Pride on the Other Side: The Emergence of LGBT Web sites for Prospective Students

By Daniel Mathis and Christopher Tremblay

Since the advent of the printed college viewbook and college Web sites, consideration has been given to depicting diversity. It has been easier to display diversity through visual representations of different races and ethnicities than of lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender (LGBT) students. Aside from icons like pink triangles and rainbow flags, the diversity of sexual orientation is more challenging to present visually. According to Einhaus, Viento, and Croteau (2008), “LGBT students have largely been ignored in diversity-oriented admissions practices.” However, that is changing as colleges and universities expand visibility and awareness by leveraging existing resources.

For several decades, colleges have maintained an LGBT Web presence for currently enrolled students. These Web sites inform students about resources, services, events, and staff. They serve as a way to communicate a school’s inclusivity and commitment to the LGBT population. Only recently have Web sites specifically targeted for the prospective student LGBT population appeared. Some colleges and universities provide limited information for prospective LGBT students on their LGBT resource centers’ Web sites while others provide it on their admissions Web sites. A Google search reveals only a small number of such easily identifiable Web sites. As acceptance of differing sexual orientations has evolved, colleges have responded by expanding their outreach and direct recruitment of the LGBT population.

Schools demonstrate varying levels of integration, for example, by connecting the admissions office with the LGBT resource center and vice versa. According to Einhaus, Viento, and Croteau (2004), “By collaborating with the LGBT student services office, information regarding the college can be more effectively communicated to students.”

Within a college or university’s Web space, the admissions office maintains the most information for prospective students. However, academic and student affairs units often also provide information for specific subsets of students. For example, units may promote programs and initiatives for women, multicultural students, or international students. These units may or may not collaborate with the admissions office to determine a site’s content and layout. Thus, a prospective student may find inconsistencies while examining different Web sites for the same institution. This scenario can be problematic, confusing, and frustrating. Further, inconsistencies may detract from the admissions office’s attempt to present a unified marketing strategy and message.
**LGBT RECRUITMENT AS AN INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITY**

Before exploring examples of LGBT Web sites for prospective students, it is important to consider the reasons a college would create such a Web presence. At the institutional level, one would review a school’s mission, vision, and values. One should not be surprised that a quick survey of a variety of schools’ mission statements reveals key phrases emphasizing inclusion: “supportive community,” “dignity of all people,” “inclusive academic community,” “inclusiveness and cultural diversity,” and “celebrate diversity.” If a university strives to demonstrate actions congruent with its stated value of diversity, and if that definition includes the LGBT population, then a school should consider offering information and resources to prospective LGBT students as they embark on their college search process.

At the enrollment management level, another reason to develop such a Web site is in support of an established strategic plan that includes direct recruitment and enrollment of LGBT students. Students who come out prior to the start of the admissions process expect colleges to provide them with targeted information; they are much more conscientious in evaluating a school’s commitment and outreach to LGBT students. Knowing that sexual orientation is a factor in the college selection process, enrollment managers would be remiss if they did not consider this factor in creating and maintaining LGBT-affirmative recruitment initiatives (Einhaus, Viento & Croteau 2008). Just as an effective enrollment manager would allocate resources and create a plan to attract any targeted population, so the LGBT population deserves comparable attention.

External and internal forces also affect the creation of an LGBT recruitment Web site. The addition of *The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students* and the online Campus Climate Index has increased awareness and prompted admissions offices to focus on their ratings and the attention they may (or may not) be receiving from these resources. An admissions professional who is an ally or who identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender also may influence development of an LGBT recruitment Web site. Interest may translate into focused efforts which result in
information online. The process is similar when an “out” student affiliated with admissions is showcased because of involvement in the LGBT community.

The Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) in Higher Education’s (2009) The Role of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Services and Programs details the importance of internal and external relationships created by the LGBT resource center. While not specified, collaboration with the admissions office is encouraged and should be practiced. Noticeably absent from “Part 10: An Overview of Campus and External Relations” is inclusion of the admissions office in the listing of collaborating campus offices. By emphasizing the relationship between an admissions office and an LGBT student services office, the CAS Standards could shape a commitment to serving prospective in addition to currently enrolled students. One way this could happen is through collaboration on Web site information for prospective students.

**CONTINUUM OF PROSPECTIVE LGBT STUDENT WEB SITES**

Review of college Web sites and contact with admissions and LGBT resource professionals informed construction of a continuum of integration for the purpose of categorizing Web site models. As Web sites were analyzed for content, navigation, and linkages, five styles emerged: highly integrated, reciprocal link, one-way link, singular presence, and non-existent. Figure 1 depicts the five models on the Continuum of Prospective LGBT Student Web sites in order of increasing integration from right to left.

**Highly Integrated Model**

A Highly Integrated Model represents a best practice characterized by collaboration and communication between the admissions office and the LGBT resource center. Information is thorough and cross-referenced, with messaging that is consistent and intentional. The Web site is an outgrowth of a strategic LGBT-affirming recruitment initiative. Highly Integrated Models typically are found at LGBT-affirming universities where this population is a priority.

**Reciprocal Link Model**

In the Reciprocal Link Model, each Web site (admissions and LGBT resource center) is linked to the other. While this affords a prospective student the ability to toggle between information from these two resources, the user experience may not be cohesive. The links exist, but in a limited manner.

**One-Way Link Model**

A One-Way Link Model is characterized by an LGBT resource center Web site linked only to the admissions office’s Web site or vice versa, but there is no reciprocal link. Information exists in isolation and so creates a potential boundary.

**Singular Presence Model**

The Singular Presence Model describes online information for prospective LGBT students that is hosted either on the admissions office’s Web site or on that of the LGBT resource center.

**Non-Existent Model**

The Non-Existent Model denotes that no online information for prospective LGBT students exists in either domain. Information for current students may be present on the LGBT resource center Web site, but no content specifically targets prospective LGBT students.

All colleges are somewhere along the continuum, but their location need not be static. They have the ability to advance their position as philosophies are adopted, as decisions are made, and as actions are taken. These classifica-
tions represent the models of LGBT prospective student Web information at the time of this article’s publication, but they are subject to change as colleges and universities evolve.

RECRUITING LGBT STUDENTS VIA THE WEB: FEATURES AND BEST PRACTICES

In response to review of college and university Web sites and through an informal survey, features and best practices of recruitment-oriented information for LGBT students emerged. Table 1 highlights seven features of institutional Web sites that target prospective LGBT students. This list is not comprehensive, but it provides an overview of the type and location of information that may aid prospective LGBT students in the college search process. Beside each feature, an institution is listed (along with the URL of its Web page) that provides an example of the feature. While many of these features are found within LGBT resource center Web sites, two of them live on admissions Web sites: LGBT information provided within the context of a diversity tab and student profiles/bloggers.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feature</th>
<th>College</th>
<th>Comments</th>
<th>Online Location</th>
<th>URL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student Profiles and bloggers</td>
<td>Western Michigan University</td>
<td>Students are showcased based on their involvement in LGBT campus organizations.</td>
<td>Admissions</td>
<td>“Talk2WMU” <a href="http://www.wmich.edu/talk2wmu/groups/glbta.html">www.wmich.edu/talk2wmu/groups/glbta.html</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT Viewbook</td>
<td>University of Southern California</td>
<td>Available in print and PDF; Not linked from admissions</td>
<td>LGBT Resource Center</td>
<td>“Final Recruitment Guide” <a href="http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/glbss/Fliers/FinalRecruitmentGuide.pdf">www.usc.edu/student-affairs/glbss/Fliers/FinalRecruitmentGuide.pdf</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Rankings</td>
<td>American University</td>
<td>Inclusion of campus rankings and information on interpreting rankings</td>
<td>LGBT Resource Center</td>
<td>“How to Choose a College” <a href="http://www.american.edu/ocl/glbta/Prospective-Students-How-to-Chose-a-College.cfm">http://www.american.edu/ocl/glbta/Prospective-Students-How-to-Chose-a-College.cfm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity Tab</td>
<td>University of Iowa</td>
<td>Tab for LGBT students as well as racial minorities, international students, students with disabilities, etc.</td>
<td>Admissions</td>
<td>“Resources for Diverse Populations” <a href="http://www.uiowa.edu/admissions/undergrad/diversity/populations.htm">http://www.uiowa.edu/admissions/undergrad/diversity/populations.htm</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Handouts and PDFs</td>
<td>Ithaca College</td>
<td>Documents featuring FAQ's and information regarding the college search process</td>
<td>LGBT Resource Center</td>
<td>“Prospective Students” <a href="http://www.ithaca.edu/sacl/lgbt/docs/prospect/">http://www.ithaca.edu/sacl/lgbt/docs/prospect/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FAQ’s and Common Links</td>
<td>University of Michigan – Ann Arbor</td>
<td>Listing of resources and links to such as: scholarships, campus ally groups, housing, etc.</td>
<td>LGBT Resource Center</td>
<td>“Frequently Asked Questions” <a href="http://spectrum-center.umich.edu/prospective/studentfaq">http://spectrum-center.umich.edu/prospective/studentfaq</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact Information for Admissions</td>
<td>Duke University</td>
<td>Contact information for a designated liaison in the admissions office</td>
<td>LGBT Resource Center</td>
<td>“Info for Prospective Students” <a href="http://www.studentaffairs.duke.edu/lgbt/resources/prospective-students">http://www.studentaffairs.duke.edu/lgbt/resources/prospective-students</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information current as of 2/20/10

BEST PRACTICES

All colleges and universities seek to employ best practices—that is, ideal processes that represent the optimum manner of execution in any given situation. In the fields of enrollment management and LGBT outreach, best practices can be observed at institutions across the country. As the aforementioned continuum indicates, many best practices constitute part of a highly integrated approach (though some also may exist at other levels of the continuum). “Best practice” here refers to actions that facilitate information sharing and relationship building while focusing on an advanced delivery mechanism.

- A best practice considers every prospective student population (e.g., freshmen, transfers, international students, graduate students). For example, Suffolk University Law School has a page for prospective students (Gavin and Filman n.d.). At any stage in their personal and professional development, LGBT students seek affirming environments.
- Having a prominent link for prospective students on the LGBT resource center Web site is a best practice. Such a link ensures visibility and attention, especially for a Web surfer.
Going beyond the kind of online information typically made available to prospective students, Duke University’s Web site (Info, n.d.) provides an admissions representative’s name, telephone number, and e-mail address. This facilitates direct contact for prospective students who seek a personal connection.

The University of Southern California’s LGBT Recruitment Guide (a viewbook-type publication) as an online PDF represents a best practice for several reasons (University of Southern California n.d.). The 16-page guide is highly integrated in its presentation of admissions data/facts/information and LGBT-relevant content. The message from the director points to both the admissions Web site and the LGBT resource Web site, clearly indicating their partnership in support of the prospective student.

Princeton University’s 3000-word prospective student Web site in the LGBT section has extensive content to help students (n.d.). This best practice represents thoroughness in the presentation of information.

Baldwin-Wallace College offers an LGBT Host Program for Prospective Students (LGBT Host n.d.). This extended outreach is designed to provide a comfortable visit for the LGBT-identified prospective student.

Colleges and universities should strive to employ these best practices to advance recruitment efforts of the LGBT prospective student population. From print to personal connections, these practices assist in achieving the goal of welcoming LGBT prospective students as they enter the college’s front door while simultaneously demonstrating the connectedness of admissions and the LGBT resource center.

CONCLUSION

First, we examined current practices of colleges and universities to attract prospective LGBT students through Web site information. Next, we presented findings and created a continuum of Web site models based on research. Finally, we proposed opportunities for advancement of LGBT recruitment initiatives through Web sites. This article demonstrates emergence of an intersection between enrollment management practices and the world of LGBT students. To further advance this understanding, enrollment managers and LGBT resource center professionals must collaborate to share information and consider new intersections in their work. Admissions offices can maximize the venues in which LGBT resource centers interact with prospective students.

This inquiry was not intended to be all-inclusive but instead was approached from the perspective of prospective students as they conduct electronic searches. Thus, it can serve as a starting point for formal analysis to more thoroughly understand the availability, accessibility, and consistency of Web site content specifically for LGBT prospective students (Wilson and Meyer 2009). Further research should utilize focus groups and surveys of prospective LGBT students in order to document their experiences and obtain their perspectives.

It is apparent that this topic has not been explored on many campuses. Colleagues’ responses revealed that connecting admissions to LGBT centers and vice versa has not been investigated to its fullest potential. Often, our inquiry prompted action on the part of the schools contacted, with several LGBT resource centers altering their Web sites to direct prospective students to their institutions’ admissions Web pages. One LGBT resource center employee wrote:

“As far as I know, no link between the two Web sites existed. Thanks to you, the director of admissions is now aware of this page, [sic] and excited to know about it and wants to create a link.”

Many factors will influence the creation, maintenance, and evolution of these prospective student Web sites for the LGBT population: acceptance, openmindedness, commitment to diversity, leadership, and resources. Ultimately, the goal is a highly integrated model that results in pride on all sides.

REFERENCES


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