

**Campus Climate Committee Report 2
Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual and Transgender Student
Population at the University of Florida**

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Introduction

This committee was formed in 2002 to examine, report and make recommendations to the University of Florida administration regarding the status and treatment of Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, and Transgender (GLBT) students on this campus. The committee began its work with the assumption that there is a significant GLBT student population at the University of Florida and there exist opportunities inside the classroom and in environments throughout campus for these students to feel alienated and isolated.

The purpose of this report was not only to document the existence of discrimination facing GLBT students at the University of Florida, but also to make recommendations to the administration that would aggressively address these issues and in doing so, help to transform the University of Florida into a model community.

The committee gathered data, opinions and information from multiple sources including research conducted on campus; collated best practices from other colleges and universities; and documented discussions with students. We collected and reviewed quantitative and qualitative information and gathered information from professional meetings.

In the final analysis, we present a report based on these data, with specific recommendations we believe will help move the institution forward in an area that deserves its attention and resources to the benefit of all of its students.

Background

The University of Florida has a significant Gay, Lesbian, Bi-Sexual, and Transgendered (GLBT) undergraduate population – with self-reported GLBT figures as 4.4 percent of respondents to a survey regarding sexual orientation. If accurate, and the same ratio holds true for graduate students as well, then more than 2000 UF students fall within the GLBT

category. Further, the researchers recognize that the social stigma attached to homosexuality was likely to “discourage self-identification in the semi-public arena of a classroom....”

Therefore, the population of GLBT students may be somewhat larger than the estimate provided, although the 4.4 percent figure seems to tally close to the national average. (For a discussion on national averages, see

http://www.gaydemographics.org/USA/2000_Census_Total.htm)

To place this 4.4 percent figure into perspective, it exceeds the percentage of UF students with substantial disabilities (1.6 percent) and approaches the percentage of UF students who are African American (6.5 percent) and Asian and/or Asian American (6.3 percent).

However, sheer numbers of students in an identifiable grouping does not by itself necessitate organizational awareness and sensitivity. The question, therefore, is whether members of that group are apt to endure a campus environment hostile due to the immutable factors that identify them as members of that group.

Methodology

The Office of the Provost charged the Florida Survey Research Center to assess campus climate for GLBT students. This organization conducted classroom, telephone and “snowball” sampling as well as a literature review. In addition, our committee drew on research conducted by the Provost's Committee on GLBTQ Affairs about the structures and best practices regarding this issue at other institutions. Other universities explored included Penn State University, the University of Michigan, Emory University, the University of Pennsylvania, University of Maryland, and University of California at San Francisco.

The research commissioned by the Office of the Provost revealed data on the GLBT student population, indicating that UF's environment can be negative, if not hostile, to GLBT students. This information resulted in further action on the part of the Committee to meet its original mandate for seeking best methods to reduce unique challenges and barriers facing minority populations.

To assess fully the climate for GLBT students at the University of Florida, it is necessary to determine how such students feel about their experience on campus and how non-GLBT students perceive them.¹ Both factors, self-image and the assessment of heterosexual classmates, contribute to the description of the campus climate. Prior to the 2000-2001 academic year, the University had never assessed campus attitudes about sexual orientation.² During that year, however, the Office of the Provost funded a campus climate survey that included questions about the experiences and perceptions of students regarding sexual orientation.³ Because it also included an item that allowed students to describe their sexual orientation, data from the survey can tell us with some degree of precision how the perceptions of UF students may be shaped by their self-selected sexual identity.

As revealed by the campus survey of undergraduates in the 2000-2001 academic year, GLBT students face an environment that they often regard as unfriendly if not hostile and that, according to students who are not gay, is in fact laced with homophobia. The data collected by

¹ As is customary in such research, we refer interchangeably to "GLBT" and "gay" students and also use "heterosexual" and "straight" synonymously. This linguistic convenience is not meant to deny the complexity and diversity of sexual orientation. The survey did not inquire about trans-gendered status or "Queer" identity.

² An informal survey of faculty and staff was done some years earlier. The LGBT Concerns Committee, created by the Provost, has monitored complaints informally over the years but was never funded to undertake systematic research.

³ The question was worded as follows: "Which category at the right best represents your sexual orientation? Bisexual, Gay, Heterosexual, Lesbian" and students were asked to circle the label that applied.

the Florida Survey Research Center in both classroom, telephone and snowball samples reveals several powerful trends.

First, there is a substantial GLBT student population at UF. The classroom survey yielded 4.4 percent of respondents who identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Based on prior research (Ronni Sanlo 2002, Murray 1996), this figure should be considered the lower bound of an estimate because of the social stigma against homosexuality. Moreover, self-identifying as gay, lesbian or bisexual is often the final step in a process that begins with same-sex physical attraction and/or intimate contact. Surveys that estimate sexual orientation by asking about respondents' physical attraction to persons of the same sex or whether they engage in sexual intimacy with same-sex partners have yielded substantially higher estimates than studies that rely on self-identification with the GLBT label.

As testimony to the looseness of such identity, consider that 70 percent of the students who indicated Hispanic/Latino ancestry upon enrollment at UF told interviewers in the telephone component of the Campus Climate Survey that their racial or ethnic identity was best described as "White/European." If self-identification questions so massively underestimated something as relatively non-controversial as ethnicity, similar questions were likely to have the same or greater effect on a socially devalued sexual identity.

Second, GLBT-identified students perceive UF as decidedly unfriendly to gays and report experiences that reinforce the impression of a hostile environment.

A comparison between the responses of GLBT-identified students and heterosexuals on a series of items about their perception of the general campus climate for gays found several looming gaps between the average responses of gays and straights. Compared to their straight classmates, gay students at UF were much more likely to believe in the prevalence of harassment based on sexual orientation and appreciably less likely to conclude UF is generally

accepting of homosexuality and welcoming to same-sex couples. These conclusions appear to rest on direct observation. GLBT-identified students, more frequently than their peers, have heard anti-gay statements by fellow students, UF staff, and UF faculty. Having seen discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation to a much greater degree than heterosexual students, they were also much more likely to report having concealed their sexual orientation.

Third, GLBT students report that they feel uncomfortable in many campus locations. According to the survey, GLBT students felt less comfortable at Homecoming and in courses in their major departments. Viewing the UF experience as a whole, they reported less satisfaction in general and gave lower marks to Tigert Hall than their fellow undergraduates. Perhaps even more striking, GLBT students reported lower levels of comfort and satisfaction with many campus locations and services than African-American students. Although these differences are not always statistically significant, their consistency across so many places and activities underscores the alienation of many GLBT students from the UF community.

Fourth, the testimony of heterosexual students largely validates the reports of GLBT-identified students at UF. Even though gay students were much more prone to report instances of harassment than their heterosexual peers, it is noteworthy that students outside the GLBT community also reported a high degree of what can be construed as homophobia on the UF campus. Among the students who identified as heterosexuals, an actual majority believed that harassment based on sexual orientation occurs occasionally or frequently. Roughly one third believed that UF does not extend a welcome to same-sex

couples. Over half the heterosexuals have heard another student make insensitive or disparaging remarks (including comments, jokes, slurs, etc.) about GLBT students on five occasions or more. In a striking example of candor, three-fifths of the heterosexual students reported some degree of personal discomfort with public displays of affection by GLBT couples.

Fifth, heterosexual students believe that gays face a colder climate at UF than other minority students. The heterosexual students reported their perception that harassment based on sexual orientation is more common at UF than harassment based on race, ethnicity, gender, or religion. They believed that UF does a better job accommodating racial minorities, the physically disabled, non-native speakers of English, and members of diverse religious backgrounds than it does gays. Heterosexual students heard insensitive or disparaging remarks about gays more often than they reported having heard comparable slurs against other minority groups. More than twice as many admitted some degree of personal discomfort with public displays of affection by GLBT couples than reported similar unease about similar displays by interracial couples.

By highlighting these results, we do not mean to assert that gays are more subject to discrimination and harassment than students from other minority groups. The results of the survey show that students from a variety of minority statuses—gays included—often feel like outsiders on the UF campus. The student perceptions reported above may not be accurate and may understate the problems that confront other minority students. To consider another possibility, perhaps a concern for social desirability has prompted white heterosexuals to deny the extent of racism and they feel freer to comment openly on the prevalence of antigay feelings because there is less social pressure against homophobia (as well as fewer policies and laws that provide the same degree of protection for gays as for members of racial and religious

minorities). Regardless, it is remarkable to obtain such candor from students about their own behavior. When heterosexuals indicate that gays faces a hostile climate at UF, that finding deserves to be taken as a call to action.

The research found that GLBT students surveyed felt a degree of general campus hostility and experienced a degree of uncomfortable feelings that were, on average, statistically greater than was the case with the student population as a whole. Abiding by the University of Florida's stated goal of merging diverse cultures, peoples and perspectives into a livable community, steps clearly should be taken to reduce the level of discomfort for the GLBT student population. The Campus Climate Committee accepts the findings of this commissioned research that GLBT students currently endure a campus climate that is counterproductive to the enrichment process of an academic experience and recommends some organizational enhancements to assist in eliminating GLBT alienation.

In summary, the research discovered that GLBT-identified students "perceive UF as decidedly unfriendly to gays and report experiences that reinforce the impression of a hostile environment." This apparently exists to the degree that there is a concern about revealing their sexual orientation.

Current UF Structure

The University of Florida has a significant GLBT population, but a limited existing structure to help monitor issues. While it has done yeoman's work on a broad range of issues of concern to GLBTQ students and faculty, the GLBTQ Concerns Committee, created by the Provost, was never empowered to conduct systematic research. University resources dedicated to the concerns of GLBT students are scattered across campus. Many of these services--the inclusion of training for Residence Hall assistants and leaders of the Greek

system--are the result of self-motivated activity by individuals and rise or fall depending on the availability of willing volunteers. Currently, there exists no formal department/office to specifically handle GLBT issues and such issues often fall between the cracks. Poor infrastructure and lack of institutionalized services combine to reinforce the impression that UF is hostile or indifferent to its sizable GLTB population.

Structures at Other Universities

Other universities have addressed the concerns of their GLBT population administratively (Sanlo 2000). Almost all AAU universities have some formal structure and staffing for GLBT programs and services. For example, 31 AAU universities provide at least one full-time staff member (or two half-time) for services to GLBT communities, and 56 colleges and universities have a GLBT resource center with at least one full-time paid professional reporting to a vice president (or equivalent). At UF, by contrast, there is no such position. Liaison with GLBT students is one of a large number of group-related specific mandates entrusted to a staff member in the Office of Student Affairs. This position has frequently gone unfilled and GLBT concerns are afforded very limited systematic attention.

Additionally, nearly all AAU public universities (total of 47 – *Gainesville Sun*, June 12) offer “domestic partner benefits” while other practices at other universities include offering GLBT alumni activities, targeting initiatives for foundation support, providing anonymous opportunity to report hate incidents online, the creating and maintaining a central GLBT Website for the GLBT community, and institutionalizing programs of periodic GLBT campus climate assessments. These programs are conspicuous by their absence at UF.

Some specific organizational structures, programs and positions of other universities include Penn State’s Senior Diversity Planning Analyst/Coordinator of GLBT Equity whose responsibilities include strategic planning, fund raising, printing of materials, the creation and

maintenance of on-line Website and newsletter, and the establishment of a program that provides opportunities for GLBT faculty, staff and students to discuss their concerns. Due to the complexity and wide ranging responsibilities of the job, Penn State's position requirements include a "preferred Ph.D. with a masters degree requirement" and at least five years of experience in an appropriate position and a demonstrated experience with proposal/grant writing.

The University of Michigan's director position is similar, with the added responsibility to help "coordinate university responses to concerns about sexual orientation issues."

At Emory University, the Director of the Office of Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual/Transgender Life is a position with a decidedly educational emphasis with the responsibility of facilitating the development and implementation of anti-bias workshops and encouragement of relevant scholarly dialogue in areas of lesbian/gay studies as well as establishing a network of referral sources and the creation of a resource library.

At the University of Pennsylvania, the Director of the Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Center is charged to both enhance the quality of life of lesbian, gay, bisexual students, staff and faculty, and to "increase the general Penn community's awareness, understanding and acceptance of its sexual minority members." This director is expected to be an expert and spokesperson on "matters pertaining to sexual orientation and the sexual minority community" and must maintain accountability to the Vice-Provost for University Life and to the Penn Lesbian Gay Bisexual Center Advisory Board. The Penn position requires an advanced degree in a relevant field such as student affairs, social work, psychology or education.

At the University of Maryland, the Coordinator of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Equity has among his/her responsibilities the task to "cultivate the development

of new courses and the development of a certificate in LGBT studies” as well as “coordinate with students to ensure continued interest in participation in (a) Speakers Bureau.”

Best Practices by Other Universities for LGBT Community and UF Action/Inaction

The Committee also reviewed best practices by other universities in an effort to determine what might be workable options at the University of Florida. The following list references the activities we found, which institutions have adopted them and where the University of Florida stands on each.

1) Inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity in nondiscrimination clause

Participants: all AAU public universities.

Note: UF’s Board of Trustees voted to include sexual orientation in the non-discrimination in June 2003, making UF the final AAU public university to have this protection. Gender identity is still not included at UF.

2) Offering domestic partner benefits

Participants: nearly all AAU public universities [Not yet adopted at UF.]

3) Providing at least one full-time staff member (or two half-time) for service to LGBT communities

Source: http://www.lgbtcampus.org/resources/staffing_patterns-2001.htm

Participants: Public universities (AAU universities underlined): Ohio State, Missouri, Rutgers, Minnesota, Penn State, Ohio State, Texas A&M, Michigan, UMass, Indiana, UC-Irvine, Michigan State, UCLA, Maryland, Wisconsin, UC-Berkeley, Oregon, Illinois, Colorado, UC-Santa Barbara, UC-San Diego, UC-Davis, Colorado State, Vermont, Washington State, UC-San Francisco, UC-Riverside, UConn, University of Illinois-Chicago,

Private universities: Southern California, University of Pennsylvania, Emory, Stanford, Tufts, Williams, Duke, Cornell, NYU, Dartmouth, Princeton, Tulane, University of Toronto,

[Not adopted at UF]

4) Developing an LGBT resource center reporting to a vice-president’s level

Source: http://www.lgbtcampus.org/resources/development_administration.htm

56 Colleges and universities have LGBT resource centers with at least one full-time paid professional.

[Not adopted at UF]

5) Offering LGBT alumni activities and opportunities for foundation support

[The GLBTQ Concerns Committee in cooperation with a private organization, the Rainbow Alliance, has raised funds in the hope of endowing scholarships for GLBT leadership and scholarship. The UF Foundation has no formal outreach to the GLBT alumni community.]

6) Providing anonymous opportunity to report hate incidents on-line

See http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/findout_reportit.html for example

[In progress for students. No equivalent opportunity exists for faculty.]

7) Create and update central website for LGBT community at www.lgbt.ufl.edu

See www.lgbt.ucla.edu for example

[In progress]

8) Assess LGBT campus climate on regular basis

{Not adopted at UF}

Recommendations

In light of the various research findings, the Campus Climate Committee makes the following recommendations. These recommendations, combined with the university's recent action on the Non-Discrimination Clause, would help to move the university toward greater inclusiveness and would clearly demonstrate positive action on the institution's part.

1. Hire a full-time staff person to direct/coordinate GLBT efforts on UF's campus.

As it is typical for the chief/full-time staff member of GLBT programs and services on other campuses to report to the vice president of student affairs or a vice president for diversity the former seems appropriate here. Further, the individual selected should have the experience and academic qualifications necessary to effectively coordinate a complex array of responsibilities. This individual would be responsible for the following:

- Creating, providing information on and leading a GLBT resource center
- Maintaining a centralized Website for GLBT issues
- Conducting outreach activities and programs for GLBT issues across campus

- Creating and maintaining a Website for reporting hate incidents anonymously
- Providing appropriate referrals to campus and community resource
- Organizing and managing activities and development opportunities for GLBT alumni
- Assessing the campus climate regarding the GLBT population on a planned regular basis

The creation of such a position is the single most important action to make the anti-discrimination clause an effective force on campus.

2. Implement Domestic Partner Benefits at the University of Florida. As the research on AAU universities indicates, peer institutions provide such benefits for students, staff and faculty. The offering of benefits not only reinforces the spirit of a non-discrimination clause but also makes clear that institutional support is clearly and consistently provided to all individuals. Domestic partner benefits would;

- Assure current and incoming students that the university has made every effort to create a welcoming environment for GLBT students
- Insure that UF remains competitive with peer institutions and is able to recruit the best available faculty, thus insuring continued academic excellence

3. Publish and widely circulate the University of Florida statement on non-discrimination.

- Providing visibility for the university's position on non-discrimination brings attention to the subject and reminds the community that certain behaviors are not acceptable and will not be tolerated
- Reiterating a non-discrimination statement also allows external audiences, e.g., web visitors, potential students, other universities, to understand UF's policy

One way to accomplish this would be via the pay slips that are received by UF faculty and staff as well as funded students. The message could include clear directions for reporting violations of the UF anti-discrimination policy.

4. Clarify a process for reporting, collecting, and analyzing harassment claims against GLBT students.

- The university needs to develop clear guidelines on how such claims should be handled

Clearly, the most important outcome would be the first recommendation, which would serve the entire GLBT community.

In conclusion, given the results of the research, there is compelling evidence that students self-identified as GLBT feel alienated on the campus of the University of Florida. This is unacceptable and the steps recommended above should continue the university's process of building a campus climate that is both tolerant and inclusive of all who choose to work, study and live here.