead happier, more productive lives. Whether gay or straight, you can help each other by accepting and affirming the differences among us – the differences that make us all unique individuals.

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