Gay and Lesbian Faculty Issues

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This article attempts to connect the literature regarding queer perspectives of the professoriate. While many universities have taken steps to be welcoming to gay and lesbian individuals, the actual experiences of those within the academy find issues of hostility and marginalization. Consequently, this article examines the work environment and its challenges for gay and lesbian faculty members along with a discussion of the reactionary measures taken by colleges and universities.

Introduction

In recent years, colleges and universities have attempted to create welcoming environments for gays and lesbians. From the inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in non-discriminatory polices to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) student support services, university leaders have constructed mechanisms to build an inclusive community. However, research within the field shows that the experiences of self-identified gay and lesbian faculty often include issues of heterosexism, homophobia and hostility from peers and other members of the academy (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Sears, 2002).

This research is further exacerbated by current events within higher education. For example, on November 10, 2009, Alabama state legislator DuWayne Bridges introduced a bill to prohibit public universities within the state from offering employee benefits to same-sex domestic partners (Beyerle, 2009). This potential legislation is the result of initial conversations at the University of Alabama-Birmingham (UAB) to explore the addition of domestic partner benefits. The university (which houses an extensive medical school and allied health program) believes that such benefits are necessary to attracting and retaining talent. As currently presented, Representative Bridges' bill would block state appropriations to institutions offering same-sex benefits. These actions articulate just some of the challenging issues for gays and lesbians within higher education and the importance of this topic as it relates to attracting and retaining a diverse faculty.

As a result, the purpose of this literature review is to examine the experiences of this marginalized population. From an analysis of mixed qualitative and quantitative research studies to ethnographic and personal essays, this work will highlight the varied experiences affecting both gay and lesbian faculty. More specifically, this literature review will explore the working environment for LGBT faculty, the consequences of being an openly out faculty member, and the reactionary measures taken by colleges and universities to improve working conditions for gay and lesbian faculty. Finally, this review will conclude with implications for future practice and needs for additional research.

Framework

The sources used in this literature review represent the evolving body of work concerning gay and lesbian faculty. In addition to specific pieces related to higher education, current news items have been identified in support of the research studies. These selections present a variety of

perspectives on workplace conditions for diverse faculty, including, but not limited to, gays and lesbians. In an effort to provide additional insight into the socialization of gays and lesbians into the workplace, research from other professional fields such as law enforcement have been incorporated.

The challenge with any study of gay and lesbian individuals is the fact that sexual orientation is less visible than other differences such as gender and ethnicity. In order to be identified as gay or lesbian, an individual typically declares that he or she is "out." For instance, some gays and lesbians, as Bilimoria and Stewart (2009) suggest with faculty, are not "out" and choose not to disclose their sexual orientation in an effort to be deliberately invisible. The terms *"out"* and *"out of the closet"* typically refer to being open about one's sexual orientation. Furthermore, sexual orientation compounds other areas of diversity (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). In other words, if an individual identifies both as a member of the LGBT community and as a member of an ethnic minority group, it becomes difficult to determine whether or not the experiences he or she is encountering are the result of being gay, an ethnic minority, or a combination of multiple identities.

The Work Environment

A key attribute to retaining diverse faculty is providing a welcoming work environment. Yet, hostility and marginalization from peers and other members of the academy often become barriers to building an inclusive community for gay and lesbian faculty. For example, a recent Indianapolis Star article (McFeely, 2009) reported on comments made by a Purdue University professor that argued the cost for AIDS research and treatment should factor into the national debate over the acceptance of gays and lesbians. In effect, the professor's comments received criticism from both students and fellow faculty members particularly given the university's recent efforts to support the LGBT community at Purdue University. Given that hostile working conditions can and do exist within the academy, it is important to begin with an understanding of work environment issues specifically for gay and lesbian faculty. The two studies that follow explore the working climate for gay and lesbian faculty in vastly different disciplines – science/engineering and education.

Bilimoria and Stewart (2009) conducted a qualitative study of faculty members in the fields of science and engineering at research universities in an effort to ascertain a qualified perspective of the working environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered faculty. Using an open-ended interview protocol, "the research team interviewed fourteen faculty members who identified themselves as lesbian and gay" (p. 88). According to Bilimoria and Stewart, the fourteen interviewees included:

> Six participants who were listed publicly as willing to mentor LGBT students, five who were individually known and out to the researchers, one who was recommended by an interviewee, and two who responded to an e-mail sent to an LGBT listserv requesting participation in the study (p. 88).

The nature of the interviews included questions regarding the climate for themselves and other LGBT faculty and their experiences during the faculty recruitment process.

Bilimoria and Stewart's main research finding was that according to the interviewed gay and lesbian faculty "gayness or homosexuality was invisible, and that heterosexuality was routinely assumed"

(2009, p. 89). The researchers speculated that the lack of conversation regarding homosexuality may be the result of the constructs within science-based disciplines. Bilimoria and Stewart (2009) suggest that faculty within these fields are not aware of sexual identity theories and research. In addition to the avoidance of homosexuality, many research participants reported their colleagues "expressed or revealed their discomfort" for LGBT individuals (2009, p. 90). From fellow faculty feeling uneasy about sharing a room with a LGBT colleague at a conference to a department chair encouraging LGBT faculty to not bring their partners to department activities such as picnics and holiday gatherings, individual responses articulated an unsupportive environment.

In comparison to the fields of science and engineering, a study completed by Sears (2002) gathered data from a national sample of lesbian, gay, and bisexual education faculty. A survey instrument was mailed to a list of 821 deans of schools provided by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), colleges and departments of education, and a group of 173 members or former members of the American Educational Research Association (AERA) special interest group on lesbian and gay issues (2002). Sears received 104 completed surveys from education faculty and researchers. Of the sample, 52% were lesbian, 33% were gay men, and 12.5% were bisexual (split evenly between men and women); 15% were "racial minorities" and 57% were members of the AERA special interest group (p. 15). The survey instrument sought to examine how participants viewed their institutional climate as defined as gay-affirming, gay-tolerant, gay-neutral, gay-intolerant, or gay-hostile. For example:

> Faculty who self-identified as working within a "gay affirmative" institution were defined as working within an environment where campus leaders worked in a proactive manner to reduce homophobia and heterosexism through actions such as modifying affirmative action and non-discrimination statements to include sexual orientation, and establishing gay/lesbian studies in curriculum, providing domestic partner benefits, recognizing the accomplishments of its homosexual students, encouraging gay-related scholarship among its faculty, and hiring/admitting other lesbian, gay, and bisexual faculty and students into the university community. A "gay tolerant institution" was conceptualized as support of initiatives undertaken by it student body and faculty, such as offering courses with homosexual content, the adoption of a nondiscrimination statement and accepting memorabilia, such as photographs of one's significant other in the office… "gay intolerant" institutions were those at sites that did not support pro-gay initiatives in its policies, procedures, curriculum, personnel, or student body. A "gay hostile" institution was one that promoted an anti-gay agenda, including the restriction of homosexuals from its student or faculty bodies and the inclusion of anti-gay connect in the curriculum (pp. 17-18).

More than two-thirds of Sears' (2002) survey participants viewed their institution as gay-affirmative or tolerant, while less than one-quarter perceived the campus climate as gay-intolerant or hostile. When accounting for institutional type such as public versus private, 30% of public university faculty viewed their campus as intolerant or hostile

as compared to only 6% of private university faculty. In addition, lesbians viewed their institutions as less gay-affirming than homosexual men; although the researcher noted that female participants were more heavily employed at public institutions than their male counterparts (p. 18). In addition to the overall assessment, Sears' survey included individual components of institutional climate in an effort to determine what correlation various elements had on creating an affirming environment. While specific campus interventions and programs will be discussed later, it is important to note though that the highest correlation was between perceived level of "gay-affirmative" and perceived unit support (Sears, 2002). In other words, those gay and lesbian faculty members who rated their campus environment as gay-affirming were more likely to have strong institutional support within their academic discipline. In addition, when Bilimoria and Stewart's research is compared next to Sears', there is a strong suggestion that academic disciplines in the humanities, fine arts and education are more gay-affirming than those in science and other related fields. A comprehensive study involving faculty from a variety of disciplines would be helpful to support such assertions.

Nonetheless, findings in both studies illustrate deeply rooted issues of homophobia and heterosexism. These studies emphasize how the attitudinal responses of one's peers influence the extent to which one perceives his or her environment as welcoming. It is interesting to consider the additional layer of institutional type as it relates to the experiences of those at public institutions versus private. Though, recent events such as the introduction of Representative Bridges' bill and same-sex marriage referendums may help to explain how state and local politics could impact public institutions more so than private.

The Consequences

Feelings of Isolation

The decision to come out as a gay or lesbian faculty member brings with it increased visibility on the campus community. LaSala, Jenkins, Wheeler and Fredriksen-Golden (2008) discuss the risks of being a LGBT faculty member based upon their own personal experiences. In regards to visibility, they note, "Because openly LGBT faculty members are more likely to stand out, they may also be more likely to be scrutinized" (p. 258). Similarly, many gay and lesbian faculty members are more likely to experience issues of isolation. For instance, one of the authors on the LaSala et al. (2008) study recounts how a standing invitation to regular tennis matches with the department chair, dean and chancellor abruptly ended upon his/her decision to come out. This experience can be even more challenging for lesbian and gay faculty in a rural university community.

In an auto-ethnographic piece, D'Augelli (2006) recounts his experience of coming out in State College, Pennsylvania. He writes:

> I was then the only known gay faculty member and the only open gay professional in our town. I felt generally supported by my colleagues and friends, yet I needed a gay community to connect to. My search for such a community brought me to a dead-end (p. 204).

In addition, Bilimoria and Stewart's (2009) respondents made comments of "relative isolation" with little to no other gay people with which to connect (p. 92) along with survey results from Taylor & Raeburn (1995) who noted fears with "being too visible on a campus with no other 'out and public' gay or lesbian faculty" (p. 263).

Yet, this notion of isolationism is not unique to gay and lesbian faculty nor is it unique to higher education. Colvin (2008) explored the work environment climate for lesbian and gay people in law enforcement. More specifically, the author surveyed members of the New York City Gay Officers Action League (GOAL), the Law Enforcement Gays and Lesbians International (LEGAL International), and attendees at the 11th Annual International Conference for Gay and Lesbian Criminal Justice Professionals. In Colvin's (2008) findings, many of the participants mentioned that they see themselves as outsiders, concluding that "social isolation and outsiderism may dominate when lesbian and gay officers have disclosed their sexual orientation" (p. 97). These findings support similar research conducted with other diverse groups of faculty. For example, Stanley's (2006) auto-ethnographic study of 27 faculty of color at predominantly white institutions concluded that visibility and invisibility has an effect on issues related to collegiality with fellow faculty and other members of the academy. Once again, the need to feel connected to one's peers within his/her academic unit is shown as being crucial to developing an inclusive community for gay and lesbian faculty.

Challenges Working with Students

Another challenge for some gay and lesbian faculty involves potential consequences of working with students. In an auto-ethnographic writing, Scott Gust (2007) articulates the fears of a gay faculty member encountering straight male students upon receiving the advice from peers to "look out for the football players and the frat boys" (p. 44). His personal reflections recount introducing the *The Laramie Project*, written by playwright Moises Kaufman, a theatrical piece centered on the weeks that followed the murder of gay student Matthew Shepard, into an introductory speech communication course at a large, state-funded, Midwestern research university. As it applies to being a gay faculty member introducing the subject of homosexuality into the curriculum, Gust writes, "my personal belief is that, by self-identifying as a queer teacher. I at least get a chance to fight back against the hate, violence, and oppression. I get a chance because I demand that we talk about it" (p. 50). Yet, faculty like Gust risk facing a hostile environment from students. Whether it is direct open hostility or implied (through written coursework or even student activities), gay and lesbian faculty who chose to be out can sometimes face scrutiny not only from peers but also the very students inside their classrooms (2007).

However, not all interaction with students is as potentially threatening for gay and lesbian faculty. In David Wallace's (2002) auto-ethnographic piece, he shares with readers three institutional moments that shape his voice as a gay member of the academy. In particular, Wallace has two students in his entry-level composition class who confide in him about their challenges with scheduling issues that interfere with the school's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Ally Alliance's meetings. According to Wallace (2002), he "saw students as young gay men desperately in need of immediate supportive social contact on an overwhelming straight campus" (p. 58). For Wallace and others, the opportunity to serve as a role-model for gay and lesbian students on campus can be a rewarding part of the faculty experience.

Risking Academic Career

A severe consequence for out gay and lesbian faculty is jeopardizing academic success. In other words, the decision to be an out faculty member may prevent opportunities to advance and secure tenure. This can be particularly true for those faculty

whose profiles are raised because of their role as activists for LGBT causes. In a survey collected by Taylor and Raeburn (1995), LGBT sociologists reported higher rates of discrimination for activists than non-activists. In particular, 25% of those identifying as highly activists reported encountering greater bias in the tenure and promotion process, while non-activist candidates reported 16%. Individual respondents cited that discrimination in the tenure process is greater than in the hiring process because the faculty's activist behavior is likely to have been observed before the tenure decision (p. 263). As means to be successful, multiple participants in Taylor and Raeburn's study noted they "toned-down" their gayness or activist behaviors before the tenure process. The authors write, "a man who had been active in the gay and lesbian movement before moving into academia discussed how, before securing tenure, he chose less visible means of participating. 'As soon as I got tenure, I started going back on television again,'" (p. 263).

Participants in Bilimoria and Stewart's (2009) study reinforce the notion of negative career consequences – "two [participants] pointed to specific academic jobs they knew they had not gotten because they were gay" (p. 92). Other findings of gay and lesbian faculty in science and engineering included a colleague attempting to interfere with potential partnerships by outing them, not being invited to recruitment dinners, and not being offered mentoring opportunities (2009). Their results reinforce the notion of being on the outside or being isolated by one's peers.

Tierney's (1993) study at a large, public research, land-grant institution located in a rural-area outside of a major city explored the relationships gay and lesbian faculty had with peer and administrators. One lesbian faculty member responds:

> Professionally I would be frightened to be open about my lifestyle. Having a president who does not want to include a sexual orientation clause makes me fearful of being found out. What concerns me most right now is my career. I must protect it (1993, p. 150).
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Collectively, the research illustrates a reoccurring theme of fear among gay and lesbian faculty members. For many, the decision to disclose one's sexuality brings too much risk. Yet, university leaders are becoming increasingly aware of such consequences and the need to take action.

Universities React

Universities have recently acknowledged the challenges created for gay and lesbian faculty. Through internal campus assessments or even national research such as the *2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People* published by the organization Campus Pride, universities leaders are facing challenges in creating a welcoming environment for its LGBT community. The Campus Pride report, a comprehensive study of 5,149 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and queer (LGBTQQ) students, faculty, staff, and administrators, found members of the LGBTQQ community were significantly less likely to feel comfortable with campus climate than their heterosexual counterparts (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld & Frazer, 2010). In addition, the research team for Campus Pride found that "LGBQ faculty members had more negative perceptions of campus climate than their student and staff counterparts" (Rankin et al., 2010, p. 14). Yet, the initial reaction for university leaders is a change to discriminatory policies and benefits programs.

In a study of work-life policies and benefit programs of ten Midwestern public universities, Munn and Hornsby (2008) set out to determine how gay and lesbian families are treated compared to their heterosexual married counterparts. Their research question was to determine the effects of state and local laws that potentially could impact extending benefits to gay and lesbian staff. Findings of their study illustrate the dramatic influence state laws and referendums can have on promoting an open and welcoming environment for gay and lesbian faculty.

Munn and Hornsby cite a Michigan Court of Appeals ruling on same-sex domestic partner benefits that caused the University of Michigan and Michigan State University to discontinue such benefits (2008). However, both institutions, understanding the need to provide such benefits for the purposes of recruiting and retaining talent, developed benefits for "Other Eligible Individual" or "Other Qualified Adult" in an effort to withstand a constitutional challenge (2008). While the researchers found significant progress in universities providing benefits for domestic partners and children, there continue to be issues of inequities when compared with benefits of heterosexual married couples. Furthermore, Munn and Hornsby believe that heterosexism continues to dominate the university culture by requiring additional steps and tasks such as annual affidavits of domestic partnership and longer insurance waiting periods for gay and lesbian faculty and staff.

The inclusion of sexual orientation into university non-discriminatory policies continues to show growth. As Sears noted in his study, approximately two-thirds of participants noted such inclusion yet only one-fourth noted the mention in affirmative action statements (2002). Six years later in Munn and Hornsby's study each of the ten public Midwestern universities included sexual orientation in their non-discriminatory statements (2008).

Beyond policy changes, institutional research concerning the campus climate for LGBT faculty represents a more recent practice. For example, on January 16, 2011, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI) Chancellor Charles R. Bantz released the annual *State of Diversity* message. For the first time in its history, IUPUI included survey questions to better understand the concerns of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) campus community. Not surprising, a large percentage of the LGBT faculty, staff, and students indicated they had experienced "negative or disparaging comments, expressions of negative stereotypes, offensive language or humor, sexual comments, feeling isolated or unwelcome, and or being excluded from conversations or events" (p. 9). Such findings suggest that more is needed than just supportive policies to improve conditions for LGBT faculty.

Conclusion

While universities have made strong efforts to create a welcoming environment for gays and lesbians (Munn & Hornsby, 2008; Sears, 2002), the actual experiences of this diverse group include hostility from peers (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009), issues of isolation (LaSala et al., 2008), and continued heterosexism and homophobia (Wallace, 2002). As a result, universities face losing diverse talent because of the professional risks associated with being a publicly out faculty member (Taylor & Raeburn, 1995). With the ever-evolving public debate on same-sex marriage, further research is necessary to provide a modern day perspective on the issue not only for gay and lesbian faculty members, but also bisexual and transgendered faculty. Furthermore, current research has begun to focus more on

the topic from a human resources perspective (Munn & Hornsby, 2008) and fails to investigate whether or not the presence of such policies is influencing change at the department or unit level, which Sears (2002) suggests is the greatest correlation to a faculty member's perspective of a gay-affirming climate.

In addition to new research concerning the impact of state and local politics on campus policies, further study is needed to determine whether or not faculty socialization initiatives such as peer mentoring can influence a gay-affirming environment. Current literature explores and recommends faculty development programs related to women and ethnic/racial minority faculty, yet few studies have included gays and lesbians. As a result, research studies focused on specific faculty populations such as women and ethnic minorities should be replicated where possible with LGBT faculty for comparative purposes. By expanding research on gay and lesbian faculty, valuable information is created for university leaders and other members of the academy to utilize in developing policy and faculty development programs. By implementing new programs and practices, universities may ultimately succeed in creating inclusive communities that not only attract but also retain talented LGBT faculty.

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