

*WORKING WITH
LESBIAN, GAY,
BISEXUAL, AND
TRANSGENDER
COLLEGE STUDENTS*

A HANDBOOK FOR FACULTY
AND ADMINISTRATORS

EDITED BY
RONNI L. SANLO

The Greenwood Educators' Reference Collection



GREENWOOD PRESS
Westport, Connecticut • London

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students :
a handbook for faculty and administrators / edited by Ronni L.
Sanlo.

p. cm.—(The Greenwood educators' reference collection,
ISSN 1056-2192)

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-313-30227-8 (alk. paper)

1. Homosexuality and education—United States—Handbooks, manuals,
etc. 2. Gay college students—United States—Handbooks, manuals,
etc. 3. Lesbian college students—United States—Handbooks,
manuals, etc. 4. Bisexual college students—United States—
Handbooks, manuals, etc. 5. Transsexualism—United States—
Handbooks, manuals, etc. I. Sanlo, Ronni L., 1947- .

II. Series.

LC192.6.W67 1998

378.1'98'0866—dc21 97-26182

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available.

Copyright © 1998 by Ronni L. Sanlo

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be
reproduced, by any process or technique, without the
express written consent of the publisher.

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 97-26182

ISBN: 0-313-30227-8

ISSN: 1056-2192

First published in 1998

Greenwood Press, 88 Post Road West, Westport, CT 06881

An imprint of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Printed in the United States of America



The paper used in this book complies with the
Permanent Paper Standard issued by the National
Information Standards Organization (Z39.48-1984).

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

CHAPTER 3

Making Meaning: Providing Tools for an Integrated Identity

Laura C. Engelken

In the midst of a society embedded with heterosexism and homophobia, gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students are forced to develop new meanings of self and world. Without the essential tools for constructing such an understanding, many students do not succeed. These feelings may contribute to high suicide rates among GLBT youth as they are overwhelmed by the challenge of making sense of their sexual and spiritual identities (Jennings, 1994).

Charged with promoting the academic and personal development of all students, both faculty and administrators play an important role in assisting GLBT students in their search for new meanings of self. As Parks (1986) states, the power and vulnerability of young adulthood lies in “the experience of the dissolution and recomposition of the meaning of self and world. Yet the quality of that recomposition depends upon the leadership of adult culture, as mediated through both individuals and institutions” (xii). By providing essential tools for making meaning, administrators and faculty can assist GLBT students in redefining themselves and their world.

TOOLS FOR MAKING MEANING

The meaning-making tools recommended in this chapter—resources, interpersonal opportunities, and role models—are derived from the analysis of two developmental theories: Vivienne Cass’s (1979) model for homosexual identity formation and James Fowler’s (1981) stages of faith. Both theories assume that the basis for both change and stability in individual behavior and

understanding is found in interactions between self and society. According to Cass, individuals seek congruency between personal and societal perceptions of self, and development occurs when individuals work to rectify incongruencies arising between these two perceptions. Fowler characterizes incongruencies as “disruptions of normality” requiring explanation (96). Consequently, as individuals begin to make sense of their lives, they effectively redefine their conceptions of self and world.

Although all students must “formulate a personal strategy to address the most important question human beings face—the need for their lives to have enduring meaning” (Willimon & Naylor, 1995, 130), spiritual development has special implications for the GLBT student. Faith development requires community, language, ritual, and nurturance. Those who have been harshly excluded from society are hindered in constructing positive understandings of self and world (Fowler, 1981). When revealing their GLBT identity to self and others, GLBT students potentially lose the three essential pillars supporting both self and identity—family, friends, and faith (S. Fritz, personal communication, August 4, 1995). Consequently, the GLBT student must reach deeper within, to “spiritual roots,” to develop meaning that will ground and support in the face of such rejection (J. McNeill, campus lecture, October 13, 1995). Informational resources, interpersonal opportunities, and role models are essential tools for the GLBT student’s construction of supportive new meanings.

Resources

According to McNeill (1994), GLBT individuals have “a desperate need to understand [their] lives and experiences in a positive spiritual context” and “need to hear the story of others” who have journeyed toward new meanings (315). Students in the early stages of homosexual identity formation are searching to find what it means to be homosexual and whether such knowledge applies to them directly. Consequently, it is essential for faculty and administrators to ensure the availability of such information.

More than in a mere paragraph in a psychology text, GLBT students should find themselves reflected in materials throughout the campus—in library acquisitions, class texts, magazines on sale in the bookstore, and professionals’ offices. “As institutions of learning, colleges and universities are obliged to present information by and about as full a range of knowledge, behaviors, and cultures as possible” (McNaron, 1991, 20). Failing to acknowledge GLBT life and culture on campus—from the art hanging on building walls to syllabi in the classrooms—communicates to the GLBT student that he or she is nonexistent. Through such omissions, it is easy to understand how GLBT students’ attempts to make meaning are invalidated by the educational institutions and experiences that are designed to enrich their lives and deepen their understanding of the world (DeSurra & Church, 1994).

The invalidation and alienation of the GLBT student’s life is often communicated by the deafening silence of the curriculum. According to

D'Augelli (as cited in DeSurra & Church, 1994), "When [GLBT students] pursue an understanding of themselves, they do not encounter a literature affirming their lives. More importantly, when they look to their undergraduate curricula for insight, they find themselves deleted from most courses. They are the 'invisible' minority, yet the 'hidden curriculum' that devalues the existence and contribution of lesbians and gay men is quite clear" (11).

Feeling unconnected to course material and class discussion causes many students to remove themselves from the educational process. For example, one student interviewed by DeSurra & Church (1994) noted:

My teacher was talking about relationships and that the only reason we date and court and stuff is to get married, that the only reason for relationships is to lead to marriage, and I'm thinking OK, where does that leave me? I'm never going to get married. I totally do not belong in that class, I just get depressed, nothing relates to me at all. (27)

Educators do all students, both gay and straight, a disservice when failing to seriously consider the lives and contributions of those whose efforts help build societies (Crumpacker & Vander Hagen, 1984).

One highly visible and effective way to ensure that GLBT resources and information are available to all students is through the creation of a GLBT Campus Resource Center as a safe, student-centered space to gather informally, hold meetings and lectures, and house educational materials and referral files of gay-friendly professionals in the area (doctors, lawyers, counselors, etc.). "Such physical locations would signal to students that their universities or colleges 'see' them and want them to have as positive an experience as possible" (McNaron, 1991, 21).

The creation of such a center must not be construed as sufficiently meeting all the needs of the university community, let alone GLBT students on campus. GLBT education, resources, and support cannot be the sole responsibility of only one office, department or program. There must be an "interrelation of campus resources" in order to serve students well (National Association of Student Personnel Administrators [NASPA], 1989, 39). There must be a concerted effort among all professionals on campus to fight heterosexism and homophobia and facilitate GLBT students' positive identity development.

It is important to charge a professionally trained individual with the responsibility for these educational efforts. According to McNaron (1991), most administrators act on behalf of GLBT issues and individuals only after repeated requests and/or increased pressure. Those few GLBT students who advocate for their constituency may be hindered due to limited time, resources, and experience. For example, Evans and Levine (1990) note that although the number of GLBT student organizations has increased, they often function without official administrative support. "Their persistence in visible activism often leads to physical exhaustion and demoralization" (130). Administrators and faculty must take primary responsibility in advocating for change and relieve open lesbian and gay students from the burden of solving the problems of their own

victimization (D'Augelli, 1989a). It is unacceptable to expect these students to do the job of a higher education professional—they are at the institution to earn a degree. According to D'Emilio (1990), hiring an “ombudsperson” for GLBT concerns makes “good institutional sense” (19) as they can think expansively about issues, provide departmental educational training (police services, financial aid, admissions), and intervene decisively in emergencies (hate crimes) to guide the campus forward.

Interpersonal Opportunities

Faculty and administrators can facilitate GLBT students' identity development by creating opportunities for meaningful relationships and quality interaction. Since individual development is conditioned by the quality of interpersonal and group relationships and the kind of society in which he or she lives, educators must create time and space for positive relationships to grow (NASPA, 1989). This is especially true for the GLBT faculty who—fearing harassment, discrimination, and violence—must continually monitor how “out” he or she will be in various situations and relationships. As a result, GLBT individuals experience a sense of loneliness, alienation, and detachment from the campus community unequaled by their heterosexual peers (D'Emilio, 1990).

In order to facilitate greater connection and inclusion in the campus community, faculty and administrators must support intentional programming both inclusive and celebratory of GLBT students and culture. For example, dances that are advertised and that welcome same-sex couples and campus films and art exhibits with GLBT themes—not only during National Coming Out Week each October but throughout the academic year—are important tools in “fostering toleration, understanding, and enthusiasm for differences in culture and identity,” as well as in creating affirming and inclusive social opportunities for GLBT students (D'Emilio, 1990, 19).

As students engage one another and their professors in the classroom, faculty have responsibility and an opportunity to create a climate conducive for the growth of meaningful relationships and quality interactions. In their study of GLBT students' perceptions of alienation and inclusion in the classroom, DeSurra and Church (1994) discovered that instructors' responses to issues regarding sexual orientation greatly impacted GLBT students' experiences and learning. A gay student shares:

We were talking about Achilles and his love for Pericles, and the teacher elaborated on it, not like graphically, he just gave enough, then said if anyone was interested in this kind of stuff to go to the library and follow up with reading the Persian Boy or reading about Alexander the Great. I was always going over to the library and looking in the computer for these obscure titles; it was such an enhancement to my education. (28)

In contrast, when professors make negative comments or refuse to include information about GLBT life and culture relevant to course materials and

discussion, they reinforce the concept that homosexuality and homosexuals are invisible and unwelcome in the classroom (DeSurra & Church, 1994). GLBT students are then forced to respond to this hostile climate by either confrontation or withdrawal—coping mechanisms hindering academic and personal development (DeSurra & Church, 1994).

In addition to creating a positive classroom environment and inclusive social programming, administrators and faculty must facilitate opportunities for relationships and communities to form that enable GLBT students to share intimately of themselves and learn from others. Alternative spring break programs are excellent examples of time and space carved out of the college experience to facilitate interaction among students, faculty, and staff. As one lesbian student reflects:

We had a thirty hour van ride to Missouri, and so of course we all got really close, really fast. So she [the student leader] brought it [sexuality] up with me over the week-long trip and it was such a peace—I mean I read my journals now and that’s what I talked about and that’s why my alternative spring break trip was so wonderful. When I came back, she was there for me, there with me, from a point at which I said I would never come out—if this is a part of my life, I would never come out—to her all of a sudden hearing me one day refer to myself as a lesbian. (Jess, personal communication, October 28, 1995)

Through organizing and involvement in such efforts, faculty and administrators responsibly share in the creation of community—“a partnership of people committed to the care and nurturing of each others’ mind, body, heart and soul through participatory means” (Willimon & Naylor, 1995, 145).

Originally, institutions of higher education in America were created with the purpose of preparing young men for the clergy. As time has progressed, higher education has become increasingly removed from examining and facilitating students’ development of faith and spirituality. Faculty members Willimon and Naylor (1995) lament the “abandonment by higher education of the moral, character-related aspects of education, the widespread erroneous assumption that it is possible to have a college or a university without having an opinion of what sort of people ought to be produced by that institution” (15). Far from trying to orchestrate specific answers to life’s greatest questions, faculty and administrators must assist students’ reflection upon their lives to discover those answers for themselves. As faith shapes the way we invest our passion and energy, it is essential to engage students in discussion that helps bring their meanings to light (Fowler, 1981). Thus, students must be given the opportunity to share their thoughts, concerns, and questions of faith in order to greater understand them.

Such opportunities for faith discussion can be facilitated by educators through interfaith dialogues in classrooms, residence halls, student centers, campus ministry offices, and campus newspapers. Professionals must encourage dialogue among students of all perspectives. This is especially crucial for GLBT students who “must learn a new level of spiritual maturity, basing their spiritual

life on inner convictions and not on outside expectations” (McNeill, 1994, 317). Such encounters with the faith stances of others give words to those “inner convictions” (317) and illumine GLBT, as well as all, students’ efforts to make sense of their own lives.

Role Models

Faculty and administrators must provide and serve as role models for students. Just as it is important for women and students of color to see themselves represented in faculty, staff, and administrative positions, so too is it important for GLBT students to see themselves reflected in campus life. These role models testify to the possibility of the positive integration of sexuality with the rest of one’s life. For GLBT students struggling to make sense of self in a hostile environment, these examples are crucial.

Consequently, closeted professionals must “rethink their silence and invisibility.” Research shows that when a heterosexual learns a family member, friend, or colleague is lesbian or gay, homophobia often decreases (Tierney, 1992, 46). Yet the same hostile environment existing for the student also exists for the GLBT professional. Without federal, state, or local protection, GLBT professionals can be fired for their orientation without any grounds for recourse (D’Augelli, 1989b). Administrative divisions and academic departments must actively encourage and support the professional in coming out and ensure his or her ability to do so. Minimally, this means formally enacting a non-discrimination policy regarding sexual orientation that is openly announced and in print wherever the institution proclaims its policy with regard to race, gender, and religion (D’Emilio, 1990). According to D’Emilio, such policies would apply to hiring, promotion, tenure, admissions, and financial aid. “Because of the history of discrimination in this country, it is not enough for an administration to claim that it subscribes to the principle of fairness for everyone” (18). It must explicitly acknowledge protection for GLBT community members.

Ensuring against employment discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is a crucial action. Harassment and other hate crimes directed at staff members, as well as students, must be immediately and intentionally addressed. Administrative response to anti-gay harassment directed at GLBT live-in, residential life professionals must be clear and decisive, communicating that such behavior is not tolerated in either the residential or the greater campus community. Support for faculty members conducting research in GLBT-related topical areas is also important—honoring academic freedom and financial recognition—for special appointments and tenure decisions. Individuals are most efficient and effective when able to study and work in an organization where they feel appreciated and affirmed. If this support is absent, GLBT professionals will remain in the closet or go elsewhere, and wisely so.

Self-Reflection

Faculty and administrators must also exert moral courage in turning inward to the spiritual self, examining the faith by which they make sense of their world. As we encourage students to explore and clarify values, so must we review our own. Professionals must not perpetuate the false division between “home” and “office” (the spiritual and the professional). Fowler (1981) notes that failing to acknowledge our faith makes it no less influential in determining our initiatives and responses in life. Thus, as educators, we must be willing to respectfully share how we make meaning of life, listen attentively to the perspectives of others, and encourage students to do the same.

Given such an “objective” analysis, it is tempting to survey some strategies for institutional change. Those strategies can be helpful—but not until we have done some “inner work.” For our tendency to blame institutions for our problems is itself a symptom of our objectivism. Institutions are projections of what goes on in the human heart. To ignore the inward sources of our educational dilemmas is only to objectify the problem—and thereby multiply it (Palmer, 1993, 107).

In order to facilitate individual, communal, and societal growth, faculty and administrators must “more than tolerate homosexuality. You must be active against GLBT oppression in order to combat and overcome society’s message” of isolation and condemnation (A. Reynolds, personal communication, 1995). Such action first requires self-reflection.

Faculty and administrators, through the power vested in them as educators, have tremendous influence on the environment shaping students’ lives and experiences. People in positions of power are able to create either healthy or unhealthy living conditions for others (Palmer, 1993). Possessing such influence, educators must examine their personal beliefs and attitudes toward homosexuality as these effectively shape “the manner in which they work with individuals and groups, the ways in which policies are made, and the content of programs and services” (NASPA, 1989, p. 15). As John McNeill (personal communication, October 13, 1995) maintains, a homophobic counselor cannot effectively advise a homosexual client; so also a homophobic administrator or faculty member cannot successfully serve the GLBT student.

Although many GLBT students, staff, and faculty remain in the closet for fear of discrimination, harassment, or violence, they are not alone in their silence. “The ‘closet’ is shared by heterosexual people on campus who know of the needs of lesbians and gay men but who do not speak on their behalf” (Tierney, 1992, p. 129). As a result, educators must develop “moral courage” (Tierney, 1992, 46) and speak out concerning issues of social justice.

CONCLUSION

Faculty and administrators must intentionally respond to the developmental issues of GLBT students by equipping them with the tools needed to make meanings. By providing resources, interpersonal opportunities, and role models—tools to dig and “drink from their own wells” (McNeill, 1994, 314)—educators assist the GLBT student’s effort to create an integrated self and world.