

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Students:
Risk, Resiliency, and Retention
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➔ intro

While some colleges and universities acknowledge the presence of lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB)—or sexual minority—students on their campuses, few institutions gather and maintain data on the numbers or needs of sexual minority students. As a result, many sexual minority students in higher education tend to be invisible; therefore their presence and experiences are known only anecdotally. While this presentation ➔

➔ purpose proposes to explore an examination of the lives and experiences of sexual minority college students to provide an understanding of the students' language, behaviors, and stressors, and how those areas affect students' academic achievement and success in college, in reality, it's similar to the old Seinfeld plot. It's about nothing. There is very little hard evidence about the lives of Lesbian, gay, or bisexual college students, and there is even less about transgender students. I've not included transgender students in this work as trans students specifically. This work is about non-heterosexual sexual orientation and sexual minority students which would indeed include some transgender students since sexual orientation and gender identity are two entirely different personal characteristics, one not assuming the other.

➔ work in progress

➔ intros

➔ group discussion

➔ Question: who are our students?

➔ photoquilt

Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Students: Risk, Resiliency, and Retention

While addressing diversity and exploring the experiences and health-related issues of minority, or non-White, students on college campuses have become popular topics of research and discussion, the inclusion of sexual minorities—lesbian, gay, bisexual, (LGB) and students questioning their sexual identity—in these efforts has been slow.

➔ Homo 101 slides, cass, trans

➔ Adrienne Rich

➔ discussion

The unique and specific experiences, perspectives, health issues and concerns of sexual minority students are not fully captured in the current available literature.

Sexual minority college students suffer the consequences of intolerance: Students who worry about an unsupportive environment and harassment are unable to focus on either academic or co-curricular learning.

➔ Rankin

Dr. Sue Rankin, who is here with us today, noted that in her recent study of over 1000 sexual minority college students, one third experienced some form of harassment on campus, and Sherrill & Hardesty said that 31% of sexual minority college students left for a semester or longer and 33% dropped out altogether due to harassment on campus. Tinto documented that difficulty, adjustment, and isolation are three of the

experiences that influence student departure from college, with social isolation being a primary cause.

➔ drop out

Hunter and Schaefer (1990), Remafedi (1987), and Rotheram-Borus (1991) agreed that sexual minority students are likely to drop out of school or have problems with learning when they are faced with the chronic stress of discrimination and harassment

➔ Franklins slides

➔ background

Background

Discrimination based on sexual orientation is not unusual throughout the United States. To date, 36 states still do not prevent discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Fewer than 10% of the nation's 3500 colleges and universities have *sexual orientation* in their nondiscrimination policies, and only about 40 institutions have professionally staffed centers that provide services to, for, and about sexual minority students, faculty, and staff. While the majority of Americans say they believe sexual minorities should enjoy basic human rights and job protections, about half say they believe that homosexuality should not be considered an acceptable lifestyle, and only 29% want to see the full acceptance of sexual minority people in the United States..

Blumenfeld stated that sexual minorities “are among the most despised groups in the United States today.” Blum and Pfetzing said, “‘Not being queer’ is a central organizing

principle in our culture. Every young boy's experience is shaped and formed within this framework." They noted that unlike the Jewish child whose parents are typically Jewish, or the Black child with Black parents and relatives, the gay or lesbian child does not have gay or lesbian parents and understands the word *gay* only in the most negative of terms.

→ spoiled identity

The gay or lesbian child is therefore left with fear and shame and isolation. As the child grows and becomes a college student, those feelings accompany that young person to campus. Goffman referred to as a spoiled identity.

→ who ya gonna call?

→ Kinsey

Since the Kinsey studies, people have attempted to determine the number of LGB people in the United States. Some studies reflect that about 10% of the population in the United States is lesbian, gay, or bisexual, while other studies indicate smaller percentages.

→ Eyermann & Sanlo

Eyermann and Sanlo discovered that about 10% of the respondents of a quality-of-life survey in the residence halls at a large academic research institution identified as being sexually attracted to someone of the same sex, but self-identifiers—labels such as *lesbian* or *gay*—were not asked. Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Sanlo (1998) noted that while the number of sexual minority college students is not at all clear, lesbian, gay,

and bisexual students are on college campuses throughout the United States and face discrimination and harassment regularly.

Issues of LGB College Students

All college students face a number of developmental tasks, or vectors, precipitated by the internal processes of maturation and the environmental challenges offered by their experiences in college.

➔ Chickering

According to Chickering and Reisser (1993), these seven vectors of development include developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. Students generally experience developmental crises related to these tasks at some point during their college years, become preoccupied with an issue, resolve it, and move to another issue. For sexual minority students, however, dilemmas related to sexual identity and sexual identity development often take precedence to the exclusion of all other developmental tasks.

➔ Question: challenges?

➔ Challenges 2

Sexual minority people face unique challenges such as maintaining self-esteem and coping with being different; establishing same-sex romantic relationships; deciding whether to come out to family and friends; and facing harassment, violence, and

discrimination. These challenges become much more difficult when the person is a college student who decides to identify openly on campus as lesbian, gay, or bisexual.

➔ UCLA

Researchers have documented the prevalence of harassment of sexual minority students on college campuses, and that sexual minorities are victimized at a far higher rate than other populations on campus, perhaps as much as four times more often than the general student population.

➔ Franklin

In Franklin's (2000) study of community college students who were perpetrators of anti-gay harassment, the harassment occurred for four general reasons: so that the perpetrator could impress friends; because a person perceived to be gay made what the perpetrator perceived to be a sexual advance and therefore deserved to be beaten up; because of anti-gay ideology regarding religion and/or morals; and/or because the perpetrator needed to prove to friends that he himself was not homosexual.

➔ Question: who gets studied?

➔ Question: who gets studied 2?

While sexual minority students are likely to be on most college and university campuses in the United States, only scant anecdotal information documents their existence, their experiences, their health issues, and their persistence to graduation. Retention is one of the most frequently considered and researched questions regarding college students, especially minority and differently-abled college students. Multiple

studies of the health, resilience, and retention of African American, differently-abled, and diverse populations in general proliferate in the literature—the purpose of which is to learn of the issues that either encourage students to persist to graduation and have a successful academic career or to leave college before they have completed their course of study. Most students in these studies are considered to be at risk, both for the physical, mental, and emotional stresses associated with being underrepresented on their campuses and for the behaviors in which they may participate as a result of the stresses they experience.

➔ Nowhere

Nowhere in the literature have there been similar studies that focus on the sexual minority population on college campuses, despite the growing body of literature, including a Federal study (Gibson, 1989), acknowledging that this population is at greatest risk for suicide and other health issues.

➔ Coming out

Youth are questioning and/or revealing their sexual orientation at much younger ages than ever before. The median age for coming out in 1998 was 13, compared to 20 in 1979. Further, both Evans and Wall (1991) and Talbot (1996) observed that growing numbers of sexual minority students are coming out within the college environment. According to researcher Caitlin Ryan this generation of sexual minority youth is evolving differently from past generations and their issues are new and unresearched.

➔ Issues

Specifically, they lack role models; they are negotiating puberty in the age of AIDS; coming out at younger ages which increases their risk for victimization; and using terminology and definitions different from past generations (Broido, 2000). Despite the younger and more visible generation of sexual minority young people, negative attitudes toward sexual minorities have not significantly changed over the past twenty years. In fact, Herek, Berrill, and California Attorney General William Lockyer reported that levels of violence toward sexual minority people have increased.

Evans and D'Augelli (1996) and Rankin (2003) noted that the college environment still does not provide a welcoming context in which sexual minority students may develop a positive identity.

➔ stressors

While sexual minority college students share many of the similarities of other college students, there are a number of major stressors and behaviors that are highly distinctive to this population. Because of the stigmatization and harassment they face, sexual minority students may experience a variety of serious problems that deeply affect their physical and mental health as well as their academic success and retention, including: low self-esteem; feelings of alienation; isolation; invisibility; depression; anxiety; violence; substance abuse; self-destructive behaviors including high-risk sexual behaviors; and suicide.

Many college students remain closeted because they are unsure of how to handle the conflict that coming out creates.

➔ Identities

Some students choose to maintain two identities—the heterosexual one known to parents and friends at home, and the new emerging sexual minority identity. The two worlds are often kept distinct, creating an enormous stress of identity management. Despite the serious mental health problems, life stresses, and victimization experienced by sexual minority students, few campuses provide adequate services for them.

Invisibility in the Literature

➔ Invisibility

There remains a dearth of information about the specific health issues and concerns of sexual minority college students. While sexual orientation is mentioned in the Surgeon General's Call to Action, in Healthy People 2010 (2003) and in Healthy Campus 2010 (2001), specific mention of sexual minority *college students* is nearly non-existent. In fact, their concerns are given only two paragraphs in the Healthy People 2010: Companion Document for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health (2001). Additionally, this specific population is not mentioned in the 1999 Institute of Medicine's Report on Lesbian Health: Current Assessment and Directions for the Future nor in the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health: Findings and Concerns (Dean et al, 2000), nor in the U. S. Department of Health and Human Service's A Provider's Introduction to Substance Abuse Treatment of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Individuals (2000). The sexual minority college population is invisible, both on campus and in the much of the literature.

The Need for Research

➔ further research

Researchers suggest the need for rich in-depth analyses of the day-to-day experiences of sexual minority college students. This population has not been explored longitudinally nor has it been inclusive of sexual minority students of color. Sexual minority youth face unique health care risks. Further research is needed to evaluate the health care issues facing this population, as is basic research in human sexual development, sexual health, and social and behavioral research on risk and protective factors related to sexual minority youth need to be explored. Rivers and D'Augelli (2001) emphasized that research focusing on the victimization of sexual minority youth in the college setting is "long overdue" (p. 202).

There are many unexamined questions regarding sexual minority college students. While issues of sexual minority people have been identified in the literature, and while higher education literature has explored minority populations on campus, few studies in either of these areas include college students and their particular needs and circumstances. In addition, no work was found in the literature that explores resilience, positive survival skills, and academic success of sexual minority college students.

Broad theme areas should include an examination of the following independent variables: family background and socioeconomic status; race/ethnicity; degree of comfort with sexual orientation and sexual identity development; level of participation in some aspect of the campus community including major course of study, living

arrangements both on and off campus, organizational or athletic involvement; work commitments; and on-campus support including mental health counseling and student health services.

The following themes, therefore, seem critical to explore:

➔ theme 1

Theme 1: Discrimination and Coping

How do sexual minority students currently in college define identify and respond to homophobia? How do they deal with negative labels, symbols, gestures, and language? How do they resist and defy oppression on campus? How do they realistically appraise when and what they should fight?

➔ theme 2

Theme 2: Health Effects/Outcomes

How does anti-gay negativity affect sexual minority students physically and emotionally, and how and when do these students seek assistance and from whom? In addition, who gets to define the term anti-gay negativity?

➔ theme 3

Theme 3: Resiliency

What factors affect resiliency (measured as psychological well-being and coping skills) and persistence to graduation among sexual minority students, particularly in the face of discrimination and harassment on campus? Does community involvement and/or leadership on or off campus help develop coping skills and resilience?

Such studies would provide vast amounts of information about sexual minority college students heretofore not obtained from this population. U. S. Surgeon General David Satcher (2001, p. 1) stated, “Community responsibility includes assurance that its members have: access to developmentally and culturally appropriate sexuality education, as well as sexual and reproductive health care and counseling; the latitude to make appropriate sexual and reproductive choices; respect for diversity; and freedom from stigmatization and violence on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation.” Such freedom does not yet occur on college and university campuses in the United States. Through the voices and experiences of the participants in anticipated studies, student affairs professionals may begin to understand the needs of this invisible population and then develop methods to fully address inclusion and social justice on our campuses.

The Need for Information in Student Affairs

➔ need for information

Retention is one of the most studied topics in higher education student affairs. Astin, Kuh, Pascarella and Terenzini, and Tinto all have suggested that the more satisfied and involved a student is in college, the more likely s/he will be academically successful and ultimately persist to graduation.

African Americans, Latinas/os, Asian-Pacific Islanders, Native Americans, and differently abled students have been focused in numerous retention studies. However, the literature is void of such studies of sexual minority college students. Because

admissions data is usually collected regarding these students, there is an understanding of the number of students within these populations on college campuses. They are not invisible, at least on college records. No such data is collected (nor would it be easy to collect such data) on LGB college students, so they remain invisible, and easy to forget that they are present.

In a recent email correspondence, I asked Vincent Tinto, the nation's expert on college retention issues and studies, about students regarding LGB issues in retention literature. He wrote, "Unfortunately, I am unaware of any articles on the subject." A thorough review of the higher education literature on retention by Eimers validated Tinto's assessment: neither articles nor books were found on the topic. While there was no mention of sexual minority college students in the literature, Eimers did identify the common experiences of minority groups which mirrors the experiences of the sexual minority population: higher levels of prejudice, a more difficult time identifying with peers and faculty, and an elevated risk for experiencing isolation and alienation.

Despite the pressures created by the threats of rejection, harassment, and abuse, most sexual minority youth cope with the increased stress and some even excel, but it is unknown as to how or why. Why do some sexual minority college students remain in college and why do some leave? How does homophobia, whether experienced or observed, affect their academic success? Primarily, how is their physical and emotional health affected by their campus experiences and when, how, and from whom do they seek health services and intervention?

➔ promising practices

Promising Practices and Further Research

A number of institutions have identified programs that may positively affect retention. Such programs include: the ➔ Safe Zone project in its variety of iterations; training of student affairs professionals and other staff for service provision; education and advocacy for faculty for curriculum inclusion; ➔ mentoring and peer counseling programs; ➔ lavender graduation celebrations; leadership training programs; and ➔ ➔ campus offices and resource centers. ➔ Unfortunately, there are no studies that explore each of these areas to determine if they are effective in helping LGB students persist to graduation. ➔ Further research is needed for each of these areas and programs.

➔ Who is your hero?

➔ heroes

Research is also needed to examine the lives of sexual minority college students longitudinally. Both qualitative and quantitative methodology should be employed to gather the broadest range of data. This information must be added to the literature so that the health and behavioral issues of this population are understood through their own experiences and their own voices. Such understanding will allow colleges and universities to develop training programs that enable faculty and staff to provide appropriate services and create a welcoming campus climate for this population of students, and may also be useful in its application to the greater student population as

well. Such studies may provide a thorough foundation that answers questions about the lives, experiences, successes, and very specific health issues and concerns of sexual minority college students.

➔ work in progress

➔ Question: what can you do?

➔ Then...

➔ Question: what could that inclusion be?

➔ final question

➔ Questions?

What's missing?

➔ close