

SECTION 3: LGBTQ+ AT COLUMBIA: THEN AND NOW

Anke A. Ehrhardt



Anke A. Ehrhardt, Professor of Medical Psychology (in Psychiatry) Emerita and co-founder of the HIV Center for Clinical and Behavioral Studies and the Program for the Study of LGBT Health, joined Columbia's Department of Psychiatry in 1977. Her pioneering work on gender and sexual development of children, adolescents, and adults started

in 1964. She conducted some of the first clinical cohort studies of transgender individuals and set a standard for understanding the process of sexual differentiation. In 1987, she made history by receiving a major grant from the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) for one of the first, large interdisciplinary research centers in the country to address the HIV pandemic. From the beginning, the Center's work included a focus on sex-positive and gender-sensitive interventions for LGBTQ+ youth and adults with multiple vulnerabilities (e.g., mental health, homelessness). From 2007 to 2018, Ehrhardt served as Psychiatry's Vice-Chair for Academic Affairs, strongly advocating for the recruitment and advancement of women and other underrepresented groups in academic medicine. Since 2012, Ehrhardt has led research and training efforts of the Program for the Study of LGBT Health (see Section 4.4), with projects on LGBTQ+ families and parenting, the effects of gender-affirming hormones on brain health, improving access to competent LGBTQ+ healthcare, and promoting equal opportunities for transgender people in the workplace.

3.1: A BRIEF HISTORY OF LGBTQ+ ACTIVISM AT COLUMBIA

Note: *These highlights are part of the known history, which has been recorded through books, University archives, oral histories, and interviews. As with any history, we must acknowledge the inherent privilege of the tellers, those whose stories are recorded and repeated.*

In 1966, Columbia sophomore Stephen Donaldson (a pseudonym for Robert Martin) founded the Columbia Student Homophile League (today's Columbia Queer Alliance), the world's first queer organization on a university campus. Despite the administration's initial reservations, the University granted the club's charter in April 1967, and the story made the front page of the [New York Times](#) on May 3, 1967.

Though the group's initial membership was small, the members had the support of the University's chaplain, an Episcopal priest and antiwar activist named Reverend John Cannon. By 1970, weekly LGBT Friday night dances were held in Earl Hall. In 1971, students established a gay lounge in Furnald Hall, which is now known as the Stephen Donaldson Queer Lounge. Thanks to the advocacy of the NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, led by Andrew Dolkart, Professor of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation at Columbia, Earl Hall has been added to the National Register of Historic Places.

LGBTQ Columbia University Oral History Project

The [LGBTQ Columbia University Oral History Project](#), an effort of the Columbia Center for Oral History Research and the Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics (INCITE), is a compilation of oral histories of several LGBTQ+ individuals and allies at Columbia. The complete transcripts, audio, and video are cataloged and archived in Butler Library.

In his oral history interview for the 2019 Columbia [Pride of Lions](#) project, History Professor David Eisenbach noted that the activism at Columbia began well before the Student Homophile League: "We have the famous examples in the 1940s of Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, the foundation of the Beat moment, which opened a whole discussion in post-war America about

sexuality. These students were nurtured by great professors like Lionel Trilling and Mark Van Doren . . .

[Columbia had this] history of nurturing the rebel." For more information, please visit the [Columbia Libraries Columbia LGBT records](#).

In 1995, the group [Proud Colors](#) was created at Columbia to address the specific needs of queer students of color.



Pride of Lions front page, 1972.

Kendall Thomas



Kendall Thomas, Nash Professor of Law and co-founder of the Center for the Study of Law and Culture at Columbia Law School, joined its faculty in 1983 as the first out gay professor and the second African American faculty member. [In an interview](#) for the Columbia Law

School website, Thomas recalls that “the central and shaping reality of American legal culture for those of us in my generation who were gay or lesbian—whatever our race, ethnicity, or nationality—was the knowledge that we were entering the profession at a time when it was still a felony punishable with imprisonment in many places in the country to engage in consensual sexual intimacy with someone of the same sex.” Throughout his career as an activist during the AIDS epidemic, as a scholar and teacher in critical race theory, law and sexuality, and, most recently, as a performance artist, Professor Thomas has challenged traditional power structures and paved the way for the robust LGBTQ+ scholarship that exists at Columbia today.

Peter Awn



Peter Awn (d. 2019) was a professor of religion and dean emeritus of the School of General Studies, having served on the faculty since 1978 and as dean for 20 years. For a time in the 1980s and 1990s, Awn was one of a small cadre of faculty members willing and available to speak on

behalf of gay and lesbian issues at any and all campus events and task forces. As one of the founding members of CU-GABLES—a “lesbigay” faculty, staff, and supporters organization, he was at the forefront of a years-long effort in the mid-1990s, spearheaded by Jonathan Cole, provost at the time, to convince the University Trustees that domestic partner benefits be extended to all at Columbia. From a 2019 remembrance in the [Spectator](#): “A man known for his socks, suspenders, and mischievous smile, Awn mentored thousands of students through a crucial juncture of their lives, and, for many, often for years beyond—officiating their weddings, meeting their children, and cheering them on in the New York City Pride parade.”

Gay Health Advocacy Project

In 1985, in response to the unfolding AIDS crisis, student counselor Laura Pinsky and graduate student Paul Harding-Douglas founded the [Gay Health Advocacy Project \(GHAP\)](#). It was the first organization in the United States to provide HIV testing, counseling, and education to students. GHAP continues to operate today as part of Columbia Health, offering a wide range of sexual health services.

“Columbia has a lot of history of challenging things. [Columbia has been a pioneer in student organizing, for] both of these identities—in this case, me being Black and being gay. I think a lot of people at Columbia embrace such differences. You mention harassment, reporting, etcetera. I actually have nothing to report there. And that’s a great thing. I definitely appreciate being here. I realize how lucky many of us are to be part of Columbia. It can, you know, it can definitely get better. I think it’s great that the Provost’s office is thinking so progressively and proactively to provide guidance.” (Junior faculty member, Morningside)

This early activism and academic work of individuals like Professors Ehrhardt, Thomas, Awn, and Blount planted the seeds for the LGBTQ+ Scholarship Initiative (see Section 7.2) and many of Columbia LGBTQ+-related contributions to the academy (see Section 4).

For more information on LGBTQ+ history, see the Resources website.

3.2: COLUMBIA LGBTQ+ COMMUNITY AT A GLANCE

"I could not have imagined at the beginning of my career that in my 50s, people would ask me my pronoun preference or ask me how I describe myself in gender terms. Because back in the day, you had to really fight to get people to notice differences. We were all just lumped into a kind of LGBT without any recognition of what that might mean. The work of transgender politics in recent years has been to really educate people about what young people call nonbinary identification or identifications that do not simply fit into male, female, masculine, feminine boxes. I think that Columbia has made a good effort to try to have a lot of sensitivity to trans issues and that's been really great." (Senior faculty member, Morningside)

Faculty and Staff

Currently, we do not know how many Columbia faculty and staff identify as LGBTQ+. Data on their sexual orientation is not routinely collected, and information about gender is not collected in a way to reliably assess the number of transgender and nonbinary faculty and staff. What we do know is that an estimated 11.4–12.2 million US adults identify as LGBTQ+, including approximately 1.4 million transgender adults (Badgett et al.2020). According to Gallup, the percentage of Americans identifying as LGBTQ+ has increased from 4.5 percent in 2017 to 5.1 percent in 2021, largely attributed to increasing numbers among the younger generation. Of the 1,521 respondents to the 2015–2016 Faculty Quality of Life Survey, 7 percent identified as LGBTQ+; 85 percent identified as straight; and 8 percent did not disclose their sexual orientation identity. In addition, 0.4 percent of respondents identified as trans or gender nonbinary.

Visibility of LGBTQ+-identified faculty and staff varies considerably across Schools, Departments, and units at Columbia. In part, this may be related to the focus of scholarship; certain disciplines and interdisciplinary areas of focus may be more conducive than others to addressing issues of sexual and gender diversity in their teaching and research. It is critical to understand that, although their visibility may vary, LGBTQ+-identified faculty, staff, and students are present across the University in nearly every discipline, school, department, and unit.

"I think this LGBTQ+ resource guide is a very symbolic gesture; it will help a community feel seen and represented. I would hope that the putting together of a guide also would be a nice catalyst for a way that members of this community can engage with one another."

(Administrative staff, Morningside)

New York City provides a wealth of LGBTQ+ resources to members of the Columbia community. It is one of the reasons LGBTQ+-identified faculty, staff, and students want to work and study at Columbia.

"I can tell you that being in a big university in New York City is just such a pleasure, because there is a constant back and forth between the art museums, galleries . . . Almost nothing in virtual teaching and virtual online talks can make up for the loss of that organic intellectual community that was the consequence of this chemistry between a big diverse university and an exciting city."

(Senior faculty member, Morningside)

Due to its sheer size and diversity of resources, the city can also be hard to navigate. In particular, LGBTQ+ people new to New York may benefit from help to find an entry point:

"New York City is a beast to navigate, and it's so hard to build long-lasting relationships in the city because it's so transient. It's so big, it's so fast, and so if you could be helpful and identify at least connections for people early on, and at different points in their time at Columbia, that would make a difference, because it is hard. It's not easy to build relationships in New York because it's so fast-paced." (Faculty member, Morningside)

At times, however, the rich resources of New York City (NYC) are taken for granted, leading some to conclude that, just by its urban location, Columbia has the issues related to LGBTQ+ lives covered. Aside from local peer institutions that have their own resources, NYC resources do not necessarily address the specific needs of LGBTQ+ people in higher education, particularly for faculty. Columbia's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL) has offered programming designed to respond to the needs of LGBTQ+ teaching faculty.

"We have had an affinity group for LGBTQ+ faculty, [which has] been highly attended. The room was packed and they were like, 'there's never [been] anything like this.' And I said, well, I'm so sorry to hear you say that. But I'm also glad to hear you say that because that's what I thought, too." (Columbia administrative staff, Morningside)

Beyond these efforts by the CTL, there is a broad need for LGBTQ+ faculty to connect with one another and engage in a community at Columbia.

CUIMC Human Resources (CUHR) organizes Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), including one for LGBTQ+ employees who meet every month for networking, educational, and social opportunities. To learn more about the LGBTQ+ and other ERGs, please visit the CUIMC HR website: <https://www.cumc.columbia.edu/hr/working-at-cumc/staff-diversity-inclusion>.

Students and Trainees

"We didn't have a club . . . so we just created one." (Graduate student, Morningside)

Columbia students have created a number of LGBTQ+ student organizations. These include the [Columbia Queer Alliance](#) and the Medical Center's [Queer and Ally Partnership](#). Nevertheless, in a number of settings across the University, opportunities for students—and trainees—to connect can be improved, particularly when it comes to connecting LGBTQ+ graduate students with undergraduates and to joining forces across schools on the Morningside campus. For students in schools with little visible LGBTQ+ representation, this is especially important. *For an updated listing of LGBTQ+ student groups, please visit the Office of University Life's Resources to Promote LGBTQ+ Inclusion: <https://universitylife.columbia.edu/resources-promoting-lgbtq-inclusion>.*

"But in my experience . . . [building a sense of community is] quite disparate; it seems like . . . something that's left up to the students to patch together as friends, not really as a synthesized community. And that's something that I'm not particularly thrilled with . . . [we need] spaces for people to gather—spaces for visibility. I think things like that could really help push LGBT life a little bit further on campus." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

1. Visibility and Community. Students agreed that campus resources need to be more easily accessible:

"A lot of this feels like it's sort of built out of our own incentives, sort of outside of built spaces . . . and I think there are built spaces like QAP [Queer Allied Partnership] at VP&S, like Lambda [Health Alliance at CUIMC]." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"[It would be helpful] if there was even an initiative that identif[ies] faculty who were queer- and trans-affirming because I know in [some departments] you're not going to find queer faculty, so maybe there are people who consider themselves to be allies." (Graduate student, Morningside)

"All of the different resources that I did need because of my identities . . . I had to find separately. There wasn't a centralized LGBT resource location I could look at. I had to find the medical information for insurance in one place, the information on social life in another place. I'd find all of these things in quite disparate locations." (Graduate student, Medical Center)



"We had Lynn Conway come and give a discussion, and with faculty at an [Office of the Provost-sponsored] luncheon. I think that was very helpful, and it was the first time that these issues had ever been talked about."

(Senior faculty member, Morningside)

In 2016, Lynn Conway BS'62, MS'63 gave the Columbia Engineering annual Magill Lecture. Conway, Professor Emerita of Computer Science and Electrical Engineering at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, was a pioneer of microelectronics chip design. Conway was also an early advocate for transgender people, having faced challenges in her career when she transitioned from male to female in 1968.

2. Mentorship. Having LGBTQ+ (or allied) mentors among the faculty had a powerful impact on students' experience:

"At one of the introductions to med school there was an event that was hosted by [the Associate Dean for curriculum] . . . It was at his house, and we had an opportunity to just, like, feel like we were humans and we're not like exclusively defined by or based off of the identifiers that we check off on a check box." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"Especially like within medical school, and within our medical training, the times that I felt most supported in this specific identity have been ones in which . . . there's been a mentor." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"One thing that our student organization is trying to do is build an outlet for faculty who self-identify as LGBTQ to sign up to be mentors for students to try to build in that mentorship, but without [students] specifically [having to] seek it out." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"Queer representation [of] somebody successful in my field is currently impossible because they don't exist above me." (Graduate student, Morningside)

3. Financial Burden. LGBTQ+ students, who may not have emotional and material support from family for tuition, housing, or medical care, may face an additional financial burden:

"One of the biggest struggles that I see in the community . . . at an existential level, like, it's financial; a lot of the members of the community . . . are not well-supported by their family . . . not only financially, but also emotionally . . . not only for health insurance, but also like shelter and food . . . I'm only supported by loans." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"I know as a trans person who's trying to get healthcare that transitioning is really [expletive] expensive. And I think that's not something that I could get my financial aid package increased for at all." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"[There is an additional challenge of] . . . being able to get an apartment in the city because you don't have a guarantor . . . that can weigh on mental health. And then, there aren't additional mental health resources. So I think really looking back at some of these determinants, even before we get to the point of health interactions, is really important, especially as far as financial support could be increased." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"When we talk about creating community, that also includes sort of financial and material support. That's really the only way to start building a safe and strong community; [it] starts with the structural supports that are required." (Graduate student, Medical Center)

"I want that financial insecurity to be understood and to be known and for, like, the shakiness of the backgrounds of where some of us are coming from to be in the forefront of these conversations and not an affinity group conversation that happens after the real meeting, and I think that hearing people who are in leadership have those conversations in front of us and in public . . . they may be happening. But if we're not aware of it, we can't benefit from that work or . . . from knowing that that work is happening." (Graduate student, Morningside)

4. Intersectional Identities and Mental Health. Many LGBTQ+ students experience an additional emotional burden due to navigating intersectional identities in addition to their academic and professional responsibilities. Students on the Morningside campus indicated the need for more counselors able to speak to the queer experience, and given wait-times, a directory for referrals elsewhere:

"Removing that copay [for student mental health services] would be very helpful because . . . as most people know, queer people, especially people of color, . . . we don't have the same resources to get to outside medical help." (Graduate student, Morningside)

“I really appreciate that the visibility is there, that I can show myself and I show up with all of myself, but I do think that sometimes it does come with . . . this responsibility that can be a bit rough with everything else that I have to handle in life [as a first-generation student].”

(Graduate student, Morningside)

Key Resources for Students

For a comprehensive, up-to-date listing of student resources, Please visit the Resources for Promoting LGBTQ+ Inclusion [website](#) from University Life.

The Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA) provides resources for for undergraduate students through LGBTQ @ Columbia (<https://www.cc-seas.columbia.edu/OMA/CULGBTQ>), with LGBTQ+ student group advising, events, education, advocacy, and other services and resources to help all students explore and better understand diverse queer and trans identities, experiences, and communities at Columbia and beyond. They organize the Queer and Trans Advisory Board and the Queer and Trans Resource Team. These collectives work together to identify and address LGBTQ+ community needs and advocacy points.



University Life and the **Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement** co-host a series of Graduate Initiative Roundtable panels with faculty members who share their experiences in higher education. Panels include LGBTQ+, First Gen, Women of Color, and Black and Latinx faculty, but these events are open to the whole Columbia community. For more information, please visit: <https://www.universitylife.columbia.edu/graduate-initiative>.

Columbia Pride: Columbia Alumni LGBTQ+ Shared Interest Group

Once students graduate, they have additional opportunities to connect and build social and career networks as alumni. The Columbia Alumni Association (CAA) is the University-wide alumni community of more than 365,000. Spanning all of Columbia’s schools, the CAA provides opportunities for alumni and students to connect with fellow Columbians through events, Regional Clubs, and Shared Interest Groups (SIGs) around the country and the world.

SIGs serve to build community based on shared identities, experiences, and backgrounds. **Columbia Pride** is the official SIG for LGBTQ+ and allied alumni. Columbia Pride’s mission is to build and strengthen community, foster a safe environment, and deepen the sense of connection between the LGBTQ+ alumni and student communities, as well as between those communities and the Alma Mater. For more information, visit <http://pride.alumni.columbia.edu/>.

LGBTQ+ Scholarship Initiative

Columbia’s faculty, staff, students, and other trainees include scholars whose work focuses on diversity in sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression; the experiences of LGBTQ+ people; and the challenges they face.

The Office of the Provost has supported a number of LGBTQ+ initiatives with participation from across campuses, schools, and departments. Since 2016, the Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty Advancement has sponsored Queer Disruptions, an annual conference that gathers an international slate of esteemed scholars, activists, and artists to explore the ways that queer studies, politics, and practices theorize, transform, and generate new social possibilities and reimagine scholarship. This conference is organized by the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Council (WGSSC).

Additionally, the Office of the Provost has pioneered the LGBTQ+ Scholarship Initiative to promote the recruitment of LGBTQ+ scholars to Columbia. To date, this initiative has resulted in four new faculty hires in Nursing and Psychiatry, History, English and Comparative Literature, and Religion (see [Section 7.2](#)) and additional authorizations have been approved for Psychology and Art History.

For vignettes about Columbia’s LGBTQ+ scholarship, see [Section 4](#) (Beyond Inclusion: Hubs of LGBTQ+ Scholarship at Columbia).