

# LGBTQ in Higher Education

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“Understanding what matters the most to students can lead to improved services and higher levels of student retention and success in college” (Burlleson, 2010)

## Executive Summary

Higher Education is meant to be a transformative experience. For decades, student affairs professionals have worked to meet the personal, academic, and social needs for students to ensure professional development and growth. It was not long before administrators realized that several student populations needs were not being met and action was taken to spearhead both affirmative action and diversity on college campuses today. According to the College Equality Index, 100 colleges and universities have a LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) center on campus, and 38 colleges and universities provide gender-neutral housing. While steps have been taken to provide support and a voice for LGBTQ students on campus, a further refinement of policies is needed to ensure equality across campus. This brief will examine ways to advocate, support, and provide programming that is inclusive for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students in higher education.

## Access & Equity

LGBTQ students face many challenges on a traditional college campuses. Compared to their heterosexual classmates, LGBTQ students face higher risks for mental health concerns, sexual health concerns, substance abuse, and family issues (Angeli, 2009). Student success for LGBTQ students is most affected by their ability to feel safe and secure on campus, feel welcomed by faculty, staff, and students, and be provided additional support and safe spaces on campus (Angeli, 2009; Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith, 2007).

## Introduction

“Policies that explicitly welcome LGBTQ employees and students powerfully express the commitment of a college or university in building a community of difference. Individuals will be more likely to be open

about their sexual identity or gender identity knowing their institution is supportive. When individuals do not have to expend energy hiding aspects of their identity, they, in turn, tend to be more satisfied and productive” ~ Rankin, Weber, Bumenfeld, & Frazer (2010)

Many college campuses today struggle with finding what the best practices are for creating a safe and open campus climate for LGBTQ students. While some campuses have already adopted various policies and procedures to affect campus life (Beemyn, 2005; Burlleson, 2010; Rankin, Weber, Bumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010), this brief argues for an adoption of policies standardized across various colleges and universities to bring equality and various measures across the board. For LGBTQ students seeking a college or university that will be welcoming to all students they look to a variety of factors to be sure they can feel safe and secure on campus: campus climate, safety, housing policies, academics, student support, presence of an LGBTQ center and staff person, and student involvement/interest groups. Each affects an individual's college choice decision. Additional formalized research should be completed to help campuses communicate and share data regarding best practices in order to better inform future policies and practices in higher education.

## Transgender Students: Which Box Do You Check?

Beemyn (2005) illustrates several deficiencies that exist on college campuses for transgender students. Beemyn also emphasized best practices currently used at model campuses. Examples included the use of family locker rooms as safe and private spaces in recreation facilities; open response fields instead of checkboxes to indicate sex or gender; LGBTQ living-learning communities within residences halls with the option of gender-neutral housing; and streamlining and simplifying the process of changing a student's name and photo identification while a student transitions.

### **Supporting LGBTQ Students on Campus**

- Health Care – provide counseling services, support groups, and adequate health care for LGBTQ students
- Residence Halls – provide gender-neutral housing, have inclusive policies for residence life, create living-learning communities, and provide single residence halls for students
- Bathrooms – provide gender-neutral bathrooms and private showers across campus, and publicize information on accessible websites
- Locker Rooms – provide private changing rooms and single-person showers at recreation facilities on campus
- Records and Documents – assist transgender student with the process of changing gender on college documents and records
- Public Inclusion – provide trainings for students and gender-specific groups on campus (Greek Life, Sports, Etc.) regarding common LGBTQ issues and how to provide support
- Programming/Training/Support – offer events dedicated to celebrating LGBTQ members on campus, offer speakers, training, and support for LGBTQ students and friends
- Orientation – open the dialogue for gender and sexuality discussions before classes start
- Curriculum – include LGBT current issues and set the stage for open discussions
- Find a Point Person – ideally this should be a full-time staff person, but if not locate and post a faculty/staff resource for students to direct questions and concerns
- Career Center – post information and discuss LGBTQ-friendly employers (Beemyn, Dominigue, Pettit, & Smith, 2005; How to Support LGBTQ Students on Campus, 2013)

### **Campus Climate**

“Campuses give signals to potential students about the level of support GLBTQ students can expect”

~Burleson (2010)

The institutional climate at a college or university has been shown to create a powerful impact on students’ perceptions and attitudes regarding diversity on campus (Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith, 2007). Research also demonstrates that students in a non-discriminatory environment are more open to diversity and challenges to their belief system throughout college (Angeli, 2009; Burleson, 2010; Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith, 2007). College

campuses send signals, intentionally or not, about their openness to LGBTQ students through the form of student organizations, resource centers, and special-interest housing (Burleson, 2010). Most students consider the campus climate an important factor when deciding where to attend college. One method of addressing these issues is to examine ways in which to focus on marketing and communication to prospective students and making it evident that regardless of a student’s individual sexual orientation, the campus, itself, supports the LGBTQ community (Burleson, 2010).

### **LGBTQ & Race**

Research also demonstrates the importance of examining challenges for LGBTQ students who are also multicultural students, as often-times neither support system is adequate for multicultural LGBTQ students (Misawa, 2007). Additional programming efforts and support are needed for students, and evaluation of those programs is required for success in reaching all students.

### **Policy Recommendations**

- LGBTQ Student Data & Research – More student data is needed to make recommendations and to assess the quality and progression of an LGBTQ student’s educational performance
- Enforcing Student Policies – Important to ensure existing student policies are being applied and that there are policies in place that forbid discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity
- Inclusion in Diversity Efforts and Non-Discrimination Clause – Include sex/gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity in diversity efforts in addition to non-discrimination clauses
- Provide a Safe and Open Campus Climate – Demonstrate an institutional commitment to programming and support of all students and initiatives on campus
- Provide Student Support – Offer safe spaces on campuses, and identify faculty/staff as allies on campus, allow for funding for at least one full-time staff devoted to LGBTQ programming and advocacy
- Increase Outreach and Communication – Add support groups, speakers, classes, and open-ended discussions on gender and sexuality for all students
- Commit to Professional Development Efforts – Train faculty, staff, and students on inclusive practices/curriculum, safe zone trainings, and how to respond to harassment and hate crimes on

campus

### Equality in Action

“Several studies in higher education show a clear link between students’ interactions with diverse peers and increases across a number of student outcomes; intellectual and social self-confidence; openness to diversity and challenge; critical thinking; and leadership and cultural knowledge”~ Engberg, Hurtado, & Smith (2007)

### Conclusion

As higher education continually seeks to provide and promote access and inclusion for all students, it is important to consider our policies and programs dedicated to LGBTQ students on college campuses today. By examining previous research regarding the LGBTQ higher education experience in addition to the main issues affecting LGBTQ students today, it is clear that there are a variety of ways that faculty, staff, and student affairs administrators can address not only the campus climate, but also many possible suggestions for better support of LGBTQ students. Higher Education should be a transformative experience for ALL students. Higher Education should also be a safe place for students to grow by being exposed to diversity, and learn from one another. The research demonstrates that support and climate are crucial for LGBTQ students academic and social success. Higher Education policy should adopt a requirement for hiring a full-time staff person committed to addressing LGBTQ needs on campus.

### Implications and Limitations

Limitations of this policy brief are due to the lack of formalized research regarding LGBTQ issues in Higher Education. There is a clear need for additional research regarding best practices and how to effectively meet the needs academically, socially, and physically for all students. The implications of this project indicate that change is needed on most college campuses. Additional training for faculty, staff, and students regarding diversity is needed to help address promoting an open and diverse campus climate. Colleges and universities want to provide a safe community that is diverse and innovative; by committing to supporting LGBTQ issues, institutions are one step closer to achieving their goals.

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