"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 see a unique position to research the information behaviors of LGBTQ+ students as we have two single-sex historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs): Morehouse College and Spelman College, established as men’s college in 1867, and Spelman founded as a women’s college in 1867, continue to consider biological sex as a criterion for enrollment, which makes being a Morehouse Man and a Spelman Woman’s 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.

Recent research from Matthew P. Ciszek (2011) suggests that libraries should take a more proactive stance in the services they provide for LGBTQ+ populations. Correspondingly, information gathered during this study supported the need for conscious, deliberate, and intentional embedded services for the group. Students emphasized the importance of presenting a more inclusive scope of community through libraries’ support of LGBTQ+ activities, increased access to information via social media, electronic advertising of LGBTQ+ related library materials, and the library participating more openly in events such as PRIDE Week. Specifically engaging the AUC’s LGBTQ+ students through social media is key, the Woodruff library can hope to overcome the status quo “tolerance” and promote widespread acceptance.

CONCLUSIONS

One unexpected result is that 10 out of 14 students interviewed said that what they had researched LGBTQ+ issues at their college (including student groups or campus support before making their decision to enroll). A few students mentioned that they were still exploring their sexualities and felt that high school and their college years— and some of them were not sure even family —so LGBTQ+ issues were part of their decision for choosing a college to attend.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank:

American Library Association’s Office for Diversity, Literacy, and Outreach Services for supporting this research with a grant. Our colleagues at this Atlanta University Center Robert W. Woodruff Library. Oscar Daniel for assistance with the design of this poster. Spelman College and Morehouse College. Finally, many thanks to our great student research assistants, Chike Jackson and Brentt Johnson.

WORKS CITED

1. “Nothing better or Worse Than Being Black, Gay, and in the Band: A Qualitative Examination of Gay Undergraduates Participating in Historically Black College or University Marching Bands,” by Bruce Allen Carter for Journal of Research in Music Education, 61(1), April 2013, pp. 26-43

METHODS

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To try to avoid biases and encourage openness in sharing among peers, we had two student assistants who identified as belonging to the AUC’s LGBTQ+ community (one from each campus) to conduct face-to-face interviews with students from Morehouse and Spelman who also identified as LGBTQ+. In total, we talked to 16 students: 7 Morehouse students and 9 Spelman students (1 Spelman focus group focus student, 3 Morehouse focus group focus students, 3 Morehouse interviews, and 3 Spelman interviews. Focus groups were held in the library and interviews were on campus.

One challenge we faced was participant recruitment. We put flyers on campus, emailed campus contacts, and asked the administration. Our students were more receptive to participate in a focus group, whereas Morehouse students seemed more comfortable with participating in individual interviews, which, due to the nature, gave 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.

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