The Campus Environment for Gay and Lesbian Life

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The theme of this issue of Academe confirms the profound influence of feminism on contemporary life. Just over twenty years ago, a new generation of feminists coined the phrase "the personal is political." Although the slogan has carried different meanings for those who use it, one implication has been to challenge our notions of private and public. Feminists have argued, and rightly so, that defining women's sphere and women's concerns as "private" has effectively excluded women from full and equal participation in the "public realm." As more and more women in the 1970s and 1980s fought for entry into academic life, higher education institutions increasingly have had to deal with a host of issues that were once safely tucked away in the private domain.

Colleges and universities in the pre-feminist era addressed privacy only in the breach, particularly with respect to matters of sexual identity. Consider the following examples:

- In 1959, at a small midwestern college, a student told her faculty adviser that one of her friends was a homosexual. The adviser informed a dean, who called in the student in question and pressured him into naming others. Within twenty-four hours, three students had been expelled; a week later, one of them hung himself.
- About the same time, a faculty member at a Big Ten school was arrested in mid-semester on a murals charge (at that time, all homosexual expression was subject to criminal penalties). The police alerted the administration, and the professor was summarily told to leave the campus. He never appeared before his classes again.
- At an elite college in the Northeast, male students in the 1960s were in the habit of training a telescope on the windows of the women's dormitories. In one instance, they spied two female students erotically engaged. The women—not the men—were disciplined.
- At a women's college in New England, where accusations of lesbianism were periodically leveled against roommates in the 1960s, the standard solution was to separate the accused by housing them in different dorms.

I could list many more such examples. They came to me not through research but through the gay and lesbian academic grapevine. Stories like these are the substance of an oral tradition by which gay academics who came of age before the 1970s warned one another of the dangers they faced and socialized their younger peers into necessary habits of caution and discretion.

The point, I trust, is clear. For gay men and lesbians, the past is a history of privacy invaded, of an academy that enforced, maintained, and reproduced a particular moral order—a moral order aggressively antagonistic toward homosexual expression.

Since 1969, when the Stonewall Riots in New York City ushered in the gay liberation movement, activists across the country have challenged that order. We have formed organizations by the thousands, lobbied legislatures, initiated public education campaigns, engaged in civil disobedience, and promoted self-help efforts. We have attempted to emancipate gays and lesbians from the laws, policies, scientific theories, and cultural attitudes that have consigned us to an inferior position in society.

When one considers that the political climate for most of the last twenty years has been conservative, and that this new conservatism has taken shape largely through an appeal to "traditional" notions of family, sexuality, and gender roles, the successes of the gay movement appear rather impressive. Half the states have repealed their sodomy laws. Many of the nation's largest cities have enacted some form of gay civil rights ordinance, and a number of states are seriously debating the issue. The American Psychiatric Association has removed homosexuality from its list of mental disorders. Several religious denominations are revising their positions on the morality of homosexual relationships. And lesbian and gay organizations around the country are better financed and more stable now than at any point in their past.

Those of us associated with institutions of higher education have contributed to this movement and have benefited from it as well. Because the birth of gay liberation was so closely tied to the social movements of the 1960s, student groups have been part of the gay political and social landscape from the beginning. Currently, more than four hundred of these groups exist, in community colleges and

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Nevertheless, being openly gay on campus still goes against the grain. Despite the changes in American society in the last two decades, gay people are still swimming in a largely oppressive sea. Most campuses do not have gay student groups. Most gay faculty members and administrators have not come out. Even on campuses that have proven responsive to gay and lesbian concerns, progress has often come through the work of a mere handful of individuals who have chosen to be visible. And, although I do not have statistics to measure this precisely, I know that there are still many, many campuses in the United States where no lesbian or gay man feels safe enough to come out. From a gay vantage point, something is still wrong in the academy.

Oppression in its many forms is still alive, and the university is not immune to it. Indeed, as the gay population has become a better organized and stronger force in the 1980s, we have also become easier to target. In recent years, harassment, vio-

research universities, in public institutions and private ones. Braving the ostracism and harassment that visibility sometimes brings, these young women and men have often had to battle for recognition and funding. In the process, their struggles have created a substantial body of judicial opinion that protects gay student groups as an expression of First Amendment rights of speech and assembly.

Faculty members, too, have organized. Initially forming separate organizations, such as the Gay Academic Union, they have increasingly turned to their professional associations as venues for action. Most social science and humanities disciplines now have lesbian and gay caucuses that publish newsletters, review current literature, and sponsor well-attended sessions at annual meetings. A vibrant new scholarship has emerged in the last decade that is substantial enough to spark a movement for gay studies programs in institutions as diverse as San Francisco City College, Yale University, and the City University of New York.

If one’s reference point is university life a generation ago, one can say that things are getting better for gay faculty, students, administrators, and staff. Grit, courage, and determination have opened up some space in which it is possible to live, breathe, and work openly. Our situation no longer appears uniformly grim.
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...
"Gay faculty, administrators, staff, and students need to know that their school is committed to fairness."

### The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (NGLTF), based in Washington, D.C., provides a networking resource for gay and lesbian students, faculty, and staff through its campus project. The project provides organizing materials and fields phone calls on a wide variety of gay and lesbian issues, such as establishing gay and lesbian study courses and lobbying to ban institutional discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. It also sponsors campus organizing workshops at the NGLTF annual convention.

Kevin Berrill, project coordinator, notes that the campus organizing project helps college-age gays and lesbians, who are often in the process of coming to terms with their sexual identity, learn who they are and how they can be part of a larger nationwide movement.

For more information on the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and its campus project, contact Kevin Berrill at NGLTF, 1517 U Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

also need reassurance that campus activism on gay issues will not come back to haunt them when they return to their dorms each night.

2. Student affairs programming is an important tool in fostering toleration, understanding, and enthusiasm for differences in culture and identity. Resources should be made available to sponsor special gay awareness week events, as well as to integrate gay films, public lectures, and other events and activities into the regular programming.

3. Late adolescence is an especially stressful time for gay men and lesbians. These may be the years when they become sexually active, form their first relationships, and grapple with issues of identity. School counseling services need personnel who are sensitive to these issues and who can foster self-acceptance and self-esteem rather than reinforce self-hatred.

4. Because the issues and situations affecting lesbians and gay men range widely across the structure of large and medium-size campuses, hiring an "ombudsperson" for gay and lesbian concerns makes good institutional sense. Someone who can think expansively about these issues, provide a resource where needed, and intervene decisively in emergencies can move a whole campus forward.

5. When hate-motivated incidents occur—and the evidence of the last few years suggests that they happen with greater frequency than we care to admit—the highest officers of the university need to exercise their full authority in condemning the attacks and correcting the underlying problems which encourage such incidents. Bias-motivated incidents are awful, but they also offer a unique opportunity for raising consciousness and for shifting the climate of opinion on a campus.

6. An institution that prohibits discrimination against gays ought not to countenance the presence on campus of institutions and organizations that engage in such discrimination. The government intelligence agencies and the military are the most egregious perpetrators of anti-gay bias. Recent actions by the military against its gay and lesbian personnel amount to a form of terrorism. Military recruiters and ROTC programs ought to be banned from American campuses until the armed forces change their policies.

7. Last, but not least, is the issue of research. The 1980s have witnessed an efflorescence of scholarship on gay and lesbian issues in several disciplines. Yet many topics go begging for researchers because faculty members know that prejudiced department heads and tenure committees will label such work trivial and insignificant. Gay scholarship, opening as it does a new window on human experience, must be encouraged.

On sunny mornings, I am optimistic that the 1990s will see a dramatic improvement in the quality of life for gay men and lesbians in higher education: the body of scholarship is growing and pressure for gay studies programs will mount; academics in many disciplines have created stable and permanent caucuses which will strengthen our networks; regional associations of gay student groups are forming to reinforce those groups already established on individual campuses. In addition, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, D.C., recently initiated a campus-organizing project so that gay men and lesbians on each campus no longer have to reinvent the wheel.

Of equal importance, perhaps, some administrators are moving beyond the most elementary issues of visibility and recognition. They are addressing the key areas of equal treatment and deep-rooted prejudice. Such a stance—on every campus—is long overdue.