"Where are all the girls who like girls?": An Exploratory Study of LGBTQ+ Information Behaviors at Two Single-Sex HBCUs

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INTRODUCTION

At the Atlanta University Center (AUC), we are in a unique position to research the experiences of LGBTQ+ students on single-sex Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Morehouse, established as a men’s college in 1867, and Spelman, founded as a women’s college in 1881, continue to consider biological sex as a criterion for enrollment, which makes being a “Morehouse Man” and a “Spelman Woman” defining part of their students’ experience in higher education. With these labels ingrained into the campus culture, the question of how they affect students in the LGBTQ+ community must be answered.

Conversations on the LGBTQ+ experience usually take an encompassing approach. This reality is that this is not a “one size fits all” experience; there are innumerable segments of this community that each have their own unique issues andropes. Libraries, both academic and public, have always sought ways to meet the needs of their patrons, but according to Bruce Allen Carter (2013) there is a lack of research on the information needs of LGBTQ+ African American college students because the literature largely focuses on students at Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs).

Recent student demonstrations on both campuses have confirmed the need for a more open dialogue regarding LGBTQ+ issues: one Morehouse student discussed instances of sexual assault endured by the dormitories, while Spelman students received hate mail that spurred the creation of the RialSafe movement. In addition to student demonstrations, there have been recent efforts on our campuses to provide resources for LGBTQ+ students, including a reading room (Safe Space) at Morehouse and a Predome Week at Spelman. As librarian-practitioner-researchers, we are interested in researching the information needs of LGBTQ+ students on our campuses to see if the library can play a bigger role in helping them meet their educational goals.

METHODS

To try to avoid bias and encourage open information sharing among peers, we had two student assistants who identified as LGBTQ+ on campus. To facilitate comfort and diversity within our sample, we used a snowballing interview strategy, where interview participants were encouraged to suggest individuals who met the criteria. One assistant worked full-time in the library, while the other worked part-time in their dormitory. Student assistants were more receptive to participating in a focus group, whereas those on campus seemed more comfortable with participating in individual interviews, which may explain some insight into information sharing on these two campuses.

Another challenge was training student assistants on focus group and interview techniques in a short period of time. It was difficult to coach the assistants on maintaining a balance between letting participants respond and probing for additional information. This process was facilitated by the assistant in the library, and the other assistant had the students work in pairs with colleagues from the school of psychology.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

During a preliminary review of the data we noticed a few burgeoning themes.

Theme 1: Information shared by administration. Some amount of information on LGBTQ+ student groups and campus support centers is offered to incoming new student orientation activities, academic programs, and social events sponsored by the administration. Students differed in their responses about the amount of information that was offered and the level of emphasis the administrations put on LGBTQ+ issues. This suggested a lack of emphasis on these issues within the administration.

Theme 2: Information behaviors mapped to personally. Students had vastly different responses to certain behaviors, such as conversations with their peers, use of social media, and other means, such as campus bulletin boards. Students differed in their responses about the amount of information that was offered and the level of emphasis the administrations put on LGBTQ+ issues. This suggested a lack of emphasis on these issues within the administration.

Theme 3: The role of social media. Most students indicated that social media has an impact on information seeking and sharing behaviors on campus. GroupMe appeared to be the most popular platform for sharing information on campus, while SnapChat, Instagram, and Twitter appeared to be the most popular for staying in touch personally.

Theme 4: “Tolerance” versus “Acceptance” on campus. One impact on students’ information behaviors appeared to be the norm of LGBTQ+ “tolerance” versus “acceptance” on campus. Students talked about a breakdown of a previouslyheld “tolerance” trend on campus, and a more welcoming trend of “acceptance.” The standard to include topics that they think about themselves and their peers, which may further influence the amount and depth of their information exchanges.

FURTHER RESEARCH

It seems like LGBTQ+ students are using different social media platforms and networking sites in different ways based on certain variables, such as their extroversion, engagement in student organizations, and views on activism. Further research could investigate these variables and see if they impact information behaviors or access to information (information privilege).

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WORKS CITED

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