

The Analysis of LBGT Club Name Transitions at Lafayette College Compared to
National LGBT Happenings from 1993-2000

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WGS 340 Sexuality Studies

Throughout much of the 1990's, the topic of homosexual rights was one of much debate. The United States government permitted gays in the military, but only if they did not disclose their sexual orientation. Antidiscrimination laws against homosexuals were signed into law and it seemed as if the country was beginning to accept a lifestyle many had negative thoughts about. Nationally, there were flaws in the logic behind many laws passed and the events happening on the campus of Lafayette College reflected national trends. Groups were formed to help support homosexual students at Lafayette--and to try and counteract being named one of the most homophobic colleges in the nation. As gay rights shifted in the country, Lafayette changed their clubs to be more accommodating. As Foucault would think, it did not mean that those people did not exist before, there was just no defined group that they fit into. Even today, the act of adding more letters to the LGBTQ is intended to encompass all of the identities being defined today.

On a national scale, 1993 was a critical year for LGBT persons. In November, "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was signed in to law by President Clinton. In theory, the law lifted the ban on homosexuals from serving in the military. The idea was that nobody should disclose their sexual orientation or partake in homosexual acts while in the armed forces. Officers were not allowed to question the sexual orientation of any military personnel. Nonetheless, many military officers were still opposed to accepting homosexuals in the military because they believed having homosexual personnel destabilized morals the military was to uphold (Don't Ask, Don't Tell). Just like any law, this did not completely protect homosexuals and thousands were removed from service between 1993 and 2000, due to their sexual orientation. It can be argued that this law forced homosexuals into secrecy and did not help the LGBT community. Because

homosexuals still faced dismissal based solely upon their sexuality, homosexuals did not have the same rights as their heterosexual counterparts.

In December of 1993, Massachusetts became the first state to protect LGBT students in public school. The bill passed almost unanimously in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and students were the ones who pushed for the legislation. The law protected them from discrimination based on their sexual orientation. If any student experienced unfair treatment or was bullied, they knew that the school administration would provide them with guidance and protection. The law stated that any student who wanted to form a Gay Straight Alliance, or GSA, could not be denied the opportunity (The Massachusetts Commission on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Youth). The GSA would be treated like any other club in the school and funding would be made available to the club.

1994 was a relatively uneventful year in terms of new laws protecting LGBT people. In March, the Boston St. Patrick's Day Parade was cancelled because there was outrage over gay rights advocates participating in the parade. It was argued that First Amendment rights protected the LGBT groups who wanted to participate, and the Boston city counsel would not stand for any form of discrimination against the group (Rimer). Before the end of December, the American Medical Association stated in its end of year publication that there should be no denial of treatment to a patient based on his or her sexual orientation (*American Medical Association*).

In August of 1995, President Clinton signed Executive Order 12968 into effect, which was the first executive order to include sexual orientation as a means by which one could not be discriminated against (Clinton). Two months prior, the state of

Massachusetts passed a law declaring that private organizations, such as the Boy Scouts of America, had the authority to exclude other groups with opposing views (*Hurley v. Irish-American Gay, Lesbian & Bisexual Group of Boston*). This also allowed those same groups to exclude others from public events. It was a masked form of discrimination.

President Clinton signed the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996. This act denied the federal recognition of same-sex marriages. It also gave states that did not recognize same-sex marriage the right to choose not to legally recognize same-sex marriage licenses from other states (*TheFreeDictionary*). The same-sex partners would receive no federal benefits after marrying. Marriage was seen to be between one man and one woman, and a spouse was officially defined as "a partner of the opposite sex" (*TheFreeDictionary*). DOMA addressed the states' rights to decline acknowledging a same-sex marriage, which was performed out of state, in direct response to a simultaneous push in Hawaii encouraging the recognition of same-sex marriages.

In 1997, the state of New Jersey became the first in the nation to permit same-sex couples to adopt children together (Smothers). Previously, each person had to file individually for custody of a child. It was a time consuming and expensive process, and this new law reduced both burdens for adoptive parents. The one stipulation was that the couples could only adopt children in the custody of the state of New Jersey (Smothers). International adoptions, as well as adoptions from other states, were still forbidden.

Executive Order 13087 was signed in May of 1998, which prohibited "discrimination based on sexual orientation in the competitive service of the federal civilian workforce" (Clinton). The order did not allow for people to file appeals against businesses for discrimination, but they were able to file complaints. This came just three

years after the executive order that originally included sexual orientation as a way people could be discriminated against.

In 1999, California was at the center of LGBT issues in the United States. The Domestic Partnership Act was on the floor of the California House of Representatives, and if the law were to pass, it would have made California the first state to legally recognize same-sex relationships in any form (*AB 26 Assembly Bill*). Assembly Bill 26 came out of the Domestic Partnership Act. The bill would only recognize rights for same-sex partners ages 62+. The bill passed and the partners were awarded hospital visitation rights and health insurance coverage in the state of California (*AB 26 Assembly Bill*). On the heels of this victory, however, Orange County, California School Board voted against permitting the formation of a Gay/Straight Alliance in El Modena High School. The board argued that they would not permit a group that discussed sexual education (*Los Angeles Times*) to form. Sex education was not permitted in the curriculum in the schools in Orange County, and until the agenda of the group changed they would be denied the right to be recognized.

At the end of 1999, the Vermont legislature unanimously decided that same-sex couples would be granted equal rights as heterosexual couples. The state legislature concluded that denying rights to its citizens went against its state constitution (*Baker v State of Vermont*). The state decided that they either had to implement same-sex marriage or give an alternate legal authority to same-sex couples.

The new millennium brought a change of mind to California state legislators in regards to same-sex couples. In March, it was decided by the representatives of California that marriage would not be granted to non-heterosexual couples (Nieves). The

state representatives used the argument that the only valid marriage was between a man and a woman. One month later, the Millennium March on Washington occurred. The LGBT community rallied around several issues pertaining to their group, but the march had no real focus (PBS). There was no distinction as to which issues should take precedence. Hate crimes, gay marriage, HIV/AIDS, and lesbian health issues were just a few of the topics people marched for that day.

Here at Lafayette, Friends of Lesbians and Gays (FLAG) was formed in 1993 in response to Lafayette being named the most homophobic college in the United States by the Princeton Review. FLAG initially paired with Students Organize Against Racism (SOAR) in order to inform the campus of their goals to promote a more accepting community for lesbians and gays (News). The groups encouraged students to attend meetings in order to broaden their perspectives on global issues and also promote awareness of campus attitudes. (Letter To The Editor). FLAG then asked Mary Fridley, a gay rights activist, to speak to the campus about current homosexual issues within the United States in early May of 1993. Fridley went on to tell the students that it was hard to be gay anywhere in the country, not just at Lafayette. "Homosexuality is part of the mainstream to talk about" (Fridley Hosts Workshop). Following the 1993-1994 academic year, FLAG was renamed to Friends of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexuals (FLAGB). The acknowledgement of "bisexuals" as a distinct group was a relatively new concept.

Then, in 1994 FLAGB did the unthinkable, given the current campus climate on LGB issues, and invited a lesbian activist, Laura Morrison, to campus. The talk was well received, and Morrison put the issue of gay rights into perspective for the students. She said that gay rights legislation was being shot down across the country, which in turn,

shut the door on the discourse surrounding gay rights (Lesbian Activist Speaks at Lafayette). However, a promising sign at the time was that there were more than 70 elected politicians at all governmental levels who were "out" as being homosexual, which provided some reassurance that the country would soon be moving in a positive direction (Lesbian Activist Speaks at Lafayette). Several months later, FLAGB was named the outstanding service organization for the 1994-1995 academic year; quite an impressive feat since it was the first year for FLAGB (Aaron O. Hoff Award Winners).

In 1996, FLAGB initiated Safe Zone training. The purpose of Safe Zone was to raise awareness of LGB issues and help students identify where they could receive support (Talking About Sexuality: FLAGB Initiates 'Safe Zones'). It helped create a safe environment for students to explore their sexuality. All students had to do was go attend several seminars and meetings to receive the proper training to support someone (Talking About Sexuality: FLAGB Initiates 'Safe Zones'). The idea was to make homosexuals feel more comfortable and safe on campus, reassuring them they had somewhere to turn when they felt persecuted.

During the fall of 1996, the Newman Association hosted a talk about the Catholic Church and its opinion on homosexual issues. During the talk, students found that the attitude toward homosexuals was positive and the church did not condemn them for their choices (Newman Association Tackles Homosexuality Issue). The church actually encouraged fostering a positive environment for homosexuals. Catholics believed that there was a place for homosexuals in the church and they should not be turned away due to their sexual orientation.

At the start of the 1998-1999 academic year, FLAGB changed to the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). Students felt that GSA would appeal to more straight students and help the homosexual students on campus see that they had a larger support system (FLAGB Changes Name). GSA ended up failing and becoming inactive that entire academic year. GSA changed its name to Questioning Established Sexual Taboos (QuEST) in hopes to revive the fallen support group (Gay Straight Alliance Seeks to Revalue Gay Awareness at Lafayette). Much of the student body felt that the school was not homophobic, but the students chose not to engage in discourse around sexual orientation. It was also of concern that QuEST would cater to too small of an audience and fail just like GSA.

Over the course of just seven years, the changes made nationally and within the institution of Lafayette College reflected each other quite clearly. Lafayette was behind the times when it came to focusing its attention to LGBT issues. No institutional changes were made until the school was named to be one of the most homophobic in the nation. There seemed to be an overwhelming trend on a macro and micro level that LGBT rights throughout the 90's tended to be a one step forward, two steps back struggle. Permitting small basic rights which did not cause too much of an uproar, like prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation, were well received, but when the institution of marriage was threatened, people hesitated to support LGBT rights.

Using Foucault to analyze the back and forth of LGBT rights helps us to understand the role the institution plays in maintaining the good and bad groups in society. The government is the highest power that grants access to rights to minority groups typically seen as "the bad group" in society (Foucault 41). Granting rights to LGBT people, which protect them from discrimination, helped them start to break out of

the bad group and become part of the good group. When the traditional idea of the institution of marriage was threatened, the government oppressed the LGBT group to keep them in the bad category. LGBT people could not break through the barrier and be seen as equal to heterosexual people because the country was not ready for such a sudden role change. The constant give and take, and the amount of power the government has to give and take in such a short time frame, shows that the institution is too powerful and that there are always going to be these good and bad groups until there is a power change with the institution itself.

Throughout this seven-year span, part of the problem was that the identity consumption of LGBT people was not happening in the United States (Weeks 18). Lafayette was the perfect example of this because the school was seen to be so homophobic, so the only identity that was "cool" and sellable was being heterosexual. The group of LGB in the 1990's was going through a social reordering because they shared the common oppression of the denial of basic rights such as marriage, benefits from their partners, and the luxury to be able to express their sexuality without fear of ridicule and compromising their safety, especially at Lafayette. The social movement that FLAG and FLAGB spearheaded was the key to liberation on campus. At the same time, the acknowledgement of being a member of a group different from one that is acceptable reinforces the power hierarchy and good and bad groups (Foucault 38). Programming events to help raise awareness of LGB issues reinforced the divide between students who identified as LGB and those who were heterosexual. The heterosexual students have the constant upper hand because they have privileges and basic rights that the non-heterosexual students have to fight for. It should also be noted that there was a constant

attempt to maintain the comfort levels of heterosexuals in relation to LGB issues throughout this time frame. It was heterosexual people at the highest levels in the government who put a stop to the progress of LGB rights. They did not feel comfortable with altering what they thought the definition of marriage was. Meanwhile, at Lafayette, part of the reason for changing the name of FLAGB to GSA was to make straight people feel more comfortable and welcome at meetings. The amount of privilege and power heterosexuals hold over a marginalized group, essentially forcing them to make changes in order to accommodate heterosexuals, is significant. LGBT people not only have to fight for their rights while reinforcing the institutional structures in place, but they must keep the powerful majority happy, because if they do not, there is a risk of losing the fight to fit into the good group (Foucault 47).

There is still much work to be done today with LGBT rights, but over the course of 1993-2000 strides were made in the goal for equality for all. Several laws such as DOMA and DADT have since been repealed, which has helped LGBT people gain traction in their push for equality. Heterosexuals are still the overwhelming majority and they have control over the good group. As policy shifts in the United States, the boundary between the good and bad groups is challenged. Institutions holding all of the power will ultimately reinforce the binary between good and bad, because new groups will be identified who will keep the binary in place. At Lafayette, the climate surrounding LGBT issues has improved since 1993, and QuEST is still an active club on campus. Revisions to club goals help the club cater to the needs of the student body. Safe Zone training has provided an outlet for discourse around LGBT issues on campus, and many students and faculty alike are Safe Zone trained. Overall, the climate towards LGBT people on a

macro and micro level has shifted to be more accepting and inviting to people of varying sexual orientations.

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