



College experiences that contribute to students' thinking about their sexual orientation identity

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GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES KNOWLEDGE COMMUNITY

*College Experiences That Contribute to Students' Thinking
About Their Sexual Orientation Identity*

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On election night, voters in three states approved marriage equality legislation, and more gay and lesbian characters can be seen on television than ever before. People are thinking and talking about sexual orientation, and if sexual orientation is salient in society, we can also expect it to be salient on our

campuses. The following article, adapted from a paper presented at the 2012 Association for the Study of Higher Education conference, presents the findings of a study conducted to identify experiences that relate to a higher salience of sexual orientation among college students. Salience is essential to “coming out” and developing a sexual orientation identity (Cass, 1979; D’Augelli, 1994; Troiden, 1989), because it relates to a critical awareness of oppression (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012) and, among heterosexual students, leads to greater empathy for their lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) peers (Morgan, 2011).

Literature Review

Prior research has determined that salience of sexual orientation can be an indicator of stigma consciousness (Pachankis & Goldfried, 2006; Troiden, 1989). Studies have also shown that heterosexual students do think about and question their heterosexuality (Morgan, 2011; Mueller & Cole, 2009). Finally, several studies have examined aspects of the campus environment where sexual orientation may be salient, such as the curriculum and the cocurriculum (Lopez & Chism, 1993; Renn, 2007). However, none of these studies specifically examined how the college environment may affect salience—a knowledge gap that our study intended to fill.

Methods

The data for this study were taken from the 2010 and 2011 administrations of the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey, the only ongoing national survey of college students that includes a sexual orientation demographic item, by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Two smaller samples were drawn for comparison—one consisting of all gay, lesbian, bisexual, and “other” students, and a similarly sized sample of heterosexual students, matched by institution. Salience was measured as the frequency with which students thought about their sexual orientation over the past year, and independent variables included demographic characteristics and items asking students about college experiences. Descriptive statistics and ordinary least squares regression were used to analyze the data.

Results

For both groups, sex significantly related to salience; heterosexual women think about their sexual orientation more frequently than men, but among LGB and other students, men think about their sexual orientation more frequently. Participation in a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) student organization relates to a higher frequency of thinking about sexual orientation for both groups, as does experiencing bias. An inclusive curriculum and cocurricular diversity activities, like LGBT Resource Center activities, also were associated with a higher frequency of thinking about sexual orientation for both groups. Tests of our regression coefficients demonstrated no differences between groups on any of these variables except for sex, indicating campus practices work in the same manner across groups.



Discussion and Implications

College students think about sexual orientation. Much of this awareness is due to the work of student affairs practitioners and faculty, who provide students with formal and informal opportunities on campus to engage across difference, including diversity courses, cocurricular diversity activities, and LGBT student organizations. Yet we also see evidence of stigma consciousness among students, including heterosexual students, which further demonstrates the importance of improving the campus climate for all members of our campus communities. For further discussion of the full study, which was presented at the 2012 ASHE conference, our paper is available on the DLE page at the HERI website (heri.ucla.edu/dle). ■

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