

Gay and Lesbian College Students' Identity Issues and Student Affairs: 30 Years Later

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The opportunity to revisit an article written over 30 years ago is really something! To look back in time at my early 20-something brain and perspective has been fun and thought-provoking. I am grateful to Autumn, Alice, Dajanae, and the IU SPA Journal review board for the chance to think about this again.

The state of affairs for gay and lesbian college students in 2020 is much different than it was in 1988. The context now is one that, truly, I could not have imagined 30 years ago. Writing the article for the IU SPA Journal in 1988 felt risky (Westfall, 1988). There was little attention being paid to lesbian and gay students in our standard reading, and we were still on the upward trajectory of the AIDS crisis. No states and few institutions had protections of any kind for gay and lesbian people. It was a scary time.

At least three big changes strike me as important in the last 30 years. First, dedicated resources and support for lesbian and gay students are present on many campuses. This includes everything from supportive policies to advocacy centers to research and academic programs of study. Importantly, these structures have made it easier for gay and lesbian students to see healthy, functional faculty and staff role models. The presence of out faculty, staff, senior-level institutional leaders and board members is powerful and important.

Second, I remember the first time I met a student who came to college already having come out as a lesbian. She had come out in high school, had a loving, enthusiastic family, and hit the ground running. This was a revelation to me. For many decades, college was the time and place when students either acknowledged or discovered their sexual identities and orientations. While this certainly still happens, it is much more common that students arrive with clarity about their sexual orientation. The normalization of coming out prior to college has enabled our institutions to normalize providing support, too. When students and families expect us to be welcoming and of service, it is easier for us to do so.

The third big change is the visibility of trans-identified folks. The LGBTQAI community has expanded over time (as evidenced by the breadth of people included in the acronym), and trans people have emerged as a distinct identity group in recent years. Campuses have learned and become more welcoming to trans students over time and have done so at lightning speed compared to our response to gay and lesbian students.

I am still concerned, as I was in 1988, about the support for lesbian and gay students. While societal and cultural support overall is significantly better than it was then, I worry that students who are “just” gay or lesbian – who don’t identify as queer, trans, or non-binary, for example – will be overlooked. While visibility is largely a political issue, the developmental issue for us remains. Gay men and lesbians have unique developmental needs. Subsuming those under the larger LGBTQAI umbrella risks overlooking them. We cannot lose sight of these needs while we support students in the broader community.

References

- Westfall, S. (1988). Gay and lesbian college students identity issues and student affairs. *Journal of the Student Personnel Association at Indiana University*, 4-7.
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