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Providing a positive campus climate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students

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Abstract

The purposes of this paper are three-fold. The first purpose is to discuss the homophobic stereotypes and discriminatory campus environments with which gay, lesbian, and bisexual students must deal on a daily basis. The second purpose is to discuss the negative effects these practices have on gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' college experience. The final, and main purpose of this paper, is to provide suggestions on how student affairs professionals can provide a positive campus climate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.

PROVIDING A POSITIVE CAMPUS CLIMATE FOR GAY,
LESBIAN, AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS

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In 1959, at a small midwestern college, a student told her faculty adviser that she had discovered that one of her friends was a homosexual. The adviser informed the dean of students, who promptly called in the student in question and pressured him into naming others. Within twenty-four hours, three students had been expelled; one week later, one of these students hung himself (D'Emilio, 1990, p. 16).

Of course, since then things have changed, or have they? On the college campus of the 90s it would be nice to think that we as a society have grown, at least to the point where such tragic occurrences are an unfortunate aspect of our past. All too often, however, gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students on college campuses across America are victims of verbal and physical abuse and other acts of bigotry. Unfortunately, there is usually little or no support system available on most college campuses to help these students deal with the negative results of discrimination. Until recently, it was even believed that GLBs had contracted a disease. It was not until the 1980 version of the Diagnostic and Statistical

Manual of Mental Disorders that homosexuality was no longer listed as a disease (Pope, 1995).

The purposes of this paper are three-fold. The first purpose is to discuss the homophobic stereotypes and discriminatory campus environments with which gay, lesbian, and bisexual students must deal on a daily basis. The second purpose is to discuss the negative effects these practices have on gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' college experience. The final, and main purpose of this paper, is to provide suggestions on how student affairs professionals can provide a positive campus climate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students.

Heterosexism is defined by Herek (1991) as "the belief that heterosexuality, having sexual relations exclusively with members of the opposite sex, is the only natural and acceptable sexual orientation and the fear, hatred, and prejudice directed at those deemed non-heterosexual" (p. 68). People who hold such beliefs are considered to be homophobic. Homophobia (Goff, 1990) is "an intense, irrational fear and dread of homosexuals and homosexuality, and can be: internal-- values incorporating homophobia are internalized and become a part of the person's belief system; external--

external forces and institutions which are premised on unfounded and prejudicial teachings and beliefs about homosexuality" (p. 601). It is for this reasoning alone that many gay, lesbian, and bisexual students have uncomfortable or unsatisfying college experiences.

Heterosexual Beliefs and Homophobic Stereotypes

The following are results of a number of studies that focused on the experiences of gay, lesbian, and homosexual students at college. It was found that three out of four homosexual students were victims of verbal harassment, one out of four were threatened with violence, almost one in five reported personal property damage, and most feared for their safety on campus (D'Augelli, 1989). Of the 125 residents in this study, six were victims of extreme violence, which included either being punched, kicked, beaten, or attacked with a weapon. The following recollections of gay, lesbian, and homosexual students recall actual acts of violence and verbal threats:

A student recalled walking home from a party with a boyfriend when a young man hit him in the face without provocation. He had to get 18 stitches. Another student also needed stitches after he was

assaulted at a party when he commented on the attractiveness of a straight man there. The bathroom mirror on one man's residence hall floor had scrawled acrossed it: "Fag in 408. We don't like cock suckers on our hall." (Rhoads, 1995, p. 71)

Even more discouraging are the results of another study that surveyed heterosexual college students to measure homophobic beliefs (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990). Of the students in this study, fewer than 30% had an interest in learning about lesbians and gay men. In fact, a higher percentage, 35%, would prefer to have a completely heterosexual college environment. Homophobic stereotypes are responsible for many such beliefs.

One study in particular discovered four such commonly held student homophobic stereotypes. First, "lesbian/gay relationships are only about sex." The second stereotype is that "gays, lesbians, and homosexuals have a disorder that needs to be cured." The third belief is that "gay men, lesbians and bisexuals are predators who approach heterosexual individuals for sex." The final stereotype commonly held by students is that "lesbians can be identified by having a masculine appearance and that gay men can be

identified by having feminine characteristics"

(Geasler, Croteau, Heineman, and Edlund, 1995, p. 485).

These stereotypes and the aforementioned homophobic behaviors were substantiated by Herek (1989) after information was compiled from several college campuses. The study revealed that the majority of the gay, lesbian, and bisexual students are being victimized by either verbal abuse or threats of physical violence. In addition, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, in its 1989 sample of 40 colleges and universities, discovered that 1,329 anti-gay episodes had occurred across the United States in the previous 12 months (Liddell & Douvanis, 1994, p. 122). With such homophobic attitudes, stereotypes, and discrimination taking place on most college campuses, it is no wonder "it was found that homosexual students perceived the college campus climate as significantly less emotionally supportive, less intellectual, and less tolerant of change and innovation than a heterosexual comparison group" (Reynolds, 1989, p. 66).

Effects of Heterosexual Beliefs and

Homophobic Stereotypes

To understand fully how the homophobic environment of today's college campus affects gay, lesbian, and

bisexual students, it helps to be familiar with their developmental process. The special developmental stages that GLBs are suspected of going through, as stated by Cass (1979) are: "(a) identity confusion, (b) identity comparison, (c) identity tolerance, (d) identity acceptance, (e) identity pride, and (f) identity synthesis" (p. 301). Cass believed that these are the stages a student must accomplish if he/she is to successfully complete the "coming out" process, whereby a person lets those around them know of their homosexuality. Completing these stages during the college years is important because many social and relationship skills are developed during these years, and it can be extremely difficult, or even impossible, to correct the psychological and emotional damage caused by not having these skills properly developed. For this development to occur, GLB students must have positive interactions with heterosexual students (Cass, 1984).

Another developmental aspect of coming out that affects identity development is the process of coming out to family. First of all, "unlike other minority groups, parents of homosexual children cannot communicate to them what the coming out experience is

like" (Maylon, 1981, p. 21). Second, it was found that more than half of GLB students were so afraid of being rejected by family members that they refused to come out to family or friends (D'Augelli, 1991). This is another reason development for this group is so important during the college years. For the majority, it is this time away from home and family which provides the opportunities for expressing their sexual identity. This is in complete contrast to heterosexual children who can reveal their concerns dealing with the formation of their sexual identity to friends and family at a relatively young age.

One of the most recent stage models dealing with homosexuality, which takes into consideration all past models, found that:

1. Homosexual identity formation occurs against a backdrop of stigma.
2. Identities develop over a long period of time, involving a number of changes occurring roughly in a series of stages.
3. Development involves an increasing acceptance of the label "homosexual" as applied to self.

4. Lesbians and gay men develop increasingly personalized and frequent contacts with other homosexuals over time.

5. The stages of development homosexuals go through to establish their homosexual identity are: sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption, and commitment. (Troiden, 1988, p. 109)

It is these important developmental stages that are stagnated by the continued proliferation of homophobic stereotypes and sexual discrimination. In the D'Augelli (1992) study more than half of the students were not comfortable with disclosing their homosexuality. In contrast, almost all the participants (98%) thought that disclosure was important. One student put the coming out process into perspective:

Coming out involves taking all the negative things that you've heard about yourself--heard about those people--and just saying to yourself that none of it matters as much as you do. It means opening up the door and letting out all the internalized hatred, fear, self doubt, and self worthlessness. I think it's the point of breaking.

You either come out or you sort of die. (Rhoads, 1995, p. 67)

This student's statement of "you sort of die" should not be taken lightly. The most startling effect that homophobic stereotypes and heterosexual beliefs have on the gay, lesbian, and bisexual college populations is an increased suicide rate. It has been determined that 30% of all successful teenage suicide attempts, or 1,500 suicides a year, are completed by gay and lesbian teens. This is made even more substantial by the fact that gays, lesbians, and bisexuals only make up 10% of the teenage population (McFarland, 1993). This relates directly to the important coming out period which tends to occur during the freshman and sophomore years of the college experience.

Another negative effect that homophobic stereotypes and sexual discrimination have is to cause gay, lesbian, and bisexual students to alter their behavior. The main result is not being open about their sexuality to avoid the violence and harassment they believe they would receive by doing so. For this same reason, they also avoid certain places, people, and hang-outs on campus that may lead others to suspect

their homosexuality. This includes either dating or claiming to date members of the opposite sex. In addition, fear of retribution can also cause a student to refrain from becoming involved in gay and lesbian student organizations. These changes in behavior are all detrimental to GLB students because it separates them from possible emotional and social support structures which are important to their development and academic experience.

This fear of harassment and violence has one additional effect on GLB behavior: it leads to students' failure to report incidences of violence and gay bashing to the proper university authorities. D'Augelli (1992) determined several reasons for this. First, GLB students believe that nothing would be done by the authorities if a report was made. Second, GLB students fear increased harassment and violence from perpetrators. Finally, GLB students fear the possibility of being "brought out" during the investigation process, thus leading to the possibility of even more harassment and personal injury.

In the end, the whole system of harassment against gays, lesbians, and bisexuals feeds on itself. Fearing abuse, GLB students refuse to come out, which prevents

heterosexual students from getting to know the real GLB student, and thus only strengthens existing stereotypes. It is up to student service professionals to break this chain of events. This needs to be done if homosexual students are to be provided a more positive college experience.

Suggestions for Student Services Professionals
to Improve the GLB Experience

The first step that student affairs professionals should take is to determine what dilemmas, if any, are being faced by GLB students on their campus. Tierney (1992) believed this can be accomplished by creating a committee of both heterosexual and homosexual faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Not only should the committee be responsible for researching the campus climate but also for appointing a coordinator for GLB equity. The coordinator would be responsible for arranging seminars and training sessions for faculty, staff, students, and administrators. Finally, this committee would be responsible for creating and implementing a sexual orientation clause. This clause should indicate that the college does not discriminate against or allow the discrimination of someone on the basis of their sexual orientation. This should include

the areas of housing, classes, services, financial aid, and employment.

The following is a list of ten themes that an exemplary student affairs program would provide. It would be used by a student affairs committee, similar to the one mentioned earlier, to evaluate the quality of the institution's GLB services.

1. Student affairs professionals openly express affirmation of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people and confront homophobic remarks made by others.

2. Student affairs professionals respond to homophobic harassment and violence with support for victims, sanctions for perpetrators and anti-homophobic education for all.

3. Student affairs professionals are inclusive of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in language, programming, written materials, social events, and diversity activities/policies.

4. Student affairs professionals treat lesbian, gay, and bisexual people with the same level of regard they would any other students or colleagues.

5. Student affairs professionals are sensitive to the unique developmental and situational needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people.

6. Student affairs professionals value students and staff being "out," work to promote a climate that supports openness, and respect the confidentiality of those who choose not to be "out."

7. Student affairs professionals provide staff training and campus programs designed to reduce homophobia, increase awareness, and promote sexual self-esteem.

8. Student affairs professionals provide or support programs specifically for lesbian, gay, and bisexual persons on campus.

9. Student affairs professionals advocate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual organizations and individuals.

10. Student affairs professionals are equitable and affirmative in employment procedures, decisions, and benefits. (Croteau & Lark, 1995, p. 474)

One of the best locations to provide programming about homophobia is in the residence halls. Many GLB students claim residence halls are where homophobic activities are likely to occur. The compactness of most college residence halls makes it that much harder to escape discrimination and to hide one's sexuality. However, this aspect of the residence hall makes it conducive to programming. When student affairs professionals attempt to develop programming to deal with heterosexism and homophobia, there are some things to keep in mind.

First, programs should go beyond promoting tolerance of GLB students to nurturing GLB students and their beliefs. This is important because "tolerance defines a condition of allowing without accepting or encouraging, whereas nurturing defines a condition of allowing, accepting, and encouraging gay, lesbian, and bisexual students" (Schreier, 1995, p. 20). Without these in place, little more than a short-lived cease-fire between heterosexual and homosexual students can be expected.

Second, men have higher rates of homophobia than women, and freshmen have higher levels of homophobia than sophomores, juniors, and seniors. For example, 30%

of men, compared to 7% of women, made negative comments toward a homosexual student (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990). This later result backs up what other studies have found: that men hold significantly more homophobic attitudes and are much more likely to verbally and physically attack gay, lesbian, and bisexual students than women. This study also found that such attitudes were lower among those who had increased contact with homosexuals. Unfortunately, research found that less than half of freshmen men and women knew a gay man casually, and only 9% of men and 15% of women knew a gay man well. The statistics for knowing lesbians were even lower: 5% for men and 6% for women (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990). This suggests that when developing programming it may be beneficial to offer different types or more intense kinds of homophobic programming for first-year and male students, especially in the case of first-year men.

In addition, student affairs professionals should provide programming with a multimodal treatment program. Rudolph (1989) developed a multimodal workshop to increase participants' knowledge and understanding of GLBs. It included a didactic lecture, videotape presentation, case-study role-play, and small group

discussions. It results in improved attitudes toward GLBs. It is true that this workshop would be better suited for training faculty and staff. However, it could be developed, with help from student affairs professionals, to be utilized in certain sexuality and developmental classes and in the residence halls of a university. Students could benefit by concentrating on the media source which best matches their learning style.

One additional and more useful programming idea for student affairs professionals to utilize in residence halls is the panel. Panels made of up GLB students, staff, and faculty have been found to be extremely useful in lowering homophobic levels in college students. They consist of two or more homosexual panel members, preferably with at least one GLB representative. They are not time-consuming and can be held in a variety of settings. Most importantly, the panel allows students not only to become more informed on homosexual issues, but it also provides them contact with someone who is GLB. This is an important first step. The reason most students hold homophobic beliefs is that they have no positive relationship with someone whom they know to be GLB. Panels provide a way to

remedy this in a controlled and non-threatening environment.

Two studies demonstrated the effectiveness of panel discussions. When McEwen (1996) studied the effectiveness of panels on increasing GLB awareness, she found that on a seven-point Likert-type scale (with seven being extremely effective), the mean score of participating students was 5.7. Another benefit provided by these panels is that they assist in the developmental process of the actual panel members. In a second study (Geasler et al., 1995), GLB panels brought about four distinct changes in heterosexist attitudes toward GLBs. They included: (a) dispelling of homophobic myths and stereotypes; (b) the realization that GLBs are people just like heterosexuals; (c) students could now empathize with the gay, lesbian, and bisexual struggles; and (d) it allowed for self reflection to occur among students on their views of homosexuality.

Conclusion

It is obvious that homophobia is rampant on many college campuses. GLB students are constantly in fear of being found out because of the harassment they believe they will receive. This constant fear affects

their ability to learn, socialize, and properly develop. It is up to student affairs professionals to develop programming and establish committees that are able to provide GLB students with a pleasant and beneficial college experience. Academic faculty should definitely be involved in the process, but the main weight of the movement rests on staff members such as hall coordinators and campus counselors. Future studies need to expand on the present research. The first thing that should be explored is why men have such high homophobic scores compared to women. Then it could be determined what kinds of programming are best suited to each group. Second, more studies need to be done to determine the level of homophobia that student affairs professionals have and how, if at all, these attitudes effect students and fellow employees. Third, future research needs to concentrate more on lesbian and bisexual college experiences. A large majority of the present studies were made up of male participants or a mixture of GLB participants. None of the studies dealt with lesbians or bisexuals on their own. Finally, some long-range qualitative studies should be undertaken. The short-range quantitative studies are useful in discovering the problem; however, most do not do a very

good job of providing solutions to the problem.

Qualitative research provides personal insights into the problem and helps to determine whether or not a certain solution is effective.

Change has occurred, and improvements have been made in the past 40 years. Unfortunately, change is moving too slowly for many GLB students. The 1,500 homosexual students who will commit suicide in the next 12 months need change now. At this moment, on a college campus, maybe even yours, a student who could not cope with the homophobic college environment is coping the only way he or she knows how.

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