

Practicing What We Preach? Gay Students' Perceptions of Student Affairs

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Though student development professionals have clear ethical guidelines related to discrimination, how do such guidelines affect populations not normally considered protected classes? Through a national survey, this study explores how one such population views discrimination on campus and their conclusions that on many campuses, existing ethical guidelines concerning discrimination are not equally applied to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students. The authors consider the possible causes for this apparent divergence between ethical standards and behavior on campus, and suggest a starting point for changing such behavior.

Student affairs educators have ethical duties toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) college students. The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (1993) includes both an overriding principle and a specific ethical standard concerning sexual/affectional orientation. The principle titled "Promote justice" enjoins student affairs professionals to ensure "fundamental fairness for all individuals within the academic community," including "demonstrating an appreciation for human differences and opposing intolerance and bigotry concerning these differences," with specific reference to "sexual/affectional orientation" (p. 90). In addition, Ethical Standard 4, "Responsibility to Society," contains this admonition:

Student affairs professionals ... respect individuality and recognize that worth is not diminished by characteristics such as ... sexual/affectional orientation. Student affairs professionals

work to protect human rights and promote an appreciation of human diversity in education. (p. 92)

Despite this explicit ethical statement, there are relatively few scholarly studies about GLB students in the professional literature (D'Augelli, 1989; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990) and no research in the current literature assesses the degree to which student affairs educators meet this ethical standard or provide explanations for many student affairs professionals choosing to ignore this ethical standard.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of GLB college students toward student affairs units through a qualitative study and to evaluate what these students perceived constituted a just and supportive environment for them. In the remainder of this article, the authors will present the results of this study and provide discussion on reasons that student affairs units do not provide a just and supportive environment for these students.

Participants and Procedures

In April and June 1994, the authors posted a brief survey on eight computer newsgroups which focused on GLB issues to determine what GLB students believed constituted a just and supportive environment. A total of 181 students responded electronically. Another six students received the survey by computer but chose to respond by mail. Finally, 32 students responded after receiving the questionnaire in hard copy from acquaintances. Overall, a total of 219 GLB students from colleges throughout the United States participated.

E-mail research presents special issues to researchers (Goree & Marszalek, 1995). One issue is that surveys conducted over e-mail may not reach students who do not have access to e-mail unless the receivers of the survey distribute it in hard copy to non-users. For example, this survey failed to reach large numbers of racial minority students. Another issue is determining the response rate. It is not possible to know the response rate for this survey because there is no way to know how many of the computer newsgroups subscribers were college students, and because recipients were free to pass the survey on (electronically or in hard copy) to others. Therefore, the analysis presented here is purely descriptive, and no attempt is made to generalize to a larger population of GLB college students.

Results

Demographic and Descriptive Section

Although white gay males were the largest demographic group of the 219 respondents, lesbians and female bisexuals were well represented. Students

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Table I
Demographics of Participants

Gender	
Female	90 (41%)
Male	126 (59%)
Not listed	3 (1%)
Race/ethnic identification	
White	192 (88%)
Asian-American	8 (4%)
Hispanic	6 (3%)
African-American	3 (1%)
Other	3 (1%)
Not listed	2 (1%)
Sexual/affectional orientation	
Gay	8 (4%)
Lesbian	
Bisexual Male	106 (49%)
Bisexual Female	57 (26%)
Not listed	18 (8%)
Not listed	31 (14%)
Classification	
Freshmen	7 (3%)
Sophomores	
Juniors	12 (5%)
Seniors	30 (14%)
Graduate/professional	32 (15%)
Not listed	56 (26%)
Not listed	69 (32%)
Not listed	20 (9%)

in all classifications (freshmen through graduate/professional student) responded (see Table 1). The median age of respondents was 22, with a range from 18 to 41. These students were enrolled in 100 colleges, both public and private, in 40 states in every region of the United States. The mean reported enrollment at these colleges was 15,000, with a range from 720 to 52,000.

Qualitative Section

Participants in this survey were asked to report both positive and negative experiences with student affairs units. Students also reported experiences that were neutral; these responses described experiences with student affairs that were neither positive nor negative. Taken as a whole, students' comments paint a clear picture of the types of student affairs activities which provide a supportive atmosphere in the view of these students.

The students in this study reported the following positive experiences that contribute to a just and supportive atmosphere: (a) The university provides funding and other support for a student organization for GLB students, and for a wide variety of events and activities for this group; (b) the university provides policies which support GLB students and staff, and it enforces those policies; (c)

the counseling center provides gay-positive counseling and referral to gay-positive community resources; (d) the health service provides sex and health education programs specifically for GLB students, gay-positive medical care, HIV counseling and testing, and guaranteed confidentiality concerning both sexual orientation and FUV testing; (e) the housing service provides a safe living atmosphere, educational programs for residents and staff, and opportunities for partners to live together; (f) the university supports both GLB staff members who choose to be out and gay-positive staff members throughout student affairs; (g) the university responds quickly and effectively to harassment of GLB students; and (h) all student affairs offices are meticulous in offering the same services, charges, recognitions, and awards to GLB students and groups as to others.

Students reported the following negative experiences with student affairs units that impeded progress toward a just and supportive environment for GLB students: (a) not making meeting rooms available for GLB events or simply not allowing any functions to occur; (b) not including GLB students in nondiscrimination policies, not having domestic partnership policies, or not having policies permitting housing for same-sex partners; (c) not providing counseling services specifically for GLB students, or therapists making heterosexist or homophobic comments; (d) health care providers engaging in inappropriate behavior which made GLB students feel less safe about seeking health care services; (e) staff members "outing" students; (f) staff members not responding to harassment which created a threatening atmosphere in which further harassment was likely; (g) student affairs professionals not offering services to GLB students on an equal basis with others.

Students also reported neutral experiences with student affairs units. For some students, a neutral administrative stance was, in fact, supportive. These students believed that by remaining neutral on issues such as harassment or the creation of domestic partnership policies, staff was ignoring GLB students. One comment explained, "I think that the administration is just going to let us fight our own battles. It's hard to do this and go to school at the same time."

Discussion

Based on the positive comments of the students in this study, many student affairs professionals are attempting to provide a just and supportive environment for GLB students as outlined in ACPA's Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (1993). However, based on the negative comments, there are many student affairs units that are not meeting these ethical standards. To instigate an initial assessment of why many student affairs units do not meet ethical standards regarding GLB students, the authors interviewed several student affairs professionals. Based on these interviews, the authors' own experiences, and the comments of the students, the authors identified possible reasons for the divergence between ACPA ethical standards regarding GLB students and the behavior of many student affairs units toward these students.

One possible explanation for divergence between ethical standards and behavior is because colleges are greatly influenced by a society that continues to view GLB people with suspicion. According to a Gallup poll (1993) about 57 percent of Americans hold negative attitudes toward gays and lesbians. Additionally, 85 percent of Americans with less than a high school education believe that gay and lesbian relations are wrong compared to less than 40 percent of those with postgraduate education. Although heterosexist and homophobic views are less prevalent in a more learned environment, they are still difficult to eradicate. Those student affairs professionals who hold negative views toward GLB people, may believe that they are advocating a GLB lifestyle if they seek to provide a just and supportive environment for GLB students. Those student affairs professionals who have had little interaction with gays, lesbians, and bisexuals may have had little opportunity to reassess a belief system that includes negative stereotypes about GLB people. These negative beliefs can affect the treatment of GLB students and can affect the extent to which they are provided a just and supportive environment.

Another possible explanation for divergence between ethical standards and behavior is because administrators may not feel that the rationale for providing a just and supportive environment for GLB students outweighs political pressure against such a policy from the community and alumni. For example, Cohen, Bauwin, and Fritz (1993) state that the main deterrent to establishment of domestic partnership policies is attitudes against nontraditional partnerships. Some public colleges have faced strong external opposition to proposed policies such as domestic partnership policies that provide equal benefits or treatment to GLB students and staff (Collison, 1993).

A third possible explanation for divergence between ethical standards and behavior is that GLB people are not protected by the federal government under the equal protection clause of the Constitution as are other minority groups. Federal laws applying to college students, such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Title IX-of the Education Amendments of 1972, do not include GLB students (Seaquist, 1990). Only a limited number of localities and states include gays and lesbians in their nondiscrimination and domestic partnership laws (NGLTF, 1994).

A fourth possible explanation for divergence between ethical standards and behaviors is that many colleges do not include GLB students in university policies. Student affairs units at these colleges are not required to protect GLB students or address their issues. Any efforts by these student affairs units to address the concerns of GLB students are most likely driven by an ethical duty and not by adherence to university policy. The Standing Committee for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Awareness of the American College Personnel Association (1995) identified only 36 institutions out of 250 surveyed that allowed domestic partners to live in family housing. Sherrill and Hardesty (1994) reported that only 37 percent of 1,464 gay students surveyed at 189 colleges state that their school includes sexual orientation in its nondiscrimination policy.

A fifth possible explanation for divergence between ethical standards and

behavior is that student affairs professionals may not understand what constitutes a just and supportive environment for GLB students. Some professionals may ignore GLB students, believing that as long as they do no harm to GLB students, they are meeting ethical requirements. However, by taking such a stance, they are not meeting the ethical standard to promote justice (ACPA, 1993, p. 90).

A sixth possible reason for divergence between ethical standards and behavior is that student affairs professionals may not be required to hold membership in a professional organization such as ACPA that includes GLB students in its ethical standards. If student affairs professionals do choose to hold membership in a professional organization, there are many from which to choose. There is no single ethical document for the student affairs profession, and student affairs professionals can choose which student affairs organizations' ethical guidelines, if any, to follow.

A final possible explanation for divergence between ethical standards and behavior is that student affairs professional organizations that include GLB students in their ethical standards have little power to enforce their standards. Even student affairs organizations, such as ACPA, that do offer a mechanism for charging members with unethical behavior constitute little threat of serious repercussions to members. Furthermore, there is no board of student affairs professionals to threaten professionals with expulsion from the profession for unethical behavior.

Conclusion

Based on the comments of the students in this study, the degree to which student affairs professionals provide a fundamentally fair campus which opposes intolerance and respects individuality for GLB students, as required by ethical standards, appears to vary from unit to unit and campus to campus. The analysis provided here should not be taken as generalizable to all GLB students or to all student affairs professionals, but as an initial attempt at studying GLB students' perceptions of student affairs. Student affairs professionals can use the above list of GLB students' comments of what does and does not contribute to a just and supportive environment as a starting point to evaluate their units' effectiveness in addressing the needs and concerns of GLB students. In addition, professionals can use the above discussion of possible explanations for the divergence between ACPA ethical standards and the behavior of many student affairs units, as a means to spur further discourse on the conflict of meeting ethical standards and respecting student diversity versus the external/internal pressures faced by student affairs professionals.

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Cheaters Never Prosper, But Do They Get College Degrees?

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Current literature on academic dishonesty identifies many factors that influence students to cheat, faculty members' responses to cheating, and ways that campuses have sought to deter cheating. Although student development professionals have both theory and experience in dealing with such behaviors, they frequently treat academic dishonesty from a reactive stance. Most institutions treat academic dishonesty through procedural measures, stressing due process and punishment while ignoring the possibility of a proactive, student development perspective. Through an appropriate use of both educational and developmental programs and due process policy responses, campuses can take real progress in the struggle against academic dishonesty.

The old adage "cheaters never prosper" has become a questionable statement for most colleges and universities today. Cheating on college campuses is becoming increasingly common and has taken many creative forms. Examples include copying another student's paper, stealing an exam, hiring someone to write a term paper, and simply looking on a neighbor's test during an exam. Recent studies have found that 75%-90% of students admitted to cheating in college at least once (Davis, Grover, Becker, & McGregor, 1992; Graham, Monday, O'Brien, & Steffen, 1994; Greene & Saxe, 1992; McCabe & Bowers, 1994). This alarming percentage has challenged many campus educators to examine the factors that influence cheating on their campuses and to look for ways to deter such behavior. As stated by Moffatt, "Cheating comes almost as naturally as breathing. . . It's an academic skill almost as important as reading, writing, and math" (as cited in Collison, 1990, p. A31).

Most colleges and universities aspire to develop the academic abilities of students in order to increase their knowledge and prepare them for future roles

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