Assessing the Campus Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Students: Methodological and Political Issues

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ABSTRACT

Launching a LGBT campus climate study can make campus administrators, as well as those conducting the climate study, vulnerable to criticism regardless of the study’s outcomes. Methodological and political issues will arise from inauguration of the study, during the design of the study, when conducting the study, and when reporting the results. This poster considers these interactions, as it addresses ten major questions, which climate assessors must consider.

QUESTION #1: Who is initiating and/or sponsoring the study?

- Political issues are typically present from the beginning of the study.
- Ideally, a key campus administrator initiates the study. More likely, an incident such as an assault on a LGBT student, provokes the LGBT campus community to demand a campus climate study.
- The study needs to be sold to the administration as a step to improve the campus climate. Describing the study as a “needs assessment” is a good selling point.
- Garnering administrative support and/or funding from the beginning increases the probability that findings and recommendations will be acted upon.

QUESTION #2: Who should be on the planning group?

- The following key persons should be consulted throughout key junctures of the study. Early involvement and consensus across persons may increase responsiveness to findings.
- Stakeholders who may be responsible for implementation of recommendations.
- Should be represented throughout planning and implementation.
- Members of the LGBT campus community.
- Need to be intimately involved in the planning, design, implementation, and results disclosure of the study.
- May be found from LGBT campus organizations.
- Chief campus administrator.
- May initiate and/or provide funding for study.
- Financial investment usually correlates with follow-through with recommendations.
- Other stakeholders may include students, faculty, staff, and members of the town community.

QUESTION #3: What is the purpose of the study?

- The purpose(s) of a campus climate study present different methodological and political issues.
- The purpose should evolve from the campus’s diversity goals, examine opportunities for LGBT students to become empowered, and look at the extent of heterosexism on campus.

QUESTION #4: Will the study be quantitative, qualitative, or a mixture?

- Published LGBT campus climate studies are about evenly divided between those employing quantitative and qualitative methodologies.
- Quantitative studies have the advantage of providing data amenable to comparisons among student groups.
- Qualitative studies that quote LGBT students describing their personal campus experience, can be quite powerful.
- Quantitative data may be more difficult to be succinctly displayed and comparisons cannot be made.
- A mixed-method approach may be the best method to satisfy a variety of audiences.

QUESTION #5: What populations need to be sampled?

- Studies may be comprehensive and involve a variety of persons or focus upon a specific subgroup including:
  - Students (GBT students, general student body, heterosexual students, resident hall staff, members of fraternities and sororities).
  - Faculty
  - Staff and administrators
- It will be difficult for campus administrators to ignore reports of the concerns and experiences of LGBT students, but adding data on the attitudes and behaviors of the general student body, faculty, and staff members will be more powerful and add insights important in planning intervention strategies.

QUESTION #6: Which sampling procedures will be most effective?

- Unique problems are often encountered when collecting data for LGBT studies due to confidentiality and return rates.
- Snowball solicitation strategies can be useful and concerns about differences between the responses of out and closeted students can be examined by including a scale that distinguishes the two groups.

QUESTION #7: What instruments should be used?

- Measurements must be strategically developed and/or selected. The better the instrument, the better data and conclusions that can be drawn.
- Before obtaining information, the purpose must be delineated to guide data collection.
- Potential instruments include:
  - Unobtrusive measures such as campus graffiti and reports of vandalism.
  - Institutional checklists.
  - Interview/Focus groups.
  - Published scales that assess perceptions of LGBT students and anti-LGBT attitudes of general students.
  - Mohr & Sedlacek’s (2000) scale regarding barriers to friendships.

QUESTION #8: How will the data be analyzed?

- Differences within and between respondents should be assessed.
- De-aggregation of data into subgroups (academic class, residential groups, college majors, gender) provides helpful clues about prioritizing where and with whom programming would be most fruitful.
- Looking at the unique experiences and needs of students within the LGBT grouping would be helpful in determining how best to address these differences.
- Data should be analyzed in a way to highlight campus needs and magnitude.
- Comparisons of local results with those from published studies can provide an indicator of where the local campus stands relative to other campuses.
- It is important to note that progress needs to be based on the standard of zero incidences of verbal and physical harassment rather than solely being better than another comparable institution.

QUESTION #9: How will the results be reported?

- Dependent upon funding and/or who conducts the survey, type of dissemination methods and reports may vary.
- The determination of Who owns the results? needs to be made in the initial phases of designing the study.
- Multiple reports are the surest way to meet the needs, interests, and concerns of the variety of campus audiences.
- Reporting strategies may include: Full report, Technical report, Executive summary, Reports targeting specific subgroups, Press release, Panels of LGBT students discussing findings, PowerPoint presentations to various campus groups.

QUESTION #10: What actions will ensure that findings will be accepted & applied?

- It is important to include the spectrum of stakeholders in the development of recommendations to increase the likelihood of implementation.
- The wide dissemination of results and recommendations provide a framework for specific interventions, expected outcomes, and evaluation techniques.
- The degree of acceptance and how well the findings and recommendations are acted on will be a function of the extent to which the administration has been sold on the importance of the study from the beginning and the political power of the campus study group.

DISCUSSION

- Conducting a campus climate study on LGBT student life presents unique methodological and political issues and challenges.
- A essential task is to get the involvement of key administrators and stakeholders right from the start of the campus climate study.
- Addressing key questions during the process of the study will assist the development, implementation, and reporting of results.
- Researchers conducting LGBT climate studies must be alert and sensitive to these issues and the institution’s vulnerability, if the study’s findings are to be accepted and result in its recommendations being seriously considered and implemented.

REFERENCES

This document is available at: http://www.ncsl.org/freepub/ls/ls173000.pdf

Additional resources: