

NOTE: Seattle Pacific University's (SPU) [Statement on Human Sexuality](#) and related non-discrimination policies referenced below are connected to the [Book of Discipline](#) determined by the Free Methodist denomination. While our department is advocating for removal or revision of the Statement and associated policies, the final decision rests with the Board of Trustees.

Department of Clinical Psychology Comment on the Statement on Human Sexuality & Non-discrimination Policies

Faculty, staff, and students in the Department of Clinical Psychology (CPY) have drafted this document in response to SPU's [Statement on Human Sexuality](#) (hereafter referenced as "Statement") and associated non-discrimination policies. An earlier version of this letter was distributed to SPU's president, Dan Martin, and all university faculty in January 2021. The purpose of this letter is to provide a perspective on the Statement and related policies governing faculty/ staff hiring decisions as guided by expertise held within the CPY. The Statement, policies, and lifestyle expectations summarized below do *not* apply to CPY graduate students or in any way effect decisions in relation to admission into the program or academic activities of CPY students (e.g., dissertation topics; curriculum). The letter reflects the current state of applied psychological science* as well as a sample of Ph.D. student and faculty perspectives. The requests and recommendations contained herein are guided by empirical literature, anecdotal experiences of students and faculty/staff at SPU, and relevant position statements published by the American Psychological Association (APA).

Summary

1. Approximately 10% of the CPY current student body identifies as LGBTQ+, representing an increase in recent years that has strengthened our department in innumerable ways - culturally, academically, intellectually, and otherwise. The Statement has been experienced as explicitly marginalizing and discriminatory by students in the CPY program.
2. Marginalization can have severe mental health effects on LGBTQ+ people, including but not limited to depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress, and suicidality. The Statement undermines our standing with the local LGBTQ+ community, thereby limiting our ability to pursue our departmental mission to serve and promote the wellbeing of people pushed to the margins of society through the work of clinical psychology.
3. SPU's Statement introduces tension between institutional policy and our professional and ethical mandates as clinical psychologists.
4. Taken together, we are concerned about the future health of our department in the context of the Statement. What will happen to our ability to attract and enroll high quality students to our program? Will we be able to fill vacant staff and faculty positions with competitive professionals? Will we be able to maintain our status as an APA accredited program?
5. CPY is a strong contributor to SPU's academic reputation and financial stability. Our tuition revenue supports the program and consistently meets our return-rate obligations. Further, our faculty and students produced 68 publications from 2016-17 to 2019-20. These efforts substantially contributed to SPU's Best National University distinction.

Requests and Recommendations

1. Please (a) remove the Statement altogether in order to mitigate against marginalization of students on campus, a move that would appear consistent with the university's lack of position on other matters debated within our ecumenical environment; OR (b) revise the Statement to reflect the human diversity and range of theological and interdisciplinary perspectives represented in our university community and affirm the value and worth of our LGBTQ+ SPU community members.
2. Explicitly endorse hiring practices that are inclusive of faculty from diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. From a mental health perspective, our undergraduate and graduate students benefit from having professional role models to assist with navigating a world in which they may be or may have been pushed to the margins of society (including in their interactions with other faith communities)
3. Rewrite SPU's institutional non-discrimination policy to include, specifically, all legally protected classes, including gender identity and sexual orientation, and marital status.
4. With respect to lifestyle expectations contained within the Employee Handbook (NOTE that these lifestyle expectations do *not* extend to CPY students), delete the second bullet point that reads:
Sexually immoral behavior that is inconsistent with Biblical standards, including cohabitation and extramarital sexual activity. (See the University's [Statement on Human Sexuality](#)).

Background and Context

Effects on CPY Graduate Students

Students within the Clinical Psychology program, one that generates significant revenue for SPU, are dismayed and disappointed by the University's Statement and constraints on hiring diverse faculty. Many of us chose to attend SPU because we resonated with a university where we could develop both competence and character. We perceive that these policies, practices, and positions are inconsistent with the grace-filled values that SPU portrays to the public -- including prospective students and potential staff-and-faculty hires.

These policies were unknown to many of us at the time we accepted admission. Had we been aware of the Statement, many of us might have not applied or declined the offer of admission. Now that we are here, it is difficult for us to transfer elsewhere due to financial and logistical commitments as well as restrictions placed on programs with secondary accreditation (in our case, by APA). Interview day for admission to our program is February 22nd. Currently enrolled students volunteer to help recruit students to our program. If we are forthcoming about SPU's policies, these students are likely to select a different university because people drawn to clinical psychology are more likely to hold allegiance to APA's stance as a discipline than SPU's Statement as an institution. Like our faculty, we want to recruit excellent students to our program. This puts us in a bind.

Because SPU's Statement and policies are in direct conflict with the [Ethical Principles of Psychologists](#), we (as CPY students) are concerned about the impact to our professional reputations and credentials. Recent allegations of LGBTQ+ discrimination that have been covered by news organizations have made these issues even more salient. Many of us have already heard from clinical supervisors, hiring managers, and community members who are expressing concern and dismay relating to SPU's positions.

Finally, just as racial minority groups are represented among our students and faculty, so are students of diverse sexual orientation. In keeping with SPU's Christian values and modeling a grace-filled community, CPY welcomes and celebrates individuals of all backgrounds. As a department, we are proud of our university's Free Methodist Church origins and celebrate an educational history formed in unity against the institution of slavery and in defense of the value and worth of all people, as equals. CPY students and faculty, like others all throughout this campus, have been spending the year engaging seriously with what our call to action looks like in the face of racism and anti-Black oppression. As future psychologists and scientists, CPY students know too that racism is one form of injustice among many. We believe we are equally obligated to fight for the good of all marginalized and oppressed, including those who face injustice based on their race, gender, religion, disability, socioeconomic status, nationality, or sexual orientation. Taking this commitment seriously means creating an educational environment that is welcoming and supportive to students with marginalized identities, and developing competency working with clients who hold marginalized identities. We are concerned that the Statement impairs our ability to do both, with marginalized students feeling unwelcome and unsupported at SPU and community members facing injustice feeling unable to trust us.

Effects on CPY Faculty & Staff

The Statement and associated policies leave faculty and students in tension with the [Ethical Principles of Psychologists](#), evidence-based research, and best practices related to factors influencing mental health and wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people. Ultimately, all instruction within our program must align with our professional standard as defined by the APA and it undermines our effort to effectively mentor students when the broader institution holds tension with our guild.

APA's practice guidelines regarding LGBTQ+ individuals (2012) note that students from gender and sexual minority groups, especially those who are questioning or who are newly engaging with their sexual orientation, may have no access to LGBTQ+ role models. As with other individuals from other marginalized groups, an absence of faculty with overlapping identities compounds psychological, social, and educational struggles and jeopardizes capacity for successful program completion. Just as we seek to diversify our faculty along race and ethnicity, the presence of LGBTQ+ faculty in our program would enhance our ability to meet the needs of our students.

Student satisfaction is of the utmost importance within our department. The Statement and associated hiring practices have been very upsetting to students, with many having communicated that they did not consider searching for such a Statement as part of their early decision making process and that they would not have attended SPU for their doctoral training had they been aware of the Statement prior to admission. As a result, in the interest of fully informed consent as required by the [Ethical Principles of Psychologists](#), CPY faculty must begin to be more explicit about pointing prospective students to the Statement and inviting conversations about the tensions between the university and the department and profession of clinical psychology on this issue. We anticipate more dialogue on these issues around our annual prospective student interview day on February 22nd.

Science and Policy Contributions from the Disciplines of Psychology

Psychological science offers much to SPU's deliberations around changing the policy. Further, in its [Guidelines for Psychological Practice With Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients](#) (APA, 2012), APA

outlined a number of professional expectations in psychologists' roles as clinicians, researchers, and *educators*. In a manner consistent with these guild expectations, we use the remainder of this document to convey our professional knowledge and perspectives regarding (a) the wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals, (b) employment rights, and (c) religious considerations.

The wellbeing of LGBTQ+ individuals. APA's Statement on Human Rights and Sexual Orientation (2004) states, "Decades of research and clinical experience have led all mainstream mental health organizations in the United States to the conclusion that homosexuality is a normal form of human sexuality." Owing to discrimination -- both explicit and microaggressive -- we know from the [National Alliance on Mental Illness](#) that LGBTQ+ adults are more than twice as likely as heterosexual adults to experience a mental health condition. Transgender individuals are nearly four times as likely as cisgender individuals (people whose gender identity conforms to their identity at birth) to experience a mental health condition in response to marginalization and discrimination.

Researchers have further shown that greater exposure to religious anti-gay prejudice predicted higher levels of anxiety, stress, and shame; more instances of physical and verbal abuse; and more problematic alcohol use (Sowe et al., 2017). This introduces significant mental health risk, including suicidality. LGBTQ+ adults are two times more likely to make a suicide attempt and among transgender adults, the lifetime prevalence of suicide attempts is 40%. (Haas et al., 2010; Mathy, 2002). LGBTQ+ youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide with 42.8% of LGBTQ+ youth reporting having seriously considered suicide (King et al., 2008; James et al., 2016; Kann et al., 2015; CDC, 2018).

Factors that put people in the LGBTQ+ community at elevated risk for suicide include isolation from family and peers; discrimination, harassment, and bias from places of worship, schools, and colleagues; victimization, and related-mental health difficulties (Fergusson et al., 1999; 2005; D'Augelli et al., 2001; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2016). Among students in non-affirming religious higher education settings, 37% reported being bullied or harassed at school because of their sexual orientation. Further, the students on non-affirming campuses had greater struggles with their sexual orientation, more negative self-identities, and more religious incongruence. Involvement with affirming community groups (e.g., Gay-Straight Alliance) served as a protective factor against these negative consequences for students. At SPU, the Statement and exclusion of LGBTQ+ faculty from our ranks creates a non-affirming context and causes harm to our sexual minority students.

Employment rights. APA's Council of Representatives has produced resolutions in support of civil rights, including same sex marriage and right to employment since the mid-1970s. In 1981, APA's Council of Representatives publicly opposed "personnel actions against any teacher solely because of sexual orientation or affectional preference." More recently, and in response to violations of these rights in both domestic and global contexts, the APA has worked with the United Nations to oppose employment exclusion and human rights violations on the basis of sexual orientation (e.g., 2004, 2008).

[APA President Sandra L. Shullman, PhD offered the following comments regarding the June 2020 U.S. Supreme Court ruling](#) that gay and transgender workers are protected by federal law from discrimination on the basis of sex:

When laws are enacted to prohibit discrimination against gay and transgender individuals, research has shown that health outcomes, both mental and physical, improve. Workplaces that have adopted LGBT-supportive policies have also benefited from improved health among those employees, as well as greater job commitment, job satisfaction and productivity.

Although the APA's Committee on Accreditation has maintained its [religious exemption policy](#), the interpretation and implementation of the policy could change at any time. This has been a significant area of lobbying, with the [passing of resolutions that make clear APA's stance on opposing anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination](#). Based on the substantial empirical evidence of harm on psychological health, APA could determine that adverse effects observed within the discipline supersede religious exemption as it pertains to specific training programs. It is essential that we safeguard APA accreditation of our clinical psychology PhD program. [If more scientific evidence is desired, APA produced a social science research summary while lobbying for the 2020 Equality Act.](#)

The intersection of psychology and religion. [On the topic of religious exemption, APA notes that:](#)

It is often unclear whether, how, why, or to what extent accommodating sexual orientation or gender diversity in a private place of business would infringe the owners' religious liberties in any way. On the other hand, in practice... "religious freedom" exemptions purported to protect business owners' beliefs perpetuate stigma, which can cause serious psychological harm for sexual orientation and gender minority people (Hatzenbuehler, 2010; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009; Hatzenbuehler et al., 2010).

There can be negative psychological and emotional effects on individuals when they do not have access to rights that others have. A study found that advertisements arguing against marriage rights for sexual orientation and gender minority people evoked sadness in these populations, while heterosexual cisgender people were not affected either positively or negatively by the advertisements (Flores, et al., 2018). Another study of a "religious freedom" law in Indiana found that while sexual orientation and gender diverse individuals reported higher rates of "unhealthy days" the year the law was passed, the rates amongst heterosexual cisgender people remained flat (Blosnich et al., 2019).

APA's Council of Representatives has acknowledged that psychologists and their clients (e.g., organizations, individuals, students) are often religious. The intersection of psychologists in religious contexts is addressed in a variety of resolutions. These include (a) examining one's own religious beliefs to prevent them from taking precedence over professional practice and standards in work with LGBTQ+ individuals (2008); (b) seeking collaboration with religious professionals and organizations to promote the wellbeing of sexual minorities (2010); and (c) serving as custodians of empirical evidence on the mental health effects at the intersection of religiosity and sexual orientation. This 2008 resolution states, "...those operating from religious/spiritual traditions are encouraged to recognize that it is outside their role and expertise to adjudicate empirical scientific issues in psychology, while also recognizing they can appropriately speak to theological implications of psychological science." This compels CPY faculty to respond to specific assumptions and assertions about policy on these matters. As such, we disagree with the notion expressed by some SPU faculty that theology, for example, holds a fundamentally integrating role in determining the Statement and policies that affect the psychological wellbeing of LGBTQ+ people at SPU. Theology holds a central and essential position but, according to our professional standards,

cannot take hierarchical primacy on a policy that has had clear mental health effects on campus stakeholders. A 2011 APA resolution “encourages psychologists and other professionals with appropriate knowledge to take the lead in developing interventions and educating the public to reduce prejudice and discrimination and help ameliorate the negative effects of stigma.”

Conclusion

In closing, the CPY Program (students, staff, and faculty) urge you to make the policy changes we have outlined above. Consistent with the expectations of our guild, we stand ready to partner with you to create a *fully inclusive* community for our LGBTQ+ members and we argue against any premise that doing so comes at the expense of SPU’s Statement of Faith or other stakeholder groups on campus.

Grounded in faith and prompted to action consistent with the mandates of our profession, CPY Faculty and Staff have signed below. The following voluntary signatures of CPY students are welcomed as a reflection of their partnership in writing this commentary.

Co-authored and signed by all faculty/staff and 49 PhD students in the Department of Clinical Psychology at Seattle Pacific University on January 20, 2021.