

**THE EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE FOR
GAY, LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS**

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THE EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE FOR GAY, LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS**ABSTRACT**

The harassment of gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) students was studied at UC Santa Cruz. Students were sampled to assess their attitudes and behaviors toward GLB people. A non-random survey on the site, frequency, and type of harassment was distributed to GLB students. Fifteen percent of the students identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. These students were less comfortable than heterosexual students, but were not socially isolated. One-fourth of GLB students reported some form of academic discrimination and one-fifth had concealed their sexual orientation to avoid harassment. Freshpersons were more homophobic than more advanced students and males were more homophobic than women. Students who had attended workshops or courses on GLB issues were less homophobic than those who had not.

THE EDUCATIONAL CLIMATE FOR GAY, LESBIAN AND BISEXUAL STUDENTS

Creating and preserving a campus atmosphere that offers equal learning opportunities for all students is one of the primary responsibilities of the university. University policies have been developed to assist individuals from groups who, in the past, have been systematically denied access to education. Several groups (e.g., women and ethnic minorities) have been specifically targeted for special attention in university equal rights policies. In addition to receiving special advising, counseling, academic and financial support, the University is bound by law to make every effort to eliminate any organizational or personal forms of discrimination.

Gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) students have also been a target of discrimination and are often cited in university equal rights statements. The policy at the University of California, Santa Cruz (UCSC), states in part:

Students, faculty, administrators, and staff who are perceived to be gay, lesbian, or bisexual are to be free from harassment or legally impermissible, arbitrary, or unreasonable discrimination related to their sexual/affectional orientation . The strength of the campus community lies in its open dialogue between persons and groups of differing views. No one is asked to personally embrace a particular identity; what is asked is a thoughtful and reasoned approach to differences . Therefore, the practice or display of legally impermissible, arbitrary, or unreasonable discriminatory practices against any person or group based on sexual/affectional orientation is prohibited ... and will not be tolerated on the UCSC campus .

Providing student organizational and counseling support may not be sufficient to ensure that the campus provides equal support and protection for

GLB students. Although these services may exist and may be successful, they may do little to alter an atmosphere of suspicion and misunderstanding. The intent at UCSC is to promote and maintain an atmosphere where students of all sexual orientations can feel comfortable. This is a goal that goes beyond the minimum legal requirements stated in the University's policy statement.

The University began studying the academic and social climate for GLB students in 1986. At that time, the Student Union Assembly (SUA) passed a resolution calling for the Chancellor to "immediately form a committee to catalog and report to the SUA the needs and concerns of the gay community." The committee interviewed groups of students about GLB issues and published its report in 1987. As a result, the University created a permanent committee to address the needs of the GLB community.

This study was designed to provide quantitative information to the Chancellor and the Committee on Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Community Concerns on the nature, extent and effects of harassment of GLB students. The study assessed student knowledge about GLB-related issues, and documented students' attitudes and behaviors toward GLB students, faculty and staff. A copy of the complete report may be obtained from the authors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In a review of the published studies on attitudes toward homosexuality, Plasek and Allard (1984) found persistent methodological flaws. According to Plasek and Allard, many researchers relied on attitude scales that suffered from a host of measurement problems. For example, many of the scales confounded cognitive and affective dimensions of attitudes, leading to the incorrect labelling of negative feelings toward homosexuality as beliefs about homosexuality. Given the seriousness of the flaws, they argued that research has shed very little light on attitudes toward homosexuality and homosexuals.

Although much of the literature published on homosexuality was of little use, other colleges have also studied GLB issues and concerns. Studies conducted at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (1985), Rutgers University (1987), and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (1987) proved very useful for identifying important issues.

During the Fall semester of 1984, a series of confrontations occurred at University of Massachusetts at Amherst. These events convinced the university that GLB students were "subjected to an unusual amount of harassment and may well lack any of the usual student services sensitive to their needs as a group" (University of Massachusetts, 1985, p. 1). This led to an evaluation of the campus' climate, needs, and existing services for GLB students. The multi-faceted evaluation included telephone surveys, open-ended surveys distributed among the GLB community, surveys in the student newspaper, and surveys sent to student services units and residence halls.

Results showed that over half of the student body believed there were widespread anti-gay and anti-lesbian attitudes on campus. Over a third of the students frequently saw anti-gay or anti-lesbian graffiti on campus. Almost three-fourths of the student body believed GLB students were directly and verbally harassed; over half believed these students had been the victims of vandalization; and close to half believed that GLB students received threatening phone calls. Students were reluctant to intervene in these types of harassments: only one-fourth indicated willingness to intervene directly, and fewer than five percent said they would even report such an incident.

GLB students reported a similar pattern of harassment. About eighty-five percent reported seeing anti-GLB graffiti, almost half reported having received verbal threats, a third had been harassed over the telephone, and a fifth reported physical confrontations or assaults. Many of these students

also felt their sexual orientation was responsible for other, more subtle, forms of discrimination including lower grades (60%), job discrimination (21%), and being forced out of housing (13%).

The study concluded that "lesbian, gay, and bisexual students experience a range of verbal and physical assault [sic] which exceeds that of any other group of students" (University of Massachusetts, 1985, p. 20). When assaults did occur, GLB students were either afraid or unwilling to report such instances because they considered University staff to be insensitive to gay and lesbian issues. Faculty were also of concern to GLB students. Professors were deemed to be, at best, ignorant of the experiences of gay men and lesbian women. Finally, GLB students who were most open about their sexuality were much more likely to experience harassment and discrimination. The University of Massachusetts report concluded that a

clear definition of sexual identity is a primary task for the college years. This is a stressful task even for heterosexual students and often an overwhelming one for lesbian, gay and bisexual students. The lack of adequate physical protection, the anti-gay stance of many academic courses, the inadequacy of student services and the openly anti-gay atmosphere in many residence halls combine to create a climate producing anxiety and depression for many of these students. This is particularly true for those whose self-image suffers from the negative attributes assigned to lesbian, gay and bisexual people by societal prejudice (p. 21).

In 1987, students enrolled in a Homosexuality and Society class at Rutgers University performed a study similar to the one conducted at the University of Massachusetts. Their results showed that almost a third of the campus thought it was likely that a GLB person would be harassed, threatened,

or assaulted and almost half believed that a GLB student would receive unfair treatment on campus. These results matched the experience of GLB students. One-third of the GLB students reported at least one instance of verbal insults, one-sixth reported being threatened at least once with physical violence, and one-fifth had been chased or followed. The malicious intent of these events was underscored by more serious events: four percent reported having been physically assaulted, and two percent had been assaulted with a weapon. As a result, many GLB students kept their sexual identities secret, fearing for their safety. So pronounced was the anti-GLB sentiment on campus, that the student researchers feared for their own safety even after the study was finished. The report concluded that GLB students do not have access to, or receive, the same rights and services as heterosexual students.

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the Chancellor also appointed a task force to study GLB issues. Compared to Amherst and Rutgers, there was less awareness of the problems faced by GLB students. Even though fewer incidents were reported, around forty percent of the gay and lesbian respondents reported having been "socially ostracized," and about a third reported having felt ridiculed in classes. Passive acceptance of anti-GLB practices had a negative impact on GLB students' well-being resulting both in loss of self-esteem and feelings of isolation.

METHODOLOGY

Two surveys were developed. A general survey was randomly distributed to 20 percent of the undergraduate and graduate students. This survey was designed to: (1) assess attitudes toward GLB students, faculty, and staff; (2) document students' acceptance of discrimination or harassment; (3) assess knowledge about GLB related issues; and (4) determine the proportion of students who were gay, lesbian or bisexual. A "select" survey was distributed

through various GLB student organizations which focused on the nature, site, frequency, and effects of discrimination.

Because the University is legally required to create and maintain an environment free from discrimination, part of the survey focused on harassing or discriminatory behaviors. The items documented specific behaviors, often without reference to the motive of the offender. Having addressed the University's minimum responsibilities, it was necessary to examine the less tangible elements that are necessary for a healthy academic atmosphere. Although the University is not responsible for any individual prejudices that students may harbor, students' private feelings and attitudes have an important influence on the campus atmosphere. The items on attitudes and student comfort examined how comfortable GLB and heterosexual students felt when interacting with one another. Of particular interest was the acceptance of discrimination or harassment by other students. While students would not initiate an incident themselves, their tacit acceptance of such an occurrence creates an atmosphere where such incidents are more likely to occur.

The most common instances of harassment on campus were not overt and often were quite subtle. Thus, the surveys did not focus on acts of violence, but on types of harassment that were more common. Harassment was studied in the context of students' daily lives in classrooms, campus housing and administrative offices. Questions on the frequency of harassment were included on both surveys.

To ensure that students understood what was meant by the phrase "sexual orientation," the surveys defined it as "having to do with the gender of the people to whom one is romantically or sexually attracted. Current social descriptions of sexual orientations include lesbian women, gay men, bisexual men and women, and heterosexual men and women ." Students were asked to select

the best description of their sexual orientation (being primarily attracted to members of the same or opposite gender, both genders, neither gender, or unsure). However, student-supplied classifications may not address the relationship between students' sexual identities and their actual behavior. Because of this, students were asked if they had engaged in sex with members of their own or opposite gender during the last year or ever in their lifetime. This was used to establish the degree to which sexual behavior corresponded to sexual identity.

Information from GLB students was collected in the randomly-distributed general survey, but the questions generally were focused on heterosexual students. Because the population of GLB students could not be identified, non-random sampling was required for the select survey. As the results of the select survey could not be considered representative, questions on the select survey were primarily designed to document individuals' experiences. About one-third of the questions were identical with the general survey. On the remaining items, more emphasis was placed on open-ended questions.

A recurrent problem in developing survey questions was defining a referent group -- should the questions refer to gay, lesbian or bisexual people separately or all of them as a single group? For example, would homophobic men respond differently to questions referring to gay friends than they would to questions referring to lesbian friends? Asking each question with regard to each group, however, would have created a tediously long and repetitive questionnaire. Splitting the sample would have markedly increased the required sample size. During field testing, it was found that heterosexual respondents generally referred an item to the group towards which there was the greatest emotional impact. As a result, most questions referred

to GLB students as a single group. Several items were targeted to specific referents (e.g., gay professors) for the purpose of examining this assumption.

One of the purposes of the study was to examine the relationship between homophobia and knowledge of GLB-related issues. If students who knew less about GLB people were found to be more homophobic, more emphasis could be placed on education and awareness programs. However, many of the knowledge issues were a matter of controversy even among experts in the field. This resulted in some knowledge-based items without agreed-upon correct answers.

RESULTS

The surveys were administered during the fall of 1988. The general survey was mailed to 2000 randomly selected students of which 733 were returned (36.6%). The students who returned the general survey were fairly representative of the UCSC student population in terms of their residential college, age, ethnicity, and major. The average sampling error across all items on the general survey was about 1.5 percent.

The students who responded to the select survey were not similar to the GLB students who responded to the general survey. Equal numbers of GLB students responded to each survey: 112 on the select survey and 103 on the general survey.

The Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Community at UCSC

Nine percent of the males identified themselves as being primarily attracted to members of their own sex, as did eight percent of the females. Six percent identified themselves as being attracted to members of both sexes (four percent of the males and eight percent of the females). Ten percent of the heterosexual males reported having had sex with a male at least once and four percent within the last year. Fifteen percent of the heterosexual women reported having had sex with a woman at least one time and four percent had

done so within the last year. Similar complexities were found for GLB students. Two-thirds of the gay men reported having had sex with a woman in the last year and over forty percent of the lesbian women reported having had sex with a man in the last year. Thirty percent of the GLB students reported never having had sex with a same sex partner. As expected, there were large differences between students' sexual behaviors and their sexual identities.

Academic Atmosphere

On the general survey, only two students (non-GLB) reported changing or avoiding an academic project related to sexual orientation because of an instructor's discouragement. On the select survey however, 11 percent of the respondents reported such incidents and 20 percent reported that they changed a project because they feared the instructor might disapprove.

On the general survey, one-fourth of the GLB students said that they had attended classes where the instructor ignored GLB-related issues when they were appropriate to discuss. This was reported by only five percent of the heterosexual students. On the select survey, half of the respondents said this had happened in their classes. Over ten percent of the GLB students said they felt they had been penalized in a class for being homosexual.

A similar disparity was found regarding anti-GLB remarks in the classroom. Five percent of the heterosexual students reported that an instructor had made such remarks. Thirteen percent of the GLB students in the general survey said such remarks had been made and over a fourth of the people responding to the select survey reported occurrences.

Eight percent of the heterosexual students (seven percent of the men and eight percent of the women) reported that professors or teaching assistants made sexual remarks or advances, creating uncomfortable classroom situations.

Over ten percent of the GLB students also reported this problem -- nearly all of them were women.

Social Atmosphere

An important part of creating a healthy social atmosphere is providing an environment where students can be comfortable enough to explore their own sexual identities. For GLB students, this is closely related to "outness" -- the degree to which they feel comfortable revealing their sexual orientation to others. Compared with their peers, GLB students expressed a much greater degree of discomfort over disclosing their sexual orientation to others. This was especially true for gay men. None of the GLB students reported keeping their sexuality a secret, but thirty percent were 'out' only to a select group (this included half of all GLB freshpersons). Thirty-six percent were 'out' to a majority of the people they knew and only thirteen percent were 'out' to everyone. The settings where GLB students felt most comfortable being 'out' were social events sponsored by gay or lesbian groups. The most difficult place to be open about one's GLB sexual orientation was in class. When asked how comfortable GLB students felt publicly expressing affection for a person of the same sex on campus, 43 percent said they were comfortable, 22 percent had mixed feelings, and 35 percent felt uncomfortable.

Openness about homosexuality is influenced by how students talk about it informally among themselves. About 75 percent said it was discussed in a positive or neutral manner while twenty percent reported it was talked about negatively. Heterosexual and GLB students reported very similar percentages. However, nearly a fourth of the select respondents said they heard anti-GLB jokes or slurs weekly and half reported this happened at least once a month. Nearly half of the students reported seeing defaced GLB bulletins each month.

Having social contact with people who share similar interests and values is important to well-being. Half of the GLB students said they belonged to an organization that serves the GLB community and three-fourths had attended social events sponsored by such organizations.

Student Services and Housing

There was little evidence that University staff deliberately treated GLB students differently than other students; however, over ten percent of the GLB students reported difficulty working with a heterosexual non-teaching staff member. For example, GLB students reported difficulty in finding satisfactory counseling on campus. Over a fourth said they met resistance or were unable to receive counseling on issues related to sexual orientation.

Finding compatible roommates was also a problem. Ten to twenty percent of the GLB students reported difficulty in finding comfortable living arrangements on campus. Thirty percent of the GLB students said they felt uncomfortable in on-campus housing as a result of their sexual orientation (compared to seven percent who lived off-campus). There was no difference between the percentages of GLB and non-GLB students who lived off-campus.

About twenty percent of the GLB students reported moving off-campus to find a more accepting environment. One student wrote "This year, I'm living in an all-straight (besides myself) household, and I hate it. . . The most 'understanding' straight person, while being easier to be around than some homophobe, still is not the same as a gay or lesbian housemate, with whom I can talk about my experiences without having to explain everything, justify my position, or feel bad about who I am." Another said "It seemed to me like a lot of these people, having never been away from home, started doing a lot of sexual exploration in the dorms ... I just didn't want to be around all that budding young drunken heterosexuality."

Harassment and Discrimination

On the average, students reported that it was "somewhat unlikely" that a GLB student would be harassed on campus; however, eight percent of the students said it was "very likely." Over 20 percent of the GLB students said they had concealed their sexual orientation to avoid harassment and about half said that at least once each quarter they felt pressured not to talk about their sexual identity (a third said this happens weekly). Sixteen percent of the GLB students said they feared for their physical safety on campus.

Of the types of harassment studied, verbal harassment was the most common. Forty percent of the GLB students reported that it had happened at least once a year and ten percent said that it happens at least once a month. The most common written comments had to do with homophobic remarks and jokes outside of class. Of greater concern was that nearly 20 percent of the GLB students said they had been sexually harassed, and over ten percent reported instances of physical confrontation during the year. These same types of harassment also occurred off-campus, and with greater frequency.

As a rule, when harassment occurred, students did not discuss the problem with the University Police, Ombudsman's Office, or other University officials. About a quarter of the students said they talked to someone in Counseling and Psychological Services, a faculty member or residential college staff, and a third brought the problem to a GLB campus organization. Most students (75 percent), however, talked with friends about such matters.

Other campuses have found that the more open GLB students were about their orientation, the more harassment they experienced. This was also found at Santa Cruz, but it was not a direct relationship. Instead, only the GLB students who reported being "out" to everyone reported significantly higher levels of harassment than those not "out" to everyone (including those who

were "out" to most people). These students reported more frequent instances of viewing defaced GLB bulletins, verbal harassment, physical confrontation, viewing anti-GLB graffiti, and feeling penalized in class. As some of the reported incidents were not necessarily related to being "out" (i.e., viewing defaced bulletins, viewing graffiti), greater sensitization rather than more frequent occurrences may have contributed to the differences.

Homophobia and Related Behaviors

A homophobia scale was created to identify students who were markedly homonegative (having negative attitudes about homosexual people) or homophobic (fearful of homosexual people). Items related to homophobic or homonegative behavior were combined into a scale. Binary items were assigned a maximum value of five and a minimum value of one so that their variances would be similar to items employing five point scales. Items that were not highly correlated with the scale were dropped from the composite. The final seventeen item scale had an internal consistency (KR-20) of .90. The mean score on this scale was 32.5 and the standard deviation was 12.3. The distribution was markedly skewed to the right and ranged from 17 to 78.

Previous studies have made the distinction between homophobia and homonegativity. This distinction was useful in developing a range of attitudinal and behavioral items. Homonegative and homophobic items were analyzed to examine whether these sets of items behaved differently. Using alpha factor analysis and several nonorthogonal rotation methods, the data were examined for evidence of more than one factor. A strong single factor emerged and no robust second factor was found. The difference between homophobia and homonegativity, although conceptually useful, was not substantiated by our data.

The relationship between homophobia and demographic characteristics was investigated. Using analysis of variance, differences were found due to academic level, ethnicity, gender and residential college. Freshpersons were considerably more homophobic than the other grade levels (freshpersons, 35.5; sophomores, 31.9; juniors, 32.0; seniors, 30.8; graduate students, 30.5). Asian and Hispanic students were significantly more homophobic than Caucasian students (Caucasian, 31.5; Asian, 38.8; Hispanic, 40.7). Males scored considerably higher than females (35.0 vs. 30.8), and the mean scores for the residential colleges ranged from 29.3 to 35.4.

More important from a policy perspective was whether students who had attended lectures, seminars, or courses on GLB issues were less homophobic than students who had not attended such events. Students who had attended GLB-related lectures or seminars were found to be significantly less homophobic (attenders, 28.9; nonattenders, 32.9). Receiving information on GLB issues accounted for about two percent of the variance of the homophobia scores, and the effect was uniform for men and women and across all ethnic groups. Thus, organized instruction and discussion may have reduced homophobia.

Contact with other students on campus is also an important source of information. As shown in Table 1, there was a strong inverse relationship between the number of GLB people a heterosexual student knew and homophobia. In addition, there was a high negative correlation between how well a student knew a GLB individual and their homophobia score.

Table 1

Homophobia and Personal Contact

How many people do you know who would describe themselves as
lesbian, gay or bisexual?

<u>Response</u>	<u>Description</u>	<u>Number of Respondents</u>	<u>Average Homophobia Score</u>
A	None	51	45.5
B		205	35.9
C	Some	202	29.7
D		71	26.3
E	Many	38	23.4

Forty-one students (24 male, 17 female) scored two or more standard deviations above the mean on the homophobia scale and were classified as severely homophobic. There were no differences between this group and the other survey respondents in academic level or college affiliation. However, like the population, there were differences between men and women, and among ethnic groups. Homophobic students averaged between one and two standard deviations above the nonhomophobic students' average on every item. In spite of these differences, it is difficult to infer that these people are more prone to overt harassment. Many of their responses fall in the midrange of possible responses, and, since many of the items are attitudinal, inferences about actual behavior must be made cautiously.

There were predictable differences between homophobic and nonhomophobic students. Thirty percent of the severely homophobic students reported not knowing any GLB people (compared to only eight percent of the nonhomophobic group). Five percent of these students have a close relationship with a GLB

person compared with nearly half of the nonhomophobic students. The same percentage of homophobic students had attended workshops, lectures and other events as students in the general population. This suggests that extreme homophobia may not be affected by educational programs.

DISCUSSION

The two surveys had a common set of items and the results obtained from GLB students on these questions were often quite different. The results from the select survey always showed greater levels of harassment than did the general survey. The general survey was sent to a random sample while the select survey was distributed through GLB-related organizations. The students responding to the select survey may have viewed the survey more as a political vehicle for change or have been more sensitive to harassment. Although the incidence of harassment was fairly low, it also may have been overstated due to some GLB students attributing their difficulties to sexual orientation rather than to other personal characteristics.

The relationship between knowledge of GLB issues and homophobic behaviors was difficult to establish. There were no differences on knowledge items between students who had attended classes and seminars and those who had not attended, nor were there differences between GLB and heterosexual students. Without a subject matter expert, these questions were difficult to create. To examine this relationship more closely, items that have been extensively field-tested will be required.

It is a generally-accepted practice to reverse the scaling of items to help assure that the respondents read each question carefully. In analyzing the homophobia scale, the items which were reverse scaled did not correlate as highly with the scale score as did the other items. In this case, reverse scaling of these items may have confused the students.

The select survey attempted to assess the personal impact of different types of harassment. Examination of these data revealed that the average impact score correlated very closely with the frequency of the incidents. Since the two were so similar, the analyses focused only on the frequency data. Either the respondents did not understand the item in the way it was intended or personal impact was a simple function of frequency. Either way, these data did not add any additional information.

The survey was cited in the student newspaper several times. Articles written by representatives of student GLB organizations criticized the study for two reasons. One author felt that the monies used to fund the survey should have been given directly to the student organizations. Efforts by "the administration" to study GLB issues were not viewed positively. However, when respondents were asked to evaluate the survey, eighty-five percent said the surveys had addressed their concerns. Another article said that making the issues more salient would probably raise the level of homophobia on campus.

Topics not addressed in the study were mentioned in students' written comments. A few heterosexual students felt that exclusion from GLB social functions and organizations constituted a form of discrimination. Several students reported wanting to join, but felt unwelcome. Thus, items on heterophobia, the fear of heterosexual people, might have been included on the select survey. Such items would not focus on pathological distrust; they would be similar to the items on comfort developed for the general survey. While heterophobia may not be a major problem, it could help to identify GLB students who are having trouble adapting to the university environment.

Several students commented that the survey did not place enough emphasis on the social atmosphere as it is perceived by heterosexual students. Many heterosexual students said they were completely unaware of any of the issues

discussed in the survey or had never thought about them. A number of students felt that there needed to be items about how GLB students were viewed by heterosexual students. For example, several students thought GLB students were unduly powerful because they were politically active and outspoken.

There were several times when inappropriate, misleading, or politically volatile survey questions or analyses were proposed. It was important to focus the study on policy issues to protect the legitimacy of the study. The sensitivity of the information required tight control of the research agenda.

Undertaking such surveys require working closely with GLB students, faculty, and staff. For an institutional researcher to provide the professional expertise required, the researcher must cope with his/her own homophobic anxieties. While many educated heterosexuals feel comfortable dealing with GLB people on an intellectual level, their emotions may betray their logic. Undertaking research on GLB-related issues may also raise concerns about how one is perceived by one's co-workers. As others learn of the project, the researcher may feel some of the social stigma that GLB students experience. Related to this, Plasek and Allard commented that one of the of reasons there is a paucity of solid research on GLB issues is that many people don't want to be labelled as gay or lesbian researchers. Regardless of one's sexual orientation, when familiarity with GLB people overcomes any fears of stigmatization, it becomes easy to identify with the victimized group. This is a natural process which must be treated cautiously. Understanding the personal, social, and political problems of GLB people must be balanced by the need for accurate and non-judgmental analyses.

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