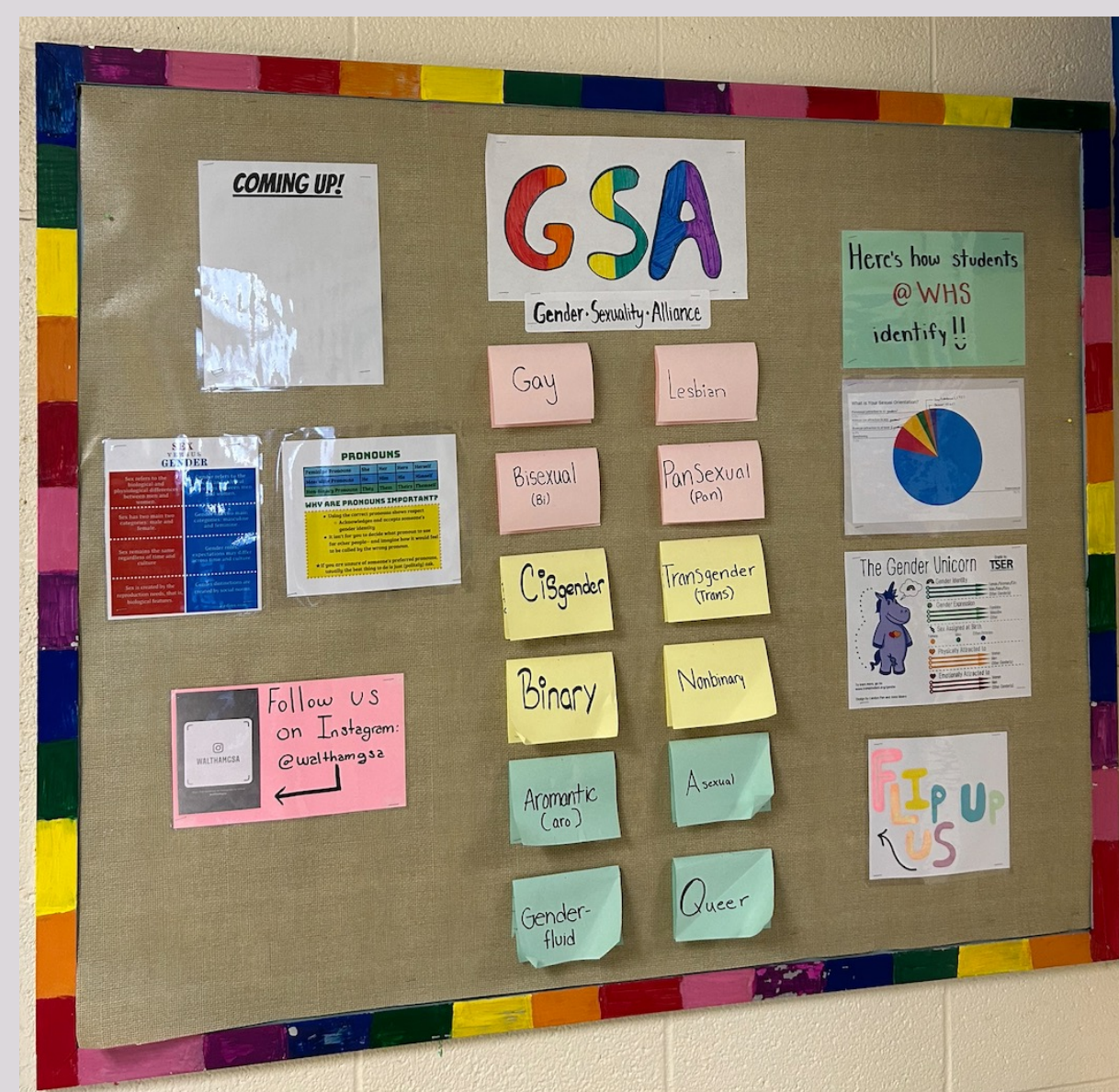


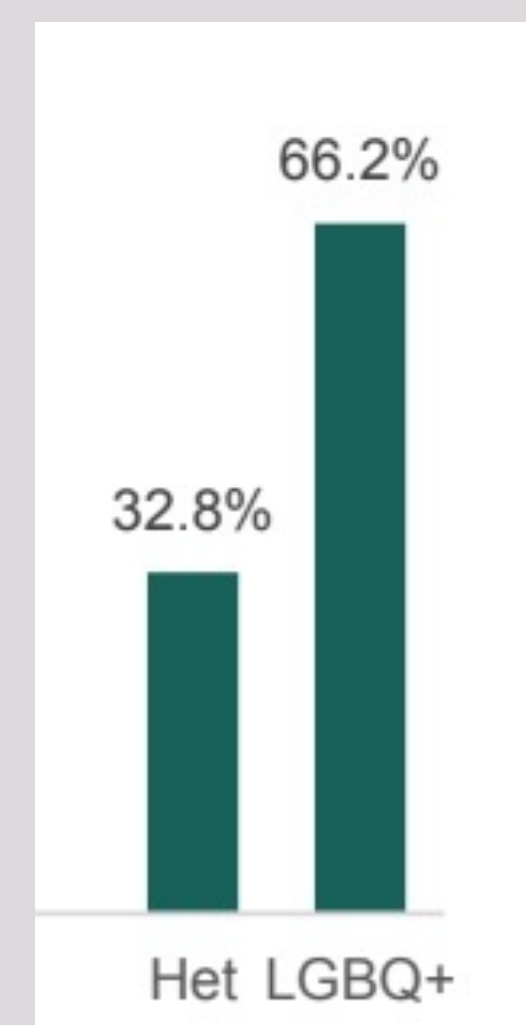
Overview of Project

My project is to address the need for long-term relationships within the LGBTQIA+ community. Although recent decades have shown sociocultural shifts in a better understanding of sexual identities along with greater social acceptance and political rights for LGBTQIA+ youth, there is still growing evidence that LGBTQIA+ adolescents struggle with mental health, higher levels of stress, and increased risk of self-harm. According to the Waltham 2021 Youth Risk Behavior Survey Report, 66.2% of LGBTQIA+ identifying students surveyed had suicide ideation and/or attempts. To compare, 32.8% of heterosexual-identifying peers had suicide ideation/attempts. I want to afford LGBTQIA+ youth an opportunity to interact with college students to gain exposure to queer life in college. Additionally, I actively recruited my peers who were also Pride Reps for the Gender & Sexuality Center, who are peer educators on matters of gender and sexuality. Partnering with Waltham High School Gender & Sexuality Alliance will benefit the students through connecting with community members that are not affiliated with the high school and are still close in age. There is a need to develop a network of trusted adults who validate the GSA students' identities because some of the students do not have supportive relationships within their homes.

Meet the Waltham High School Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA)



Experienced depression, in the past year



The typical meeting spot for GSA is Ms. Long's Math Classroom after school on Tuesdays. The board lists the upcoming events, descriptions of different gender identities and sexual orientations, and current statistics of those that participate in GSA. The mission of the Waltham GSA is to support anyone who identifies outside the terms of heterosexual and cisgender. Allies of the LGBTQ+ are welcome to support community members and support the loud & proud LGBTQ+ focus of GSA. The GSA is devoted to the advocacy of LGBTQ+ rights and has worked to improve the lives of not only LGBTQ+ people at Waltham High but anywhere that they can within their community.

Share Your Story 1st Event: Introduction between Brandeis students and GSA Members



We began our first event together with introductions, including name, pronouns, graduation year, and major/intended major. After, I discussed the emotional safety plan that emphasized participation is completely optional and if anyone felt uncomfortable, anxious, or stressed, they were free to do what they needed to do in order to take care of themselves. Then, we brainstormed Community Agreements, including the following:

1. What is said here, stays here; what is learned here, leaves here
2. Use I statements when talking
3. We are all learning together
4. Confidentiality and respect
5. Intent vs Impact

Julian spoke about his unique coming-out story, and the rest of the time was spent with high school students sharing their experiences in GSA and Brandeis students sharing their experiences in high school that might have had a GSA or lack thereof.

Share Your Story 2nd Event: Q&A between Brandeis students and GSA Members



We began our second event by re-introducing ourselves and eating Chipotle together. We talked in a very informal manner in more of a Q&A style. There were many more high school students, but they preferred not to be in any pictures. Respecting their privacy allowed us to connect better with them and gain their trust. Both Brandeis students and GSA students were able to share their stories comfortably. We talked about our current experiences with queer life on the Brandeis campus as well as others.

Goals: You are not alone

- "I want to make sure that LGBT high schoolers feel supported in a way that I didn't."
- "Just provide a safe space for members of my community, whether someone is sure of their identity or not. I also want to support those who may be questioning, closeted, etc."
- "I would want to be the friend to the queer and trans youths that I wish I had when I was that age."
- "I started to learn about the LGBTQIA+ community in high school. Part of the reason it took me so long to recognize my biases and better understand the community is that I didn't have anybody I could personally identify with. As someone who's now on the "other side", I'd like to be the example and support for high school students that I never had."
- "I would love to be able to feel more connected to Waltham, and I would like to also be able to provide support/conversation and get to know other people within our community."
- "I want all students to feel like they can exist as they are without having to hide a part of their identities. Also, I think it would be amazing if Waltham could have more events for LGBTQIA+ youth so students can have spaces to celebrate with a community."
- "I would love to work with LGBTQ+ youth, particularly students of color in a predominantly white environment since that was something I experienced in middle and high school. I'm hoping to achieve peer mentoring and relevant interpersonal skills from this opportunity in helping LGBTQ+ youth feel empowered and supported."
- "I really hope to serve as a mentor to high schoolers. When I was in high school, I wished I could have someone in college to talk to because I often worried about the future and felt I had no one to turn to offer me advice or just kindly listen."

Proud Moments + Sustainability Plan

- I am so incredibly grateful to have formed a partnership with Waltham High GSA to make these events become a reality!
- I learned a lot about the Waltham community and some of the issues facing LGBTQIA+ high school students, such as students feeling concerned about choosing a college that is accepting of their identity or about creating safe spaces if someone uses an incorrect pronoun.
- A focus of these events for me was to express positive experiences with people who have helped me feel accepted, asking questions such as "When was the last time you felt validated" in order to help students navigate successfully getting support.
- I felt proud listening to everyone speak up slowly one by one, learning to advocate for themselves in a welcoming and inclusive environment.
- I hope these events occur annually with our continued partnership with the Waltham High School GSA. I would be honored to reapply next year for funding. I am also certain the students involved in this year's events will ensure the sustainability of this program in future years to come with the unwavering support from the Brandeis Gender and Sexuality Center.

Acknowledgements

Thank you, Jeannette, for being the best advisor I could have asked for. Thank you, Julián, for your unwavering support throughout this process. With every bump in the road, you have made me feel seen, understood, and accepted. You have shown me genuine kindness by having confidence in me and my abilities even when I could not. Thank you to everyone else who has supported me in curating this opportunity. Lastly, thank you Rich Collins CLIF Mini Grant funder for granting me the opportunity to build partnerships on campus and in my community through the Rich Collins Leadership & Impact Fellowship.