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*Sexual minorities encounter unique challenges due to their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression that often prevents them from achieving their full academic potential or participating fully in the campus community.*

## Campus Climates for Sexual Minorities

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Sexual-minority students<sup>1</sup> on college or university campuses encounter unique challenges because of how they are perceived and treated as a result of their sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The challenges faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students can prevent them from achieving their full academic potential or participating fully in campus communities. Similarly, other LGBT faculty, staff, and administrators can suffer as a result of the same prejudices, which can limit their ability to achieve their career goals or to mentor or support students. This chapter examines current campus climates for lesbian, gay, and bisexual students and employees in institutions of higher education. *Campus climate* is defined here as the cumulative attitudes, behaviors, and standards of employees and students concerning access for, inclusion of, and level of respect for individual and group needs, abilities, and potential.

### **Literature Review**

Several research articles (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, and Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Evans and Broido, 2002; Garber, 2002; Malaney, Williams, and Geller, 1997; Waldo, 1998) document the perceptions of campus quality of life for LGBT people. The results of these studies suggest that LGBT people are marginalized on campus. Additional research has documented the experiences of harassment and violence faced by LGBT people on campus (D'Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1993; Waldo, Hesson-McInnis, and D'Augelli, 1998) and the consequences of anti-LGBT harassment and violence on its victims (D'Augelli, 1992; Herek, 1994, 1995; Hershberger and D'Augelli, 1995; Norris and Kaniasty, 1991; Savin-Williams and Cohen, 1996; Slater,

1993). Still other research has examined the success of and best practices for programs to improve campus climate for LGBT people (Draughn, Elkins, and Roy, 2002; Little and Marx, 2002; Louvaas, Baroudi, and Collins, 2002; Sausa, 2002; Yep, 2002).

Some of this research focuses on perceptions of campus climate for sexual minorities. In these studies, LGBT college students generally rate campus climate lower than their non-LGBT peers (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, and Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Waldo, 1998). Rankin (1998) noted that LGBT students are targeted for harassment and violence more often than non-LGBT students; derogatory comments were noted as the most common form of harassment.

Another body of literature suggests several predictors of positive attitudes toward LGBT people. These include knowing someone who is LGBT (Malaney, Williams, and Geller, 1997; Norris and Kaniasty, 1991), being comfortable with one's own sexual identity (Simoni, 1996), being female (Engstrom and Sedlacek, 1997), and not being a first-year student (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, and Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Engstrom and Sedlacek, 1997; Malaney, Williams, and Geller, 1997). This research also suggests that resident assistants and other student affairs staff members are more sensitive to the issues and concerns of LGBT students than members of the general student or staff population and faculty (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, and Robinson-Keilig, 2004).

### **The Rankin Study**

The studies referred to were all conducted at one or two institutions or within one department at one institution. In an effort to examine the climate for LGBT people at a national level, I designed a study to examine the experiences of LGBT people, their perceptions of campus climate for LGBT people, and their perceptions of institutional responses to LGBT issues and concerns (Rankin, 2003). Fourteen campuses participated in the study: four private and ten public colleges and universities from across the country. The respondent sample (1,669 self-identified LGBT people) is larger than that of any other study using one assessment tool.<sup>2</sup>

The results of my study indicated that more than one-third (36 percent) of LGBT undergraduate students have experienced harassment within the past year (Table 2.1). Derogatory remarks were the most common form of harassment (89 percent). Other types of harassment included spoken harassment or threats (48 percent), anti-LGBT graffiti (39 percent), pressure to conceal one's sexual orientation or gender identity (38 percent), written comments (33 percent), and physical assaults (reported by eleven respondents). Seventy-nine percent of those harassed identified students as the source of the harassment. Of the eleven physical assaults noted in the study, ten were reported by students. These findings point to the need for intervention strategies aimed at student populations on campus.

**Table 2.1. Harassment Experienced by LGBT Students and Staff, Rankin Study**

<i>Experienced Harassment?</i>	<i>Undergraduate Student % (n)</i>	<i>Graduate/Professional Student % (n)</i>	<i>Staff % (n)</i>	<i>Faculty % (n)</i>	<i>Administrator % (n)</i>
Yes	36 (254)	23 (63)	19 (72)	27 (41)	32 (30)
No	64 (459)	77 (216)	81 (299)	73 (109)	68 (65)

**Table 2.2. Perceptions of Harassment Toward LGBT People**

<i>Perceptions of Harassment Toward:</i>	<i>Very Unlikely % (n)</i>	<i>Somewhat Likely % (n)</i>	<i>Uncertain % (n)</i>	<i>Somewhat Likely % (n)</i>	<i>Very Likely % (n)</i>
Gay men	3 (41)	13 (219)	22 (369)	41 (690)	19 (324)
Lesbians	4 (67)	18 (298)	23 (388)	42 (693)	12 (196)
Bisexual people	5 (87)	19 (311)	37 (609)	28 (471)	10 (163)
Transgender people	2 (31)	4 (70)	21 (348)	29 (486)	42 (702)

The results also indicated that 20 percent of the respondents feared for their physical safety because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and 51 percent concealed their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid intimidation. In addition, respondents in the study felt that LGBT people were likely to be harassed on campus.

Moreover, most faculty (73 percent), students (74 percent), administrators (81 percent), and staff (73 percent) described their campus climates for LGBT people as homophobic. In contrast, most respondents perceived the campus climates for non-LGBT people as friendly (90 percent), concerned (75 percent), and respectful (80 percent). Both the perceived and experienced harassment LGBT people noted in the literature discussed earlier support this finding (Table 2.2).

Forty-one percent of the respondents stated that their college or university did not thoroughly address issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity. This view was strongest among administrators (44 percent), gay individuals (46 percent), and transgender people (42 percent). Further, 43 percent of the participants felt that the curriculum did not represent the contributions of LGBT people (Table 2.3).

This research also suggests that LGBT people of color were more likely than white LGBT people to conceal their sexual orientation or gender identity to avoid harassment. Many respondents commented in the open-ended portion of the study that they did not feel comfortable being “out” (open

**Table 2.3. Response of Institution and Curriculum to Issues of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity**

<i>Institutional Response</i>	<i>Strongly Agree</i> % (n)	<i>Agree</i> % (n)	<i>Uncertain</i> % (n)	<i>Disagree</i> % (n)	<i>Strongly Disagree</i> % (n)
The college/university thoroughly addresses campus issues related to sexual orientation/gender identity	6 (101)	31 (515)	21 (350)	29 (482)	12 (199)
The curriculum adequately represents the contributions of LGBT persons	4 (63)	18 (300)	34 (568)	29 (480)	14 (233)

about their sexual-minority status) in venues where straight people of color were predominant and felt out of place in predominantly white LGBT settings. Also, although nontransgender LGB men and women (28 percent) reported experiencing harassment, a significantly higher proportion of transgender respondents (41 percent) reported experiences of harassment.

### **Institutional Responses and Actions**

The research from the past two decades demonstrates that college campuses have been inhospitable, and even hostile, toward their LGBT members. To address this concern, several institutions have initiated structural changes, such as creating LGBT resource centers and safe-space programs, and provided institutional recognition to LGBT student groups. In addition, many have revised or created LGBT-inclusive practices, such as domestic partner benefits or nondiscrimination policies. Others have launched LGBT-inclusive educational initiatives in staff orientations and sensitivity trainings for resident assistants and have integrated LGBT issues into curricula (National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004). Yet, even on some of these campuses the climate reported by members of the LGBT community in my 2003 study was less than welcoming.

That study examined the climate on campuses that had designed proactive initiatives such as those described to address the particular needs and vulnerabilities of LGBT people. The results suggested that despite those initiatives, LGBT people fear for their safety, keep their identities secret, experience harassment, and feel that their universities are unsupportive of LGBT people. If these are the experiences and perceptions on these “proactive” campuses, colleges without such initiatives may leave LGBT people feeling even more afraid, vulnerable, and less supported. The realities of these lives must be addressed through the creation of programs to lower rates of harassment and violence and assure LGBT people that the university is a

truly safe and supportive place where they, like other members of the academic community, can reach their full potential as workers and learners.

The research on the needs of LGBT people suggests that these interventions fall into three categories: institutional support and commitment to an LGBT-friendly campus; recruitment and retention of open LGBT students, faculty, and staff; and attention to LGBT student life, including social outlets, housing, and safety (Windmeyer and Rankin, n.d.). Examples of best practices in these types of programs include “safe zone” programs (Draughn, Elkins, and Roy, 2002), the inclusion of LGBT people in the mainstream curricula and the creation of curricula focused on the study of LGBT people, creation of residence life centers or resource centers focused on LGBT needs and issues (Herbst and Malaney, 1999), creation and implementation of antidiscrimination policies, and the creation and implementation of rapid response systems to record and address the needs of students who have experienced violence and harassment on campus (for overviews of existing programs for LGBT students, see also Garber, 2002; National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, 2004; Rankin, 2003).

## **Future Directions**

This chapter examined the climate on campus for LGBT people. The review revealed that many LGBT people on campus hide significant parts of their identity from peers and others, thereby isolating themselves socially or emotionally. Those who do not hide their sexual-minority identity have a range of experiences, including discrimination, verbal or physical harassment, and subtle or outright silencing of their sexual identities.

Although individual programs or interventions (that is, LGBT centers, LGBT policy inclusion, and so forth) are important because they provide needed services to LGBT people and demonstrate institutional support, the “paradigm shift” in treatment of LGBT people and recognition of their concerns called for by Schreier (1995) demands more than individual programs or enforced tolerance of LGBT people.

As participants in institutions of power, higher education faculty and staff are part of systems of relations that can silence those who are not in positions of power. Heterosexism and homophobia, for example, operate to reinforce the heterosexual norm. Differences disturb the norm; a culture of silence reinforces the norm for those who are different. When LGBT people on campus increase their visibility and, therefore, their voice on campus, they challenge heterosexual norms. By providing a voice through visible LGBT-supportive initiatives on campus, they engage in dialogue and action with individuals who may have different ideas and perceptions about the world. This is hard work, but such work creates the conditions for change.

To address the challenges facing LGBT people on campus successfully, a shift of basic assumptions, premises, and beliefs must take place in all areas

of the institution; only then can behavior and structures be changed. In the transformed institution, heterosexist assumptions are replaced by assumptions of diverse sexualities and relationships, and these new assumptions govern the design and implementation of all institutional activities, programs, and services. Transformative change demands committed leadership in articulating both institutional goals and policies. New approaches to learning, teaching, decision making, and working in the institution are implemented.

New approaches to creating transformative change include creating centers for interdisciplinary study and cross-cultural teaching and learning inclusive of LGBT issues; supporting active, collaborative learning concerned with helping students to come to grips with their identities; and reconfiguring classes by encouraging students to assist in developing or changing the syllabus at the start of and during the semester.

## Notes

1. The author acknowledges the personal and political import of language and the need to recognize a broad range of self-identity choices. This chapter uses the terms *sexual minorities* and *lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)* when referring to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. Many individuals identified as LGBT may choose to use other self-identifying terms or none at all.
2. Despite the large sample size, caution must be used when attempting to generalize from the results to all institutions of higher education. The institutions that agreed to participate in this study all had a visible LGBT presence on campus (for example, a resource center with a paid staff person who had at least part-time responsibilities to address LGBT concerns on campus), whereas nationwide fewer than one hundred institutions of higher education have such resources.

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