

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Diversity in Academe

June 9, 2013

The Campus Climate for Gay Faculty

At a time when momentum for gay rights is growing, we asked several academics to comment on how, and whether, the campus climate has changed for lesbian and gay scholars. President Obama recently mentioned gay rights for the first time ever in an Inaugural Address. In the November elections, voters in several states approved initiatives supporting gay marriage. Meanwhile, after ending its ban on openly gay service members, the Pentagon has decided to extend certain benefits to same-sex partners. And the Boy Scouts of America, a champion of what it considers traditional values, has ended its longtime ban on gay scouts. Here's what we heard from gay and lesbian professors and scholars of sexuality.



Peter S. Cahn

Associate provost for academic affairs at the Massachusetts General Hospital Institute of Health Professions, and author of Direct Sales and Direct Faith in Latin America (Palgrave Macmillan, 2011)

When I last wrote about the climate for lesbian and gay faculty, in a 2006 *Chronicle* [essay](#), I had been an anthropology professor at the University of Oklahoma for four years. While I focused on building a supportive community near the campus, I could imagine that larger state politics didn't affect my world. Yet I soon realized that no bubble was strong enough to protect lesbians and gays from narrow interpretations of the Bible.

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The intractability of heartland intolerance became clear after I served on a panel about same-sex marriage with a Republican state representative named Bill Graves. It frustrated me that my carefully supported arguments could not penetrate his moralistic Christian mind-set. In his genial handshake I recognized the smiling faces of other Oklahomans who had greeted me warmly in public only to vote for anti-gay measures and candidates at election time.

In 2004 Representative Graves co-authored legislation that not only prevented same-sex couples from adopting children but also dissolved legal same-sex relationships established in other states. It passed the House on a vote of 93 to 4 and the Senate unanimously. "This is a Bible Belt state," he said. "Gay people might call it discrimination, but I call it upholding morality."

Now the intolerance penetrated my campus bubble. A few years before I joined the Oklahoma faculty, a professor of accounting had moved to Norman with her same-sex spouse and children. New Jersey, where they had lived before, allowed the nonbiological parent to legally adopt her partner's children. Suddenly, under Oklahoma law, their family no longer existed. The other parent could not make medical decisions for her children or even sign

their school permission slips.

My colleagues and two other couples sued the state, claiming that their constitutional rights had been violated. An appeals court ruled that they did not have standing to sue because they had not suffered tangible harm, but the court did find the adoption law unconstitutional.

I would later see my colleagues eating with their children at the local Mexican restaurant that served as the unofficial faculty club, and I applauded their acceptance by the university community. However, we still lived in a state that offered us no protection from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and no recognition for our families.

The lesbian couple moved away from Oklahoma, as did I. On sabbatical in Massachusetts, I started dating a man from Boston. He returned with me to Oklahoma to see about moving there, but, as our relationship deepened, it made more sense to live in a state that honored our commitment to each other. We married in 2011, on the campus of my new university.

Bill Graves remains in Oklahoma. He's an elected county judge now and still uses the Bible to condemn what he considers immoral sexuality.

While I lived in Oklahoma, I thought the campus bubble insulated me from rigid religious dogma. I learned, however, that it also isolated me. And academics who don't engage with their surroundings risk becoming narrow themselves.



Toby Miller

Professor of media and cultural studies at the University of California at Riverside

Sports Illustrated recently had to shut down its online comments

section because of brutal reactions to basketballer Jason Collins's coming out. Universities aren't like *Sports Illustrated*, are they?

When I moved to the United States, in 1993, a term that had once been used as gentle self-mockery on the left and by minorities—political correctness—had become a tool of the right and majorities. There seemed to be two great wings of identity politics flapping. One favored difference; the other, sameness.

Apart from redoubts of the right and affirmative-action lawsuits, since that time the trend has seemed to be toward difference. There are now out college presidents. Queer studies has attained quasi-disciplinary status. Ethnic studies and women's studies have consolidated earlier gains by satisfying breadth requirements for the liberal arts.

But despite those advances, the story is not some Whiggish teleology that heads inexorably toward tolerance and the encouragement of diversity. Ethnic studies has experienced legislative condemnation and obstruction. Sexual violence remains a major issue on campus, in terms of both dormitory rape and everyday workplace harassment. Barriers to professorial recruitment and advancement continue to undermine women and minorities, and the evidence suggests insubstantial discussion and action on those issues within many science and engineering faculties.

As with class issues and other social identities, the research shows that the experiences of LGBT people in high school and earlier are key determinants of whether folks go on to further study and then, potentially, the professoriate. Entry to higher education is often stymied early on.

Some studies indicate severe discrimination against LGBT candidates for hiring, tenure, and promotion, while spousal hires tend to privilege straight culture and reduce the number of jobs available to others.

Needless to say, the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities is a byword for LGBT exclusion and prejudice, based on tendentious

readings of tiny components of hotly contested books, while some jurisdictions see counselors able to refuse therapy to LGBT professors on religious grounds. The council and its kind claim that gay students are welcome, as part of their development. Faculty? Not so much.

Opinion and attitude polls across higher education suggest that homophobia among straight male students—the biggest problem people in this area—is diminishing rapidly. But teaching evaluations of LGBT faculty are frequently negative, as per stereotypical religious and other prejudices. Out professors are perceived as more likely than straight ones to be pursuing a political agenda, even when their curricula and instructional methods are virtually identical.

In terms of the external environment, tax issues confront same-sex couples in both federal and state spheres, and there appears to be major regional variation in the everyday experiences of LGBT faculty, who often experience a powerful sense of isolation, especially in small college towns.

So the story remains a mixed one in terms of the underpinning political economy of difference and its expression in pedagogy. Straight supporters have a lot of work to do to help change the situation. We must ensure that *Sports Illustrated's* active readers learn new tricks.



Jonathan P. O'Connor

Assistant professor of Spanish at St. Olaf College

I am in my second year as an assistant professor at a small Lutheran liberal-arts college in rural Minnesota. I feel welcomed, supported both professionally and personally, and integrated into the campus community. The college's benefits plan recognizes domestic partnerships; college social invitations automatically extend to my

partner; and any scrutiny I receive centers appropriately on the quality of my work without regard to my sexuality. On the other hand, my partner and I have chosen to live in the Twin Cities metropolitan area, for greater access to social resources than in the rural area surrounding my campus. Yet the acceptance I have felt from the campus community has fostered in me a strong sense of loyalty to the college.

Two experiences strike me as particularly revealing about the campus climate. The first regards the interview process. Frankly, a college in a rural setting with a religious affiliation did not rank at the top of my list, largely because I was not confident that the campus would welcome an openly gay professor. I felt strongly that success in my career would depend on a sense of personal engagement with, and investment in, the campus community. So, in my first interview for the position, I took what I considered to be a necessary risk and asked what life would be like for a gay professor at the college. The reaction to that question and the follow-up with the college diversity officer had a profound impact on my final decision.

Then, in my second year, the November 2012 election in Minnesota brought the issue of gay rights to the foreground at our institution. Voters in the state would decide whether to amend the state Constitution to define marriage as solely the union of a man and a woman. Our campus took an active role in the debate, and the faculty chose to address the issue collectively, voting overwhelmingly to speak out against the amendment. As a result of that resolution of solidarity, I shared with many colleagues and students a sense of validation.

It's not that sexual identity is a nonissue at our institution. During the debate about the amendment, at least one faculty member voiced the concerns of the minority that supporting LGBT rights was immoral. There also seems to be a pattern of reluctance to acknowledge LGBT issues in an official, public way at the college—for example, through the creation of a visible and professionally staffed gender-and-sexuality center and training for faculty, staff, and students on diversity, including issues that affect the LGBT community.

Despite room for improvement, the generally supportive nature of the current climate has had a positive impact on the experience of lesbian and gay faculty, staff, and students here.



Michelle Valois

Professor of liberal arts and sciences and general studies at Mount Wachusett Community College

Recently I marched in a gay-pride parade with students from Beyond Str8, the LGBT group at the community college where I teach. This may not seem like a noteworthy event, but my students had driven more than an hour to get to the march from a conservative pocket of the otherwise liberal state of Massachusetts. Our small contingent, about a dozen, including my son Ari and me, were wedged between the Gay Men's Chorus and students from the local vocational high school.

"What do we want?"

"Gay rights!"

"When do we want them?"

"Now!"

Those words were at once as familiar as a lullaby—I had marched to them in my 20s—and as distant as the moon. "Rights? Are you kidding?," I wanted to shout at my students. "Look at all of our rights!"

When I landed my first tenure-track teaching position, at the dawn of the new millennium, my partner, Katharine, and I had decided to start a family. We were meeting with a gynecologist to discuss insemination right about the time I had my mandatory session with human resources.

I learned that if I were divorced, I could put my ex-husband on my health insurance, but not the woman with whom I was in a committed relationship. It was explained that she and I would have to be married for her to receive that benefit. "How can you make marriage a requirement when it's not allowed?" I argued. It didn't matter what I said; my partner was not going on my health insurance and wouldn't until we were legally married.

As a teacher of composition, I have read hundreds of research papers. I used to cringe when a student would inform me of his or her intention to write about gay marriage, or gays in the military, or sometimes just gays and our very right to exist. My response, "The Bible isn't a scholarly source," went only so far. I have stood in front of a classroom of 20 students and listened to a poorly argued research paper on gay parenting that would have me about as fit for motherhood as Lizzie Borden.

But that was then. Today, when the topic of homosexuality comes up, I can step back and let the students figure it out. I let the voices of the majority speak, and that majority is more open-minded and accepting than any previous cohort of students I have taught, which has profoundly improved my life as an openly lesbian college professor. Yes, health insurance for my partner is a practical and welcomed benefit. And, yes, I will be forever grateful to my college for the generous maternity leave granted to me, the nonbiological mother, when my three children were born. Those benefits, however, were mandated by law.

There was no law demanding that an entire generation of young people become accepting to the point of matter-of-fact with regard to sexual orientation. Dissertations could be written to explain that societal shift. One might argue that legislation and court rulings helped to bring about the social changes. Still, while I bemoan my students' excessive cellphone use and lack of academic readiness, I am deeply grateful for their open-mindedness and acceptance.

And those students with whom I marched recently? It is in the nature of youth to demand more. That is how progress is made. It is also in the nature of a middle-aged college professor to glory in how far the world has come since the days when she used to march

in pride parades uphill both ways.



Suzanna Danuta Walters

*Director of the program in women's, gender, and sexuality studies, and a professor of sociology, at Northeastern University. Her next book is *The Tolerance Trap: What's Wrong With Gay Rights*, forthcoming from New York University Press*

I think there is a certain story line dominant today that homophobia is largely a thing of the past. We point to the presidential Inaugural Address that invoked Stonewall or to the polls that indicate shifting attitudes on specific issues like same-sex marriage or military inclusion, and we imagine we live in a brave new rainbow-colored world.

Academics are, I trust, a bit more measured in their buy-in to this romanticized progress narrative. Need we mention 2011 as a banner year for antigay hate crimes, or the inability to pass the Employment Non-Discrimination Act, or the paucity of openly gay public figures, or the disproportionate numbers of gay youth among our homeless population, or the stubborn persistence of rigid gender constructs? Yet the tale of triumph filters insidiously through, making people who should know better remarkably quiescent.

The current campus climate is, in my view, not a show-tune-singing queer extravaganza, nor does it perpetuate the fearful and openly antagonistic days of yore. When I was coming up in the ranks, my chair took me to the woodshed and urged me (alas, unsuccessfully) to "tone it down," because, as she put it, she didn't realize how different I was. I knew other queer faculty, but most were quite firmly in the closet because of legitimate fears of reprisal. By the time I left that (Catholic) institution and went to a Big Ten in the Midwest, my outness (and, more important, my queer and feminist research agenda) was no serious impediment. No doubt, the rise of

queer theory and sexuality studies more broadly, along with the institutionalization of women's and gender studies, has helped to carve out a legitimate space for intellectual investigation of nonnormative sexual identities and desires. And that space has been hospitable to queer faculty.

The explicit and virulent homophobia of earlier days, and the enforcement of the closet that often went along with that, has—at some colleges and universities—given way to a sort of tepid inclusion. I say tepid because I guess I am still persistently struck by the paucity of openly queer faculty at so many institutions, even those in the bluest states, which we would expect to be havens for lefty profs. Queer theory seems to be more of a "catch" than queer faculty. In truth, if the world were so wholly transformed, wouldn't there be a more robust queer presence percolating throughout academe—as faculty, as deans, as provosts, as presidents?

Counterintuitively, the most robust gender-studies programs seem to be situated in state institutions in the Midwest and the Southwest, not the Northeast. And queer faculty, too, seem more thoroughly present, and more genuinely equal players, in those locales. Perhaps those venerable bastions of (neo)liberal privilege in the Northeast feel they are already so inclusive and "tolerant" that they don't need to actually demonstrate a commitment to actual difference and can just continue to exist as the unadulterated old guard without apology or alteration. Or perhaps the state universities of the Midwest just try harder. I say this as someone who recently—happily—returned to the East Coast.

Moreover, there is an incredible unevenness in how the dynamics play out. Many universities continue to be hostile to queer faculty, queer theorizing, and queer students. And some disciplines in particular (economics and political science, you know who you are) retain unique hostilities to the incursions by "others" of all kinds: gays, women, people of color.

We may not be taken out to the woodshed anymore—although I would guess that still happens more than we care to admit. But the illusion of victory and the sop of tolerance are perhaps punishments of another kind.



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