“What Should I Do If ...?”
Answers to Commonly Asked Ally Questions

How can I tell if someone I know is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender?
Ultimately, the only way to tell if a person is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender is if that person tells you so. There are many stereotypes of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. Many people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender don’t fit those stereotypes, and there are people who fit the stereotypes who aren’t lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. Assumptions on your part can be misguided. The important thing to remember is that there is a great possibility that someone you interact with on campus is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, and to try to be sensitive to that no matter who the person is.

What should I do if I think someone is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, but they haven’t told me?
Again, remember that assumptions on your part may be inaccurate. The best approach is to create an atmosphere where that individual can feel comfortable coming to you. You can do this by making sure you are open and approachable, by giving them indications that you are comfortable with this topic and that you are supportive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender concerns. If the person is already “out” to themselves, and they feel you are worthy of their trust, then they may tell you. If the person seems to be in conflict about something, it may or may not be their sexuality or gender identity. In this case, it is best to simply make sure they know you are there if they need to talk. Remember, they may not have told you because they don’t want you to know.

How do I make myself more approachable to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender?
Demonstrate that you are comfortable with topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity and that you are supportive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender concerns. Be sensitive to the assumptions you make about people — try not to assume that everyone you interact with is heterosexual, that they have opposite-sex partners, that you understand certain things about them based on their biological sex, etc. Try to use inclusive language; for example, avoid use of pronouns that assume the sex of someone’s partners or friends, or use inclusive examples that specifically use lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender topics. Be a role model by letting others know that you don’t appreciate homophobic jokes or remarks; when you hear these kinds of jokes or remarks, confront them. Don’t tease others for nontraditional gender behaviors, and discourage others from this kind of teasing also. Make yourself knowledgeable about lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender concerns by reading books or attending a meeting or activity sponsored by a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender organization.

What kinds of things might a person who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender go through when “coming out?”
Because of the difficulty of growing up in a largely homophobic society with restrictive gender norms, people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender may experience guilt, isolation, depression, suicidal feelings, and low self-esteem. As people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender become more in touch with their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, they may experience any number of these thoughts and feelings to any degree. On the positive side, coming out can be an extremely liberating experience as people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender learn who they are, gain respect for themselves, and find friends to relate to. Coming out to others can be an anxious process, as the individual worries about possibilities of rejection, ridicule, and loss of family, friends, and jobs. For students, college life is already stress filled, and adding the process of grappling with one’s sexual and/or gender identity to that mix can be overwhelming.

If someone wants advice on what to tell his/her roommate, friends, or family about being lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender how can I help?
Remember that it must be the individual’s decision when and to whom to come out. Don’t tell the person to do one thing or another; he/she could hold you responsible if it doesn’t go well. Do listen carefully, reflect back the concerns and feelings you hear expressed, and suggest available resources for support. Help the
person think through the possible outcomes of coming out. Support the person’s decision even if you
don’t agree with it, and ask about the outcome of any action taken.

**What do I do if someone who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender wants

to come out in my office, on my residence hall floor, or within the context of any

**other group I am a part of?**

Again, help the individual think through the possible outcomes. Discuss how others might react and how

he/she might meet those reactions. Mention the option of coming out to a few people at a time as

opposed to the entire group. If someone has decided to come out, let them know you will support them.

**How should I respond to friends or coworkers who feel negatively about a person

who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender in our office, on our residence

hall floor, or in any group I am a part of?**

When such problems arise, it is most useful to discuss this with the people involved. Help them to see

past generalities to the reality that they are talking about a person, not just an abstract identity or sexual

orientation. Make sure that you have accurate information so that you may appropriately discuss

stereotypes and misinformation that often underlie such negative reactions. Note the similarities between

people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender and non-LGBT people. Be clear with others

that while they all have a right to their own beliefs and opinions, you do not appreciate derogatory

comments or discrimination. Remember that others may take their cues from you — if you are

uncomfortable with, hostile to, or ignore the person who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender,
others may follow suit. Conversely, if you are friendly with the person who is lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and/or transgender, and treat them with respect, others may follow suit.

**How can I support people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender

without my own sexual orientation or identity becoming an issue?**

Be aware that if you speak out about issues related to sexual orientation and/or gender identity, some

people may take this as an indication of your own identity. Take time in advance to think through how

you feel about this. How do you feel about your own sexual and/or gender identity? Are you comfortable

with yourself? Regardless of your identity, a confidence in your own self-image will translate into a

comfort that leaves you less vulnerable.

**How should I respond to rumors that someone is lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or

transgender?**

Let others know that the sexual orientation and/or gender identity of any individual is irrelevant unless that

person wishes to share that information. If you can, address any myths or stereotypes that may be

fueling such speculation. If a particular person continues to spread rumors, talk to that person

individually.

**How can I get others to think more open-mindedly about people who are lesbian,

gay, bisexual, and/or transgender?**

In short, be a role model for others by being open and visible in your support. Share your beliefs with

others when appropriate. When lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender topics come up, talk about

them, don’t just avoid them. Show that you are comfortable talking about these issues, and comfortable

with people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. Remember that part of your goal as an

ally is to create bridges across difference, to increase understanding. While you may be motivated to

share your views with others, be careful of being self-righteous: others can’t learn from you if they are

turned off from listening to begin with. Of course, your views are more convincing if they are backed up

by sound knowledge. Take the time to educate yourself so that you know what you are talking about.

**How can I respond when someone tells a homophobic joke?**

Many people believe jokes are harmless, and get upset by what they perceive as “politically correct

attitudes” when others are offended by inappropriate humor. Labeling a belief or attitude as “politically

correct” is an indirect way of supporting the status quo and resisting change. Most people who tell jokes

about any minority group have never thought about how those jokes perpetuate stereotypes, or how they

teach and reinforce prejudice. Someone who tells jokes about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual,

and/or transgender probably assumes everyone present is heterosexual and traditionally gendered, or at

least that everyone shares their negative attitudes toward homosexuality and/or gender variance.

However, most people do not tell jokes to purposefully hurt or embarrass others, and will stop if they
realize this is the effect. Responding assertively in these situations is difficult, but not responding at all sends a silent message of agreement. No response is the equivalent of condoning the telling of such jokes. It is important to remember that young people, particularly those questioning their own sexual and/or gender identity, will watch to see who laughs at such jokes, and will internalize some of the messages. In some instances, the inappropriateness of the joke could be mentioned at the time. In other situations, the person could be taken aside afterwards. Try to communicate your concerns about the joke with respect.

**How can I respond to homophobic attitudes?**

If you disagree with a negative statement someone makes about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender, the assertive thing to do is to say so. Again, silence communicates agreement. Remember what your goal is in responding: not to start an argument or foster hostility, but to attempt to increase understanding. Disagreement can be civil and respectful. Share your views without accusing or criticizing. You are simply presenting another way of thinking about the topic. You may need to be prepared for the kind of responses you might get to stating your beliefs. It can be difficult to speak out in support of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. You might be afraid that others will question your own sexual orientation and/or gender identity, your morals, or your values, or that you will be ostracized in some way. It is easy to forget there might be positive effects of your speaking out as well.

**How can I respond to people who object to homosexuality or gender variance for religious reasons?**

Usually, there is no way to change the minds of people who base their negative beliefs about homosexuality or gender variance on religious convictions. However, while respecting their right to believe as they wish, you can share some information with them. It can be useful to point out that identifying as Christian is not absolutely incompatible with having positive beliefs about homosexuality or gender variance. Not all individual Christians, nor even all Christian denominations, are uniform in their views about homosexuality and gender variance. There is a great deal of diversity among the Christian community with regard to beliefs about homosexuality and gender variance. In addition, there is much disagreement about the Biblical basis for condemning homosexuality. Many religious scholars argue that the meaning of the Biblical passages which are said to refer to homosexuality is actually unclear. It is also important to point out that while individuals are entitled to their personal religious beliefs, the beliefs of some should not be used to deny people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender equal treatment under the law.

Adapted from “Lesbian, Gays, and Bisexuals in the Residence Halls,” University of Wisconsin-Madison; “Moving Beyond Tolerance: A New Approach to Programming about Bi/Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Residence Halls,” University of Iowa; and Kishwaukee College Allies Program Manual.