



Shane Windmeyer

Campus Pride Founder Says LGBT Inclusiveness Benefits Everyone

By Nancy Fowler



A national organization called Campus Pride has helped thousands of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students navigate the world of higher education with services such as a national index, which rates universities for LGBT-friendliness. But Campus Pride is also a resource for educators.

Colleges and universities can boost their appeal to LGBT students by increasing their "Gay Point Average," according to Shane Windmeyer, the organization's founder. Having a high "GPA" attracts not only LGBT prospects, he says, but also other applicants, increasing enrollment at a time when many institutions are struggling financially.

Windmeyer's efforts stem from his personal story. He credits a gay student group at Emporia State University in Kansas for softening the rough edges of his coming-out experience in the 1990s. But student organizations are only one resource needed by LGBT students, Windmeyer says. Programs aimed at educating administration and faculty are another critical component that Campus Pride provides.

Windmeyer recently spoke with *INSIGHT Into Diversity* about his organization, which last year worked with more than one-fifth of the country's post-secondary schools.

With universities often viewed as liberal institutions, and LGBT activists now achieving goals including legalizing same-sex marriage in over a dozen states, why is Campus Pride still necessary?

I think the big misnomer right now is that college campuses are LGBT-friendly, but only about 13 percent have sexual orientation as part of their nondiscrimination statement, and only about 7 percent include gender identity.

Only about 300 actually have an LGBT staff person paid to do LGBT work, or a center or an office. Our research shows roughly a quarter of

lesbian, gay, and bisexual students encounter harassment on a daily basis on campus, and that number is higher for transgender students. A third of LGBT students today consider leaving their campus as a result of the challenging climate. It's an environment that also causes more than half of the faculty and staff to hide their sexual orientation or their gender identity.

So when people say colleges are safe places and they're liberal bastions, I would say there is a percentage of campuses doing amazing work, but by and large about 70 to 80 percent of

colleges are not doing anything related to LGBT inclusion.

How many college students in this country identify as LGBT?

We lack the research on that. It would be easy for college entrance forms or research studies, for instance, to ask that demographic question, but they don't. Only the University of Iowa, Elmhurst College, and the technical and community colleges in the state of Washington actually ask an optional LGBT identity question on their admissions applications.



Music Therapy during 2013 Camp Pride in Nashville, Tenn.



Camp Pride 2013

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Why does it make financial sense for campuses to increase their resources for LGBT students?

It's a buyers' market out there for colleges today and they need to reach out to all communities. And the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student is a new demographic to recruit, so part of it is a financial argument. But there's also the responsibility of a campus to provide a safe learning environment.

I think most campuses want to be called LGBT-friendly, but they're not necessarily doing the work to be LGBT-friendly. And still today most colleges don't know what transgender students' needs or concerns are, much less actively work to support transgender students.

How might being perceived as LGBT-friendly make a college more attractive to even non-LGBT students?

More straight students are looking for safe places because they have family members or friends who are LGBT. They have two moms or two dads. More and more straight people want to choose a campus with an open and

accepting environment for their family to visit or for their friends to feel welcome.

Also, there's an impact on preparing for the job market. You wouldn't want to go to a campus that lacks diversity around ethnicity, race, ability, religion, or international students. LGBT students are another demographic for preparing people for the workforce.

When we create services for international students, or African American cultural centers, or a multicultural office or resource center, those programs are there to support specific student populations but also to support the entire campus on educational awareness around multicultural issues. The same is true of LGBT services. That's where colleges are really dropping the ball, by not seeing the value of LGBT diversity or the value of retention or recruitment by providing such services for all students.

Are there some types of campuses that tend to be more resistant than others to the idea of LGBT inclusiveness?

There's definitely a need to focus resources in the South: in rural

communities, not only in the South; but all over; in community colleges; and at historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs).

In the past year, Campus Pride renewed our focus toward working with HBCUs, and we're developing scholarships to attend Camp Pride [leadership camp for LGBT students and allies]. It's definitely challenging to work with administrators at some rural area colleges, religious colleges, and some historically black colleges and universities, so we've been working with providing support to the LGBT and ally student leaders who are pushing for change.

It's slow work. It's not like, "Here's what you do, and then do it." There's a lot of buy-in necessary and needing to break through institutionalized anti-LGBT bias and prejudice. But Campus Pride has made a strong commitment and is working with a growing number of rural area colleges, religious colleges, and about a dozen HBCUs to improve their climate.

In programs such as next year's Sports Summit at the University of Richmond aimed at infusing LGBT acceptance into sports culture, how do you ensure you're not just preaching to the choir?

I think that's a challenge with a lot of programs. But the University of Richmond approached us and wanted to collaborate because they have buy-in from their athletic program. So they're going to incentivize their students and get them there.

But for other campuses, especially in the arena of sports, right now we need to educate the choir; the choir needs to know how to sing because by and large, the choir in the sports arena has never gotten together to rehearse—they don't know what they should be doing to provide a safe space in college sports, inside and outside the locker room.

How important are heterosexual allies?

Straight allies, especially young people and those under 35, are the advocates,



Queer People of Color Caucus from 2013 Camp Pride in Nashville, Tenn.

are the voices we need to open the door, especially in the athletic realm. Sometimes it takes a straight athlete to open the door for an out LGBT person to walk through that door.

But being an ally is not an identity you give yourself; it's about actions that you do. I think we've gotten into this mindset where someone can say, "I'm an ally." But it's your actions that determine whether you're an ally.

We've seen some amazing straight athletes, celebrities, and leaders come out as allies through talking about LGBT issues. But we still need more "out" LGBT people, from all walks of life, to break the cycle of invisibility that exists. This goes for college campuses as well as throughout society. Together—that is how we make a lasting difference, coming out, changing hearts and minds. ●

Nancy Fowler is a contributing writer for *INSIGHT Into Diversity*. Campus Pride is a partner organization of the magazine. For more information about Campus Pride, visit CampusPride.org.

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