



Colleges and Universities

by Brett Genny Beemyn

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.

Entry Copyright © 2004, glbtq, inc.

Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

While a number of colleges and universities provide support to their glbtq students, staff, and faculty today, institutions of higher education were initially slow to respond to the needs of glbtq people on campus. But persistent advocacy from the glbtq community and heterosexual allies led schools to change institutional policies to be inclusive, establish glbtq centers and studies programs, and recognize glbtq people in programming and services.

Students, staff, and faculty argue that colleges and universities can still do a lot more to be welcoming to members of the glbtq community, but progress continues to be made.

Student Services

Until the late 1960s, homosexuality, as a sign of immoral behavior or psychiatric disorder, was often a reason for expulsion from colleges and universities. While homosexuality can still be grounds for dismissal or denial of a diploma at some religiously-affiliated schools, most institutions of higher learning in the United States are more welcoming of glbtq students.

The first gay student organizations were established in the late 1960s, and informal and underground social networks have existed on many campuses since at least the turn of the twentieth century. But most colleges and universities did not readily seek to serve the needs of this population.

On the contrary, more than 25 public and private institutions refused to recognize their gay student organizations until forced to do so by political pressure or legal action. (The legislature of the state of Alabama even passed a law--subsequently ruled unconstitutional by a federal court--prohibiting state institutions, including the University of Alabama, from recognizing gay student organizations.)

Even today, especially in conservative areas, gay student organizations are sometimes subject to various kinds of harassment. Student governments sometimes refuse to recognize or to fund their activities; often their posters are destroyed or defaced; frequently, students are reluctant to attend meetings for fear of confrontations with members of religious groups or other homophobes.

Notwithstanding the historical and continuing resistance to gay student organizations at many institutions, however, the glbtq student movement has been a great success story. The gay groups have enabled glbtq students to develop a sense of community, to deal with issues of coming out, and to explore glbtq history, culture, and politics. The student movement has been a significant part of the larger movement for glbtq equality.

The first university to provide specific support services to its lesbian, gay, and bisexual students was the University of Michigan, which hired two part-time "human sexuality advocates" in 1971 in response to demands from students, including members of the campus Gay Liberation Front.

It was more than a decade, however, before another school created an administrative position focused on the concerns of glbtq students, and only five institutions had established a professionally staffed glbtq center or office by 1990. But in the 1990s, as lesbian and gay students became more visible on campuses throughout the country and organized to have their needs met, a significant number of schools began to provide administrative support to members of the community.

As of 2006, more than 100 U.S. colleges and universities have established glbtq centers or offices with at least a half-time paid director, and others are in the process of doing so. Administrators working in glbtq student services formed their own organization, the National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, in 1997.

LGBT Studies Programs

The establishment of LGBT or queer studies programs has followed a similar pattern. While "homosexuality" has long been a subject of classroom discussion, colleges and universities did not begin to offer courses specifically focused on the lives of glbtq people until the early 1970s.

At some schools, the introduction of courses was impeded by conservative administrators and faculty members who questioned their legitimacy and academic rigor. But as scholarly research in LGBT Studies steadily increased in the 1970s and 1980s, challenges to its worthiness as an area of study waned, and more and more courses were developed based on the growing body of literature in the field.

By the 1990s, institutions with an extensive number of LGBT courses began to offer a program of study. The first Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Studies department was established at the City College of San Francisco in 1989; other early programs included the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the City University of New York and the Lesbian and Gay Studies Center at Yale University.

In addition to the City College of San Francisco, other schools that offer an undergraduate degree in LGBT studies or gender/sexuality studies include Amherst College, Brown University, Carleton College, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, Indiana University, New York University, and Rice University. An even greater number of colleges and universities offer a minor, certificate, or concentration in the field.

Non-Discrimination Policies

In the 1970s, glbtq advocates on campuses across the country began lobbying schools to add the category "sexual orientation" to their equal opportunity statements in order to protect the rights of lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. As of 2006, approximately 560 colleges and universities have added "sexual orientation" to their policies, including most schools in the "Doctorate-Granting Universities" category of The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. The exceptions are primarily conservative public universities in southern states and private, religiously affiliated schools.

The inclusion of sexual orientation in equal opportunity statements does not necessarily cover transgender people, who face discrimination based on their gender identity, rather than their sexual identity. To address this omission, colleges and universities are now adding the phrase "gender identity and expression" to their policies.

In the ten years since the University of Iowa pioneered by revising its nondiscrimination policy to include gender identity in 1996, more than 70 colleges and college systems have followed suit, including Ohio State University, the University of California, the University of Wisconsin, and North Carolina State University. All but one of the Ivy League schools include "gender identity or expression" in their non-discrimination policies.

Domestic Partner Benefits

A more contentious policy change at some institutions is extending medical and dental insurance, tuition assistance, and other fringe benefits to the same-sex partners of campus employees. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty and staff members argue that domestic partner benefits are in keeping with a commitment to non-discrimination and equal pay for equal work, as glbtq employees incur a significant financial penalty by being excluded from compensation packages that are available to heterosexual workers.

Opponents of domestic partner benefits often cite the potential cost, but studies of colleges and universities that offer same-sex spousal coverage find that the additional expense is minimal, because only one to two percent of employees typically enroll.

Others object to their institutions' recognizing and rewarding same-sex relationships. However, with opinion polls showing that the general public is increasingly supportive of equal rights for lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, this argument is becoming harder to make outside of religiously affiliated schools and public universities that are overseen by conservative trustees and state legislatures.

The number of institutions offering domestic partner benefits has grown rapidly since the City College of San Francisco became the first school to extend spousal coverage to its glbtq employees in 1991. As of 2006, approximately 300 colleges and universities offer domestic partner benefits, including the school systems of the State University of New York, the City University of New York, the University of California, the University of Michigan, and the University of Maine.

Campus Climate

The efforts of glbtq students, staff, and faculty over the last thirty years to make their colleges and universities more inclusive have noticeably improved the campus climate at many institutions. Whereas, prior to the 1970s, most glbtq students were not out, even to their closest friends, many students in the 2000s are open about their sexual and gender identities even before they enter college. Indeed, many choose a school based in part on the institution's record on glbtq issues.

Similarly, most glbtq faculty and staff members did not disclose their sexual identities a generation ago for fear of being fired or denied tenure. Today, however, many campuses have glbtq faculty and staff organizations. Moreover, many faculty in a number of disciplines regularly conduct research and teach on glbtq-related topics without having to worry about a negative effect on their careers.

But, despite improvements in the campus climate, colleges and universities can still be hostile environments for glbtq people. In a 2003 study of the campus climate at 14 institutions, the first scientific research on the climate at multiple campuses, Sue Rankin found that 36 percent of glbtq undergraduates had experienced harassment, such as verbal harassment, hostile graffiti, threats of violence, and physical assault, within the past year. Moreover, twenty percent of students, staff, and faculty feared for their physical safety because of their sexual or gender identity, and 51 percent concealed their sexual or gender identity at times to avoid intimidation.

Rankin makes a number of recommendations for schools to improve their campus climates, including recruiting and retaining glbtq students, staff, and faculty; demonstrating the institution's commitment to glbtq issues; integrating glbtq concerns into the curriculum; and providing sustained educational programming on the experiences of glbtq people.

Conclusion

Many colleges and universities have taken steps to become more inclusive and welcoming to glbtq people, from revising non-discrimination policies to creating programs that address glbtq concerns. Most glbtq students, staff, and faculty, however, feel that their institutions can and must do a great deal more to be

safe, comfortable places for people of all sexual and gender identities.

For example, colleges and universities have largely failed to address the needs of transgender students, staff, and faculty. Few schools recognize transgender people on college forms or have a ready means to alter records when someone transitions from one gender to another.

Transgender students also face discrimination in residence halls, where they may be assigned to a building or have a roommate of the "wrong" gender or be denied access to the appropriate restroom. To date, only a handful of schools, such as the University of California-Riverside, Sarah Lawrence College, Oberlin College, Lewis and Clark College, and Swarthmore College, offer a gender-neutral housing option, in which students are assigned a roommate regardless of gender and have non-gender-specific bathrooms.

With more glbtq students and heterosexual allies choosing schools based on their climate and policies toward glbtq people, colleges and universities that currently provide little support to members of the glbtq community will need to become more inclusive or risk losing quality students to more glbtq-friendly institutions. While even schools that have historically been supportive of gay and lesbian students, staff, and faculty have been criticized at times for not doing enough, there is no denying that tremendous progress has been made when institutions now compete for glbtq students, rather than shunning or ignoring them.

Bibliography

Beemyn, Brett. "The Development and Administration of Campus LGBT Centers and Offices." *Our Place on Campus: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Services and Programs in Higher Education*. Ronni Sanlo, Sue Rankin, and Robert Schoenberg, eds. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2002. 25-32.

Human Rights Campaign WorkNet. www.hrc.org/worknet/index.asp.

National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education. www.lgbtcampus.org.

Rankin, Susan R. *Campus Climate for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender People: A National Perspective*. New York: The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute, 2003.

Trans-Academics.org. "Queer Studies Programs and Trans Friendly Educations." www.trans-academics.org.

Younger, John G. "University LGBT/Queer Programs: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Transsexual, Queer Studies in the USA and Canada." www.people.ku.edu/~jyounger/lgbtqprogs.html.

About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.