

## Transcript—Episode 3: The importance of LGBTQ inclusivity at UH

*[Theme music begins]*

Lauren: Welcome to the University of Houston Office of Admissions Official Coogcast where we talk about all things admissions, student life, paying for college and much more. I'm your host, Lauren, a student here at U of H.

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Lauren: UH is taking steps to promote a culture that is safe and welcoming to the LGBTQ community. I'm here with Juliann Losey, the Gender and Sexuality Education Program Manager at the UH LGBTQ Resource Center. Juliann, thank you for your time today.

Juliann: Oh, I'm so excited to be here!

Lauren: We're so excited to have you! So, kind of going straight into it—I noticed that we have a thing called Cougar Ally, and I was wondering if you can expand on that a little bit, like what is an ally, and why is it important that we become one and how we become one?

Juliann: That's a good question! So, I think in general an ally is someone who demonstrates support for a group that is either historically excluded, marginalized, discriminated against and/or targeted. I want to put some emphasis on that word "demonstrates support" because there's definitely an active component to allyship. You have to speak up when situations are happening, speak out against systemic oppression and help create spaces and policies that help support and protect folks. Specifically for LGBTQ folks, this is thinking about places where LGBTQ people may not be experiencing support or may be actively discriminated against. As far as allyship goes, I think once those behaviors are being demonstrated, it's pretty obvious that someone is behaving like an ally.

The reason why it's important is because it does literally save lives. I have a little bit of a trigger warning for just a couple of minutes in this answer, but the LGBTQ community has faced a lot of discrimination over the years. Within the last two years, the trans community and the gender non-conforming folks in our community have had record highs of fatal violence in the last two years. LGBTQ youth are also more notably to experience self-harm or attempt suicide than their cisgender and heterosexual peers. Certainly, if you know anyone that needs support with those things, The Trevor Project is a wonderful resource out there for that. So, the reason why allyship is so important is it makes such a big difference on those specific issues. Trans youth who are in an environment where

they can use their chosen name and have their pronouns respected, are 71% less likely to experience severe depression. They're 34% less likely to have thoughts of suicide, and they are 65% likely to attempt suicide. So, I mean, just having that respect and that allyship makes a huge difference.

I also want to give a little bit of a plug that even if someone is in the LGBTQ community, there can be, there's so many opportunities for intra-community allyship. Just because you identify as gay means that there's still an opportunity for you to be an ally for folks in the trans community, or if you're in the trans community, there's an opportunity for you to be an ally for bi people, because there's certainly biphobia and transphobia that exists for those specific identities. Also, of course, for LGBTQ people of color, being an ally to those intersectional identities and creating space for two-spirit folks and same gender loving folks, I think is something that we can do to make everyone's life better.

Lauren: So, I actually kind of want to touch on some of the things that you said, and one of them is the idea of what you said about being active. Like, I think that's something that people either maybe don't consciously think about. They just say, "I'm an ally", but like you said, a big component of that is being active.

Juliann: One of the kind of general rules that I think about—we hopefully are able to be allies to all sorts of communities that need support. So, for myself, I try not to label myself as an ally. I try to live in such a way that the other, the community that I'm trying to support or serve (*laughs*) is like, "no, you are the ally", and I'm like, "okay, great!". (*laughs*)

Lauren: I don't know if you want to go ahead and kind of zone in on what a Cougar Ally is in that training that y'all offer and how to get a part of it.

Juliann: Yeah! So, Cougar Ally Training is a program that we do. It's an experiential education workshop that we spend about, I believe it's about four hours going over some of the basics of what it means to be LGBTQ, and then we do some really in-depth reflection and understanding of what it's like to be in that community. So, it's really been amazing to see how many different kinds of people show to the training. We have students, and faculty and staff, and you get this opportunity to like, really hear each other's viewpoints and consider the ways the LGBTQ community experiences life around you and how you can impact their life as well. So, I kind of talk about it as being a really foundational part of getting introduction into allyship because sometimes we do have folks who are like, "I haven't heard of most of this." "I'm really starting at the entry level" and so we want to make sure that those folks get the understanding of some of the basics. Then, we also get lots of people who are in the community or have lots and lots of friends in the community, and we try to make sure that everybody walks away having the opportunity to learn something new, think about something in a new

way, and then kind of move forward just being a little bit more mindful about what the world looks like for other LGBTQ folks.

Lauren: I've noticed a lot of people using the gender-neutral language and pronouns, but for those who maybe don't understand why it's so important, can you share why gender-neutral language is helpful?

Juliann: Yeah, gender-neutral language is just an easy way to create space for everyone. I think, so just to disclose, I'm non-binary, and so when someone addresses a room that I'm in with ladies and gentlemen—they're not including me in that introduction. When language is so gendered that it excludes people—that can really cause something called dysphoria for people, which is basically the feeling that you aren't being seen, and you're not being recognized in the space that you're in. Especially when that kind of thing happens over and over and over again, it kind of creates this feeling of gender noise in your life where your identity is being repeatedly invalidated, which can certainly lead to some of the anxiety and other mental health concerns that I mentioned earlier. Yeah, when gender-neutral language happens, it's just great because it includes everybody.

I think it's hard for people to shift that mindset because we're so used to kind of assuming the language that we should use. People have been using "ladies and gentlemen" for so long—it takes a little extra mental effort. One of the things I love is that technically "y'all" is gender neutral. *(laughs)*

Lauren: Yes! *(laughs)*

Juliann: While we're here, I just want to give some more suggestions like, I think one of the things I hear a lot in Houston is "sir" and "ma'am", which is totally meant, it's coming from a place of trying to demonstrate respect for someone. Finding some more gender-neutral language like, "friend" or "esteemed colleague" *(laughs)*, or something like that can just make it a little more gender neutral and a little more open to anyone.

Lauren: Going into something that the Cougar Ally Training provides, that is it involves hearing a homophobic comment and then working in a group to determine the best response. What do you think is the general takeaway from this exercise?

Juliann: Ah, yes, our BAR exercise, which stands for breathe, acknowledge, respond. So, I think the general takeaway is that sometimes when we hear something homophobic or transphobic, we have a bit of a reaction inside of us. It can be very easy to take that reaction as fuel and then say something that is ultimately not helpful to the situation. So, instead this activity helps us learn to like take a moment to breathe and calm that reaction inside of ourselves and then acknowledge where the person is coming from. There's usually something that they are not trying to say that's fueling what led to the comment. That gives us the opportunity

to like see their humanity, see where they're coming from and then respond in a way that's going to be much more productive. There is some labor involved in really stepping into giving them some benefit of the doubt or really trying to understand where they were trying to come from, which can be really hard when it's a comment that is incendiary. Then we, by doing that it gives us the opportunity to have the greatest impact by either providing some education, or a different perspective or even just sharing what your values are that may be different than what was stated.

Lauren: That's great cause I'm a psychology major, so that idea, exactly what you just said is super important to me. The idea of really understanding where a person is coming from. Homophobia threatens the safety of students, and UH works hard to create a safe environment for all of its students. So, what would you say are some of the major steps that the university has taken to create a safe environment on campus?

Juliann: Oh, wow! I think, so I'm a little new to our community, but I can already tell coming to this campus from working at a couple of schools previously, there are so many gender-neutral bathrooms around campus. That can really make such a big deal for Trans and gender non-conforming folks who sometimes feel really unsafe in bathroom spaces, to have a room that they can just go use.

It has been so heartwarming to see how many faculty and staff to attend Cougar Ally Training. I like to give the little plug here, that once you attend Cougar Ally Training, you get a placard with your name on it. So, if you're looking for a faculty or staff member in a specific department that at least has that foundational understanding of what it means to support the LGBTQ community, you should be able to find them a little bit easier. There's also been some departments that team up with us to do a review of their department to see if there are opportunities for them to demonstrate more systemic support as an entity. There are offices and departments around campus who have taken those steps to be very intentional to implement that support.

I think also, the university as a whole has created so many opportunities for students to update their names and pronouns in the systems that we use for names. So, you can make sure you have a Cougar Card that has your accurate name on it, so that we're not misgendering people or deadnaming people on a regular basis.

Lauren: Oh, I find that so great! I like how involved the staff is, opening the curtain to this, that so many professors do go to these trainings and want to provide a safe space, just very comforting to know that not only are there students who are your allies, but also your professors are looking out for you as well.

I've looked on y'all's page, on the trainings that you offer and workshops and things like that, and I just want to say y'all have the cutest names for these trainings (*laughs*). Whether it's like, it can be something more serious of really talking about feelings and stuff, and then I've noticed that y'all have some really fun ones about just like either painting or poetry or something. Y'all provide so much, and I feel that's great because if someone is really looking for a community, they can definitely go to y'all's page and see that community literally developing and flourishing, and I feel like that is so awesome!

Juliann: (*laughs*) Well, that's very generous (*laughs*). Thank you. I will give a shout out. We have a gender reveal program or gender reveal party, and we will have cupcakes this year, so stay tuned for that. (*laughs*)

Lauren: I love that. That is so cute. So, I've read in your bio on the UH website, and I just have to ask. You mention that you really enjoy humor and have even braved the stage, so can you share with us about how your experience doing standup and how humor can really start a conversation into tough issues?

Juliann: Ooh! I love making people laugh, truly! I think with tough topics, I think like you mentioned earlier, people can come into those spaces not wanting to say the wrong thing or feeling really anxious about learning something new. I do try to find ways to infuse a little bit of humor, as much as possible actually, just to kind of help bring the mood down. The truth is we want our programs in general to be fun and to be engaging, and just me as a person, I want people to feel calm and relaxed around me and to feel like they can have some of that humor with me as well.

Lauren: Well, I feel like you definitely give off that vibe! (*laughs*) It's so easy to talk to you.

Juliann: Aww!

Lauren: I'm glad that you work to transition that feeling throughout all of the program. I feel like, like you said, it's very important, especially for people who don't know much about the LGBTQ community and want to learn more. Bringing down that mood so it's a little less scary about learning something new or trying to tweak your mindset a bit.

Juliann: Yeah!

Lauren: So, is there anything you'd like listeners to know about the UH LGBTQ Resource center?

Juliann: Yes! Feel free to stop by. We are open and students can hang out in our space. We're open Monday through Friday, 9AM to 6PM in the fall, and we're located in Student Center North, room 201. Check out all the things that you said were cute on our website (*laughs*) at [uh.edu/lgbtq](http://uh.edu/lgbtq). If you're there, I highly recommend

signing up for our monthly newsletter. You can follow us on social media @UHLGBTQ on Instagram, Twitter or Facebook. And then, stay tuned for some of our events.

Lauren: I'm looking forward to that! Thank you so much for coming on! We really appreciate you coming on and talking about the LGBTQ community here at U of H and how y'all are working to foster that.

Juliann: Well, thank you so much for having me. I really enjoyed this conversation!

*[Theme music begins]*

Lauren: Alright y'all, so that was the end of our episode, and we'll see you in the next one! Go Coogs!

*[Theme music fades out]*