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Heath Boice-Pardee

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## Entering the Closet: An Examination of Views About Sexual Orientation on Campus

Heath Kendare-Boice [Heath Boice-Pardee]  
Centenary College Hackettstown, New Jersey

Several pieces of literature have been written on the status of heterosexual college student attitudes toward homosexuality, homosexual students, and homophobia (D'Augelli, 1989; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Ficarroto, 1990; Goldberg, 1982; Grieger & Ponterotto, 1988; McDevitt, 1987; Spees, 1987; Wells & Franken, 1987; Yarber & Yee, 1983). Conversely, limited research outlines the impact that this heterosexual perspective has on homosexual (gay/lesbian) students. Furthermore, little research has been presented in the specific area of addressing the needs of homosexual and bisexual students (Baker, 1991; Scott, 1988). Due to the minimal attention focusing on gay/lesbian/bisexual students, and more specifically the issues that they face on our college campuses, this study attempts to extend the existing research.

Within the parameters of many college campuses lies a forum for a diversity of ideas, thoughts, personalities, and behaviors. In fact, some researchers posit that the college and university classroom provide students with the opportunity to explore new ideas and social issues (Wells & Franken, 1987). Hudson and Murphy (1978) maintain that compared to the general population, college students espouse more liberal attitudes

toward numerous social issues. However, a significant amount of evidence contradicts this supposition. The available literature on this topic shows that if Hudson and Murphy (1978) are indeed correct, then topics addressing homosexuality and bisexuality are not social issues included among college student's "liberal attitudes."

One study conducted by D'Augelli and Rose (1990) provides evidence that college first year students express extremely biased views toward lesbian and gay students. The study shows that 30% of the college freshman interviewed would prefer a completely heterosexual college environment. Almost half of the freshmen believed that any form of homosexual activity is wrong (D'Augelli & Rose, 1990). This evidence not only opposes the theory of Hudson and Murphy (1978) but justifies research in the area of gay/lesbian and bisexual students to identify the specific needs of this student population.

Much of this research, including that of D'Augelli and Rose (1990), focuses on homosexuality through the eyes of heterosexual students. However little research has been conducted about issues that face homosexual/bisexual students, as expressed by the homosexual/bisexual students themselves.

Through personal interviews with gay/lesbian/bisexual students and persons affiliated with such students, an understanding is sought of the issues that these students face relating to their college environment. From these issues and needs recommendations will be made as to how student affairs professionals can better meet the needs of homosexual/bisexual students.

### **Review of Literature**

Of the literature concerning college students and homosexuality, the majority falls within three general categories: 1. heterosexual student attitudes toward homosexuality; 2. Homophobia; and 3. AIDS education. Limited research discusses issues that gay/lesbian/bisexual students face, and a lesser amount of research presents itself from the perspective of gay/lesbian/bisexual students themselves.

### **The Heterosexual Perspective**

In terms of heterosexual attitudes toward homosexuality, Yarber and Yee (1983) note that 86% of the national population in 1970 disapproved of homosexuality.



Consistent with these nationwide statistics, Yost and Adamek (1974) discovered in 1971 that Kent State college students felt homosexuality was an illness and was immoral. In a nationwide survey in 1974, 72% of the population felt that homosexuality was always wrong (Yarber & Yee, 1983).

Moving away from a heterosexual perspective, there has been limited research on homosexual student's point of view on homosexuality as "wrong" and as an "illness" (Yarber & Yee, 1983). A study conducted in the seventies which surveyed homosexual students showed that of the homosexual students who sought counseling, the majority sought understanding and advice with significant others and their heterosexual family members and coworkers (Nuehring, Fein, & Tyler, 1974). They did not see themselves as a "sociological minority" (Spees, 1987).

Once again, examining heterosexual students' attitudes toward homosexuality is the work of Weissbach and Zagon (1975). In this research, students were asked to rate other students being interviewed on videotape. When the students were told that the person on tape was a member of the campus gay/lesbian/bisexual organization, 50% rated the student more "feminine, emotional, submissive, non-conventional, and less strong" (Spees, 1987). In a similar study, Thomson and Fishburn (1971) discovered that fewer positive traits were attributed to gay/lesbian students and as a result, the homosexual students were stereotyped into categories. Concerning homosexual students and counseling, Thomson and Fishburn (1971) discovered that the practice of stereotyping homosexual students was not limited to undergraduate students. They found that stereotyping also took place among graduate students involved in counseling and consequently, many felt ill prepared to work "with homosexual clients" (Spees 1987).

In order to combat such stereotyping activities, Wells and Franken (1987) uncovered limited evidence showing that an increase in educational programming about homosexuality in classrooms and other campus environments decreases a person's "homonegativism" or negative feelings toward homosexuality. In terms of education, Goldberg (1982) found that use of audio-visual material in educational programming about homosexuality significantly decreases student's homonegativism and /or homophobic reactions.



## Homophobia

Dealing specifically with homophobia, the literature suggests that there are several factors leading to this phenomenon. Ficarrotto (1990) suggests two alternative theories that explain the origin of homophobia. Attributing the theories to Churchill (1967), Ficarrotto (1990) suggested that homophobia may be the product of a “sex negative” culture where the human sex drive is a threat to social organization. The second theory views homophobia within the context of other intergroup prejudice, similar to prejudice directed against members of other “low powered” groups (Ficarrotto, 1990). Edgar (1983) posits that men who are homophobic limit or inhibit their self-disclosures with other men, fearing that this intimacy might be associated with the very homosexual behavior that they detest.

D'Augelli (1989) maintains that many homosexual students do not disclose their homosexuality because of homophobia, fearing negative reactions from others. This theory is supported by researchers, including Bell and Weinberg (1978), Jay and Young (1979), and Spada (1979). Researchers such as Cramer and Roach (1988) and D'Augelli and Rose (1990) maintain that homosexuals do not disclose their sexual orientation in fear that they will disappoint others and thus be rejected or abused. In relation to abuse, Herek (1989) discovered that verbal and physical abuse as a result of homophobia increased on every college campus where studies on the topic have been conducted.

In a study of prospective resident assistant (R.A.) candidates on one college campus, D'Augelli (1989) found that although most of the candidates supported the legal rights of homosexuals, the male candidates were more biased against gay men than were the female candidates. D'Augelli (1989) also found that the male candidates made more abusive comments about homosexuals. Additionally, the male candidates believed that harassment and violence against gays is less likely to occur on college campuses. These attitudes can be juxtaposed with the reality that there is a higher frequency of violence against gay men on college campuses in relation to violence against lesbian students (D'Augelli, 1989). D'Augelli's (1989) reason for this occurrence is the supposition that male R.A.'s might view anti-gay language as normative, and therefore will not view this homophobic action as harassment. D'Augelli (1989) goes on to posit that this behavior



among male R.A.s might deter gay males from confiding in these R.A.s due to the fear that the R.A. will be unresponsive to the situation or be abusive. It is also suggested that greater exposure to gay men and lesbians might decrease these negative views (D'Augelli, 1989).

### **AIDS Issues**

Another factor contributing to homophobia is discussed in a study conducted by D'Augelli and Rose (1990). These researchers posit that increased attention given to AIDS and HIV in relation to the homosexual population have also increased homophobia and negative views of homosexuals.

There is some conflicting evidence considering heterosexual views of homosexuals in relation to the AIDS virus. Grieger and Ponterotto (1988) suggest that attitudes toward homosexual persons have become more critical because of AIDS publicity. Hirsch and Enlow (1984) and Kayal (1985) maintain that AIDS has renewed scrutiny of gay sexuality.

In a study conducted by Grieger and Ponterotto (1988), findings show that heterosexual subjects did not hold negative views toward homosexuality or persons with AIDS. Yet, research conducted by McDevitt (1987), as well as Larson, Reed and Hoffman (1980), suggest that a factor in homophobia is the belief by heterosexuals that they should avoid individuals with AIDS, as well as homosexuals and bisexuals. Relating to this misconception that AIDS is a homosexual disease, Hirschon (1987) found that persuading college students to use safer sex practices was very difficult because the students viewed AIDS as a disease contracted and spread by homosexuals.

### **Method**

Due to a great deal of research conducted in heterosexual attitudes toward homosexual students, an attempt was made to attain a different perspective. Instead of studying how homosexuality affects heterosexual students, as is the focus of much of the literature, the intended perspective of this study is the effect of heterosexuality on gay/lesbian and bisexual students. Because of limited research conducted from this perspective, as well as considering the heterosexual perspective of this study's researcher, an attempt was made to gain the perspectives of gay/lesbian/bisexual students on what



issues affect them based on their sexual orientation.

Subjects were solicited for this research on a strictly voluntary basis. In the attempt to talk to homosexual students themselves about issues relevant to their status as college students, and to limit the bias of a heterosexual perspective, a focus group was gathered, and participatory research was conducted. Constructing a collaborative research effort and learning from the participants is the rationale behind this type of research.

Because it is impossible to distinguish gay/lesbian/bisexual students from heterosexual students, unless students clearly identify their sexual orientation in some way, subjects were chosen based on their involvement with gay/lesbian/bisexual support groups on two college campuses. Group members from the State University of New York at Albany (SUNY Albany) and The College of Saint Rose, Albany, NY, were interviewed.

Subjects were contacted only through the presidents/chairpersons of each gay/lesbian/bisexual support group. Each chairperson was contacted initially via letter or a personal phone call, requesting a meeting with members interested in discussing issues related to gay/lesbian/bisexual college students. No direct contact was made with any student members other than by the chairpersons prior to the approval of such contact by each chair.

Although the occasion did not arise, subjects were notified that if they wished to participate in this study but were not willing to meet with the interviewer personally, confidential telephone interviews would be arranged. The interviewer's telephone number would have been given to the interested subject by:

- a) the chairperson of each support group
- b) a person aware of this study and in contact with such a student

Each contact person would have then acted as liaison, setting up a time convenient for both subject and interviewer. This process was defined to allow the interested subject to contact the interviewer without the interviewer knowing his/her name, telephone number, address or any other personal information.

Attempting to be sensitive to the privacy of subjects, and due to the personal



nature of the topic of sexual orientation, disclosure of all information was left up to the subject. Only general, non-threatening questions were asked, such as, "Are there any specific issues that you face on the college campus based on your sexual orientation or the sexual orientation of someone that you know?" Again, due to the sensitivity of this topic, it was made clear at the beginning of each personal interview (individually and in groups) that the interviewer did not need to be made aware of an individual subject's personal sexual orientation. Regarding the fact that many gay/lesbian/bisexual support groups serve gay/lesbian/bisexual students, as well as their friends, co-workers, roommates, and families, it was stated by the interviewer that no assumptions would be made that the subjects being interviewed were gay/lesbian/bisexual. The only assumption that would be made is that because of some affiliation with a gay/lesbian/bisexual student, each subject is knowledgeable of the issues that these students face and an interpretation of their perspective would be considered. All the participants in this research, however, shared that they were either gay/lesbian or bisexual.

Consent forms were not required of any subject because names (unless given voluntarily) were not disclosed to the interviewer. Subjects were not obliged to sign their names to any document, thus insuring their personal privacy. Instead, implied consent was based on each subject's presence at scheduled meetings. Each subject was told in advance by the interviewer's liaison that his/her participation was voluntary. If the subject did not wish to participate in the study, they were told that they were free to leave the meeting any time they felt uncomfortable. Interviews were conducted once at each school in a space designated by group members for a period exceeding one hour each. At each meeting, only the interviewer and five to fifteen people were present.

### Findings

As a result of the discussions with the two gay/lesbian/bisexual support groups, several issues emerged that were salient for the group members. The issues most commonly dealt with on a semi-daily basis are (as stated by group members):

1. **Harassment based on the student's sexual orientation.** This includes verbal abuse, negative graffiti written on personal objects, threatening telephone calls, as well as death threats. Abuse also includes harassment aimed at individual





students as well as the student support groups.

**2. Alienation and discrimination which includes:**

- a. *Avoidance by heterosexual students of gay/lesbian/bisexual students* on campus walkways, dorms, classes, etc. due in part to fear and homophobia.
  - b. *Heterosexual students not including gay/lesbian/bisexual students* in social and academic activities such as parties, lectures, and church services also due in part to fear and homophobia.
  - c. *The use of specific language based on heterosexual values* by college students, professors, Resident Assistants and other college personnel. An example of this is the use of gender specific labels such as "boyfriend" and "girlfriend," such as saying to a gay male, "Well, what does your girlfriend think?" instead of using the non-specific or "gay friendly" terminology such as "partner," "significant other," "lover," etc.
3. **Lack of support** from administration, students, and other factions within the campus community.
  4. **Lack of educational programs** on campus to provide the college community with accurate information about gay/lesbian/bisexual issues.

Many of these current issues concur with a 1980's assessment of issues facing gay/lesbian/bisexual students. According to this study conducted nearly a decade ago, the issues facing a sample of gay/lesbian/bisexual students included campus-wide recognition of gay student organizations, the development of support systems for gay and lesbian students, faculty, and staff members, and confronting the AIDS issue (Spees 1987).

### **Discussion**

A comparison of the issues that gay/lesbian/bisexual students faced in the 1980's with issues of the early 1990's shows that many are still the same. Students are still striving to achieve campus wide recognition of homosexual student organizations, support systems, and an increase in educational programming concerning the issue of AIDS. This comparison may suggest to college students and professionals that the needs



of gay/lesbian/bisexual students are not being met. Referring to the literature, some movement has been made concerning education of the student population on the issue of AIDS and gay/lesbian/bisexual students. The emphasis, however, now seems to be on removing the stigma that AIDS is not a homosexual disease and can kill anyone regardless of their sexual orientation. Education in this perspective once again moves the pertinent issue from the homosexual perspective and into the heterosexual one, meaning, "How does this affect me?" (heterosexual perspective).

Considering another issue, members and supporters of the gay/lesbian/bisexual support group on one of the college campuses involved in this study met varying degrees of opposition from members of the campus community when attempting to change their name from, "My Friends" to "The Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual Alliance." The effect of this type of reaction to such a proposition led to feelings of resentment by many gay/lesbian/bisexual students toward student leaders and college administrators. Some of the members of the gay/lesbian/bisexual student group felt that a precedent might be established creating a negative role model for the rest of the college community to follow.

Concerning the previously asked question, "How does heterosexuality affect gay/lesbian/bisexual persons?" evidence suggests that many gay/lesbian/bisexual students live in a state of fear and frustration (Bijli & Weinberg, 1978; Cramer & Roach, 1988; D'Augelli, 1989; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Herek 1989; Jay & Young, 1979; Spada, 1979). As research in this area suggests, many of these students are afraid to "come out" about their sexual orientation for fear of being ostracized and persecuted by their college communities, as well as parents and other family members.

A more intimate examination of the participatory research conducted with the gay/lesbian/bisexual students interviewed in this study may add salience to the restraints under which many of these students live. Transcribed from notes taken by the primary researcher, several quotes from focus group members lend further credence to their fears about telling friends and family about their sexual orientation:



Gay male: "I can't come out [of the closet] because once I'm out, I will lose control of my life . . . I need the support of my parents."

Gay male: "It's not the person's choice to be 'out,' when I confide in someone that I'm out, and they tell 100 other people, that's not my choice."

Lesbian: "'Who gives people the right to 'out' people?'"

The combination of the previously reviewed literature, interviews, and direct quotes from students suggests that the issues that gay/lesbian/bisexual students face are prevalent in society as well as college communities. These references further suggest the volatile nature as well as the timeliness of the issue.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

For student affairs professionals, it seems logical that the first step in dealing with the issues those gay/lesbian/bisexual students face is recognition of such issues. We need to be aware and as up to date as possible about issues affecting gay/lesbian/bisexual students to make their college experience a positive one, and to assume a proactive stance in decreasing this student population's rate of attrition.

As researchers such as D'Augelli (1989) have shown, student affairs professionals need to be aware of the perspectives of all staff members who work with these students, including Resident Assistants. D'Augelli (1989) goes on to suggest that a homophobic environment can lead to isolation of gay/lesbian/bisexual students.

To lessen the homophobia on college campuses, research suggests that educational programming offered to members of our college communities is a viable course of action (Goldberg, 1982; Wells & Franken, 1987). However, due to the volatile nature of this subject, including violence and death threats directed at gay/lesbian/bisexual students, student development staff should make themselves aware of the environment at their own institutions.

Finally, it is important to be aware of our own individual frames of reference. As individuals, as well as student affairs professionals, we need to be sensitive of the lens through which we view the world, and thus, the bias that we bring to each situation. Regardless of our own sexual orientation, we need to be aware of these personal biases when dealing with student issues. In dealing with gay/lesbian/bisexual students we need



to be sensitive to the issues that both heterosexual and gay/lesbian/bisexual students face. When we examine these issues, and become sensitive to our own lens, can we can identify solutions toward creating a less volatile campus atmosphere more conducive to student development.



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