

By Elisabeth Pain

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.”

Science Careers spoke with Wantling—who received the oSTEM Global STEM Service Award at this year’s conference last month in Chicago, Illinois—about what it is like to be queer on campus and how to make academia more inclusive. This interview was edited for clarity and brevity.

Q: Why did you get involved in oSTEM?

A: I really liked oSTEM’s mission, which is that we can be out with queer people and still be in STEM. I don’t have to compartmentalize part of my identity so that I can either be a successful advocate or have a successful career. Now, as vice president of the KU chapter, one of my main priorities for this year is to provide support to our students and build a strong sense of community, because being queer in Kansas is hard.

There are all sorts of groups that come and protest queer events on campus. You’re just trying to go to class, and they are standing there reminding you that there are people who want to hurt you or kill you just because of who you love or the way that you present your gender. Beyond campus life, a lot of KU students don’t have supportive families, so if they go home, they have to either pretend they’re not queer or put up with a lot of bullying there, too. In my work with oSTEM, I want our students to know that although life out there may be hard, at least as long as they are inside the doors of our meeting room, they are safe, they are cared about, and they have people they can rely on.



“We can be out with queer people and still be in STEM.”

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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