

VIEWS FROM CAMPUS

The Cost of Not Being Out: Reflections on Efforts to Address LGBT Issues at a Large Southern Public University

Establishing a LGBT Center can be challenging, nowhere more so than at a large southern public university. Steven Thurston Oliver describes the process and what it taught him about the experiences of LGBT students, staff, and faculty... and himself.

By Steven Thurston Oliver

MY FORMER BOSS, WHEN TELLING ME about the skills I would need to develop in order to be successful in higher education administration, would invariably start with saying “like it or not, you’re in the game.” By this she meant that college campuses are by nature politically charged environments. Furthermore, a thick skin and stomach for politics is a necessity, as full participation is unavoidable. I had the opportunity to understand the reality and wisdom of these words through my efforts to establish a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender (LGBT) Task Force at a large southern public university (LSPU) where I served in a leadership role in the Office for Institutional Diversity for three years. The mantra

“like it or not, you’re in the game” came to mean that I would need to navigate my own identities as a gay man, an African American, and a campus leader. LGBT individuals working in higher education often experience the need to carefully negotiate our identities as we do the work of addressing LGBT concerns on our college campuses. Depending on the campus climate, we are at times invisible and acutely aware that should our visibility increase so might our vulnerability. This has certainly been my experience having worked at several institutions. I’ve always had to take the time to learn who all the players are on campus in order to determine who would be willing and well positioned to serve as an ally. In a process that is often exhausting, I’ve

also had to contemplate the advantages and potential liability of being out as a gay man within the campus context. This was especially challenging for me personally, being both black and gay, and therefore embodying two identities whose respective communities have in recent years, been increasingly compared to and pitted against each other.

When I arrived at LSPU, I was struck by the fact that LGBT issues were not part of the university's broader diversity efforts. LGBT student groups and LGBT students in general suffered due to lack of institutional support. This was also true for faculty and staff including myself, who did not feel that the campus was a safe environment to be out professionally. What was needed, I determined, was a Task Force that would place the concerns of LGBT students, faculty, and staff squarely within the realm of broader diversity and inclusion efforts. A LGBT Task Force emanating from the Office for Institutional Diversity would send a powerful message of inclusion to the broader campus community.

While some knew my gay identity, it was not something I shared or confirmed for fear that it might hamper my ability to move in influential circles. As administrators in higher education, much of our success is dependent on the quality of the relationships with the individuals who make up the campus community. It was unclear to me whether I would be respected within the black community on and off campus where belonging to one of several local church communities carried a lot of weight socially and politically. This is not to suggest, as some have, that communities of color are somehow innately more homophobic than any other, but that the spoken and unspoken rules about what is acceptable functions differently.

In hindsight, I think I was overly tentative and I regret not being more forthright and out professionally in all aspects of the work I was engaged in. The

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fear of what might happen hindered my ability to be authentic, present, and effective. I am writing to share some aspects of my experience of advocating for LGBT issues as a gay man, in hopes that it might be useful to individuals LGBT identified and otherwise who also might be trying to find ways to build structures of support for LGBT individuals while negotiating aspects of their identity in campus environments that they don't always perceive as safe. It will also be useful for people working in higher education to have a deeper appreciation for why it is important for LGBT students, faculty, and staff to be able to bring their whole selves to their work on campus.

LGBT Work in a Conservative Southern Context

LSPU IS LOCATED WITHIN A midsize Southern city. Conservative churches representing mainline Christian denominations wield a powerful influence on the culture and the tone of interactions on and off campus. Many of these churches are not in favor of any effort to provide support for LGBT individuals. In this environment, the first challenge was identifying faculty and staff who would be willing to do the work. When I tried to think of faculty and staff who were openly gay or who might serve as an ally, I was hard pressed to come up with any names. I utilized the snowball method, asking around to find out who might be LGBT identified themselves or possess a philosophical disposition that could locate the work within a broader social justice framework. I had lots of one-on-ones with individuals over coffee (often off campus) to garner enough interest and support to begin the work. These conversations were insightful as individuals shared with me the history of LGBT work on campus and the LGBT community in the region. I learned that in a conservative southern context people were generally ok with LGBT people as long as they didn't make an issue of it or publically advocate for gay issues. While supportive and excited about the idea of a LGBT Task Force, many did not want to be identified or formally involved. One individual stated plainly, "I think its important work and I applaud your efforts but please do not expect to see me at any of your events!"

After a period or six months working strategically to build relationships, I began with a group of 12 individuals evenly distributed between faculty and administrative roles. Some individuals I was only able to identify due to their involvement in LGBT groups that had existed sporadically on campus and often in isolation. The establishment of the task force brought representatives of these groups together and raised the stature of the work on campus. The group was

balanced by gender and there was one other person of color. The mission and goals of the LGBT Task Force included making ongoing assessments of the attitudes and conditions throughout LSPU regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons and issues. The LGBT Task Force also made recommendations for changes and sought implementation of these recommendations on issues such as (1) the campus environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, staff, and faculty; (2) appropriate supportive services; (3) educational programs for the campus community; and (4) other matters affecting the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community members.

The LGBT Task Force, in addition to raising awareness and impacting the culture of the institution, played a vital role as a convener of the LGBT community and allies on campus. For all of us who were involved, we were being intentional about creating a space for us to inhabit on campus that added to the richness of our overall experience. It is important that the LGBT community, like other marginalized groups, has the ability to create environments on campus where they can be affirmed in who they are. These recuperative spaces allow for the possibility of fostering friendships that bolster the resilience of LGBT students, faculty, and staff by functioning as a buffer against the stresses of an unsupportive campus.

I discovered that others were struggling with the same issues I was regarding being out on campus. Faculty members on the Task Force shared their perception that faculty and staff did not feel safe to be out at LSPU. This was especially the case for junior faculty who worried about whether being openly gay might hurt their chances for tenure and promotion. We asked the Vice President for Institutional Diversity to host a gathering at her house in celebration of LGBT faculty, staff, and graduate students for their contributions to the campus community. The event was well attended and it sent a powerful message to people that the culture of the campus was beginning to shift toward one that was more welcoming and inclusive of everyone. A sense of belonging is important for any individual hoping to bring all of their intelligence, creativity, and energy to fruition for the benefit of the campus community.

Over a period of several months, the LGBT Task Force began to find its footing and garner support from the administration. I found it important to periodically gather students together to engage them in dialogue, solicit their input, and test my assumptions. I met regularly with the leaders of a LGBT student group on campus and held focus groups with LGBT students to learn more about their experiences. Students reported not feeling safe to be who they are on campus. This experience of not feeling safe ranged from the threat of not being accepted or ostracized by peers to anticipating the possibility of physical assault. I asked the students to reflect on whether they would feel safe holding hands or expressing affection for a same-sex partner on campus. One student responded this way:

“I’ve had experiences where I was holding hands with somebody walking through campus and during the daytime especially like between 10 and 4 when most people have class. I don’t necessarily

feel terrible or even bad in the slightest way holding a guy’s hand, but when night classes start and the sun starts to set where shadows move over campus and it’s really easy for someone – and I’m not trying to create a conspiracy theory – but it’s really easy for some people to kind of wait out.”

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Many comments echoed this sentiment of feeling safe in some instances and not in others. Students were able to describe in detail the places

on campus that were safe and the places that were not. At times being in one building vs. another or being on one floor vs. another could make all the difference in whether students felt safe to express their LGBT identity or not.

Students spoke of needing help to facilitate events and dealing with issues of homophobia that may arise. Students shared many similar stories of tense situations that occurred when they attempted to have events in support of LGBT issues. When negative incidents occurred, students did not feel that there was anyone they could go to for support and so nothing was done. Slurs against LGBT people routinely went unchecked and unchallenged in the absence of someone with authority to do so.

I learned that many of the students who were out on campus, were not out to their families and communities at home. Often, their gay identities were discovered through social media, creating a crisis that their

LGBT peers did not feel equipped to deal with. Students expressed the desire for a full time staff person dedicated to LGBT concerns that they could go to for support and advice when needed. In the absence of a professional dedicated to addressing LGBT issues on campus, LSPU was leaving students to fend for themselves in dealing with critical life issues.

I learned that coming out remains the single biggest challenge for LGBT students at LSPU. In *The Campus Climate Report: Assessment and Intervention Strategies*, Sue Rankin posits that despite changing societal attitudes toward homosexuality, coming out is often fraught with tension, fear of rejection, and a reconceptualization of one's future. The emergence of these themes strengthened my resolve to utilize the growing collective strength of the LGBT Task Force to push for the establishment of an LGBT Center and a dedicated staff person to address LGBT issues on campus.

Making the Case for an LGBT Center

MAKING THE CASE FOR AN LGBT Center and a dedicated staff person proved more difficult than I anticipated. The first question I was asked was "how many LGBT students are there?" While this may seem like a logical thing to inquire about, it is in fact the wrong question. An LGBT Center would not only serve students, faculty, and staff who are LGBT identified, but rather it would educate the entire campus about the importance of LGBT issues. I was inspired by the work of LGBT Centers on other campuses that were able to routinely bring LGBT scholars to campus, conduct LGBT awareness workshops, and advocate for the inclusion of LGBT issues within the curriculum.

Campus cultures are often slow to change and resistance can come in subtle forms. At times it came in the form of a blank expression on the face of colleague while I explained the need for a LGBT Center and full-time staff person. Other times it would be a broken promise to attend an event with an e-mail offering hollow regrets appearing in my inbox at the last minute. I realized that well-meaning people who might agree with us philosophically may not feel

safe to publicly support our efforts. Several campus administrators who sincerely wanted to position themselves as allies, encouraged the task force to work to create ways for them to show collective support so that no single administrator would be out there on his or her own. While on some level it was disheartening to regard supporting LGBT students, faculty, and staff as dangerous or subversive, the tentative nature of our progress reflected the larger societal landscape of which LSPU is a part.

In 2012, I left LSPU for a faculty position at another university. At the time of this writing, I am happy to report that LSPU has established an office for LGBTQ resources and has hired a full time Director responsible for addressing these issues on campus. The LGBT Task Force has morphed into an advisory group providing support and recommendations for the new Director. Great things are happening on campus and many have written thanking me for my efforts to get the task force started. While I take great pleasure in what was accomplished, I know that I probably could have done more if I'd had the confidence and courage to be fully out at LSPU. Heading to a new institution, I made the conscious decision to identify myself as gay from the outset so that I could bring my whole self to my work and feel comfortable in my own skin as an educator and a colleague. In addition to my teaching, I continue to work on campus efforts to support LGBT students, faculty, and staff. I developed a graduate course *LGBT Issues in Higher Education* that will run for the first time in Fall Semester. In the midst of personal and professional growth, seldom does a day go by that I don't hear the words and wisdom of my former boss ringing in my ears. Like it or not, I'm still in the game.

NOTES

Rankin, S. (1998). The campus climate report: Assessment and intervention strategies. In R. Sanlo (Ed.), *Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students. A handbook for faculty and administrators* (pp. 277-284). Westport, CT: Greenwood.