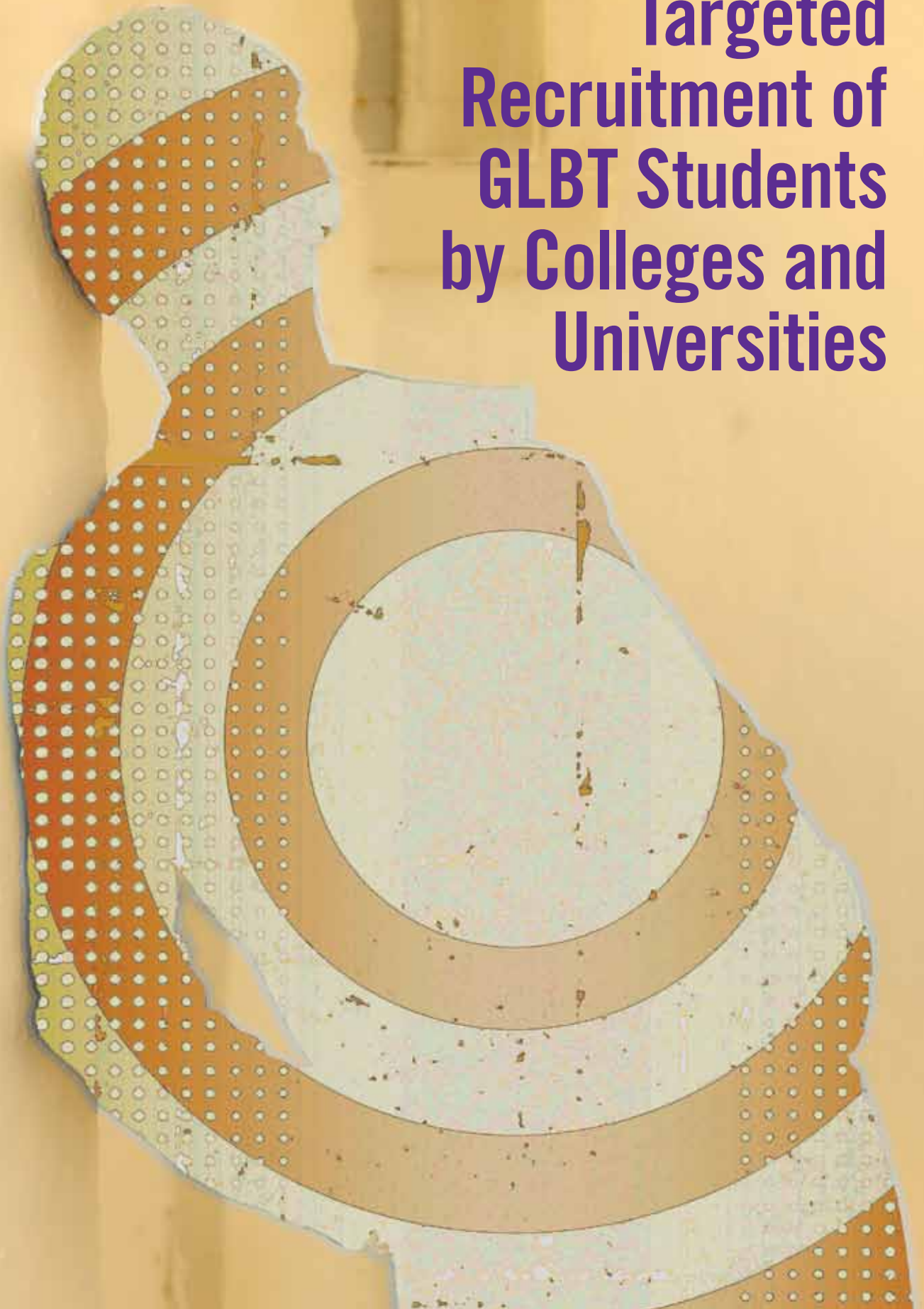


by Tyler D. Cegler

Targeted Recruitment of GLBT Students by Colleges and Universities



Abstract

The recruitment and admission practices of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students by admission offices in higher education are examined as an emerging trend. Limited research on the targeted recruitment and hopeful admission and matriculation of the LGBT prospective student populations exists. Third-party GLBT organizations have provided the greatest support and push for open information on campus climates. A small handful of institutions, including the University of Pennsylvania and the University of Southern California, are actively engaged in the targeted recruitment of BTLG students. For this article, the GLBT acronym may be used in part or in any order. Recommendations on how to best and safely engage this student population are proffered. The ethical implications of engaging with a student population claiming an invisible and often violently oppressed identity should be of highest concern to admission and other higher education professionals.

Keywords: admission, college choice, gay, GLBT, higher education, homosexuality, LGBT, sexual identity, sexual orientation, student diversity, student recruitment

College and university recruitment efforts often seek out students whose interests, values and beliefs match those of the institution. Some institutions enroll only those with unique or special abilities, such as The Julliard School (NY), whose mission is “to provide the highest caliber of artistic education for gifted musicians, dancers, and actors from around the world” (Julliard 2011). Others, perhaps most notably community colleges and land-grant institutions, tend to have a more regional mission, focusing on the citizens of a city or state, as well as the needs of local employers. Regardless of institutional type, “most [schools] also note the value of enrolling students with a diversity of experiences, talents, viewpoints, and backgrounds” (Rigol 2003, 7). Historically, “LGBT students... have largely been ignored in diversity-oriented admissions practices” (Einhaus et al. 2008, 312). Today, diversity is also being recognized as needing to incorporate gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals (Young 2011, 39).

As this population of prospective students becomes more visible, in tandem with higher education institutions broadening their definition of diversity beyond visible differences, LGBT students are being targeted as a unique recruitment group. This article first focuses on a review of the minimal amount of literature on the trend, along with the factors that have created an environment ripe for targeted BTLG recruitment by higher education admission offices, including identification of the population. Second is a review of the brief history of the schools and programs that partake in the hopeful matriculation of GLBT students. Lastly, implications for best practices for student affairs and admission professionals are discussed, along with recommendations for future action as this trend continues to accelerate.

Literature Review and Modern Influences

Diversity and affirmative action have relatively long, if contentious, histories in many colleges' recruitment and admission policies. Such practices have even led to Supreme Court decisions regarding the appropriateness of such procedures (CNN 2003). These practices, however, have almost solely been related to racial and ethnic diversity. In a 2002 survey of four-year public higher education institutions by Einhaus et al. (2008, 22), only four percent “engage[d] in any recruitment activities that specifically targeted LGBT students.” While limited in number, these institutions are laying out a much-needed roadmap for GLBT student recruitment.

For nearly 35 years, the US Department of Education (2008) has mandated higher education institutions report race and ethnicity statistics for staff and students. It is not uncommon for university admission offices to track or admit students based on many other factors, including honors status, disability, first generation, socio-economic status, ACT/SAT score, or even graduating from a specific high school (Rigol 2003). The same is not true of GLTB identities, as “universities generally do not track data on the sexual orientation of their students” (Einhaus et al. 2008, 321). Indeed, The Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) Self-Assessment Guide (SAG) for LGBT programs and services (2009b) states that no single college or university tracks non-normative sexual identities or gender identification in the admission process. The CAS SAG for Admission Programs (2009a) makes no mention of LGBT identities, and barely mentions diverse identities at all. Special admission considerations are noted only for applicants who “possess outstanding talent” or, more vaguely, students who come “from academically disadvantaged backgrounds” (CAS 2009a, 21).

The Common Application (2011), used by more than 400 colleges and universities that engage in a holistic admission process, continues to give only the binary male/female choice, stressing applicants should indicate the gender listed on their birth certificate (Jaschik 2010a). The Common Application is considering adding an optional question concerning sexual orientation, as well as an open-ended gender identity option, though for federal reporting purposes the applicant would still need to answer male/female (Jaschik 2010a). Investigations did not find any undergraduate admission office that asks an optional sexual orientation question on the application. An article by Gabriel Arana (2010) states the University of Pennsylvania would begin asking the question during the 2010–2011 recruitment year. However, in a conversation with the director of the LGBT Center at the University of Pennsylvania, he stated the question was not currently being asked, only that conversations around the issue had taken place (B. Schoenberg, personal communication, April 19, 2011).

Colleges and universities can now target GLBT students because of their increased visibility on campuses, both secondary and postsecondary. Recent studies state that the average age at which youth are “coming out,” or are beginning to take on the identity of LGTB, is somewhere between 13.5 years and 16 years (Ryan 2009, Cianciotto and Cahill 2003, Ryan and Futterman 1998). Compare this to the 1970s, when the average age of coming out was in the mid-20s (Ryan 2009). While perhaps not directly comparable to the coming out process in the US, the United Kingdom-based group Stonewall recently released a survey indicating that over the last 40 years the average age of coming out has reduced

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by 20 years (Stonewall 2010). What this means is students are beginning to take on a BLTG identity before they enter college, rather than about the time they are exiting higher education institutions.

In a 1994 study done by Jan-Mitchell and Hardesty (as cited in Einhaus, Viento and Croteau 2004, 11), “30 percent of LBG students considered their sexual orientation as a factor in making their college choices.” In the preceding 18 years, it is logical to assume this percentage has grown. Even if the percentage has not

increased, based on the decreasing age of coming out, 30 percent of today’s self-identified GLB(T) youth is a significantly larger raw number than in 1994.

Current Trends in Recruitment of GLBT Students

While there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the GLBT student population numbers, this has not prevented some forward-thinking institutions from doing outreach to LTGB and other non-heterosexually identifying groups and individuals. The number of schools participating in GLBT outreach is relatively small compared to the number and variety of institutions in the US. Furthermore, little is known about best practices in LGBT student recruitment. As is the case with nearly all recruitment tactics, TGBL outreach can be divided into two main categories, passive and active.

Passive Recruitment

One way in which institutions have passively attempted to recruit GLBT students is through advertising LGBT-friendly policies, services and communities on admission Web sites and recruitment materials. These subtle tactics normally include actions such as listing Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in recruitment materials, advertising on-campus gender-neutral housing (if available), listing BTLG scholarships on financial aid Web sites, or prominently displaying photographs of gay students and LBGT programs. San Jose State University (CA) is often credited with being a leader in GLBT-inclusive advertisements (New York Times New Service 2002). Dartmouth College (NH) lists its BGLT organizations and gender-neutral housing options as possible areas-of-interest for students to check off on the admission application (Young 2011).

Other institutions try to get listed in directories and on GLBT-related Web sites as a safe place to seek higher education.

Campus Pride is an organization with a mission in part to “support programs and services to create safer, more inclusive LGBT-friendly colleges and universities” (Campus Pride 2009, para. 4). Since 2001, Campus Pride has developed and published *The LGBT Campus Climate Index*, which assesses how GLBT-friendly a campus may be (Campus Pride 2011). Currently, 264 four-year institutions have

publicly released their information on the Campus Pride Web site. Higher education institutions opt to take the self-assessment, and can then choose to not have their results published (Campus Pride 2011).

Institutions can use strong results of the Campus Climate Index to set themselves above their peer institutions. Oregon State University (OR), in a recent press release concerning retention rates of students in science and engineering programs, heralded itself as “one of only 19 colleges and universities in the United States to receive a five-star [highest] rating for inclusion and friendliness from Campus Pride” (Oregon State University 2010, para 8). Such additions to press releases or other institutional advertising requires little work on the part of university, but could be instrumental in drawing a GLBT student to the institution.

Active Recruitment

The first documented program of actively targeting LGBT prospective students was a college fair held in Boston in 2002 (Cavanagh 2002). Organizers had been expecting only half a dozen schools, but on the day of the event, more than 40 institutions showed up, some from as far away as Iowa (Cavanagh 2002). Since 2008, Campus Pride has undertaken and sponsored the LGBT-Friendly National College Fair Program (Campus Pride 2009). During the 2010–2011 academic year, the Campus Pride college fair program extended to five different regional locations: New York, Los Angeles, Boston, Charlotte, and Portland (Campus Pride 2010). The Fall 2011 program itself has five locations, in Charlotte, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, and New York City (Campus Pride 2011).

The above-mentioned recruitment programs, active or passive, were still mostly sponsored or hosted by third parties, not by higher education organizations. Only within the past few years have colleges and universities been engaged in direct, personal recruitment of LTGB students. The University of Pennsylvania (PA) is believed to be the first school to recruit students *because* of their sexual orientation (Jaschik 2010b). The University of Pennsylvania does much the same as it would other target students. A “young woman who expresses an interest in engineering will hear from a female junior in engineering. A black admit might hear from a black student” (Jaschik 2010b, para 1). Students who apply to the University of Pennsylvania and self-disclose a GLBT identity will receive outreach from a current BGTL student. In theory, this is not so different than the targeted recruitment in which more selective institutions are already engaged.

The University of Southern California (USC) (CA) offers a more in-depth view of GLBT life on its campus. Advertised as the only program of its kind, prospective (presumably GLBT) students can

arrange to be hosted with a current USC student who lives on the Rainbow Floor (USC 2011b). A collaboration between the USC LGBT center and residence life, “the rainbow floor is a special interest residential community for LBGT students and supportive allies” (USC 2011a). This opportunity is a chance for recruited students to engage in a more holistic experience and interact with a variety of individuals immersed in the campus GLTB student life.

Western Michigan University (MI), in Kalamazoo, takes its message out to GLBT students by giving presentations to Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) groups (Einhaus et al., 2008; Marklein 2004). During these visits, led by professional staff members from the Western Michigan University LGBT Center and Admissions office, current GLBT students speak to their personal experiences of being non-heterosexual or non-gender conforming at the institution. Additionally, such actions can also build credibility with high school guidance counselors as they advise students who may be looking for accepting and inclusive institutions (*New York Times* News Service 2002). Higher education institutions interested in reaching out to GSA’s could easily work with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which has more than 4,000 such groups registered (GLSEN 2011).



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These recruitment strategies come with some hesitation, criticism, and even hostility, as one blogger wrote “now, we’re recruited with other minorities under the goal of the giant, dubious buzzword: diversity... we have to probe whether a school is genuinely committed to a supportive and thriving environment.”

Direct, personal outreach to TGBL students is still very limited and in its infancy. Passive advertising and outreach to LGBT students, while more common than active recruitment strategies, is still done by only a small minority of institutions. Should this trend continue, best practices will likely be realized, and such outreach could even be considered normal and expected.

Recommendations

As universities continue to reach out to underrepresented or oppressed populations, they must be intentional and ethical in their actions. These recruitment strategies come with some hesitation, criticism, and even hostility, as one blogger wrote “now, we’re recruited with other minorities under the goal of the giant, dubious buzzword: diversity... we have to probe whether a school is genuinely committed to a supportive and thriving environment” (Cordes 2010). Professionals in higher education must be mindful of their actions and actively engage best practices in both admission and GLBT student services. As the two functional areas fuse during the recruitment process, active research, evaluation, and assessment of programs must occur.

Ethical Considerations

Universities that engage in active recruitment of GLBT students must be especially careful of the ethical dilemmas. The CAS SAG for LGBT Programs and Services, in the ethics section, states unequivocally that “privacy and confidentiality [must be] maintained” and “staff members must ensure that the confidentiality of individuals’ sexual orientation and gender identity are protected” (CAS 2009b, 22). While technically these ethics are not for recruitment and admission offices, they should still be carefully abided. A student may identify himself or herself as

non-heterosexual in an admission essay or interview, but not yet have had such a conversation with his or her parents. If a college or university were to accidentally or unintentionally disclose an applicant’s sexuality to still-ignorant parents, issues of the prospective student’s safety and possible homelessness might arise. This is especially important as the most recent Campus Pride National College Climate Survey found only 46 percent of undergraduate students were open with their family about their sexual identity (Rankin et al. 2010). It is safe to assume an even smaller percentage of high school students researching their college options have informed their parents of their non-heterosexual identity.

While not specific to the TBLG student population, services, and campus climate, the CAS SAG for Admission Programs is equally clear that “promotional and descriptive information must be accurate and free of deception” (CAS 2009a, 20). It is the job of admission personnel to recruit students to their institution, but only in a way that benefits all parties involved. One piece of this accuracy can be campus climate indexes. Institutions that choose to engage in recruitment of GLBT students must separate how the general campus feels about the acceptance of LGBT identities, and how accepted GLBT students actually feel (Schwartz 2010). The most recent Campus Pride National College Climate Survey indicates that both non-heterosexual and non-gender conforming students find campus climates for GLBT people less hospitable than their heterosexual and gender binary conforming counterparts (Rankin et al. 2010). Additionally, while no one would expect admission personnel to disparage their institution, when asked, they must be truthful about perceptions of LGTB life on campus and within the greater community.

Research and Data Tracking

More research is needed on GLBT student populations. Organizations like GLSEN: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network and Campus Pride continue to contribute vast amounts of new research. In the long term, if campuses are to provide services to their student populations, it is essential they know what these populations are and what presence they have on their campuses. Currently, this research, Campus Pride, the Council for the Advancement of Standards, or the National Consortium of Directors of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Resources in Higher Education couldn’t find a single institution that optionally asks for sexual preference or gender identity on admission applications, let alone tracks the success of this unique student population. Until such time when more research and short-term and long-term student and data tracking takes place, best practices will continue to remain relatively unknown.

This does not imply higher education institutions should discontinue, or not start, outreach toward the BTGL prospective student population. Best practices in higher education can only emerge once colleges and universities institute programming and evolve their practice as additional information, research and assessment becomes available.

Conclusion

The targeted recruitment of GLBT students by admission offices in higher education is an emerging trend. Prospective applicants at higher education institutions are not currently asked to self-identify their sexual or gender orientation. Regardless, a number of institutions are engaged in passive recruitment of LTGB students. Some of these recruitment techniques include making sure GLBT-related services and programs are listed in advertising materials. A smaller number of schools participate in active recruitment, including attending LGBT-themed college fairs and contacting students who self-disclose a BGLT identity in their application.

For those institutions that do practice targeted recruitment of TGBL students, ethical considerations must be in the forefront of the enrollment management plan. Because little research on best practices currently exists on this prospective student population, higher education institutions should actively seek out the most diverse population as possible as defined by the institution's mission, vision and values. This will empower the institutions and their student populations.



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