

Educating Our Youth on Queer Topics: Is UIUC Truly a Community Leader

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I started this project wanting to better understand how Queer organizations on the UIUC campus and those in the local high schools operated and if they ever created alliances with one another in order to further education on Queer issues. This is because as a student at the U of I, a lifelong resident of Champaign, and parent in a Queer family, I feel the University has an obligation in helping to build and foster the community in which it resides due to its substantial amount of resources and diverse body of students and faculty members. Promoting youth education on Queer topics and allowing them opportunities to interact with others both like them and different from them is one way that this can be accomplished. It is with that, that I came into this project asking: how can campus Queer organizations work with Gay-Straight Alliances in the Champaign-Urbana community schools to provide access to resources, further education on Queer issues, foster a creation of safe spaces within the schools and the community, and act as role models to youth as well as school district teachers and administrators? Does UIUC, but more importantly do campus Queer organizations have a responsibility to the Champaign-Urbana community and its youth in promoting inclusion within schools and fostering stronger education initiatives on a topic that is vastly ignored by parents and educators?

To fully understand this research, two definitions must first be put forward. The first term is Queer, which in regards to this project, encompasses LGBT identities including Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender, as well as those questioning their sexual or gender identity, and those who consider themselves an ally to LGBT individuals and concerns. The second term is Gay-Straight Alliance or GSA, which are after school organizations located in all of the Champaign-Urbana

high schools in which LGBT, questioning, and ally identified students can meet to create a safe space inclusive of all gender presentations and sexual orientations and discuss issues relevant to the Queer community.

The goals of this project included contacting all of the Champaign-Urbana school GSA sponsors, the LGBT resource center, and all of the campus Queer organizations that focus specifically on certain Queer populations in their work. Though I contacted four schools and over six campus organizations I was only able to participate in six face-to-face interviews with seven people, two with GSA sponsors which are school faculty members who facilitate the after school groups, a double interview with the LGBT Resource center, one with La Casa Cultural Latina Allies, and two with UIUC faculty who, through their individual work, have become connected to the University, the campus Queer population, and school-age youth. Though almost every interview has focused on a different avenue of this research, it has allowed the project to grow so that it no longer focuses on the creation of broad alliances, but on the creation of intricate connections between race, gender, identity, and social position that would be beneficial not only to the Queer community or youth in general, but beneficial to each individual person, each group, and each school that has some connection to the Queer population of Champaign-Urbana. I always started the interviews somewhere along the lines of asking “does your organization, whether it be campus or high school, form alliances with one another in order to promote and further youth education on Queer topics, or have you seen this done within your own research? The answers were overwhelmingly “no, seldom, or we never really thought about it”, though the response in potentially creating new alliances was always positive. It is with this project then, that I am seeking to discover why these alliances have not been created and how the benefits in doing so

could be immense and invaluable to the Champaign-Urbana community, including the University of Illinois.

Through my discussions with the seven individuals I interviewed as well as a review of previous research into the presence and need of school GSAs, a number of key issues arose that pinpointed why Queer identified youth are in need of resources and guidance and why school administrators and teachers along with students who do not identify as Queer are in need of programs to teach them methods of inclusion and acceptance: 1. inclusion of racialized Queer youth, 2. the protection of Queer youth, 3. the creation of safe spaces in the community, 4. the education of school faculty and administrators in Queer issues, and 5. the location of present GSAs within the schools. As a member of the community, the University of Illinois Queer organizations could extend their efforts to reach out to the local schools in order to help address these issues.

Campus organizations have the advantage of having a variety of backgrounds and experiences amongst their members which is the essential building block in creating alliances with community youth. While talking with a member of La Casa Cultural Latina Allies, the topic of racialized Queer youth was seen as an extremely important, yet ignored topic because of the differences in cultural attitudes between groups concerning Queer people which make it hard to do specific outreach:

“We struggle, I won’t lie, we struggle with outreaching to Latino, LGBT Latino, because there’s a, I would say, a homophobia within the Latino community. It’s not as well articulated as it is in the African-American community, it’s there... I think it’s there but it’s also mitigated by this huge extensive family network, so it seems like everybody knows someone in their family who is gay...and I’m not ostracizing

the African-American community, but I think because of the church structures and how they operate within the community it's easier to say these fairly homophobic statements publicly [within the African American community].”

Forming alliances between the local schools and Queer campus groups that focus on specific racial groups, such as La Casa, Asian American LGBT Allies, Colors of Pride, and Kehilat Keshet, will allow minority youths to interact with others like them in racial makeup, as well as sexual orientation and gender presentation. Though interactions between groups should not be restricted to people who identify in similar ways, an ability to connect on similar levels will allow more youth to share their own experiences because they may be mirrored in the experiences of the campus group members. During an interview with a Champaign GSA sponsor, the demographics of the group were discussed and it was evident that though the group was meant to be inclusive of everyone, it was made up of primarily White, middle-to-upper class students and did not represent the diversity in the school's Queer population. Forming alliances with the diverse Queer organizations of campus then, could present school GSAs with an opportunity to engage more non-White Queer students in the schools by offering them opportunities to interact with people they may feel more comfortable with.

Another issue that has arisen through this research is the extensive problems faced by LGBT youth, though I did not address it at length during my interviews. School-age youth that identify as Queer or LGBT are at a higher risk for developing unsafe lifestyles including substance abuse in which “68% of adolescent gay males use alcohol and 44% use other drugs while 83% of lesbians use alcohol and 56% use other drugs”; they are more likely to have hostile home environments in which parents are unknowledgeable and unaccepting of their sexual/gender

identity which has resulted in 26% of Queer youth being forced to leave their home and causing them to represent 40% of the homeless youth population; the leading cause of death for Queer youth is suicide in which they are “two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth” and represent “30% of completed youth suicides”; and finally 28% of Queer youth drop-out of high school due to the harassment they face for their identity (FAQs). Youth who identify as Queer are not only at risk for these problems, as can be seen in the April 9th suicide of Massachusetts boy, Carl Joseph Walker-Hoover, who did not identify as LGBT but was harassed with anti-gay bullying. Though his mother requested help from school administrators, help that went unanswered, he hanged himself days before his twelfth birthday, which happened to fall on this year’s ‘Day of Silence’. The campus Queer organizations can be beneficial to youth development and stopping destructive behaviors by providing safe spaces in which Queer identified and questioning youth can go to discuss problems and search for positive solutions, by providing schools and counselors with information on Queer friendly services such as tutors, doctors, or shelters, provide role models and images of Queer people who are able to succeed in a University environment and who have developed their own family networks on campus, and in cases such as Carl’s, the campus organizations can provide school administrators with resources that promote inclusion and safety of all students in the school environment.

The creation then, of safe spaces within schools that are composed not only of GSAs but also include daily classrooms, lunchrooms, restrooms, gyms, hallways, and the sidewalks that children use to get home are essential to the well-being and safety of the community as a whole. The deterrent of violence both towards Queer youth and perpetrated by Queer youth is the first step that needs to be taken, and a step that can be aided through youth interactions with campus members. According to a 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey based in Massachusetts in which

LGB identified students were compared with non-LGB identified students, 42% of LGB students have been bullied, 22% have been threatened or injured with a weapon, 15% have skipped school because they did not feel safe, 30% have experienced dating violence, and 41% have been contacted sexually against their will (Grossman 25). Campus Queer organizations have a responsibility to protect youth in their community because they have also experienced that sense of violence during their own adolescent years and because the campus students understand that this violence exists, the forms it takes, and ways to possibly prevent it. It is up to campus organizations then to provide resources to schools on what to look for and how to understand the magnitude of violence towards Queer youth. Violence that Queer youth take part in is also on the rise with the Massachusetts study finding that LGB students are more likely to carry a weapon than non-LGB identified youth, are 11% more likely to be in a physical fight, and 14% more likely to be involved with gang-related activities within their school (Grossman 25). Though this study took place outside Illinois and the statistics may not coincide perfectly with the youth of the Champaign-Urbana community, it shows that Queer youth are trying to combat the harassment, violence, and overwhelming isolation that they experience within an environment that they spend the majority of their daily lives in. Forming alliances between campus organizations and community schools can again benefit the wellbeing of youth and the community by allowing adolescent students to form positive connections with other Queer people so that they can turn to sources other than violence to protect themselves and so they can find safe zones that provide guidance and support if their school does not.

The education of school faculty and district administrators is the most important step in providing all youth with positive education on Queer topics and people, and providing Queer youth with safe environments in which to thrive and grow. Currently, there are a number of problems

with school systems in general: staff attitudes towards Queer youth and topics, university teacher preparation programs, lack of knowledge in school psychologists, and fears of faculty wishing to sponsor a school GSA. With the help of Queer organizations, specifically the diverse organizations located on the UIUC campus, these problems can be addressed in the Champaign-Urbana schools and if found to be a significant problem, remedied. In a study by Paul C. McCabe and Florence Rubinson titled “Committing to Social Justice: The Behavioral Intention of School Psychology and Education Trainees to Advocate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered Youth”, it was found that “in general, education programs at the college level have been relatively silent on LGBT issues in schools” (471) and that many school psychologists “possess a low-to-moderate level of knowledge related to LGBT issues. Although...willing to address the issues, they reported being inadequately prepared and unsure how the concerns of LGBT students presented in academic settings” (472). As a body of the University of Illinois, all of the campus Queer organizations should ensure that teacher education program, including psychology programs, on this campus incorporate multiculturalism into their curriculum and require that education students take classes that teach on issues of social stratification including gender, race, social class, sexual orientation, and gender presentation. The campus organizations have more resources on Queer issues and community problems and so are able to educate the University on the importance of requiring courses that are inclusive of sexual and transgender minorities so that future teachers do not add to the harassment of Queer youth by being uninformed about problems in the Queer community, using offensive and anti-gay language, or disregarding their problems as common of all adolescents and not needing attention.

Another problem with the education system is that many potential GSA sponsors are concerned about their presence in the group. According to the article “Working With Youth On

LGBT Issues: Why Gay–Straight Alliance Advisors Become Involved” by Maria Valenti and Rebecca Campbell, many GSA sponsors are “worried about their possible lack of credibility, their fear about possibly losing their job, and their fear about being accused of recruitment to the “gay lifestyle” (238). During the two interviews that I had with local GSA sponsors, I received no indication that the current sponsors had these specific concerns, or any concerns, revolving around their involvement in their school’s program, and each sponsor had been with the program from the beginning. One Champaign sponsor did voice a concern over the specific administration in their school as not being someone who completely desired the GSAs presence, while an Urbana sponsor claimed that their school was very supportive of the functions of the GSA. During a third interview, one with a member of the Gender Women Studies program at UIUC, we discussed how the creation of GSAs is often met with community criticism and administration concerns. She discussed how the Champaign Centennial high school and nearby Mahomet-Seymour high school both faced potential legal issues while trying to create their GSA programs. The administration in both schools questioned whether the programs had to, by law, be allowed and what restrictions that the schools placed on the programs were illegal to implement. These series of issues, sponsor worries of whether or not they are the right person and are protected under the law for sponsoring the program, as well as legality issues of what types of programs have a right to exist and how far the program is allowed to go, can also be addressed by campus Queer organizations. Through alliances with the local school districts, the campus groups can provide youth and GSA sponsors with information on their legal rights, they can help the school districts understand their limits in placing boundaries on GSA programs, and they can help potential sponsors learn how to advocate for the GSA program so that they do not have to worry about not being “qualified” enough or being reprimanded for becoming a sponsor.

The final component of campus-school alliances involves the present location of Champaign-Urbana GSAs as being restricted to the high schools: Champaign Central's Spectrum Alliance, Champaign Centennial's Gay-Straight Alliance, Urbana's Gay-Straight Alliance, and University Laboratory's Queer-Straight Alliance. In all of Champaign County there is only one other high school, Mahomet-Seymour, that has a Gay-Straight Alliance. During my interview with one of the sponsors though, I discovered that at least two Champaign middle school teachers are in the works for creating a GSA program in their schools. Queer organizations on campus may hold a substantial amount of influence regarding the problem of GSA location in the community because not one middle or elementary school in this area provides a program for students who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Allied or those whose parents identify as LGBT. During an interview with the campus LGBT Resource Center, I was told that adolescents have been known to call the office for resources on how to start GSA programs in their schools or to receive information about Queer-related events which shows that there are students out there that do not feel they are being presented with enough information in their schools related to Queer issues, or who wish to take action and promote inclusion of Queer people and topics. The campus organizations then, can take more steps in ensuring that GSA programs be presented to all schools within the community and that school administrators understand that children of any age may realize they identify differently in terms of sexuality or gender than they have been taught to identify as. More importantly, campus organizations can help elementary and middle schools understand that the creation of a GSA is not about promoting sexual promiscuity, providing young students with sexual health lessons, promoting abstinence-free education, or as trying to "recruit" young children to the "gay lifestyle". GSAs are about the creation of safe spaces for all children, promoting inclusion and appreciation of diversity, and creating knowledge about how to

understand people who may be considered different in some ways. Implementing GSA programs into elementary schools in which children's minds are open to new ideas and middle schools in which many children began to realize they identify as LGBT can help to reduce the amount of problems that Queer youth experience in high school. More students may learn to be accepting of these youth so that harassment and bullying rates lower, substance abuse problems decrease, and more LGBT students go on to complete high school and possibly further their education.

Overall, the benefits of creating alliances between campus Queer organizations and all of the community schools, not just those with a GSA program, is invaluable to the community. LGBT youth can benefit by receiving attention they are not always afforded in school, at home, or with friends, they can find safe zones within an after school program or at a campus location, they can be provided with resources to help them overcome struggles and find help if needed, and they can meet groups of people as diverse as they are in which they find role models and develop their own aspirations. Campus members and organizations can benefit by providing the Queer community of Champaign-Urbana with resources they may not presently have, ensuring that the University develops future teachers and school psychologists that are ready to help all students and understanding of the amount of diversity within student populations, and by providing services that may not have existed during their time in school to today's community youth so that mistakes are not repeated and problems continued to be ignored.

Despite the overall positive response that this project received, there are still a few things that need to be addressed in future research. First of all, all the schools in the community with GSA programs need to be contacted, as well as more Queer organizations on campus. To do this, contact information must be updated on a regular basis as I found this to be the biggest problem in securing interviews with a diverse population. Many email addresses, websites, and names of

organization leaders were out of date in LGBT resource guides, as well as many organizations being listed that were no longer present on campus which made it hard to find the correct person or organization to contact. Contact lists for schools must also be updated due to similar problems of email addresses being out of date or wrongly listed on school websites as the address to contact a teacher at. The second thing to address is specific school district policies regarding Queer issues being addressed in the school curriculum, faculty education on issues of diversity, policies of protection for students, and policies regarding the creation of alliances with campus groups, including potential contact between students and campus members. Finally, the statistics of Champaign-Urbana should be studied in order to research how this community compares to national statistics regarding Queer youth. This will help in determining what other steps that students and teachers feel need to be taken to create positive school environments.

The creation of alliances can be as simple or as extensive as each school and each organization want it to be but there are a few things that I would like to recommend as starting points: 1. adding school GSAs to the campus LGBT resource listserve so that the sponsors and students can learn about events that they may be able to attend or news related to the general and local Queer community; 2. inviting school GSA sponsors and members to interact with campus organization members during events such as 'National Coming Out Day' or 'Day of Silence', as well as during group meetings and everyday settings; 3. providing the Champaign and Urbana school districts with information on the need to form inclusive curriculums, the need for and how to form GSAs in elementary and junior high schools, and creating workshops for school faculty and administrators in which campus groups can facilitate education initiatives; 4. providing education to parents of Queer children as well as Queer parents within the community to help them better understand their children; 5. creating manuals on how to create a GSA for use by interested

schools; or 6. creating safe zones for community youth to come to or inviting them to spaces already designated as a safe place, such as the Rainbow Coffee House, and making them feel welcome. UIUC campus organizations are not the only institution responsible for the education of the community and its youth on Queer topics, and they are not the only institution that should act in the interest of Queer youth, but the University has been a member of the Champaign-Urbana community for a long time and is considered the backyard to the community's youth population, so they do have a responsibility to take a look at what they can do for this community, *their* community. Helping to advocate for Queer youth is one step.