In August 2007, The Chronicle of Higher Education published a story about the three openly gay presidents in higher education, all at private universities. Immediately after the story ran, five additional openly gay or lesbian presidents “outed” themselves to the Chronicle, bringing the number to eight. By 2010, when these presidents decided to form LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education, the number had grown to twenty-five. Today, there are more than 50 openly LGBTQ presidents and chancellors across all sectors of higher education.

Members of our group now convene at most national higher education conferences, including AASCU’s, and independently at least once a year. As a relatively new chancellor, I’ve found the support and encouragement of these colleagues to be important to my success at Washington State University Vancouver. This is a new era for out presidents and our spouses and partners. We have greater visibility. Governing boards are more open to LGBTQ presidents and same-sex couples, and past fears that fundraising or legislative success will suffer are dissipating. Yet, relatively speaking, the number of openly LGBTQ presidents remains very small—only seven within AASCU.

Recently, our nascent organization has focused on creating pathways to senior leadership. This June, we will host our first national conference: LGBTQ Leaders in Higher Education: Shaping Our Futures. Our objective is to create safe spaces and networking opportunities, as well as mentor candidates for senior leadership positions in higher education. The conference, which runs June 26-28, will address the challenges faced by LGBTQ administrators, and develop strategies to overcome them. As with all traditionally marginalized communities, we must support the professional development of our LGBTQ colleagues in higher education so institutional leadership becomes reflective of the diverse students and communities we serve.

Equality is not a settled matter. All presidents and chancellors must remain steadfast in our commitment to diversity in our communities. LGBTQ students and faculty are asking us to recognize gender fluidity, provide more support for transgendered members of our communities, and address both physical violence and cyber-bullying, as well as longstanding concerns with homophobia. We face more complex matters of sexuality since my first days as an administrator, when members of LGBTQ campus organizations heatedly debated whether they were social clubs or activist groups. Today we’re more visible on our campuses, in far more diverse roles and with a broader range of identities grouped under the LGBTQ label.

The courage of those college and university presidents who came out some years ago made it possible for this next wave of presidents, of which I consider myself a part, to be open from the first moments of the search process. This commitment to being out has changed the nature of presidential searches and has required campus and board discussions around LGBTQ issues in hiring.

As LGBTQ college and university presidents, we have the opportunity and privilege to bring our personal narratives to bear in creating climates of acceptance and support for LGBTQ members of our communities. But like all matters of diversity on our campuses, all higher education leaders must be unequivocal in supporting safe environments that promote learning and personal development.