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The Effectiveness of LGBTQ Equality Efforts in the 1990s

Since the late 1960s, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people have been gradually obtaining legal rights and acknowledgment. Issues such as same sex marriage have gained political momentum and visibility, increasing the cultural acceptance of LGBTQ persons (Yost and Gilmore 2011). These strides have filtered through many facets of society including the government, corporations, and most significantly, higher education. In recent decades, colleges have upheld their commitments to diversity by creating policies that support the acceptance of all students regardless of gender, race, or sexual orientation. From the middle of the 1990s up to the early 2000s, colleges enforced equality through official policies; however stigmas and biases held by the community did not disappear. The conflict between progressive institutional norms and the unsupportive college atmosphere resulted in tension for LGBTQ students. Dickinson College, a small liberal arts school in Pennsylvania, is one such example of a campus where administrative techniques did not necessarily create an accepting environment. Firsthand accounts from Dickinson students in the 1990s emphasize this struggle. Although responsive work in the late twentieth through early twenty-first century did not fully alleviate the concerns that negatively affected LGBTQ college students, such as those at Dickinson College, the institutional changes led to

improved conditions and paved the way for future equality and a sense of community among these students.

At Dickinson College, the office of student services administered a survey to gay, lesbian, and bisexual students in 1995. Students answered open-ended questions regarding their openness about their sexuality, their participation in the LGBTQ support club called Allies, and their ideas for improving the campus atmosphere at the time. While we know that eighteen students submitted surveys, the distribution by word of mouth makes it unclear how many surveys the office of student services handed out. The survey itself indicates that this particular college, like many others during the time period, made attempts to improve the lives of LGBTQ students. The survey questions imply that the school aimed to improve the lives of gay/lesbian/bisexual persons at Dickinson, and the mere existence of a club such as Allies supports this goal. Posters and flyers promoting equality remain from this time period, which demonstrates that administration made an effort to increase LGBTQ visibility and equality.

Despite the acceptance the administration seemed to be promoting, student responses to the survey were surprisingly negative. In response to a question regarding social improvements for the gay/lesbian/ bisexual Dickinson Community, one student writes: “I don’t see the gay/lesbian/bisexual community here as a cohesive group” (Andrews, Malmshemer, McDonald, & Spelow 1995). The word “community” that this particular student utilizes appears eight times throughout the administered survey responses. The word most often describes a lack of togetherness that the LGB students experience at Dickinson. The students clearly desire a sense of place, or the feeling of comfort held by people in a given space. Students lack a “cohesive group”, therefore

they did not feel a sense of place at Dickinson College, a crucial aspect for a positive undergraduate experience.

In addition to this desire for a unified community, many students expressed fear of judgment resulting in a lack of comfort in their environment. In fact, ten of the eighteen returned survey responses voiced a fear that their peers would discover the LGB students' sexual orientation. After answering no to the survey question "are you a member of Allies?" one student explains that he has not "quite built up the courage to go" (Andrews et al 1995). In fact this lack of "courage" explains the declining LGBTQ program attendance for four other students. Many others refer to the consequences of coming out with words such as "negative responses", "judgment", and "stereotyping" (Andrews et al 1995). This lack of community and fear of involvement points to a subtle but widespread feeling of isolation, which in some cases may be more harmful than physical abuse. This discontent among students makes it unclear whether attempts to create a positive community among students during this decade were effective. Even today students struggle with their identity and sense of place on college campuses.

LGBTQ students are more likely to experience discrimination, harassment, and intimidation than their heterosexual peers (Yost and Gilmore 2011). Even when campuses describe themselves as supportive, students often describe the atmosphere as containing a lack of negative comments rather than an abundance of positive ones (Hinrichs and Rosenberg 2002). During the late twentieth through early twenty-first century, homophobic acts consisted of verbal abuse and pressure for the LGBTQ students to suppress their identity rather than involving overtly hostile or violent acts (Yost and Gilmore 2011). In Nancy Evans and Ellen Broido's article analyzing interviews from ten

lesbian and bisexual college women, one girl states: “I don’t remember any specific person saying anything negative... but there were... times where I knew I shouldn’t say anything” (Evan and Broido 2002). Although LGBTQ members did not experience obvious harassment, the subtle disapproval by heterosexual peers effectively silenced this minority group of students. Preventing these women from having a voice removed some of their basic rights and made it hard for them to display their sexual orientation freely. In the Dickinson College survey responses, one student explains, “I don’t expect all people to be open minded and accepting- so at this point it is easier to keep things private than to take on the whole campus” (Andrews et al 1995). This student exemplifies how the closed-minded atmosphere prevented LGBTQ members from expressing their sexuality, which isolated them from the community. The fact that this student had to stand against the “whole campus” shows how alone he felt at Dickinson College. Similarly, the lesbian student’s inability to talk about or display her homosexuality can lead to a similar kind of loneliness. Victimization takes on many different forms, and in the 1990s the intimidation and judgment became as harmful as any physical abuse. Silencing gay students and forcing them to hide their true identities can lead to depression and self-hate. If LGBTQ students on campus cannot communicate or rally together, not only will they become miserable, but the college community as a whole will fail to progress forward into a truly diverse and accepting environment.

As a result of such a negative environment, many students felt the need to hide their sexual orientation from their peers. Society commonly refers to this secrecy as being “in the closet” while openness about one’s sexuality is being “out of the closet”. The campus environment has a strong impact on the number of outed LGBTQ on campus. As

mentioned in the Dickinson College survey responses, a lack of “courage” exists among young LGBTQ adults. Fear of revealing their sexual orientation prevents students from not only actively speaking out for gay rights but from finding resources that can improve their very own lives. In one response to the Dickinson College administered survey, when asked about his involvement with Allies, one student honestly states, “as sad as it may be, this campus associates anyone involved with allies as homosexual and I’m not willing to cause people to suspect my orientation” (Andrews et al 1995). In the 1990s homophobia existed in society and, as a result, LGBTQ students frequently withdrew themselves from certain events for fear that attendance would reveal their orientation. Despite the difficulty it takes to openly display one’s sexuality in an oppressive atmosphere, there are many benefits in doing so. A case study conducted by Valerie Gortmaker and Robert Brown, which examines the difference between out and closeted students, reports:

Out students were significantly more active than closeted students... More out students visited the LG resource center on campus (78%) than closeted students (50%). 94% of out and 70% of closeted students reported attending LG events/programs. Additionally, 39% of out students and 7% of closeted students reported being very active politically and socially in LG issues and concerns. (Gortmaker and Brown 2006).

These statistics depict the different lives of closeted versus outed students. Out students involve themselves in the community to a much higher extent than closeted students. This is most likely due to the fear that becoming involved will “out” a student and result in negative feedback from the college community. Evans and Broido add to the findings of the previous case study by stating that “those individuals who were not out to others on

their floors and who were less involved on the floor had a more negative perception of the climate while those women who were selectively out and who were engaged with others on the floor were more satisfied with the climate” (Evans and Ellen 2002). For LGBTQ young adults in college, students who freely express their sexuality achieved a positive experience more often. These “out” students involved themselves in the gay community and as a result, received the administration’s attempts to improve their lives. Although it is difficult for LGBTQ students to embrace one’s sexuality, those who do so typically become involved in the college community and as a result, feel satisfaction.

In the 1990s and early 2000s the college environment was not ideal for LGBTQ students, especially for those who felt they had to hide their sexual orientation. As the case of Dickinson College shows, college administration in the 1990s aimed to create an accepting community where students did not need courage to express. An example of one such attempt to achieve this goal is the creation of positive space campaigns, which attempt to turn originally heterosexual spaces into accepting places for all students. According to Allison Burgess’ article “Queering Heterosexual Spaces”, “The domination of heterosexuality as a pervasive sexual norm regulates spaces, and therefore any expression of sexuality other than heterosexuality is out of place” (Burgess 2005). To counteract these negative effects, colleges have created signs and stickers that professors may place outside of offices and buildings indicating that the people inside accept LGBTQ students. Even today Dickinson College administration use this method to increase the comfort level of all students. In doing so the LGBTQ community gains visibility and a voice. In addition to this, colleges, including Dickinson, focus on training Resident Assistants (RAs) to discuss LGBTQ issues on their floors, organize support

programs, and defend any students in the event of discrimination. Reports indicate that a lot of residence hall discomfort can be alleviated by responsible RAs who know how to deal with issues that may arise (Evans and Ellen 2002). In Evans and Broido's article notes that "participants who held positive attitudes about their halls mentioned that the staff actively confronted homophobic behavior, helped LGB students meet each other, assisted with room changes when students were experiencing difficulty with their roommates, and actively reached out to LGB students" (Evan and Broido 2002). Adults have a significant influence on the sense of place students feel. By enforcing the norms set by administration, these authority figures help create the safe and comfortable community that LGBTQ students require. These examples demonstrate the ways colleges worked towards a positive environment for LGBTQ students.

When considering the many different accounts of how colleges in the 1990s attempted to create a sense of place for LGBTQ students, one cannot say that school policies were either widely successful or miserable failures. While the students surveyed at Dickinson mentioned that they lacked a sense of place despite the existence of Allies, the women interviewed in Evans and Broido's article felt satisfied with their helpful RAs. Allison Burgess notes in her article that putting up posters does not necessarily transform the mindset of an entire campus. However, she recalled a time when a student emailed about the poster and asked to become involved in spreading awareness. For Burgess, the student's email "serves as a reminder that despite the constraining limitation to the disruption of heteronormative space, the Positive Space Campaign can have an impact" (Burgess 2005). Different methods used to support the LGBTQ community did not affect all students or colleges equally. While Allies did not necessarily alleviate concerns of all

students at Dickinson College, the club started a trend of giving LGBTQ persons a voice on campus. Despite the fact that not all issues were alleviated during the LGBTQ movement by colleges in the 1990s, the progress made created at least several positive outcomes such as helpful RAs and positive spaces which still help students today

Although students in the late twentieth through early twenty-first century may have experienced a lack of community despite certain efforts by a college, these initiatives were only the beginning of a process towards equality and acceptance. Today colleges, including Dickinson, hold guest speakers, create peer support groups, and even have LGBTQ courses. The efforts by the college administrations in the 1990s did not have immediate success in creating an accepting environment for students, but they did allow for a positive sense of place that exists on campuses today. However, in modern times there is still room for improvement. While our culture has become accepting of lesbians and gays, the acknowledgement or toleration of different members of the LGBTQ spectrum such as pansexual, transgender, or even bisexual persons has lagged behind. Perhaps the safe spaces that were utilized in the 1990s or the retraining of the RAs could take place once again with specific focus on all members of the LGBTQ spectrum. Responsive work did not necessarily alleviate the real experiences of harassment and violence that negatively affect LGBTQ people of the 1990s, but it did start a chain reaction that will hopefully one day lead to a sense of place for all students of different orientations.

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