

## Open Letter by Prof. Michael Falk (Johns Hopkins University)

Dear Colleagues:

I am writing this open letter in the wake of the recent mass shooting in Orlando. Clearly mass shootings are a deep, endemically American issue, but I feel compelled to address this attack because it directly targeted the LGBTQ community. This creates particular issues for LGBTQ people, particularly those in the 18-28 age range we mentor as undergraduate and graduate students, in assessing their safety in public spaces where they socialize, work and study.

- Please be aware that LGBTQ identified students likely make up 3-10% of the students you interact with, and that you may not be aware of which of your students identify as LGBTQ and which are in the process of questioning their sexual or gender identity.
- Please take into account that some of your students may be assessing the safety of their studying and work environments at our university both in terms of their physical security and in terms of their exposure to risk of other kinds of physical, verbal or emotional violence or shunning.

It may seem to those of you who are not LGBTQ or do not have LGBTQ children or family members with whom you are close, that this reaction is excessive. Certainly many kinds of students are on campus from targeted minority groups and all students need support. I fully agree. However, there are several issues unique to LGBTQ students that can make their situation precarious in ways that are different from other students.

- **Uncertain family support:** Many (but not all) students who come to our campus from vulnerable targeted groups have grown up in families that share their marginalized identity. As such, these students can often rely on falling back on their family support structure if they should suffer bias related violence. For LGBTQ students this may not be the case.
- **Fear of consequences:** Furthermore, many LGBTQ youth, particularly in the 18-28 age group we interact with, may not be “out” to their families or friends. Being the victim of bias related violence can also trigger difficult questions from parents, other family members and close friends that can result in the loss of the support structures, including those they have relied on for their entire lives.

- **Maintaining invisibility:** The potential for invisibility is another hallmark of LGBTQ identity which often leads students to assess the consequences of being open with friends, colleagues, mentors, acquaintances and friends. Students fear being subjected to pre-judgement, bias, shaming and various forms of violence. However, this invisibility often comes at the price of isolating students from sources of support.
- **Difficulty identifying allies:** In assessing their environment to determine whether they can safely be open, LGBTQ students often report difficulty determining whether their mentors, colleagues, co-workers and peers can be trusted or not. This can lead students to assess their environment as lacking in support although nearby allies exist. Safe Zone programs provide a mechanism for allies to make themselves visible.
- **Building self-esteem:** LGBTQ students on our campus often arrive from families or cultures who have taught them to ascribe moral opprobrium to sexual or gender nonconformity. LGBT young people experience depression and exhibit suicidal behavior at higher rates than the general population. Maintaining a safe environment in which these students can study and avoiding isolating them is particularly important for helping LGBT students develop healthy self-esteem.

Thank you for reading this letter. I hope it is helpful as you think about your personal reaction to the distressing and sobering events in Orlando.

Sincerely,  
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