

STRAIGHT, BUT NOT NARROW

Some colleges come out in support of gay students

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WOULD AN NFL HOPEFUL GO TO A COLLEGE WITH no football team? Would someone who wanted Greek letters on his résumé go to a school without a fraternity row? Would a prospective biologist apply to universities without long lab hours or good research opportunities?

So why would a gay, lesbian or bisexual coed not look for gay-friendly academia when cruising for a campus? Perhaps a tougher question is: What makes a college a positive environment for someone who is a member of one of the most under-represented minorities?

David Buckel, a Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund attorney, wishes he had an easy answer.

"Students really benefit from a gay-friendly setting in which they don't worry about their physical safety and emotional well-being," says Buckel, whose organization protects gays' legal and civil rights. "It allows them to focus on getting the education they went for in the first place."

Starting point

Resources are slim for finding schools that are straight, but not narrow. The best strategy is to go directly to the source — students, alumni, faculty and activist groups. Expert guides tend to ignore the subject, but Jan-Mitchell Sherrill, assistant dean of students at George

Washington U., Washington, D.C., took the subject head-on. *The Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Students' Guide to Colleges, Universities and Graduate Schools* (NYU Press) rates schools on a scale from gay friendly to absolutely intolerable using the real experts — students.

Sherrill and co-author Craig Hardesty distributed surveys to gay, lesbian and bisexual student organizations at 1,100 U.S. colleges. Schools earned points for gay student organizations, supportive

policies, gay-friendly curricula and resources such as medical services and counseling. Oberlin College, Ohio, Reed College, Ore., and Johns Hopkins U. are some of the schools that earned high marks from those surveyed. They said pass on Dartmouth College, N.H., U. of Colorado and Boston U.

Under the rainbow flag

Unfortunately, ranking universities isn't all that simple. And even universities that want to go the extra mile for gays have trouble measuring up. Criteria seem to vary from student to student.

Sean M. Burke, a grad student at Northwestern U. in Illinois, says a university's general attitude toward gay students often mirrors the attitude of its surrounding community.

"If a school is upbeat and progressive, expect it to be accommodating of gay folks. If a school has a strong activist streak, you can expect the gay community there to be very active."

For senior Will Kilfoyle, a gay community — or lack thereof — at rural Humboldt State U., Calif., was a major factor in his decision to transfer to California State U., Sacramento. "There [Humboldt], I was made more aware of it. You feel that strangeness a little more sharply."

The presence of large gay communities in nearby San Francisco and Sacramento helps gay students know they aren't alone, Kilfoyle says. "If I feel like it, I can now drive a short distance and be in a gay community," he says.

According to Kilfoyle, the smaller university and rural setting of Humboldt State offered less variety. Burke also suggests avoiding schools in remote areas. "You'll come to know every gay, lesbian and bisexual person

there in no time at all, simply because there won't be very many."

Schools with a religious administration may be a problem also, Burke says. "Brigham Young U. is a Mormon school. You are certifiably insane if you are gay and want to go there."

Burke also suggests checking what the school's administrative policies toward gays are like. "Ask faculty, recruiters, alumni and students. If they're uncomfortable answering questions like, 'Does this school have a domestic partnership policy for gay, lesbian and bisexual students?' that's a bad sign."

The choice is yours

Joneil Adriano, a graduate of Columbia U., warns that other elements may be more important to consider when deciding on a college.

"As far as I was concerned, it didn't matter [if Columbia was gay friendly] because I was so close to Greenwich Village. First and foremost, I was concerned that I was going to the best school possible, followed closely by how big and accessible the nearest gay, lesbian and bisexual community was."

But the issue of gay-friendliness did cross her mind. She says that despite the number of resources on campus for gay students, the school itself is trailing behind the trend.

"[Columbia] is a fairly late entry into the group of gay-friendly educational institutions. Only this year did it implement a domestic-partnership policy for queer staffers," Adriano says. "The development of a queer studies curriculum has been stagnant, although recent hirings allowed for more queer-oriented courses."

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For most, being gay isn't the most important factor to consider when choosing colleges, but students say it can make for a smoother ride on the road to the real world.

Kilfoyle says an accepting school atmosphere allows you to be yourself. "I want to feel a sense of ease when I hold hands with somebody. It should be no different than heterosexuals showing affection."

In many cases, colleges are paving the way to a future where rainbow flags whip in the wind along with the stars and stripes and the admission policy reads, "Come as you are."

Marolyn Love Krasner accepts others for who they are because her hidden past includes a commune and the Guru Prem.

Now for the bad news...

Although the future seems bright for an end to homophobia in higher education, there are still incidents that make it seem like we're stuck in the Dark Ages. Here's a small sample:

- Aug. '96: Students and alumni at Washington State U. protested when the school's mascot appeared in a gay-pride parade.

- July '96: A gay student at Penn State U. was verbally harassed and punched into unconsciousness.

- July '96: A U. of Miami football player was arrested for assault of the captain of the track team, who was allegedly spreading rumors that the football player was gay.

- Summer '96: The U. of Maryland Board of Regents voted against faculty domestic-partner benefits for gay and unmarried couples.

- Feb. '96: Boston College administrators called a gay-student group's drag show "offensive to the tradition of Boston College."

- Republicans at Pennsylvania's Bucknell U. wore khakis to demonstrate "true family values" on the same day students who support gay rights are asked to wear denim.

- '95: Central Michigan U. library books on gay issues were thrown into a toilet. It was the second incident within several weeks.

