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Are We Doing Enough?: A Look at Current Issues Affecting LGBTQ Students at the University of Kentucky

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Notes:

Colton Barton won the second place in the Social Sciences category. He is enrolled in the College of Arts and Sciences and in the Lewis Honors College. His majors are English and Gender & Women's Studies.

Dr. Zada Komara was the faculty mentor.

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University of Kentucky

Are We Doing Enough?:

A Look at Current Issues Affecting LGBTQ Students at the University of Kentucky

INTRODUCTION

In 2018, the University of Kentucky proudly announced that the Campus Pride Index had ranked them among the top 25 universities in the country for LGBTQ students (Conner). While this may seem like a cause for celebration, the University of Kentucky still has a ways to go before it can truly be considered a safe and inclusive university for those in the LGBTQ community. The Office of LGBTQ* Resources on campus is a step toward progress, rather than simply an indication of. The reality is that the appropriate resources are not being dedicated to these services, and the university is not instituting adequate programming for these services to succeed. LGBTQ students at the University of Kentucky continue to face discrimination and are increasingly feeling as though their needs are not being met.

The following proposal is addressing the gaps in research regarding how the University of Kentucky could better implement its resources to make the campus more inclusive to LGBTQ students. Beginning with students' freshman year, the university should promote student organizations focused on diversity and inclusion. They should implement a mandatory class into UK Core that covers diversity-related topics. Lastly, they need to direct more resources at the Office of LGBTQ* Resources as well as toward infrastructure to build more accessible and gender-neutral bathrooms. This proposal is targeted at University of Kentucky administrators and advisors as well as those in charge of the allocation of resources for organizations like the Office of LGBTQ* Resources and the construction of gender-neutral bathrooms.

BACKGROUND

To fully understand the climate surrounding the LGBTQ community at the University of Kentucky, it is important to first look at non-LGBTQ students. Worthen found in her study on

Bible Belt universities that students attending these universities tend to have negative views of LGBTQ people (996). She also found in her study that the number of years a student has attended a university is also a factor, stating that freshmen tended to be less accepting than upper-classmen (Worthen 1005). This indicates that LGBTQ individuals in their first years of college are more likely to experience judgment from their peers and feel as though their environment is less safe and inclusive. A former University of Kentucky student Landon Foster highlights this in his article discussing his anxiety over coming out as gay during his time as a student (Foster). He expressed his fears about his fellow teammates and students treating him differently, forcing him to wait until he graduated to come out (Foster). These sources indicate that students at the University of Kentucky continue to feel unsafe while fully being themselves, and these feelings are validated by the prejudicial views held by students on campuses such as this one.

In 2015, the University of Kentucky attempted to solve these issues by creating the Office of LGBTQ* Resources (“Gray Matters”). However, students often do not use these resource centers for fear of harassment from their peers, and many graduate students working for these centers feel as though they are set up for failure due to a lack of resources (Sokolowski 1; Tillapaugh and Catalano 130). This not only demonstrates that the attitudes of other students may prevent LGBTQ students from accessing resources needed to feel included on campus, but it also indicates an issue with the allocation of resources within universities. In addition to this, the website for the Office of LGBTQ* Resources can be difficult to maneuver, forcing students to go out of their way to find information on student organizations and events (*Office of LGBTQ* Resources*).

In more recent years, the University of Kentucky conducted a climate survey attempting

to address the concerns and demands of LGBTQ students on campus (Komara). However, in a discussion with Dr. Zada Komara, a lecturer in the Lewis Honors College and attendee of the survey, she stated that many LGBTQ students and faculty in attendance felt it was more of a performative gesture rather than something that would produce actual results (Komara). Those in attendance seemed to make one thing abundantly clear: campus still does not feel safe for LGBTQ students (Komara). Despite their demands, though, the University of Kentucky has not taken adequate steps to solve these issues.

DISCUSSION

The University of Kentucky has two orientations designed to integrate freshman students into life on campus: “see blue. U” Orientation and K Week (*Big Blue Nation*; “K Week”). During these events, students are exposed to faculty, student organizations, and resources for success (*Big Blue Nation*; “K Week”). For some students, this could be their first experience on a university campus interacting with diverse groups of people. These orientations could be a crucial time to demonstrate the university’s dedication to inclusion by introducing topics related to diversity and the LGBTQ community and working to educate students on potential resources. Alongside this, the university could promote affiliated events and organizations that students can participate in. Organizations could be given a platform to inform students about themselves and introduce key members so students can feel more comfortable approaching them in the future. Providing links and contact information for further resources would ensure every student is aware of everything they have to offer as well.

The implementation of these events during orientations would help in creating a campus where LGBTQ students feel safer. In a study analyzing LGBTQ resources on university

websites, McKinley et al. concluded that providing information on services dedicated to assisting LGBTQ individuals in the areas of mental health and/or harassment is essential to their wellbeing (112). In the same study, they also concluded that universities cannot simply assume students will “infer that support services are available” when they are facing these issues (McKinley et al. 115). In summary, students are more likely to use these services and benefit from them if they are explicitly made aware of their existence. One could argue from this that the University of Kentucky already utilizes all of the time allotted for their orientations, and that this would take time away from other important issues. While this is a valid point, the well-being of students should be of utmost importance, and, as stated by McKinley et al., preventing the dropout of minority students should be a financial motivator to promote these services if nothing else (129). This would further promote the idea that the University of Kentucky prioritizes diversity and inclusion by demonstrating all of the resources they have devoted to LGBTQ services to every incoming student. Ultimately, setting aside time during freshman orientation would be beneficial in making LGBTQ students feel safe on campus and could potentially diminish some of the negative attitudes other students may have toward the community.

Another solution to be implemented alongside the orientation events would be a general education course added to the UK Core requirements that would teach about topics related to diversity, including a section dedicated to the LGBTQ community. Currently, one of the UK Core learning outcomes is to “demonstrate an understanding of the complexities of citizenship and the process for making informed choices as engaged citizens in a diverse, multilingual world.” However, there is not a specific section dedicated solely to diversity (“UK Core”). As a result, students who may be biased toward certain minority groups can avoid classes that discuss

these topics. Implementing this course would promote a diverse and inclusive campus, but could also educate people on their prejudices and make them more well-rounded citizens of the world.

Educating students on these topics could also have benefits aside from challenging their prejudicial views. A 2019 study determined that information about different sexualities was difficult to find for students and that there is an information barrier that promotes a culture of heteronormativity on college campuses (Stewart and Kendrick 610). It was also determined that around one-third of college students have questions regarding their sexuality but face these barriers both within their universities and from their peers (Stewart and Kendrick 617). In an anonymous interview with an LGBTQ student at the University of Kentucky¹, they also stated that they wished there were more safe sex informational events promoted on campus. A class that teaches students basic information would be beneficial for students who have concerns regarding their sexuality and could help get rid of the stigma that they may face from their peers. This course could then be a basis for further research to be conducted to provide more applicable resources for students to educate themselves outside of class.

It is clear that education on these issues is important, but implementing a new course that is mandatory for students could be difficult due to the potential backlash from students and faculty as well as some majors having an already rigorous courseload. However, in an interview with Dr. Tara Tuttle, the Assistant Dean of Diversity and Inclusion for UK's Lewis Honors College, she states that the Honors College already has multiple courses dedicated to diversity that have received nothing but positive feedback- to her knowledge. The only difference between these honors courses and the proposed courses is that they are not mandatory, possibly skewing the feedback. Dr. Tuttle goes on to state that the act of hiring professionals in fields related to

¹ Note: A series of personal interviews over text message were conducted with LGBTQ students attending the University of Kentucky. All are kept anonymous.

diversity and the LGBTQ community to teach said courses shows the Honors College's dedication to diversity and inclusion. When looking at the University of Kentucky as a whole, this prospective course could provide the university with a chance to hire more diverse professionals as professors and overall increase the diversity of its faculty. In regards to the heavy course load of other majors, this course could also be offered for a portion of the term instead of the full semester like UK 101, which is an orientation course already offered for new students ("UK 101"). This, along with the informational events during freshman orientations, could be solutions to decreasing the harassment and negative views toward the LGBTQ community at the University of Kentucky.

The Office of LGBTQ* Resources is the university's main resource center for LGBTQ students, faculty, and alumni (*Office of LGBTQ* Resources*). For being such an important resource, the Office of LGBTQ* Resources' website is particularly difficult to navigate, making it difficult to find information about getting involved on campus (*Office of LGBTQ* Resources*). According to McKinley et al.'s aforementioned study, online resources appeal to LGBTQ students more because they allow them to get assistance while being able to avoid a potentially hostile environment on campus (125). Similarly, students often avoid using such resource centers due to the stigma surrounding being a part of the LGBTQ community (Sokolowski 1). With more resources and funding, the resource center could potentially hire more individuals to better manage and maintain the website to present the information in a way that is accessible to every student. The office could also work better with student organizations to ensure the necessary contact information and calendar events are always kept up to date to maximize student involvement. More resources could even allow them to host more events and outreach programs dedicated to promoting certain organizations and getting students more involved that may not be

aware of their opportunities. Not only is making this website accessible important for students who may be uncomfortable using in-person services, but it is also important for those who are immunocompromised or otherwise unable to physically attend the office due to the current COVID-19 pandemic.

The importance of engaging students in LGBTQ organizations such as this one is further made clear in a study that looked at the wellbeing of LGBTQ students in relation to “sporting, creative, and social groups” (Ceatha et al. 3636). This study determined that the mental health of LGBTQ students tended to improve when being surrounded by like-minded individuals within LGBTQ groups (Ceatha et al. 3636). By allocating more resources to the Office of LGBTQ* Resources, they can better promote and host events for LGBTQ organizations and ultimately work to improve the mental health of LGBTQ students at the University of Kentucky. Reorganizing their website to better promote student activities and organizations could achieve the same effect. While it is understandable that the University of Kentucky cannot simply give more funding to organizations without reasonable cause, the mental well-being of students and the potential to prevent LGBTQ students from dropping out should be important enough to provide the Office of LGBTQ* Resources the necessary resources for further success in their current efforts.

While these studies are crucial in understanding the climate surrounding LGBTQ issues on college campuses, students at the University of Kentucky have also expressed their dissatisfaction with the current facilities in place. In anonymous interviews with three different transgender students at the University of Kentucky, they stated that they were unhappy with the bathroom facilities on campus, wishing there were more gender-neutral bathrooms. One student explicitly expressed that they did not feel safe using the public bathrooms on campus and often

had to wait an entire day before using the bathroom. This is a problem that could easily be solved through the allocation of resources to build more bathrooms, and yet the University of Kentucky has still not done so.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, when taking a broad look at the University of Kentucky's efforts toward diversity and inclusion, it's clear that there is more to be done. The Office of LGBTQ* Resources, for example, is a place to host events and promote organizations on campus that can give LGBTQ students a sense of community. With more resources or even more time devoted to certain areas like the office's website, the Office of LGBTQ* Resources could better accomplish its goals to "create a space for education, advocacy, and community building" within the LGBTQ community on campus ("Gray Matters"). More gender-neutral bathrooms would promote a sense of safety for LGBTQ students, specifically transgender and gender-nonconforming students, and could work to mend the relationship between them and the university. Some of the time spent during freshman orientations should be allotted to promoting a diverse and inclusive campus by giving the spotlight to speakers and representatives from various organizations devoted to marginalized communities. A required course dedicated to educating students on topics related to diversity and inclusion could then be a potential step in the right direction in eliminating the culture of fear and prejudice that still persists at the University of Kentucky. Making the campus welcome to all- but especially to those within the LGBTQ community- should be of utmost importance to a university and community that prides itself on being safe and inclusive.

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