

Making the Choice to Create an Inclusive LGBT Campus Culture

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Abstract

Although issues regarding the rights of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) individuals will likely remain controversial for years to come, the fact is that *all* universities have LGBT students, faculty, staff, alumni, or constituents. Universities can make a choice to be inclusive, or alternatively, can choose to tolerate, or avoid issues that affect the experiences and lives of LGBT individuals. This article outlines several suggestions for universities choosing to create an accepting/inclusive LGBT campus culture.

Making Choices

University administrators and faculty have explicit choices to make about the acceptance and inclusion of LGBT individuals on their campuses. One choice is to simply avoid or ignore issues that affect LGBT individuals. Avoidance/ignorance has certainly been, in the past, the most common choice made by universities. By avoiding or ignoring LGBT issues, universities have felt that they protect themselves from potential backlash from stakeholders (on campus and off-campus) who might believe that an LGBT sexual orientation is a sin or a sickness, and/or that LGBT individuals should not receive any type of recognition or consideration from the university. Avoid/ignore may also be perceived as a safe choice by faculty and students who have not had any experience addressing LGBT issues on campus or in the classroom.

A second choice that a university can make might be described as tolerance. According to *Webster's Dictionary* (1986), to *tolerate* is to “allow the existence of or

occurrence of without interference” or “to endure.” A tolerance approach at least acknowledges that there are LGBT people on campus (and in the world beyond campus). This choice may be a bit more common (and realistic) at universities today given that 6 in 10 Americans say they have a homosexual friend, colleague, or family member, and nearly three-quarters of college graduates (73%) say they have a friend or relative who is gay (Pew Forum & the Pew Research Center, 2003). Obviously, the fact that many members of a typical university community are LGBT or know LGBT people makes it far more difficult for campuses to avoid or ignore LGBT issues altogether.

Tolerance may be the most common choice for universities. The choice of tolerance is the equivalent of saying “We know you exist; we’ll do nothing to purposely hurt you, but we also won’t do anything to help you.” Tolerance as a choice may be viewed by some as the ultimate safe haven by universities. In this environment, LGBT community members won’t feel entirely ignored, and university administration/faculty can take a neutral stance with those who are opposed to acceptance and inclusion of LGBT individuals.

The third choice that Universities may make is acceptance and inclusion. The choice of acceptance and inclusion is difficult because it may clearly put the University at odds with community members who are opposed to this choice (those who view an LGBT orientation as a sin or sickness). It may also be difficult because LGBT issues are so rarely discussed that members of the University community, even those truly committed to doing so, may

not know *how* to implement a choice of acceptance and inclusion.

DeSurr and Church (1994) and Connelly (2000) describe a “marginalizing-centralizing” continuum to represent the extent to which LGBT students perceived messages that signaled whether LGBT perspectives would be included or excluded in class:

1. Overt homophobic messages and behaviors that go unchallenged describe Explicit Marginalization.
2. Subtle, indirect messages and behaviors that heterosexuality is the norm and the LGBT people are the “other” or abnormal describe Implicit Marginalization.

3. Unplanned, supportive responses to LGBT issues describe Implicit Centralization.

4. Actively considered and openly discussed responses to LGBT issues describe Explicit Centralization.

I believe the university community, in general, receives signals about whether LGBT people are to be included or excluded on campus, and whether the campus has made a choice of avoid/ignore, tolerance, or acceptance/ inclusion. Table 1 shows some of the attributes (signals sent) typical of Universities that have chosen to avoid/ignore, tolerate, or accept/include LGBT issues.

Table 1
Attributes of Avoid/Ignore, Tolerate, and Accept/Include Choices.

Avoid/Ignore	Tolerate	Accept/Include
No acknowledgement of LGBT people in university policy.	May have some LGBT supportive policies.	LGBT people are fully acknowledged in university policies and policies are well-communicated.
LGBT organizations are not officially acknowledged.	LGBT organizations may be recognized, but receive no direct support from the university.	LGBT organizations are recognized and receive support (financial and participation) from University.
LGBT people generally afraid to be “out.”	Some LGBT people are out and there are pockets of LGBT acceptance.	LGBT people feel comfortable being out on campus and have support from straight colleagues.
University administration does not/will not discuss LGBT issues.	University administration will discuss LGBT issues only when pressed to do so.	University administration openly discusses LGBT issues.
Explicit Marginalization/ Implicit Marginalization	Implicit Marginalization/ Implicit Centralization	Implicit Centralization/ Explicit Centralization
Diversity initiatives do not address LGBT issues	LGBT issues may be part of a general diversity initiative, but are not specifically addressed.	LGBT issues are specific, central component of the university’s diversity initiatives.
No discussion of LGBT issues, internally or externally.	May talk about issues of sexual orientation diversity internally, but do not take a public stance.	University is a public advocate for the rights of its LGBT community members.

Choosing Acceptance and Inclusion

Let me be explicit about my assumptions before I move to some suggestions for implementing the choice of acceptance and inclusion. First, as I noted in the Abstract, *all* universities have LGBT students, faculty, staff, alumni, or constituents. Whether these individuals (faculty, students, alumni, etc.) are open about their sexual orientation is a direct reflection of the extent to which the campus is currently perceived to be LGBT inclusive/accepting. Second, I'm making the assumption that, regardless of specific beliefs (religious or other) about LGBT individuals or orientation, no university employee would want to *purposely* alienate or create an uncomfortable/unwelcoming environment for *any* university community member.

The Role of Leadership

As in any organizational change, the choice of acceptance and inclusion must ultimately be made at the university leadership level, and behaviors and language must reflect this choice. Although LGBT-supportive pockets may exist on campus, without on-going top-level support, acceptance and inclusion will *never* be the campuswide choice (in some cases, pockets of acceptance/inclusion may be the only option available, and I'll discuss this later). Making the choice of acceptance and inclusion requires top leadership to act on the following:

1. Adding "sexual orientation" to the university's nondiscrimination statement. This is one of the most public statements a university can make. The nondiscrimination statement is typically published in all official documents (job advertisements, university catalogs, etc.). This sends a visible message to individuals currently at the

university, or, just as importantly, individuals thinking about joining the university (faculty, staff, students), that the campus is supportive of LGBT community members.

2. Including LGBT issues as a specific and active aspect of the university's diversity statement/strategic plan. Adding sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination statement suggests that a university is moving toward acceptance/inclusion. Simply adding this to the nondiscrimination statement, however, is not sufficient in itself. Rather, the university must actively implement policies of nondiscrimination and proactively deal with LGBT issues as a specific component of an overall diversity plan. This means specific, public discussions on how to make the university more accepting and inclusive, implementation of specific policies that support acceptance and inclusion (e.g., domestic partnership benefits, partner housing for graduate students), sponsorship of educational events pertaining to LGBT issues, using gay inclusive language and behaviors, and publicly advocating on behalf of LGBT community members.
3. Using gay inclusive language and behaviors. Individuals often make the assumption that their colleagues and students are heterosexual. Heterosexuals are supported in talking openly about their husbands, wives, and children, and these topics are often the focus of discussion both inside and outside of the classroom. LGBT people often are excluded or feel excluded from these discussions. In an accepting/inclusive environment, LGBT University community members (including students in our classes) are explicitly

given permission and opportunity to discuss their families and their lives. Partners and significant others are included in invitations to events and are recognized at official university functions. Top leadership of the university must also create a culture where harassing/derogatory language about or behavior toward LGBT people is deemed inappropriate and unacceptable.

4. Advocacy for LGBT community members. If the University makes the choice of acceptance/inclusion, top leadership has the responsibility to be visible advocates for the university's LGBT community members. This means communicating a strong, ongoing public message that the university is entirely supportive of and will do whatever necessary to create the most effective learning and work environment for its LGBT employees, students, and alumni. This message must be communicated in numerous ways—through campus publications that discuss LGBT issues or highlight LGBT events, through invitations to LGBT friendly organizations/individuals to speak on campus or be involved in campus activities, through public speeches (and private conversations) of university representatives, and through the university's responses to public policies that affect LGBT University community members.

Creating Pockets of Acceptance/Inclusion

In the absence of on-going top-level leadership support for acceptance and inclusion, it is still possible to create pockets of acceptance/inclusion at the academic unit level (college/department/office/classroom). In fact, in my experience, grassroots action at the academic unit level may ultimately be the impetus for movement to acceptance and

inclusion at the university level. The intent of the actions outlined above can also be implemented on a smaller scale.

If adding “sexual orientation” to the university's nondiscrimination statement is not a viable option, academic units can develop their own inclusive diversity statements. The Kennesaw State University Senate (King, 2003) recently endorsed the following statement:

The KSU population reflects differing backgrounds and experiences including but not limited to age, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, geographic region, language, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. It is our goal to foster a community in which every human being is treated with dignity, respect, and justice. The KSU academic experience will provide the opportunity to gain knowledge and experiences necessary to thrive in a diverse, global environment (King, 2003, Faculty & Student Diversity Leadership Team section).

Such a statement can be printed in academic unit brochures and placed on course syllabi as a means of acknowledging the diversity of the campus community and signaling the intent to create an accepting/inclusive environment for LGBT individuals. Such a statement could also be included in course syllabi without broader endorsement, for example:

Participants in this class reflect differing backgrounds and experiences including but not limited to age, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, geographic region, language, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. It is my goal as an instructor to foster a learning experience in which every human being is treated with dignity, respect, and justice. This class will provide the opportunity to gain knowledge and experiences necessary to thrive in a diverse, global environment (King, 2003, Faculty & Student Diversity Leadership Team section).

If, at the university level, the choice is made not to include LGBT issues as a

specific and active aspect of the university's diversity statement/strategic plan, academic units can make the choice to proactively deal with LGBT issues by holding discussion groups or sponsoring educational events pertaining to LGBT issues, and by supporting training and research geared toward helping faculty deal effectively with

LGBT issues in the classroom. Many universities have implemented "Safe Space" programs, and an academic (or service) office could designate itself as a Safe Space. The mission statement for Kennesaw State University's Safe Space Initiative is provided in Table 2.

Table 2
The Kennesaw State University Safe Space Initiative.

In 1996, Kennesaw State University (KSU) became one of the first institutions in the University System of Georgia to add sexual orientation to its nondiscrimination statement. KSU's goal is to have lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students, faculty, and staff feel comfortable on campus so that they can perform at their highest level.

Many members of the KSU community remain uninformed about the lives of LGBT individuals. For this reason, many LGBT students, faculty, staff, and administrators feel that to be honest and open would result in their being treated differently than their peers. Consequently, they often feel a need to hide their sexual orientation and anything about their personal life that might reveal it.

The result is that LGBT students, faculty, and staff often experience a sense of isolation. Unlike more visible under-represented groups, LGBT persons cannot be readily identified. Likewise, there is no easy method of identifying persons supportive of LGBT issues.

KSU Safe Spaces is a campus-wide initiative that offers a *visible message of inclusion, acceptance, and support to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals*. The goal of the Safe Space Initiative at KSU is to identify and educate individuals who will affirm and support all persons regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Persons displaying the Safe Space logo are committed to combating hatred and discrimination through assistance and support. Posting this logo does not indicate anything about a student, staff, or faculty member's own sexual orientation. Rather, the KSU Safe Space logo sends a message to students, faculty, and staff that you support the equal treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender persons.

Gay inclusive language and behavior are particularly important at the academic unit and classroom level, given that this is where individuals experience the university on a daily basis. If it is not already the culture at the university level, academic units and/or faculty must, at a minimum, create and maintain an environment free of derogatory/harassing language and behavior. Also, partners and significant others should be included in invitations to events and activities and LGBT community members should feel supported in discussing their lives and partners. Broad community participation (e.g., LGBT individuals, along with straight administrators, faculty and students) in LGBT events both on and off campus demonstrates gay inclusive behavior.

Toward Acceptance/Inclusion

Many universities have not dealt proactively with LGBT issues and individuals. Universities that have made a choice concerning how to deal with their LGBT population have often chosen avoid, ignore, or tolerate as means of addressing LGBT individuals and issues.

In conclusion, the university must:

1. Add "sexual orientation" to the university's nondiscrimination statement.
2. Include LGBT issues as a specific and active aspect of the university's diversity statement/strategic plan.
3. Use gay inclusive language and behavior.
4. Advocate publicly for LGBT community members.

If the choice of acceptance/inclusion is not made at the university level, LGBT and LGBT supportive university community members can and must create pockets of acceptance for LGBT individuals at the academic unit level. As LGBT issues continue to be debated in such a public manner, I believe that universities will be

forced to make an explicit choice about how they will treat and support the increasingly visible population of LGBT administrators, faculty, staff, students, and alumni. The choice of acceptance and inclusion will be made by those universities most interested in creating a truly productive working and learning environment for all community members.

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