

Are You Dedicated to Diversity?
Is the Welcome Mat Out?

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American colleges and universities often refer to their “dedication to diversity”. The truth is, some institutions really make an effort, and some only offer lip service. Even if your institution is the second one, you, as an admissions and records officer can make a difference.

The admissions office is frequently referred to as the “front door” of an institution. Is the welcome mat out? Your institution’s message to prospective students is being established in your office. Are you interested in reaching 10% more students? With little or no additional expense? Of course you are! So, what does your institution do to attract gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (glbt) students? Think you can do nothing? Think again, because there are many things to do that provide a more welcoming atmosphere. Consider the following: brochures, web sites, office surroundings, and informal networks.

Brochures and Web Site

What does your institution’s brochure, catalog, and web site communicate to prospective glbt students? Inclusion of the words “sexual orientation” in the non-discrimination policy carries a powerful and positive message to the glbt community. If your institution will not include sexual orientation, or if your state still has criminal laws against glbt individuals (as mine does), then consider including sexual orientation in the mission, values or goals statement of your college or university. Even better, adopt a separate statement on diversity that is fully inclusive.

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Beyond the formal statements, a prospective glbt student will review lists of activities, clubs and organizations for clues to the institution's diversity. Also, unwritten clues can be sent. Without reverting to stereotype, do any of the pictures in your publications or your web site look "gay-friendly"? When reviewing photos with the publishers, ask for some to be included that will send a message, however subtle. For example, two athletes of the same sex celebrating a victory by one placing an arm around the other. Even something so far removed as same sex individuals merely looking at each other could be used. Far too many publications only show heterosexual couples; you know the picture, boy and girl walk hand in hand across a quad as the sun sets beautifully in the background. The message to the parent is "your child can find a mate here". The message to the student is "you can have sex here". The point is that there are subtle ways to send a message.

Office Surroundings

Look around your offices. What unspoken messages are you sending? Believe me, you are sending a message whether you intend to or not. Does the office reflect an open and accepting environment for glbt's? Clearly the most welcoming is an open glbt staff member, but the next best thing is to have a staff that is actively "gay friendly". Even if neither of these solutions is available, you can still send an open, positive message with certain furnishings. Include a framed poster of an AIDS walk or fundraiser on your office wall, or add a Keith Haring poster. If you don't know who Keith Haring is, you aren't as gay-friendly as you think. If you're really inspired, include something from the Human Rights Campaign. Individual workstations for staff members that have frequent contact with students are another area to consider. If the staff member is openly glbt, have you made it clear that "family" pictures are welcome? This recognition will be a very powerful message and will be noticed by a glbt prospect or student. If your staff is "gay-friendly" ask them to include some personal photos that are more diverse in their collage of their "family" photos. What books are on the bookshelves? Are there titles that would welcome diversity? Consider adding a title from the references for this article.

Staff Training

If they don't already know it, make your staff aware that they are unique...as is everyone. This will go a long way to establish a positive mind-set when they encounter the public at-large. Diversity training is a wonderful exercise, but if you are not blessed with someone at your institution that does this training, check community agencies. Still no luck? Look to your faculty. Someone in the Psychology or Sociology department can help. Offer lunch, and you can probably get a session in exchange. More subtle exercises can be accomplished during staff meetings. Role-playing serves as an excellent way to illustrate a point. Asking staff members to describe a situation in which they were uncomfortable can be a starting point. Broaden the scope of the conversation to embrace diversity issues and how uncomfortable many people can feel, however unintended.

Strive to make your staff understand that the point is to create a welcoming atmosphere, not to change anyone's beliefs. Basically"do unto others.....".

Another helpful exercise is to suggest that when confronted with a situation that falls within the parameters of diversity sensitivity, staff members try to imagine themselves on a movie screen. It will give them the detachment to see the "big picture" and how what they are saying may be coming across to the other person.

If you don't think this issue deserves your attention, please consider the following from *Sharing Silent Journeys of Faith* (Catholic Pastoral Committee on Sexual Minorities, 1989). *Privileges of being heterosexual*: The following aspects of interpersonal relationships are taken for granted by heterosexuals. Imagine the feelings of those who are not allowed the same rights.

The right to kiss or show affection in public

The right to talk about your relationship

The right to not question your normalcy

The right to show pity when the relationship ends

The right to live comfortably without fear of rejection

The right to be open when apartment or house shopping with your significant other

The right to marry

The right to share holidays with family and partner

The right to not hide friends and same-sex activities

The right to have your partner appear in family photographs

The right to have friends seen with you at any place

Other items to consider include the right to have your partner included as part of "family" events at work. The right to have your partner be a part of your medical and retirement benefits plan, and most importantly, the right to not lose your job based upon your sexual orientation.

Informal Networks

Most of us in admissions have already established many informal networks. When outstanding high school scholars visit the campus, we want to talk exclusively with certain people in financial aid and scholarship offices, see only a particular advisor or dean, and visit certain housing facilities. We may arrange for the prospect to meet and participate in activities with selected students. It's only one more step to identify those individuals on campus who will be supportive of glbt students. You probably can name a few right now. Once you get started, you can use the network to expand to others and as a means to raise awareness. There are issues that will arise for your network to consider. For example: Does your housing office offer the opportunity for a student to self-identify and request a similar roommate? Most ask about a smoker or non-, early to rise, etc. Just the presence of a box to check will send a message to glbt students and others as well.

Would your counseling center recognize that a student's unhappiness might stem from a struggle with his/her own sexuality? Is your retention office so attentive as to catch that a student's withdrawal from school might be because they have been "outed" to their family and the funds have been cut off? Does the career service center understand that employment or relocation of a same sex partner might be an issue in placement? Would your Human Resources/Employment office grant bereavement leave for the death of a same sex partner? As a supervisor, you might, but what is your institutional policy?

Another area to consider is the creation of a "Safe Zone". Many college campuses have established these type programs. Individuals are trained and are willing to identify that their personal office is a "safe zone." This identification is usually done through a sticker, magnet, or display card. Establishing a "safe zone" for glbt's identifies you as a person sensitive to the issues that confront these students on a daily basis and are willing to help. Usually, the safe zone training is a function of the diversity of student affairs area and is open to faculty, administration, and staff. Most training programs consist of a half-day intensive training session followed by activities to maintain the network.

Other Opportunities

Can you see that you make a difference? There are still other ways to do more. Consider hosting a glbt awareness group or an event for National Coming Out Day in October. Contact the nearest chapter of PFLAG (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays) and ask them to host an awareness session. Sponsor a Diversity Awareness Week where different cultures and groups are recognized on different days, and include glbt's. Make sure that listings of religious groups include the nearest contact for the Metropolitan Community Church (MCC), which is a national fellowship that is open to glbt Christians.

Finally....just do something

We no longer think of homosexuality as a disease, at least the enlightened among us anyway. Consider this: as a group, homosexuals are one of the only minority groups that still suffer government-sanctioned discrimination. Recently, laws were passed by Congress and state legislatures in response to the mere possibility of same-sex marriage to insure that homosexuals were barred from enjoying this basic right. Plug another minority group into that equation, and think "how far would that law have gotten?" And yet, when applied to homosexuals, it passed. We do not have to be complicit to discrimination. Remember that your silence on diversity can be interpreted as an unwillingness to provide an open and positive learning environment. We are not unwilling... prove it! *Be a voice of acceptance and tolerance on your campus, and show that the welcome mat is out at your institution.*

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