The Texas Higher Education Symposium 2012: LGBT Issues Working Group Narrative

The LGBT issues working group discussed a variety of issues regarding LGBT students and higher education. After introductions and some definitions of terms, we discussed three major issues on college campuses. These included the lack of discussion about LGBT issues, student safety and campus climate, and campus policies. We decided on two next steps: to be trained as allies and to learn more about the effect of these issues on LGBT student retention.

First, we all introduced ourselves, institutions, and reasons for participating in the LGBT issues working group. Reasons included discovering and understanding experiences of LGBT students, finding out how to be an ally, learning how to advocate for and best serve LGBT populations, and making connections between personal, student, and faculty issues.

Next, we discussed a few important terms, starting with LGBT. The acronym LGBT stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Lesbian, gay, and bisexual describe sexual orientations, whereas transgender describes a gender identity. Therefore, LGB and T are sometimes separated in the literature because they may face different issues. There are other terms that we may hear with varying degrees of acceptability and meaning. Homosexual should not be used to describe a person as it is a behavior; a person may engage in homosexual behavior but not identify as gay. Homophile was a term used in the early part of the 20th century; it is no longer in use. A newer term that may be familiar to some is queer. Queer was used in the past, and in some places still is, as a disparaging and derogatory term; however, many have reclaimed the term as positive and may use it as such. The use is regional; queer may be used more often on the east and west coasts and less so in the south or in Texas.

We then discussed issues we see on our campuses. One major issue raised was that people do not want to talk about LGBT issues. Participants mentioned that LGBT issues are not
discussed in class; for example, one participant brought up an experience in which even though literature was present, the in-class discussion was curtailed. Another participant brought up an example of a student complaining because there was too much discussion about LGBT issues in class, even though it was a multicultural-focused class. Other participants mentioned the taboo nature of LGBT issues in the educational environment, including in higher education and counseling classes. This raised an important point of how we should best support our students if issues are not even addressed. Homophobia and heterosexism are not always acknowledged as existing, in much the same way as racism is often not explicitly said to exist, as Dr. Shaun Harper mentioned in the opening lecture. In addition, many of us do not feel prepared to talk about LGBT issues, and therefore do not.

Another major issue raised was about student safety and campus climate. Campus climate, or the environment on a college campus is explained by Sanlo, Rankin, and Schoenberg (2002): “the climate on college campuses acts to silence the voices of its LGBT members with both subtle and overt oppression” (p. 16). There is a disturbing lack of action on some campuses to improve the campus climate. We briefly discussed some major cases, such as Tyler Clementi’s suicide after being videotaped by his roommate on a college campus. Furthermore, reports, including Rankin (2003) and Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer (2010) (full citations at the end of this report), document the number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students who have faced covert and overt harassment and violence on college campuses. Participants noticed varying degrees of harassment and violence on their college campuses and in their work situations. While one participant did not notice any overt exclusion of a student who identified as gay in class, another mentioned a student who was whistled at and felt uncomfortable in another situation. Spotting and responding to harassment can be difficult,
depending on our role and the level of our interactions with students. Questions rose about how we, as students, staff, and faculty, should best respond to this harassment and violence. We discussed on option, ally training or safe zone programs, which educate staff, faculty, and staff about LGBT issues and responses. The Ally Program at UTSA, for example, provides those who have completed training a placard that says “Ally” that faculty and staff can display to let students know that they are open to talk to students about LGBT issues, including harassment. Students find out about these placards during orientation. The intent with these programs is to provide a safe space for students as well as other faculty and staff, but not necessarily to assume that allies know everything and always have the answer; instead allies are open-minded and willing to learn and provide resources. A question arose about how we should encourage students to get educated about LGBT issues, since that is largely the environment students are in, not with faculty and staff all the time. One participant brought up a year-long, student-led program called “Peers for Pride” that educated other students through performances about LGBT issues. This seemed to be an effective way to get students involved and to reach more students. A concern that came up within this discussion was that transgender students are often left out of the conversation and there should be spaces for a greater inclusion of transgender students.

A third major area of discussion was about policies on campus. We discussed non-discrimination statements. While sexual orientation is now covered in the non-discrimination of UTSA, for example, gender identity and gender expression are still left out. This opens up the possibility of discrimination against transgender individuals as it has not been codified into the Handbook of Operating Procedures. One participant asked if supervisors technically have a responsibility to speak out against discrimination against LGBT individuals. Another participant brought up that inclusion is part of the UTSA Core Values. Furthermore, discriminating on the
basis of sexual orientation and gender identity can still be done in terms of employment in many states.

We then discussed some gaps in existing research. We think there should be more research in terms of the intersection of policy and education based on the above discussion. Furthermore, LGBT students of color and transgender students are underrepresented in the research.

The working group came to two major conclusions and points for further work. First, to increase our preparation to understand and discuss LGBT issues, we committed to becoming trained as an ally. This is a good first step in terms of learning about LGBT issues and being a safe space for students, staff, and faculty. Second, in terms of student safety, we will work to spot it better. In addition, we are interested in learning more about how campus climate and support programs affect LGBT student retention.
References and A Selected Bibliography for Further Reading


