LGBT Challenges in Higher Education Today

5 Core Principles for Success

BY JEFFREY B. TRAMMELL

THE NATION AND ITS INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION are in the midst of a social awakening as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Americans move toward full acceptance. My experience in both the LGBT and higher education communities leads me to propose five core principles that will help the boards and other leaders of the nation’s universities and colleges succeed in meeting important institutional goals during this time of change.

TAKEAWAYS

1. The leadership of universities and colleges must be open to and include openly LGBT trustees and administrators.
2. All forms of discrimination against LGBT faculty and staff must end.
3. Institutions must create full acceptance for LGBT students.
4. Academic integrity requires governing boards to ensure their curricula include LGBT-relevant study.
5. Universities and colleges benefit greatly from embracing LGBT alumni.
Among those goals are attracting top-notch trustees, administrators, faculty members, and staff members; protecting LGBT students and creating a climate where they are accepted; recruiting and educating future leaders across a range of traditional and emerging disciplinary fields; and bringing LGBT alumni back into the fold. Institutions that address those principles will reap the benefits of this growing social dynamic and be attractive to the next generation of Americans who will judge our institutions, in part, on how they respond to this LGBT awakening.

Where We Stand Today

Demographers suggest there may be nearly 1 million LGBT students and more than 160,000 faculty and staff members at universities and colleges across the nation. With society quickly becoming more accepting, those numbers will trend higher as more students, faculty members, and staff members voluntarily reveal they are LGBT.

And as these LGBT students, faculty, and staff are increasingly open to their universities and colleges, they expect their university and college leaders to advocate for and protect their equal rights and academic opportunity. LGBT alumni, who have often traditionally drifted away from their alma maters, today are far more open to engagement once they see the progress made on campus toward ending discrimination and welcoming all.

But how well do our governing boards understand this?

Based on my many interactions with trustees around the country, I would say we are earning failing marks. The nation’s higher education board members are disproportionately older, less engaged in social change, and almost entirely heterosexual. When it comes to LGBT matters, the generation gap between younger Americans and most higher education trustees is wide. Most board members came of age when LGBT Americans were still largely invisible. Meanwhile, many Fortune 500 companies have leapfrogged higher education by grasping such social and demographic changes, understanding the value of LGBT employees, markets,
and customer relations. They are dedicating more resources and focus to the LGBT dimension of their enterprises.

What do most governing boards and presidents know of their institutions’ past discrimination against LGBT people at the university or college? I would suggest the answer is “very little or nothing.” As this past emerges, many institutions, private or public, regardless of geography or prestige, will be embarrassed. Smart university and college leaders will uncover their own history and develop a strategy for overcoming such failings.

Some of those shameful chapters have already emerged. Harvard University had a secret committee in the 1920s that was responsible for ferreting out and expelling gay faculty members, staff members, and students. Florida universities lived through the notorious Johns Committee investigations of the 1950s and ’60s, when a state legislative committee persecuted gay and lesbian university faculty members, and students, destroying lives and careers—and resulting even in suicides.

Recently, at the dedication of its new Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity, Duke University President Richard H. Brodhead spoke of a time when Duke was “saturated with homophobia.” Speaking of the evidence of past gay and lesbian repression at Duke, Brodhead said, “As president of this university, I would like to say today that this university regrets every phase of that history. There is nothing in that past that I will not now confidently and totally repudiate. I regret every act that ever limited the human life of anyone who came here.”

The Five Core Principles

What do today’s trustees need to consider when it comes to LGBT issues? I recommend the following principles as of particular importance to boards and their members.

1. Governing boards and the top ranks of administrators must welcome and include openly LGBT candidates.

If governing boards represent and reflect our institutions and their many constituencies—including the whole university community—why do so few governing boards have any out gay or lesbian board members? Incongruously, it is easier for an openly gay or lesbian individual to get elected to a state legislature than to serve on a public university’s governing board. Today, 84 openly LGBT state legislators serve in 32 states, ranging from the Deep South to the Rocky Mountains to New England to the West Coast. And openly LGBT members thrive on city and county governing bodies, but not on the boards of public universities and colleges. Why?

I have often observed, while attending various gatherings of board members and presidents, passionate discussions of diversity, inclusion, and the representation of various university or college communities, regardless of the region. But I have heard barely a whisper about LGBT Americans. Is this a blind spot for the leadership of higher education in America?

When Virginia Governor Mark Warner (D) appointed me to the Board of Visitors of the College of William & Mary in 2005, I was not surprised to be the first openly gay trustee in the university’s three centuries of existence. But I was most surprised to learn that I could find virtually no other openly gay or lesbian member of the boards of public universities across the nation. Eventually I discovered there were openly gay or lesbian board members at regional universities in Illinois and Michigan. The only other public trustee I could find was my friend Robert Achtenberg, then on the California State University board of regents before resigning to accept a federal appointment. That appeared to be the net representation for public universities, with little added progress since my appointment nine years ago. Private universities and colleges have done somewhat better, although I have found no formal data about it.

It is also instructive to look beyond boards to presidents and top administrators. To what extent have well-qualified LGBT individuals been blocked from institutional leadership?

At public institutions, we find the same paucity of LGBT presidents as we do board members. Private universities and colleges, however, are choosing some openly gay or lesbian presidents. In fact, Roosevelt University’s president, Charles R. Middleton, has created the “LGBTQ Presidents in Higher Education” (www.lgbtpresidents.org), which now has 48 members, mostly from private institutions. Middleton is a highly respected leader who many believe would have contended for an Ivy League presidency, but for the “gay glass ceiling.” To help support Middleton’s higher education aims, we are forming the “LGBTQ Trustees in Higher Education,” albeit a small group at this time.

The social awakening will bring increased urgency to the appointment of qualified, experienced LGBT trustees and presidents to help lead universities and colleges. Such candidates can and will serve ably, not because of their differences, but because of a shared commitment to higher education.

2. Governing boards must bring an end to discrimination against LGBT faculty and staff members.

Last spring, at a meeting of Virginia board chairs and university presidents, the agenda included discussion of domestic partner benefits for faculty and staff. Before the meeting began, I was pulled aside in the hall by an individual who said, “Jeff, I’m David Hanson. I have been working at my institution on partner benefits, but I have been really intimidated by the attorney general and his staff on this issue.” I recognized him as the highly regarded senior vice president for administration and chief operating officer at Virginia Commonwealth University. The evening proved David Hanson’s chilling point. The apprehension among the higher education leaders was palpable, as Charles W. Steger, president of Virginia Tech, raised the issue of partner benefits, and Taylor Reveley, president of William & Mary, and I spoke passionately about our LGBT faculty and staff members. In that eerily silent room, only Angel Cabrera, president of George Mason, supported us. Representatives of the other Virginia universities carefully studied their shoes and avoided my gaze as I spoke about my experience as the first openly...
vowed to end this discrimination.

But what about the dozens of other states where discrimination against gay and lesbian faculty and staff members continues, including the denial of benefits for their partners? What are boards and presidents doing to help their institutions offer equal domestic partner or spousal benefits for same-sex couples? And does the institution have a policy against discrimination in employment and treatment on the campus for faculty and staff members?

Even though 33 states do not yet have statewide nondiscrimination laws, hundreds of colleges and universities have developed their own nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity. However, such nondiscrimination policies are at best inconsistent when an institution fails to provide equal benefits for faculty and staff members.

3. Universities and colleges must create full acceptance for LGBT students.

Students are the reason that universities and colleges exist. And good governance requires that boards and presidents ensure students are able to pursue their studies without discrimination or harassment. That is especially true for students who come from groups traditionally the subject of considerable opprobrium, such as the LGBT community.

The bullying, ostracizing, and tormenting of LGBT students, who often had no family member or friend to whom they could turn, were once commonplace on American campuses. Fortunately those experiences are less prevalent today, although they still exist at far too many institutions. Quite simply, the buck stops with governing boards and presidents when it comes to ending this discrimination.

With the increased number of self-identifying LGBT students, more universities and colleges are tailoring services to fit the needs of this subset of the campus population. LGBT students bring distinct perspectives and experiences to campuses, adding immeasurable diversity. That means smart institutional leadership adjusts student services to fit the profiles of students who often come out before arriving on the campus.

One important resource for evaluating universities and colleges is Campus Pride, a student-focused organization that works to create safer, more inclusive LGBT-supportive campuses. Campus Pride ranks universities and colleges on how friendly they are to LGBT students and has several innovative initiatives underway (www.campuspride.org).

The college experience is a time of significant personal growth, in and out of the classroom. The truth is that we don’t know how many young students, such as in the tragic example of Tyler Clementi of Rutgers University, may have taken their own lives over the difficulty of coming out and fitting in with other students. Governing boards and presidents must ensure their universities and colleges institute effective policies against bullying and provide mental-health services for those students who struggle with coming out. Virtually all institutions need to make progress on this front. The well-being of students—including sometimes their physical safety—demands that governing boards take a firm position that zero discrimination against any student will be tolerated on their campuses.

4. Academic integrity requires governing boards to ensure that their institutions’ curricula include LGBT-relevant study.

Historically, the curricula of colleges and universities have been the responsibility of the faculty, with broad oversight by the administration. Governing boards can play a constructive role by standing firmly on the side of academic study in which no part of society is whitewashed out of the picture. LGBT individuals, despite their contributions and participation in society, have often been invisible in many academic disciplines, including history, sociology, law, religion, and many others.

That is changing swiftly. Across the country, universities and colleges are offering more courses that examine such disciplines from the perspective of sexual minorities where that is relevant. Quite
simply, academic integrity means governing boards should not tarnish their institutions by seeking to force their views about acceptable areas of study, including proscribing courses with LGBT subject matter.

Higher education institutions are enriched by encouraging the latest scholarship from all points of view, including the important contributions made by and about LGBT people. In diverse subjects such as psychology, business, sociology, history, literature, political science, law, and anthropology, researchers produce important works with an LGBT focus every year. I know, anecdotally from discussions with young scholars, that a new generation of emerging LGBT academics will devote their careers to these studies and to remedying the past widespread exclusion of the LGBT experience from academic study.

By no means does that mean an end to conflict and opposition in some quarters that remain obdurate or resistant to LGBT inclusion and free academic inquiry. Earlier this year, for instance, South Carolina legislators voted to cut support for two state universities specifically because they included LGBT-themed books in their required reading for freshmen. Such political censorship is a modern metaphor for the kinds of repression and historic blacklisting that many marginalized people have experienced in academe and society—and is the hallmark of a backward-looking rather than forward-looking educational system.

5. **Universities and colleges benefit greatly from embracing LGBT alumni.**

For decades, gay and lesbian students at higher education institutions across the nation waited until they graduated and then fled to large cities. There they could be free of the scorn and homophobia that would have overwhelmed them had they been honest about their orientation while still students.

It is important to make sure that those graduates from earlier, less-accepting eras know they are welcome and valued in the academic family today. That is often made possible through a distinct LGBT alumni or affinity organization organized under the umbrella of the general alumni association.

Those efforts help LGBT alumni stay connected to each other and, most important, to the university or college. It may take time and convincing to reach some older alumni who felt stigmatized while students and had a painful association with the institution at a time when LGBT students were not accepted in the campus community. To bring those former students back to the fold, it is important for the leadership of the university or college to make it a priority and implement strategies to forge such relationships.

Of course, far-sighted development officers know firsthand the value of reconnecting disgruntled LGBT alumni. Such efforts have paid remarkable dividends to LGBT alumni. In 2011, President and CEO of the national alumni association for William & Mary (W&M) alumni, William & Mary alumni helped create an academic initiative to honor John Boswell, a gay W&M alumnus who pioneered scholarship on same-sex relationships, including marriage. Princeton University’s LGBT reunion last year brought back more than 550 alumni for wide-ranging discussions about LGBT-related topics. Princeton’s reconnection with its LGBT alumni spawned the creation of a new national fundraising network. And the list goes on across the country. Increasingly, as institutions see the benefit of, and focus on, fostering bonds with LGBT alumni, they will overcome the frayed relationships that resulted from hostile climates on their campuses.

**In conclusion, a new era is upon us. Those leaders with the wisdom to acknowledge and accept it enthusiastically will benefit. Wise boards and administrators will embrace the full integration of LGBT Americans into the fabric of their institutions. Governance, talent, academic offerings, student diversity, and alumni outreach all deserve far-sighted leadership that recognizes and values, and never again shuns or neglects, every LGBT member of the university and college community.**

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