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# 2SLGBTQ+ INCLUSION IN CAMPUS SPORTS & RECREATION



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# INTRODUCTION

This report was completed in partnership between two student-run groups at Western University, the University Students' Council (USC) and PrideUSC. The purpose of this project is to assess the current state of Western University's Recreation Centre (hereafter referred to as the Rec Centre) in regard to 2SLGBTQ+ participation and barriers to participation, and to provide some recommendations on how the Rec Centre could remove barriers and improve 2SLGBTQ+ participation. 2SLGBTQ+ generally refers to individuals "who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual," which includes, but is not limited to, individuals who identify as two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (Denier, Mok, Waite, 2022). In this report, the term queer is also used interchangeably with 2SLGBTQ+.

This report consists of a brief literature review, results from a survey and focus groups with 2SLGBTQ+ students at Western University. The four key recommendations from this project are: improving visibility, improving staff training, implementing 2SLGBTQ+ spaces, and greater inclusion of gender-diverse students on sports teams/leagues.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

Many studies have found that sexual minorities are marginalized in sports and athletics, beginning in elementary and high schools (Petty and Trussell 2018; Wagner and Osborne 2007). This is often due to the fact that sports reinforce hyper-masculinity and heteronormativity (Petty and Trussell 2018). A study analyzing the participation of American high school students in core sports (football, baseball, basketball, and/or soccer) found that males who participate in core sports are more likely to hold homophobic beliefs than those who did not participate (Wagner and Osborne 2007). While core sports do not cause homophobic beliefs, those who express these beliefs are more likely to participate in core sports (Wagner and Osborne 2007). Since core sports tend to attract individuals with homophobic beliefs, these beliefs may become accentuated and go unaddressed. While sports can be beneficial to relieve stress, the decision to participate is complicated for sexual minorities, as they may also experience stigma when participating (Petty and Trussell 2018). As well, for individuals whose identity falls outside of the gender binary, they face exclusion from men's and women's teams and clubs (Walsh 2018). Sexual minority men have also been found to be more likely to engage in physical activity than heterosexual men (Herrick and Duncan 2018). This higher likelihood may be a result of body ideals and an attempt to counteract homophobic stereotypes, particularly the stereotype which perceives sexual minority men as feminine (Herrick and Duncan 2018). For sexual minority women, there tends to be a greater acceptance of diverse body shapes, however, it was noted that a barrier to physical activity was recreation centres not allowing family memberships for same-sex families and a fear of homophobia at recreation centres (Herrick and Duncan 2018). Given the significant marginalisation that LGBTQ+ individuals face in sports and recreation, it is crucial that recreation centres be inclusive to people of all sexualities and gender identities (Daly et al. 2015; Walsh 2018).

An analysis of some recreation centres' efforts to make their spaces more 2SLGBTQ+-friendly found five key points. First, centres have trained staff to be aware of their vocabulary and understanding diverse bodies (Parker 2018; Radically Fit 2018). Second, they have prioritized representation when hiring staff, such as hiring non-cisgender individuals, individuals with disabilities, racialized individuals, etc., and including this diversity in marketing materials (Parker 2018). Third, they have worked to prevent hypermasculine expectations (Van Eeuwen 2019) and have avoided focusing on altering/conforming to specific body types in personal training (Van Eeuwen 2019; Radically Fit 2018). Fourth, they have held LGBTQ+-only hours (City of Seattle 2022; CTV News Vancouver Island 2021; Junction Climbing Centre 2021). Fifth, they have implemented gender-neutral washrooms and change rooms with the same amenities as other washrooms and change rooms (National Recreation and Parks Association n.d.; Simon Fraser Student Society 2017).



# SURVEY RESULTS

To understand the experiences of 2SLGBTQ+ students at Western University's Rec Centre, PrideUSC and the USC conducted a survey. 104 complete responses were collected from October 5, 2021 to November 2, 2021. While the respondents were distributed relatively evenly among undergraduate students ranging from first to fourth year, second-year students were the most well-represented group and students in or above fifth-year were the least represented. Most respondents were also full-time students and female. A little over one-third of respondents were racialized and nearly one-fifth of the respondents had a disability.

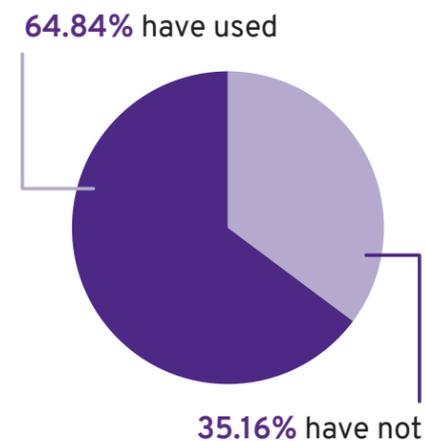
Of the students who completed the survey, 64.84% of respondents had used the Rec Centre before, while 35.16% had never used it before. Fear of experiencing queerphobia was the most commonly selected reason (35%) for choosing not to use the recreation centre, while 5% of the respondents chose not to use the Rec Centre due to previous experiences of queerphobia. This question also allowed for an open-ended response. The most common responses among those who included an answer was a fear of being judged and issues of hypermasculinity and sexism. When asked, "How safe do you feel as an LGBTQ+ student at the Rec Centre," 61.82% of respondents felt moderately safe, 25.45% felt slightly safe, 9.09% of respondents felt very safe, 1.82% of respondents felt slightly unsafe, and 1.82% of respondents felt very unsafe. More specifically, most respondents (70.91%) felt at least slightly comfortable using the change rooms in the Rec Centre, while nearly 30% of respondents reported feeling uncomfortable.

Regarding the Rec Centre staff, most respondents (93.65%) felt that staff were inclusive. Respondents were also given the opportunity to provide more feedback about the Rec Centre staff, with most of those who responded stating their interactions with staff were neutral. One respondent, however, mentioned that staff would misgender people. Roughly 15% of respondents had previously participated in the Rec Centre's women's only hour. When asked what they liked or disliked about it,

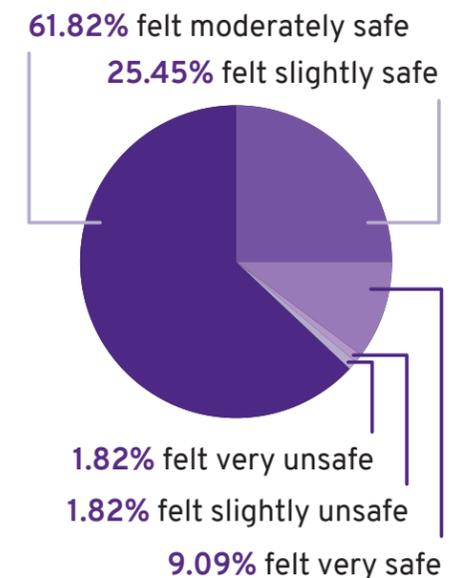
respondents mentioned they liked the women's only hour because they felt uncomfortable working out around men, enjoyed a dedicated space where they did not have to worry about being sexualized, and liked not feeling obligated to cover themselves or to avoid certain exercises. Respondents were also asked if they would be interested in participating in an 2SLGBTQ+ only hour at the Rec Centre, and nearly 85% of the respondents indicated interest.

Respondents were also asked how comfortable they felt joining an intramural team, and 57.15% reported feeling comfortable and 42.83% reported feeling uncomfortable. Lastly, respondents were asked to provide suggestions for how to make the Recreation Centre more 2SLGBTQ+ friendly. Respondents suggested 2SLGBTQ+ related decor (e.g. pride flags, signs showing that the space is for all individuals, stickers, posters, etc.), gender neutral washrooms and change rooms, 2SLGBTQ+ only hours/rooms/classes, and better educated staff, such as staff educated on LGBTQ+ related issues, gender-inclusive language, or queer staff who can "assist [users] with how to use equipment."

"Have you used the Rec Centre?"



"How safe do you feel as an LGBTQ+ student at the Rec Centre?"



# FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

In order to gain a more in-depth understanding of students' personal experiences with, or impressions of, the Rec Centre, as well as determine what could be done to make the Rec Centre more 2SLGBTQ+-friendly, two focus groups were conducted in January 2022. In total, six participants attended a focus group. In these focus groups, facilitators drew on people's responses to the long-answer questions from the survey mentioned above to formulate their discussion prompts.

During both focus groups, attendees echoed concerns from the survey of the current Rec Centre space being straight-coded and not visibly queer or welcoming, which seemed to be a big barrier to even stepping foot in the centre. In discussing potential solutions to this problem, we suggest the following, which could add to the welcomeness aspect of the centre:

- 1)** Community-building initiatives (ie. 2SLGBTQ+ fitness classes, educational programming to educate gym-goers on equipment, familiarize individuals with the physical space).
- 2)** Policies that prioritize the safety of gym-goers and hold people accountable for breaking the rules, particularly in cases of sexual harassment.
- 3)** Explicit uses of queer terminology and language related to washrooms/changerooms (ie. implementing gender-neutral washroom/change rooms that may be used by non-binary people, but also people who may not feel safe using a space for their gender identity).
- 4)** Training to allow staff to be more conscientious and respectful when interacting with 2SLGBTQ+ students (ie. to prevent cases of dead-naming when someone's photo/name on their OneCard doesn't match their presented identity). Additionally, more training implemented for the handling of sexual harassment/assault instances.

**5)** Offering one free session of personal gym training, educational tours, or a "buddy system" for 2SLGBTQ+ students, as entering the space can be incredibly daunting by yourself without any prior guidance.

**6)** Implementing a physical barrier to provide a space for women.

**7)** Delegating certain hours for 2SLGBTQ+-only students to be able to access the entire gym, or at least creating separate spaces for 2SLGBTQ+-only students, both of which would operate on an honour system (similar to women's only space currently operating).

**8)** Offering pronoun tags at the front desk to normalise the use of diverse pronouns.

An alternate solution brought up within a focus group was potentially designing a 2SLGBTQ+-only room or space within the Rec Centre, even for just a short period of time. Attendees remarked that having an expanded space would feel less confining and restricting. A longer-term solution might look like re-designing the Rec Centre to be more 2SLGBTQ+-friendly in the ways that were discussed above. Some individuals highlighted that it might be beneficial to reduce the size and/or number of mirrors within this space so as to not trigger individuals' body dysmorphia/dysphoria. It was also mentioned that there would likely be no need for individuals using the 2SLGBTQ+-only space to "prove" their identity since most straight-identifying students would not want to be mistaken as 2SLGBTQ+. Thus, such a room or space would operate on an honour system. When asked what a 2SLGBTQ+-friendly Rec Centre would look like, both focus groups said that the creation of a separate space would be ideal as the current culture of the gym isn't preferable for the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

With respect to having an explicit gender-neutral bathroom in the Rec Centre, all individuals agreed that it would be beneficial, since only having family change rooms can sometimes feel outdated.



# RECOMMENDATIONS

Four main recommendations are offered below, which represent the most common suggestions and recommendations surrounding how the Rec Centre could become more inclusive for 2SLGBTQ+ students. Both the survey and focus groups offer considerable suggestions and these four recommendations were not able to completely encompass all student suggestions. Therefore, it is important to recognize that the execution of the following recommendations will not fully result in 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, but rather, it is the first step to this inclusion.

## Main Recommendations

- 1) Improve visibility:** adding pride flags, including diverse bodies on posters, adding pronouns onto staff name tags, changing signage to explicitly state gender-neutral spaces.
- 2) Staff training on 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion,** including the awareness of vocabulary and 2SLGBTQ+ language, and being equipped to handle harassment reporting.
- 3) 2SLGBTQ+ spaces:** 2SLGBTQ+-only hours or rooms, implementing an area without mirrors, developing or facilitating a learning program or event for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals to learn about the equipment.
- 4) Gender-neutral teams:** changing the gendered language of team sports/leagues to include gender diverse individuals.

### **Recommendation #1: Improve Visibility**

The first recommendation is to improve visible signals of inclusion in the rec centre. As gyms in general have been regarded as catering mainly towards cisgendered, heterosexual, white men, the entire space is often deemed unsafe or unwelcoming for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals. Despite the fact that employees and the facility itself should be assumed to be 2SLGBTQ+-friendly, the lack of explicit support or visibility around the centre unfortunately does not foster a welcoming environment for the 2SLGBTQ+ community.

Through the inclusion of pride symbolism (ie. pride flags, stickers, pins, etc.) and diverse people and bodies on posters, the inclusion of pronouns on staff name tags, and changing of signage to explicitly state gender-neutral spaces, the Rec Centre directly signals to students that the Rec Centre welcomes and supports diverse/minority students, particularly 2SLGBTQ+ students. By creating a welcoming environment for all students, barriers begin to be dismantled, allowing for more students to comfortably access the Rec Centre.

### **Recommendation #2: Staff Training**

The second recommendation is to train staff on what 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion entails. This includes training on vocabulary and queer terminologies. For example, the importance of referring to an individual by their correct name and pronouns. As mentioned previously, a student's correct name may not align with the name on their OneCard. Additionally, while the University has a form allowing for students to indicate their preferred name, this paperwork can take a long time to process. Therefore, the Rec Centre should allow for students to approach their staff to change their name in the Rec Centre system. Both avenues for indicating one's preferred name should be made explicitly aware to Rec Centre users, such as putting this information on a poster at the front desk. Staff should also be trained on other elements of 2SLGBTQ+ inclusion, such as how one can be an ally or supportive of 2SLGBTQ+ people in general. An organisation which can aid the Rec Centre in this training is Egale.

Rec Centre staff should also be well-equipped to handle reports of harassment or discrimination. To truly be inclusive, the Rec Centre must have a zero-tolerance policy for harassment or discrimination. Therefore, the staff need to be aware of what discrimination can look like (including microaggressions), how minorities are more susceptible to harassment and discrimination, and how to react to these situations. By training staff to actively work towards the inclusion of all people at the Rec Centre, minority students will feel more comfortable and safe at the Rec Centre. In addition to staff training, the representation of 2SLGBTQ+ staff is important to creating a more inclusive environment at the Rec Centre. Targeted hiring of 2SLGBTQ+ students may help to achieve this representation.

### **Recommendation #3: 2SLGBTQ+ Spaces**

The third recommendation is to establish 2SLGBTQ+ spaces at the Rec Centre. This can include 2SLGBTQ+-only hours or rooms, similar to women-only hours. Another space for 2SLGBTQ+ individuals that can be established is a program or recurring event for 2SLGBTQ+ students. Such programs or events can teach 2SLGBTQ+ students who have previously been too fearful to enter the Rec Centre about the equipment available at the Rec Centre, and how to use this equipment safely. As well, these programs/events can allow for 2SLGBTQ+ students to meet other 2SLGBTQ+ students who are interested in using the Rec Centre, which could result in a "buddy system" and lead to greater feelings of safety and comfort in the Rec Centre. Importantly, these programs and spaces should be led by 2SLGBTQ+ individuals, which would create a safer and more comfortable environment. Again, targeted hiring of 2SLGBTQ+ students could aid this recommendation. By creating spaces specifically for 2SLGBTQ+ students, students are able to feel greater comfort and safety in a space that has not historically been inclusive. This space would not only signal the Rec Centre's efforts towards inclusivity, but also the recognition of the discrimination and exclusion of 2SLGBTQ+ individuals and the Rec Centre's efforts to diminish this harm.

Another method of inclusion can be the removal of mirrors in specific areas of the Rec Centre. This is particularly important for gender-diverse individuals, among



others, who may suffer from gender dysphoria. Gender dysphoria refers to the psychological discomfort experienced by those whose physical presentation or biological sex does not align with their emotional and psychological identity (Yarhouse, 2015). Thus, removing mirrors can allow for these individuals to feel welcome at the Rec Centre while also not being constantly reminded that their bodies do not correspond with their gender identity.

#### **Recommendation #4: Gender-neutral Teams**

The fourth recommendation is to change the gender requirements of intramural teams and be more explicitly inclusive of gender-diverse individuals. Currently, the intramural teams include “Women’s, Men’s, and Co-ed leagues”, with the Co-ed leagues requiring “minimum female and male participation and roster requirements” (Western Campus Recreation, 2022). While some leagues do not contain these requirements, gender-diverse individuals are excluded from sports leagues that have these requirements. Therefore, the Rec Centre should adjust the names of these leagues to allow for the inclusion of gender-diverse individuals, rather than simply categorizing an individual by their biological sex. Nonetheless, some requirements are still necessary to ensure leagues are not male-dominated and more research is needed to understand best practices.

As well, Western University’s mascot, J.W., uses male pronouns. A simple, yet meaningful change that could be implemented is to establish J.W.’s pronouns as “they/ them”. This change would signify that Western University Athletics, and Western University as a whole, recognizes the importance of individuals’ pronouns and the need for inclusivity. This not only creates a visible presence that can further welcome students into the Rec Centre and Athletics, but also signals to other universities and people that Western is working to become more inclusive.



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