

4-15-2013

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Tammy R. "How Should Colleges Ask About Students' Sexual Orientation?" Headcount. Chronicle of Higher Education, April 15, 2013. Web

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How Should Colleges Ask About Students' Sexual Orientation?

April 15, 2013, 7:05 pm

By [Tammy R. Johnson](#)



*Colleges might have good reasons for wanting to know whether their students identify as LGBT. But they should think carefully about whether and when to ask students to share that information, writes **Tammy R. Johnson** in a guest post today. Ms. Johnson, executive director of admissions at Marshall University, is scheduled to present on this topic at a session of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers' annual meeting on Monday.*

In recent years, there has been increasing interest among admission officers regarding the identification of LGBT students on campus. Reliable statistics about LGBT populations on campuses across the country are all but non-existent, and many progressive institutions are aiming to remedy that problem.

It is a growing concern: How can schools provide outreach and support (and increase retention rates) for LGBT students if this at-risk population continues to be invisible? Likewise, LGBT campus groups are almost uniformly in favor of collecting reliable data that will document the presence of LGBT students on campus, which would help these groups advocate more successfully for funding and support. In the research-based environments of most college campuses, there is little opposition to collecting data to identify LGBT students. Faculty and staff who are even remotely familiar with the unique struggles faced by many LGBT students

understand the justifications for identification. Disagreement usually arises, however, when campuses begin to wrestle with the question of *how* to collect the data.

Almost inevitably, the first reaction for most campuses interested in identifying the LGBT status of incoming students (or any other attribute or characteristic for *any* incoming student) is to say “let’s ask a question on the app.” Instead of moving ahead with this initial plan, schools should spend some time deciding exactly what they wish to determine and how the information will be used.

An institution that wishes to identify LGBT students for recruitment purposes, for example, will likely decide that asking a question at the application stage is too late for most recruitment outreach efforts. In this scenario, it might be better (and less intimidating) to ask a question (or to ask an additional question) about interest in LGBT campus groups as part of the questionnaire given when a student first shows interest in the college. Some institutions have indicated an interest in identifying applicants who would be eligible for LGBT-specific scholarships, but do not plan to allow the information to influence the admission decision. Depending on scholarship requirements, a more relevant, focused question might be appropriate, such as one about the extent to which the applicant has been involved in the LGBT community or LGBT-related causes.

And while some institutions may simply want to document the number of students who identify as LGBT on campus for statistical or retention-related purposes, it should be noted that there is no way to verify this information when it is self-disclosed on an application. Besides, many LGBT applicants will not disclose their status on an application as they (almost certainly incorrectly) believe it may adversely affect their chances of admission, particularly in certain fields, such as education or religious studies. Other applicants may not yet be out to their families and may have well-founded concerns about how the information will be used during campus visits or referenced in mailings to their homes.

And, in perhaps one of the most surprising developments related to this issue, some heterosexual applicants have apparently falsely claimed LGBT status. What could possibly cause an applicant to falsely identify as LGBT? A cursory search of online discussion boards reveals self-identified applicants to top-tier institutions saying they falsely claimed LGBT status in essays or during campus interviews because they think this will bestow some type of minority status on their application and improve their odds of admission. College-admission consultants and high-school counselors I spoke with have heard of this happening, too. In addition to the unreliable nature of unverifiable, self-disclosed information on an application, identifying LGBT students at the admission stage includes the added problem of delayed self-awareness: Many students do not even realize that they identify as LGBT until after they are already enrolled in college.

Identifying LGBT applicants can be a legitimate institutional goal for many reasons. Before asking a question about LGBT status on the application, however, institutions should determine their specific reason(s) for asking and they must plan to clearly communicate that purpose to applicants, along with the fact that the question is optional. Otherwise, despite institutions’ best intentions, for future generations of prospective students for whom LGBT status will carry less

and less stigma, the answer to “are you gay?” on a college admission application is very likely to be “it’s none of your business.”

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