

# First living-learning community for LGBTQ+ studies opens this fall:

## Lavender House.

For decades, the shade symbolized a quiet understanding among LGBTQ+ individuals and later, a revolution.

With rainbow flag adornments increasingly commonplace across college campuses, individuals are often encouraged to wear their pride on their sleeves. But that doesn't mean it is always easy.

This month, Virginia Tech will open an academic residential space on campus for students who identify as members or allies of the LGBTQ+ community. [Lavender House](#) is the university's first living-learning community (LLC) for students who want to study queer history.

Lavender House, located on two floors of [O'Shaughnessy Hall](#) — home of the [Leadership and Social Change Residential College](#) — will house 41 students in double-occupancy rooms. Lavender House, one of [18 living-learning communities](#) at Virginia Tech, is sponsored by the [College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences](#), but students of all majors are welcome as residents.

Virginia Tech's LLCs are niche communities that integrate academics into the residential living experience. The benefits of Lavender House are two-fold: providing students with a built-in community from the moment they step foot on campus and affirming that the lives of LGBTQ+ individuals are worthy of academic study.

Lavender House residents will be required to take a three-credit introductory course on queer studies, which will provide a foundation for understanding the LGBTQ+ community's history of leadership and advocacy. Students also will learn about LGBTQ+ lived experiences and the ways they are shaped by intersecting and marginalized identities.

This move by Virginia Tech underscores steps that colleges and universities nationwide have been taking for several years to offer specific campus spaces, from residence halls to cultural centers, where students who identify with the LGBTQ+ community can gather and feel a sense of belonging.

At least 425 colleges and universities across the country provide gender-inclusive housing options, according to Campus Pride, a nonprofit that advocates for safe college environments for LGBTQ+ students.

Shane Windmeyer, founder of Campus Pride, said successful academic retention and graduation rates depend on whether students can achieve academic success without fear of harm, bias, or an unsafe classroom environment.

“A living-learning community provides LGBTQ+ students a safe space to call home and to live fully and authentically as who they are,” Windmeyer said. “Campuses that create these inclusive living options are ensuring that LGBTQ+ student safety is a priority inside and outside the classroom.”

Ashleigh “Bing” Bingham, director of the LGBTQ+ Resource Center at Virginia Tech and advisor of HokiePRIDE, said when naming the LLC, “Lavender House” stood out for the shade’s connotation.

“There’s this really beautiful history around talking about queerness without talking about queerness,” Bing said. “And many did so using soft, beautiful, vibrant purple.”

In the 1920s, lesbians often wore sprigs of lavender and violets to symbolize their love for other women. In letters, Oscar Wilde used the phrase “purple hour” to describe love among gay men. Bingham said she wanted the name to be obvious for students searching for queer community, but not so obvious as to immediately out someone wearing the LLC’s name on a T-shirt.

“Lavender itself is meant to be empowerment. It’s meant to be strength. It’s meant to be connection,” Bing said.

Living-learning communities at Virginia Tech have built a strong track record.

"Students report a higher sense of belonging when they're part of a living-learning program," said James Penven, director of Living-Learning Programs at Virginia Tech, adding that students living in such communities often have higher cumulative GPAs and retention rates. "It also reinforces the current environment at Virginia Tech, as we are trying to integrate students' social and intellectual lives."

Laura Belmonte, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences, worked adamantly to make the idea a reality at Virginia Tech. Belmonte, who authored "The International LGBT Rights Movement: A History," has personally experienced the shifting attitudes toward LGBTQ+ members in academic settings. She said she was inspired to support the LLC after a former student said he wished he had the opportunity to study queer history.

Ultimately, Belmonte hopes Lavender House becomes a thriving space for LGBTQ+ students and their allies and a reflection of Virginia Tech's commitment to ensuring students feel affirmed and engaged in their identities, regardless of their backgrounds.

"It's a really potent illustration of VT's commitment to building spaces that really ensure the wellness of our students, both within their curricular time and their extra co-curricular space," Belmonte said. "When the opportunity to be the academic sponsor for this new endeavor came to us, it was really a no-brainer for me that we would do this."

The program's larger goal is to demonstrate the centrality of a curriculum that examines the diversity of the human experience by emphasizing the intellectual contributions of queer studies, said Shaila Mehra, assistant dean for diversity, equity, and inclusion in the College of Liberal Arts and Human Sciences.

"For decades, scholars have studied how LGBTQ+ people have faced down oppressive systems, built novel forms of community, and worked in coalition with other groups to build a just future," Mehra said. "We are excited to see how students will use this classroom learning to imagine and create new forms of belonging at Virginia Tech."

Jess Silvia, who received her master's degree from Virginia Tech in higher education and student affairs, is the Lavender House program director, which means that she will coordinate its activities and programs.

“Serving the LGBTQ+ population has always been a passion for me and it's why I wanted to go into higher education with college students,” Silvia said. “The thing that excites me the most is that this is the first time Tech has done something like this. This has definitely been a long time coming.”

Silvia has been in the role since July 1. She said she is excited for move-in this month, and the energy students will bring to Lavender House.

“I'm really excited to start setting traditions and creating keystone programs that students know they will be able to experience when they join Lavender House, whether it's this year or five years down the line,” Silvia added.

According to the Trevor Project, a nonprofit that focuses on suicide prevention among LGBTQ+ youth, those in this community are more than four times as likely to attempt suicide than their peers, and 28 percent of LGBTQ+ youth report homelessness or housing instability at some point in their lives.

Trace Broyles, who will be a student leader for well-being, formerly known as a residential advisor, at Lavender House this fall, faced struggles of his own during his coming out process. He said he's determined to create a strong support system within the residence hall.

“I've been through a lot of the things students coming into the program have gone through,” Broyles said. “When I came out, it didn't go well. These students have queer-specific issues they are dealing with, and I can relate to and help with that. When they graduate college, when they leave the university and go into their adult life, they are going to keep these memories they've had in our residence halls with them.”

Lavender House's official ribbon-cutting ceremony will be held Oct. 14 during the university's homecoming weekend.

*By Kelsey Bartlett*