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Building a Model: LGBTQ+ History and Higher Education

Though K–12 schools have been slow to integrate LGBTQ+ topics, higher education institutions began to recognize the importance of the LGBTQ+ population in the United States as the gay rights movement progressed. Colleges and universities have long been sites of protest and progress, as evidenced by Civil Rights, Free Speech, and anti-war demonstrations on college campuses. Before Kevin Jennings created the network that became GLSEN, scholars and researchers at select institutions identified LGBT studies as a necessary academic discipline and worked to educate others on this interdisciplinary subject.¹ Unlike high school students in many parts of the country, college students today often have opportunities to explore LGBTQ+ lives and experiences through literature, anthropology, gender studies, and history.

Although many LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations focus more on school climate than historical content in K–12 settings, other institutions began and continue to provide instruction in LGBTQ+ and/or queer studies. Colleges and universities, free from the constraints facing public schools and the challenges that advocacy organizations target, were and are able to develop and teach information absent at other educational levels. According to the LGBTQ+ Studies page on the Hobart and William Smith Colleges website, “the discipline of LGBT Studies was founded by activists and nurtured in the visible social and political activism of the late sixties through the mid-seventies.”² The first universities to offer courses in this discipline did so in the aftermath of the Stonewall riots that awakened the nation to an existing and, in some places, thriving gay rights movement. The University of California, Berkeley, introduced its first undergraduate LGBT studies course in the spring of 1970, with the University of Nebraska—despite attempts to ban discussions of homosexuality at a public institution of higher education—and Southern Illinois University following in the fall of that year.³

Though Stonewall was a catalyst for the earliest LGBT and queer studies classes, it did not lead to rapid or wholesale change. Through the 1980s and 1990s, in fact, few colleges and universities prioritized teaching LGBT history. When universities began to pay more attention to these issues, it was under the umbrella of LGBT studies—an interdisciplinary area often encompassing literature, sociology, anthropology, women's studies, psychology, and history—yet the vast majority of institutions began offering courses rather than establishing departments. The University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), a university with deep connections to the LGBT community,⁴ offered its first LGBT-related course, “Gay and Lesbian Literature,” in 1976; it began offering other LGBT studies courses in 1992.⁵ UCLA's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies Department elucidated the need to develop this line of research and education:

As the political movement for lesbian and gay rights gained strength after 1969, the knowledge that had flourished underground for centuries found a public voice sufficiently strong to mount a sustained challenge to the official teachings concerning minority sexualities. ... This originally rather disparate work gradually coalesced into lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer studies, which, over the last two decades, has developed into an academic discipline of remarkable breadth and vitality.⁶

UCLA was a leader in the field, but other universities followed. Yale established its Lesbian and Gay Studies Center in 1986 and began hosting conferences on this topic in 1987; the department's website claims, “In ways the organizers could not have foreseen, these three conferences played a crucial role in constituting the field of LGBT Studies at a critical moment in its early development.”⁷ Yale established a research fund for Lesbian and Gay Studies in 1992, and course offerings in lesbian and gay studies began the same year. Historian Martin Duberman, meanwhile, established the Center for LGBTQ Studies (CLAGS) at City University of New York (CUNY) in 1991, a year before Yale established its research program, “as the first university-based research center dedicated to the study of historical, cultural, and political issues of vital concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer individuals and communities.” In its current mission statement, CLAGS declares that it “provides a platform for intellectual leadership in addressing issues that affect lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer individuals and other sexual and gender minorities. ... and fosters network building among academics, artists, activists, policy makers, and community members.”⁸

These early programs, which set the precedent for those established in the twenty-first century, continue to exist and thrive today. Though Yale's program, under the umbrella of the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Department, does not grant degrees, UCLA offers a minor in LGBTQ studies and CLAGS an interdisciplinary concentration in LGBTQ studies for CUNY doctoral students, in addition to supporting a minor at Brooklyn College, another CUNY institution. Each of these programs broke new ground in the academic exploration of LGBTQ+ lifestyles, experiences, influences, and history; the interdisciplinary nature of the programs gave now-prominent scholars a chance to develop their work. Students in LGBT studies programs weren't—and aren't—solely focused on history, but the course of study acknowledges its significance in students' learning and the country as a whole.

Colleges and universities, then, began to think about incorporating and disseminating LGBTQ+ content long before the vast majority of K–12 institutions acknowledged that such issues might need to be addressed. Many of the same obstacles that inhibit inclusion in primary and secondary education in the twenty-first century, including parental reaction and educational standards, would likely have impacted upon attempts to teach LGBTQ+-inclusive curricula to an even greater extent in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s when they were introduced at universities like UCLA, Yale, and CUNY, yet these obstacles are not the only thing that separates colleges and K–12 schools in this case. Faculty members at higher education institutions, many of whom specialize in specific fields, are more often attuned to cutting edge scholarship than K–12 teachers who, by and large, teach broad survey courses. Moreover, college and university departments, as evidenced by the work done at institutions that began to research and offer courses in LGBT studies in the 1970s, can react more rapidly to national and international events than public schools enmeshed in massive bureaucracies. Primary and secondary schools build skills and impart knowledge that children need in order to be prepared to enter, function, and participate in society; higher education provides students with the opportunity to explore and consider diverse topics in more profound ways. It therefore makes sense that colleges and universities preceded K–12 institutions in offering courses in LGBT-related fields. More than a decade into the twenty-first century, though, university faculty wish that students entered their LGBT studies and history classes with more foundational knowledge than their secondary schools offer.⁹

Multiple colleges and universities in the twenty-first century offer LGBTQ studies programs,¹⁰ certificates, research clusters, and course options; some offer minors in this area.¹¹ These programs reflect collaboration and cooperation among

academic disciplines, with scholars from several departments coming together to offer students a comprehensive, LGBTQ+-focused education. The University of Maryland's program was established in 2002 as "part of the institution's broad and deep effort to transform curricula ... and to ... convey some sense of the diversity of human cultures. The task of LGBT Studies is to highlight sex and gender variation as aspects of the diversity of the University community and of the knowledge generated by our faculty and students."¹² Maryland began offering courses in LGBT studies in the mid-1970s, beginning with "Homosexuality and Morality" and "Gay and Lesbian Philosophy"; the LGBT studies program's establishment was the result of years of work by university faculty to earn its approval.¹³ Maryland's program, now an entrenched part of its academic life, currently offers courses including "Sexuality and Culture," "LGBT People and Communication," and "Constructions of Manhood and Womanhood in the Black Community," among several others;¹⁴ it awarded eighty-nine certificates and forty-three minors as of December 2016. Hobart and William Smith Colleges—a small liberal arts institution as opposed to Maryland, a large public university—has a similar history with LGBT studies. Hobart and William Smith began offering a course entitled "Lesbian Cosmologies" in the 1970s and, in the 1980s, expanded to offer "Literature of Sexual Minorities," "Queer Film," and "Sexual Minorities in America." Like Maryland, the number of related courses and the emphasis on their importance grew throughout the 1990s with the establishment of a formal department in 2002.¹⁵ Hobart and William Smith Colleges, which highlights the various methodologies incorporated in LGBT studies, also pays attention to the historical element of this program. According to the department website, "students in LGBT Studies explore the cultural and historical construction of sex, sexuality and gender in cross-cultural contexts. The program examines the lives of sexual and gender minorities throughout history, as well as the relation of gender and sexuality to the social body more generally." Moreover, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, corresponding with its statements on the importance of developing this field of study, offers a major as well as a minor in LGBT studies,¹⁶ the first college in the nation to do so.

Other institutions, including but not limited to University of Colorado-Boulder, City College of San Francisco, DePaul University, San Diego State University, and UC Berkeley also offer students courses in LGBT studies. City College of San Francisco and San Diego State University, like Hobart and William Smith Colleges, offer a major in LGBT studies.¹⁷ City College of San Francisco, which began offering LGBT studies classes in 1978, currently maintains a list of thirty-two available courses in LGBTQI+ Studies and related fields, all of

which count toward the major.¹⁸ San Diego State University's program began in 2009; it established the major three years later. DePaul University established its LGBT studies program, which "examines the history, politics, culture and psychologies of LGBTQ+ individuals and communities," in 2005 and offers a minor in this area;¹⁹ DePaul, the largest Catholic university in the country, encountered resistance from some religious groups when it first announced its intentions.²⁰ University of Colorado-Boulder and UC Berkeley emphasize the inclusive and interdisciplinary nature of their programs. Boulder's program description states, "LGBTQ Studies involves the academic investigation of sexuality in established fields such as literature, history, theatre, law, medicine, economics, sociology, anthropology and political science. With its interdisciplinary approach, LGBTQ studies interweaves complex theories and analysis into the study of sexuality" and goes on to further reiterate, "By its very nature LGBTQ studies is interdisciplinary."²¹ Berkeley, meanwhile, mentions its program's interdisciplinary nature and emphasizes its real world implications, asserting, "The field of [LGBT] Studies both addresses the particularities of the modern forms of sexuality we call lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender ... and further addresses the phenomenon of sexuality itself in all its historical and cross-cultural diversity." Similar to other universities that explicitly state that their LGBT programs are open to students of all sexualities, Berkeley stresses the inclusive nature of its program and this course of study, contending, "LGBT Studies is not only by, about, or for lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender people—it includes all humanity in its purview."²² At the college level, then, LGBT studies provides students with the opportunity to immerse themselves in LGBTQ+ lifestyles, culture, arts, issues, history, and discoveries. In a departure from K–12 education and the limitations it presents, college students are able to navigate the complexities presented by an interdisciplinary program that, by its nature, undertakes mature topics and discussions.

Though colleges and universities present students with greater opportunities to explore LGBTQ+ culture than secondary schools, similarities exist in the way in which this information is presented and conveyed. Where LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum is present in high schools, the focus of the majority of this information is on improving school climate, encouraging acceptance, and decreasing the harassment and bullying LGBTQ+ students endure. In elementary schools, students learn about diverse family structures and lifestyles to reinforce the same message; the earliest attempts to convey this information, such as the Rainbow Curriculum, concentrated specifically on family life.²³ University-based LGBT studies programs, though more in-depth and culturally focused,

employ similar tactics—albeit through academic disciplines like psychology, anthropology, and sociology as versus health classes, climate workshops, and GSAs. Lifestyles, then, are a prevailing theme of LGBTQ+-centric education at all levels. History, in higher education as in K–12 education, is merely one piece of the puzzle.²⁴ Nevertheless, its importance on its own merit is more widely acknowledged in a university setting and courses there are more pervasive than in high schools throughout the country.

University programs have different points of emphasis, yet they all include a historical evaluation of the LGBTQ+ community and its experiences to some extent. LGBTQ+ history instruction is present in schooling, therefore, even if it is not a significant presence in K–12 classrooms. The Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History (CLGBTH), an affiliate of the American Historical Association, maintains a database of LGBTQ+ history course syllabi dating back to 1997, when Duke University offered “History of Sexuality in America” in its summer session. Similarly themed and titled courses have appeared at institutions around the country since, including Ohio State University, New York University, University of Chicago, and University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where David Palmer’s “U.S. Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender History” examines “the formation of early LGBT communities from the colonial period through the mid-twentieth-century” and “aspirations for ‘liberation’ advanced by different LGBT-identified people since World War II.”²⁵ Moreover, Notre Dame, a Catholic university, offered “History of Sex, Sexuality, and Gender in British North America and the U.S., to 1900” and “Historiography: The Histories of Women, Masculinities, Gender and Sexualities” in fall 2005. The list also includes universities in more conservative areas, like the University of Utah, which offered “The History and Psychology of the ‘Gay’ Family in America: Origins, Context, and Implications” and “Sexuality in 20th Century America” in spring 2011 and the University of North Texas, which offered “Gender and Sexuality in Early Modern Europe” in spring 2013. In all, CLGBTH’s list—which does not hold syllabi from every course offered—includes more than eighty college and university syllabi from 1997–2018.²⁶

Morehouse College, an all-male historically Black college, began offering “History and Culture of Black LGBT,” a course taught via Skype by a Yale professor, in 2013 in response to anti-gay violence on campus.²⁷ Unlike K–12 schools that rely on anti-discrimination and anti-bullying programs to create a safer environment, Morehouse’s response to threats to student safety was to teach history. It is a long-held axiom that those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it. It is reasonable, therefore, to deduce that history might also be

instructive in the present and could serve similar purposes to school climate initiatives underway through LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations. Furthermore, the increasing availability of this information in higher education necessitates its presence in high schools to establish prior knowledge and indicates that, at educational institutions, the growth of this field is possible.

Quantity and variation in course offerings are greater at colleges and universities across the country than in the vast majority of elementary, middle, and high schools, where students enroll in a prescribed course of required classes. This difference is meaningful in explaining the rise of LGBTQ+ history at the higher education level despite its infrequent appearances in K–12 schools. It is inarguable that colleges and universities have made greater strides in LGBT studies and LGBTQ+ history, though Emily Hobson, who teaches courses in the history of sexuality, LGBTQ history, and queer studies at University of Nevada, Reno, asserted that “it’s important to parse the difference between queer studies broadly and LGBT history” and cautioned against conflating the prevalence of these courses at selective universities and small liberal arts colleges with higher education writ large.²⁸ She stated,

The history departments have been a little slower on the uptake, significantly slower, I would say. ... LGBT history is fairly still recent to many history departments. Certainly, in my own department, I am the first person specifically doing history of sexuality that my department has ever hired. ... And my department is not hostile or conservative.²⁹

LGBTQ+ history in higher education, then, remains a work in progress. As history scholars at colleges and universities continue to promote this branch of history and its importance for students and the larger society, these advancements will likely continue. As Morehouse College decided, learning LGBTQ+ history is essential to changing the culture and climate. Therefore, in the same way that the rise of LGBT studies created space for students to learn LGBTQ+ history, the increased emphasis on school climate and creating safe spaces in K–12 institutions can provide a springboard, too.

Teacher Education

The clearest connection between colleges and universities and K–12 education are the teacher education programs housed in schools of education across the country. Though many preservice teachers in the twenty-first century seek out

newer, more immersive paths to certification, education schools continue to offer programs through which undergraduates and graduate students learn and practice the tools of their trade. Within these institutions, individuals learn the methods, strategies, and subject matter they need to successfully run their own classrooms. LGBTQ+ history, though, is not a significant enough component of social studies teacher education programs, where it factors in at all, to prepare teachers to comfortably integrate this information into their lessons.

Wendy Rouse, a professor at San Jose State University, runs a teacher preparation program purposefully dedicated to training future teachers to incorporate LGBTQ+ history in their classrooms; she was motivated to create this program by the passage of the FAIR Education Act,³⁰ and it is now housed in the university's history department.³¹ Rouse's program, which asks students to explore, evaluate, and apply the content they learn, does not provide teacher credentials; the undergraduates enrolled in the program transition into a credentialing program when they complete their undergraduate coursework. As Rouse described it, the program is a social science major for emerging teachers through which they become immersed in the content that they will teach in addition to the skills necessary to convey that information to students. LGBTQ+ individuals' contributions to US and California history are a through thread in all of the courses in which students enroll; they also have the opportunity to engage in a semester-long LGBTQ history class.³² Given these circumstances, she has the space to concentrate on LGBTQ+ history in a way that more abbreviated or methodology-focused programs do not. Prospective teachers advance in their studies equipped with this knowledge in the hope that they impart it when they enter the classroom.³³ This is especially important in California, Rouse posited, where credentialing programs focus solely on pedagogy and undergraduate programs therefore must provide future teachers with the content and resources they will ultimately share with their students.³⁴

Rouse reported that except for her own, she is unaware of any other teacher education program that focuses on LGBTQ+ history to a remarkable extent. Though faculty and instructors might choose to discuss this information in their classes and social studies education students at some colleges and universities have the option of enrolling in an LGBTQ+ or gender history class as part of their program—social studies students at Hunter College in New York regularly enroll in Professor Daniel Hurewitz's gender and sexuality history course in that institution's history department—few if any programs highlight LGBTQ+ history to the extent that San Jose State does. Incorporating this information into teacher education programs would allow the information conveyed at the university level to trickle down to K–12 schools, creating a wider circle of students and teachers

with knowledge of LGBTQ+ history and preparing high school students for the courses to which they will have access at institutions of higher learning. It would also, in small part, alleviate one stated reason for this topic's omission in high school classes, as teachers would know and have experience with LGBTQ+ history; Lyndsey Schlax, in fact, insists it is necessary across the board in teacher education programs.³⁵ As colleges and universities progress toward embracing LGBTQ+ history, there are multiple ways that it might be beneficial for this information to find a place in schools of education, as well.

* * *

More than forty years after LGBT studies courses were first introduced, an increasing number of universities across the United States offer LGBTQ+ or queer history courses, with some institutions offering majors and minors in LGBTQ studies. These courses and the departments that offer them extend the possibility that, under the right circumstances, academic LGBTQ+ content can be part of a student's education.

Universities and K–12 schools adhere to different requirements and grapple with different sets of circumstances. The vast majority of elementary, middle, and high school students are minors whose schools act *in loco parentis* while children are in their care. Student age, therefore, imposes restrictions on the freedom schools have to impart information. Students at higher education institutions are mostly over eighteen and therefore legally adults; there are fewer limitations on what they consume. As John D'Emilio posited, inclusive curriculum is difficult in K–12 settings because “it also presses up against the discomfort that almost all adults experience when they think of sexuality in terms of the young.”³⁶ Similarly, K–12 teachers risk parent reaction to controversial information to a far greater extent than college professors who often have more distance from their students' families. In addition, Emily Hobson, whose essay “Questions, Not Test Answers: Teaching LGBT History in Public Schools” explored the absence of LGBTQ+ history in high schools, contended that most high school teachers are not familiar with this material and therefore cannot teach it; colleges, meanwhile, are more likely to have faculty members who can.³⁷ Furthermore, Hobson asserted, standards and testing pose a significant hindrance to including LGBTQ+ history in K–12 education in ways that they do not in higher education. This dichotomy, in fact, clearly indicates the fine line between obstacle and opportunity in education: standards, which currently inhibit including LGBTQ+ history in the vast majority of states, could just as easily be the impetus for incorporating this material. Hobson stated,

Certainly, at the college level, those standardized tests from high school are now no longer really relevant and so you can really spend a lot of time talking about what is and isn't taught. ... You get to have conversations with students about what was included at the K-12 level and what wasn't and kind of all these various ways to talk about public memory and it opens up a lot of conversations.³⁸

Thus, because it establishes what teachers must include and the way in which material is presented, testing stymies the introduction of and meaningful conversation about LGBTQ+ history in high schools. This, according to Hobson and her coauthor Felicia Perez, is the one of the most significant reasons that LGBTQ+ history is taught in college but not high school.³⁹ The removal of this retinue of obstacles on a college campus creates a more hospitable environment for LGBTQ+ content. If high schools followed the model established by higher education—greater openness to change and support from authority figures—efforts to teach LGBTQ+ history at the high school level could also be more pervasive.