

Privacy in the residence halls: An unrecognized concern for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students

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ABSTRACT

Questions about privacy were raised to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students at the University of Michigan. The purposes were to learn how LGBT students experience privacy and to discover how a safe atmosphere may be created which is conducive to the growth of these and other students. Students shared their feelings about privacy issues, which included feeling violated in classrooms and residence halls, being the 'token queer', and dating secretly, as well as being unavailable for one another as LGBT people unless there is a crisis. This work looks at issues raised by students and seeks ways in which these issues may be addressed on a large midwest campus.

"Straight students bring their boyfriends and girlfriends to their rooms to have sex. There's no way I can do that. There is no safe place to just be together, or to just be." - lesbian sophomore

The problem

Students who live in residence halls on college campuses have very little opportunity for privacy. Unless a student has a room of her or his own, privacy is nearly non-existent. Even in single rooms, privacy is often violated. Shared living quarters, shared bathrooms and showers, shared dining halls, classrooms, events, organizations, athletics, and other campus activities leave little time and space in which a student may find anything resembling privacy.

When a student is in need of solitude, she or he must seek the quiet of an available library cubicle or an isolated space outdoors, away from the crowds and quarters of campus life. It is not an easy search unless one has the time to explore both the indoors and outdoors for nooks and crannies in the campus and the surrounding community.

Literature review

There is a dearth of literature regarding privacy issues in the residence halls. Chickering and Reisser (1993:394) noted that "when a person is known and observed [in residence halls] for over a year or more, discrepancies become apparent". There is no place for a student to hide in the residence halls, whether to maintain a secret or to be reflective. Chickering and Reisser (1993), Evans and Wall (1991), Pascarella and Terenzini (1981), and many others have provided insight into students' lives in residence halls, but few have looked very deeply into the importance of privacy in the lives of the

students they researched. Evans and Wall (1991: 82) alluded to the importance and the largeness of the issue of privacy for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. They indicated that the majority of students in residence halls complained about the lack of privacy. "But for gay and lesbian students who have a secret that they can admit to only a few trusted friends, the privacy issue becomes even more troublesome": Wishik and Pierce (1995) wrote about students' emotional risks of secret same-sex relationships but did not address these issues as they related to campus residence hall situations.

The questions

What are the privacy issues on campus? All students need time and place to think, to feel, to cry, to be homesick, to be sexual with self, to be intimate with another, to listen to their favourite music, to read trash novels, to write journals or letters. All students need a place to decompress and de-stress, where they are neither on guard nor on their best behaviour. They need a place where they don't have to be vigilant. LGBT students have these needs and more. They need additional space to think about their emerging sexual identities in addition to the usual pressures and rigours of college life. They need time to learn about their differences and about the discrimination they may have already encountered or expect to encounter. They need to experience their own sexual development and have the opportunity to emerge as whole, healthy people.

The students

Questions of privacy were raised to 14 LGBT students who were members of Queer Unity Project, an LGBT student organization at the University of Michigan. The students were undergraduates and ranged in age from 19 to 21. Although only four students currently live in the residence halls, all had been in the halls during their first year at Michigan. Four were Residence Advisors (RA) at one time or another. The purposes of these questions were to learn how LGBT students experience privacy and to discover how a safe atmosphere may be created which is conducive to the growth of these and other students. The answers to these questions will provide further information on how LGBT students may be better served on college campuses.

LGBT students were asked about opportunities for privacy in their University of Michigan residence halls. A lesbian coed said, "I don't think anyone really has enough privacy in the residence halls, but it's more notable with LGBT students because people are more watchful and critical of our dating habits." Another lesbian, a junior, noted, "I found privacy to be basically absent when I had a double. During my freshman year, I could do nothing without someone else knowing about it." A male student, also, a junior, reflected, "I had more opportunities for privacy my first year when I juggled the schedule of my roommates very carefully. My second year as an RA, I had no privacy whatsoever. Everyone knew my business and who I was dating. That's part of why I quit my job."

One student commented on the physical environment of his floor. "The doors in most dorms are set up so that there is a room directly across from yours, so the people across the hall can see right into your room and you can see right into theirs. Not a good arrangement."

Two male students talked about being open about their sexual orientation. "Sometimes I feel like I'm a demonstration model since I'm out. If I don't answer questions, who will? I don't mind answering questions, but I sometimes do feel like the token queer." The other student commented that he is "used to violation of my privacy, because I'm out."

A female student voiced dismay with the lack of privacy in her lesbian social group. "Recently I've felt invaded in my personal life. I find that the queer community here can be quite incestuous. There are only a limited number of places for young queers to hang out and you run into the same people over and over."

Students were asked about privacy and dating issues. Heterosexual students do not hesitate to bring their dates into their residence hall rooms for intimacy and sexual connection, according to the RAs in the group. LGBT students have added stress of bringing dates to their rooms. "Even with the doors closed, people on the hall still know that you're in the room with someone and are oh-so-nosy about it. And eventually you have to go to the bathroom and there's the dreaded bathroom encounters with people." One female student said she felt she had to close her door just to hug a friend who is also a lesbian.

However, two male students currently living in the residence halls explained that they felt they had plenty of private time with their male dates, and did not feel threatened or in any way harassed. They said they were open about their sexual orientation, introduced their dates to people in their halls, and otherwise acted "just like anyone else with a date."

For the most part, LGBT students acknowledged a sense of feeling unsafe in the residence halls. That feeling kept them hyper-vigilant, always looking over their shoulders to see who was present, who was watching, and who may verbally or physically attack. "I lived in an all-male hall and felt terribly threatened, and I had a private room. I tried to have only minimal contact with the loud barbarians who occupied my floor." Another male student, a recent victim of anti-gay harassment in his hall, said, "People must think that because I'm gay I must be fair game." A lesbian student felt a little differently, but she also had not publicly acknowledged her sexual orientation. "I never really felt threatened but I never felt safe either. I was always very protective and watchful about who was around. And public displays of affection were out of the question." Another lesbian sadly noted, "I felt I had to be silent. Negative attitudes and consequences are greater than our ability to change them. I wonder if I had outed myself if it would have changed their opinions of gays." Nearly all the students agreed with the gay male sophomore who said, "The bathroom encounters were always the worst."

Students were asked what needed to happen so that privacy was available to them. Two LGBT students who are RAs said they, "wouldn't be surprised if you found that a lot of LGBT students who are in the early stages of coming out live in singles. One way to make privacy an easier possibility would be to reduce the cost of a single." Another student noted that, "People should be aware going into the residence halls that there isn't going to be much privacy. The only way it could be improved is to have people in general be more open minded."

Finally, students were asked what they would do with their privacy if they had it. "I wouldn't have been afraid to go to the bathroom, or open my door without having to first look out the peephole to see who was standing in the hallway. And I wish I didn't have to worry about what people think when they saw my girlfriend leave my room in the morning."

All the students agreed with a junior male who said, "Residence halls just aren't friendly places for LGBT students for the most part."

Recommendations

Very little information currently exists regarding the effects of the lack of privacy on college students in general. Even less is available about the privacy needs of LGBT students and their inability to find privacy on campus. These areas are open to new research and exploration. LGBT students are on every college campus and in every residence hall. Their issues of privacy seem to be intertwined with their emerging sexual identity development as well as with the usual college student development. Further research needs to be conducted on the connection between these emerging identities and issues of privacy in the residence halls.

Based on the experiences of the LGBT Queer Unity Project students, the following recommendations are offered:

1. Colleges and universities must include the words 'sexual orientation' in their institution's non-discrimination policy as an integral part in acknowledging the value and worth of every student, faculty, and staff in an institution.
2. Institutions must provide safe spaces for LGBT students where they can simply be themselves with fear and without ongoing hyper-vigilance. These spaces may include a professionally staffed LGBT Student Center, or at the very least an LGBT campus resource center.
3. Residence staff must receive training prior to the beginning of each academic year regarding LGBT students and issues in the halls. Residence staff must also hold a commitment to and create an environment for the development of allies for LGBT students.
4. Anti-gay harassment in the residence halls must be handled in similar expedient fashion as racial issues, with policies and action developed in a proactive manner instead of as a reactive measure.
5. Living/learning environments must be developed that are inclusive and valuing of all students including LGBT students.

References

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