

by Amanda Young

Gay Students: The Latest Outreach Target at Many Colleges

Today's colleges strive for diversity in order to enrich students' personal development, perspectives, and real-world knowledge. While colleges have been trying to recruit students of different races for decades, they are now expanding their perspective of what true diversity entails. "Colleges are striving for what they see as one more element of their diversity," said Lisa Sohmer, former board member of the National Association for College Admission Counseling and Director of College Counseling at the Garden School in New York. LGBT students, due to their orientation, often have different hopes and struggles and a unique outlook on the world which can contribute to college life.

Miami University of Ohio freshman Katie Kass came out at age 14. By the time she applied to college, she was comfortable enough with her orientation to self-identify her sexual orientation in her application. "LGBT-friendliness was a big factor when I was looking for colleges," said the 18-year-old who graduated from Walnut Hills High School in Cincinnati, Ohio. To search for colleges, Kass searched the Web site of Campus Pride, a nonprofit organization that aims to make the college environment more LGBT-friendly. While Kass was not accepted to attend her first-choice college, what attracted her to it was its large and inclusive LGBT community. Kass is one of many students nationwide seeking colleges that are more accepting of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. Many universities are not only acknowledging and providing for their LGBT students, but in many cases, recruiting them.

This demographic is increasingly visible by college application time. According to a study by the National Gay and Lesbian Task

Force, the average LGBT person now begins the coming out process at 16, compared to the 1980's when it was between 19 and 23. According to the US Department of Health and Human Services, 2.5 to three percent of the US population is LGBT. "Ten or more years ago, students were more hesitant to come out during high school than they are now," said Josh Boshoven, a former board director of the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

As a result, many schools are now addressing this demographic directly. For example, Dartmouth College (NH) added LGBT community and/or gender identity to the possible interests applicants can check off on its application supplement two admission seasons ago. "It lets us reach out to them earlier in the application process," said Senior Assistant Director of Admissions Caroline Kerr. She notes that Dartmouth also started doing other outreach to LGBT applicants "in the last two to three years," including a video chat for prospective students hosted by the chairs of the college's gay-straight alliance and participating in college fairs sponsored by Campus Pride. Dartmouth also makes information about LGBT resources available to all applicants in case students aren't comfortable enough to check the interest boxes. Explaining that this outreach continues their mission of diversity, she said, "I think ultimately the outreach is consistent with the ways... we reach out to other students whether that's based on first-generation status or whether that's based on race and ethnicity and being part of a historically underrepresented populations or whether that's just based on geography." Benjamin Baum, an admissions counselor at Tufts University (MA) agrees, "This is one kind of diversity that we feel is important to have on our campus." In the

past two years, Tufts has reached out to gay students through college fairs.

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The University of Southern California (CA) has taken its outreach further than publications, college fairs and Web sites, offering college prep to local high school students and allowing prospective students the opportunity to experience life on the Rainbow Floor, an LGBT and allied special interest community. "We found that a lot of times for LGBT students, they know about the campuses and the resources, but they don't really get a glimpse of them or they don't really get to experience them," said Vincent Vigil, director of the USC LGBT Resource Center. "We wanted to build components online, in paper form, but then also in real life experiences where these students can actually experience what it really means to be LGBT at a college or university and use USC as a backdrop for that."

Outreach does not end when students are admitted to college. Rather, universities aim to convince the students to matriculate. At the University of Pennsylvania, admission officers flag admits who write about coming out in their admission essays, are active members of their high school gay-straight alliances or otherwise mention their sexual identity in the application. The Lambda Alliance, the on-campus LGBT coalition, then emails them about the gay community at Penn. "It's sort of an extra hook for

why they should come to Penn,” said Taylor Ernst, a junior and the chair of the Lambda Alliance. Cindy, a freshman at Penn self-identified in her application essay to show how much the LGBT resources meant to her. She was contacted by the members of the Lambda Alliance. “For them to reach out just makes things easier and more comfortable for everyone,” she said. Some schools even extend this level of comfort as students take their first steps onto campus. Dartmouth, for example, gives the option of requesting LGBT-friendly hosts during their admitted student weekend.

The Common Application, which hundreds of colleges including Penn use, does not have any way to identify a person’s sexual orientation or gender other than male or female. While applicants to Penn currently have to self-identify in order to be contacted by Lambda, Ernst said he hopes that gay applicants will be able to check an optional box, similar to ones that already exist for race and ethnicity. “We are going to make it part of our priority to try to work with the administration and the admission office to get that on the supplement,” he said.

Steven Smith, chair of the GLBT Caucus, which meets each spring as part of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers, said, “The 2009–2010 academic year was a landmark year in GLBT student recruitment.” Clearly, recruitment of this group is growing and services to students are expanding. For example, Campus Pride founder and executive director Shane Windmeyer has used colleges’ interest in creating a diverse class to grow his organization from “an online Web site” in 2001 to “a full-fledged nonprofit.”

Windmeyer began LGBT college fairs three years ago to support youth looking for LGBT-friendly colleges and universities. “When we started, we were barely getting maybe 12 or 20 colleges coming out for our

college fair. Our largest college fairs right now attract about 50 colleges and about 250 students and their families and those are the larger fairs like New York City and Boston,” he said. In addition, Campus Pride has seen more interest in another resource it provides for college bound students: the Campus Climate Index. The online tool rates colleges on a five star system on their LGBT-friendliness based on a survey submitted by colleges. When the tool was launched in 2008, there were only 30 colleges on the index. Currently, about 250 colleges are on the list. Colleges that are registered with the index and attend LGBT-friendly college fairs range from “name-brand” colleges like Harvard University (MA) to smaller colleges like Colby-Sawyer College (NH).

For some selective colleges that review applications holistically, the recruitment of LGBT students extends into admission decisions. “When we evaluate students, many will self-identify as being LGBT in their applications. In our admission process, we consider that as a type of diversity on campus,” said Robbie McKnight, senior associate dean of admission at Emory University (GA) “It’s an underrepresented population to a degree and so when we make admission decisions, it is something we would at least be aware of if they do choose to self-identify.” Kerr said that at Dartmouth, LGBT status is considered as it informs other parts of the application. “It’s not us looking for simply, is this box checked, yes or no, and that will drive the decision on the application one way or another,” Kerr said. “It’s really looking to inform the rest.”

Student Matt Barnett didn’t self-identify as being gay on his application to Duke University (NC) where he is a freshman, but he did on his applications to what he considered “more liberal schools” like Penn, Brown University (RI), Yale University (CT) and Columbia University (NY). “I did so because

as a white male, I figured that anything that made me stand out would increase my chances of acceptance,” Barnett said. He was rejected at all four of the above colleges except Columbia where he was wait-listed. Barnett’s guess was incorrect, reinforcing Kerr’s claim that this aspect of the application does not decide admission.

Just as schools don’t admit solely on LGBT self-identification, students don’t choose schools solely on their LGBT services and sensitivity. However, many schools are working to create a comfortable and accepting environment for the LGBT students they do admit. For Kass, who self-identified in her application essay for the honors program at Miami, the decision to matriculate came down to their generous financial aid and viola program. After she made her college decision, she met a few students involved in Spectrum, Miami’s queer organization. After one semester, Kass said she likes Miami even though she finds the majority of the community to be unwelcoming to LGBT students. “I feel that the biggest problem at Miami is a lack of discussion about queer issues,” Kass said. “Spectrum does what it can to change that, but there’s only so much good publicity we can make for ourselves,” she added. Still, Kass said she has found a home at Miami through Spectrum which has enabled her to make many friends, be more open to the community and enjoy Miami.



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