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Finding a Gay-Friendly Campus

By **JOHN SCHWARTZ**

The scene was similar to one that plays out thousands of times a year in gyms and auditoriums around the country: a college fair. The folding tables, the school banners, the admissions officers with a student representative or two, and the brochures and tchotchkes laid out. The only thing that might have made this one appear out of the ordinary was the preponderance of handouts with rainbow designs, and the fact that the fair was being held at the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center in Greenwich Village. This college fair, and several like it around the country, was devoted to recruiting gay students.

“Actually going out and recruiting a gay student — that’s a very new thing for colleges,” says Shane L. Windmeyer, the co-founder of Campus Pride, a national organization that promotes safe college environments for gay students and sponsored the event.

While [Ivy League](#) schools are often represented, the fairs also attract lesser-known institutions like [Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis](#). Scott A. McIntyre, associate director of admissions there, says that his university attends some 500 fairs each year, and that including one for gay students made sense.

“The more I can help my institution be open to diversity of all different kinds,” he says, “it’s just going to make us a stronger university, and it’s going to make our student body be more robust.”

All this is good news for the young gay applicant. Of course, being gay does not lend an advantage, and the embrace is not universal inside admissions offices, and out. While much of the stigma of homosexuality may have eased over the years, harassment and even violence are still real concerns around campus — [Matthew Shepard](#), after all, was an undergraduate.

Students are looking for colleges where they will feel comfortable and safe, Mr. Windmeyer says. Also, he says, “straight students who have gay family members want to find a campus that is welcoming,” so, for example, two moms can show up for parents weekend without a ripple. “They don’t want to pick a college that’s not going to be accepting of people they love.”

Although many young people say they do not feel the anguish about coming out that has burdened past generations, the fact is that adolescence is a time of strong pressures to conform, and being different in any way can cause intense inner turmoil.

Life's conflicts can make for compelling narratives — the stuff of memorable college essays. And students are working the story of their sexuality into their admissions essays. “Students are finding out that not only are they not being discriminated against for revealing their orientation in their applications, it may be an extra,” says Rachel Pepper, a co-author of “The Gay and Lesbian Guide to College Life.”

As with all essays, the value is in what you actually say. Being spurred to found an organization or join one could show the positive attitude and leadership abilities that colleges look for, Ms. Pepper says. “Students who are out in high school and are comfortable enough to put this in their essay are probably leaders.”

Another reason for a student to be up front about sexual orientation: scholarships and other financial help have emerged from such groups as the Point Foundation, the League Foundation at AT&T, and Colage (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere).

The [University of Pennsylvania](#) made waves this year when the online publication Inside Higher Ed reported on the university's new outreach policy: applicants whose essay identifies them as gay are put in touch with gay students and organizations on campus. Eric J. Furda, the dean of admissions, told the publication that it was doing for gay applicants what it has long done for other groups. “We are speaking to students on the areas they are most interested in,” he says.

To some admissions officials, Penn was taking risks with students' privacy. S. Caroline Kerr, the senior assistant director of admissions at Dartmouth, says that sending gay-themed information to students can be delicate. “A lot of them aren't out to their parents or might have only come out to some friends,” she says. “We're more concerned about how we approach them with information than I perhaps am with different students. If someone talks about involvement with the gay student alliance in their essay, I'm not adding them to the list.” But Dartmouth is, for the second year, sending information about gay life and organizations to students who specifically request it on forms asking about their interests.

Ms. Kerr says that “I have gotten some raised eyebrows” from alumni, who have been surprised to find that there are special recruiting efforts for gay students and have asked, “Do you mean to tell me you are admitting someone based on this?” She counters: “That is not the case. You're not

admitting anyone based on a single aspect of their candidacy.”

The [University of Southern California](#), too, reaches out to applicants who identify themselves as gay or transgender. Prospective students can have a “Rainbow Floor Overnight Experience” — a night on the gay floor of a residence hall and a day visiting their host’s classes and student organizations.

Derek Pooley, an admissions counselor at the [State University of New York](#) at Potsdam, manned a booth at the New York college fair this past fall. “The first person I had come up to me was a drag queen,” he says. “I thought that was fantastic.”

He says, though, that not many in attendance expressed a strong interest in Potsdam, perhaps because it doesn’t have a reputation as a gay haven. Mr. Pooley, who is gay and graduated from there last year, let a lot of people know “I had a great experience; not once did I ever feel uncomfortable there.”

Ms. Pepper has served as program coordinator for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Studies at [Yale](#), which is known for its curriculum on gay issues. She says that while some institutions, including Yale, get reputations as a gay school, “you don’t want to just take any school on its reputation.”

Campus Pride’s Web site serves as a virtual college fair for gay-friendly colleges, and provides a sense of the activities and services geared to various interests. Its “campus climate index” ranks colleges based on programs and policies, including identifying those with strong ones to protect gay students — say, explicitly including them in their declarations against discrimination.

Another clue to an institution’s commitment: whether staff members serve as advisers to gay student groups, and what accommodations are made. Transgender students, Ms. Pepper says, would want to know if the health center provides hormone shots as part of the health plan.

The Princeton Review, which surveys 122,000 students on a variety of topics for its “Best 371 Colleges: 2010 Edition,” has come out with a ranking of colleges where the gay community is “most accepted.” ([New York University](#) was No. 1.)

That approach, however, drew criticism from Mr. Windmeyer: asking the overall population whether gays are accepted on campus — “Oh, gay people, I love ’em!” he mocks — “is not the way to assess how gay students feel.” Campus Pride is working on its own survey, which Mr. Windmeyer says he hopes to publish in September.

Mr. McIntyre, the admissions officer from Indianapolis, says that a welcoming environment is only part of what makes a campus right for a prospective gay student. “It’s important that when students are looking for colleges, it’s not, ‘What’s the best college I can get into?’ but ‘What’s the best fit for me?’” he says.

Mr. McIntyre represented his university at a Campus Pride fair earlier this year at the University of Southern California. He took his 17-year-old son, Anderson, who had come out to him two years ago. Mr. McIntyre says he saw the trip as an opportunity for his son to explore campuses’ attitudes and acceptance.

But Anderson was not so much impressed by whether a college was gay friendly as its focus on his areas of interest. “That’s great,” he told his father, “but do they have photography?”