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Dealing with homophobia in residence halls on college and university classess

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Dealing with homophobia in residence halls on college and university classess

Abstract

Diversity is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "the condition of being different or having differences" (Woolf, 1974, p. 215). Diversity is a major issue when discussing campus environments and can be seen as cultural, racial, economic, religious, gender, and sexual orientation. For many students, the college environment will be the first opportunity to be exposed to a wide range of diversity. Experiencing this diversity can sometimes be either enlightening or threatening for an individual, and it can be a learning opportunity.

DEALING WITH HOMOPHOBIA IN RESIDENCE HALLS
ON COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY CAMPUSES

A Research Paper
Presented to
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and Counseling
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Todd Alan Little
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INTRODUCTION

Diversity is defined by Webster's Dictionary as "the condition of being different or having differences" (Woolf, 1974, p. 215). Diversity is a major issue when discussing campus environments and can be seen as cultural, racial, economic, religious, gender, and sexual orientation. For many students, the college environment will be the first opportunity to be exposed to a wide range of diversity. Experiencing this diversity can sometimes be either enlightening or threatening for an individual, and it can be a learning opportunity.

Although diversity can be experienced in many ways on a college or university campus through various organizations, classrooms, and interaction with faculty and staff, one significant source of diversity is through living in residence halls. According to Alexander Astin's 1993 report on the American freshmen, 58.7% of freshmen from all institutions surveyed planned to live in the residence halls their first semester. The institutions surveyed for the report included: public and private two-year colleges; public, non-sectarian, Protestant, and Catholic four-year colleges; public and private universities; and public and private predominately Black colleges. At all universities surveyed, 82.3% of the incoming freshmen planned to live in the residence halls (Astin, 1993). This is a substantial number of freshmen entering college who will be exposed to many aspects of

life residence halls can offer. In this new environment, they will be exposed to many situations and issues, such as alcoholism, drug abuse, and racial tensions. Most probably, these students will make decisions regarding these issues that they never seriously considered before this exposure to this environment. One issue being confronted is the existence of homophobia in the residence halls and across the campus. Nancy Evans and Vernon Wall (1991) defined homophobia as the "irrational fear, hatred, and intolerance of people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual" (Evans & Wall, 1991, p. 39).

Homophobia on campuses is a problem, and it parallels the attitudes of society. Evans and Wall (1991) mentioned a 1983 study which reported that 50% of college students labeled "homosexuality more deviant than murder and drug addiction" (p. 40). Parallel attitudes are apparent when looking at a 1989 Gallup Poll which reported that 53% of all adults surveyed still did not believe that relationships between consenting adults of the same gender should be legal (Salhouz et al., 1990, p. 20-25).

In a recent poll (McCord, 1991), it was reported that 92% of lesbians and gay men have been victims of threats or verbal abuse because of their sexual orientation, and 24% reported being physically attacked. McCord commented that it is important not only to take a moral stance on the issue of homophobia, but also to help students understand that "verbal and physical abuse are

not justifiable responses toward the homosexual population" (McCord, 1991, p. 243). William G. Tierney (1992), in a University of California of Los Angeles (U.C.L.A.) study, found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual students are "significantly more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have experienced problems associated with harassment, discrimination, and loneliness" (p. 43).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of homophobia on college and university campuses and to look at three areas: the First Amendment and the freedom of speech; issues associated with homophobia; and courses of action to fight homophobia. It will also be concluded that homophobia is a problem in residence halls on campuses and that it is an issue which needs to be looked at carefully in order to deal with it effectively. Through training, members of residence hall staffs can be better prepared to deal with the issues of homophobia.

THE FIRST AMENDMENT AND FREEDOM OF SPEECH

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances.

This is, of course, the First Amendment to the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Through this amendment,

people are guaranteed freedom of speech and expression. Freedom of speech is a crucial part of our civil liberties, and it is our right to express our opinions in free discussion. The guarantee of freedom of speech reflects the important principle that government should not suppress the communication of ideas.

How does this apply to homophobia in residence halls? Freedom of expression allows students to express their viewpoints about issues, including homophobia. Tom Romanin (personal communication, April 13, 1995), Associate Vice-President of Educational and Student Services at the University of Northern Iowa (U.N.I.), said, "If a student decides to display homophobic material on his or her bulletin board on the door to his or her residence hall room, it is considered to be an expression of free ideas and is protected by the First Amendment."

Upholding the right of free speech is a civil liberty guaranteed to all Americans, including students living in the residence halls. It is probably better to educate people on uncivil conduct than to impose policies. Romanin commented that it is better to have homophobic attitudes out in the open instead of having the feelings and not being able to express them. Romanin wanted to see the problem of homophobic attitudes and behaviors confronted in a way that would not lead to disciplinary issues. He felt that students are tired of "being under the blanket" of different policies regarding their actions and suggested that

students need the opportunity to talk more about respect for each other instead of dealing with more policies.

Students need to learn how to treat other people in a respectable manner. Enforcing policies will not change students' attitude and behavior toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. According to the First Amendment, it is the right of the individual to express ideas and opinions. Harassment, which is not protected by the First Amendment, may be limited through more policies, but the hatred toward an individual can not be restrained. Also, it is the right of an individual to dislike and hate another, even if the other person is gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

THE IMPACT OF HOMOPHOBIA

Since the impact of homophobia can be a powerful one on students and campuses, the experiences of gay and lesbian students best illustrate the problem. Due to the nature of this subject, students' names will not be mentioned to ensure confidentiality.

A Junior student, while walking across campus at the University of Northern Iowa, was severely injured when several other students physically abused him because they perceived him to be gay (personal communication, April 13, 1995).

A Freshman student at the University of Northern Iowa was being harassed and physically threatened by other

students in a residence hall. Epithets, such as "fag" and "queer," were yelled from windows. The student made the decision to move to another residence hall on the other side of campus. When the student moved out, he was told if he returned that he would be severely beaten (personal communication, April 13, 1995).

These are just two examples of the impact of homophobia and how they can affect the lives of individuals. In the first case, the student was perceived to be gay. This is an example of how perception becomes reality for students as they come into contact with homophobia. Chris Kelly, Hall Coordinator of Shull Hall at U.N.I. (personal communication, April 14, 1995), said, "Gays, lesbians, and bisexuals are not open about themselves because the residence hall atmosphere is not supportive for them." He continued, "We need to create an environment that they can feel secure in discussing their identity." Making an environment comfortable for students can be difficult as the literature on the subject suggests. In one such incident, "the mirror on one man's floor had scrawled across it: 'Fag in 408. We don't like cock suckers on our hall'" (Rhoads, 1995, p. 71).

Trying to make the environment secure and comfortable for gays, lesbians, and bisexuals can be a challenge. One resident

assistant (R.A.), at U.N.I., who will be referred to as John Doe, (personal communication, April 14, 1995), said that, often, the existence of homophobia comes about because students fear their own identity, sexual or otherwise. He commented that the issue of homophobia is specifically mentioned during the R.A training process. Lyn Redington (personal communication, April 4, 1995), Associate Director of Residence at U.N.I., said that programming is the key toward educating students about homophobia and other issues dealing with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. One problem that is raised by this though: what do residence hall staffs do when people do not attend the programs?

Kelly referred to an example to counter this problem. When he noticed homophobic material on someone's door, he would take the time to stop and ask the residents some of the following questions about the material:

- * What is the statement you are trying to make?
- * Why is it important to display this material?
- * Do you realize it may be offensive to some people?
- * How will this statement make you look in others' eyes?

Both Kelly and John Doe recommended that residence hall staffs take the time to ask residents these questions when the opportunity arises. In this way, it can offer an educational

moment for the resident and the chance to learn from the informal discussion rather than force disciplinary action upon the resident. Kelly mentioned that when the opportunity presents itself, he thinks it is important to take the time to teach when possible and help create an open forum of discussion.

FIGHTING HOMOPHOBIA

Doe mentioned that all people have the right to express their ideas, and it is the job of a resident assistant to be "a mediator, not a ruler." If the residence hall staff can be comfortable with the issue, then they can pass that feeling on to the residents in the hall. Staff members can also have various levels of acceptance and it is important not to force acceptance onto the staff.

Evans and Wall have written that the resident assistants can be "powerful role models and educators" (1991, p. 59) on the issue of homophobia. They strongly suggested that resident assistants receive training and support in order to develop intervention techniques to help deal with a variety of homophobic comments, behaviors, roommate conflicts, and developing social programming activities. It will be up to all residence hall staff members to take the lead on dealing with the issue of homophobia. Evans and Wall said that students will learn the difference between "acceptable and unacceptable" (1991, p. 47) behavior when they

notice how staff members confront situations in their halls and on campus. Barry Schreier (1995) commented on the current programming on campuses focused toward people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. He stated that programming is often focused on fighting homophobia and heterosexism, which can lead toward a more "tolerant environment" (p. 19), but he proposed that programs could be better focused by creating an environment of nurturance, where "people who are gay, lesbian, or bisexual are seen as an invaluable and indispensable part of the culture" (Schreier, 1995, p. 20).

Tierney (1992) offered several suggestions to improve the diversity of campus environments. Members of the campus environment can not know how to deal with problems if they are not identified. By creating task forces to engage the issues of gays, lesbians, and bisexuals, the institution will be able to show concern for the issue of diversity. The term "sexual orientation" should be included in non-discrimination statements. John Doe commented that it took two and half years to win the fight over the inclusion of such a statement at U.N.I. He said it is a constant struggle for new policies and there is inconsistent communication between the parties involved. Resident hall staff, particularly hall coordinators, who fight for equality can sponsor workshops, seminars, and outreach programs to be arranged on campus. This suggests that campus leaders, such as the president

of the institution, be visible when dealing with the issues and show a desire to learn more about the issues at hand. If students are able to witness leaders becoming involved with issues, then it can also encourage students to become actively involved. Encourage and support people who speak out against homophobia instead of being silent. Besides students, the president, administrators, and faculty need to speak up against attacks on individuals. Once again, if students can observe leaders speaking against homophobia issues, then students may also want to take a stand against the issue. Along with creating workshops, it is important to offer classes which deal with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals issues in order to better educate the campus members.

One way that universities try to combat harassment on campuses is through disciplinary codes. At U.N.I., there is a student disciplinary code which is made available to every student and is found in the Policies and Regulations Affecting Students handbook. Any student can be subject to disciplinary actions if he or she is found assaulting, threatening, physically or sexually abusing, harassing, or endangering in any other manner the health or safety of any person on campus or at any University sponsored activity. Any member of the University community may bring a complaint against a student if a violation of the regulations has occurred.

One classroom exercise designed to explore students' attitudes and encounters with homophobia was implemented by two professors at the University of Michigan. Mark Chesler and Ximena Zuniga (1991) asked students to wear a pink triangle, which represents a belief and support in gay and lesbian rights, for one day. "We chose to focus on homophobia and prejudice against gay men and lesbians because this form of oppression is much less overt than racism and sexism" (p. 173), the authors said. Students reported their internal conflicts about identifying with gay and lesbian people and also their external conflicts, such as peer pressure and prejudice. The exercise allowed the students to learn more about the oppression, harassment, and discrimination displayed toward gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. It is this sort of classroom activity that should be implemented by professors across the nation in order to help decrease homophobia.

CONCLUSIONS

In Astin's report (1993) on the American freshmen, he reported that in all universities surveyed, 28.6% of all freshmen agreed strongly that homosexual relations should be prohibited. This can be further broken down into 38.9% of freshmen men and 18.8% of freshmen women who agreed that homosexual relations should be prohibited. Looking at these results, it is clear that homophobia does exist on campus environments and with a majority

of the student population living in residence halls, homophobia will definitely exist.

The encouragement and support of residence hall staff members dealing with the issues will allow administrators the chance to take a stand against the homophobia existing in the halls. Students should have a comfortable environment in which they feel secure in voicing their opinions against homophobia. Robert Rhoads (1995) commented that "college is a challenging time for students; for students who also have sexual identity issues to confront, the college experience is even more difficult" (p. 67). For many gays, lesbians, and bisexuals exploring their own sexual identity, it is extremely important that they feel the environment is safe for them to explore their identity and help foster their development. With student development being an important aspect of colleges and universities, it is crucial that students experience diversity of all kinds, whether it be racial, cultural, or sexual.

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