



LGBTQ and the Princeton Review

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Every institution has a history. If we take a look back into a history, one will usually find that context, time and culture all intertwine with histories differently. The history of an institution, such as a private college, can be a rather turbulent and interesting one. As laws are passed and new societal norms are produced, these institutions must decide whether to keep up with culture or stay in touch with tradition. However, like Lafayette College, most institutions are a business, and keeping the brand name clean is a very important part of surviving and thriving. In this paper, I will discuss and examine the relationship between the 1992 Princeton Review Access Guide to the Best Colleges, that listed Lafayette College as the most homophobic college in the United States, and how institutions, like Lafayette College, use hot topics such as LGBT issues to promote their brand and increase their rating.

GayPASG.org states, "In an age when colleges live and die by their rankings, a new focus for college assessment is emerging: gay friendliness." In September of 1992, Lafayette College was taken by storm when the Princeton Review labeled the college as, "the most homophobic college" among the 250 national colleges the educational publisher surveyed. In 1993, an article in the Morning Call entitled *Coming Out On Campus. Peer Pressure Keeps Many College Gays in Closet* by Tim Blangger also states, "Lafayette also was listed first in numbers of students who are 'still in the closet', a term for homosexuals who have not openly declared their sexual preference." There were various campus pushbacks after the book was released. The review created uproar on Lafayette's campus; leading several students to express their feelings in the school newspaper *The Lafayette* and others to create the group FLAG, which stands for Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

Some of the articles about the Princeton Review in the Lafayette newspaper were discussing how ashamed and upset students were about attending a college in which gays and

lesbians are not accepted. For many students like Jennifer Kosmela, she wrote to the editor of the newspaper to release her frustration about the campus climate:

Dear Editor:

I attended the forum last week on homophobia and would like to reiterate some of its main points for the rest of the campus that did not attend (although it was well-attended for a Lafayette brown bag). Through the discussion at this forum it became clear to me that more discussion and awareness is needed on this campus concerning homosexuality. This point is reinforced by the knowledge that someone called up the campus radio show "Talk Back" and said he was proud of Lafayette's reputation for being homophobic as stated by the Princeton Review.

There were many interesting comments at the forum. One was the distinction between homophobia, a fear of homosexuals and heterosexism. The term heterosexism better encompasses the discrimination against homosexuals. The term could be used such as racism or sexism would be used for prejudice based on race or gender. It is clear that while some people are intolerant of homo-

sexuals they do not necessarily fear them. Anyway, one of the interesting points brought out by the discussion was the discomfort many people feel towards homosexuals and the resistance (almost fear) people have towards being labeled homosexual. Even the people who spoke at the forum who generally appeared accepting of homosexuals often added some sort of comment of disclaimer which implied their heterosexuality.

There is significant discrimination against homosexuals throughout the country. This takes two main forms: legal and social. There are areas where job and housing discrimination is legally permitted on the basis of sexuality. There is also the discrimination perpetuated in society through slang and the use of derogatory terms like "fag" or "queer." The use of these terms are not uncommon on campus and this is where people can make a difference. It is important to object to the use of these terms even in seemingly

harmless jokes.

Homosexuals deserve equal rights with heterosexuals. Homosexuals should not have to feel afraid to express their sexual preference or to hold hands like heterosexual couples. Most of the discomfort people feel towards this type of action comes from lack of exposure. In London, where I studied last semester, even the British media seemed more comfortable and tolerant of homosexuality than most people in the United States.

The general feeling I get from the campus is an insensitivity towards homosexuality. I hope this is not the case but if it is, then it is time for a change. There was a suggestion made at the brown bag to have a heterosexism awareness day at Lafayette. I hope some group on campus in conjunction with student government or C.L.A.S.S. will sponsor such an event.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Kosmela

More recently, another letter to the editor from Richard Albertini from the class of 2013 was published in *The Lafayette*. In the article, he came out to the Lafayette community and expressed his comfort being in this climate.

Letters to the editor

On October 2, Lafayette observed National Coming Out Day for what feels like the first time. Everywhere I went, there were visible signs of support for the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) community, ranging from bright red ties handed out by QuEST in Farinon to much smaller and discrete rainbow ribbons. I saw more support for the LGBT community that day than I ever had, a sentiment I find both encouraging and heartbreaking.

Just a few years ago, *The Princeton Review* rated Lafayette one of the most homophobic colleges in the nation. Lafayette's 2011 Campus Climate Survey reported that 50% of LGBT students had considered leaving the school.

Even more students who begin to question their sexuality when they

arrive here feel pressure from their social circles to not express themselves openly. They feel trapped. These students, in the words of Henry David Thoreau, lead lives of quiet desperation, living in hiding, separated from their authentic selves. The worst part is that it is not their fault. This is the perceived culture that Lafayette presents to its LGBT students, and it breaks my heart.

I am an out and proud gay student at this college, and I could not be happier with my experiences here. When I came out during my freshman year, I was terrified that I would be shunned and ostracized by my friends. Let it be known: not one person at this college has left me as a friend because of my identity.

Today, I feel more support than

ever from my fellow students, as well as members of the faculty and staff. But I know it is still tough. Sometimes it is tough to be a rainbow fish in a sea of maroon. Even more, I know how hard it is to come out for the first time.

The important thing to remember is that, whether you are a musician or a scientist or an athlete or Greek, we are all beautiful, and we all deserve respect and a sense of self-worth.

For me, every day is Coming Out Day. Every day is a celebration of identity, love, and most importantly, courage. Every day is a reminder of where I have been and how alive I feel now. Every day is an opportunity to do just a bit more to improve perceptions of LGBT people on this campus and in the world and to make a difference.

So I write this to share with you a hope and a dream. I hope Lafayette

becomes a place where people are not afraid to be who they are. I hope that when people do make the decision to show that image, they are welcomed and not rejected. I hope other students see these differences, embrace them, and respect them. Most of all, I hope this day I dream of is nigh.

I truly believe it is easier to be LGBT at Lafayette today than when I arrived, and I commend the efforts that made it so. The work, however, is not done. Everyone has a part to play in making Lafayette a more accepting place. Be the change you wish to see, Lafayette. Things will only get better, and we want them to. And for some people, it really needs to get better.

Richard Albertini '13

Richard Albertini is a chemical engineering major from Sussex, NJ.

However, not all reactions to the Princeton Review were positive. On April 4th, 1993, months

after the article was published, a rather shocking letter to the editor was published in the newspaper. The article, written by a Raul Flavian, is a calling to all of the campus' homophobes. He wants to create his own group on campus of students that fear homosexuals because to him, it was only "fair". Flavian thought that he was the most concerned about this issue but apparently he was not alone. Elizabeth McMahon, a mathematics and women's studies professor at Lafayette College whom also helped to create FLAG gave a quote to the *Morning Call*, which stated, "There is no one on campus who is comfortable disclosing their homosexuality."

Dear Editor:

Ever since I arrived at Lafayette, I felt right at home since the majority of the students here are homophobic. I myself am I true homophobic and am trying to reach out to other homophobics on this campus. Ever since the creation of an organization for friends of lesbians and gays, I decided that it is only fair that an organization be created for friends of homophobics. I am very excited about starting this organization so that I can keep my fear of homosexuals and help spread to other people. If there is anyone who is interested in joining this organization, I hope that they will contact me. Keep in mind, though, that this organization must be started immediately. After all, you never know who is creeping around on this campus.

Most concerned,
Raul Flavian

Lastly in the *Morning Call* article it was stated that, "A Lafayette spokeswoman said the school doesn't add "sexual orientation" to its anti-discrimination policy because the school also has an active ROTC unit on campus." This not only shocked the readers but the campus community. As an institution, Lafayette College used FLAG and various brown bag discussions to discuss their campus climate and homophobia on campus. Eventually, the FLAG group progressed into what is known as QuEST on Lafayette's campus today. However the question still remains, How does the Princeton Review measure homophobia or gay-friendliness on campus? Who gets to say what is gay-friendly and what is not? How is sexuality used in institutions, such as colleges today, to appeal to or push away incoming students?

The Princeton Review has sold millions of books reviewing and ranking the various colleges around the nation. Each year, the review puts out the top 20 LBGT-friendly and LBGT-unfriendly college campus and list of ways in which students should be able to tell if a campus is LBGT friendly or not. The website states that "both lists are based on students' answers to the survey question: Do students, faculty, and administrators at your college treat all persons equally regardless of their sexual orientation and gender identity/expression?" This question has the ability to be very confusing to various students answering this question on a survey. First, if a student answering this question is heterosexual, they may be confused by the question and answer incorrectly. Another issue at hand is that students that are selected to take these surveys may not be homosexual and therefore cannot fully give insight to the lives of the homosexuals on campus.

On their website, the Princeton Review states that all of their surveys are randomly given to a group of students but as we have learned in class, many college admission offices give selected "ideal" students to take the surveys for the schools. However, surveying was different in

the past. Princeton Review states, "surveying tens of thousands of college students on hundreds of campuses is a large undertaking. In 1992, when we published the first edition of our Best Colleges book, our student survey was a paper survey. We conducted the survey on the college campuses, working with school administrators to get their permission for us to set up tables in centrally trafficked locations at which students filled out the surveys." This means that during the year that Lafayette College was considered the "most homophobic", it was possible that a group of students or single student could have been upset about something on campus and decided to give the campus a bad ranking. It is also hard to believe that if Lafayette College was the Unfriendliest LGBT campus in the nation that they would never be on the Top 20 list again. Over 20 years have passed and Lafayette College has not made the list again. It is the list in general that creates such issue in the media and in society. How can anything such as gay-unfriendliness and friendliness be conceptualized? Why has the Princeton Review chosen to make sexual orientation such a prevalent issue?

There are a number of ways in which the Princeton Review chooses to highlight sexual orientation and homosexuality on their website. There is a specific section in which the website coaches future college students to look for signs and hints that a school is LGBT- friendly. For example:

"Read the school newspaper. The school newspaper reflects the attitudes and interests of the student body. A paper that deals only with safe topics might indicate a more conservative environment. Grill the top brass. Don't be afraid to ask admissions staff and college administrators hard questions about the school's LGBTQ policies and services. Asking tough questions will not hurt your chances of admission. If the campus you are researching or visiting is full of red flags—no LGBTQ Center, support groups or anti-harassment policy, for example—it may not be the right place for you. There are plenty of colleges that offer a friendly, accepting environment where you can be yourself."

The Princeton Review has taken a big step as a company to make sure that all student, even gay and lesbians are able to find the right college. Normally, as a society, we would applaud their efforts for being so open and accepting that different students require different needs when looking for colleges, but as Advocate.com wrote in their article *Princeton Review's Approach is Outdated*, Windmeyer states, "the guide uses simplistic and inappropriate methodology, coupled with offensive language, to determine the gay-friendliness of college campuses, making the guide an outdated effort regarding what matters most to LGBT students." The article goes on to say, "The ranking, the, is at best limited, and at worst potentially dangerous. False confidence in an accepting environment can lead LGBT students to make the wrong decisions at the wrong school." This is an interesting point. Although the Princeton Review believes that it is doing it's best to attract students to various schools with more LGBT outlets, it does not mean it's the perfect school for all LGBT students. The Advocate.com article also stresses on the importance of language in these articles. "The language of 'alternative lifestyles' is also problematic in its disregard for LGBT people. The phrase suggests that the legitimate, often painful lives of LGBT students are nothing more than an edge fashion choice."

It is no shock that LGBTQ issues have become a hot topic in our society right now. With new laws passing for gay marriage everyday and the rising number of people coming out, LGBTQ issues are something important to talk about. But has it just become another fad. On the Princeton Review website that state, "you may even find that being queer gives you a leg up in the admissions process." The book has definitely gotten a lot of publicity around their 20 top ranking lists and many institutions try their best to be ranked as highly as possible. Gay and lesbian issues have become a rather popular topic in our society today and for many institutions, accepting LGBT has become something profitable. Schools are often shunned for having

homophobic events or incidents happen on their campuses and as we have seen in Lafayette's history, there is always a strong backlash from students and faculty from both sides. Therefore, having books like the Princeton Review boasting about schools that are the most LGBT-friendly is not only good publicity but also good for the brand overall, unless of course, you are a Catholic school. It turns out, with no surprise, that a vast majority of the schools on the top 20 LGBT-unfriendly lists are religious colleges and universities.

As a high school student, I remember looking through college ranking books and searching for schools with high rates of diversity. Although it never really mattered to me, I thought it would be good to attend a school in which there were a decent amount of students like myself on campus because to me, that meant less racism to face on a daily basis. However, as we have seen in the administration process around the country, schools are fighting to have better diversity numbers. For many schools, it is important to have a quota or set number of different racial groups so that they can be inside of books like the Princeton Review with high percentages and be able to have bragging rights. But even in a college like Lafayette, where the diversity numbers are too great but not too bad either, we see that there are a large number of African-Americans, Hispanics and Asians on campus that are unhappy with the campus climate. The campus can be seen as a high conservative place and for many students, although it may look good on paper, experience is not something that can be written down.

Foucault would find the Princeton Review's LGBT friendly and unfriendly list to be quite interesting and problematic. He would believe that it goes along with his repressive hypothesis to say that although more Gays and Lesbians have been considered a social group and are appealing to various institutions right now, soon there will be another group created that will make Gay and Lesbians no longer relevant. No one will care about the lists made and it will be

about the next hot topic. Just like gender was once important and women getting their education, then it became African-Americans being allowed into prestigious colleges and now it is important to seek out LGBTs that are looking for a place to call home for 4 years.

Measuring LGBT-friendliness is a tricky game in which there are no winners. For many of the students, finding the right place may have nothing to do with the amount of groups or campus or whether or not there is a anti-discrimination policy in the school. LGBT is a personal, experiential issue that is being mistaken for a institutional and cultural interest in which a group of people are being exploited. However, there is so much more to the issue at hand. We must focus on ways in which we can be accepting to all people no matter their gender, race, ethnicity or sexual orientation rather than picking the nations hot topic and going with it. No one wants to attend a school where they must be the spokesperson for their race or sexual orientation. They want to be considered as a person of importance with a unique background that will bring something special and important to the school, rather than a number or statistic for the archive folders. As Foucault would agree, identities change overtime and between different contexts. What might be new, cool and interesting today are the old newspapers of tomorrow.

Lastly, it is important to understand the power that is captured by the Princeton Review. As a book publisher with millions of readers each year, it is safe to say that the groups of people in which they focus on targeting are impressionable, confusing and young adults, who are in large part, the future of our society. It is important that we illustrate to that audience that the gay identity is not an interest or way to get into college but a very real, very lived experience that affects the lives of millions of people. Much like race, you cannot choose your sexual identity. Your sexual orientation is not like a pair of pants; you do not wear different identities each day. Although I do believe it is important for students of LGBT to find schools in which they feel

safe, comfortable and true to whom they are, I do not believe that we need a Princeton Review to tell them where to go. Every school should fulfill that requirement. No one should have to use their sexual orientation to get a better job or get into a better school but their identity should be used for them to find the right person to live a happy and fulfilled life. Sexuality should have a place in our institutions but should not drive our institutions. For the many whose lives are affected by being LGBTQ, it is important that as a society we all become aware that although many identities are short-lived in the media, they are forever to some in their hearts.

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