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Where's My Queer BBQ?: Supporting Queer Students at Historically Women's Colleges

Sarah D. Dews

The experiences of Queer students at institutions of higher education have long been the subject of scholarship. Scholars explored research on campus climate, experience, and identity development. In the past, scholarship on historically women's institutions explored leadership, history, and sexuality. However, the experiences of Queer students on historically women's campuses are largely unstudied. As a graduate of a historically women's institution who identifies as a Queer woman, I will reflect on my own experience of being a Queer student at a women's college, and identify where Queer students receive the support they need to succeed.

Two years after graduating from Smith College, I began my studies as a graduate student at the University of Vermont. During the first few weeks of class, the identity-based centers that support students held welcome back events, such as barbecues (BBQs) and breakfast for dinner. I went to an undergraduate institution with a student population that was very Queer and has a reputation for being a roiling mess of feminist ideals and lesbians, but we never had a Queer BBQ. If the population of Queer students was so large, why were there no events for us at Smith?

When I reflected on my undergraduate experiences, I realized that there were never any events put on by the administration specifically for Queer students. I was confused because I had a very positive undergraduate experience and found the Smith community supportive of Queer students. It came to me that although I felt supported at Smith, that feeling came from the students and faculty but never from the administration. Through sharing and reflecting on my story, I will examine the experience of being Queer at a historically women's college, and how I felt simultaneously supported and not supported during my time there. I will also include recommendations for future practice and ways women's colleges might more fully support Queer students. Additionally, I would like to note that the capitalization of the word "Queer" is a choice made to give visibility to the word in the text and highlight its importance as an identity category.

Sarah Dews is a first-year graduate student in the Higher Education and Student Affairs Administration (HESA) program. She received a Bachelor of Arts from Smith College in Sociology and the Study of Women and Gender. Her thanks go out to Smith for her wonderful undergraduate experience, and to her partner, Meg, who encouraged her to submit this article to The Vermont Connection.

Smith College: A Tradition of Women in Exciting Positions

(Context: this is a slogan on a t-shirt I own and it is sold at the Smith bookstore)

When I arrived at Smith College in the fall of 2011, I was out and identified as a lesbian. One of the first things I remember I did on campus (after my parents helped me unpack) was sit with my new first-year housemates in the living room of our house, and go around and introduce ourselves; a process which included the pronouns we used. I did not really understand the meaning of pronoun use, but I already understood that Smith was a unique place and was perhaps more open than any place I ever experienced before.

As a first-year student, my perception of Smith was that there were many Queer students there, maybe even half of the campus. Although this is somewhat of an exaggeration, I was part of a quantitative research methods class as a junior that surveyed the first-year class, and around 40% the students in the sample (which was representative of the first-year class) identified as something other than heterosexual. It was clear to me that Queer students were visible, that folks recognized their identities on campus, and in general that identity was respected. My perceptions align with Rankin's (2005) definition of campus climate, which highlights attitudes, behaviors, and a level of respect for groups of students on campus. It is important to note that the idea of campus climate is limiting because it focuses on the environment that students are in instead of the needs of the students who exist in that climate (Robles, 2017).

Smith is a small, historically women's, liberal arts college, situated in a town in Western Massachusetts that is known for its rich queer history. This created a unique environment that played a large part in defining my college experience. As Garvey, Sanders, and Flint (2017) note, for students in the 21st century, campus experience is varied and dependent on the individual campuses. My campus was influential on my experience as a Queer student at Smith, and the town environment around the college created a space where Queer students maintained a large presence on campus.

Smith College: Individual. Global. Exceptional.

Historically women's institutions are unique learning and social environments compared to other types of institutions. There have been questions of the necessity of women's colleges since the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, but the benefits of historically women's colleges are numerous. In their 1995 article, Kim and Alvarez discussed the continued benefits of women's colleges compared to co-educational institutions. They found that women's institutions had a positive effect on students' academic success, and students who attended women's institutions tended to be actively involved

on campus. Kinzie, Thomas, Palmer, Umbach and Kuh found similar results in 2007; they noted that students who attended women's colleges were more engaged in effective educational practices than their coeducation counterparts. A 2013 article from Forbes.com included the statistic that 20% of the women in Congress and 30% of the women on a *Businessweek* list of rising women in corporate America were graduates of women's colleges (Hennessey, 2013). These statistics are significant because only 2% of American female college graduates attended a women's college.

BDOCs: Toxic Masculinity, Gender Norms, and Campus Climate

During my time at Smith, many Queer students held prominent social and institutional (i.e. Student Government Association) roles on campus. Those who held visible social roles were often masculine-presenting and were called BDOCs (big dykes on campus) by many people at Smith. There was a belief that BDOCs were so attractive they could turn straight girls gay. My sophomore friends seemed to think I would be a BDOC once I was no longer a first-year, and I spent time during my first and second years with people who had the influence to elevate me to that position. However, part way through my experience at Smith, the use of the term BDOC dissipated and the student population no longer used it. I graduated two and a half years ago and when I asked someone who is currently a senior at Smith if she ever heard of the term, she had not.

Rankin (2006) relates privilege to more positive experiences of campus climate. I saw this in my time at Smith in the value given to masculine folks on campus. Even in a social scene comprised mostly of women, such as Smith, power and privilege was given to masculinity. This led to the perpetuation of toxic masculinity, which often manifested in the dynamics between BDOCs and other students on campus. Although in many ways the culture around Queerness at Smith was problematic, overall, the campus community was very open to Queer students and Queerness was a large aspect of the social and academic settings. In my sociology classes, at least during my first two years, the term BDOC came up occasionally in discussions and papers about student experiences at Smith.

Institutional Support for Queer Students (Or Lack Thereof)

Smith has a Queer resource center that serves as a safe space for Queer students, but it does not put on any events for Queer students, nor is it involved in campus life beyond an affiliation with Queer student groups. On a larger scale, the college does not have any programs specifically for Queer students. However, Smith does have an anti-discrimination policy that includes protections for students based on gender and sexual orientation. My experience resonates with the idea of policy used as a symbolic act (Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2016).

The fact that the policy exists was important to let students know that when an incident occurred related to gender or sexual orientation, the administrators would act. However, this is a reactionary process, and therefore not a proactive way to support Queer students, and using policy as a symbol can mask the fact that real change does not occur.

The college marketing materials also do not usually include students who break gender norms (in terms of presentation). On Smith's website, you will find maybe one picture of a student whose gender expression deviates from cisnormative standards on the home page. Even though Queer students were not fully represented by the administration, the feeling on campus was that since Queerness was such a large part of the community, there was no need for special programs for Queer students.

Recommendations for Future Practice

Scholars such as Alessi, Sapiro, Khan, and Craig (2017) discussed the stress that Queer first-year students feel when they first adjust to college life. In addition to the stress of adjusting, they can also experience stress because of their sexual and/or gender identity. The authors suggest programs such as orientation groups specifically for Queer students, events catered to Queer students, as well as safe spaces and competent counseling services. However, this study did not describe the demographics of the university at which the study took place. The percentage and perception of other Queer students on campus could have an impact on student experiences. The students in this study seemed to encounter many hostile experiences within their environment, which was different from my experience at Smith.

I perceived my campus environment as being generally supportive of Queer students, but it was lacking in Queer-specific programming and administrative support. It was not enough for me that the student body was a supportive entity; I wanted the entire administration and institution to feel supportive. Tetreault, Fette, Meidlinger, and Hope (2013) noted that most of the negative experiences for Queer students in their study came from their peers. However, in my experience it was the administration that contributed to any negative perceptions I had of the campus. Vaccaro (2012) suggested that for undergraduate students, "...their microclimate was the macrocosm of the campus" (p. 441) meaning that for undergraduates to feel that their campus climate was positive, support needed to come from the entire campus. I want to apply this concept to women's colleges more widely because administrative attitudes and actions have impact on student experiences of campus. Changes need to occur at the level of policy and administrative practice for students at women's colleges to feel fully supported. Programs also need to be in place to support students once they are on campus.

Further research at Smith, and other similar historically women's institutions, that focus on student needs is necessary to make accurate recommendations for practice and policy.

Without this research, it is difficult to make further recommendations. Knowing the percentage of Queer students on campus and learning about their experiences of campus (both in terms of social and classroom experiences as well as policy and interactions with administrative entities) will be key in defining future practice and policy. Research that gathers stories and experiences from a more diverse sample than myself would also greatly benefit research, as campus experiences for Queer students of color and students from varied income backgrounds might be substantially different from mine, and allow for a more intersectional analysis of Queer student experience.

Conclusion

Queer students at historically women's colleges need continued support by their institutions regardless of how welcoming the campus community is perceived. This paper gave an overview of my experience as a Queer student at Smith College and explored areas where historically women's institutions can strive to improve their support systems. However, further research is necessary to continue to improve supports and programs for Queer students at historically women's institutions.

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