

GENDER AND SEXUALITIES ALLIANCE NETWORK:

Supporting Leadership and Healthy Development of Youth
in Boyle Heights,
Long Beach,
and South Los Angeles

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Founded in 1998, the Genders and Sexualities Alliance (GSA) Network's primary mission is to address and combat homophobia and transphobia in middle and high schools across the nation.¹ The Boyle Heights, Long Beach, and South Los Angeles chapters of the GSA Network have sought to support the healthy development of their members while engaging them in organizing, advocacy, and other efforts to advance their community's well-being. By hosting programming at local high schools, GSA Network and its coordinators assist GSA youth members in fostering inclusive and safe spaces across campuses. GSA also offers unique opportunities for high school chapters to coordinate campaigns focused on sexual orientation and gender identity, while being attentive to issues affecting students who come from low-income, immigrant, or communities of color. GSA is one of many youth leadership programs funded by The California Endowment (TCE) that participates in Building Healthy Communities (BHC), an initiative seeking to improve health and well-being in fourteen very low-income communities in California.

This report draws on survey data collected from the regular participants, or "core" youth members, of the BHC-affiliated Boyle Heights, Long Beach, and South Los Angeles chapters of the GSA Network. The purpose of this report is to provide a brief overview of GSA's youth membership and outline some of the ways young people have been involved in and have benefitted from this group. This report contains five main sections. First, we briefly describe GSA programming and the demographics of core leaders in the above three BHC communities. Second, we lay out both how youth were recruited and why they remained in the organization. Third, we show how youth members participated in different types of activities in order to provide information on GSA's programming. Fourth, we share how members benefitted from their involvement. We conclude by briefly summarizing some recent campaign milestones. We

hope that this report informs the GSA Network’s efforts to continue its inclusive youth programming, as well as provide insights for other programs and initiatives seeking to build the leadership capacity of low-income, racially diverse LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer) youth and their allies.

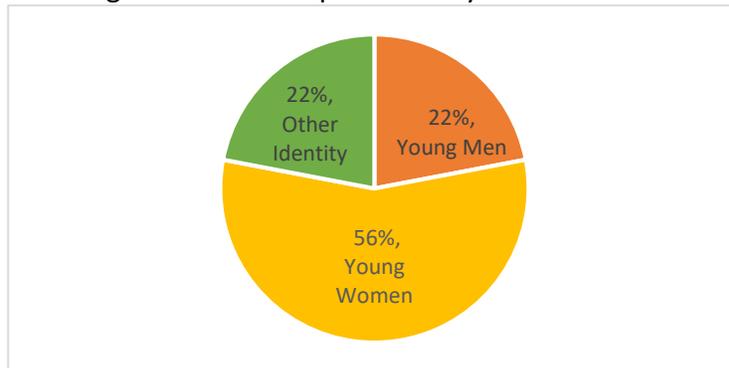
GSA Programming and Members

GSA clubs are student-run clubs that bring together LGBTQ, questioning, and straight-identified high school students. Most clubs meet once a week or every other week during lunch and after school. GSA clubs are primarily led by students, but they also receive assistance from adult allies, such as school teachers or counselors, who serve as advisors within their schools. Additionally, the paid GSA Network staff provide support to GSA clubs by meeting with the clubs, providing one-on-one coaching to youth leaders, hosting larger leadership trainings, and providing opportunities to work on district and state-wide policy campaigns.

There are three primary models of GSA clubs. *Activist GSAs*, which make up about 40% of all GSA clubs, focus on tackling specific problems and issues on their campuses through coordinated campaigns. *Support GSAs*, which make up about half of all GSA clubs, serve to discuss important issues related to identity and inequality. *Social GSAs*, which make up the remaining 10% of GSA clubs, provide students with a safe space to socialize with each other.

For this study, we surveyed 27 youth leaders who regularly participate in the BHC-affiliated Boyle Heights, Long Beach, and South Los Angeles high school activist GSA chapters. The demographic background of members reflects GSA’s goals of engaging diverse low-income youth. The average age of members at the time of the survey was 17, but they ranged in age from 14 to 29. As shown in Figure 1, the majority (56%) of participants identified as female, and 22% identified as male. Meanwhile, 22% of participants identified with another gender identity, reflecting the GSA’s inclusivity of members who do not identify along the gender binary.

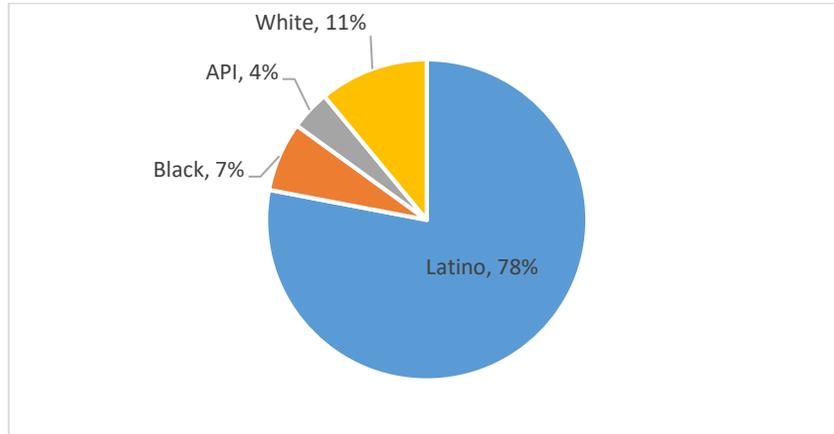
Fig. 1 Gender composition of youth members



As demonstrated in Figure 2, members were racially and ethnically diverse: 78% identified as Latino, 11% as White, 7% as Black, and 4% as Asian Pacific Islander (API). Additionally, 59% were raised by at least one immigrant parent. Most came from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, as

74% were eligible for free or reduced lunch at school and 26% were raised by at least one parent with a bachelor's degree.

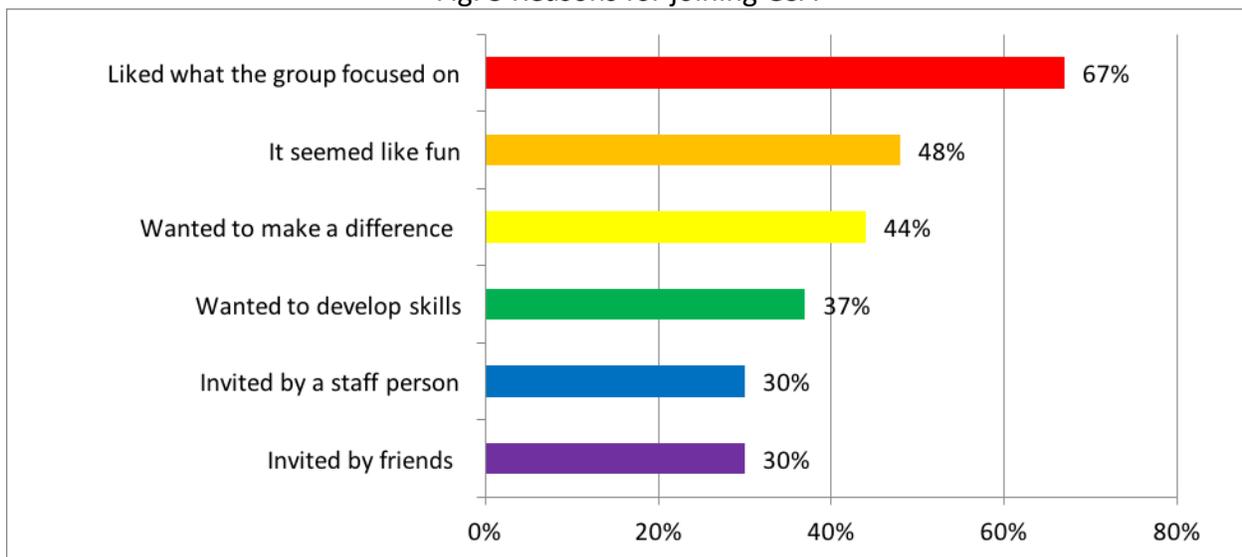
Fig. 2 Racial/Ethnic composition of youth members



Member Recruitment and Retention

Members were asked to choose one or more reasons why they joined their high school GSA group. As Figure 3 shows, two-thirds (67%) were drawn to GSA because of its focus. Many—48%—also became involved because the group seemed like fun. Meanwhile, another 44% also joined because they wanted to make a difference in their respective communities. Thirty-seven percent of the youth wanted to develop new skills, while 30% were invited to join by a staff person and another 30% were invited to join by a friend. These findings suggest that the majority of the youth joined because they wanted to help their communities and because they were attracted to the GSA's social environment.

Fig. 3 Reasons for joining GSA



The retention of members is significant to building any organization. Notably, over half of members (52%) had participated in the GSA for a year or longer. This suggests that the GSA Network retained its students, offering them extended opportunities to develop their leadership capacity over time. Of the remaining youth, 22% had participated for 6 to 11 months, 15% had been involved for less than 6 months, and the rest did not specify how long they had been with GSA.

Members' Involvement

We asked respondents to report the types of activities that they engaged in as part of GSA. The list was based on activities commonly reported among youth organizing and youth leadership groups across the state of California.² Results suggest that GSA orients its youth members towards civic engagement. Notably, more than half (52%) of the youth members reported that they had participated in a march, action, or rally (see Figure 4). Meanwhile, 52% of survey respondents made a public presentation, 44% reported making important decisions, 41% planned a meeting or event, and 19% wrote about a community issue. GSA also supports the personal well-being and success of its youth members. Over a third of of respondents participated in activities that promoted healing and/or took part in college preparation and success activities. Just over a quarter participated in a statewide or regional Building Healthy Communities activity that involved youth from other organizations.

Fig. 4 How members participated in their GSA group



How Members Benefit from Their Involvement

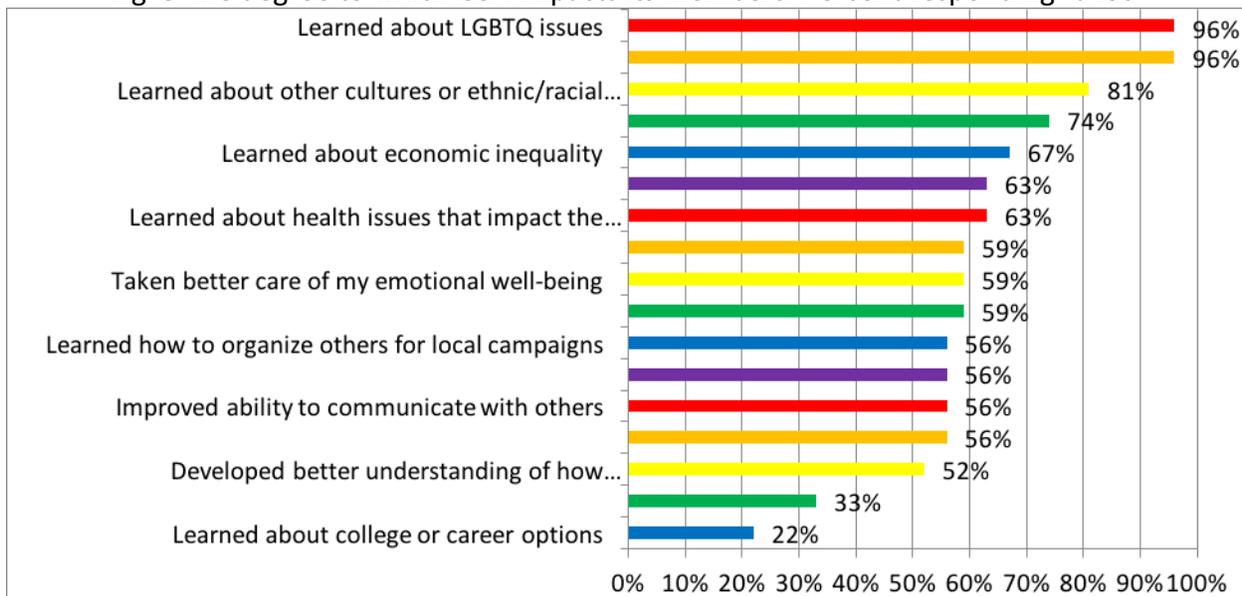
Survey results indicate that GSA supports the healthy development of their young members. We asked members to rate how their organizational involvement impacted different aspects of their personal development—did it have *no impact*, *very little impact*, *some impact*, or *a lot of impact*?

Figure 5 shows the percentage of respondents that reported that their organizational involvement had “a lot” of impact on each of the areas of personal development included in the survey.

The GSA has had a significant impact on members’ increased understanding of different forms of diversity. Almost all participants (96%) indicated that they learned a lot about LGBTQ and gender issues. Additionally, 81% reported that they learned a lot about other cultures or ethnic/racial groups, while 63% learned a lot about their own culture or ethnic/racial group. Through their GSA group, members also reported a lot learning about economic inequality (67%). These findings suggest that GSA substantially helps members develop their knowledge of important issues related to identity and inequality.

Results suggest that GSA enhances members’ leadership capacity. Almost three-fourths of respondents (74%) reported that GSA helped them learn a lot about how to stand up for their beliefs. Meanwhile, 63% learned a lot about health issues that impact their community. Over half of participants reported significant improvements their abilities to speak in public (59%), organize others for local campaigns (56%), impact local policies (56%), and plan events and activities (56%). GSA participation also has implications for members’ well-being, as 59% reported taking a lot better care of their emotional well-being and one-third took a lot better care of their physical health. Most also reported building or strengthening trusting relationships with mentors. Overall, these findings suggest that GSA contributes to members’ understanding of social diversity, their leadership capacity, and overall well-being.

Fig. 5 The degree to which GSA impacts its members: Percent responding "a lot"



Recent Coalitional Efforts and Campaigns

While GSA members have personally benefited from their involvement, they have also developed their capacity to participate in grassroots campaigns that advance LGBTQ rights in public schools. Much of this work has been accomplished through alliances with other youth or adult community-based organizations also committed to working for social justice. GSA's members have been involved in the following efforts:

- First Multi-Stall Gender-Neutral Bathroom in Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD). GSA members took part in a campaign to install a gender-neutral bathroom in Santee Educational Complex in South Los Angeles. This campaign began in January 2016 after a Santee school employee prevented a gender non-conforming student from using a girls' restroom. In response, youth demanded gender neutral bathrooms. As part of their campaign, students hung posters around their school that read "It's just a toilet" and "Pee in peace." Students also held rallies to support their cause. Additionally, youth published an article entitled, "Don't freak out! It's just a toilet," in the Los Angeles Times' youth publication, the High School Insider, which helped raise awareness about their campaign. The GSA Network acted as a support, with youth from across the Southern California region assisting Santee by sharing ideas about tactics, providing encouragement, and spreading information about the campaign on social media. In April 2016, the GSA and their allies won their campaign when a girls' bathroom at Santee was converted into the first multi-stall gender-neutral bathroom in LAUSD.
- Protecting LGBTQ Students in California. In 2016, the GSA Network partnered with Equality California to demand the passage of two bills in California that work to protect LGBTQ students: AB 2246, which requires California school districts to develop comprehensive suicide prevention policies, and AB 1732, which requires all single-stall bathrooms in California to be labeled as gender-neutral. In order to promote these bills, GSA students traveled to Sacramento in May and August 2016 to speak on behalf of LGBTQ students and lobby the legislature. Thanks in part to grassroots efforts, both bills were passed by California Governor Jerry Brown in late September 2016, and will go into effect in 2017.
- Equitable School Funding. The GSA joined other South Los Angeles and Boyle Heights youth organizations to demand proper implementation of the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) 'Equity is Justice' Resolution. Passed in June 2014 as a result of youth and community organizing efforts, this resolution guides expenditures of supplemental state funding made available through the Local Control Funding Formula (LCFF). Funds aim to support the academic achievement and well-being of "high needs students," including those who are low-income, English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, and in the foster system. To this end, the 'Equity is Justice' Resolution calls for the adoption of the Student Needs Index, which ensures that more funding goes to schools with a greater proportion of high needs students.

As part of their campaign efforts, youth and their adult allies have met with LAUSD school board members and staff to hold them accountable to the Student Needs Index.

- School-Based Wellness Centers. In 2014, GSA students partnered with other Los Angeles youth and community organizations to win the ‘Wellness Centers Now!’ campaign, through which they secured \$50 million in funding for the expansion and construction of school-based wellness centers at select schools. Following up with this victory, youth and their allies are involved in efforts to ensure health services meet their own and the community’s health needs. At Roosevelt High School, youth have demanded the expansion of existing services and the development of new services, including vision care, mental health services, and reproductive health services. Moreover, youth demand that services providers properly attend to LGBTQ youths’ needs. Meanwhile, at Mendez High School, youth and their allies are providing input into the development of a state of the art facility. Community members have demanded that the wellness center be designed and placed in a location accessible to the community around Mendez High School. To date, youth and their allies have secured commitment from health providers at Roosevelt High School and Mendez High School.
- Promoting Inclusive Mental Health Services in Schools In coalition with other youth organizations, GSA students advocated for students’ mental health within LAUSD. On June 6th, 2016, the GSA sent a student delegate to a Boyle Heights community forum with the recently appointed LAUSD Superintendent Dr. Michelle King. A GSA delegate made the case for culturally competent services that address the unique needs of trans and queer youth of color at the schools. A week later, on June 14th, GSA students attended an LAUSD board meeting to advocate for such services. The GSA plans to continue pressuring the district to provide inclusive mental health services for all students.
- Addressing the School-to-Prison Pipeline. GSA members have participated in the coalition that aims to combat the criminalization of LGBTQ and other young people of color in schools. To this end, GSA youth have advocated for the full implementation of the 2013 LAUSD School Climate Bill of Rights, which banned suspensions for vaguely defined behavior labeled as “willful defiance.” They have also promoted the Equal Protection Plan, which aims to decriminalize student conduct and prevent the racial profiling in fines and arrests on school campuses. Moreover, they joined efforts to demand divestments in school police.
- Improving School Climates and Culture. In April 2016, GSA members in Long Beach joined with other students and parents for a town hall and candidates’ forum with the four candidates running for the Board of Education for Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD). GSA members gave testimonials and urged the candidates to support and implement school programs and services to help students of all backgrounds succeed in graduating high school.

Students made four demands, including investing in high need students, reducing discrimination in student disciplinary practices, increasing health and wellness services, and listening more to students and parents. These demands were met, as the 2016 Local Control and Accountability Plan (LCAP) for LBUSD included plans to fund the expansion of college and career counseling and mentoring, nursing and psychological services, and restorative justice workshops for staff. The 2016 LCAP also included plans to expand programming to support leadership among promising students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds.



Supporting the Leadership of LGBTQ Youth and their Allies

Focusing on youth, this research report evidences the GSA Network’s efforts to support the leadership and healthy development of LGBTQI youth and their allies. By engaging them in a range of civic and other activities, the GSA builds members’ skills and capacities to address community concerns. This formative civic experience is likely to have a lasting impact on members’ abilities to work for social change.

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¹ Since its inception, the GSA has evolved and has thus changed its name in order to be more inclusive of its different youth members. As of April 2016, the Gay-Straight Alliance Network became the Genders and Sexualities Alliance Network and also adopted the new tagline of “Trans and queer youth for racial and gender justice.”

² Terriquez, Veronica and Abdiel Lopez. 2016. “BHC Youth Program Inventory Survey: Key Findings.” Los Angeles, USC Program for Environmental and Regional Equity. Available at:

https://dornsife.usc.edu/assets/sites/242/docs/VT_BHC_Youth_Program_Staff_Inventory_Report.2016.pdf