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LGBTQ Students

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LGBTQ Students

LGBTQ Students

This chapter addresses both the recruitment and retention of LGBTQ college students. General strategies as well as best practices and case studies, where applicable, are described. In most instances, this population is referred to as LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, or Queer), although, in some instances, more specific descriptions are used. Allies are included with this group, as appropriate, with the sub-population titled LGBTQA in those cases.

As with any sub-population of college students, there is a great deal of variance among individual LGBTQ students in terms of their expectations and desires when it comes to choosing or persisting at a particular college. Perhaps the one unifying objective among members of this group is a goal common to almost every student at every level of study: to find an educational environment in which the student will feel valued and supported while pursuing his or her educational goals. To this end, LGBTQ students have unique needs that historically have gone unaddressed. “LGBTQ students routinely face barriers to their success in higher education, including both direct and indirect discrimination and prejudice which oftentimes negatively

affects their academic success and overall college experience” (Daniels and Geiger 2010, 2).

Yet for most LGBTQ students considering which college to attend, very little information is available relative to the climate for LGBTQ students on campus. Because as a group they have largely been ignored and rarely been targeted in recruitment initiatives, LGBTQ students typically must conduct their own research in order to assess individual colleges (Einhaus, Viento and Croteau 2004). Many times, it is a guessing game on the part of prospective students, and often they end up relying on word of mouth or incomplete information as they attempt to make one of the most important decisions of their lives. In this chapter, the authors make the case that these students deserve to be presented with accurate information—and in a user-friendly format—relative to LGBTQ student needs. LGBTQ students must receive relevant information—positive and negative—about campus climate and related services and organizations in order to facilitate their decision making about which campuses will be the best fit for them. Likewise, once these students have selected an institution at which to enroll, it is imperative that their unique needs be considered at every

opportunity. For a college or university that is serious about access by and the success of all students, nothing less than full support of LGBTQ students will do.

For institutional officials who want to address the needs of LGBTQ students, faculty, and staff, one of the first places to start is also one of the most important: Institutions must examine their nondiscrimination policy to determine whether sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression are included. If these are not formally protected by the institution's non-discrimination statement, it is imperative that the institution address this issue as soon as possible. Without legal protection, many students (as well as faculty and staff) will remain "invisible," either by not participating fully in campus life, for fear of repercussions, or by formally withdrawing in order to study at a more inclusive institution.

In addition to a formal institutional non-discrimination policy, it is also important that the LGBTQ community be conspicuously included in discussions related to diversity. It is one thing for a prospective or current student to hear a university president talk about how he or she values diversity in the general sense; it is quite another to hear the president mention the LGBTQ community specifically as a group that is valued for bringing a unique perspective to campus.

While most schools proclaim their intent to recruit 'all students,' many fail to recognize that not all students can be successfully recruited in the same way. One would be hard pressed to find a contemporary leader in the field of enrollment management who does not recognize the value of customized recruitment initiatives relative to certain student attributes. Many institutions (and the third-party firms that help them reach their recruitment and enrollment goals) go to great

lengths to customize recruitment publications and communications according to a broad array of student characteristics. Prospective students are routinely targeted by desired academic major, interest in clubs and organizations, and other known attributes. Why, then, is it still the exception rather than the rule for interested prospective students to receive information related to LGBTQ organizations and services? The default argument, for most schools, is that there is no way to identify these students. That defense does not hold up to scrutiny, however, for any school that allows prospective students to express interest in certain student clubs or organizations. It is as easy to list the institution's LGBTQ organization(s) on an interest inventory for prospective students as it is to list Greek organizations or the marching band. Students who have no interest in LGBTQ organizations will simply skip that option, but for an LGBTQ prospective student who is searching for information about campus climate, the inclusion of LGBTQ organizations signals that the institution takes the needs of this group seriously and offers services once its members are enrolled. Of course, an inquiry is only as valuable as the follow-up action that occurs once it is received, and schools should immediately contact any student who expresses interest in LGBTQ organizations or services and provide the requested information however the student prefers—*e.g.*, print, electronically, etc. (this type of personalized follow up is appropriate regardless of the area of interest a prospective student indicates).

When a prospective student requests information related to LGBTQ organizations and services, the institution should have a specific and targeted publication ready to share immediately. Many institutions cite cost as a reason for not

providing LGBTQ-specific recruitment material, but the cost associated with specialized publications can be minimized by utilizing an electronic or print-on-demand model. LGBTQ-specific information should be included in every publication that references student organizations and services. Some LGBTQ prospective students may not feel comfortable requesting LGBTQ publications or information. Simply including LGBTQ information in general recruitment pieces signals a welcoming campus climate and may make the difference in many students' decisions to enroll.

The premise of full LGBTQ inclusion also applies to an institution's general and recruitment-specific websites. Although LGBTQ students are often used to conducting lengthy searches for information specific to their needs, including prominent links to the websites of LGBTQ organizations and services will quickly lead students to the information they seek—and it will also send the message that the needs of LGBTQ students are taken as seriously as those of all other prospective students. Web pages that provide information for enrolled students about LGBTQ offices, clubs, and organizations should be designed with the needs of prospective students also in mind. For example, they should provide contact information, a method for requesting follow-up, information regarding the services or activities in which the organization engages, and pictures of events and/or participants that feature the physical space the organization occupies. LGBTQ students want to be able to see themselves as part of the campus community; the more information schools provide, the easier it is for prospective students to visualize themselves as members of the campus community. Institutions that utilize digital campaigns in support of their recruitment efforts might also

consider dedicating a portion of their campaign resources to targeting users of LGBTQ-related educational sites and social media platforms.

When designing and implementing on-campus recruitment events, savvy enrollment managers recognize the benefit of employing a diverse group of student, faculty, and staff representatives. LGBTQ students should be utilized, whenever possible, alongside other current students who are speaking about their college experience or serving as tour guides or hosts for prospective students. When attempting to enroll a diverse class, it is important to represent all types of students at every opportunity. Prospective students want to feel safe, valued, and supported on campus, and one of the best ways for them to evaluate campus climate is to speak with other LGBTQ individuals who were recently in their place. As for any prospective student, when an LGBTQ prospective student visits campus, it's unclear what to expect. Connecting with currently enrolled LGBTQ students who can openly discuss the social aspects of being LGBTQ on campus and in the surrounding community is invaluable in the college decision-making process. For schools in less progressive areas, it is even more important for prospective students to see that LGBTQ students are an accepted, integrated part of the campus community.

Many campus visit events include an opportunity for prospective students to speak with student representatives of campus clubs and organizations. These 'meet and greet' events are a wonderful opportunity for LGBTQA organizations to be featured alongside other student clubs. It is important to continue to feature LGBTQA organizations even if there appears to be little overt interest or traffic from prospective students. Because most prospective students attend on-campus recruitment and enrollment

events with their families, not all students will feel comfortable connecting with campus representatives. For such students, the mere presence and visibility of LGBTQA clubs and organizations may be enough to influence their college choice.

Enrollment managers who are interested in successfully recruiting LGBTQ students as part of a diverse entering class may find it effective to utilize targeted recruitment practices. As noted in other AACRAO recruitment publications, there are many opportunities to recruit LGBTQ students in person (Einhaus, Viento and Croteau 2008). LGBTQ-focused college fairs are one such opportunity, though only a limited number of such fairs exist (see Campus Pride section); those that do tend to be in metropolitan areas outside the primary or secondary markets of many schools. For schools outside of these areas and for those with limited budgets, local, personalized recruitment efforts can provide a great return on investment.

Currently, more than 4,000 high schools sponsor Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs), which are affiliated with GLSEN, an organization focused on ending bullying and harassment of LGBTQ students in K–12 education. Admission professionals who develop relationships with a local GSA chapter may find opportunities both to reach out to local LGBTQA students about the admission process and to help students who decide to enroll after becoming aware of the institution's commitment to its LGBTQ students. (One local high school GSA invited the author to speak at its yearly youth summit. This opportunity led some of those students—who, because of their lack of exposure to the college planning process, had not been considering higher education—to begin thinking about their post-high school plans. The students contacted the author

for advice as they applied to different colleges, and several of them ultimately enrolled at the institution that employed the author.)

In addition to high school clubs and other community LGBTQ groups, community events focused on the LGBTQ population may provide opportunities for outreach to prospective students. Many Gay Pride events offer free or inexpensive space for nonprofit organizations, and most would welcome a college or university seeking to provide outreach to LGBTQ students. At these events, which have many adult attendees, schools should consider expanding their recruitment and outreach efforts to include non-traditional-aged students and feature graduate programs, as appropriate.

In recent years, there has been much discussion and debate about admission applications' inclusion of questions related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. The value of this information is undeniable in terms of institutions' ability to identify and track students for purposes of support and retention. Indeed, the difficulty of identifying members of this group is one of the reasons that research related to access and success by LGBTQ students is almost non-existent. In addition to offering the ability to identify and interact with these students, identification at the admission stage provides a way to document the number of LGBTQ students on campus, which is an important data point when advocating for funding or policy changes on behalf of this population. And while the value of these data for retention and success initiatives is clear, school officials should not make the mistake of relying solely on the admission application to obtain this information. Instead of including a question only on the admission application, schools

should spend some time deciding exactly what they wish to determine and how the information will be used. An institution that wishes to identify LGBT students for recruitment purposes, for example, will likely decide that asking a question at the application stage is too late for most recruitment outreach efforts. In this scenario, it might be better (and less intimidating) to ask a question (or to ask an additional question) about interest in LGBT campus groups as part of the questionnaire given when a student first shows interest in the college (Johnson 2013).

For institutions with an interest in identifying applicants who would be eligible for scholarships related to LGBTQ status, for example, a more focused question might be appropriate, such as one relating to the extent to which the applicant has been involved in the LGBTQ community or LGBTQ-related causes (Johnson 2013). And for any institution that wishes to accurately track the number of students who identify as LGBTQ at a given time, collecting such information at the time of enrollment is only a starting point. Many students begin to identify as LGBTQ only after they are enrolled in college; others who identify as LGBTQ in high school may be afraid to self-identify during the admission process out of concern about that information being disclosed to parents or others. The tendency of some students to identify as LGBTQ only after enrolling at college makes continued efforts to accurately identify this population throughout their enrollment critical to the gathering of accurate data.

Campus Pride, which describes itself as “the leading national nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization for student leaders and campus groups working to create a safer college environment for LGBTQ students” (Campus Pride 2017), has long advocated

for the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity questions on college admission applications. Relative to lobbying efforts to have those questions included on the Common Application, a Campus Pride (2015a) representative stated:

Campus Pride, alongside its national partners, believes it is paramount for the Common Application to add gender identity and sexual orientation questions as an option on the standard form. By better knowing the students who use the Common Application, it allows the colleges and universities to take responsibility for all students’ academic success, their recruitment and retention. It also places a higher value on safe, inclusive campus climates, diversity, and a respect of the various identities that intersect, making each student unique and more representative of how they experience the classroom and the whole campus climate.

The organization also offers the following advice to any school considering the inclusion of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression questions on its admission application or other enrollment forms:

- * Any such question(s) should be optional.
- * Any such question(s) should be included in the section of the form where other demographic questions are asked.
- * Responses to such questions should be able to be utilized to track the academic success and retention of LGBTQ students.
- * Responses to such questions should be used for specific defined purposes as set forth by the campus.
- * Any such questions should be asked only if the campus has an inclusive LGBTQ non-discrimination policy.
- * Responses to such questions should be deemed private information to be shared

only with specified offices for defined purposes as set forth by the institution.

- ✱ Any such question(s) should be as inclusive as possible, taking into consideration the purpose and intent of the form.
- ✱ Understand that not all LGBTQ students will be accounted for and that some LGBTQ students may not be “out” or may come out later. Consider which forms/methods to gather private data for updates beyond admissions and post enrollment time periods (Campus Pride 2015b).

Institutions do not need to spend a lot of money or engage in time-consuming tactics to have a major impact on the LGBTQ population. In less progressive areas in particular, many LGBTQ prospective students are coming to college from high schools that offered little support for or recognition of their unique needs. The simple existence of LGBTQ student services and support on a campus is often a big part of these students’ decision to enroll at an institution they perceive as more welcoming than the environment where they have been. In terms of LGBTQ support in less progressive areas, anything that can be done on campus to recruit and retain this historically underserved population will net a positive return on investment.

Retaining LGBTQ Students

A college or university demonstrates to a prospective student in many ways that it is welcoming of LGBTQ students. Many of the same things that may have attracted LGBTQ students to the college or university also play a role relative to their retention. It is important for students to create social connections as these ultimately help

ensure their retention. Not only can the following help with recruitment, but they can also ensure that the campus climate is welcoming for LGBTQ students:

Greek Life

Fraternities and sororities have long been a part of the student experience at many colleges and universities. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual students have always participated in fraternity and sorority life, though they often have not been “out” (particularly because fraternities and sororities have not always welcomed students who openly identify as LGBTQ). In fact, LGBTQ fraternities and sororities were created in order to provide LGBTQ students the opportunity to participate in fraternity and sorority life where they could be open regarding their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

In the mid-1980s, Delta Lambda Phi became the first gay fraternity; in the late 1990s, Alpha Lambda Tau became the second. Today, there are many LGBTQ fraternities and sororities, and many of the national fraternities and sororities have adopted non-discrimination policies toward gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, making membership in non-LGBTQ fraternities and sororities even more of a possibility for LGBTQ students.

It is important for prospective and current students to know about LGBTQ and LGBTQ-friendly fraternities and sororities, including their membership requirements and nondiscrimination policies, so they can seek out a fraternal experience where they will feel welcomed. This is important for all student organizations and activities, but it is especially important for fraternities and sororities.

Gender-Neutral Bathrooms and Housing Options

Having gender-neutral bathrooms is important for transgender students and other students as well (*e.g.*, students with children). The need for gender-neutral bathrooms is even greater for transgender students who commute to campus. A transgender student may leave their residence dressed as one gender and change into clothing that expresses their true gender identity only after arriving on campus.

It is important that institutions present information about gender-neutral bathrooms on their websites and in other places where prospective and current students can access it. When only certain bathrooms in a building are gender neutral, this information should be specified on the campus map so it is readily available to students and campus visitors. As appropriate, signage should clearly indicate that a bathroom is gender neutral.

Information about gender-neutral residence halls or a gender-neutral floor in a residence hall should also be available to prospective students, as appropriate. Details clarifying what it means to live in gender-neutral housing should also be readily accessible on the school's website. Because students who identify as transgender may seek out this type of housing option, colleges and universities are encouraged to provide answers to questions that transgender students might have, especially if first-year or other student populations are required to live on campus.

SafeZone Training

Many colleges and universities have developed training to help familiarize faculty and staff with the needs of LGBTQ students so that students can

safely go to them for assistance, assured that they need not worry about divulging their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. Often, upon successful completion of the training, faculty and staff are given a sticker (often the inverted pink triangle) to place in their office or on their office door or window to symbolize their availability as a resource for LGBTQ students. Some schools maintain lists on their websites of individuals who have completed the training; such lists can also help with recruitment and retention efforts as students see that there are faculty and staff who identify as LGBTQ or as an ally.

Campus Pride

Campus Pride is a nonprofit organization that produces the Campus Pride Index, a listing of LGBTQ-friendly colleges and universities; the Top 25 List of LGBTQ-friendly Colleges and Universities; and the Campus Pride Sports Index, a listing of schools that are LGBTQ-inclusive in athletics. The organization's website includes information regarding LGBTQ college and job/career fairs, Greek life, athletics, health and wellness, scholarship opportunities, a speaker's bureau, and training materials. (Colleges and universities seeking to make their campuses more welcoming to and inclusive of LGBTQ students should see Campus Pride's website for a wide range of additional information.)

Faculty/Staff Mentoring Opportunities

Faculty and staff often participate in mentoring programs for at-risk students. Such efforts help students adjust to college by ensuring that they have people who will serve as personal resources

for them. Yet at many colleges and universities, mentoring programs do not exist that specifically connect LGBTQ students with LGBTQ or ally faculty and staff. Many LGBTQ youth are victims of bullying while they are in high school, so it can be especially important to ensure that they connect with faculty and staff who can help them transition to college and succeed academically and socially. Mentoring can help increase the retention of students who often are marginalized and who may not be included in typical retention efforts.

Preferred/Chosen Name and Preferred Pronoun Policies

Because transgender students' gender identities do not match their birth sex, the majority of transgender students begin to use names that better align with their identities. Many institutions have implemented preferred/chosen name policies to enable students to be known by names that differ from their legal names. The student's preferred or chosen name can be displayed on class rosters and in other areas of the student information system so the student does not have to explain repeatedly why their name does not match what appears on the class roster or other reports. Institutions should be transparent as to where in the student information system (and elsewhere on campus) students' preferred/chosen names rather than their legal names will appear. Information about students' legal names must be carefully guarded and protected.

Along with allowing students to record a preferred/chosen name, increasing numbers of colleges and universities are allowing students to also provide preferred pronouns by which to be referred. Some schools have lists from which students may choose; others allow students to

write in their responses. This information may also be displayed on class rosters.

Not only do preferred/chosen name and preferred pronoun policies help create a welcoming and inclusive environment, but they also help create a safe environment by not inadvertently providing private information about students to people who may not treat the information with respect. Such policies should be published on a school's website so that prospective and current students are aware of their existence. In addition, colleges and universities that collect information about sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and preferred names and pronouns either on their admission applications or at other points during enrollment should create policies stipulating where this information will be stored in the student information system, who will have access to student data, and how that information can be used. These are sensitive data points, and there will be requests for the information; it is therefore ideal to have guidelines or policy in place before any data are collected.

LGBTQ/Queer and Feminist Studies Courses/Majors/Minors

Although LGBTQ students are not the only students likely to have an interest in LGBTQ/queer and feminist courses, they are more likely to have an interest in learning about LGBTQ history, culture, and theory, as well as feminism. Colleges and universities that offer courses, majors, and/or minors in these areas should promote them on their website and in their recruitment materials; doing so will demonstrate to prospective and current students that the institution offers LGBTQ curricular opportunities, which typically means that it also employs LGBTQ faculty.

Some colleges and universities are developing First-Year Experience (FYE) courses that are LGBTQA focused. The courses provide regular course content, but students enrolled in an LGBTQA-focused FYE section receive additional information related to campus and community services as well as LGBTQA-focused organizations. Social and academic networking opportunities are provided during the first semester of enrollment, enhancing students' college experience and encouraging their retention. Perhaps the greatest retention-related benefit of an LGBTQA-focused FYE section is the opportunity for students to quickly connect with one another—and with a peer mentor if one is assigned to the course. Because the student peer mentor has had similar experiences and “can relate” to the new student, a peer mentor can greatly enhance students' transition to college life. With this model, LGBTQA students participating in an LGBTQA-focused FYE course have the opportunity to form a peer support network as soon as their very first day on campus.

Students who participated during the fall 2017 semester in the first LGBTQA-focused FYE course to be offered at Marshall University submitted extremely positive preliminary feedback regarding the course. They appreciated the opportunity to attend class with peers and instructors to whom they could relate as well as the chance to meet LGBTQA professionals on campus and in the community as part of the course's companion speaker series. Students indicated that they would choose to enroll in the course again, and many spoke of the increased confidence and empowerment they felt as a direct result of enrolling in the course.

One student enrolled in this initial LGBTQA first-year experience course said, “The LGBTQ+ class changed my life for the better. I was able to

gain the friends and support I needed” and “find people with similar interests to me.” Another student remarked that “the opportunity to take this class made me feel accepted and appreciated at Marshall University. It provided me with an opportunity to make friends in the LGBT community and [with] information that mattered to me specifically as an LGBT student at Marshall University.” Similarly, one of the peer mentors for the course described the experience in the following way: “I never could have imagined the magnitude and impact a group of students would have on my life. Working with an entirely LGBTQ+ class allowed me to better educate myself on my own community and, more importantly, reaffirm my decision to continue working with LGBTQ+ students post-graduation. To see these students' development [of] a sense of pride and confidence within themselves and for their campus was the most rewarding part of the experience.”

Campus Events and Speakers

Campus events and guest lecturers/speakers are often well-publicized and help demonstrate diversity on a college campus. For the LGBTQ community, events such as National Coming Out Day, the National Day of Silence, and other events that promote awareness of the LGBTQ community are some that should be highlighted in the same way as other events related to diversity and inclusion. These opportunities bring together LGBTQ students, faculty, staff, and allies for meaningful dialogue with the rest of the campus community.

Conclusion

When it comes to recruiting and retaining LGBTQ students, a strong commitment by the

college or university needs to exist to ensure that all areas of the institution are ready both to welcome LGBTQ students to campus and to retain them. Several approaches and key offices have been highlighted throughout this chapter, but every office and department—including athletics and intramurals, counseling services, religious

services, health services, etc.—needs to review its operations to ensure that they are inclusive of LGBTQ students. By recruiting and retaining LGBTQ students, colleges and universities can help diversify higher education; even more important, they can make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ students.