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Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Resource Centers

Wendy J. Schneider

University of Vermont

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As one of the newest service units in student affairs, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) resource centers are slowly being established on campuses across the country. Ritchie & Banning (2001) note that, “Historically, a key strategy for supporting diverse groups, as well as fostering tolerance on campuses, has been the establishment of professionally-staffed offices, supported by university “student affairs divisions,” to serve and advocate on behalf of campus diversity groups” (pp. 482-483) Much in the way that multicultural centers have been established on campuses to support and educate around issues of ethnic, racial and cultural diversity, LGBT centers serve their campus communities in the realm of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression.

History

Unlike some functional areas which have century-old histories, LGBT resource centers are a fairly recent arrival on the student affairs scene. The nation’s first LGBT office was established at the University of Michigan in 1971 (Sanlo, 2000), followed by six more centers from 1971 to 1989 (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2006). Higher education took note of the fledgling movement and the 1990s saw the opening of 63 LGBT resource centers at colleges and universities across the nation, followed in the 2000s by the establishment of 73 new offices to date (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2006). According to Sanlo (2000), the need for LGBT resource centers is a direct result of the fact that institutions of higher education are responsible for fostering development among all of their students, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. Sanlo

(2000) asserts that, “The LGBT Campus Resource Center with full-time staff is one attempt to provide for Nuss’ described development of the whole person” (p. 486).

In April 1994, a group of professionals who were currently engaged in work with LGBT populations and issues on their respective campuses came together for the inaugural meeting of what would eventually be called the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2008). This professional association, which was officially chartered in November 1997, states as its mission: “To critically transform higher education environments so that lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, faculty, administrators, staff, and alumni/ae have equity in every respect” (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2008). In addition to the establishment of the Consortium as the professional association for this functional area, NASPA’s Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Issues Knowledge Community as well as ACPA’s Standing Committee for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Awareness provide resources and support for professionals in this functional area in addition to raising awareness about LGBT issues in higher education.

Trends and Challenges

A qualitative study by Ritchie & Banning (2001) identifies noteworthy trends both in the establishment and current operations of LGBT resource centers. Research reveals that the most common method of inception for LGBT offices has been by recommendation of a task force which was created by the president or chancellor to gauge campus climate. A second common catalyst for the founding of LGBT resource centers has been campus response to isolated or serial incidents of harassment or discrimination directed toward LGBT students. Another trend (and challenge) in the establishment of LGBT offices has been internal and external political

resistance. External resistance tends to come from legislative bodies and anti-gay community groups while internal resistance is commonly generated by staff, faculty and students who complicate the establishment process by challenging proposed location, administrative structure and funding scheme.

Looking at current operational trends, the Ritchie & Banning (2001) study revealed that LGBT resource centers work to disseminate information, collect feedback and offer a variety of services to their four constituency groups: students, faculty, staff and community members. A trend that has developed more recently is a focus on student services, manifested in short-term counseling onsite as well as referrals. LGBT resource centers serve not only as a “safe” environment in which students are supported in their identity development but also as a point of entry for involvement in activities and organizations that encourage personal and professional growth. Not surprisingly, funding difficulties has emerged as a trend among LGBT resource centers across the nation with most offices receiving institutional funds as well as having to do fundraising of their own. Ritchie & Banning (2001) note, “The “educational vs. ideological” intent questions that are often raised by nonsupportive campus groups regarding GLBT-type programs makes the seeking of mandatory student fees controversial” (p. 488). Consequently, many offices face the challenge of finding alternative means of funding such as grants.

Administration

The majority of LGBT resource centers are housed in student affairs and report to an assistant vice president/chancellor or associate dean of students (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2006). Roughly two-thirds of LGBT offices in the nation have two or fewer staff members working more than half time (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2006). Sanlo (2000) listed the following as important

qualities for LGBT resource center directors: “understanding college student development as well as experience, knowledge, and understanding of LGBT issues and people; resourceful and skillful programming; creative and sensitive management skills; positive regard for all students; and courageous commitment to leadership and advocacy” (p. 489). The mean reported operating budget of LGBT resource centers excluding staff salaries was \$18,181 (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2006). With small staffs and limited resources centers, the directors of LGBT offices are responsible for a variety of administrative duties.

Initiatives

One of the more recent developments in the struggle for equal rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people is the inclusion of gender identity and expression in non-discrimination statements. As such, some college campuses and student groups have taken action to address policies and/or services that directly or indirectly discriminate against students who identify as transgender and/or genderqueer. According to its website, the National Student Genderblind Campaign “is a rapidly growing student movement to promote gender-neutral rooming options at colleges across the nation. We work with college students, administrators, staff, LGBT organizations, and human rights groups to ensure that college policies and practices are affirmative to all students” (National Student Genderblind Campaign, ¶ 1). On-campus housing is recognized as one arena in which students who identify as LGBT are in need of support. According to Sanlo (1998), “Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) college students face discrimination and hostility in the very environments designed to support them and assist their transition to the university community: residence halls” (p. 53).

Fortunately, progress has been made in addressing the need for inclusion and support of transgender and genderqueer student populations. The GENIUS Index is a survey conducted by

the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition that “tracks and evaluates the efforts of colleges, universities, and K-12 school districts to prohibit discrimination and promote awareness of gender identity and expression in their policies” (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, 2008). The results of GENIUS 2008 indicate that, in the last year: the number of campuses which have added gender identity and expression to their non-discrimination policies has increased by 53%; the number of campuses that have gender-neutral bathrooms nearly doubled, increasing from 141 to 271; and the number of campuses providing gender-neutral housing has increased from 30 to 56 (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, 2008). The University of Vermont may soon offer gender-neutral housing, as a student group is currently in the process of working with Dot Brauer, Director of LGBTQA Services, to draft a proposal to present to Residential Life (D. Brauer, personal communication, September 26, 2008). Given the significant increase in student activism and policy amendment concerning this issue in recent history, it can only be assumed that gender identity and expression will continue to be a hot topic for LGBT campus resource centers across the country.

Despite the political and financial challenges most LGBT resource centers have encountered in their establishment and continued operation, evidence suggests that this functional area of student affairs is, on the whole, flourishing. More and more campuses add LGBT resource centers each year, and the education and services provided by these offices has helped to decrease some of the discrimination prevalent on campuses while fostering development among student, faculty and staff populations. The Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals is a volunteer-run professional organization that continues to expand in terms of the information it provides and the members it attracts. This relatively young functional area of student affairs will likely continue to expand exponentially in the coming

decade, providing much-needed service and support and helping to foster the development of the whole person.

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