

DIVERSITY

At an All-Science Institution, LGBTQ Students Take Visibility Into Their Own Hands

By Arielle Martinez

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COURTESY OF MOLLY LIU

Members of Prism, or People at Rockefeller Identifying as Sexual Minorities (from left: Aaron Mertz, Molly Liu, Devon Collins, Josh Zeng, and Gabriella Spitz), say the visibility provided by their organization is especially important on a small, science-oriented campus.

Students, faculty and staff at Rockefeller University answered a survey in January on their sexual and gender identities. Eighty-five people out of the 191 who filled it out identified as being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or another sexual minority, with most “out” individuals being graduate students and postdocs.

But not a single head of a laboratory — and there are 78 — identified as LGBTQ.

The [survey](#) was conducted by [Prism](#), or People at Rockefeller Identifying as Sexual Minorities. Rockefeller, a university in New York City that focuses on biomedical science research, is a small institution with about 350 postdoctoral researchers and 175 doctoral students, according to its website. The group’s members say their organization, which was founded late last year and has about 50 members, is needed on such a small campus to bring visibility to the challenges faced by LGBTQ scientists in academe.

LGBTQ on Campus



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“When we don’t have people who are visible at the highest level, I think it’s harder for younger scientists to be certain that it’s OK to be out,” said Aaron Mertz, a postdoctoral fellow at the university and one of the founders of Prism. “It’s unclear whether lack of visibility is because people have been hindered along the way or if they’re just not coming out.”

Mr. Mertz said LGBTQ students and faculty face particular challenges in the sciences because there is a culture that discourages scientists from sharing details of their personal lives.

In science, Mr. Mertz said, “people tend to lead with their data” more than their personalities. He contrasted that mind-set with those of other groups, like physicians, who talk about how to deal with diverse patient groups. “There’s a much more personal element to it,” he said “And people in the humanities, their work is often driven by their personal experiences, whereas in science, we’re supposed to be a little bit detached from our results and our data.”

“But at the same time, we are human beings operating in social groups like laboratories,” he added. “We are applying for grants or applying for jobs. Personality is a big element of our profession, but it’s usually hidden or masked.”

Although there are national organizations for LGBTQ scientists like [oSTEM](#) (Out in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) that have a number of college chapters, those chapters are most likely driven by undergraduate membership, Mr. Mertz said. Rockefeller does not have an undergraduate program.

Prism used the survey in January to see who identified as being LGBTQ, what positions those people filled at the university, and what changes they wanted to see on campus.

“A lot of the strongest responses we received,” Mr. Mertz said, “were that people felt at the highest levels of science academia, there were very few visible openly LGBTQ+ scientists.”

Molly Liu, a graduate student and another founder of Prism, said the survey respondents gave mixed reviews of the workplace climate at Rockefeller for LGBTQ individuals.

“Labs tend to be very divided and fairly variable, so the climate that you encounter tends to depend a lot on which lab you join and who else is in the lab,” Ms. Liu said.

Little Diversity in Top Ranks



COURTESY OF MARTIN MARKOWITZ

Martin Markowitz is clinical director of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center, a Rockefeller U. affiliate. When a group called Prism, or People at Rockefeller Identifying as Sexual Minorities, surveyed students, faculty and staff this year, he was the only scientist in the rank of professor who identified as LGBTQ. Rockefeller, he says, is “a good example of an institution that is not particularly diverse at the head-of-lab level.”

The survey identified only one “out” scientist in the rank of professor: Martin Markowitz, the clinical director of the Aaron Diamond AIDS Research Center, an affiliate of Rockefeller University. Because his academic appointment is through the research center, he is not a head of laboratory at the university.

The world of the sciences is overwhelmingly male and heteronormative, Dr. Markowitz said.

“Rockefeller is a good example of an institution that is not particularly diverse at the head-of-lab level,” Dr. Markowitz said. “That said, it’s quite diverse for students, postdocs, everything else, but it doesn’t trickle down.”

Timothy P. O’Connor, Rockefeller’s executive vice president, said the administration and faculty were working together to find ways to increase diversity among new hires. The university has been holding training sessions for uncovering unconscious bias in hiring and has started interviewing job candidates remotely rather than waiting to meet small groups of candidates in person in order to enlarge the pool of candidates who are interviewed. The university has also provided health and retirement benefits for same-sex partners, not just opposite-sex marriages, for years, Mr. O’Connor said.

The university provides funding for Prism through the dean’s office, Mr. O’Connor said, and the university’s incoming president, Richard P. Lifton, met with members of the group in June to get to know its mission and goals.

Mr. Mertz said the university’s support of Prism helps increase the group’s visibility.

“That sends a very nice message to the whole campus, that we are valued members of the university community,” he said.

Dr. Markowitz, who is in his early 60s, said that his experiences as a gay man may be different from those of the members of Prism, who tend to be much younger. He said that he came through his medical training at a time when gay people in the sciences kept quiet about their personal lives and stayed in the closet.

“If surgeons were telling jokes while they were scrubbing and getting ready to do their operations, you didn’t say anything,” he said. “Now, I’m sure there’s more sensitivity training and things like that. Surgeons have to be careful about what they say and how they say it and who they say it to, but certainly that was not the case 40 years ago when I was in medical school.”

Being out can affect scientists’ job searches at all stages of their careers. Gabriela Spitz, a graduate student and founder of Prism, said she feels restricted because academic careers can be limited by geography, depending on where jobs are available, and because she and her partner are planning to have children.

“I would not want to be somewhere where my children would feel ostracized,” she said.

“We’ve been lucky to grow up in a climate where being queer is not as stigmatized as it used to be,” she said.

But one issue that LGBTQ science students still face is a lack of visible role models.

Dr. Markowitz commended the founders of Prism for their efforts, saying the group was an example of how far the sciences have come since he was their age.

“My hats are off to these young people,” Dr. Markowitz said. “It takes a lot of guts to do what they’ve done.”

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