

Charlotte Li

Rich Collins Community Leadership Impact Fellowship Final Report 2023

Peer Mentorship Program

Narrative of Project

My project is to address the need for long-term relationships within the LGBTQIA+ community. Although recent decades have shown socio-cultural 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.

Personally, I never felt comfortable in high school sharing my sexuality with others. While fear of not being liked played a small role, I think the lack of opportunities in which I could express my sexuality played a much larger role. I want to offer 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. Since adolescence is characterized by rapid biological changes and increased psychosocial awareness, it is a critical period of increasing self-awareness and social exploration. I think partnering with Waltham High School Gender & Sexuality Alliance (GSA) will benefit the students through connecting with community members that are not affiliated with the high school and are still relatively close in

age as opposed to adults. 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.

Evaluation & Assessment

The program was structured as a two-part conversation series between students in the Waltham High School GSA and Brandeis undergraduates with one goal being to connect people through the power of shared stories. Recruiting Brandeis students was a lot easier than I had assumed. I placed flyers for the program across all residential halls on campus utilizing the help of the Department of Community Living's Community Advisors. On the flyer, I provided a description of the program as well as a QR code linked to an interest form I had created asking for participants' name, email, phone number, goals, and availability. I immediately met with Jeannette over zoom to schedule times that would work for both the high schoolers and Brandeis students. We were able to confirm our two events for March 29th from 2:30-3:30 pm and April 4th from 2:30-3:30 pm. For the first event, I was able to recruit 10 Brandeis students, 4 of which were Pride Reps at the Gender & Sexuality Center (GSC). For the second event, I was able to recruit 7 Brandeis students, 4 of which were Pride Reps at the GSC. The event planning went really well, and I was able to budget enough time for when Brandeis classes were ending to make it to the Waltham High School in an efficient manner before the high schoolers had to take the late bus home at 3:30 pm. The first event was so successful in our discussion that we went over time for what we originally scheduled for, but everything worked out because none of the students had to take the late bus to get home. The second event was also a hit with high school students asking Brandeis students lots of questions about queer life on college campuses. The

students also really enjoyed the catered Chipotle lunch I budgeted for, and I am glad my advisor Taisha was able to place a last minute order for me to drive and pick up despite an issue with placing an order within the 24 hours in advance deadline.

Personal Takeaways and Reflection

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. Re-reading all of the goals that the Brandeis volunteers set out to achieve before the events made me tear up because there is no doubt in my mind that we achieved all of our goals. A few examples of these goals include: ensuring that LGBTQ+ high schoolers feel supported, providing a safe space for members of the community, and forming friendships with queer and trans youth. I am hopeful that these events will occur annually with the Waltham High School GSA, and I would be honored to reapply next year for funding. I am confident that 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 & Sexuality Center.