

Houston Community College: Trans People Need Not Apply

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Abstract

Many of you will remember that Houston Community College (HCC) seemed to have attempted to cover up the anti-trans bashing of Lance Reyna, a female-to-male transgender student after he suffered an on-campus attack. On June 22, 2010 Reyna was washing his hands in the restroom when a man with a shaved head [...]

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Figure 1. hcc

Many of you will remember that Houston Community College (HCC) seemed to have attempted to cover up the anti-trans bashing of Lance Reyna, a female-to-male transgender student after he suffered an on-campus attack. On June 22, 2010 Reyna was washing his hands in the restroom when a man with a shaved head said in a mocking falsetto voice, “Hey queer!” and put a knife to his throat. Once Lance was on the ground, the attacker began kicking Lance in the head. Lance was rushed to the emergency room.

Campus Police did not file a report with the Houston Police Department and admonished Reyna to allow the Campus Police to deal with the attack without officially bringing HPD in. Furthermore, HCC police attempted to stop the local Fox News affiliate from filming a news piece on the attack. HPD became officially involved when the Transgender Foundation of America (TFA) took Reyna to file an official report. Without the police report, Reyna would not have been able to access assistance from the State of Texas Victim Assistance Fund. Additionally, TFA accompanied Reyna to the line-up and all court proceedings.

I’m sad to say that HCC seems to continue having issues with ensuring that transgender students are welcomed and that they have equal access to a supportive learning environment. I recently learned of a situation in which a HCC instructor named Donny Leveston, who prior to working at HCC was a truck driver and Drill Sergeant, organized a classroom discussion in which transgender people were referred to

as “weirdoes” and “freaks”. Leveston wound up his presentation by stating “I don’t care what those people do as long as they keep it away from me.” What seemed particularly cruel about this instructor-lead discussion was that Leveston was aware that he had a transitioning student in the classroom.

This incident followed an assignment in which students were asked to read a paper written by Leveston titled, “Taboo: Incest and Homoeroticism” in which the instructor required students to explore passages such as:

Even though there is no incest taboo in Santos-Febres’s text, the idea is implied when Martha is getting Sirena ready for a show when the narrator states:

Sirena’s penis was immense, a little grotesque because it was so disproportionate to the rest of her body. If Martha hadn’t been looking at it through the eyes of a mother and a businesswoman, she would not have hesitated to find a place to put that hunk of meat, just to satisfy her curiosity about felling it inside, in all its magnitude (Santos-Febres 34).

Figure 2. image

After the students read Leveston’s thoughts on this subject, the class then discussed GLBT issues.

In an email to the instructor, the student attempted to explain to Leveston how and why his classroom behavior affected the student to such a degree that she was considering withdrawing from his class. Leveston’s response was to dismiss the incident and flippantly claim that if the student didn’t feel welcome in his class, she could withdraw if she liked. Consider the following email exchange between the student and Leveston:

Student:

I left class early on Tuesday because I was highly offended by the way class was going that day and too clarify, I don’t offend easy. I was ok with the GLBT (gay lesbian bisexual transgender) discussion. I didn’t even mind your honesty about your conservative background. In fact, I found it refreshing to hear your honesty. The thing that got me wasn’t that you allowed the class to continue to laugh and say the things they said, nor was it that you didn’t stop them, it was mainly the comment at the end about not caring what people do, as long as they don’t come near you, or something close to that affect.

I really considered dropping your class then and there.... I had never felt such dehumanized as I did

that day. This is why I wasn't in class on Thursday. However I realized it wouldn't hurt you, it would just hurt me. So I am not going to pursue this any further, I find it pointless. I am there to learn what you have to teach, the rest I will ignore. The only thing I ask is if you are going to allow your class to mock and insult those of us who are different, do it when I'm not there.

Leveston:

I apologize if I offended you in anyway... I informed you and the rest of the class that everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion. And, we all need to respect each other. You made it perfectly clear on where you stand on LGBT, and other students did, too. We must all respect that. Again, if I missed something that someone in the class said, it was merely an oversight on my part. I assure you that is and was not my purpose.

And, to clarify my point, which you took completely out of context... I said, basically, everyone has the right to his or her own preference, just do not go trying to push your views on me. Case close.

We will have disagreements from time to time. Arguments are a part of our class. Some of those arguments will make some individuals uncomfortable.

If you decide to drop the class, then do so. I cannot make you stay. I would like for you to stay, but that is up to you.

Student:

The idea that you find it fine to attack the GLBT community using the guise of class discussion is disgusting to me. Would you have such an open mind if I had said about African American people what you said about GLBT people? Or would you say its ok to speak that way because all's fair in the classroom?

Its not the discussion that got me, as I tried to explain. It was that you not only allowed the comments like freaks, weirdoes, the laughing, its you said you don't care what they do, just keep it away from you. That went well beyond a simple classroom discussion to your personal feelings. How did I take that out of context?

I am a transsexual lesbian. I am exactly what you want to keep away from you. Again, how is that out of context?

Levenston:

I see where you stand.

At this point, I think it's important to review what an apology is since Levenston wrote, "I apologize if I offended you in anyway..."

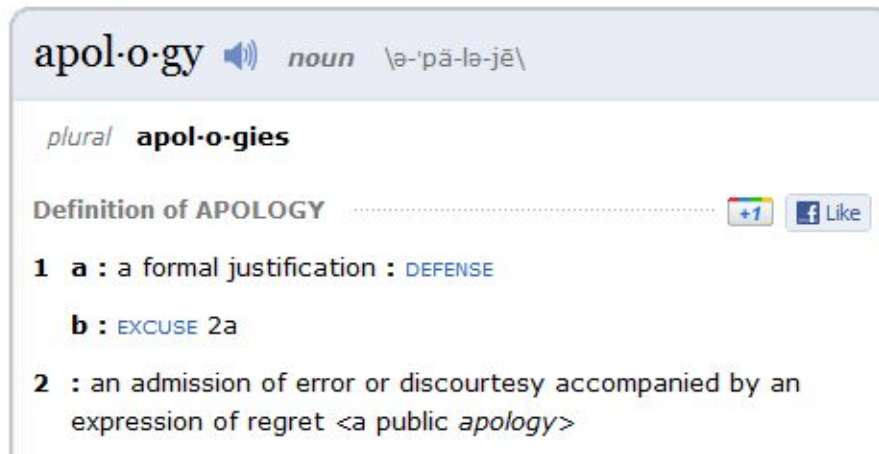


Figure 3. image

Of the above two definitions, which type of “apology” did Leveston offer? Did he acknowledge his error or did he simply offer a justification and/or excuse? This is an important factor in this exchange because only one of these two types of apologies will lead toward ensuring that all students - yes, even trans students - are afforded an equal chance at moving forward with their education free of discrimination.



Figure 4. image

- Donny L Leveston, photo not available -

Consider the following scenario:

- I require students to read a scholarly yet inflammatory paper I wrote about “Incest and Black Eroticism.”
- I then lead students in a discussion about African-Americans in which students make racial slurs and laughingly mocked black people.
- I then end the discussion by saying, “I don’t care what black people do as long as they keep it away from me.”
- I did this in a classroom full of white people... with the exception of one black student.

What do you think the HCC’s response should be? How quickly should I expect to be looking for other employment?

Now, consider the this scenario:

- I require students to read a scholarly yet inflammatory paper I made about “Incest and Homoeroticism.”
- I then lead students in a discussion about GLBT people in which students make anti-trans statements and laughingly mocked transgender people.
- I then end the discussion by saying, “I don’t care what GLBT people do as long as they keep it away from me.”
- I did this in a classroom full of cisgender people... with the exception of one transgender student.

What do you suppose HCC’s response would be to the second scenario? Yup, you guessed it; while this student alerted HCC administration to this problem a week ago, they have yet to do anything about it. Levenston simply attempted to justify what he allowed to take place in his classroom by framing the mocking as an exercise in education and feels quite happy about his response. As Levenston said, “Case closed.”

How does this experience mirror the experience of other transgender students?

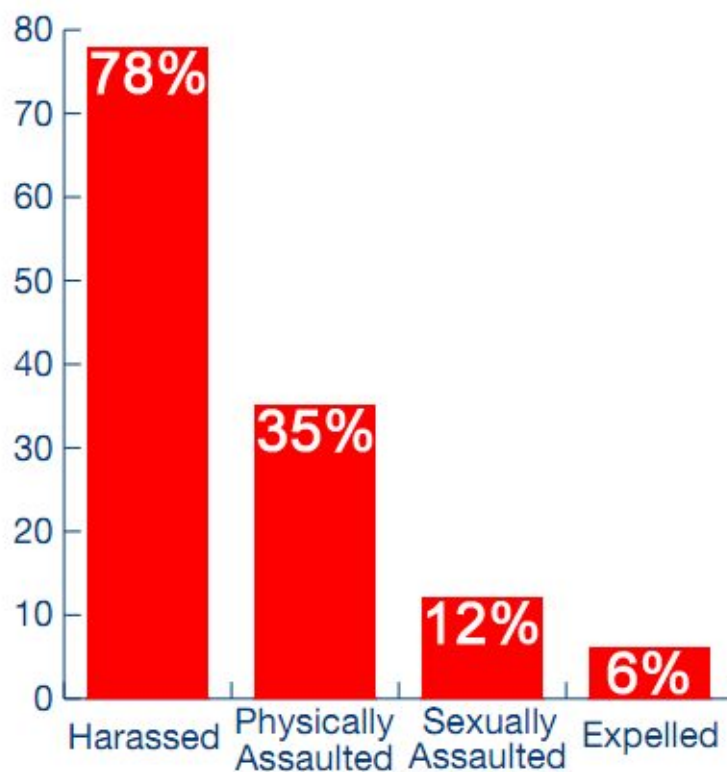


Figure 5. image

Transgender people reported alarming rates of harassment (78%), physical assault (35%) and sexual violence (12%) - this from the nation’s largest (6,400+ respondents) and most comprehensive transgender study. This study found that 23% faced a “catastrophic” level of discrimination and concluded “It is part of social and legal convention to discriminate against, ridicule, and abuse transgender people within foundational institutions such as... schools every day.”

Medical providers and health systems, government agencies, families, businesses and employers, schools and colleges, police departments, jail and prison systems--each of these systems and institutions is failing daily in its obligation to serve transgender and gender non-conforming people, instead subjecting them to mistreatment ranging from commonplace disrespect to outright violence, abuse and the denial of human dignity. The consequences of these widespread injustices are human and real, ranging from unemployment and homelessness to illness and death.

So, what can we do about this you ask?

You can contact the school administration and the Academic Dean's Council to demand that they address this issue.

Academic Dean's Council:

- Dr. Maria Straus, Director of Instructional Initiatives: maria.straus@hccs.edu
- Dr. Stephen Levey, Associate Vice Chancellor, Academic Instruction: stephen.levey@hccs.edu

HCC Administration:

- Dr. William W. Harmon, College President: william.harmon@hccs.edu
- Dr. Cheryl Peters, Executive Dean for Instruction and Student Services: cheryl.peters@hccs.edu
- Linda Koffel, Dean of Instruction: linda.koffel@hccs.edu
- Cheryl Johnson, Dean of Student Services: cheryl.johnson@hccs.edu

cross-posted from Ehipassiko

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