From Recognition to Liberation: Coming Out in College and Breaking the Cycle of Cisheterosexist Socialization

Patrick McCarron

Department of Administration, Leadership, and Technology, NYU Steinhardt

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Dr. Michael Funk

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Introduction: Coming Out of the Closet as a Process

In the past twelve years, the number of Americans who openly identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or another queer identity (LGBTQ+) has more than doubled, from around 3.5% in 2012 to around 7.6% in 2023, according to surveys conducted by Gallup. The data show that Generation Z, or those born between approximately 1997 and 2012, have the highest rate of LGBTQ+ self-identification, at more than one in every five individuals. Similar research conducted by Pew Research Center found that, while most LGBTQ+ individuals first feel that they may not be straight before age 20 (2% by age 10; 8% ages 10-14; 31% ages 15-19), the median age they first come out of the closet is at age 20. The reasons LGBTQ+ individuals come out so much later than their initial realizations are many—from uncertainty and resulting reluctance to make such a declaration, to fears of social stigmatization or familial repercussions and safety, to simply feeling that it should not matter or is not other people's business—though it is notable that the median age for coming out is right around when those who pursue post-secondary education are about halfway through their undergraduate career. Why?

In order to better understand why so many LGBTQ+ individuals come out at or around age 20, it is important to have a clear definition of what we mean by "coming out." In a general sense, "coming out" is not a one-time activity, before which one is known as heterosexual/cisgender and after which they are known as queer; it is a lifelong process of coming out to oneself, one's social circle, and others time after time. As an identity which is not as immediately apparent as the color of one's skin in a society which presumes heterosexuality and cisgender identity, queer people[1] find ourselves having to assert and reassert our identities through a variety of methods throughout our lives. Further, it is not simply stating one's

[1] While many distinguish "queer" as a separate identity from being gay, bisexual, or transgender, I use the terms "LGBTQ+ individuals", "queer people", and "queer folks" interchangeably here as umbrella terms.

sexuality; especially in the early stages of discovering one's identity, there are multiple phases to the coming out process (Skidmore, n.d.). While everyone's process is unique to them, mapping out the typical phases may look something like the below:

The first step is personal recognition, or the internal realization of "I am not heterosexual"/"I am not cisgender." The next is acceptance, or coming out to oneself, which itself has a few phases. There may first be a phase of mourning the life one had previously envisioned for themself, that the ideals they had foreseen – perhaps a wedding in a church with one's family in attendance, conceiving a child, etc. – may not be achievable in the way they had hoped. Over time (though perhaps not before the start of the following phases), this mourning gives way to reconciliation, where one accepts the possibility of a fulfilling life in spite of it not looking the way they had imagined. Once one has accepted their identity internally, they will often begin to share their identity, though only with people they feel close to (be it because they are trusted friends or because they also identify the same way). This phase helps the individual feel more confident about their newfound identity, and leads to the "final" step, which is openness about their identity regardless of the context. This is all a very simplified, procedural summary of a process that is often messy, and rarely so straightforward; many may retreat to "earlier" steps if they come across backlash or other hardships as they move towards openness. There is, additionally, a phase beyond openness, which we will come back to later. For our purposes, we will use "coming out"/"out" as shorthand for someone who has progressed at least to the confession stage.

Can't be what you can't see: Why is coming out often delayed?

As mentioned, the majority of queer individuals recognize their difference well before they come out. There are many reasons for this, and the environment of queer acceptance and liberation is rapidly shifting; just about thirty years ago, U.S. President Bill Clinton passed Don't Ask, Don't Tell and the Defense of Marriage Act – the former, a policy that prohibited openly LGBTQ+ individuals from serving in the military, and the latter, a law defining marriage as between a man and a woman and banning federal recognition of marriages that did not fit this definition. In the early 2000s and 2010s, there was a revolution of rapidly shifting opinions about queer identity; celebrities opened up about their own identities, and major publications started openly discussing the topics without condemnation. More recently, in the past ten years, the pendulum has again swung back with state-level laws across the country limiting the freedom of self-expression for transgender and gender non-conforming/non-binary individuals, some going so far as to implicitly ban these people from public existence. For obvious reasons, instability and uncertainty around how others will feel is a major driving factor that keeps LGBTQ+ individuals in the closet even after they have come to accept their identity internally.

What is less obvious – and, to be certain, a dynamic that may be dissipating – is the role visibility plays in keeping queer folks in the closet. For much of this country's history, sex and sexuality were considered impolite topics, to be kept primarily to a limited number of spaces – most of them in the home. Many queer people may *feel* that something about them is different from others, but not *know* why that feeling is there, or not know what to do about it. As civil rights activist Marian Wright Edelman famously said, you can't be what you can't see[2]; if all the people around you are either (a) visibly in heterosexual relationships or (b) not visibly in any

[2] While this quote seems to be universally attributed to Marian Wright Edelman, its exact source seems to be lost.

relationship, the very idea that an alternative exists may seem novel. In *Coming out in college: The struggle for a queer identity* (1994), Robert Rhoads quotes a gay university student in attendance at a National Coming Out Day event on campus:

> When I was little I was attracted to boys, not to girls. I lived with this feeling for years, without anyone knowing, without knowing what to do about it. It wasn't until I came to [college] that I realized it was possible to live happily as a gay man. (p. 5)

Many students in attendance at this rally, as well as others that Rhoads interviewed for his own research, shared a righteous anger about the injustices they had experienced as queer people; firstly, the injustice of discrimination and violence against queer people, but secondly, the injustice of being deprived of role models who shared their identity.

The relative invisibility of queer identity is, of course, not the only hurdle that delays the coming out process. Another key factor is the environments queer folks are in up until the usual age of starting college: their family homes. In *Gay men in college: Identity processes and adaptations* (1991), Anthony D'Augelli notes that while most of the gay men he surveyed recognized their identity during their teen years, they did not reach the "confession" stage of telling anyone else until college, and that the foremost reason for this was concerns about their families finding out and how they would react. Most people are fully reliant on their parents or other caregivers at least until they graduate from high school, which means that a negative reaction to coming out could lead to housing or food insecurity, upending their entire lives. Especially for students who move into university residence halls (or other non-familial housing), the resulting increase in autonomy and privacy from their family means some freedom to explore their sexual/gender identity. This is also a time when they will meet many new people, and naturally, some of them

will also be queer. As a result, it becomes much less daunting to make progress through the acceptance, confession, and even openness stages of coming out for the first time.

Coming Out of the Closet and Coming In to a Sense of Belonging

With a better understanding of the reasons why many LGBTQ+ individuals delay their coming out until college, the next questions are about what happens once they arrive there, and what resources are available to support them. While there has been plenty of research and publication on supporting LGBTQ+ students and institutionalizing said support, according to a 2023 report from the Postsecondary National Policy Institute, only around 6% of postsecondary institutions in the United States have a formal LGBTQ student center established – a number that seems to be beginning to decrease amidst a surge in anti-DEI state legislation (USA Today, 2023). In a climate where LGBTQ+ students who faced discrimination or harassment before college are measurably less likely to enroll in university at all (PNPI, 2023), and where lacking a sense of belonging can lead to anti-social behaviors and retention difficulties (Strayhorn, 2018), it is important to ensure that postsecondary institutions are providing the resources and support students who do attend need to retain them and graduate them on time, and to help minimize the unique struggles they face.

In *Institutionalizing LGBTQ+ student support* (2022), Anneliese Singh lays out ten key strategies administrators in postsecondary institutions can utilize to further the mission of supporting queer students. These strategies are largely pulled and adapted from historical strategies used by Black student activists starting in the civil rights era, which led to many of the DEI (or, to use the more contextually appropriate terminology, EDI) initiatives of the current day. It is also important to note that Black and brown students are responsible for much of the pro-LGBTQ+ organizing, both on college campuses and off; though, the many intersections in

this area – from Black, brown, and indigenous LGBTQ+ folks, to disabled or differently abled LGBTQ+ folks, and others – merit their own discussion. The first several strategies revolve around LGBTQ+ Centers; not only establishing them, but funding their missions and enabling them to provide support that LGBTQ+ students need. Many LGBTQ+ Centers primarily revolve around safe sex education and resources, with some offering assistance navigating relevant healthcare issues. While these are important initiatives, support should go far beyond that; one very critically-needed area, for example, is having dedicated counselling services with specialists in counselling LGBTQ+ folks available from these centers. These centers should also have some level of policy authority, to recommend, create, and implement queer-affirming policies across the entire university.

Beyond the LGBTQ+ Centers, Singh (2022) also urges campus climate surveys to measure how LGBTQ+ students feel on campus, with regards to their safety, support (or lack thereof) from faculty and administrators, etc. Findings from these surveys can then be used to shape future policies–which should start at a very base level with non-discrimination policies inclusive of queer identities, but also go beyond that to active affirmation. This work can further expand into comprehensive EDI-oriented professional development and strategic planning, to help empower LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and administrators beyond simple annual non-discrimination trainings. The final steps involve recruiting (and retaining) LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff who can help make the campus environment feel truly inclusive and affirming, which, done successfully, becomes a virtuous cycle that creates a sense of belonging for queer individuals. A sense of belonging is critically important, and queer students – especially those who have recently come out or are in the process of coming out – feel a heightened sense of need for belonging. When the campus environment does not do enough to provide this,

queer students' success on campus is negatively impacted; they often turn to anti-social behaviors (such as drug use, excessive drinking, and unsafe sexual practices) to achieve short-term gratification of this need (Strayhorn, 2018). On the other hand, when students *do* feel supported and like they belong at their institutions, it creates an opportunity for them to grow as people, create and uplift community, and break from the cycle of cissexist and heterosexist socialization.

So…What Now? Recommendations for Postsecondary Institutions and Administrators

There is a wealth of established research on how American society socializes people into cisheterosexist norms (Catalano and Griffin, 2016; Jourian, 2015; Harro, 2000; among others); with the above-mentioned particularities of the college environment that allow for increased autonomy in self-exploration, there is a unique opportunity to help students—queer or not—break from this socialization and start a cycle of liberation. Here, I will primarily focus on what this looks like for queer students, though it can certainly be adapted for cisgender and heterosexual individuals as well.

According to Bobbie Harro's model for a cycle of liberation (2000), the first step is a critical event that causes one to "wake up" to the reality of the existing system being perpetuated by each of us. For most queer folks, their lived experience of being othered and stigmatized for their identity is sufficient; even those who are otherwise privileged and are fortunate enough to grow up in an environment that minimizes societal othering will almost certainly experience or witness, at some point or another, an instance of unjust and unequal treatment against either themselves or against a queer peer. The following steps involve self-education, community-building, community education, fighting for change by restructuring existing

systems, and ensuring that these new structures remain in place. I contend that institutions of postsecondary education are uniquely equipped to be the epicenter of this change.

The first role postsecondary institutions play is simply existing as a space for queer people to be themselves. This is where many of Singh's recommendations come in; universities must not only allow queer students among their ranks (they already do), but they must be actively affirmative environments for queer students, with access to fellow queer folks in faculty and administration. These connections in positions of authority can help them further develop queer students' sense of self, and encourage them to live their truth knowing that they have allies by their side. Further, universities should incorporate aspects of diversity and social justice education into their core curricula for *all* students. In the current environment, where universities are often painted as institutions of indoctrination into left-wing thought, doing so will be fighting against the currents. However, these outside criticisms have not yet critically damaged the reputations of highly-regarded institutions, and they should in fact lean on these reputations in asserting the need for this education. Colleges are additionally well-structured for fostering community; be it through LGBTQ+ Centers, clubs and affinity groups, student housing, or otherwise, they provide a safe environment for queer folks to meet each other, exchange ideas, build friendships, and reach out to their non-queer peers. Finally, to borrow a term usually used in computing, colleges are a sort of "sandbox" environment, i.e. one that allows "experimentation and testing without repercussions outside its confined space" (Proofpoint Blog, n.d.). Whether within the structure of a student group/club or more largely within the university structure, students have more autonomy than at previous points in their life, while still being, to some extent, protected and safe as they practice their free speech and push for change via protest (this is not to say that universities always handle protest well, and in

fact they often don't; however, there is a lower risk of life-changing consequences than there would be in the post-college working or political environments). Thus, colleges can be an incubator of sorts for leaders and change agents, giving those willing and able to push for real change a small-scale environment to see what tactics work, which ones tend to fail, and what risks and benefits are associated – lessons they can take and apply elsewhere after they graduate.

What happens next is up to the students; while the onus to break toxic cycles of socialization and work towards liberation for all is on all of us, for all the reasons laid out here, I believe that universities are a near-ideal environment for nurturing liberatory ideals and fostering a new generation of leaders and revolutionaries who can help lead us there.

Limitations

There are limitations to the literature and frameworks referenced here. The largest limitation is that many of these studies and data focus primarily, if not exclusively, on gay men; those that have a broader scope still tend to focus on queer sexual identities, with the experiences of folks with queer gender identities either lumped in or left out, rather than exploring the nuanced similarities and differences between these groups. From a liberatory- and solidarity-focused perspective, this is problematic; there is immense overlap in the systems that hold back "LGB" folks and "TQ+" folks, and as such there is immense overlap in how we must respond to and change these systems. However, from an experience-focused perspective, there are valid reasons to separate these groups; transgender and gender non-conforming individuals have, unfortunately, not shared in many of the successes of the LGBTQ+ rights movement as of yet. While the last few decades have seen great strides in the rights of LGB folks – from the right to marriage, to visibility in media, etc. – the landscape has looked quite different for TQ+ individuals, despite their often leading roles in the fight for equality (James, 2019). Progress on

this front seems to be stalling, and those who benefit from existing systems have even sought to drive a wedge in the LGBTQ+ community by offering false promises of acceptance to LGB folks if they just "drop the T", arguing that trans rights activists are just too radical, their demands too abnormal and intrusive, and their goals too different from lesbian, gay, and bisexual people's. While it is ultimately upon the LGBTQ+ community to work out these internal division concerns, I would urge further research and coverage on the historical and contemporary reasons why these groups are often put together, and on the underlying systems that pushed them together in the first place, to help raise consciousness and understanding and to combat the narratives being pushed to drive a wedge between us. The LGBTQ+ community is certainly not a monolith; however, we have everything to gain by working together, and much progress to lose by falling for divisive rhetoric. To quote Audre Lorde in her famous essay *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (1984), written after participating in a conference at this very institution: "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist."

Conclusion

While immense progress on LGBTQ+ rights and equality has been made over the past half century, we remain in a system that makes coming out an anxiety-inducing and often risky process for queer people to take. Culture wars around our very right to exist in public have reignited with a vengeance in just the last ten years. Many attitudes towards queer folks have changed; many still have not. Nonetheless, the nature of postsecondary education in America

makes these institutions ideal environments for queer folks to grow into themselves and gain the confidence and community they need to live their truth.

Earlier, I mentioned that there is a final phase beyond that of "openness" in the coming out process; that phase is liberation. While postsecondary education institutions still have a lot of work to do to affirm and uplift their LGBTQ+ student populations, they are uniquely equipped in a way that makes them better than near any other environment in America for advancing liberatory thought and practice, and it is on all of us – from students, to faculty, to administration, to higher leadership – to push towards this ideal. Students must use their newfound autonomy to build communities of liberation; faculty must ensure that their classrooms and offices are not just accepting of queer identities, but actively affirmative and supportive of them, and work with students to do further research and experimentation that allows for a better understanding of queer folks and the support they need; administrators and higher leadership must study this research and experimentation, and work with faculty on it to create policies and practices that affirm, uplift, and retain queer students and faculty/staff, and monitor the progress made to ensure we keep moving in the right direction. We *must* all work together to protect what makes colleges secure environments for queer people to discover and live their truest self, and to dismantle the hurdles that block us from making them even better. To finish with one more quote from Audre Lorde, in fact describing what academics must do to work towards liberation, "divide and conquer must become define and empower" (Lorde, 1984).

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