

Searching for Gay-Friendly Colleges:

How Guidance Counselors Can Help Their Gay Students

By Jeffrey B. Cook

The degree to which the lives of America's gay youth have improved over the past decade is staggering. In no small part due to frequent exposure to gay issues and gay people in the popular media, there is greater acceptance of differences in sexual orientation, and in many communities youth can access one of hundreds of gay student associations that have sprouted up across the country.

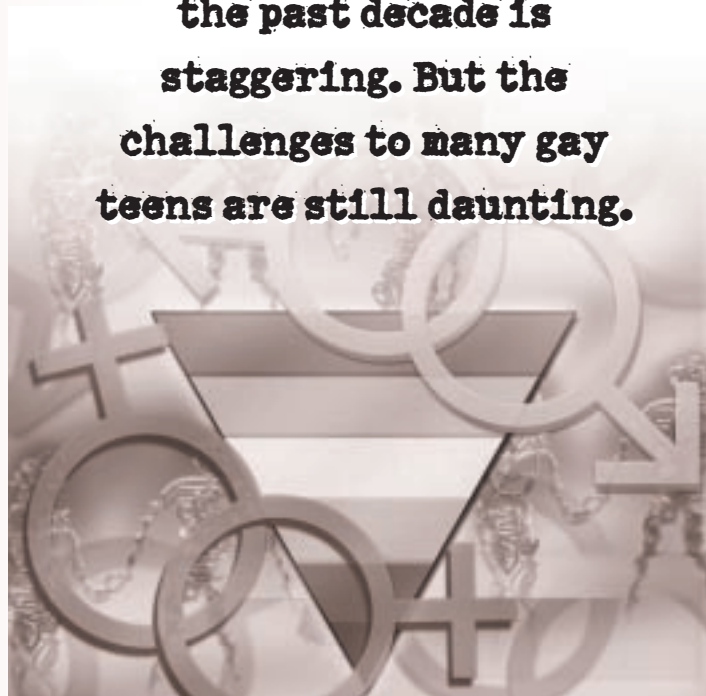


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But the challenges to many gay teens are still daunting. Especially for those in small, rural or conservative school districts, life can be riddled with complexities that are often far more stressful than those of their straight peers. Students who are out, rumored to be gay, or simply deemed to exhibit stereotypically gay behavior or interests are sometimes victimized in varying degrees, from verbal harassment to physical violence. At the very least, these students are often marginalized in the fickle and sometimes ruthless high school social scene, many of whom are also dealing with the anxiety of deciding whether or not to come out to family or friends.

Isolated, depressed and pushed to the outskirts of high school life, statistics on gay students not surprisingly indicate everything from higher levels of absenteeism to higher levels of suicide. Statistics also show that all too often educators fail to intervene in combating things like hate language, which gives a

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green light to those who would contribute to what can sometimes be an unbearable environment for these students.

These realities place even greater importance on the college search, which can not only represent the opportunity for further education, but a chance to move on from high school to an environment with a higher propensity for acceptance and understanding.

College counselors, of course, play a major role in helping students in this search, which is why awareness about and sensitivity to issues confronting gay students is critical for these professionals. But getting information about accepting collegiate environments can sometimes be difficult, and dealing with issues of sexual orientation is foreign territory for some counselors. Compounding the problem is that while some advisees who are gay are actually out, others may not have assigned labels to their developing identity, or at least not be in a place to discuss it with others.

A first step for college counselors is embracing the fact that it would be extremely unlikely for there not to be gay students at their institution, no matter the school's location, makeup or culture. And most schools probably have gay teachers, administrators and parents. Understanding the full potential diversity of one's school and broader community is essential in becoming even more aware of the dynamics, issues and concerns affecting those that counselors serve.

Another perhaps obvious concept for counselors is that the college search for gay students involves the same key components as the process for straight students. The difference is that gay students and their counselors need to do more homework on researching the character and culture of prospective institutions, and the nature of the communities in which these colleges are located.

This search for gay-friendly colleges might be as easy as recalling anecdotal information about certain communities and schools that many counselors accumulate over time, or picking up on key signals on university Web sites or in printed materials. If these simple methods do not yield results, it is the job of college admission staff members to provide the information that is needed, even if it means that they have to do some research themselves.

When contacting colleges directly, it is important to remember that gay students may not yet have the comfort level to personally email or call admission offices in search of answers to their unique questions. While students need to own the search process, gay students who are out at least to their counselor may seek their help in communicating with schools.

By far the best way to learn about prospective schools is to encourage students to engage in some of their own primary research. Listed here are some questions that may help gay students in learning more about the colleges and universities they are considering.

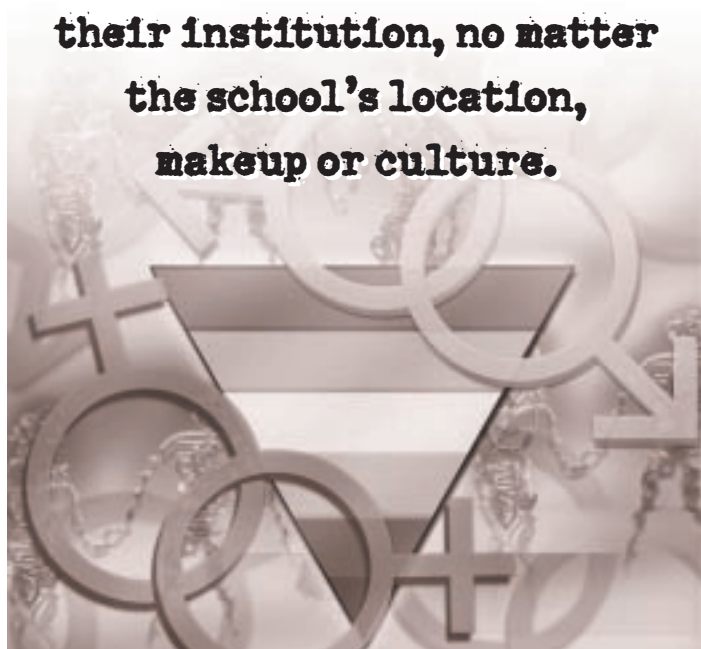
- Is "sexual orientation" included in the college's nondiscrimination statement? If it is, has it been included for a long time or is it a recent addition? If it is not included, why? Did the college's board of trustees defeat such a proposal, or was a proposal never made?
- Does the college have a gay student association? If it does, is it active? Does it receive financial support either directly from the administration or through student-controlled activity funds?

- Is there a college-administered office or individual that provides counseling, resources, support, and advocacy for gay students?
- Is there a gay studies program or are there any classes on gay literature, history, theory, or gender/sexuality issues?
- Is there a gay alumni group? How about a committee of gay faculty and administration members? If these types of groups exist, are they readily acknowledged and/or publicized?
- Does the college have domestic partner benefits for its employees, including insurance coverage, bereavement leave, sick leave (to care for a same-gender domestic partner), and access to campus programs and facilities equal to that of opposite-gender legally married couples? Is there equal treatment of same-gender spouse names in directories or donor recognition documents, and does the college freely reference same-gender spouses in publications such as the alumni magazine?
- Because the larger community affects the campus and vice versa, what is the city or town like? Walking the streets of the community is one way to sense its character. Reading local newspapers to find out what off-campus events, activities and opportunities are offered is another good strategy.
- What is the process for reporting and dealing with discrimination or verbal or physical harassment believed to be due to the victim's sexual orientation?
- What are the statistics on crime believed to be initiated against students because they were known or perceived to be gay? What are the statistics on sanctions taken against those found by student court or college-administered judicial proceedings of committing hate crimes or harassment?
- Is there a "Safe Space" program in place at the college? While the exact origin of the program is apparently not fully known, the Safe Space program enlists gay faculty and staff and their straight allies to display "Safe" symbols such as rainbow stickers or flags, or even gay-themed pens or key chains, indicating that a particular individual or office is

open, accepting and willing to discuss gay issues. While most efforts are not formally organized, some programs are structured with manuals and orientation programs for staff members. A thorough walk-through of the campus should provide clues if some type of Safe Space program exists, or at least if there is an attempt at making gay acceptance a visible goal.

- Have there been any campus programs or speakers about gay issues? Is National Coming Out Day, for example, acknowledged, promoted and/or celebrated?
- Does the library have a diverse and large selection of books, periodicals and other resources about gay issues?
- Does the career counseling office have resources on gay-friendly companies? How about information on corporate fringe benefit programs (e.g., domestic partner benefits) and the language contained in company diversity statements? Are companies and organizations that do not have progressive, inclusive policies allowed to recruit on campus?

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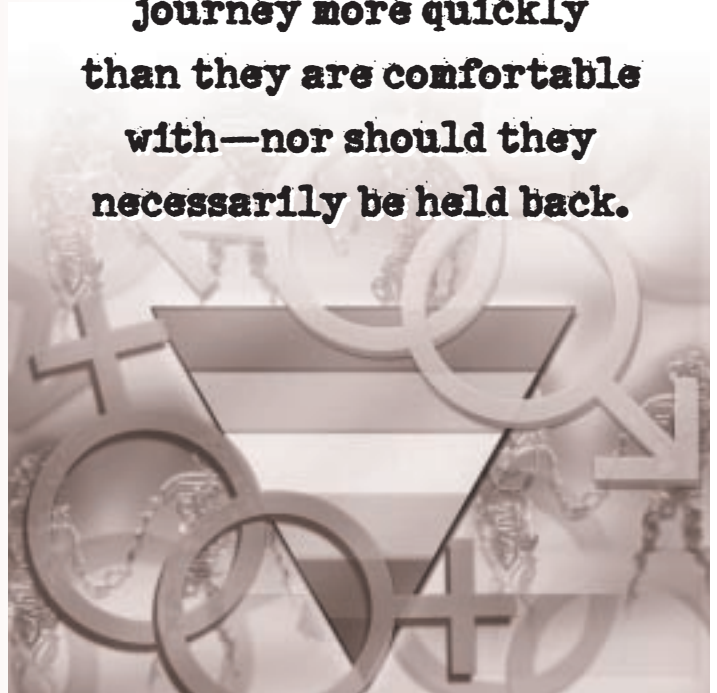


- What are some topics and issues discussed in current and past issues of the campus newspaper? Readers should remember that it is fairly common for student newspapers to have negative articles in them about the school. The purpose here is to find out the culture of the college, identify what the social and political interests are on campus, and to pick up hints about what the institution is like. For example, what special events are listed or advertised? Is there a huge sports section but few opinion columns? Are there articles that make reference to issues of diversity? Does the paper give the impression that the college is socially progressive?
- What kind of bumper stickers can be found on cars in the college's parking lots? This may sound a little strange, but students might want to find out what they say. Are there political statements? Rainbow stickers? This unique exercise may help students gather a little more background information on the character of the school and its inhabitants.
- What is dinnertime like in the dining hall? Instead of just testing the food, prospective students should observe people and their interactions. Do different types of students mix well? Are people generally happy and interact well with each other? What are the topics of conversation? If they are bold, they can even sit with current students and get their perspectives on the school.

As students become more engaged in the college search, researching these types of issues and looking forward to actually applying to schools on their short lists, some of them may be considering the idea of discussing their sexual orientation in their essay.

If done well, such an essay can be moving and high impact, and show maturity and depth of character to admission staff. However, there is also no guarantee how the reader on the college side will react to a coming-out essay. Perhaps they have read several similar essays in the past, and the topic has become about as popular as the infamous string of annual missives on "Why playing football was important to me." The reader on the other end may also not be the open-minded and accepting person for which the student had hoped.

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Counselors should help students explore other issues surrounding the essay, such as whether or not they are already out to family and friends. Some students may be viewing the essay as a tool for coming out. In this case, the act of writing an essay could quickly become a bigger event than simply being part of a college application.

The ultimate happiness of gay students is dependent on them coming out. But coming out is a journey, and no one needs to or should be forced to take that journey more quickly than they are comfortable with—nor should they necessarily be held back.

Discussing sexual orientation or actually coming out in a college application is a valid option, as long as it is done with care.

Better than most, those in the counseling field know of the power of higher education in transforming lives. Going away to college can be even more profound for gay students, as they jettison any unwanted baggage from high school, open a new chapter of life with a renewed sense of optimism and preparation for success, and enter a time and place in which they can better come to terms with their sexual orientation and find acceptance. College will certainly bring fresh challenges, but for gay students there is one that should be most welcomed: the challenge of being their true selves.

