

Campus Environments for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Students at Southeastern Institutions of Higher Education



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The authors report findings of a regional survey project which assessed the current support services provided to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students and student organizations at NASPA Region III institutions. Campus climate for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students was also assessed based on academic support and resources provided to student organizations, along with data on bias-related incidents and institutional non-discrimination statements.

Studies regarding the personal development of gay, lesbian, and bisexual [GLB] students have encouraged the provision of support services on college campuses (Evans & Levine, 1990; Evans & Wall, 1991; Geller, 1990; Rhoads, 1995). Like other minority students, GLB students often require support and services different from those needed by non-minority students, although, at times, providing these services has caused controversy (Carmona, 1994; Mallory, 1997). Courts have ruled, however, that

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institutions may not specifically withhold support for the establishment and recognition of GLB student organizations (Liddell & Douvanis, 1994; Rullman, 1991). Even in church-related schools that are subject to federal guidelines, religious belief has not been recognized as a reason to deny equal treatment to GLB groups (Dutile, 1988; Rullman, 1991).

On many campuses, fraternity, sorority, and ethnic- and culture-centered living environments have received special support (Obear, 1991); students from non-European racial backgrounds, disabled students, international students, and other recognized minorities have routinely received support through student services offices. Research has demonstrated that these students require extra support because they may be at risk for academic failure (Barna, Haws, & Knefelkamp, 1978; Jacoby, 1991). The same support is less often accorded in recognition of the special developmental challenges of GLB students, although much research from various disciplines provides evidence that these students are also at risk (Obear, 1991). Where lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths were given support and guidance, their overall health and development was improved (Nieberding, 1989; Proctor & Groze, 1994; Rhoads, 1995). To gauge how well these needs were being met, this survey project was guided by two primary questions: Are NASPA Region III institutions providing support services to GLB students on their campuses? What types of organizational support exists for GLB students at these institutions?

Methods

Five chiefs student affairs officers [CSAOs] outside Region III reviewed and modified a survey developed by the authors. Modifications that improved readability and ensured accurate coverage of the issues were incorporated. The items were designed so that respondents could check off an appropriate response, with additional space for them to clarify or comment on their initial response. The anonymous survey was mailed to NASPA voting delegates at 262 institutions in NASPA Region III. One-hundred-and-twenty-two (46.5%) responses were returned.

Participants

According to NASPA membership guidelines, institutions of higher education designated as institutional members name an official to serve as a voting delegate. Although the survey was sent to voting delegates, they were instructed that they could assign the completion of the survey to another staff member of the institution who was better qualified to provide accurate responses. Eighty of the respondents were NASPA voting delegates, 40 were designated by the voting delegate to complete the

survey, and 2 were unclassified. Eighty-four respondents indicated that they were CSAOs, holding such titles as Vice-President, Dean of Students, Dean of Student Life (Affairs), and Assistant or Associate Vice-President. Twenty-four respondents were directors or coordinators in student affairs divisions, including activities, residence life, and unspecified areas. Six respondents were directors or coordinators of counseling centers, two were faculty members, and two were multicultural coordinators or coordinator of gay, lesbian, and bisexual life. One minister and one administrative assistant acted as respondents, and four did not indicate a title.

Results

Table 1 describes the total survey responses. Data were also analyzed using three categories: institutional size, public/private status, and Carnegie classification. Breakdown of this information can be found in Table 2. Cross-tabs were run across each category by item response.

Respondents were asked to provide the number and types of GLB student organizations on their campuses. Complete data comparisons are provided in Tables 2, 3, and 4. Fluctuations in percent calculation resulted from "no reports" (1, Public/Private; 7, Carnegie classifications). Only the total group results will be discussed in this section. All results are given although no generalization should be drawn where frequencies were too small ($n < 3$).

The report of support and resources for student organizations was based on existing organizations: 55 (45%) respondents had no GLB student organizations at their institutions, and 67 (55%) reported having such student organizations. All 122 respondents answered questions about institutional policies and climate.

Location and Activity Level of Organizations

The number of GLB organizations varied by institutional size. These groups were more likely to exist at larger institutions ($n=31$, 46%). Organizations were more likely to exist at public (46, 68.7%) rather than private institutions. Of the 67 GLB organizations reported, 48 (71.6%) were described as being as active or more active than other student groups on campus.

Table 1
Total Survey Responses

	<i>n</i>	%
GLB Organization Resources Used	67	55
Meeting Rooms	64	96
Office Space	16	24
Student Union	54	81
Club Space	19	28
Funding Sources		
SGA	34	51
Institution	2	3
Activities Center	3	4
Auxiliary Services	4	6
Relation with Academic Unit	16	24
Relation with Counseling Center	29	43
Gay Studies Courses	10	8
GLB Content in Regular Courses	17	14
GLB Mentors to Students	50	41
Incidents of Hate Crime ^a	5.3	
Non-Discrimination Statement	48	39
Total Responses	122	100

Note: For Resources Used and Funding Sources percentage values are in terms of responses from institutions having GLB organizations; all other percentages are in terms of total responses.

^a*Mean incidents of hate crimes for the two-year period, 1992-1994*

Use of Campus Resources

Respondents were asked to indicate which resources were used by GLB student organizations. These resources included funding and the use of meeting rooms, institutionally assigned office space, the student union, and club space for programming. Among all GLB organizations 64 of 67 (96%) had access to meeting rooms, 16 (24%) had office space, 54 (81%) had access to the student union, and 19 (28%) used club space for programming.

Campus Funding

Forty-three organizations (64.2%) received institutional funding. By far, the largest source of funding for GLB organizations was a student government organization (34, 79%). Respondents were asked to indicate any limitations on the funding received by student organizations; these included "travel only," "educational purposes only," "leadership training only," and "not to be used for political reasons."

Academic Support and Contact with Faculty and Staff

Of the 122 responding institutions, 10 (8%) had gay or lesbian studies courses, and 17 (14%) included content relevant to gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues in regular courses. Of these 17 courses, 13 (76.5%) were offered at public institutions.

Relationship to Other Departments

Direct relationships between GLB student organizations and counseling centers or academic departments existed at several institutions. In 29 (43%) of the total number of responses, GLB organizations had a direct relationship with the counseling center, and in 16 (24%) there was a direct relationship with an academic department. Sixty-eight (56%) responding institutions indicated that there were openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual faculty or staff at their institutions, and 50 (41%) respondents reported that there was formal mentoring of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students by staff and faculty.

Availability of Printed Resources

Respondents were asked whether their library collection development policies and active library subscriptions addressed GLB interests. Fourteen respondents (11.5%) indicated that there were formal collection development policies addressing the routine acquisition of materials relevant to GLB concerns, while 27 (22%) indicated that such policies were encouraged although not formally written.

Hate Crimes

Minority group students have often been targets of bias-related violence. Finn and McNeil (1987) concluded that gay and lesbian people are more often targeted for bias-related crimes than any other group. The mean number of hate crimes that had occurred over the past two years on campuses of the institutions participating in the present study was 5.3; these included verbal assaults and threatening telephone calls, vandalism of posted flyers and unauthorized posting of homophobic flyers, vandalism of personal property, gay bashing, roommate harassment, and direct reprimand of faculty for homophobic behavior.

Table 2

Survey Responses: Institutional Size (N=122)

Type of Institution	Small n=67	Medium n=22	Large n=33
GLB Organization	23 (34%)	13 (59%)	31 (94%)
Resources used			
Meeting rooms	21 (91%)	13 (100%)	30 (97%)
Office space	3 (13%)	2 (15%)	11 (35%)
Student Union	17 (74%)	9 (69%)	28 (90%)
Club space	5 (22%)	2 (15%)	12 (39%)
Funding sources			
SGA	12 (52%)	5 (38%)	17 (55%)
Institutional	–	1 (8%)	1 (3%)
Activity Center	2 (9%)	–	1 (3%)
Auxiliary services	1 (4%)	1 (8%)	2 (6%)
Relationship with academic dept.	8 (35%)	1(8%)	7 (23%)
Relationship with counseling center	11 (48%)	4 (30%)	14 (45%)
Gay Studies courses	3 (40%)	1 (5%)	6 (18%)
GLB content in regular courses	4 (6%)	5 (23%)	8 (24%)
GLB faculty / staff mentoring of students	15 (22%)	9 (41%)	26 (79%)
Incidents of hate crime ^a	6	9.3	3.4
Non-discrimination statement	23 (34%)	11 (50%)	14 (42%)

Note: Dashes indicate data not reported by respondents.

^aMean incidents of hate crimes for the two-year period, 1992-1994

Table 3

Survey Responses: Public / Private Status (N=121)

Type of Institution	Public n=75	Private n=46
GLB Organization	46 (61%)	21 (46%)
Resources used		
Meeting rooms	46 (100%)	18 (86%)
Office space	14 (30%)	2 (10%)
Student Union	39 (85%)	15 (71%)
Club space	14 (30%)	5 (24%)
Funding sources		
SGA	22 (48%)	12 (57%)
Institutional	2 (4%)	—
Activity Center	1 (2%)	2 (10%)
Auxilliary services	4 (9%)	—
Relationship with academic dept.	8 (17%)	8 (38%)
Relationship with counseling center	19 (41%)	10 (48%)
Gay Studies courses	6 (8%)	4 (9%)
GLB content in regular courses	13 (17%)	4 (9%)
GLB faculty / staff mentoring of students	36 (48%)	14 (30%)
Incidents of hate crime ^a	4.9	6
Non-discrimination statement	33 (44%)	14 (30%)

Note: ^aMean incidents of hate crimes for the two-year period, 1992-1994

Table 4
Survey Responses: Classification (N=115)

Type of Institution	Research / Doctoral n=23	Comprehensive n=36	Liberal Arts n=40	2-year n=16
GLB Organization	22 (96%)	26 (72%)	14 (35%)	2 (13%)
Resources used				
Meeting rooms	21 (95%)	26 (100%)	12 (86%)	2 (100%)
Office space	9 (40%)	3 (12%)	2 (14%)	1 (50%)
Student Union	19 (86%)	22 (85%)	9 (64%)	1 (50%)
Club space	7 (32%)	8 (31%)	2 (14%)	2 (100%)
Funding sources				
SGA	10 (45%)	15 (58%)	7 (50%)	1(50%)
Institutional	1 (5%)	1(4%)	—	—
Activity Center	—	—	1	1(50%)
Auxilliary services	2 (9%)	1(4%)	—	—
Relationship with academic dept.	3 (14%)	6 (23%)	6 (43%)	1(50%)
Relationship with counseling center	10 (45%)	9 (35%)	5 (36%)	2 (100%)
Gay Studies courses	4 (17%)	2 (6%)	3 (8%)	1(6%)
GLB content in regular courses	5 (22%)	7 (19%)	3 (8%)	2 (13%)
GLB faculty / staff mentoring of students	19 (83%)	14 (39%)	11 (28%)	3 (19%)
Incidents of hate crime*	17.3	2.5	4.8	1
Non-discrimination statement	10 (44%)	19 (53%)	13 (33%)	3 (19%)

Note: Dashes indicate data not reported by respondents.

*Mean incidents of hate crimes for the two-year period, 1992-1994.

^b Only one two-year institution reported incidents of hate crime.

Non-discrimination Statements

Forty-eight of the respondents (39.3%) indicated that their institutions included sexual orientation in their non-discrimination statements.

Discussion

This survey project was the first multi-institutional assessment of support services available for GLB students at Southeastern institutions. One problem in using survey data as an indicator of existing support is that it often represents the respondent's best guess concerning programs and policies with which they have limited direct contact. In the present study, quantitative methods were used to obtain information from a greater number of respondents. Institutions and regional professional associations should consider using a combination of quantitative and qualitative assessment techniques to investigate the effectiveness of supports and services on their campuses.

Implications and Conclusions

Tierney and Rhoads (1993) suggested that if institutions of higher education wish to create multicultural communities of difference, they must recognize the needs and human rights of gay, lesbian, and bisexual community members. Results of the present study indicate just over half of the responding institutions have recognized GLB student organizations, with most of the organizations having existed for less than five years. If these findings indicate a positive trend, the growth of formal GLB student organizations sends a message about acceptance that is necessary for creating a more positive climate for all students.

Generally, GLB organizations in this study were perceived to be as active as other student organizations, but their use of facilities other than meeting rooms was rather low. Few GLB student organizations have institutionally-assigned office space, although such a space or a designated resource center where students, faculty, and staff may have access to written information concerning GLB issues can serve as an important contact point for campus education efforts (Schreier, 1995). Three respondents indicated that such resource centers were supported on their campuses. This study found that few places existed where students, faculty, and staff could come together to learn, such as courses with GLB-related content, academic departments, and counseling centers.

Several studies have indicated that educational efforts were helpful in combating negative attitudes and increasing accurate knowledge of the GLB population (Nieberding, 1989; Serdahely & Ziemba, 1984; Wells, 1991). Appropriate education was also found to enhance the levels of self-esteem and self-concept of both heterosexual and non-heterosexual students (Wells, 1989). These studies have demonstrated that providing concerned and human-focused in-class instruction can be helpful in reducing heterosexist attitudes. Positive contact with faculty is one of the most important contributing factors to student learning (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). According to the present study, although mentors and GLB staff are available, their expertise is limited by the minimal number of course offerings and programming conducted for the benefit of all students.

The question of providing services for GLB students is not only limited to support but also includes ensuring a safe environment in which students may learn and live. Norris (1992) and others (D'Augelli, 1989a; D'Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1993; Herek & Berrill, 1992) inferred that colleges and universities have not had a good track record in providing a safe environment for GLB students. Over two-thirds of gay and lesbian students reported experiencing harassment and violence during their college years (Norris, 1992). Reported incidents of bias-related attacks in the present study indicate that Region III campuses are not immune to this activity, yet the limited nature of educational contact points reduces the potential for decreasing bias-related violence and for increasing the sensitivity that could help provide a safer learning environment.

Several authors (D'Augelli, 1989b; Geller, 1990; Wells, 1991) suggested that lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty and staff offering support and acting as role models, as well as non-discrimination statements that include sexual orientation, can improve the learning opportunities for many members of the campus community. Many authors (Evans & Wall, 1991; Nieberding, 1989; Schreier, 1995; Tierney & Rhoads, 1993) have suggested that institutional policies and non-discrimination statements that discourage discrimination based on sexual orientation are fundamental to creating positive environmental change for GLB students and staff. The results of the present study indicate that fewer than 40% of responding institutions have taken this step.

The ethical principles of the student development profession require that we serve the needs of all members of the campus community, embracing diversity rather than restricting its scope (American College Personnel Association, 1990). At the same time, the student development profession

is exploring means for making a stronger contribution to student learning. The present study indicates, however, that many Southeastern institutions have yet to meet the challenge of laying the groundwork needed to provide balanced and appropriate services for GLB students.

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