
LGBTQ academia in a rural setting

An American perspective

Chet DeFonso

After the 1999 murder of Matthew Shepherd in the “college town” of Laramie, Wyoming, considerable attention has been paid to the experiences of LGBTQ individuals in rural America. In spite of popular films, plays and television programs which portray gay life as an exclusively “Big City” phenomenon (and which usually are set in major media outlets such as New York, Los Angeles or San Francisco), queer communities exist in every state and in settlements of every geographical size and type. In many of America’s smaller population centers, these queer communities have become more politically, culturally and socially active because of the presence of colleges or universities.

One widely held view is that for queer folk living in the United States outside the major cities, life is a constant battle against bashers, bigots and bores. One would need be oblivious to reality to discount the continued presence of religious fundamentalism and a political structure which is still deeply homophobic. Yet within rural America, colleges and universities often provide settings in which gays, lesbians, bisexuals and other queer folk can prosper and flourish. Naturally, strong distinctions exist between (and within) the varying regions, making broad generalizations impossible. If I had space, it would be valuable to contrast the varying experiences of LGBTQ faculty and staff in different regions of the country: in the rural areas in the South, the Midwest, and the Mountain West. Much work remains to be done. Here, I will begin with reflections based on my own experience in the American “north woods” on the isolated shores of Lake Superior, before moving on to make a few more general comments about college campuses in rural America today.

When I completed my Ph.D. in 1990, the academic job market for 19th and 20th Century British Historians was not encouraging. I did not identify myself as a “gay historian”: I had no training, no coursework on anything remotely related to the history of LGBTQ people. I had gone to graduate school in the 1980s; gay history was a barely recognized field then. I had only come out as gay in the late 1980s, and I certainly had no concept of myself as an “activist” or “community organizer” of any kind. I sent out batches of applications, but I

was offered only one on-campus interview: Northern Michigan University. Northern Michigan University was truly north in the American Context, located in the Upper Peninsula of the State, on the southern coast of Lake Superior, the largest (and one of the coldest) bodies of fresh water in the world. Far removed from the metropolitan cultures which I had yearned for, Northern Michigan was located in the town of Marquette, whose population of 25 000 marked it as the largest regional center for many miles in any (land) direction. Marquette is located 180 miles – 300 kilometers – north of Green Bay Wisconsin, which I had always as the northernmost limit of human endurance. I moved to Marquette in August 1990. At that time, there were no LGBTQ organizations on campus, neither student nor faculty groups; no administrators specially designated to deal with queer issues, no other obviously “out” faculty members on campus, no visible local community of any kind. The closest gay organizations were in Green Bay, which I became quite familiar with. For the first 10 months of my life in Marquette, I was convinced that I was the only gay person in the entire region.

First meeting with gay people in Marquette

My first connection with a population of gay people in Marquette came about in the spring of 1991, when a notice appeared in the “classified advertisement” section of the school newspaper that a “support group” for gay and lesbian students was being formed on campus. The group was led by a member of the counseling office who herself was straight, and who while sympathetic to gay and lesbian individuals had no formal experience or training in dealing with matters relating to gays and lesbians. In order to obtain information about the support group, it was necessary to call the counseling center and ask for the meeting time and place. The “support group” met in the evening, in an unmarked room in the administration building; the counselor told me that almost twenty people (students, faculty, and staff) had called asking for information, but only five showed up on the first night. (I was the only faculty member there; the other four were all students.) Several of those who did attend mentioned that they felt great anxiety; “gay people” just did not gather together in public in the Upper Peninsula. Later I discovered a reason for the invisibility of the LGBTQ community: the year before I arrived in Marquette, there had been a brutal murder of a gay man in town: his mutilated body, stabbed over a dozen times, had been left in a public park, his genitals stuffed in his mouth. No charges were ever brought in the case, although I’ve talked to half a dozen people who swear they know who did it, and who believe that the police know as well.

I mention this piece of personal and local history to indicate that the visible

community of LGBTQ people on my rural campus – and on most rural campuses around the United States – has been in existence for only a short period of time, and has come into existence amidst an environment of fear and suspicion.

A better environment for LGBTQ people

While no one would confuse Marquette with a progressive community today, there has been some progress made in creating a better environment for LGBTQ people on campus:

- The establishment of separate student and faculty-staff LGBTQ organizations on campus;
- the university decision to include “sexual orientation” in its official non-discrimination statements and policies;
- the “coming out” of a few older faculty members and administrators;
- after some struggle, the granting of same-sex domestic partner benefits for members of the faculty;
- the creation of a regularly-offered gay/lesbian history course;
- the establishment of a scholarship to recognize and encourage student leadership in improving the campus climate for LGBTQ students;
- more cultural visibility, in the form of queer films on campus and gay-themed plays produced by the theater department;
- In addition, there is now a feminist-lesbian bookstore open on the main street in town, a gay newsletter which is circulated via email (“the Rainbow Calendar”), and a gay bar located in a nearby town, only an hour away by car.(!)

The non-University gay and lesbian population of the Upper Peninsula remains isolated. In 1998, my colleague from the Sociology Department Dr. David O’Haran performed an HIV prevention “needs assessment” for the region, focusing upon the population group of “Men who have sex with men” as the sector with the greatest priority.

Given the rural characteristics of the region, MSM are an elusive and difficult to reach population. For a variety of reasons, the majority of MSM are not open about their sexual orientations, interests, or activities. It is, however, their participation in sexual activity with other men that continues to place them at greatest risk for exposure to HIV. The U.P. [Upper Peninsula] does not have a vocal or politically active MSM population and the larger population of the U.P. is generally unaware of their presence, activities, or needs.¹

The campus environment in Marquette, Michigan – and at other comparable campuses through the rural Midwest – is difficult to generalize. LGBTQ students I talk to – who are in my classes – report widely different experiences. Many live in Marquette for a year or two, before harassment and their fear of facing

violence drives them away to more congenial surroundings. Others, male and female, report the opposite. If anything, some students look at rural America through those proverbial rose-tinted glasses. Some LGBTQ students – particularly lesbians – express a desire to remain in the rural north all their lives. The general consensus among students involved in the gay lesbian bisexual scene is that the “northwoods” are much more favorable as an environment for lesbians than for gay men. In general, LGBTQ students who are male face more harassment from fellow students than does females. Furthermore, the more active a student is politically in queer related causes, the more likely that student will have strong negative feelings about living in a rural environment.

Being gay in a small town and surviving

A delegation of ten students from my campus recently traveled four hundred miles to the capital of the state, Lansing, to attend the 2002 Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender and Ally College Conference, a major regional gathering which attracted over four hundred faculty, staff, administrators and students to discuss campus related LGBTQ affairs. There were two papers in particular that discussed the environment of small town America, both expressing a sense of struggle and survival in the middle of hostility. One was a joint presentation from a faculty member and an administrator from Southeast Missouri State University in Cape Girardeau, near the Mississippi River:

You're All So Gay: Being Gay in a Small Town and Surviving

What?! There are gay people in small towns? A look at how the media present GLBT people and how that affects people in small towns. Tips on how to help change University Policies from someone who works on the inside.²

Another relevant paper was from a student-leader at Michigan Technological University, in Houghton, which is located 100 miles to the north and west of my own town of Marquette (people in Houghton regard Marquette as *their* nearest metropolis):

How to Survive Small Town America

This workshop is for those that are stuck going to school in a small town. This workshop will give advice on how to survive small town America as a GLBTA organization. We need to stick together; no matter how small a town or how close-minded it is, you CAN make it.³

This does not exactly sound hopeful! It should be mentioned that Michigan Tech is largely devoted to the so-called hard sciences, particularly engineering, and that it is overwhelmingly (73 p.c.) male. Male-dominated institutions are traditionally more homophobic than comparable gender-balanced colleges. One reason why Northern Michigan may be perceived as relatively receptive to the interests of LGBTQ students is that the ratio of females to males is close to six to four.

The leading national experts on the campus environment for gay and lesbian students in the United States are Dr. Nancy Evans, Professor in the Department of Education at Iowa State University, and Vernon Wall, who is Assistant Dean of Students there in Ames. Iowa is one of the least urbanized states, and Ames is not even one of the larger towns in the state. But Iowa State is one of the oldest land-grant institutions in the United States, and the university does have a tradition of providing leadership on educational issues of all sorts. Evans and Wall are co-authors of what is generally regarded as the path-breaking studies in the emerging field of LGBTQ campus studies: *Beyond tolerance: Gays, lesbians and bisexuals on campus* (1991), and *Toward acceptance: Sexual orientation issues on campus* (2000)

Dr. Evans was involved in the creation of the “Safe Zone” concept, the creation of “spaces” on campuses (administrative or faculty offices and meeting rooms which are designated by adhesive stickers) where LGBTQ students may be assured that they can discuss matters relating to sexual orientation. In 1999, she won a national award from the Association of College Unions for her work in improving campus life. “The Safe Zone research is powerful and provides actual data that the project has changed the climate for LGBT people at Iowa State,” Dr. Evans says.⁴ The Safe Zone concept has been emulated by “Allies programs” across the nation.

There is ample evidence – both anecdotal and statistical – that the attitudes of all American college students regarding LGBTQ have changed over the last decade. Every year the American *Chronicle of higher education* conducts a nation wide survey of student’s goals, expectations and attitudes on a wide variety of different topics. Every year they have asked incoming college students whether or not they agree with this statement:

It is important to have laws prohibiting homosexual relationships.

In the autumn of 1991, 44% of all first year students agreed with that statement. By the autumn of 1996, that figure had fallen to 33,5%, and in the most recent year, 2001, it had declined yet further, to 25%.⁵

GLBTQ faculty may find themselves singled out as “role models” by students

who look to them for advice and inspiration. In my years in Marquette, I have found myself serving a counselor, a resource provider, a social guide to those newly arrived in the community, and an occasionally spokesperson for GLBTQ issues for local and campus media. I've served as the advisor for the student group on campus, and an "activist" in local and campus affairs. I've been asked questions about financial aid for students who have been disinherited from their parents, about options for students who find themselves in same-sex abusive relationships, how students should respond to faculty members who make homophobic comments in the classroom, how to respond to the visiting campus preachers who vehemently denounce "fags and dykes" in the campus quadrangle.

It's not surprising that LGBTQ students at rural universities are faced with numerous social, economic, familial, and cultural difficulties. From my conversations with student's staff and faculty on my campus, and beyond it, I am convinced that students who attend universities in a rural setting face experiences, which are notably different from those whose higher education is based in metropolitan environs. Faculty like myself find themselves serving a community purpose for which they are not trained, but which in my case has provided me with a deeper sense of participation in a truly significant social movement with ever-deepening implications for the particular region and state I live in, as well as for the nation and for the world.

Notes

- ¹ David O'Haran: *Needs assessment among region VIII's MSM population*, July 1998, p. 1.
- ² Josh Littrell and Daniel Pattengill: Midwest BLGTA College Conference, 15 March, 2002.
- ³ Jason Evans: Midwest BLGTA College Conference, 16 March, 2002.
- ⁴ Kevin Brown: "Filling in the blanks," *Alliance Newsletter*, December 17, 1999.
{www.alliance.stuorg.edu/Newsletter/isfeature.html}
- ⁵ *Chronicle of higher education, Almanacs* for 1992, 1997, and 2002. It is impossible to ignore the "gender gap" regarding the tolerance of homosexuality in the United States. Females students have continuously been more accepting of homosexuality than male students have.

Chet DeFonso is an Associate Professor of History at Northern Michigan University, where he has taught since 1990. His research is in 19th and 20th century British History, but he also teaches contemporary American Gay and Lesbian History.