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# LGBTQA Students on Campus: Is Higher Education Making the Grade?

Susan R. Rankin

As D'Augelli and Grossman note "educational researchers have overlooked the development of sexual orientation among adolescents and youth." Certainly, those working in higher education have, in many cases, overlooked lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and ally (LGBTQA) students' needs and not provided sufficient resources to address their issues and concerns on campus (Rankin, 2003). This climate of exclusion certainly creates a campus environment that marginalizes LGBTQA students. But, what have we learned from researchers who have studied both LGBT and other minority students' experiences of their campus environment and its influences on both learning and developmental outcomes? What role does their perception of campus climate play on these students' educational outcomes and what are the differences among students from different social groups? And, finally, how can this frame our future research efforts?

## *CAMPUS CLIMATES AND STUDENT OUTCOMES*

Several empirical studies reinforce the importance of the perception of non-discriminatory environments to positive learning and develop-

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mental outcomes. Pascarella and Terenzini (1991), in their comprehensive review of student outcomes literature, concluded that attending an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) related to greater educational attainment, academic self-image, and cognitive development for African American students. Whitt et al. (2001), in a longitudinal study of 1,054 students over their first three years of college, found that the perception of a non-discriminatory environment was one of seven statistically significant predictors of openness to diversity and challenge.

Other studies have identified the deleterious effects of discriminatory environments. For instance, Cabrera et al. (1999) found that if students perceived the campus climate as "racist," it negatively influenced their academic experiences, academic and intellectual development, institutional commitment, and persistence.

Perception of climate also appears to influence the degree of engagement with the learning enterprise. Salter and Persaud (2003) examined the classroom climate for women in either education or engineering courses to explore how classroom climate encouraged (or discouraged) participation. Women who reported a better "fit" with the classroom environment participated at higher levels than did women who felt less of a "fit."

### ***DIFFERENTIAL PERCEPTIONS BASED UPON SOCIAL GROUP MEMBERSHIP***

Clearly, the perception of a campus climate plays a large role in students' educational experiences and outcomes. Empirically-supported student development and environmental studies indicate that students from different social groups likely perceive campus environments differently (Chang, 2003; LaRocca & Kromrey, 1999; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Our understanding of campus climates must, therefore, incorporate differences based on social identity group membership.

Miller et al. (1998) found statistically significant differences in perceptions of campus policies by racial identity. Caucasian students described their campus racial climate as positive; African American students rated their campus racial climate as the more negative. African American and other students of color described interracial interactions on campus as less friendly and reported being the targets of racism.

Empirical studies also reveal that men and women perceive sexual harassment quite differently. Men tend to hold more tolerant attitudes

regarding sexual harassment than do women. Dietz-Uhler and Murrell (1992) found that men held more tolerant attitudes on six of fourteen sexual harassment items. Men, for example, were more likely to agree with the statement, "This issue of sexual harassment has been greatly exaggerated."

College campuses historically have also been difficult environments for students who do not identify as heterosexual (Bieschke, Eberz, & Wilson, 2000; Dilley, 2002; Rankin, 2003). The results of these studies indicate that LGBT students reported experiencing high levels of harassment on campus. The consistency of the results lends credence to the conclusion that LGB students experience campus climates much more negatively than do heterosexual students.

### ***DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES, DIFFERENT OUTCOMES***

If students from different social identity groups experience, or at least perceive, campus climates differently, and if perceptions of campus climates can effect education and developmental outcomes of college students, then are not those working in higher education obliged to intervene? Further, while necessary attention has been paid to issues of racial and ethnic differences, and to differences based on gender, only a small body of research explores the different perceptions of LGBTQ and heterosexual students. What obligations do researchers have—regardless of sexual orientation—to expand and extend such research?

Several studies have documented the perceptions of campus quality of life for LGBT students and those who work and study with them (Brown et al., 2004; Evans & Broido, 2002; Garber, 2002). Other studies have documented students' experiences of harassment and violence (Rankin, 2003; Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, & D'Augelli, 1998), reviewed the effects of this harassment and violence on students (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 1996) or examined the success of programs to improve campus climate for LGBT students (Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Little & Marx, 2002; Yep, 2002).

In studies that compare LGBT students and heterosexual students on their perceptions of campus climate, LGBT college students generally perceive the climate as less welcoming (Brown et al., 2004) and report being targeted for harassment and violence (Rankin, 1998; 2003).

Much of the academic writing on LGBT students, however, is not empirical, but rather takes the form of advice or personal reflections based on experience; this is particularly true for minorities within the

LGBT community such as students with disabilities, transgender students, and students of color (Draughn, Elkins, & Roy, 2002; Ferguson & Howard-Hamilton, 2000; Harley et al., 2002). While these studies are valuable both because they provide some testable hypotheses and because they indicate the issues that some administrators and LGBT service professionals are already aware of, they do not provide systematic documentation of existing problems or solutions.

Empirical studies generally include small numbers of students, from 10 for the smallest, qualitative study which only included lesbian and bisexual women, to almost 2000 in an extensive study of one university which included both heterosexual and LGBT students (Stevens, 2004). Most include a few hundred students, if they are not limited to LGBT people, and less than one hundred if they are. This has seriously limited the generalizability and statistical power of these analyses. Rankin (2003) while providing information on campus climate for LGBT people that was more national in scope (14 institutions; 1669 participants) was still limited in that the campuses all had visible institutional commitments to LGBTQA issues.

These studies suggest high rates of victimization of LGBT people in the form of verbal harassment, physical assault, and negative campus climate. Although both victimization and openness of heterosexual students to LGBT issues seem to be improving, it is difficult to tell if this is occurring as there is no consistent measurement of these concepts nor are there longitudinal studies of change over time.

#### ***FUTURE RESEARCH: CLIMATE STUDIES AS OUTCOME MEASURES***

Additional research is necessary on assessing campus climates for LGBTQA students to provide policy makers and program planners with the information necessary to specifically address the issues and concerns of LGBTQA students. These actions must be included in the overall strategic plan for the institution and accompanied by the same strategic indicators and outcome measures as other college-wide initiatives. Some suggested recommendations might include:

- creating centers for interdisciplinary study and cross-cultural teaching and learning—inclusive of LGBTQA issues—that offer the necessary bases for education and scholarship that does not take place in existing departments;

- supporting active, collaborative learning that is concerned with enabling students to come to grips with their own realities;
- reconfiguring the classroom, for example, by encouraging students to assist in developing or changing the syllabus at the start of and during the semester.

Structural interventions are necessary because they provide needed services to LGBTQA people, demonstrate institutional support, and shift basic assumptions and premises. But we cannot stop there. What is the impact of these intervention strategies? There is a need for systematic, sustained, and empirical-based research to evaluate the outcomes of these strategic initiatives and their effectiveness in improving the institutional climate for LGBTQA people.

A final area of needed research is on multiple identities among college youth. One wonders what the campus climate experience is for those LGBTQA students who also are members of other marginalized social groups. Do African-American, Chicano, Latina, or American Indians even use the identifiers of LGBTQ? Recent research suggests that if appropriate language is not used, that we may “miss” LGBTQ students of color. In my 2003 research, I used LGBT. The results made clear that not all respondents wanted to place themselves in these boxes. Many would prefer choices such as “same-gender loving,” “gender-queer,” “pansexual,” “queer,” “woman-loving-woman,” “on the down-low.” Some considered the “gay,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “transgender” categories as predominately white social constructs of identity, and, therefore, not relevant to their personal experiences.

I choose to identify as “queer,” not as a label, a camp, or a statement but as a means of confronting and disrupting static notions of gender and sexuality. The term “queer” allows me to not conform to any discrete categorization of sexuality. However, “queer” was overwhelmingly not the self-identity choice of black LGBT people who were surveyed in a recent study (Battle, 2002). Many of the written comments provided by respondents in my study further elucidate the personal and political import of language and the need to recognize a broad range of self-identity choices.

Future researchers must be cognizant of the various languages used to describe one’s sexual orientation and gender identity so as not to exclude from the onset many members of our community. We must also incorporate the unique experiences of LGBTQA students from other underrepresented groups and investigate their specific challenges. For example, what are the experiences of LGBTQA students who are physi-

cally challenged, Muslim, or international? Our challenge as researchers is to embrace fully the differences within the LGBTQA population in our research questions, methodologies, and samples.

The challenge for college campuses is to not only provide inclusive structures, programs and policies for LGBTQA people, but to also measure the success of these initiatives via systematic, sustained, empirical research. This can only be achieved if research is inclusive of the multiple dimensions of LGBTQA people.

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