

Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression in Social Work Education:

Results From a National Survey

Executive Summary

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 Lambda Legal
making the case for equality

 CSWE

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Lambda Legal

Lambda Legal is a national organization committed to achieving full recognition of the civil rights of lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgender people, and those with HIV through impact litigation, education, and public policy work. Lambda Legal's Youth in Out-of-Home Care Project focuses on improving care for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in foster care, juvenile justice settings, and homeless systems of care.

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)

CSWE aims to promote and strengthen the quality of social work education through preparation of competent social work professionals by providing national leadership and a forum for collective action. CSWE pursues this mission through setting and maintaining policy and program standards, accrediting bachelor's and master's degree programs in social work, promoting research and faculty development, and advocating for social work education.

Background

Social work has a special mission to alleviate and eradicate discrimination, to advocate for social and economic justice, and to work with individuals to improve their quality of life. Social work education is concerned with preparing students to do social work practice competently across populations and contexts (CSWE, 2008). In 2003–2004, Lambda Legal collaborated with the Child Welfare League of America to hold a number of listening forums examining the experience of LGBT youth in out-of-home care. Stakeholders, including LGBT youth and social work child welfare practitioners, were asked about casework and experiences with the child welfare system. During the sessions Lambda Legal found that youth and practitioners alike felt that social workers were not adequately prepared to work effectively with LGBT youth in out-of-home care (Woronoff, Estrada, & Sommer, 2006). These findings echo concerns in the social work literature about the treatment of sexual orientation and gender identity issues in social work education (e.g., Mackelprang, Ray, & Hernandez-Peck, 1996; McPhail, 2008; Morrow, 1996; Van Den Bergh & Crisp, 2004; Vanderwoerd, 2002; van Soest, 1996), as well as the environment in social work programs for lesbian and gay students (e.g., Martin, 1995; Messinger, 2004; Newman, Daley, & Bogo, 2009; Towns, 2006).

Social workers are often the frontline providers in child welfare, making it especially critical that they are prepared to work competently with LGBT youth in out-of-home care. These young people are highly vulnerable to discrimination and stigma (Mallon, 2001). The 2003–2004 listening forums provided insight into the frustrations and lack of preparation felt by both practitioners and clients (Woronoff et al., 2006). Although the 2001 and 2008 CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS; CSWE, 2001, 2008) require programs to attend to diversity in curriculum and program environment, the listening sessions suggested that practitioners need additional resources to provide effective services to LGBT youth in out-of-home care.

As part of an endeavor to improve the quality of social work services to LGBT youth in out-of-home care, Lambda Legal also collaborated in 2009 with the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to develop a training curriculum on working with LGBT youth in out-of-home care settings (Elze & McHaelen, 2009) and gave advanced train-the-trainer education to 40 master trainers around the nation.¹

The listening forums also suggested that, in the first instance, greater focus is needed on how well schools of social work are training their students to work with LGBT individuals. How much LGBT-related content is included in social work programs? What methods are used to train students? Social work education literature addresses these questions only in part. However, there has not been a recent national study of the breadth of student preparation that includes social work courses and the educational environment.

¹See Lambda Legal's Web site (www.lambdalegal.org) for more information on the NASW-Lambda Legal train-the-trainer curriculum and program.

In 2007, Lambda Legal approached CSWE about conducting a study of social work programs that would fill this gap in the literature and provide critical information about additional resources needed to prepare students to provide competent and respectful services to LGBT individuals, especially LGBT youth in out-of-home care. A summary of findings from this study follows, along with recommendations for programs and steps CSWE will take to develop resources to assist in this work.

Study Design

The study was intended to address the whole of social work education, including (1) social work curriculum, that is, the courses offered, course content, and classroom activities; and (2) the educational environment, that is, the context in which education takes place—program facilities, policies, faculty, and resources. To have the most accurate information about social work curriculum and the educational environment, the study team determined that both program directors and faculty would need to be surveyed. A social work program director has key information about the program as a whole, along with the policies of the institution and program, whereas social work faculty members are likely to have more detailed information about what takes place in the classroom and field placements.

The study used an Internet-based survey in a two-stage design. A random sample of social work program directors was contacted and, as part of the survey process, was asked to provide the names of faculty members in their programs who were knowledgeable about curriculum in five areas: field education, HBSE, policy, practice, and research. Directors could identify the same faculty member as the expert for multiple curriculum areas. The faculty members then were contacted with an invitation to participate in the study.

The development of the study questionnaires was informed by the literature. The questionnaires addressed specific details about the curriculum, including critical course content, as well as relevant program policies. The program director questionnaire included 39 items; the faculty questionnaire branched participants to specific sections based on their curriculum areas of expertise. Questions included yes/no/don't know and 4-point scale items. The CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression reviewed the questionnaire prior to implementation.

The program director survey included the following areas:

- Institutional policies and resources (e.g., nondiscrimination policies)
- Program policies and resources (e.g., admissions policies, LGBT student groups)
- Course offerings (e.g., electives on child welfare or LGBT issues)

- Assessment (e.g., assessment plan, how well students are prepared)
- General open-ended question

The following areas were covered on the faculty member–curriculum expert survey:

- Field placement opportunities (field expert only)
- Field instructor training (field expert only)
- Curriculum (e.g., topics covered, methods used)
- Comfort discussing topics

Questions that were common to both surveys covered the following areas:

- Comfort of LGBT students in program
- Knowledge of faculty about sexual orientation and gender identity/expression

The sample of program directors was stratified by program auspice (public, private sectarian, private nonsectarian) and program level (baccalaureate, master's). Some types of programs were oversampled because of their small number. To encourage participation, respondents were entered in multiple drawings for Amazon.com gift cards (\$50.00 amount each).

Survey Administration

Sampled program directors were contacted by e-mail on March 3, 2009, with an invitation and link to the survey. The program director survey was open until April 1, 2009. Faculty members were contacted with an invitation to the second survey on a rolling basis as directors' responses were received, beginning on March 16, 2009, and ending May 1, 2009. Four reminder e-mails were sent to program directors and faculty during the survey period.

There were 301 programs randomly selected for participation in the study, but 2 of them closed before invitations were sent. Of the 299 invitations sent to program directors, 157 completed the survey, for a 52.5% response rate. The response rate differed across strata, as shown in Table 1. In the program level category, master's programs had the highest response rate (60.2%). The highest response for auspice was from programs at private, non-sectarian institutions (56.1%).

TABLE 1: Program Director Survey Response Rate by Auspice and Program Level

| Auspice | Baccalaureate | | Master's | | Total | |
|-------------------------|---------------|------|----------|------|----------|------|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Public | 51 | 49.5 | 36 | 63.1 | 87 | 54.4 |
| Private Sectarian | 29 | 44.6 | 9 | 52.9 | 38 | 46.3 |
| Private Nonsectarian | 21 | 55.3 | 11 | 57.9 | 32 | 56.1 |
| Total | 101 | 49.0 | 56 | 60.2 | 157 | 52.5 |

Additionally, 547 faculty members were invited to participate in the second stage of the study; 303 responded, for a 55.4% response rate. The response rate varied across curriculum areas, with the lowest response among policy faculty (40.0%) and the highest for practice and field education faculty (52.0%).

Survey Results: The Educational Environment

The education of social work students goes beyond the content and activities that take place in the classroom and field placement. The most recent EPAS (CSWE, 2008) is clear in recognizing that elements such as the program and institutional policies, faculty, and student resources and activities also affect students significantly. Questions about the educational environment were included on both the director survey and the faculty survey. The highlights of results related to institution and program resources, faculty, and students follow.

Institution and Program Policies and Resources

Program directors were asked about the availability of policies and resources relevant to LGBT students and faculty at their social work programs and the host institutions. Table 2 shows the percentage of directors who reported the presence of these policies and resources in their programs and the institutions in which their programs are located. Overall, nondiscrimination policies are more common in social work programs than in their host institutions. However, policies prohibiting discrimination on the basis of gender identity are frequently not in place at either the program or the institution. Gender-neutral bathrooms, which are important resources for transgender students and faculty, are rarely available. LGBT student groups are less available in social work programs than in their host institutions.

TABLE 2: Program and Host Institution Policies and Resources Reported by Directors

| Policy or Resource | Program (%) | Institution (%) |
|---|----------------|-----------------|
| Sexual orientation nondiscrimination policy | 90 | 79 |
| Gender identity nondiscrimination policy | 63 | 39 |
| LGBT student groups | 23 | 73 |
| Partner benefits for same-sex couples | not applicable | 39 |
| Gender-neutral bathrooms | 3 | not applicable |

Note. Directors, N=157. LGBT=lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

Program directors were also asked questions about their admissions processes; few reported having an application that asks about applicants' sexual orientation (3%) or provides an opportunity to report a gender other than male or female (7%).

Many directors did not even know about LGBT-related policies in their institutions or the jurisdictions in which they are located, with 15% uncertain whether their jurisdiction had a sexual orientation nondiscrimination law and 26% uncertain about a gender identity nondiscrimination law. In addition, 24% were uncertain whether their institutions had a gender identity nondiscrimination policy, and 17% were uncertain whether their institutions offered domestic partner benefits to same-sex partners.

Social Work Faculty

Questions about social work faculty focused on perceptions of faculty knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, presence of openly LGBT faculty, faculty scholarship on LGBT issues, and LGBT-related professional development opportunities.

Both directors and faculty were asked to report their perceptions of how knowledgeable program faculty members are about sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, and LGBT people. They responded according to a 4-point scale ranging from *not at all knowledgeable* to *very knowledgeable*. Faculty experts were also asked how knowledgeable their curriculum area colleagues (policy, HBSE, practice, or research) are about sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Table 3 shows the percentage and number reporting perceptions of relatively low knowledge (*slightly knowledgeable* to *not at all knowledgeable*) among faculty.

TABLE 3: Perceptions of Limited Faculty Knowledge About Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity/Expression

| Knowledge Category | Number of Item Respondents | % |
|---|----------------------------|----|
| Faculty knowledge about sexual orientation, LGB people ^a | 447 | 9 |
| Faculty knowledge about gender identity/expression, transgender people ^a | 442 | 30 |
| Policy faculty knowledge about LGBT issues ^b | 63 | 12 |
| HBSE faculty knowledge about LGBT issues ^b | 71 | 12 |
| Practice faculty knowledge about LGBT issues ^b | 82 | 12 |
| Research faculty knowledge about LGBT issues ^b | 76 | 33 |

Note. LGB=lesbian, gay, or bisexual; LGBT=lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

^aDirectors' and faculty experts' combined responses

^bFaculty experts' responses only

The finding that faculty are perceived to be less knowledgeable about gender identity/expression and transgender people than about sexual orientation and LGB people is consistent with other findings in the survey indicating that issues related to gender identity/expression are covered less well by the programs' curricula. It is notable that ratings of knowledge about LGBT issues among research faculty were considerably lower than ratings of faculty in the other curriculum areas.

Ongoing training could be one important way to increase faculty knowledge about LGBT issues. However, 61% of respondents reported no faculty development opportunities in their programs during the last 2 years on sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or LGBT people; an additional 11% of respondents were not sure whether these opportunities existed. Only 16% of programs had field instructor training in these areas. LGBT-related faculty development opportunities were more commonly offered in master's programs.²

Openly LGBT faculty can be an important resource for social work programs in a variety of ways, such as by providing expertise on LGBT issues. In their open-ended responses some directors noted that out LGBT faculty served as role models for students. More than half (53%) of all respondents reported having openly LGBT full-time faculty members at their programs. The percentage with openly LGBT part-time faculty was less (37%), and an additional 20% of respondents reported being unsure about the presence of out faculty. Notably, master's programs were significantly more likely to have out LGBT faculty in their programs.³

² $\chi^2(1, N=400)=6.89, p<.001$.

³Full-time faculty $\chi^2(1, N=424)=127.50, p<.001$; part-time faculty $\chi^2(1, N=339)=35.42, p<.001$.

In the open-ended responses directors identified other ways social work faculty are engaged in education, advocacy, and support related to LGBT issues, such as serving on boards or leading local LGBT agencies/projects, serving as advisors or sponsors for campus LGBT student groups, and advocating for LGBT-supportive policies on campus and in the community. This type of engagement can also affect the educational environment.

Social Work Students

Questions about students (e.g., presence of openly LGBT students in the program and perceptions about LGBT student comfort) were included on both surveys. The second item was used as an outcome measure. That is, it would be expected that programs with supportive policies and resources and relevant curriculum would also have an environment that would be more comfortable for LGBT students.

The great majority of directors and faculty (87%) reported there were openly LGB students in their programs in the last 2 years, but only 22% of program directors and 21% of faculty reported having transgender students within the same period. The presence of LGBT students was significantly⁴ related to the following variables:

- Master's level program ($p < .01$)
- Gender identity nondiscrimination law in the institution's jurisdiction ($p < .01$)
- Nonsectarian program (private or public; $p < .01$)
- Sexual orientation nondiscrimination law in the institution's jurisdiction ($p < .05$)

Program directors and faculty were also asked to rate on a 4-point scale how comfortable LGBT students are likely to feel in their programs; the scale ranged from *not at all comfortable* to *very comfortable*. The majority of respondents felt that LGBT students would be “somewhat” to “very comfortable” in their programs. However, 9% of program directors and 15% of faculty respondents felt that LGBT students are likely to feel only “slightly comfortable” or “not at all comfortable” in their programs.

The level of expected student comfort was significantly related to a few program characteristics. These findings were in the expected direction, in that greater student comfort was associated with greater faculty knowledge about LGBT issues or the presence of certain policies or curriculum content. The expected comfort level of LGBT students, as assessed by directors, was associated with

- Faculty knowledge about sexual orientation and LGBT people ($p < .001$)
- Faculty knowledge about gender identity/expression and transgender people ($p < .01$)

⁴The Pearson chi-square test of association was used to test the statistical significance of bivariate relationships in this report. Phi or Cramer's V was used to estimate the strength of the bivariate relationships. Further information about the statistical analysis is available in the full report.

- Human sexuality content in required courses ($p < .05$)
- Domestic partner benefits for same-sex couples at institution ($p < .05$)

The expected comfort level of LGBT students, as assessed by faculty, was associated with

- Faculty knowledge about sexual orientation ($p < .01$)
- Faculty knowledge about gender identity/expression ($p < .05$)
- Faculty scholarship on LGBT issues ($p < .05$)

Survey Results: The Curriculum

The survey posed questions about the social work curriculum, including course offerings, course content, and classroom activities. The curriculum questions also addressed field education and field placements. In the open-ended responses some directors explained that their programs infused LGBT content throughout the curriculum, whereas others reported that specific courses were used. The survey addressed both methods by including questions about course offerings and content delivered in required courses. Directors reported that their programs offered courses focusing on the following topics.

- Human sexuality, 95%
- Diversity, including LGBT content, 68%
- LGBT issues, 14%

Although 82% of directors reported their programs offered courses on child welfare, material about LGBT issues was frequently absent from them. For example, only

- 54% included material on identity development among LGBT youth;
- 50% included content on LGBT youth in out-of-home care; and
- 41% included best practices with LGBT youth.

In addition, faculty experts were asked whether specific LGBT-related topics were included in courses in each curriculum area. The list of topics was developed in consultation with expert consultants and through examination of the literature.

HBSE⁵

In a list of 17 LGBT-related HBSE topics, the ones most commonly included in HBSE courses were “gender identity development” (97%) and “LGB identity development” (96%). The least included topic was “LGBT history” (44%).

⁵ $N=70-72$ for each item in HBSE.

Policy⁶

The policy section included 13 items. The most reported topics were “prejudice and discrimination against lesbian and gay populations” (95%) and “civil rights issues affecting LGBT populations” (92%). The least reported were “international LGBT issues” (16%) and “diversity among LGBT populations” (49%).

Social Work Practice⁷

The social work practice section covered a range of 15 specific topics. Faculty reported “practitioner self-awareness of values/biases” (92%) and “cultural competence” (89%) as most often included in practice courses. “Legal issues in practice” (50%) and “issues in practice with communities” (51%) were included least often.

Research⁸

Eight topics were included in the research section. None of the items in this section reached the rate of inclusion that the other subject areas did. The most frequently included topics were “avoiding sexual orientation bias in research” (78%) and “avoiding gender identity/expression bias in research” (74%). The least often included were definitions and measurement of sexual orientation/gender identity (28%) and “issues facing LGBT researchers” (16%).

Field Education

The structure for the field education section of the survey differed from the other curriculum areas. Field education experts were asked about field placements that allow students to work with LGBT issues, adults, or youth. Almost all respondents (86%) reported offering field placements with an opportunity to work with LGBT issues or LGBT clients. All of the 11 programs not offering such placements were baccalaureate, mostly in institutions without an MSW program. There were no other demographic commonalities among programs not offering such placements (e.g., no difference by region, setting, auspice). The percentages of programs with field placements in LGBT-specific settings for adults or youth ($N=81-83$ for each item) were as follows.

- HIV/AIDS programs, 67%
- Violence prevention/victim services programs, 52%
- LGBT elder service programs, 8%
- Juvenile detention centers for LGBT youth, 6%

Following are the percentages of programs with opportunities to work with LGBT youth in general youth settings ($N=81-84$ for each item).

⁶ $N=62-64$ for each item in Policy.

⁷ $N=81-82$ for each item in Practice.

⁸ $N=74-76$ for each item in Research.

- Youth services programs, 79%
- Health/mental health programs, 75%
- Runaway/homeless shelters, 54%
- Juvenile detention programs, 50%

Program Assessment

Three questions related to assessment of program outcomes. The first was a general question to directors asking whether their programs assessed the competence of graduates to provide services to LGBT individuals. Only 19% reported having an assessment plan in place that covered competence to work with LGBT people. The other two questions asked program directors how well they thought their programs prepared students to provide competent services to LGBT individuals in general and to LGBT youth in particular. The following are the results from directors who reported their programs did “very well” or “fairly well”:

- Trained students to provide competent services to LGBT individuals, 59%
- Trained students to provide competent services to LGBT youth, 47%

Some variables were significantly related to perceptions of how well programs trained students to work competently with these groups. These findings were in the expected direction, in that perceptions of better training were associated with greater faculty knowledge or the presence of certain resources or curriculum content in the program. Directors’ perceptions of how well their programs train students to provide competent services for LGBT individuals in general, in order of the strength of the relationship, were as follows.

- Faculty knowledge about gender identity/expression and transgender people ($p < .001$)
- Faculty knowledge about sexual orientation and LGB people ($p < .001$)
- Gender-neutral bathrooms in program facilities ($p < .01$)
- Faculty development on LGBT issues within the past 2 years ($p < .05$)

Following, in order of the strength of the relationship, are directors’ perceptions of their programs’ ability to provide training for services specifically to LGBT youth.

- Faculty knowledge about gender identity/expression and transgender people ($p < .001$)
- Material on best practices with LGBT youth in child welfare courses ($p < .001$)
- Material on LGBT youth in out-of-home care in child welfare courses ($p < .001$)
- Material on LGBT identity development in child welfare courses ($p < .001$)
- Gender-neutral bathrooms in program facilities ($p < .01$)

- Faculty knowledge about sexual orientation and LGB people ($p < .01$)
- Faculty development on LGBT issues within the past 2 years ($p < .05$)

Limitations

Several limitations should be understood when interpreting the findings of this study. First, there was a lower response rate from baccalaureate programs in private sectarian institutions and programs in the Great Lakes region. Second, knowing the subject of the survey, program directors may have selected faculty members who were most knowledgeable about LGBT issues, introducing some bias into the sample. As a reminder, the faculty survey was sent to faculty members identified by program directors as experts in curriculum areas. Third, given the nature of the survey, social desirability bias may have entered into the responses. Thus, the data could give a more positive picture of social work education than is accurate, although many programs did report less than positive responses.

Fourth, although the survey asked program directors to rate how well their programs prepared students for practice, much more research is needed to gauge the accuracy of the program directors' assessments. In particular, future studies should include direct contact with students.

Finally, the list of LGBT resources and topics for courses included in these surveys is not exhaustive.

Discussion

This study was intended to examine the current state of social work education as it pertains to training social work students to provide competent services to LGBT individuals, especially LGBT youth in out-of-home care. The study found both strengths and areas where there is need for further development.

- Programs are doing better at addressing sexual orientation issues than gender identity/expression.
- Programs are better preparing students for work with LGBT individuals generally than with LGBT youth (including youth in out-of-home care) specifically.
- Baccalaureate programs have fewer LGBT-related resources in place than do master's programs.
- Social work faculty knowledge about sexual orientation and gender identity/expression was associated with how well students are being prepared to work with LGBT individuals and youth and perceived LGBT student comfort in the program.

- Substantial LGBT content was reportedly infused in courses, although many topics were not being covered in all programs. Content on LGBT youth (including youth in out-of-home care) was generally lacking, even in child welfare courses.
- There was far less infusion of LGBT content in research courses than in other courses. Research faculty were also perceived as being less knowledgeable about LGBT issues than other faculty.
- Faculty were reported to be more knowledgeable about sexual orientation and LGB people than about gender expression/identity and transgender people.
- Very few program directors reported faculty development opportunities on LGBT issues.
- Fewer openly LGBT students were in sectarian programs.

Social work programs are including a variety of LGBT content and resources in the social work curriculum. However, improvements could be made in a number of areas that would increase the knowledge of social work faculty about sexual orientation and gender expression, increase the comfort of LGBT students in social work programs, and help programs better prepare students to work effectively with LGBT individuals and LGBT youth in out-of-home care.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the authors make the following recommendations:

1. Increase program assessment of how well programs are preparing students to work with LGBT adults and youth, including youth in out-of-home care.
2. Infuse LGBT-related topics more comprehensively across the curriculum, especially material about LGBT youth and transgender individuals.
3. Improve education and resources relating to transgender and gender identity/expression issues in the social work curriculum and the educational environment.
4. Include in the program assessment plan the level of support for LGBT students and faculty in the program, institution, and local environment.
5. Ensure that the program has faculty who are knowledgeable about LGBT issues; provide faculty development opportunities on these issues.
6. Support and foster faculty scholarship on LGBT issues.
7. Advocate for institutions to adopt sexual orientation and gender identity nondiscrimination policies.

8. Faculty and directors should learn about the status of LGBT policies and conditions in their institutions and the jurisdictions in which they are located and advocate for supportive policies where needed.
9. Basic competence in working with LGBT individuals should be a criterion for graduation.

Several of the program directors commented that they wanted their programs to do more to improve education on LGBT issues, but that their programs do not have adequate resources. The CSWE Council on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression has agreed to assist with developing a series of resources and opportunities for program directors and faculty members to better prepare students to work competently with LGBT adults and youth. The Council will be working on the resources this fall for launch in 2010.

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