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Queering Campus: Understanding and Transforming Climate

Recent research indicates that prejudicial acts against queer students, faculty, and administrators surface with alarming frequency, in which queer members of the academic community are subjected to physical and psychological harassment, discrimination, and violence that obstruct the achievement of their educational and professional goals. This article discusses the importance of the campus climate in providing an atmosphere conducive to maximizing the creation of knowledge, reviews the current national climate for queer members of the academic community, and proposes strategies for implementing change.

Matthew Shepard was a 21-year-old gay man. He was slight of frame, educated abroad, studied German and Arabic, had a particular interest in the Middle East, was a political science major who wanted to be a diplomat, and attended the University of Wyoming to further his studies. He found friends, joined a queer organization, and appeared to be happy, and, for the most part, to feel safe. On October 8, 1998, following a queer organization meeting, Matthew met two men in a local bar, and in his usual trusting manner, came out to them. They allegedly told him that they too were gay, then lured him from the bar, drove him out of town, beat him and hung him—bloodied and shoeless—on a fence post, leaving him to die in near-freezing temperatures.

Matthew's death dramatically demonstrates how unsafe it is to be queer in America, in this case specifically on college campuses. This particular gay bashing was so brutal that it captured national media attention, but the truth is that gay bashings happen on college campuses every day. As a lesbian whose career consists of working with queer issues and concerns on college campuses, Matthew's beating and death greatly affected me. Matthew could have been any one of the students I work with at Penn State. And this horrific incident could just have easily happened on your campus...perhaps it already has.

However, our battles are often not reported, and when they are, they usually grace the back pages of the

mainstream press. Federal law does not prohibit discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, and civil rights legislation to protect queer citizens has languished in the Congress since 1974 with no immediate prospect of passage. Consequently, anti-queer discrimination remains legal in the United States except in twenty-one states (AZ, CA, CT, DE, DC, FL, IA, IL, LA, ME, MA, MN, NH, NJ, NV, OR, RI, TX, VT, WA, WI), which have enhanced penalty for hate crimes that include those for nonstandard sexual orientation. Regardless of the legal system's response, hate crimes carry a message, not only to the victim, but also to the entire stigmatized minority community—victimization is the punishment for stepping outside culturally accepted boundaries.

These acts of intolerance are fueled by heterosexism: the assumption of the inherent superiority of heterosexuality, an obliviousness to the lives and experiences of queer people, and the presumption that everyone is, or should be, heterosexual. Based on the ideology of heterosexism, or what Adrienne Rich calls "compulsory heterosexuality," a systematic set of institutional and cultural arrangements exists that rewards and privileges people for being or appearing to be heterosexual while establishing potential punishments or lack of privilege for being or appearing to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered. Like racism, sexism, and other ideologies of oppression, heterosexism is manifested both in societal customs and institutions and in individual attitudes and behaviors.

The term queer is often times used as a shorthand for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and the transgendered (LGBT), although some prefer not to use the term at all due to its historical use as a derogatory epithet. It can have widely differing meanings: for example, queer sometimes describes a radical, anti-assimilationist stance taken by LGBT people, and sometimes includes not only LGBT people, but all of those who dissent from the dominant organization of sex and gender. I use the term queer to identify myself as a lesbian, using my experiences of marginalization to produce an aggressive critique of prevailing social systems.

Impact of Heterosexism and Anti-Queer Violence

Heterosexism is preserved through the routine operation of major social institutions such as employment where discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation remains legal in many states; marriage, where queer couples generally are denied the community recognition, legal protection, and economic benefits accorded to married heterosexual partners; and the law, where sexual intimacy between same-sex partners remains illegal in many of the states and the constitutionality of such laws is upheld by the United States Supreme Court.

The theology and subsequent social actions of many of our current political and religious leaders is predicated on the devaluation of queer people, and when leaders foster a climate of prejudice, as in the days of Jim Crow, they give cultural permission to less scrupulous followers to inflict violence upon their targets. This is evident on college campuses and public schools around the country where young queer students

are the targets of harassment and discrimination. Anti-queer violence is a logical, albeit extreme, consequence of heterosexism. But what are the personal consequences for individuals who are victims of anti-queer prejudice?

Victims of anti-queer crimes face the same negative psychosocial consequences as those of other hate crimes. Victimization shatters three basic assumptions: the individual illusion of invulnerability, the view of oneself in a positive light, and the perception of the world as a meaningful place. The impact on queer students is related to the amount of support that the student has received throughout her or his life. Those who have had little support experience more trouble coping with negative situations and experiences than those who have previously received understanding and assistance in dealing with issues about their sexual orientation.

Common problems experienced by victims of queer-related violence include a heightened sense of vulnerability and fear for their safety; chronic stress; depression, feelings of helplessness, anxiety, and anger; somatic disturbances; low self-esteem; and internalized homophobia. In addition, criminal victimization is often followed by posttraumatic stress disorders.

Individuals who have been targets of violence often experience further victimization in the form of accusations that they deserved what happened to them. They may also experience harassment and discrimination if their sexual orientation becomes known as a result of the crime. For example, in a 1988 case involving the beating death of an Asian-American gay man, a Broward County [Florida] circuit judge jokingly asked the prosecuting attorney, "That's a crime now, to beat up a homosexual?" The prosecutor answered, "Yes, sir. And it's also a crime to kill them." The judge replied, "Times have really changed."

Lack of support from others is a common occurrence that leads victims to isolate themselves and avoid reporting or talking about what they have experienced. The findings of a national campus climate review noted that 50% to 90% of those who responded did not report at least one incident. One wonders, "Why hasn't this problem made its way through the usual streams of anointment as a campus 'problem?'" The answer is locked in "the closet" of lesbian and gay life on campus. It is a closet inhabited not only by self-identified queer students, faculty, and staff, although they constitute most of the inhabitants, but is shared by heterosexual people on campus who know the needs of lesbians and gay men but do not speak out on their behalf.

One of the primary missions of higher education institutions is unearthing and disseminating knowledge. Academic communities expend a great deal of effort in fostering an environment where this mission is nurtured, with the understanding that institutional climate has a profound effect on the academic community's ability to excel in research and scholarship. Recent investigations suggest that the climate on college campuses not only affects the creation of knowledge, but also has a significant impact on members of the academic community, who, in turn, contribute to the creation of the campus environment. Therefore, preserving a climate that offers equal learning oppor-

tunities for all students and academic freedom for all faculty—an environment free from discrimination—should be a major responsibility of educational institutions. Yet, as noted earlier, the climate on many college campuses is not equally supportive of all of its members, and as a manifestation of heterosexism, queer prejudice can obstruct the pursuit of knowledge in academe and create a hostile climate that allows or countenances victimization. It is important to determine, therefore, what the climate is for queer faculty, students, and staff on college campuses.

Campus Climate Review

In my own research earlier this year, I conducted a meta-analysis of thirty campus reports that focused specifically on the climate for queer members of the academic community. The campuses surveyed included public and private institutions, and varied in both size and geographic location. Each institution's purpose for assessing the campus climate was unique, prompted by a particular set of circumstances occurring on that campus, so that the methodologies used to examine the climate were also varied. Of the thirty college and university reports reviewed, thirteen conducted surveys, six conducted focus groups or interviews, and five opted for a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methodology (six reports did not indicate their method of assessment). Just as there was a variety of stimuli for writing the reports and various methods employed to complete the assessment, the population samples also differed. For example, the University of Arizona queried 600 faculty and staff regarding their perceptions of the campus climate for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people. In contrast, the University of Massachusetts conducted three surveys purposefully sampling lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, resident assistants, and student service personnel. Open forums and public hearings, where all members of the academic community were encouraged to share their voice, were held at Vanderbilt University, Rutgers University, and the University of Wisconsin at Madison, while Pennsylvania State University and the University of California, Davis conducted interviews with queer faculty and staff.

Although it is difficult to compare findings from such dissimilar research methodologies, instruments, and samples, it is clear that anti-queer prejudice is prevalent in higher education institutions. For example, in studies using surveys as the primary tool, the data indicated that queer students regard themselves as victims of anti-queer prejudice that ranges from verbal abuse (2%-86%) to physical violence (6%-59%) to sexual harassment (1%-21%).

In those investigations using qualitative data, analogous findings were reported that indicated the invisibility, isolation, and fear of queer members of the academic community. For the professor, counselor, staff assistant, or student who is queer, there is the constant fear that, should they "be found out," they will be ostracized, their careers will be destroyed, or they will lose their positions. The reports indicate differences in the experiences of these individuals, but their comments suggest that regardless of how "out" or how "closeted" they are, all experience fears that prevent them

from acting freely. Three themes emerged from the interviews, focus group comments, and open forum statements presented in several reports and will be briefly reviewed.

Invisibility/Ostracism. Institutionalized heterosexism on college campuses creates an oppressive situation for queer people. The university environment negates their existence, thereby promoting further invisibility. The fear of rejection has a tremendous impact on the way that these individuals lead their lives:

> I have tenure, but if the faculty in my department found out that I am a lesbian, I would be ostracized.
>
> —faculty member, Pennsylvania State University, 1994

> What has to be the most painful to me is the invisibility I have had to face as a gay student. I have often felt unwelcome in the place that is my home. What I can say is that except for the university gay community, I have not participated in campus life. It may be an unwritten rule, but it is clear that gays are not welcome in fraternities or on athletic teams.
>
> —undergraduate student, University of Minnesota, 1993

> The predominant feeling I have is one of exclusion. Much of the coursework and research in which I am currently involved addresses issues of children and families. We are lucky to get a footnote. Professors may comment that families including GLB members do exist, but the discussion revolved completely around the lives of heterosexuals.
>
> —graduate student, University of Minnesota, 1993

> At work, I am not a human being. At 5:00 P.M., that's when I can be who I am. I remember thinking about finishing school and starting work as being a freeing experience. Now I know better; it makes me bitter at the University and the world.
>
> —staff member, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1991

Isolation/self-concealment. In order to prevent what they anticipate will be their colleagues'/peers' rejection, many queer members of the academic community choose to conceal their sexual orientation. As one faculty member noted, "Being gay is a part of myself that I've learned to hide in order to survive." To protect themselves from discrimination, queer individuals do a lot of lying. The university climate communicates the message that being honest about one's sexual orientation may have direct negative effects on salary, tenure, promotion, and emotional well-being, so they chose to remain "in the closet," where it is safe. Here is how they feel:

> I know a lesbian who had to leave her position...because of gossip about her sexual orientation. In her new position she had to stay in the closet and be very secretive about her private life. She eventually quit the university.
>
> —heterosexual staff member, Univ. of Colorado, Boulder, 1991

> A friend of mine confessed to a campus priest that he was "homosexual" and was told to change or he'd go to hell."
>
> —undergraduate student, University of Massachusetts, 1985

> An untenured faculty member has been afraid to attend meetings of the Faculty/Staff Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Caucus for fear that senior colleagues might hear about it.
>
> —Tufts University, 1993

> I completed your survey at home so no one would see me.
>
> —staff member, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1991

University consequences. The university suffers from its own heterosexism. Talented queer students, faculty, and staff feel "forced" to leave the university and students (both queer and heterosexual) are deprived of role models and academic growth.

> I'd be scared to be an advisor to the lesbian, gay, and bisexual student association because that is being too obvious. I am close to tenure, and I don't want them to find a reason not to give it to me.
>
> —faculty member, Pennsylvania State University, 1994

> A student enrolled in a history of sexuality course told the instructor that her roommates tried to talk her out of it because "only lesbians take that course."
>
> —Tufts University, 1993

> I regret that I can't be more "out" in order to be a role model for gay students.
>
> —faculty member, University of Minnesota, 1993

> A heterosexual athlete told his advisor that he wanted to drop a dance course because he was afraid that his Tufts teammates might think he was gay.
>
> —Tufts University, 1993

> I would feel better about myself if I could be more supportive to students and colleagues. Living a dual life is painful.
>
> —staff member, University of Colorado, Boulder, 1991

> It's a very good school, or at least it's trying to be. I'd like to stay if this place were better for gays—but it's not.
>
> —faculty, Pennsylvania State University, 1992

Heterosexism is a form of prejudice that conspires to render queer people invisible. Indeed, most queer members of the academic community are invisible. Due to fear of harassment and discrimination, we deliberately conceal our sexual orientation. The

pervasive heterosexism of the university not only inhibits the acknowledgment and expression of queer perspectives, it also affects curricular and research efforts. Further, the contributions and concerns of queer people are often unrecognized and unaddressed, to the detriment of the education not only of queer students, but of heterosexuals as well. In summary, the results of the campus climate review reveal two important themes. First, institutions of higher education do not provide an empowering atmosphere for queer faculty, staff, and students—an atmosphere where their voices are heard, appreciated, and valued. Second, and perhaps more significant, the results suggest that the climate on college campuses acts to silence the voices of its queer members with both subtle and overt discrimination.

As a community of scholars, what is our response? Given the heterosexist values underlying higher education, the work involved in proactively addressing violence against queer students and building a community inclusive and welcoming of queer people is controversial and demanding. Advocates do not have an easy task. Systematically examining and publicizing the extent of the problem and thoughtfully developing a comprehensive intervention strategy are necessary steps to build support for change.

Strategies for Change

To successfully address a problem as endemic as queer harassment and discrimination, a comprehensive program of intervention is needed. The recommendations provided in Table 1 have several implications for policy makers and program planners in higher education. In order for institutions of higher education to welcome the complexity and richness of the world of the twenty first century, there is a need to shift basic assumptions, premises, and beliefs 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 any activity, program, or service of the institution. This sort of transformative change demands committed leadership in both policy and goal articulation. New approaches to learning, teaching, decision-making, and working in the institution are implemented. It will demand the forming of relationships between individuals who are radically "other" to each other. These transformed assumptions, premises, and beliefs will provide the environment with the catalyst for change.

A synthesis of the recommendations suggested in the thirty campus reports reveals four areas where climate change may be influenced: 1) structural transformation; 2) policy inclusion; 3) curricular integration; and 4) educational efforts. Anyone who reviews the recommendations and is aware of previous efforts by underrepresented populations will anticipate the expected response. A number of reasons might be given for why these recommendations are impossible to operationalize. Administrators may arguably say that they are too busy to attend a homophobia workshop. Personnel officers might point out that the recommendations will strain an already stretched budget. A

Table 1
Summary of Recommendations for Change

Structural Transformation
- Creation of an office for queer concerns
- Creation and identification of a designated safe, social meeting place
- Integration of queer presence in university documents/publications (grievance procedure, housing guidelines, application materials)
- Active recruitment and retention of queer persons and allies
- Creation of a queer alumni group within the existing alumni organization (such as a special interest group)
- Creation of a form in security services for reporting of hate crimes against queer persons
- Creation of a standing queer advisory committee

Policy Inclusion
- Inclusion of sexual orientation/gender identity in the institution's nondiscrimination clause
- Extension of employee spousal benefits to domestic partners (health insurance, tuition remission, sick and bereavement leave, use of campus facilities, child care services, comparable retirement plans)
- Providing safe housing for same-sex partners

Curricular Integration
- Creation of a queer studies center/department
- Provision for release time for queer course development
- Expansion of queer library holdings
- Integration of queer issues into existing courses
- Use of inclusive language in the classroom (for example, creating a pamphlet with examples of heterosexist assumptions and language with suggested alternatives)
- Production or purchase of audiovisual materials that can be used by faculty to introduce queer materials

Education
- Develop workshops/programs to address the Greek system
- Develop workshops/programs to address residence life, especially residents' assistants
- Inclusion of sexual orientation/gender identity issues in new student programs
- Inclusion of sexual orientation issues in new faculty/staff programs
- University sponsorship of lectures, concerts, symposia, and other activities to increase queer awareness on campus
- Providing course credit to queer students for peer education initiatives
- Providing training for campus health care professionals to increase their sensitivity to issues of sexual orientation/gender identity and the special health needs of queer individuals
- Providing training sessions for public safety officers on violence toward queer persons

facilities planner may say that the university has hardly any space for classrooms, much less an office or center for yet another group. To an extent, each of these detractors has a point. Administrators are busy. Space is tight. Budgets are finite.

Perhaps more than any of our detractors, I recognize that change does not occur overnight. But change can happen. The recommendations suggest the basis for constructive conversation and frame a way to overcome the problems outlined in the climate review.

It is important to note a number of challenges that may occur when trying to implement the recommendations. The implementation phase is the most crucial in transforming the campus climate, and several questions need to be asked as the process is started. Is the administration supportive? Is there fiscal support? As noted earlier, change demands committed leadership in both policy and goal articulation. Are those administrators who have the power and authority to make decisions making public and affirming statements? Are the resources available to implement the recommendations? Are the recommendations presented in the university's strategic plan? The other key players in transforming the campus climate are faculty and students. Are they involved in the planning and writing of the recommendations?

Rather than focusing exclusively on surface level issues—faculty appointments, an inclusive curriculum, a gay-friendly environment—I further suggest that structures need to be "disrupted." If one assumes that the structures of knowledge in part have defined normalized relations that exclude queer people, then one needs to break those structures rather than merely reinvent them. To quote Audre Lorde, "The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."

One wonders if the implementation of policy changes and more inclusive curricula and service programs will indeed improve the campus climate or if, as queer theorists suggest, we need to "disrupt" the existing structures. Regardless of the path, it is still too early to tell if the recommended changes and disruptions implemented at many colleges and universities have indeed effected change. However, if we agree that higher education has as its mission the creation and dissemination of knowledge and the provision of an environment conducive to nurturing that quest, than we must enact that mission through inclusive policies, integrated curricula, structural changes, and increased education.

Suggested Readings

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