

## **WORKING MORE EFFECTIVELY IN ADVISING: UNDERSTANDING MULTICULTURAL DIMENSIONS OF GAY, LESBIAN, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER IDENTITIES<sup>1</sup>**

Advisors want to work effectively with their students. Understanding multicultural issues is essential if advisors are to be effective in their work. Cunningham (2003) addressed the need for global multicultural awareness that encompasses more than race/ethnicity. While race and ethnicity are two important components of multicultural awareness, they are not the only two ways in which a person maintains a multicultural identity. Many other identities relate to multiculturalism; one of those identities is sexual orientation.

The first step toward better understanding of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) persons is the understanding of definitions as discussed in Perez, DeBord, and Bieschke (2000). The first definition that needs to be understood is *sexual orientation*.

*Sexual orientation* extends beyond a romantic relationship to include aspects of attraction, desire, and emotional connection. Limiting the definition to one that focuses only on sexual behavior perpetuates the inaccurate notion that a GLBT identity is just about sex. That perspective is harmful and blatantly inaccurate! It is crucial that advisors understand that sexual orientation relates to emotional attraction and is about sharing commitment and a romantic life. It should be noted that individuals are GLB or heterosexual even when they are not in a relationship.

In most ways, GLBT individuals are like heterosexual individuals. Although there are differences, especially in the way each group is treated within society, persons in all of the groups share similar hopes and dreams. Cunningham (2003) noted that **there are often more *within group differences than differences between groups***. Indeed many issues faced by GLBT persons are quite similar to those faced by heterosexuals.

Until we become better informed, our preconceived notions, stereotypes, and prejudices about GLBT persons guide our beliefs. Once we are able to see GLBT individuals as real people and not stereotyped notions, we have a new perspective. Everyone does not share the same beliefs and affirmation for GLBT persons, but accurate and humanizing information can help those who see GLBT persons as “others” work more effectively with GLBT students.

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<sup>1</sup> Smith, B. (2006). Working more effectively in advising: Understanding multicultural dimensions of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender identities. NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources Web site: [www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/GLBT-Definitions.htm](http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/GLBT-Definitions.htm)

Accurate definitions can provide advisors with the information needed to effectively work with students. These definitions include:

- ? **Gay** refers to both men and women who are attracted to persons of the same sex.
- ? **Lesbian** is the term used for women who are romantically and sexually attracted to other women. Note: contemporary women often use the term *gay* .
- ? **Homosexual** has been used to identify both men and women who are attracted to persons of the same sex. This phrase evolved from the medical treatment of people attracted to same-sex persons and thus can have a pejorative connotation.
- ? **Queer** is another term used to describe GLBT persons. It previously had a negative connotation. Many still view it negatively, but some GLBT persons are reclaiming it as a way to empower themselves.
- ? **Bisexual** is used to indicate that a person is attracted to both men and women. Some describe bisexuality as an attraction to the qualities a person possesses rather than the gender of the person who possesses the qualities . Bisexual persons often experience a lack of acceptance in both heterosexual and GL communities because of misconceptions and stereotypes associated with bisexuality.

**It is important that advisors are familiar with these terms** not only so we can relate to use of the terms but so we can avoid use of terminology that is derogatory. Understanding the history associated with some words (i.e., homosexual, queer) also gives insight into why certain words are avoided or only used within an explicitly affirming context.

Another group that is often met with little support in any community is transgendered persons. **Transgender** relates to gender identity rather than sexual orientation; however, it is often included when people discuss GLB issues. This population is sorely lacking in attention and understanding.

- ? **Transgender** is an umbrella term used to describe someone who experiences his/her gender in a way that varies along a continuum from masculine to feminine.
- ? **Transsexuals** are a sub-group within transgender. The term refers to persons whose anatomy does not match the way they feel and who desire sex reassignment surgery or hormones. Note: other groups of transgendered persons are discussed by Brown & Rounsley (1996)

Some transgender persons identify as GLB, while others identify as heterosexual.

**Examples** of when it is important to be prepared to work with transgendered students include phone conversations and in-person advising. An advisor who speaks with a student on the phone notes that the student's voice and name sound male but information on the computer shows a distinctly female name. In this case the advisor may inquire to ensure that she is speaking with the correct student; the result may be that the student shares that he is transitioning (going through the process to become male which often includes hormones that change the voice). The discussion can be unexpected but, since the advisor is familiar with some of the issues surrounding a transgendered identity, she is more prepared to work effectively with the student. Clothing may also signal that a student is transgendered, which would be noted when the student arrived for his/her advising appointment. This is most noticeable when working with a male student who dresses in feminine clothing, *e.g.*, wears a dress.

**Coming out** is another term related to sexual orientation; it refers to the disclosing of one's sexual orientation. This is not a one time event; instead it is a decision made whenever a GLBT person meets someone new. Sometimes GLBT disclosure is considered to be something very personal, but because most people assume heterosexuality, the responsibility for challenging that assumption rests on the GLBT person. Not disclosing is often seen as lying or keeping a secret. Heterosexual individuals are not required to "come out" because their sexual orientation is assumed and visible in everyday conversation.

This visibility informally occurs when a heterosexual female refers to a show she and her husband attended over the weekend. When a lesbian refers to her partner attending the same show, she is attempting to socially relate by sharing about her weekend. She is not sharing about her sexual behavior; she is relaying stories of her life on the same level as her heterosexual peer. Understanding this is one way to challenge stereotypes.

Other terms that need to be defined include ***homophobia, internalized homophobia, heterosexism and heterosexual privilege.***

- ? ***Homophobia*** is the fear or dislike of gay persons.
- ? ***Internalized homophobia*** refers to gay persons who internalize homophobia which results in the person feeling shame about being gay.

Homophobia hurts heterosexual persons as well as those who are GLBT because it inhibits people, especially men, from forming close relationships with those of the same sex for fear of being perceived as gay. Advisors encounter this when a male student makes derogatory

comments about a dance class for fear that he would be assumed gay if he enrolled in the class. That fear often locks people into strict gender role behaviors and is sometimes used as peer pressure for a heterosexual person to verbally or physically “bash” a GLBT person to “prove” his/her heterosexuality.

- ✍ **Heterosexism** relates to making assumptions that someone is heterosexual and acting as if heterosexuality is the only acceptable identity.

This can occur when advisors are getting to know students. Often advisors ask students about their outside responsibilities or other-sex dating relationships. Instead, advisors should ask a broad question inquiring if the student is trying to maintain a dating relationship as well as school and other responsibilities/obligations.

- ✍ **Heterosexual privilege** is an advantage given to heterosexual persons simply because they are heterosexual. This is similar to privileges White persons receive because of their race.

Examples of heterosexual privilege include:

- ✍ being able to display simple affection, *e.g.*, hand-holding, in public without fear of retaliation
- ✍ discussing dating relationships without wondering if the conversation will be okay with all participants
- ✍ receiving empathy when a relationship ends
- ✍ never being afraid of losing a job because of your partner’s gender.

These issues manifest themselves in the advising relationship when GLBT students are hesitant to disclose a same-sex relationship or to disclose their participation in a GLBT-related campus organization because of fear of how the advisor might react.

Brown, M. & Rounsley, C. A. (1996). Understanding transsexualism: For families, friends, coworkers and helping professionals (pp. 5-29, 78-95). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cunningham, L. A. (2003). Multicultural awareness. Retrieved June 8, 2006 from the *NACADA Clearinghouse of Academic Advising Resources* Web site:  
<http://www.nacada.ksu.edu/Clearinghouse/AdvisingIssues/Multicultural.htm>

Perez, R. M., DeBord, K. A., & Bieschke, K. J. (2000). *Handbook of counseling and psychotherapy with lesbian, gay, and bisexual clients*. Washington, D. C.: American Psychological Association.