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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed college students' and faculty's feelings toward and knowledge of gays and lesbians. A 20-question survey assessing attitudes toward, opinions of, personal feelings about the knowledge of gays and lesbians was distributed to 450 entering college freshmen at the University of Maine, Farmington. Of these, the first 150 to be completed were used. In addition, surveys were completed by 36 faculty, 14 clerical staff, 31 professional staff, and 7 others, a response rate of 59 percent. The results revealed a significant difference between the response patterns of students and educators on all statements except one. Students appeared to be uncomfortable with gays and lesbians. For all but one "feeling" statement, less than 50% of the students expressed comfort with a particular situation. Only three of six "knowledge" statements had appropriate responses from students, suggesting that students lacked knowledge about gays and lesbians. Educator responses support the hypothesis that they are knowledgeable about and comfortable with gays and lesbians. Taken together, the results suggest a need for student development activity on the campus that focuses on gay and lesbian issues. There appears to be a core of students who would probably support an educational effort that could be led by sensitive and knowledgeable educators. (The 20 questions from the survey are included, as is a summary of percent of responses to the survey.)

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Students and Educators: Attitudes on Gay and Lesbian Matters

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ABSTRACT

This study surveyed students' and educators' feelings toward and knowledge of gays and lesbians. Educators are more knowledgeable and comfortable than students.

STUDENTS AND EDUCATORS: ATTITUDES ON GAY AND LESBIAN MATTERS

In the past two years there have been numerous calls for tolerance and acceptance of people regardless of sexual orientation. The concepts of pluralism and diversity have been publicly discussed and advocated by educational leaders, especially campus presidents. Recently both wishes have become focal points for a variety of campus activities including new student orientation programs and residence hall staff training. If students are to appreciate and embrace the spirit of pluralism or diversity, then educators need to consider student attitudes. At my campus, what are the student attitudes towards gays and lesbians, and how do they compare to those of the educators from whom they learn?

A review of the common periodical indexes reveals a relatively small though increasing number of broadly focused homosexuality attitude studies published in the past five years. Many of these were reviewed by Rudolph (1988). Grieger and Ponerotto (1988) suggested that there has been a proliferation of attitude studies, but, given the advent of AIDS, learning about attitudes toward gays is of renewed importance. Reynolds (1989) stated that there needs to be more investigation of the campus social environment. D'Angelli (1989), interested in attitudes, studied those of perspective resident assistants because they are the front line people who can set a tone by how they respond to issues of harassment. Other than counseling publications our

profession has published little on the topic.

Regardless of the number of previous studies there are several reasons for doing a campus survey. Attitudes vary with the nature of the student population and the geographical location of the campus (Astin 1989). The campus community needs to have confidence in what it understands as its commonly shared attitudes. Are the graffiti and jokes the work of a few and subscribed to by the majority? Is it safe to be known as gay or lesbian? Is it safe to publicly support lesbians and gays? The answers to these questions underscore the importance of Reynold's interests and suggestion. The campus survey provides one avenue to dialogue, often absent on gay and lesbian topics.

D'Angelli's (1989) thesis should be applied to another set of front line educators: faculty, clerical staff, and professionals. If their attitudes demonstrate a lack of support and understanding of gays and lesbians, then any exploration with students about their attitudes would be difficult. This study examines the attitudes of new students and compares them to their educators. The general null hypothesis is: there is no difference between students and educators as it pertains to comfort with and knowledge about lesbians and gays. The hypothesis pertaining to students is: a majority of new UMF students are uncomfortable with lesbians and gays, and lack knowledge about them. A second hypothesis is: the majority of UMF educators will be knowledgeable about and comfortable with gays and lesbians. A secondary student hypothesis is: there is a

core of students who are informed and are comfortable with lesbians and gays. If these hypotheses are supported, then there is a group of students to join a necessary educational effort that could be launched by educators.

METHODS

Participants

As part of new student orientation all students were randomly assigned in groups of 15 to an upperclass peer facilitator. They distributed an estimated 300 surveys in an entering class of 450 students. As soon as 150 usable surveys were returned no effort was made to collect more.

The same attitude survey was sent to a stratified random sample of 150 UMF educators (75 faculty, 25 clerical staff and 50 professionals). The return rate was 59 percent (36 faculty, 14 clerical, 31 professional, 7 unknown). Given the number of respondents caution should be used in extending inferences beyond those returning the survey.

The Instrument & Procedures

The instrument is composed of twenty questions. Ten questions focus on knowledge and opinion. The other ten questions, influenced by the work of Hudson and Ricketts (1980), are "I" statements pertaining to personal feeling. The response categories are strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree and strongly disagree.

The surveys are tabulated with frequency counts. For ease

of analysis the categories for agree are combined as are those for disagree. Since interest focused on particular feelings and specific aspects of knowledge, no attempt is made to generate an overall score. The chi square analysis is used to compare the distribution of student responses to educators' responses on each question.

RESULTS

Feelings

In general there are a large number of students who respond neutral (Table 1). The educators' responses indicate they feel comfortable with gay and lesbian matters. There is a significant difference between students and educators on all 10 feeling statements.

Nearly a majority of the students are disgusted when they see two people of the same sex holding hands. The educators' response pattern to these same two statements (1, 11) is opposite that of the students.

Only 40 percent of the students are at ease talking with a homosexual at a party (statement 15); and 34 percent are neutral. In contrast 84 percent of the educators are comfortable with the same situation.

About a majority of students are comfortable telling others to stop making fun of gays and 40 percent are neutral on the matter (statements 3, 5). The educators are not worried about being labeled a homosexual (82%) and are comfortable telling a

group of friends to stop making fun of lesbians and gays (72%).

In the working or teaching environment (statements 7,17,13) about a third of the students compared to nearly 80 percent of the educators are comfortable with a homosexual boss or colleague or teacher. Another third of the students are uncomfortable and the remaining third neutral. Almost a third of the students and three fifths of the educators would feel uncomfortable if they learned that a best friend of the same sex was homosexual (statement 19). More students (41%) than educators (23%) would feel comfortable with this same situation. When the same question is applied to a sibling (statement 9) 66 percent of the students and 40 percent of the educators would be upset. Forty one percent of the educators and 17 percent of the students would not be upset.

Opinion/Knowledge

There is a significant difference between students and educators on each statement except number two, preferability of homosexuality. Educators, as compared to students, know more about homosexuality and their opinions reflect greater support for lesbians and gays. Student responses in the neutral category are noticeably higher than those of the educators for every statement except the second (Table 2).

In terms of general opinion both students (67%) and educators (89%) agree that homosexuals should be entitled to the same legal and financial benefits as heterosexuals (statement 12). Only 12 percent of the students and three percent of the

educators disagree. Similarly few students (24%) and educators (10%) would agree that it is important to find out how to prevent homosexuality (statement 4). However, about 40 percent of the students are neutral compared to 22% of the educators. Students (54%) and educators (81%) agree that homosexual relationships can be just as loving and caring as heterosexual relationships (statement 20). Eighteen percent of the students and three percent of the educators would disagree. The majority of students (63%) and educators (55%) agree that it is preferable to be heterosexual (statement 2). Another 25 to 30 percent in either group are neutral. While it may be preferable to be heterosexual only 30 percent of the students and 16 percent of the educators agree that homosexual behavior is immoral (statement 6). In fact 41 percent of the students and 76 percent of the educators would not agree to call it immoral.

The responses to matters that are often labeled as myths about homosexuality are revealing. Eleven percent of the students and five percent of the educators agree that with therapy homosexuals can be heterosexuals (statement 18). The neutral category for students (48%) is high compared to that for educators (21%). A large majority of both students (67%) and educators (91%) agree that homosexuality is not a sign of mental illness (statement 8). While less than 10% of either group believe that homosexuals have unusually strong sex drives, 74 percent of the students and 23 percent of the educators are neutral (statement 14). Many students (51%) and educators (74%)

disagree with the statement that homosexuals are interested in "converting" heterosexuals to their lifestyle; however, 44 percent of the students selected neutral (statement 10). Some students (24%) and few educators (9%) agree that homosexuals will always stand up for each other regardless of the issue (statement 16). However, 49 percent of the students choose neutral as compared to 21 percent of the educators.

CONCLUSIONS

The null hypothesis, that there is no difference between students and educators as it pertains to comfort with and knowledge about gays and lesbians, is not supported. There is a significant difference between the response patterns of students and educators on all statements except number two.

The results support the part of the hypothesis that students are uncomfortable with gays and lesbians. For all but one feeling statement (5), less than 50 percent of the students express comfort with a particular situation. The other part of the hypothesis stating that students lack knowledge about gays and lesbians is supported. Three (8, 10, 20) of six knowledge statements (18, 8, 10, 20, 16, 14) have responses that are appropriate.

Educator responses support the hypothesis that they are knowledgeable about and comfortable with gays and lesbians. All knowledge questions have a majority of appropriate responses. On six of the ten feelings statements better than 70 percent

indicate comfort. Over 50 percent express comfort on three of the remaining four statements. The excepted statement is number nine (learning that a sibling is homosexual).

The secondary hypothesis states that there would be a core of students who are informed and are comfortable with lesbians and gays. This hypothesis is supported by the fact that one third or more of the students fall in this category on seven (15, 3, 5, 7, 17, 13, 19) of the 10 feeling statements and four (18, 8, 10, 20) of six knowledge statements.

The overall combination of results indicate that an educational effort at UMF should be initiated and that there is a core of people who have the potential to provide support. While representativeness of the samples can be questioned, they are sufficiently large to support general directions. No inferences should be extended to any other campus.

DISCUSSION

One question is how to interpret the high percentage of neutral student responses on virtually every item. For some knowledge statements it may be that students lack facts or have information they are unsure of or do not care about the matter. Regardless of what the proper interpretation is, there is a clear role for educators. The neutral category for the feelings statements may be interpreted as students not wanting to commit themselves or not having been exposed to the situation or not being sure about how they do feel or not caring. Whatever the

interpretation, frequent dialogue is one strategy that can be used to help address the needs.

Will the third of the students who are comfortable with lesbians and gays be publicly supportive, and challenge the attitudes of others? Some in the core are no doubt gays and lesbians, but it is not perceived by them to be safe to be out; thus, they may not speak. Consequently, if one is in a class of 24 students, eight may be supportive, and two may be gays or lesbians. This makes the educator's role critical, for many of those who can speak will need to feel supported before and after talking. During any dialogue the lesbians and gays will be assessing their safety.

To what degree do educators feel safe speaking out in class and elsewhere on campus? Will they publicly defend gays and lesbians? These questions are not addressed directly by the survey. However, the results do suggest that educators have knowledge and feelings that they could use to dispell myths and to be publicly supportive of lesbians and gays. The next step is to observe the degree to which they can participate in an educational effort by openly sharing their feelings and knowledge.

The typical response pattern on the feelings statements is broken by statement 19. Twice the educators (59%) as compared to students (30%) would be uncomfortable if they learned their best friend of the same sex was homosexual. One possible reason is faculty have supposedly known their best friends for more years

than students have known their best friends. Thus, as one's long time best friend, why did that person never say anything about their sexual orientation? Students may realize that it is not safe for homosexuals to be out. What lesbians and gays often see is rejection when they come out to people who have always cared for them; like their families.

Not surprising is that the majority of educators (55%) and students (63%) agree it is preferable to be heterosexual (statement 2). The fact that it is preferable to be one versus another suggests that some people recognize an inequality or differential treatment or both. The magnitude of the student response (63%) seems to parallel the UMF gay students' expression that it is not safe to be out. Based on dialogues with very religious students, most assuredly they would say its not only preferable, there is no other acceptable way to be. The size of this group may be reflected in the immoral statement (6), 30 percent agree.

The statement on the immorality of homosexual behavior raises a question. If one disagrees that homosexual behavior is immoral, does that mean homosexual behavior is moral. Not necessarily is the safest interpretation. Some people may not wish to label it immoral, but they may be unwilling to call it moral. Morality is generally based in religion and culture. Therefore, some students and educators may believe that what is morally right for one may not be so for another.

Perhaps some of the old myths are not being perpetuated by

the respondents. However, the large number of neutral responses indicate that students need information about gays and lesbians. The neutral response on the "converting" statement (10) and stand-up-for-each-other statement (16), 44 and 49 percent respectively for students, seems like an honest reaction. There are few who do speak, and without speaking neither statement can be a reality. The voices of "converting" most often heard are those of heterosexuals.

The results reveal the need for student development activity at UMF that focuses on gay and lesbian topics. There is a core of students who would probably support an educational effort that could be lead by sensitive and knowledgeable educators.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

There is a core of students who are knowledgeable of lesbians and gays, and are comfortable with them. Do these people publicly express their feelings at opportune times? Who is it that does speak out and how do their characteristics compare to those who are silent?

Why is it that educators are more comfortable than students with issues of homosexuality? Is it because they are more self confident or are they responding intellectually or have they simply had more experiences with gays and lesbians? Is the difference a result of students rarely dealing with homosexuality in the high school classroom?

This study deals with only new entering students. Do attitudes change between the first year and the year of graduation?

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TABLE 1

Summary of Percent of Responses to Attitude Survey: Feelings

Feeling Statements	Students n=150			Educators n=88		
	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
1.* If I saw two women holding hands in public I would feel disgusted.	42	41	17	12	22	66
11.* If I saw two men holding hands in public I would feel disgusted.	53	30	17	21	21	58
15.* I would feel at ease talking with a homosexual at a party.	40	34	26	84	8	7
3.* I am comfortable telling a group of friends to stop making fun of gays and lesbians.	47	42	11	72	18	8
5.* I am uncomfortable when others make fun of homosexuals, but I am afraid if I say anything I'll be labeled as a homosexual.	7	40	53	3	13	82
7.* I would feel comfortable working closely with a male or female homosexual.	34	33	33	78	14	8
17.* I would feel uncomfortable if I learned that my boss was homosexual.	35	30	35	9	11	78
13.* I would feel uncomfortable if I learned that my teacher was a lesbian.	33	30	37	7	14	79
9.* I would be upset if I learned my brother or sister was homosexual.	66	17	17	40	18	41
19.* I would feel uncomfortable if I learned that my best friend of my sex was homosexual.	30	29	41	59	17	23

* chi square test significant, 2df $p < .05$

TABLE 2

Summary of Percent of Responses to Attitude Survey: Knowledge & Opinion

Opinion & Knowledge Statements	Students n=150			Educators n=88		
	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree	Agree or Strongly Agree	Neutral	Disagree or Strongly Disagree
2. It is preferable to be heterosexual rather than homosexual.	63	25	12	55	30	15
6.* Homosexual behavior is immoral.	30	29	41	16	7	76
18.* With therapy, homosexuals can become heterosexuals.	11	48	41	5	21	72
4.* It is important to find out how to prevent homosexuality.	24	41	35	10	22	66
8.* Homosexuality is not a sign of mental illness.	67	20	13	91	6	3
10.* Homosexuals are interested in "converting" heterosexuals to their lifestyle.	5	44	51	7	16	74
16.* Homosexuals will always stand up for each other regardless of the issue.	24	49	27	9	21	67
14.* Homosexuals have unusually strong sex drives.	6	74	20	1	23	72
20.* Homosexual relationships can be just as loving and caring as heterosexual relationships.	54	33	18	81	14	3
12.* Homosexuals should be entitled to the same legal and financial benefits as heterosexuals.	67	21	12	89	7	3

* chi square test significant, 2df p<.05