Being out in STEM

I was really excited to be able to start fresh and establish my identity right away,” Elise Wantling says about starting college. “Instead of people seeing me as who I used to be—this very religious and quiet girl who from one day to the next turned into a really loud queer person—people would finally just see me as who I am, which is I’m Elise and I’m queer and I really like science.” Meeting other LGBTQ scientists at the 2016 national Out in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (oSTEM) conference just after starting college furthered Wantling’s commitment to being out. Up until then, Wantling had only seen LGBTQ people struggling. But the conference included “queer people who were successful, and queer people who were happy, and queer people who had partners and who had lives and who had families,” says Wantling, now a second-year biology student at the University of Kansas (KU) in Lawrence. “It proved to me that things were going to be OK.”

Q: What is it like to be an LGBTQ student in STEM?
A: STEM can be competitive, and people may try to use your queer identity as evidence that you’re not as good or as professional as they are. Still, I cling to the hope that STEM should be a little more accepting than other fields, because hopefully we can acknowledge and respect one another based on the knowledge we contribute. I haven’t been in it for very long, and I may have just gotten lucky to not run into the wrong people yet, but so far, I have been met with almost nothing but love and kindness. But there is always room for improvement, and so, regardless of where my career takes me, I will continue to advocate for myself and others.

Q: What can people do to be more inclusive?
A: You don’t know the lives of people around you, so be very conscious about what you say and how you act. Don’t make or laugh at homophobic or transphobic jokes—they are very hurtful. Try to stand up if you see someone being harassed or if you hear somebody making a backhanded slight. Be conscious of the space that you take up. Don’t speak over us, but at the same time give us support. It’s a delicate line to walk and a delicate balance to achieve. But if you care, you’ll learn how.

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