Discriminatory Texas Law Spurs Questions About How to Show Solidarity with LGBT Students

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It is a fall tradition for the UC San Francisco Graduate Division to recruit new students at the annual conference held by SACNAS, the non-profit Society for the Advancement of Native Americans and Chicanos in Science. For the Graduate Division, the SACNAS conference represents a unique opportunity to reach promising undergrads in STEM, but this year’s conference location posed a dilemma.

The 2018 SACNAS conference was held in San Antonio, Texas, one of the states subject to the travel ban imposed by California State Assembly Bill 1887 [1], which prohibits state-funded travel to any state where current laws allow discrimination based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. The law specifically says that the University of California is covered by the restriction. (The other banned states are Alabama, Kansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Dakota, and Tennessee.)

The state of Texas is included on the travel ban list because in 2017 it enacted a law, HB 3859, permitting adoption agencies to turn away LGBT couples seeking to adopt children. Last year, the Human Rights Campaign issued a statement condemning Texas Governor Greg Abbott for signing the bill into law, calling it “a patently discriminatory bill which allows child welfare organizations, including adoption and foster care agencies, to turn away qualified Texans seeking to care for a child in need, including LGBTQ couples, interfaith couples, single parents, married couples in which one prospective parent has previously been divorced, or other parents to whom the agency has a religious objection.”

Like almost all of the other UC campuses, UCSF was able to participate in the SACNAS conference in spite of AB 1887, because there were federal (as opposed to state) funds
available to cover the costs of travel and the exhibit; but whether or not to make the trip presented a difficult choice for all concerned — students, faculty, and staff alike.

"We [the UCSF Graduate Division] and our sister UCs considered not attending SACNAS this year. We wanted to show our steadfast support for the spirit of the ban and stand with our LGBTQ students here in California by complying with the restriction, but at the same time we didn't want to miss an important opportunity to reach out to the students who attend the SACNAS conference, the majority of whom are members of groups that are underrepresented in science," said Dr. Anne Duncan, PhD, director of diversity and learner success.

Going to the conference was a very tough call for Roberto Efraín Díaz, a PhD student in the Tetrad program at UCSF. "I felt like I had to choose between my identity as a queer Latinx and my identity as a scientist. I've been out for 8 years now and have learned to live my life openly and proudly, with (thankfully) little adversity in my upbringing due to either of these identities. The thought of going to Texas for my professional development while the state has discriminatory laws in place felt like a betrayal not only to myself, but also to everyone else in the undocumented and LGBTQ+ communities struggling to live their lives," he said.

Díaz created a petition on Change.org [2] to ask SACNAS to boycott any state that has discriminatory laws and to add an anti-discrimination clause to any future conference related contracts. "We cannot champion diversity while overlooking how our decisions directly affect a subset of people we claim to support. We must understand that different identities intersect and we must support people for all of their identities, not just one of them. That's why I started this petition - to promote change around how we think about and implement diversity efforts. Supporting Latinx and Native scientists also means supporting women, queer folx, immigrants, people living with a disability, and so much more," he said. The petition had nearly reached the stated goal of 500 signatures as of November 20.

The national SACNAS organization, based in Santa Cruz, California, had called for a vote by its board of directors on whether to keep the conference in Texas back in September 2017, because the organization was philosophically opposed to a different piece of legislation — Texas Senate Bill 4, a hotly contested effort to ban sanctuary cities in the state.

While SB4 was not targeted specifically at Texas's LGBTQ community, Equality Texas, a non-profit organization that advocates for LGBTQ rights in the state, says that SB4 subjects LGBTQ people of color to discriminatory stops and unjust questioning about their immigration status by local law enforcement. The group is also concerned that SB4 puts LGBTQ people who have fled violence in other countries at risk for deportation.

So why didn't SACNAS move the conference to another venue? SACNAS Executive Director, John Winnett, who is himself openly gay, said in an online response to the petition [3], "We cannot turn our backs on thousands of members and conference attendees that reside in Texas. When groups are under attack, we must use the power of a national organization to offer resources and help shape and change policy through partnerships, government influence, and alliances. Texas is home to 10% of all SACNAS chapters, and the state has a large Hispanic population.

There were financial considerations too. "It would have put SACNAS in extreme financial jeopardy if we had broken contracts [with the conference venue] that were signed in 2013," said Jenny Kurzweil, director of communications and marketing at SACNAS.
SACNAS took several steps to make the 2018 conference a positive experience for LGBTQ attendees and others. Before the conference, they presented a series of webinars to outline strategies for students, faculty, and administrators at California public institutions to attend. The conference offered an LGBTQA+ reception, and Dr. Lauren Esposito, founder of 500 Queer Scientists, was a featured speaker. The San Antonio LGBT Chamber of Commerce issued a letter of support, and the San Antonio Pride Center was offered as a resource to conferencegoers. There were gender-neutral restrooms at the conference as well; a controversial Texas "bathroom bill" died in session in 2017, thanks to objections from civil rights groups and business leaders there.

UCSF students who decided to attend the conference this year were vocal about their concern for LGBTQ attendees and determined to show their support. They made and distributed buttons that read "Stand in solidarity with undocumented and LGBTQ+ scientists" and "Who's missing at #SACNAS2018? Stand up for undocumented and LGBTQ+ communities." Ramiro Patino, a PhD student in the Biomedical Sciences program, spearheaded the button-making project and personally handed out buttons at the conference. Every one was taken.

It must be mentioned that support for HB 3859 and SB4 in Texas is not universal, nor is a disdain for the LGBTQ community. At around the same time SB4 was coming into being, San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg appointed an LGBTQ liaison to his staff, pledging his commitment to governing with fairness and compassion, including service to the LGBTQ community. Nirenberg, who ran for mayor on a progressive platform, had also endorsed a 2013 city ordinance banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity as a San Antonio councilmember, and as mayor he has supported a lawsuit against SB4.

It's hard to say with moral certitude whether it was right or wrong for UCSF to exhibit at this year's conference. "Having done it in support of our current and future students, the best outcome we can hope for is that SACNAS attendees looking at graduate schools around the country will decide that UCSF is where they want to be ? not only for the excellence of our graduate programs, but also for the warm and welcoming community they will find here, whatever their identities and lived experiences are," said Duncan.

(story by Jeannine Cuevas)

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[1] https://oag.ca.gov/ab1887