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Dismantling the Velvet-lined Closet: The Generational Schism Within LGBTQA Campus Communities

Dorothea V. Brauer

LGBTQA undergraduate students need and lack faculty mentors and role models. Internalized homophobia and real dangers of discrimination and marginalization prevent experienced LGBT faculty from participating in LGBTQA leadership roles on campus. This article discusses this situation, and its implications in the context of higher education diversity initiatives.

Communities

I am one of a growing number of professionals whose role is to assist a college or university in meeting the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, and ally (LGBTQA) students, staff, and faculty on campus. In this role, I expect to be challenged by cultural forces outside the LGBTQA community. I know there are students, staff, and faculty on my campus who express everything from insensitive remarks to outright bigotry toward sexual minorities. I live and work in Vermont, the only state that allows same sex couples to join in civil union. People who lived through the battle to pass the civil unions law know that it included death threats to legislators. My job is to advocate for a constituency that some religious leaders continue to teach is sick and sinful. My job is easier than some of my colleagues' because I work in one of 12 states that have added "sexual orientation" to the list of groups guaranteed protection against discrimination. The feeling of safety this affords is limited by the overriding fact that the federal government still denies basic civil rights protections to sexual minorities. My institution, The University of Vermont (UVM), has policies and practices intended to support and protect sexual minorities, but gaps and inconsistencies require ongoing efforts to repair. Most campuses, including my own, have an even longer way to go to provide appropriate protections and accommodations to transgendered students, staff, and faculty.

Very little of this is new and none of it surprising. What is surprising is the extent to which my work to change these conditions is complicated by forces that persist within the LGBTQA community. I'm not referring to political conflicts between gays, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgendered people or differences of opinion about how resources should be applied. The problem that challenges me most is more insidious and is particular to the LGBTQA constituency. Ironically, what members of other minorities sometimes identify as an "advantage" for LGBTQA people, I see as our greatest disadvantage. Most LGBTQA people, and some T people as well, are able to hide their LGBTQA identity if they choose.

My peers who do advocacy work for other constituencies have a hard time understanding the crippling effect this phenomenon can have on my work. Only a handful of the estimated 1500 members of the UVM community who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are completely open about their identity on campus. By hiding their identity in different venues, they hope to avoid rejection or open hostility. LGBTQA programmers have to wonder if they will attract or repel their audience by making the LGBTQA focus of a program visible and clear. Every contact my office has with the LGBTQA community involves guessing games and risk-taking.

Advocacy is complicated when your constituency is hidden. Collegiate athletics provides a good example. I know my campus has gay collegiate athletes who are assaulted daily by the homophobic language and imagery that pervades college athletics, but the hostile climate keeps them closeted and discourages all students from reporting the majority of bias incidents. Unlike some of my colleagues who advocate for women or racial minorities I have to approach this problem in the abstract without direct testimony or even the acknowledged presence of the students I am trying to protect. I have to find other strategies to press for changes that will

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improve the campus climate so that the 90% of LGBTQA students who are currently invisible will be more likely to come out and demand that they be treated with dignity and respect.

In spite of these challenges, LGBTQA students, staff, and faculty have seen significant gains on our campus. “Sexual orientation” is part of UVM’s non-discrimination policy. The campus has celebrated National Coming Out Day with a full week of programming and distributed cards that read “ALLY/Safe Person/Safe Space” for the past 11 years. Six years before civil unions, the university extended domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples. The LGBTQA Services Office is in its fifth year of operation and four years ago a campus-wide protocol was established for bias-related incidents. These improvements have directly affected students’ experience by increasing LGBTQA-related programming, supporting the retention and recruitment of LGBTQA staff and faculty, and empowering at least some students to report bias incidents.

In UVM’s classrooms, the gains are more modest. Thanks solely to the courageous efforts of two junior faculty members, there are a few courses in the permanent curriculum that focus on LGBTQA issues. These same two out LGBT faculty members recently received tenure and a newly hired tenure-track faculty member has just arrived on campus with experience teaching LGBT Studies courses. An undergraduate student is hard at work pulling together a committee of faculty and students to establish a LGBT Studies concentration in the existing Women’s Studies major. These changes are taking place in small corners and are due mostly to the efforts of the newest members of the campus community.

Change in the classroom and curriculum on our campus has remained slow and minimal in spite of the relatively large number of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people occupying tenured faculty positions, and in some cases department chairmanships. Like LGBT senior faculty on many campuses, the members of UVM’s LGBTQA community with the most institutional power do not identify with LGBTQA concerns on campus. They may choose to come out in upper-class seminars, but not in first-year courses, or they may be active in community LGBTQA organizations, but remain disconnected from LGBTQA justice work on campus. A few faculty who are heterosexual allies are more likely than these LGBT senior faculty to include the lives, experiences, and issues of LGBTQA people in their courses. Many LGBT senior faculty will say that LGBTQA issues and politics relate only to their personal lives, which they guard with fierce detachment. When questioned about their choices, some offer rationales, “What does being gay have to do with _____?” Fill in the blank with almost any subject heading.

They rarely acknowledge that fear of gay oppression keeps them in the closet. Whatever the reasons, LGBTQA students are left without role models and are rendered invisible in the classroom.

Numerous books and articles have been published about the needs of LGBTQA students. In *Toward Acceptance: Sexual Orientation Issues on Campus*, Mark Connolly (2000) discusses the impact of exclusion from the curriculum on sexual minority students, saying that this

implicit exclusion suggests that although an institution may espouse the protection and inclusion of persons on the basis of sexual orientation, its actions instead reveal that its disenfranchised groups are configured in a “hierarchy of oppression” in which some—such as women or African Americans—are seen as more “legitimate than lesbians, gays and bisexuals.” (p. 112)

Today’s sexual minority students have been emboldened by the broadening of curriculum to include more than dominant culture perspectives. They are increasingly calling for representation in the curriculum of information and ideas that have immediate relevance to their lives. They want to learn about LGBTQA people and perspectives in history, the arts, anthropology, psychology, sociology, etc.

The transgender movement that is emerging on campuses across the country is demanding that courses throughout the curriculum address sex and gender, expanding the discussion to include more than the traditional “male” v. “female” paradigm. In history, political science, business, and psychology courses, these students are demanding that they learn about the marginalization and abuse of transgendered people. In courses that focus on social justice, they want discussions about oppression to include oppression on the basis of gender expression.

Students who take on an activist role question not only what is happening in their own classroom, but throughout the university. I have spoken to students at UVM who can see no acceptable rationale for UVM's Medical School not educating today's medical students about the tragedies that result from premature sex assignments, genital mutilation based on millimeter measurements, and psychiatric gender-correction treatment of adolescents diagnosed with gender identity disorder. From students' idealistic perspective the "science" of medicine could be leading society's understanding of transgendered people instead of treating transgression from society's gender norms as disease.

Instead of feeling challenged by faculty, students find they know more than their professors. The impression is that faculty are uninformed, even disinterested in the issues of greatest importance to them and invested mainly in maintenance of the status quo. While the 20-year-old college student is idealistic and impatient to a fault, it is also true that the transgendered segment of our society has lived on the margins, been the victims of vicious beatings, sometimes at the hands of police, and been targeted for harassment in every part of their lives. Today's sexual minority student is increasingly aware of the injustices transgendered people have faced and they see the Academy averting its otherwise inquisitive eye, excluding exploration of the lives of these people from academic discourse. They do not feel well-served by an institution when its scholarship and curricula in the fields of sociology, geography, psychology, social work, history, and literature teach student and scholar alike that transgendered people and their life experiences do not exist.

Having identified the need for progress in the classroom and in the curriculum, LGBTQA students and junior faculty are often perplexed that they cannot count on LGBT senior faculty for needed leadership. *Out and About on Campus*, edited by Kim Howard and Annie Stevens (2000), contains first-hand accounts by LGBT students of their own college experiences. In this book, Terry Dublinski, a graduate of the University of Wisconsin, describes how he was inspired to return to college by a book entitled *Gay and Lesbian Studies*. In his first attempt at college Terry had "flunked out...in part due to internalized homophobia and the severe depression that accompanied it" (Dublinski, 2000, p. 190). About his decision to be "academically out," he says,

I was tired of being left out. I was tired of not having information. I was tired of well-intentioned heterosexuals—who in actuality have no real understanding—writing about us. I wanted to make a change and felt that becoming the first graduate at UW-Madison in this emerging field might be a permanent way to do so. (p. 191)

Terry is the kind of student whose success could be compromised by the fact that the majority of college and university faculty members of every sexual orientation are unprepared for meaningful discourse with students concerning issues of orientation or gender identity. Sexual minority students are predictably angry when they encounter disinterest in their issues from faculty members in general, but they are perplexed and arguably damaged by the same inattention from faculty who are themselves members of a sexual minority. What can explain this puzzling, discouraging, and painful cultural and intellectual denial of identity by LGBTQA senior faculty besides internalized homophobia and the shame and identity trauma that comes from hiding?

Most of today's sexual minority senior faculty are survivors of higher education environments where their identity was explicitly and determinedly marginalized if not openly attacked. The communities where they lived supplied a steady stream of derisive imagery attacking LGBTQA identities more viciously than is common today. Toni A. H. McNaron describes her thirty-year faculty career at the University of Minnesota in the first chapter of her book *Poisoned Ivy* (1997). She shares how the climate of fear affected her: "encased in silence, I nonetheless made my way in the Academy, succeeding in the classroom and governance structure, while languishing as a scholar and person" (p. 5). One subject of McNaron's study illustrates the insidious effects of internalized homophobia. A retired professor of anthropology writes:

Being gay, combined with the upbringing I had, has made me timid and perfectionist and, for many years, shy about stepping into the arena of scholarship. My fear of homophobia was inseparable from a general fear of disapproval. This has meant that I have never mobilized my capacities for scholarship, and have had to spend my life at a second rate campus with a heavy workload. *I had great potential but was crippled by lack of self-esteem, flowing in part from self-denigration as gay.* On the other hand, once I accepted my identity more fully (thanks in good part to therapy), I gradually began to do research on gay and gender topics, which has been most

satisfying both intellectually and in the contact with gay peers it has provided. This has led to active involvement in gay academic politics, a matter of great pride and satisfaction. (McNaron, p. 195)

This anthropology scholar grew to understand the connection between accepting her own identity and feeling happy in her work, but she had less insight into the effect she could have on LGBTQA students as a role model or mentor. When asked about her choice to remain closeted in the classroom she said simply, "I cannot think of a class I've taught without self-identification that would have been aided by my doing so" (McNaron, pp. 194-5).

The political climate today suggests that LGBTQA people are more accepted in society than ever before. But these gains are fresh and fragile. Several states have gone on the defensive, passing anti-civil rights laws that bar sexual minority people from receiving "special" rights and/or make teaching about sexual minority people in public schools grounds for termination, et cetera. President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act in 1996, declaring that a state has no obligation to recognize another state's same-sex union. LGBTQA people have lobbied for a federal civil rights law for decades, but have yet to see it come up for a vote in either house of Congress.

In media there are openly gay and lesbian characters for the first time, although they are almost always comic stereotypes of gay and lesbian people. The lives of transgendered people have not reached mainstream, popular media except for tragic portrayals like the death of Brandon Teena in the film *Boys Don't Cry*. Daily newspapers and talk shows contain many more informative stories about LGBTQA issues, but also still include columns and commentaries asserting that homosexuals deserve no more rights than child molesters and murderers. Many non-LGBT people see this as minor, but it is hard to imagine similar forums being given to messages that openly attack other groups.

In trying to understand LGBTQA senior faculty on our campuses today, I remind myself that many grew up in a world where identification of anyone's sexual minority status resulted in devastating loss and trauma. They live and work in a society that assigns their identity second-class status. In contrast, today's college students are beginning adulthood in an era when Vermont's passage of civil unions inspires them to fight for more visibility and inclusion. It is impossible for these young people to know the fear and shame that still resides in a gay faculty member who was a student at UVM when psychology faculty were using electroshock therapy to "cure" homosexuality. Today's sexual minority students arrive on the campus political scene with hearts less damaged by shame, having grown up in a world where the words "lesbian," "gay," and "homosexual" have been used in polite company above a whisper. Instead of hearing how victims of gay bashings deserved what they got, they have seen the brutal killing of Matthew Shepard labeled a "hate crime."

A recent study suggests that the mixture of acceptance and denial that exists in politics and the media also exists in the classroom and makes it a treacherous place for a LGBTQA professor. Russ, Simonds, and Hunt found that, "students perceive a gay teacher as significantly less credible than a straight teacher" (2002, p. 311). In their carefully controlled study of 154 students' evaluations of a guest lecturer, Russ, et. al. found that sexual orientation status alone compromised instructor credibility to an extent that was not only measurable, but dramatic. Students' critical comments about the gay instructor outnumbered their critical comments about the straight instructor 205 to 39. While the lecturer and the lecture were in fact the same, except for the gender of two pronouns used, students described the "gay" instructor as having "distracting hand gestures," and "a grating voice," calling him "hard to listen to." Adjectives that appeared exclusively and repeatedly on students' evaluations of the gay instructor included: "flamboyant," "creative," "liberal," "pushy," and "biased." So while campuses, departments and classrooms appear friendlier today, perhaps faculty intuitively sense a continued risk to their professional standing and self-esteem if they choose to come out in the classroom.

Within any systematically oppressed community, the realities and impact of internalized oppression only fade incrementally as each generation is replaced by the next. Gains in self-respect and the safety to engage in public assertions of self-worth are painfully slow within generations because hurts, slights, dangers, and abuses carve indelible memories on our souls. The elders of an oppressed people are ill prepared to teach the younger generation about revolution. The flow of knowledge from the "older and wiser" to the youth of a culture is turned on its head as members of the younger generation discover themselves in a context of increased self-

acceptance. Their group identity is inevitably based on greater pride and self-worth than that of the generation that came before them.

Terry Dublinski is part of today's student-driven revolution in sexual minority politics on college campuses. Students like Terry are entering college believing that hiding one's sexual minority status is no longer reasonable. He has a vision of a world of full inclusion where sexual minority lives and experiences come in from the margins. While the majority of LGBTQA students remain closeted, others, like Terry, are boldly pushing boundaries throughout campus life, coming out as transgendered, crossing genders in dress, name, choice of bathrooms, and/or actively pursuing policy and academic changes through avenues like student government. These student leaders are acutely aware of faculty members on their campuses who are more or less prepared to provide them leadership and guidance. Terry describes an out gay professor he found as "the one person in the university who could probably help me most." He says, "I knew through the queer grapevine—how intertwined it is!—that there was an "out" gay professor...I'd read one of his articles (the subject matter was queer)" (Dublinski, 2000, p. 191). Terry's detailed and sentimental description of this professor conveys his importance in the development of Terry's vision and strategy.

I believe that the work of LGBTQA offices and the work of student affairs professionals in general will include finding ways to increase the number of LGBTQA faculty on our campuses prepared to work with students like Terry. New faculty arriving on campus provide some of this leadership, inspiring their students with their own LGBTQA scholarship. But it is important that I (and others) not allow my appreciation for the leadership of these new faculty to lull me into abandoning efforts to develop leadership among LGBT senior faculty. I want to recognize these community elders both for their pain and personal sacrifices and for their examples of courage.

Lesbians in Academia includes a submission by Nanette Gartrell, the first out, lesbian physician on the Harvard Medical School faculty, who concluded, in spite of opposition and interpersonal conflicts along the way, that "being out has given momentum and purpose to my work" (Gartrell, 1997, p. 68). As McNaron points out in her discussion of gradualism, insight into internalized oppression and change can come slowly for some. Another contributor to *Lesbians*, English professor Penelope Dugan, after describing the open hostility and discrimination she experienced as a closeted faculty member in an earlier position, says,

At my current institution, where I have tenure, I come out in the context of class discussions. I continue to include works by gay and lesbian authors in my required course assignments. I continue to challenge administrations and colleagues when it is an appropriate use of my energy. Life is too short to do otherwise. (Dugan, 1997, p. 42)

I long for help from my faculty colleagues in bringing about change. It is my nature that I get frustrated with slow progress in social and cultural understanding. In my work on LGBTQA issues, I am able to find some patience by reflecting on the evolution I have witnessed in my own lifetime in our society's understanding of multiracial perspectives. I am reminded that the battle for African Americans' civil rights was fought and won not only in the academic world of ideas, but throughout society. While we look to the Academy for intellectual leadership, sometimes the Academy waits for the rest of society to lead the way.

It is also instructive to look at the cultural impact of the Academy's historical use of "science" on both race and sexual minority oppression. In the past, the Academy produced scientific evidence of the animalistic nature and inferior moral character and intelligence of people of African descent. The Academy played a critical role in the oppression of African American people by providing the dominant culture with justification for everything from brutal abuse and murder to systematic denial of civil and human rights. Eventually, the Academy abandoned faulty scientific reasoning that supported ideas of African American inferiority and is finally beginning to nurture deeper investigation into diverse cultures.

Psychiatry's internationally accepted Diagnostic and Statistical Manual included homosexuality as a disease as recently as 1972 and gender dysphoria is still classified as pathology. At best, society treats those with the disease as unfortunate victims who cannot help the perversions in which they are compelled to engage. The scientific classification of homosexuals as sick added the perverted and criminal characterization of

homosexuals that is used to justify beatings and murders, particularly of transgendered people. Worst of all, it becomes an excuse for the denial of civil rights throughout the country. I believe that someday the science that oppresses sexual minorities will have vanished from the landscape and variety in relationships and gender expression will be understood outside a context of disease.

It has taken decades for the emergence of eminent African American scholars like bell hooks, Cornel West, and Audre Lorde to lead the Academy to a more honest deconstruction of racism and White privilege. It will take a similar evolutionary process to prepare the Academy for the radical deconstruction of gender that will reveal the root and nature of LGBT oppression.

I believe the Academy is in a unique position in society; it is both shaped by the larger culture and is a potential architect of cultural visions not yet realized. I would also argue that the single, most telling test of an academic institution's greatness is its ability to step forth and take on the kind of visionary exploration that supports and guides cultural evolution. But humanity must be taken into account. The idea of universal inquiry, of the development of knowledge purely for the sake of bettering the state of humankind is a lofty vision. In reality social, political, and cultural forces bind the free-flow of ideas in the Academy. When colleges and universities evolve intellectually, sometimes they are following rather than leading social revolution born in the hearts and minds of everyday people.

As an advocate for the needs of LGBTQA people on my campus, I believe the future lies in finding ways to build strong LGBTQA communities on our campuses. This means bridging ideological gaps between bisexuals, transgendered people, gays, and lesbians. It means bringing together LGBTQA people across race lines. It will also mean bridging the emotional gap between the hunger and legitimate need for progress felt by sexual minority youth and the fear and reticence felt by their faculty "elders."

Higher education professionals who are allies can support greater community among the generations of LGBTQA people on campus by stating openly and repeatedly that perceptions of LGBT people as sexual predators are misguided prejudice. This kind of cultural intervention can begin to ease senior faculty members' long held fear of their identity as a potential danger that could abruptly end a career. Similarly we can help overcome students' bitterness and cynicism by helping them understand the generational role reversal that is a necessary part of revolution.

Staff, faculty, and students need to be challenged to feel the kind of compassion, respect, and political understanding McNaron prescribes as we work together for change on our campuses. As a higher education professional, I continue to look ahead and believe that, for individuals and institutions alike, flourishing in the twenty-first century will require a sophisticated, if not always in-depth, understanding of the lives, experiences, and motivations of all people everywhere. I take hope from the fact that the world is expanding beyond the European ideals and vision that defined United States academic culture for the past two centuries. I am inspired by the gains won, both peacefully and violently, by students, faculty and world politics. I celebrate an end to cultural hegemony in higher education. I see the vocal minority who decry intellectual inclusiveness as oppressive to the dominant culture for what they are and relish in the increased efforts campuses across the country are taking to diversify their communities and their curricula. I imagine a world where intellectual inquiry in the Academy can truly be organized around the idea of cultural pluralism.

This larger vision gives me the hope to believe that frustrations and angry divisions felt within the LGBTQA academic community in this moment in time will pass. More of our elders will find ways to heal and bring their identities into their professional lives. Fear will give way to excitement as the intellectual synergy between faculty and students vitalizes both. Intellectual leaders on the level of bell hooks and Cornel West will emerge among sexual minority scholars. They will help guide the development of new programs of study within the Academy devoted to better understanding of the sexual minority experience. Questions of the integrity of closeted faculty members will be replaced with skirmishes over appropriate language and terminology and almost all campuses will have some version of Queer Studies, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Studies, Sexual Minority Studies, or whatever it comes to be called. The vision of our current generation of students will in turn give way to the next generation's vision and the willingness of all of us today to engage in the struggle to understand each other will have been part of getting there.

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