Lab & life

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Integrating one's LGBTQ+ identity into one's science

By Vivien Marx

Sometimes their queer identity is one that people set apart from their science identity. Others find unique ways to integrate multiple facets of their identity.

"I loved research," says Maya Kevorkova, but tendonitis ended her pipetting days and her planned career at the bench. When the pandemic meant lab closures for the moment, she sought training in project management, which she enjoys. She's now research projects coordinator at Pancreas Centre BC, which is affiliated with the BC Cancer Research Centre and the University of British Columbia. She previously studied endometrial cancer and now focuses on pancreatic cancer.

Kevorkova self-identifies as lesbian/queer and likes the 2SLGBTQIA+ acronym, which includes Two-Spirit Indigenous communities, as well as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual and others. Whenever she saw gendered language in cancer research, "I was thinking about my community," she says. She joined Beyond the Binary in BC, a project that supports language awareness in biomedical research about women, and helped to craft the project's guidance document.

Maya Kevorkova integrates gender-neutral language into her daily tasks.

Between 'women's' and 'men's' cancers, transgender, non-binary and gender-diverse people with cancer risk being excluded. Molecular data are crucial, but social determinants of health, too, shape cancer treatment. Not many studies specifically focus on queer patients, she says. Kevorkova integrates gender-neutral language into her daily tasks in conversations with colleagues and presentations. She did so in her thesis, too, with her advisor's support.

Roberto Efraín Díaz didn't want his PhD thesis to represent only his research themes. He was in the lab of James Fraser at the University of California San Francisco (UCSF) and graduated in May 2023. "I made a conscious choice to write a fourth chapter in my thesis that outlines my contributions to diversity, equity and inclusion and justice," says Díaz, who identifies as queer. The thesis title: "Structural and enzymatic characterization of pH-dependent chitinase activity, and contributions to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Justice."

The extra chapter covers his advocacy at UCSF and other institutions and includes his work in the LGBTQIA+ community. Both his research mentor and his diversity, equity and inclusion (DEIJ) mentor D'Anne Duncan knew how important it was to him to include both realms, says Díaz and were fine with it. His fortitude stems from multiple sources, he says and especially his parents. His father is from Puerto Rico and his mother is from Colombia. Both came to the United States determined to stand up for their beliefs, and they taught him how education propels one's path.

During his PhD research, he was active in DEIJ groups and kept his eye on social dynamics. "I never wanted to let that go," he says. "I was always building projects and collaborating with people and doing events."

After graduation, he switched from bench science to spend more time on DEIJ. He is now program manager of the Office of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility at the UCSF Helen Diller Family Comprehensive Cancer Center. He works with basic researchers, as well as those in public health, clinicians and physician-scientists. Although he is no longer a bench scientist, he on occasion helps people who reach out asking how to purify a particular protein, how to incorporate a particular amino acid or which solvent to use to solubilize a particular polymer.

Kevorkova grew up in Alberta and knew of only two other queer people at her school. In such regions, she says, "it's definitely hard on the queer kids." Only when she was University of Lethbridge in Alberta did she feel safe to come out. She found allies, as well as a queer center. In her science classes, gender and sexual identity were absent and female scientists were rarely mentioned. So she was glad for gender studies courses. Vancouver is more open for queer people.

Díaz has experienced UCSF, the University of Miami and the University of Michigan and sees UCSF and other universities in California as solid places for anyone with an LGBTQIA+ identity. But even at UCSF he has seen troubling behavior. In one queer space, the men spoke about their desire to have children. A lesbian said she wanted none. Díaz recalls that a queer man commented: "Why not? It would be so easy for you to have them." Díaz criticized this, and he checked in with the woman to talk about that incident.

"Culture change needs to happen," says Roberto Efraín Díaz.

Within the LGBTQIA+ community, it's simplified to say: "Oh, I'm gay, you're gay, we must get along," he says. Even in a dedicated LGBTQIA+ space, not everyone will automatically feel welcome.

He is developing resources and policies and exploring new ways to support the cancer center's LGBTQIA+ community. He sets up talks by queer faculty and staff and keeps his door to the community open. Together with Stephanie Wankowicz from the Department of Bioengineering and Therapeutic Sciences, he developed an article on how to host a DEIJ journal club, as well as to address the lack of representation of diverse groups in the sciences.

He sees that women in medicine experience discrimination, and "that means that any additional identity you tack on is also going to be discriminated against, probably." Says Díaz, "culture change needs to happen."

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