

## CHAPTER 14

# Addressing the Career Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender College Students

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Issues of sexual orientation for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students are influential in career decision-making, employment, and advanced educational pursuits. Students' sense of self and societal pressures interplay in their decision-making within a context of homophobia and heterosexism on campus, in the workplace, and in society. The purpose of this chapter is to describe how career offices can best assist the LGBT student population in making and implementing career decisions. From the perspective of career counselors and administrators in a comprehensive career office at a large multiversity (over 36,000 students), an underlying tenet of this chapter is the notion that if career services are enhanced for one population, the result will be enhanced services for all populations. Career issues for LGBT students, when integrated into total career services, allow the entire student population to become educated: In this way, neither services nor students become marginalized. From an organizational perspective, mission, goals, staffing, and training are the foundation for service and delivery mechanisms that ultimately make a positive difference for students.

This chapter will address three specific aspects related to working with LGBT students: career development and decision-making issues; strategies for creating an LGBT-friendly, inclusive career services climate; and issues for students making a successful transition from school to work, particularly regarding biases in the work world.

## CAREER DEVELOPMENT AND DECISION MAKING

Positive career development interventions require an intentional focus on the complexity of individuals to be served and on the resources and systems designed to provide and support service delivery. These include understanding career decision-making processes, engaging in the accurate assessment of individuals, and introducing appropriate career decision-making intervention strategies to address the career development needs of LGBT students constructively.

### Understanding the Career Development of LGBT Students

In addition to being competent in career development processes, providing knowledgeable assistance to LGBT students involves learning about the career development needs unique to this population. Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), in a call to the profession for multicultural counseling competencies, put forth necessary competencies regarding the knowledge, skill, and awareness needed for effective and ethical service to multiple constituencies. They suggest the practitioner/educator must be engaged in ongoing self-awareness, including gaining awareness of personal biases and how they may affect counseling and, in this case, programming and administration; knowledgeable about specific issues LGBT students face (i.e., how being a member of a minority group or multiple groups affects career decision-making); and skilled at intervening in effective and culturally appropriate ways. With these baseline expectations, the counselor/educator must become well versed in the career development and identity formation issues of the LGBT clientele.

*Assumptions about the Career Decision Process.* The primary assumptions about career decision-making center on the complexity of students, their issues, and the developmental processes required to reach an informed career decision. Career development models encompass identity formation and development, the impact of societal influences, culture, family of origin, and integrating information. Additionally, psychosocial, cognitive, behavioral, cultural, and spiritual processes all influence decisions as students examine what they desire from a career, their value systems, and environmental pressures. When focusing specifically on LGBT students' career issues, complexity (and therefore interventions) will be heightened by introducing intricacies specific to this population, such as identity formation regarding sexual orientation.

*LGBT Identity Formation.* As for all students, identity formation for LGBT students follows a developmental path; as such, it is important to assess where the student is along this path. Cass's (1979, 1984) developmental schema describes stages of development as (1) identity confusion, (2) identity comparison, (3) identity tolerance, (4) identity acceptance, (5) identity pride, and (6) identity synthesis. A more recent model (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996) describes phases in lesbian development encompassing individual sexual identity as well as group membership identity. Career decision-making processes for LGBT students may also be influenced by other factors including effects of oppression, limited ex-

posure to role models, internalized homophobia, and self-esteem and self-efficacy issues (Pope, 1995a; Prince, 1995).

Through such statements as "Straight people don't have to talk about their sexuality, why should I?," "Do you have a gay counselor on staff I could talk to?"; and "I'm not sure if I want to come out on my resume or in the interview," LGBT students offer clues about the phases or stages of identity in which they are operating. Understanding the developmental process allows career professionals to anticipate students' concerns and help them arrive at suitable career decisions. By doing so, the professional communicates knowledge and understanding, which, in turn, communicates safety and openness.

*Individual Assessment and Evaluation.* A knowledge base that integrates LGBT issues into career development processes serves as a springboard for individual assessment and for the realistic evaluation of the systems implemented to address career concerns. Assessment is the bridge to understanding the unique needs of individual students. In one-on-one situations (e.g., career counseling, mentoring), the practitioner's responsibility is to collect information about the individual's needs and to engage in goal-centered exploration aimed at heightening an understanding of self, career information, and the interplay of society and self. In group situations, greater responsibility is placed on students to assess and translate information independently. Groups represent a safe forum for LGBT students to test out the openness of an environment; it could serve as the first opportunity for LGBT students to explore the degree of acceptance and competency they will encounter in the career services office.

### Implementing Career Decision-Making Interventions

Counselor success in assisting students with the career decision process hinges on helping them integrate information about themselves and their world in order to identify "satisfying" career options. Clarification of values, skills, interests, strengths, and weaknesses must come together with knowledge of the labor market, culture, or subcultures; awareness of the implications of a homophobic society; and support systems in order to reach an informed decision. A skilled practitioner will tailor interventions, providing appropriate challenge and support (Sanford, 1966).

Examples of interventions and strategies for implementation are offered in Table 6. The career services provider utilizing this information with LGBT students will have a solid foundation for constructing helping relationships. However, without a gay-friendly environment, LGBT students will be less likely to utilize services. Attention must be paid to examining tangible ways in which to deliver and convey inclusive career services on campus.

**Table 6**  
**Intervention and Implementation Strategies in Career Planning**

Intervention	Implementation Strategy
<i>Provide</i> LGBT role models and allies who can articulate their decision and their work lives.	Mentors, case examples, panels, informational processes, interviews, "struggles," videotapes.
<i>Discuss</i> current and future self images.	Career counseling, career workshops.
<i>Discuss</i> key elements of career decisions, including concrete and individual elements, such as the labor market and personal style, personal meaning of work and success, balancing work and family, and dealing with homophobia in the workplace.	In person, e-mail discussions, counseling, brown bag meetings, collaborative efforts with academic and Student Affairs or counseling and career services.
<i>Discuss</i> how LGBT individuals add to a multicultural workforce.	Career counseling, career workshops targeting all students.
<i>Discuss</i> the skills, perspective, oppression, and implications of being part of an often invisible minority.	Career counseling, career workshops targeting all students.

## CREATING A GAY-FRIENDLY, INCLUSIVE CAREER SERVICE

Career offices may possess a strong theoretical understanding of the career needs of LGBT students, but it is the ability to translate theory into meaningful service delivery that distinguishes the intentionally LGBT-friendly office from one that simply serves this population among many. Essential to creating effective service delivery is possessing a clearly articulated set of goals that includes the goal of inclusiveness. In the same way that the mission serves as the cornerstone for the unit, a commitment to inclusiveness for all students forms the mortar for service. This needs to be clearly described in both the concrete long- and short-term goals established for the career office.

### Hiring and Training

In an e-mail communication, a career professional indicated that while he counseled "gay" persons as part of his job, his own value system rejected homosexuality as morally wrong. Such attitudes are as prevalent in higher education as in other sectors; concern emerges when homophobic attitudes influence behavior resulting in an uninviting or intimidating environment for students. Thus, the hiring and training of informed, open-minded staff—secretary, paraprofessional, and trained professionals alike—help ensure that inclusive behavior is practiced on a daily basis.

Indeed, if service units value being representative of the populations they serve, hiring should reflect the campus diversity, including sexual orientation. This begins with writing an inclusive job description; posting vacancies in publications targeting diverse groups; and charging the search committee to stay true to the diversity mission of the unit. All new hires should be made explicitly aware of the values held by the unit so at the time of hiring they may evaluate their ability to uphold these standards within their own practice, regardless of personal beliefs. Ongoing training—readings, discussions, speakers—reinforces the organizational goals and provides professional development for working with diverse populations. In the end, there is no substitute for a tolerant, open-minded staff committed to building relationships with students.

### Investing in Inclusive Service Delivery

*Deliberate Programming and Resources.* Targeted programming, resources, and service delivery are key in gaining credibility with any student population. Such targeting brings life to the organizational mission. Deliberate targeting means more than just offering a job search program and publicizing it in the LGBT Campus Resource Center; it is offering a program entitled "The Job Search: Perspectives for Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students" and cosponsoring it with the LGBT Campus Resource Center or programming unit. It also means being attentive to representation by gender, race, and level of "outness,"

in all programming. Deliberate programming also means making LGBT issues ubiquitous, woven into examples reaching all populations. In this way, students both “closeted” and “out” may obtain helpful information and will know that an open environment exists for pursuing additional information discreetly, whereas heterosexual students will become more informed and better prepared to function in a multicultural workforce.

Targeted resource development means acquiring LGBT-oriented job search books for the career library and featuring regular displays showcasing these resources in a highly visible location so that *both* LGBT and heterosexual students are alerted to the needs of LGBT students. Deliberate service delivery means conveying a generic warmth to *all* students and personalizing messages using multiple means of access—outreach, focus groups, the media, and electronic means—to say “this career office wants to help you.” Services operationalizing the goal of inclusiveness ensure that there is a genuine translation between word and deed, between expressed mission and the unit’s “deliverables.” Credibility is thus heightened in the eyes of students and administration.

*Linking with Constituents.* Time-intensive, often unseen efforts must be employed to create positive, tangible outcomes. These may include staff working with and educating other units. Such units might include faculty and staff in academic departments, central Student Affairs, or the LGBT Campus resource Center or programming unit where many students turn as a first contact. The career office’s goal should be to create more ties with trusted individuals within the system: If these LGBT-friendly units and individuals are aware of the interest of the career office in attending to the needs of LGBT students, this will pave a word-of-mouth path that will extend across campus.

Because career offices function with one foot in academe and one foot in the world of work, career professionals have an obligation to educate and inform the employers with whom they interact. Employing organizations are not always fully versed in the legal and ethical implications of their activities. In addition to educating employers, some career offices find deliberate mechanisms for keeping employers aware of the importance of drawing from a diverse pool. For instance, University of Florida career fairs include student-led diversity receptions. This effort shows visibility and commitment to diversity to employers and students alike. Thus, in addition to educating students about their interactions with employers, career professionals carry the obligation to educate employers and advocate equal and fair employment consideration for all students. This education must be done in a way that builds on relationships and does not alienate the recipient. This is also one of the most compelling reasons for investing in the heterosexual student population regarding these issues: They will constitute a substantial portion of future leaders and employers responsible for ethical decision-making.

### Maintaining an LGBT-Friendly Career Office

*Listen to Students.* While these strategies represent an array of options toward effective service delivery, what matters most is whether these efforts have made a difference. How will you know if your services are reaching LGBT students and are effective? Ongoing service evaluation through surveys, formal focus groups, and informal electronic communication will ensure that career services are successfully responding to the real—and changing—needs of the LGBT student population. There is no substitute for deliberately listening to students.

*Engage in Climate Control.* What are the qualities that make a difference in students’ perceptions of a career office? Focus group data suggest that it is a complex combination of impressions of the environment, perceived openness of staff, and the relevance of actual services offered that work to create an LGBT-friendly image. One focus group highlighted the following: attention to inclusive language by staff and to nonverbals that convey acceptance, evidence of staff sensitivity (perhaps gained through training) to avoid offensive off handed remarks; evidence of an informed, knowledgeable, and skilled staff; targeted materials addressing concerns of LGBT students (e.g., a chart indicating whether organizations have a non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation or whether they offer domestic partnership benefits); reference to LGBT organizations in office-produced resources and programs (this is especially effective when providing examples or including gay organizations as illustrations); attention to visual image, by displaying work of notable gay artists or creating displays highlighting themes of interest to LGBT students; demonstrating visible ties to LGBT programming units, such as linking homepages; providing evidence of being LGBT-friendly through fliers, posters, and books displayed in the environment; and displaying “safe zone” indicators, such as a pink triangle or rainbow flag.

These efforts illustrate ways in which career offices may attend to their culture, climate, and services, conveying to LGBT students that they will not be marginalized. To the contrary, combined with knowledge specific to transitional needs of the LGBT student population, students will feel welcomed and respected. Relevant content knowledge follows; while the strategies discussed below are effective for all students, they are essential for the success of LGBT students in the transition from school to work.

### THE SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION FROM SCHOOL TO WORK<sup>1</sup>

Because career education is the confluence of process and content for the practitioner and the student alike, the following section grounds career educators in the issues of transition out of academe. It offers concrete information on important success strategies for students to utilize in advancing in their chosen area. Success in seeking employment is based on targeting fields of interest,

identifying skills valued in the workplace, and possessing the confidence to market oneself to an employer assertively. As with career decision-making, determining organizational fit requires all job seekers to engage in some degree of self-assessment. What do they seek in an organization's culture? Does the organization have a conservative or progressive philosophy? Questions related to organizational fit are especially important for LGBT students, for embedded in the question of organizational fit lies the question of "outness" as professionals within their employing organization.

#### **Coming Out in the Job Search and in Professional Life: Personal and Organizational Considerations**

The extent to which sexual identity is integrated into a professional setting is a personal decision directly linked to an individual's developmental progress and, often times, to an individual's professional experiences. For example, a lesbian job seeker may choose initially to be closeted but, as she becomes a more seasoned professional, may decide to be out, or, at a minimum, selectively out in the workplace. Informed career professionals know that personal and organizational characteristics influence whether or not individuals disclose sexual identity in a work environment. These characteristics may include comfort level with sexual orientation; extent to which one is out with heterosexual friends and family; support available from a partner or LGBT friends for coming out at work; degree to which the workplace is considered a nonhostile environment; and extent to which a coming out plan is developed (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995).

*Out in the Workplace?* The following scenarios illustrate that implications are present for every choice made. "Joe," a bisexual finance major, has set his sights on a financial analyst position on Wall Street. Knowing that the types of organizations of interest to him tend to be more traditional and potentially homophobic, he decides not to disclose his sexual orientation to his prospective employer. In order to strengthen his chances for this position, Joe may decide to limit disclosure of his leadership experiences in an LGBT student organization and his independent study project on sexual discrimination in the workplace. This is a trade-off he is willing to make to get his career started. "Linda," on the other hand, decides that masking her sexual orientation would be artificial and cause her to move awkwardly into her first professional experience. She is in search of organizations that have demonstrated a commitment to diversity. Through her research she decides that organizations that include sexual orientation in their affirmative action statements are of interest to her. She will target these organizations, thus circumscribing her job search options. Joe and Linda represent extreme ends of an identity disclosure continuum. LGBT individuals may find themselves at different points along this continuum throughout their careers as they grow personally and make decisions that impact them professionally.

#### **Researching the Organizational Environment**

Many organizations are working to create inclusive and productive environments. Organizations addressing the needs of LGBT employees through instituting domestic partner benefits programs or including sexual orientation in their Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) statements are clearly at the forefront in working to attract the most qualified individuals and to counteract homophobia actively. Organizations in this category may, in many instances, be safe settings for new LGBT professionals to begin their careers, regardless of if, how, or when they choose to disclose their sexual orientation.

*Organizational Clues: Policy Positions.* While there are many more inclusive organizations (in September, 1996, IBM joined the ranks of organizations offering domestic partner benefits) than there were even a few years ago, limiting a job search strictly to such organizations may prove to be an unnecessary—not to mention unrealistic—constraint. A next tier of organizations to explore are those that have directly addressed the needs of other minority groups—women, people of color, and those with disabilities. Reviewing EEO statements, sexual harassment policies, or an organization's implementation of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) guidelines or the Family Leave Act are all indicators that an organization is committed to creating a positive environment for a diverse workforce.

*Organizational Clues: On-the-Job Experiences.* LGBT employees' daily experiences will be the ultimate test of an organization's openness to gay employees. What LGBT employees must be prepared to face are some of the "worst-case" scenarios in which knowledge of their sexual orientation, either self-disclosed or simply "suspected," creates barriers to becoming socialized and advancing within the organization. Situations ranging from isolation to being overlooked for advancement opportunities, to open "joking" or negative comments directed at the gay community, to even more insidiously covert but subtle homophobia may represent the unfortunate realities in some workplaces. Policy development is one indicator of an organization's commitment to creating a welcoming environment for gay employees, but ultimately the goal is to find an organization that conceptually *and* practically makes the commitment a reality.

Thus, as LGBT students seek their first positions, there are several ways for them to evaluate the organizational environment. Specifically, as students approach the interview phase of the job search, they will want to consider organizational messages (in print or on a homepage) and to solicit information about the organization from others in the field. During the interview process, through interactions with current personnel, LGBT students will want to evaluate how the organization treats all its employees, paying particularly close attention to represented minority groups (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995).

### Strategies for Ensuring Career Success

Career professionals attentive to LGBT clients will go beyond merely providing students with the tools to make good career decisions and the resources with which to research viable options. They will also prepare students to make a successful transition by educating them about what to expect and how to continue grooming themselves for success. Drawing from the literature and practical experience, the following strategies for job success and related rationale for implementation are provided as examples that practitioners may want to use to educate their LGBT student clientele (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995).

*Build a Solid Skill Base or Area of Expertise.* LGBT employees with solid skills and who make the effort to broaden their skill base will have greater opportunity to pursue employment in organizations that may offer a safe and supportive work environment. As new employees, they may look for opportunities to participate in projects with a broad scope that enhance their understanding of the organization and connect them with others (e.g., managers) not immediately associated with their daily responsibilities. Another key strategy is to engage in work that offers opportunities to stretch, refine, or develop new skills and to add to their knowledge base. By broadening their skill sets and organizational expertise, LGBT employees enhance their ability to move between departments and to increase their overall marketability.

*Develop Mentor Relationships.* New employees learn a great deal on the job. There are also some lessons less painfully learned through others, such as how to negotiate work relationships. Many times, finding a mentor and developing that relationship helps in charting a successful career path. By developing a trusting, supportive relationship with a seasoned professional (who may or may not be gay), LGBT professionals may engage in problem solving on workplace issues that can enhance professional growth while avoiding situations that could jeopardize advancement. The mentor and the mentee may know of each other's sexual orientation, but disclosure is not essential for the relationship to work. In many cases, however, as the relationship develops, the gay professional is likely to feel comfortable in disclosing his or her sexual orientation.

*Engage in Professional Activities Outside the Workplace.* Whether or not trust relationships develop naturally within the workplace, professionals outside the organization may fill a void and prove to be equally helpful and supportive. A new professional must realize that these relationships may take longer to develop. Extending beyond the workplace entails getting involved in the community—joining professional organizations (perhaps including gay professional associations) or capitalizing on an outside interest to expand social networks and interact regularly enough with other professionals for trust relationships to develop. The objectivity of an outsider can be an added benefit making it well worth the time invested in getting involved and making connections outside the organization.

*Seek Opportunities in Supportive Locations.* A final strategy for new professionals to consider is targeting geographic areas where supportive networks may

be more readily accessible. Focus group insights indicate that a supportive community may be even more important than an LGBT-friendly work environment. Seeking locations in which gay communities are more widely known and accepted may ease the transition from student to professional. Gay communities in urban areas or on either coast may offer support that gay professionals find advantageous as they begin their careers. By locating themselves near an established gay community, new professionals may be in a better position to seek out necessary support systems. If, however, the employing organization is highly supportive, or as the gay individual develops into a more confident professional, geographic location may be of lesser importance.

These strategies are among many that informed career professionals will turn to in educating LGBT students. While these strategies are clearly effective for all in making a successful transition, they may be particularly relevant for LGBT individuals who may encounter discrimination in the workplace and in society.

### CONCLUSION

A major emphasis in this chapter has been the importance and advantages of integrating LGBT students' needs into the total fabric of the career office's mission. LGBT students' trust and belief in career services will be reflected in how frequently they actually utilize the services. An additional measure of effectiveness will be hearing directly from the LGBT student population that they "matter" to the unit and to the institution. The benefit inherent in building quality services for one population is that, by definition, the career office will have increased the quality of services for all students. Success strategies that may be essential for one population can be similarly effective for another population. In addition, by educating the entire student body about the unique career needs of specific student populations on our campuses today, career offices will have helped prepare an entire generation of students to become contributing, successful, and ethical leaders in the multicultural workforce.

### NOTE

1. The term *work* is used in this section to represent the transition into a job, graduate or professional school, or any next step a student may pursue.