Determining the Effectiveness of a Speakers' Bureau Program

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Speakers’ Bureaus as peer education

Most student affairs professionals would agree that college is an important developmental period for students. While all students face challenges during their undergraduate years, those students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are often confronted with unique obstacles such as negative attitudes, harassment, assault, and discrimination related to their sexual orientation or gender identity (Rankin, 2003).

To combat some of these issues, colleges and universities across the country are attempting to address students’ negative attitudes toward LGBT people through various interventions. One popular form of intervention, known as a speakers’ bureau, consists of a panel of LGBT or ally speakers, who inform students about sexual orientation, gender identity, prejudice and diversity, and help students develop more positive attitudes toward LGBT individuals.

Despite the growing popularity of speakers’ bureaus as a form of peer education, little empirical research is available on the programs' effectiveness in fostering positive attitude change toward LGBT individuals. In a review of research on speakers’ bureaus and peer education programs, only a small amount of research on the topic was found. While most of the research found significant results between the intervention and students’ positive attitudes (Lance, 1987; Pagtolun-An and Clair, 1986; Geasler, Croteau, Heineman, & Edlund, 1995; Wallick, Cambre, & Townsend, 1995; and Nelson & Krieger, 1997), some found mixed results (Green, Dixon, and Gold-Neil, 1993) or no differences in students’ attitudes before and after the speakers’ bureau presentations (Black, Oles, Cramer, and Bennett, 1999; Grutzeck and Gidyecz, 1997; Cotton-Huston and Waite, 2000).

In light of the literature reviewed, two hypotheses regarding the speakers’ bureau program were developed. The researchers hypothesized that the speakers’ bureau program would immediately increase positive student attitudes toward LGBT people and that the presentation would have a lasting effect on positive student attitudes toward LGBT people.

Methodology

At the beginning of the Fall 2005 semester, the research and control groups completed a pre-survey, consisting of various scales designed to study support for lesbian and gay human rights, awareness of LGBT terminology, issues and campus resources, and comfort in interacting with LGBT individuals. The research group completed a post-survey immediately after the speakers’ bureau intervention, and again at the end of the semester. The control group completed the same survey again at the end of the semester.

Results

Sample Description: Within the research group, a total of 152 students completed the pre-survey and first post-survey. In the last phase of the research, 84 students in the research group completed the second post-survey. From the control group, 33 students from three classes completed the pre-survey and post-survey at the end of the semester.

Hypothesis Testing: The primary goal of this research was to examine whether the speakers’ bureau program increases positive attitudes among students toward LGBT individuals. Based on the data collected, there was no relationship between the intervention and student attitudes in Support for Lesbian & Gay Human Rights. However, there was a significant relationship between the intervention and the Student Attitudes and Awareness Scale.

The present research also examined whether the increase in positive attitudes after the speakers’ bureau presentation lasted over time. A paired sample t-test, comparing the means of the first and second post-surveys, was conducted. Because there was no significant difference between the post-surveys, the results suggested that the effects did in fact last over time.

Exploratory Findings: In regard to students’ knowledge of terminology, findings suggest that most students were aware of the meaning of words “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” “transgender,” and “queer” at the beginning of the semester. However, an independent sample t-test revealed a positive, significant relationship between the speakers’ bureau presentation and knowledge of the meaning of the word “ally.” At the pre-survey point, approximately 60% of students felt comfortable in their definitions of the word “ally.” This number increased to 96% of the students in the research group after the intervention.

Discussion

Findings and Conclusions: The current study was constructed using the hypothesis that the speakers’ bureau program would immediately increase positive student attitudes toward LGBT people. This hypothesis was partially supported. As predicted, there was a significant relationship between the intervention and the Student Attitudes and Awareness Scale implying that students felt more comfortable discussing LGBT
issues and interacting with LGBT individuals on campus. However, there was no relationship between the intervention and student attitudes in support of lesbian and gay human rights suggesting that while students may have felt more comfortable around LGBT people and issues after the speakers' bureau presentation, their attitudes regarding LGBT people's rights had not changed.

Another hypothesis suggested that the speakers' bureau program would have a lasting effect on positive student attitudes toward LGBT people. This hypothesis was supported on the Student Attitudes and Awareness Scale, meaning that comfort levels and awareness following the intervention were sustained for the duration of the semester.

Limitations: There are several limitations that have had an effect on the value and implications of the research. For example, the type of institution (i.e., large, public, research institution) that this research was conducted at is important to note because student populations and campus climate differ from institution to institution.

Another limitation is the non-random sampling methodology used in the study. Because participant attributes may make a difference in the research findings, non-random sampling is an important issue to address (Croteau & Kusek, 1992). In this particular case, the student participants chose to take the classes where a speakers' bureau was presented for a specific reason, which may have an influence on their attitudes toward LGBT individuals.

Implications: While the results of this study were mixed, the speakers' bureau program is an effective way of affecting students' attitudes toward LGBT individuals. Not only does the program educate students about LGBT Terminology, people, issues, and culture, but it also provides participants with a better understanding of campus resources for LGBT individuals. Finally, after the presentation, students claim to feel more comfortable with LGBT people and campus programming regarding sexual orientation.

References


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