Out of the Closet and Into the Cabinet
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Senior Student Affairs Officers

BY KRISTEN A. RENN
The presence of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students is now a fact of life on college campuses. Increasing numbers of “out” LGBT student affairs professionals, those who are open and forthright about their sexual orientations, fill the field’s ranks from entry level to middle management. Like NASPA’s GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender) Knowledge Community, LGBT caucuses or standing committees are common features of most student affairs professional associations and conferences. Why, then, are there so few identifiable LGBT senior student affairs officers (SSAOs)? Equally important, why should it matter?

An abundance of literature supports the common sense notion that a range of diversity among institutional leaders benefits both the organization and its members at all levels. The presence of an SSAO, commonly known to be LGBT, sends a message to the campus community that LGBT people are welcomed, trusted, and respected. It also sends a message that LGBT administrators have important contributions to make across functional areas of the institution, not just in areas designated as “politically correct” or “multicultural.”

Further, the presence of LGBT senior administrators conveys to LGBT new professionals, graduate students, and others that they do not necessarily have to choose between being open about their sexual orientations and aspiring to the highest levels of student affairs administration. Just as the increased presence of people of color and women in senior positions has influenced the dynamics of individual institutions and of the student affairs profession, the increasing presence of LGBT SSAOs will influence the landscape of higher education administration.

If these influences are considered desirable and we observe significant numbers of visible LGBT professionals at lower levels of student affairs administration, why are there so few out LGBT SSAOs? I propose that the answer lies in a complex array of individual and institutional factors operating in the context of the student affairs profession and the social construction of LGBT identities. These factors combine to create the conditions for LGBT invisibility at the highest levels of postsecondary administration, where there are, in fact, a number of SSAOs with gay or lesbian identities who have, for a variety of reasons, elected to keep their public and private identities separate. This article offers a discussion of several of these factors and their implications for the profession.

Four LGBT-identified SSAOs agreed to answer questions about their professional experiences for this article. These SSAOs were given the option to use real names or pseudonyms. Jonathan Poullard, associate vice president for student affairs and dean of students at California State University-San Marcos, and Karen Whitney, vice chancellor for student life and diversity and dean of students at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), agreed to be identified. An SSAO at a regional comprehensive university elected to use the pseudonym Jane Doe and an SSAO at a liberal arts college is referred to as John Smith. These four SSAOs represent gender, racial, and geographic diversity, as well as varying degrees of being “out of the closet” professionally. It would be impossible, of course, to represent the full diversity of all LGBT SSAOs, but these four professionals provide a window on the experiences of this group.
The Nature of LGBT Identity

LGBT identity, unlike some other minority identities, is one that can be either concealed or revealed by the individual. This quality is a double-edged sword. The ability to “pass” as heterosexual in professional contexts is offset by the continuous need to come out in new professional settings if one’s LGBT identity is to be known. There is a difference between being gay and being known to be gay. Arguments exist on both sides of the issue of whether an individual’s sexual orientation ought to be strictly a private matter. The assumption that, unless indicated otherwise, everyone is heterosexual and traditionally gendered necessitates coming out as a personal, political, and professional strategy to obtain equitable treatment in the workplace.

The nature of LGBT identities requires a series of decisions throughout a career that lead either to the public knowledge that one is LGBT or to an unknown public perception of life outside work. LGBT professionals decide time and again whether to maintain the separation between work and their LGBT identities or to assert LGBT identities in the work context. This is true on job applications (Do I put my LGBT articles on my resume or not? Do I mark female or male if transgender is not provided as an option?), in job interviews (They are not supposed to ask about my spouse, but they just did. How shall I respond?), at new jobs (Will I tell my colleagues that I have a partner? How will they respond if they find out I was once a different gender?), and with promotions (Will this be when they ask if there’s anything they “should know” before making me vice president?).

Whitney’s experience illustrates these decisions.

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“In every context, I am very out at IUPUI. When I applied for my current position, I included my GLBT community work on my resume. When asked during the interview why I was interested in the position, I said one of my interests was to relocate to Indiana to live closer to my partner’s parents. So, from the search and selection stage, I have been out.”

For some aspiring SSAOs, LGBT identities and work are not intimately related and it may not make sense to raise identity issues in the professional context. Yet, for others, LGBT identities are so related that it would be impossible not to make the explicit connections. An analogy might be one’s faith tradition. For some professionals, religion is not related to career. For others, deeply held beliefs and values are inextricably linked to choices and decisions made in the context of student affairs leadership. One approach is not more correct than the other, but the latter requires the professional to make a decision about whether or not to make others in the work setting aware of the unseen identity. Ultimately, these decisions shape a career trajectory in ways that may enhance or inhibit opportunities to achieve a senior position.
Individual Choice
How individuals choose to manage their public identities varies. Poullard says, “I’m out in every aspect of my professional life. I don’t announce to entering students during orientation that I am a gay man, but it is common knowledge that I am.”

Doe, on the other hand shares, “Discussing my sexual orientation is not on my ‘to do’ list, but I never deny it, if asked.”

Smith’s career included a number of positions at Christian denominational institutions, where as a “generally conservative person in many ways [I] was most comfortable keeping my personal and public lives separate.” He did not come out to colleagues, students, or supervisors.

Individual decisions regarding coming out are shaped by a number of factors, including politics, personal styles, and partner and parenting statuses. Partnered LGBT professionals face the same challenges of managing dual-career relationships and families as their partnered heterosexual colleagues. For LGBT student affairs professionals, the presence of a life partner prompts additional decisions about how out to present oneself in a variety of settings.

Doe says, “My partner is probably invisible to those who do not have an interest in me personally and that is fine with my partner and me. If people have an interest in my personal welfare, my situation is apparent to them.”

Whitney takes a different tack, saying, “I always introduce my partner as my partner to everyone—students, faculty, and staff.” Partner status, family background, and a host of other personal characteristics influence decisions about behavior in the professional realm.

Again, there is no one correct approach, but the apparent dearth of LGBT SSAOs is, in part, the result of individual experiences and decisions.

Institutional Climate
Institutional factors also play a role in the visibility of LGBT SSAOs, including campus climate, leadership, and employee benefits. Institutional leaders who support administrative efforts to increase visibility of “unseen” differences such as social class, ability, faith tradition, gender identity, and sexual orientation foster a campus climate that promotes human diversity in all its dimensions. Out LGBT professionals are more likely to seek positions and be hired at institutions that welcome them and value their experiences and perspectives as LGBT people.

Poullard reflects this attitude. “My identity is an asset because it colors how I see and experience the world, and how the world sees and experiences me.

“My mother used to worry that I would not get a job because I was out,” he says. “I would tell her that if I didn’t get a job because of my sexuality, then that particular campus was not where I belonged.”

Doe elected not to tell her institution’s president that she is a lesbian, concluding, “It wasn’t relevant because he had checked with people with whom I had worked and had not been deterred in hiring me.”

LGBT SSAOs acknowledge potential limitations placed on their careers by institutional factors. Poullard says, “As an associate vice president, I recognize that some folks may try to hold me back from becoming a vice president.”

Doe reflects, “I have not suffered blatant discrimination but suspect [my orientation] may have limited my opportunities.”

Career mobility may be further limited by the lack of domestic partner benefits at an institution. An LGBT person may forego a promising professional move because accepting the position would mean losing access to health insurance for a partner.

Variations in institutional climate, leadership, and policy contribute to the invisibility of LGBT SSAOs, just as they contribute to the visibility of increasing numbers of LGBT student affairs professionals.

The Student Affairs Profession
Arguably, student affairs is a welcoming profession for gay men and lesbians. Values we espouse—promoting the development of the whole person within diverse communities of learners—are congruent with a professional climate of respect for one another as individuals and colleagues. Indeed, many LGBT new professionals credit their decisions to enter the field, in part, to acceptance by student affairs staff at their undergraduate institutions.

LGBT identity is seen by some SSAOs as contributing to career success.

Whitney offers, “In terms of my career development, my sexual orientation has been a complete asset. Learning how to survive and thrive in a society that holds mixed views regarding sexual orientation shaped my views regarding social justice,” she says. “Being a lesbian has profoundly affected my understanding and philosophy of human identity and has shaped my work as an educator.”

Although Smith is not openly gay on his campus or in the profession at large, he says that gay and lesbian visibility in NASPA and other associations made him question if he would take a different approach to his identity and career if he were starting as a new professional today.

Student affairs is not an entirely welcoming profession. Poullard remembers: “I will never forget being a young professional and being told by my supervisor that I would not get very far in this field because I was ‘too Black and too gay.’"
“To say the least, I was disappointed by her comment, but not surprised,” he adds. “This comment came during an exit interview as I was leaving to assume the role of assistant dean of students. I told her that if I had to be in the closet to excel in this profession, then I would never become an SSAO and that would be fine with me.”

The supervisor was wrong. Not only is Poullard an institutional leader, he is a leader in the field. Even so, it is clear from this example that professional culture in student affairs plays a role in mediating the visibility of LGBT people at all career levels, including SSAOs.

**Conditions for Career Success**

Given the need to assert LGBT identity over assumptions of heterosexuality, individual characteristics and experiences, variations among institutional climates and policies, and mixed messages circulating in the student affairs profession, the question “Why so few visible LGBT SSAOs?” holds no simple answers. The conditions must be right across all areas – and must be sustained throughout a career – to support the professional development and upward mobility of LGBT student affairs administrators. As is often the case in promoting positive conditions for an under-represented group, the outcomes of a positive professional culture for LGBT people will likely benefit all aspiring SSAOs. Among these conditions:

- Institutional and professional climates that support the decisions of LGBT SSAOs to come out publicly if they choose and that do not penalize LGBT aspiring SSAOs if they came out earlier in their careers.

  The decision to come out or not always rests within the individual. We can improve the climate of our profession and of our campuses to create conditions under which the decision to come out or not becomes one of genuine free choice, not one made out of fear of losing or limiting a career in student affairs. ◆

Kristen A. Renn is an assistant professor of higher, adult, and lifelong education and coordinator of the student affairs administration master of arts program at Michigan State University. She earned her Ph.D. in higher education at Boston College. Previously, Renn was an assistant dean in the Office of Student Life at Brown University where she coordinated LGBT programs and services. She is a member of the National Consortium of LGBT Campus Resource Center Directors, the Leadership Team of NASPA’s GLBT Knowledge Community, and the ACPA Commission on Professional Preparation. Renn’s publications include Women in Higher Education: An Encyclopedia (2002, co-edited with Ana Martínez Alemán) and Mixed Race Students in College: The Ecology of Race, Identity, and Community (forthcoming from SUNY Press).