

# TWO SPIRIT/LGBTQ+ NATIVE AMERICANS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

## RESOURCE GUIDE



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## INTRODUCTION

The current mobilization around racial justice on a national and international scale has drawn much attention to how colleges and universities are addressing race and ethnicity in their programming, policies and resources. This call to action has also been heard by higher education professionals coordinating LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexualities and gender identities) student services, and other identity-based functional areas. With the apparent need for better practices focusing on intersections of race, sexuality and gender specifically, LGBTQ+ resource professionals are being called to assess the inclusivity of their programs to ensure anyone regardless of race and ethnicity is welcome into queer spaces and vice versa.

What do we mean when we say “people of color?” Who are we excluding when we lift the voices of only a few marginalized races and ethnicities? Whose history is integral to the work of LGBTQ+ resource professionals, but has been erased from historical texts, and therefore, erased from modern discussions of gender and sexuality? There are likely several cultural pasts that come to mind, but this resource guide will specifically discuss experiences of Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ Native American identities.

As stand-alone groups, Native American people and LGBTQ+ people encounter similar hardships and experience heightened rates of HIV/AIDS contractions, suicides, gender-based and domestic violence, drug and alcohol abuse, and sexual assault. With this in mind, it could be imagined that individuals who identify as both Native American and Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ may face even greater obstacles in living authentically. For someone who possesses these identities in the college setting, how the college/university has prepared itself to accommodate this student is integral to that individual’s development, integration, and sense of belonging.

Surveying some of the overlapping issues that face Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ and Native American populations, this guide will draw connections between these populations that could lead to more impactful programming, policies, and resources. Using statistical data from national organizations, identifying current resources, and contributing LGBTQ+ Native American student testimonials, this guide will offer recommendations for better practices in advocating for this student population.

## TERMINOLOGY AND HISTORY OF TWO SPIRIT

As is the case with gender identity and sexual identity terms, the exact meaning and denotation of the identity “Two Spirit” depends greatly on the individual. However, there are commonalities among those who have used this identity for themselves both historically and in modern day. The term Two Spirit comes from the Anishinaabe language meaning to have both male and female spirits within one person.

What’s important to note about the identity of Two Spirit is that it is specific to Native American and First Nations people. For those without cultural ties or tribal affiliation, using this identity would be inappropriate and culturally appropriating. Though we cannot, and should not, make assumptions about people race and heritage, incorporating better understanding and common usage of this identity in our educational work lends to ensuring this identity is respected.

There is agreement among many anthropologists and historians about the origins of the term Two Spirit, or Two Spirited. There are records of Two Spirit being coined in 1990 during the third Native American/First Nations gay and lesbian conference held in Winnipeg.

*“Originating as a term for contemporary Native American gays and lesbians as well as people who have been referred to as ‘berdache’ by anthropologists and other scholars, it has come to refer to a number of Native American roles and identities past and present, including:*

- *Contemporary Native Americans/First Nations individuals who are gay or lesbian*
- *Contemporary Native American/First Nations gender categories*
- *The traditions wherein multiple gender categories and sexualities are institutionalized in Native American/First Nations tribal cultures*
- *Traditions of gender diversity in other, non-Native American cultures*
- *Transsexual and transgender people*
- *Drag queens and butches”*

(Jacobs, 1997)

The term “berdache” has been used by some anthropologists after encountering the term in historical written work. However, the term is considered derogatory because it has ties to European colonizers who created this term to describe Aboriginal people who did not fit “conventional” gender roles and expressions.

According to Samantha Mesa-Miles, “the notion of a third, fluid, male-and-female gender conflicted with the colonizers’ heterosexual views, and in 1879, the U.S. government removed thousands of Two Spirited people from their tribes. They were sent to live in an Indian boarding school.” This was the reality for many Native Americans during this time period, who were targeted for seeming “less civilized” in comparison to European colonizers.

Historically, Two Spirit identity referred more to one’s status and role in one’s tribe than their gender or sexual identity. Some tribes that acknowledged Two Spirit identities among their culture regarded these individuals as sacred, and even had special roles within the tribe that could only be performed by Two Spirit individuals. This notable status took on different names and meanings among different tribes, and not all tribes indicate an acknowledgment of this identity.

Below is a chart listing some terms used to describe Two Spirit identities among different tribes. Some of these terms are still commonly used in their respective communities:

**Tribal Language & Two Spirit Terminology**

Tribe	Term	Gender
Crow	boté	male
Navajo	nádleehi	male and female
Lakota	winkte	male
Zuni	lhamana	male
Tongva	Wehee' ahiiken Kuuyat	male and female transgender (MTF)

What's important to note is that Two Spirit does not always refer to gender identity, but rather it can also correspond to gender expression or sexual identity. For example, an individual can identify as both cisgender and Two Spirit. The common theme for the various uses of Two Spirit is that it connotes strong cultural and spiritual connections to one's tribal affiliation.

*“By definition, the term encompasses a wide variety of sexual preference and partnership or nonpartnership, as well as ‘gender bending, gender blending, and gender changing.’ Two-spirit challenges the dichotomous categories of male and female at their core. It was not intended to ‘mark a new category of gender’ but was intended to bridge indigenous conceptualizations of ‘gender diversity and sexualities with those of Western cultures.’”*

*(Queer twin cities, 2010)*

Though the term Two Spirit gained traction after its conception, since not all tribes acknowledged this identity or the community had lost some of its reverence for this identity, some young adult Two Spirit individuals would seek out community among urban LGBTQ+ circles. This gravitation towards urban and Western expressions of gender and sexuality has been noted as a major cause of contention during the spike of HIV/AIDS.

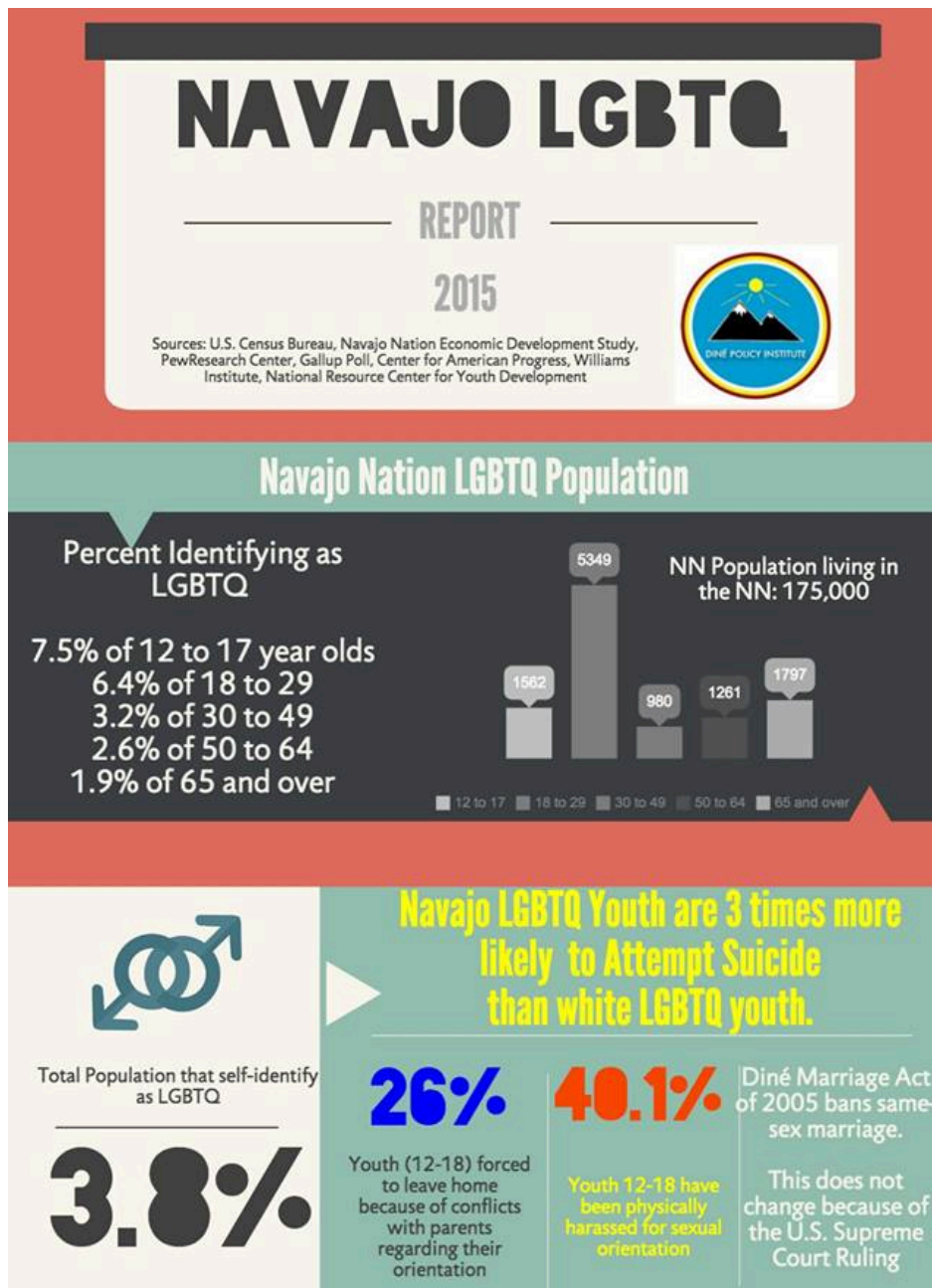
Many individuals who had left their homes and reservations were not welcome back by their families.

According to Sue-Ellen Jacobs, Wesley Thomas, and Sabine Lang, “each of us has heard personal stories from men who were not welcome ‘home’ because they have that ‘white gay man’s disease’ and gayness was not part of traditional culture.” With the ever-growing understanding of HIV/AIDS, there have been more organizations and campaigns created to address issues of sexually transmitted diseases in Native American communities, but there seems to remain speculation or lack of resources to do thorough outreach.

Overall, the history of Two Spirit identities and variations of gender and sexuality, as we have come to understand it in Westernized culture, is elusive. Understanding cultural differences, traditions and experiences of Native American people is already limited by a lack of proper historiography, and drawing on early expressions of gender and sexuality among this community has additional obstacles.

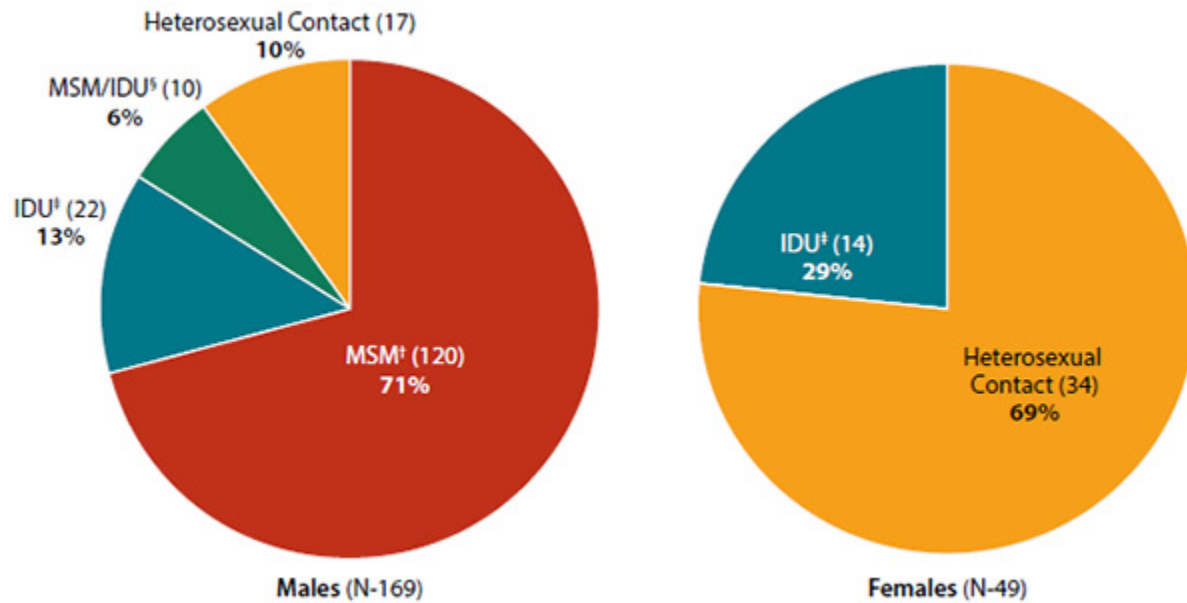
# INFORMATION AND STATISTICS

This latest infographic regarding Navajo LGBTQ populations shows large numbers of traditional college-aged individuals that identify as LGBTQ+. However, this graphic also highlights the increased rate of sexual harassment, homelessness, and suicides among Navajo LGBTQ+ youth. This resource also indicates that a marriage ban still impacts the Navajo community based on the Dine Marriage Act, which is not impacted by the federal turnover of marriage bands by the Supreme Court in 2015.





ESTIMATED DIAGNOSES OF HIV INFECTION AMONG ADULT AND ADOLESCENT AMERICAN INDIANS/ALASKA NATIVES BY TRANSMISSION CATEGORY AND SEX, 2013 – UNITED STATES



†Male-to-male sexual contact ‡Injection drug use §Male-to-male sexual contact and injection drug use The terms male-to-male sexual contact (MSM) and male-to-male sexual contact and injection drug use (MSM/IDU) are used in CDC surveillance systems. They indicate the behaviors that transmit HIV infection, not how individuals self-identify in terms of their sexuality

According to the National Center for HIV/AIDS, Viral Hepatitis, STD, and TB Prevention Division of HIV/AIDS Prevention:

- HIV affects AI/AN in ways that are not always obvious because of their small population sizes
- Of all races/ethnicities, AI/AN had the highest percentages of diagnosed HIV infections due to injection drug use.
- AI/AN face HIV prevention challenges, including poverty, high rates of STIs, and stigma.
- Compared with other racial/ethnic groups, AI/AN ranked fifth in estimated rates of HIV infections in 2013, with lower rates than in blacks/African Americans, Hispanics/Latinos, Native Hawaiians/Other Pacific Islanders, and people reporting multiple races, but higher rates than in Asians and whites.
- Of the estimated 169 HIV diagnoses among AI/AN men in 2013, most (71 percent; 120) were attributed to male-to-male sexual contact.
- For more information and a breakdown of the statistics, check out [http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/native\\_fact\\_sheet\\_508.pdf](http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/native_fact_sheet_508.pdf)

## TWO SPIRIT/LGBTQ+ NATIVE AMERICAN ORGANIZATIONS

These national and international organizations provide a variety of resources and information regarding Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ Native American individuals.

- Bay Area American Indian Two-Spirits
  - Website: [www.baaits.org](http://www.baaits.org)
- East Coast Two Spirit Society (formerly known as NorthEast Two Spirit Society)
  - Website: [www.ne2ss.org](http://www.ne2ss.org)
- Indigenous Peoples' Task Force
  - Website: [www.indigenouspeoplestf.org](http://www.indigenouspeoplestf.org)
- Red Circle Project
  - Website: [www.redcircleproject.org](http://www.redcircleproject.org)
- National Native American AIDS Prevention Center
  - Website: [www.nnaapc.org](http://www.nnaapc.org)
- Native Youth Sexual Health Network
  - Website: [www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com](http://www.nativeyouthsexualhealth.com)
- Portland Two Spirit Society
  - Facebook: [www.facebook.com/Portland2Spirits](http://www.facebook.com/Portland2Spirits)
- Indiana Two Spirit Society
  - Facebook: [www.facebook.com/IndianaTwoSpiritSociety](http://www.facebook.com/IndianaTwoSpiritSociety)
- Northwest Two Spirit Society
  - Facebook Group (Public): Northwest 2-Spirit Society
- Texas Two Spirit Society
  - Website: [www.texastwospirits.com](http://www.texastwospirits.com)
- Wichita Two Spirit Society
  - Website: [www.ict2ss.com](http://www.ict2ss.com)
- Dancing to Eagle Spirit Society
  - Website: [www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org](http://www.dancingtoeaglespiritsociety.org)
- All Nations Hope Network
  - Website: <http://allnationshope.ca/>
- Two Spirited People of Manitoba
  - Website: <http://www.twospiritmanitoba.ca/>
- Montana Two Spirit Society
  - Website: <http://mttwospirit.org/>

## BOOKS, FILMS AND ARTICLES

### BOOKS

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## FILMS

Natives (2013) Directed by Jeremy Hersh

- Synopsis: A white Jewish girl joins her Native American girlfriend on a visit to her parent's place. Her attempts at family bonding go terribly wrong.

Two Spirits, One Journey (2007) Directed by Arthur Allan Seidelman and Chad Richman.

- Synopsis: Tired of living a closeted life on the Lakota Indian reservation, a young gay man must summon up the courage to leave the only home he's ever known and strike his own path.

Two Spirits: Sexuality, Gender, and the Murder of Fred Martinez (2009) Director by Lydia Nibley

- Synopsis: Filmmaker Lydia Nibley examines the 2001 murder of Fred Martinez, a transgender teenager of American Indian descent.
- Additional resources, videos and a discussion guide available at [www.twospirits.org](http://www.twospirits.org)

## ARTICLES

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## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Safe and Caring Schools for Two Spirit Youth

<http://www.nnaapc.org/publications/TwoSpiritBook.pdf>

This is a toolkit on creating safer spaces for Two Spirit youth in schools created by the Two-Spirit Circle of Edmonton.

### Two Spirit Resource Directory

<https://lgbt.wisc.edu/documents/two-spirit-resource-directory-jan-2013.pdf>

This directory tool provides additional information about national and international Two Spirit and Native American LGBTQ+ resources. Prepared by Harlan Pruden (Cree) on behalf of the National Confederacy of Two-Spirit Organizations and NorthEast Two-Spirit Society with the generous support of the Stonewall Community Foundation.

Ending Violence so Children Can Thrive NOVEMBER 2014 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

[http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2014/11/17/National-Security/Graphics/Report\\_re5.pdf](http://www.washingtonpost.com/r/2010-2019/WashingtonPost/2014/11/17/National-Security/Graphics/Report_re5.pdf)

The Attorney General's Advisory Committee on American Indian and Alaska Native Children Exposed to Violence compiled this executive summary after hearing 150 witness testimonies from across the U.S. as part of the Defending Childhood Initiative created by Former Attorney General Eric Holder.

## TWO SPIRIT/LGBTQ+ NATIVE AMERICAN COLLEGE STUDENTS

In this section, several current or recently graduated Native American Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ college students responded to a series of questions regarding their experiences at their respective colleges or universities as someone who identifies within this intersection.

### Language and Identity Use

A Two Spirit identified student currently attending a Northern Midwest community college indicated that “those who identify as Two Spirit have a much stronger sense of their culture than those who use Native American LGBTQ+.” For this individual, they felt there was a generational difference among those who chose to identify as Two Spirit versus LGBTQ+, and that Native Americans may be quicker to identify as LGBTQ+ because resources and common language among non-Native communities doesn’t often discuss Two Spirit identities.

In a recent feature article on Indian Country Today Media Network’s website, Devin Etcitty, a 21-year old who identifies as gay and Navajo, discussed gender and sexuality with 12 Native American students at Columbia University. Etcitty organized several discussions for Native American students “including the challenge of explaining Two Sprits to non-Native Americans who have trouble with his dual identities.”

One Columbia University participant shared “I went to a queer-based workshop, and said I identify as Two Spirit. Everyone looked at me confused.” It seems for some Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ Native Americans, there is an additional burden of explaining this identity to those who are non-Native American, both inside and outside of the LGBTQ+ community.

Another gay-identified student currently enrolled in a Northern Midwest non-Native college said they did not consider themselves as Two Spirit until they started getting more involved with the Native American community in their city and state. This individual was part of a closed adoption when they were young and was not informed of their Native

American heritage until one year ago. This student has spent ample time since then familiarizing themselves with their culture, including attending local pow wows and other events. It was at one of these events that the student recalls “I was approached by an elder who asked if I’d ever heard of Two Spirit, and told me that they sensed I was very Two Spirited.”

### Navigation of multiple and intersecting salient identities

For one gay and Muslim individual of the Potawatomi Nation attending a Midwest university, identifying with numerous marginalized identities can be a lot to handle at once. When asked about how these multiple identities impact them, they said “My biggest struggle is kind of being caught in three different worlds. I have my dad’s culture, my mom’s Native culture and my sexual identity. I have felt uncomfortable many times in my life fearing that people who are a part of one of my identities will not like one of my others.”

Some of this navigation of this student’s multiple identities has differed depending on the space and the community they are in. During their time in college, this student said “I have been in Native spaces where they don’t respect me because I’m only part Native. In LGBTQ+ spaces I sometimes feel accepted but sometimes feel like I’m not good enough because of my weight or skin color. I always feel in competition with other gay men.”

The previously mentioned student who did not discover their Native American identity until one year ago, and their Two Spirit identity until even more recently, said that “tacking on one more identity was no big deal. However, learning about not only acceptance [of Two Spirit identities] within the Native Community but also their importance and status” was a greater task.

They added that until they started learning more about their Native American identity, they felt as though they would be appropriating a Two Spirited identity, because they were not familiar with how their tribe perceived Two Spirit individuals. “I know I’m Native but I don’t know how much, or if my tribe does that and accepts that.” With a growing understanding of their Native culture, it seems that this student has also had to reassess their sexual and gender identities as well.



Etcitty, the gay Navajo student at Columbia University, brought up in one of his discussions that “I’m either indigenous, or I’m queer. Non-indigenous people tell me they didn’t think Natives still existed, much less could be gay.” This struggle to explain one’s numerous marginalized identities to those outside of the community creates additional barriers for students to feel affirmed and have a full understanding of their identities. Student development theories often advocate that individuals will hopefully achieve an understanding both of how their identity resonates with them, and how it impacts the greater population. However, with erasure and misunderstanding of certain identities by the greater population, this development may be inhibited.

### Disconnect or feelings of disassociation from tribal culture, identity and history

A major commonality among the students discussed in this guide is the immense amount of disconnect each seems to have from their tribal and historical ties. Though each individual’s root cause for being disassociated with their tribal culture is different, there are some important themes to highlight.

For the adopted student in the Northern Midwest, this disconnect comes from living an entire childhood and early adult life without knowing about this ancestral background. Through their exploration of this new racial identity, they became aware of familial adversity regarding Native American affiliation, which constricted the sharing of cultural traditions and conversations.

The gay Muslim student from the Midwest was also not raised with a vast understanding of their Native American identity. It was not until they attended a tribal college in the Midwest that they started to create connections between their Muslim identity and their Native identity. “It has been a conflict but it also has been nice finding similarities between my two identities. Also it is nice that my Native side is significantly more open to my sexuality,” they said.

For Etcitty, growing into an understanding of his identities was also based on familial background and expectations. “They are OK with me being gay, but knowing I’m not part of Mormon religion creates a barrier to full-acceptance,” he said. “They say, ‘sure,

you're gay, and it's an experience,' but they don't think of me as gay in the traditional Two Spirit way." This reluctance to acknowledge his identity has seemingly created additional barriers to understanding and being confident in his identity.

With limited discussion and integration of issues regarding Two Spirit and Native American LGBTQ+ communities, creating cultural ties at the university level can be near impossible for students who are coming into understanding of identities within this intersection.

### Gravitation or interest in physical or social spaces for Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ Native American identities

Each of the students who contributed testimonials indicated they had some form of involvement with campus or community events, organizations, and/or resources that pertained to one or more of their identities.

The Two Spirit student attending a Northern Midwest community college said they feel there are strong community and campus-based resources that have kept them feeling ties to their Native identity. Their current institution has at least one queer student organization on campus, and that there are visible resources marketed toward LGBTQ+ people. However, they said visibility and access to creating community around Two Spirit identities has been "patchy."

This student indicated that any programming at their current institution for queer people of color tends to be exclusive or less welcoming for Native American individuals. During their time at their current institution, they attempted to host a social even for Two Spirit individuals and the turnout was less than ideal. They have had better fortune specifically connecting with Two Spirit individuals via social media networking as well as local bars.

One queer Native student currently attending a Southwestern university discussed a weekly, independently facilitated Skype chat they participated in comprised of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ Native Americans. This online chat format has offered participants to provide support for each other and discuss current events impacting their community.

The adopted Two Spirit student was emphatic that without having a Native American student services center at their university, they would not have been able to connect with their Native identity so quickly. “I firmly believe that if you are trying to gain an understanding of your identity and who you are, a center is absolutely essential,” they said. While there is a physical center space and professional staff serving the needs of Native American students on this campus, there is not currently a functioning center or professional staff for LGBTQ+ students.

At each of the current institutions of the students used in this report, there are student organizations that focus on LGBTQ+ identities. In some cases, the student organization seemed to be the sole source of educational and social programming for queer students. Two of the students indicated that their institution also has a First Nations Student Association. Though each student indicated varying levels of involvement with student organizations or center spaces on their campus, their overall perceptions of each individual space is positive. While there have been instances where these students have felt conflicted about integrating into these spaces, or that they weren’t being embraced for their full self, their initiative to create connections within these spaces is telling.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

There is still much to be learned about sexuality and gender diversity. What is evident in the current strive for racial justice with and alongside the queers rights movement is that higher education serves as a microcosm for these multiple identities to grow, interact, and disagree. In order for LGBTQ+ resource professionals and advocates to contribute to the larger racial justice and LGBTQ+ equality movements, an intentional focus on how history has skewed perceptions of gender and sexuality as well as how to incorporate these conversations into preexisting work is paramount.

Below are some recommendations and consideration for how higher education professionals, specifically those currently coordinating for LGBTQ+ identities, can best integrate programming, policies and discussions around Two Sprit and LGTBTQ+ Native American identities:

### 1. Find connectivity through solidarity.

There are numerous causes that are taking priority in the LGBTQ+ community that also impact Native American communities. Understanding how these issues are both similar and different but equally important to each community could open opportunities for co-programming, policy changes, and pairing of resources. Utilizing the information that exists regarding HIV/AIDS prevention, suicide prevention, mental health, gender-based violence, sexual assault, and institutionalized oppression for both of these communities could add valuable leverage to creating change. Finding ways to motivate students to mobilize and consider these intersections in their student activism and advocacy work is equally important, as it allows them to take ownership of their voice in influencing campus climate.

### 2. Co-coordinate programming and events surrounding Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ Native American identities.

When's the last time you booked a queer, Native American speaker or entertainer to your campus? It might be time to put that program on the schedule. Representation is immensely important and if students are attending programs that are tailored toward

Westernized ideas of gender and sexuality, they will be conditioned to think those are the only options. Find ways to incorporate Native voices into hot topic discussions, identity panels, speaker's series, and especially Ally trainings. If there opportunities to work with academic departments or other identity-based student services, this could be a valuable opportunity to create partnerships with department you haven't connected with in the past.

### **3. Combat cultural appropriation within the non-Native LGBTQ+ community.**

Being allies to the Native American community is a vital first step to creating access, affirmation and understanding of Two Spirit and LGBTQ+ Native American identities. It is important to educate ourselves on the unique and inherent struggles of this population in order to best serve the needs of those we encounter or who seek out our resources.

Understanding what cultural appropriation looks like for this culture has to be intricately woven into the ally and identity development work that LGBTQ+ resource professionals care called to do. This means Beyoncé isn't someone's spirit animal. This means that the rainbow dreamcatcher hanging in the office may need to come down. This means headdresses and other cultural symbols should be respected. This also means being tactful in talking through identity development should a student claim a Two Spirit identity but does not have any tribal affiliation without discrediting their experiences. Finding ways to build this into our current advocacy work will make for greater inclusivity in our spaces.

### **4. Utilize community resources to ensure better access to educational programs.**

A trend with the students mentioned in this guide was that seeking out elders or Native American community members expedited some of the identity exploration these individuals have endured. For non-native colleges and universities, finding consistent partners in the community or neighboring institution that has vital resources and direct ties to tribal nations could make a substantial differences. Creating opportunities for students who are newly navigating or questioning their Native identity could be equally impactful to their gender and/or sexual identity. Allowing students to engage with individuals who have a

greater knowledge set of Native American culture offers them access to more accurate and relevant information.

**5. Advocate for physical center spaces or professional staff to coordinate around these identities.**

If there aren't permanent, or even temporary, physical spaces for students to process, explore, and ask questions about their identities, their ability to fully grow into themselves is complicated. As administrators and colleagues, reaching out to professional staff or departments who have been considering a push for a physical space could lend more clout to breaking ground. Encourage students to utilize their numerous avenues of power to demand policy changes, money allocations, or physical space designations to better serve these populations. Understand how your university's process for founding new student organizations works so you can quickly refer any students interested in forming a group around these identities to begin organizing. Consider how space that already exists could be reassessed to become multifunctional or in which students seeking out resources could coexist in the same space.

**6. Review your resources and assess the lens being used to discuss Two Spirit and/or LGBTQ+ Native American identities.**

Most of us revise our ally training several times a semester, or at least we want to. With the ever-growing knowledge and research regarding sexuality and gender, there is always new information to be incorporated into our advocacy work. When we're making revisions, crafting language for print materials, or having discussions with students is what language we're using, we should consider whose perception of sexuality and gender we're using, and what inadvertent implications could be made when we base our framework of sexuality and gender off of mainstream and standardized identities. We need to be cognizant of how we're navigating conversations with questioning students, so as not to deter them from exploring cultural identity-based notions of gender and sexuality that better resonate with their experiences.