Sexuality/Sexual Orientation

The college campus often serves as a place where gay people confront their own sexual identities and "come out of the the closet." What makes the college atmosphere so conducive to coming out? In a time of major change, college students, often for the first time, have the opportunity to make decisions about the way they want to live their lives. Through the building of new relationships (and the breaking down of old ones), new experiences, new lifestyles, new expectations (of their own and those of others), many first-year students often undergo a process of self-actualization, trying to pinpoint exactly who they are. Exploration of one's sexuality often plays an important role in the first-year student's life. Many gay students find, for the first time, support groups/communities in which they can finally express their gayness. A student may not have known of any other gay people during high school, so would not have received any positive support or affirmation of her or his sexual orientation.

Sexual orientation, like race and gender, plays a large role in the formation of a personal identity. However, unlike race and gender, sexual orientation is not so apparent at first glance. Gay people have a choice in whether or not they want others to know of their sexual orientation. Unfortunately, those who choose to deny (either publicly or privately) their gay identity often do so because of the pressure of the "compulsory heterosexuality" imposed by society. According to our plan to foster the building of a community in which every member feels safe and comfortable with her or his identity and voice, Critical Consciousness opens the dialogue of sexual orientation to students who may have never before encountered such a dialogue, who may have been warned against any such discussion, who may have been afraid to talk about or even wonder about their own, or others', sexual orientation. During weeks eight and nine in Critical Consciousness, we aim for first-year students to:

1) become involved in the dialogue regarding "mainstream" and "alternate" sexualities.

2) be aware and begin to think critically of public policies on homosexuality.

3) consider institutional curricular and social support of gay students, staff, and faculty at colleges and universities.

4) realize and become sensitive to the problems gay students, staff, and faculty face on campus.

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5) rethink/evaluate their own feelings, biases, and prejudices regarding homosexuality.

6) acknowledge the existence of and respect and support gay students, staff, and faculty at Swarthmore.

**Week 8: Policy/Prejudice Towards Gays**

**Objectives:**

- to become involved in the dialogue regarding “mainstream” and “alternate” sexualities.

- to be aware and begin to think critically of public policies on homosexuality.

- to consider institutional curricular and social support of gay students, staff, and faculty at colleges and universities.

- to rethink/evaluate their own feelings, biases, and prejudices regarding homosexuality.

**Readings:**

- “The Last Prejudice”
- “Gay Rights Laws: the necessary caveat,” David R. Carlin
- “The Gay Nineties,” Stacey D’Erasmo
- Selected comic strips from B.B. and the Diva, Rupert Kinnard and Life in Hell, Matt Groener

**Activity #1: How do I feel about homosexuality?**

**Time:** 10 minutes

While sexual orientation may not have dominated discussion in first-year students’ lives so far, the topic has almost undoubtedly come up in some form or another. Before launching into discussion with the full group, each student needs to consider her or his feelings on the sensitive topic of sexuality. Students spread about the room, claiming a bit of personal space. For ten minutes, each student writes a private journal entry (in whatever journal she or

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he has on her or his person -- notebook, scrap paper) on the question of sexual orientation.

How do I feel about homosexuality?
Where do I place myself on the gay-straight continuum?
In what light do I consider gay people I know?
Do gay people scare me?
Am I curious?

These journal entries are solely for personal use. Now, students are ready to join in discussion with the full group.

Activity #2: Discussion of Public Policy on Homosexuality

Time: 1 hour

The students have read two articles from different perspectives on gay legislation. The author of "The Last Prejudice" appeals to "progressives" to "rally behind gays and lesbians" in the face of Republican homophobic legislative acts. Acts such as the proposed constitutional amendment in Oregon, which "would prohibit the state from recognizing homosexual rights, and would require the state and schools to teach that homosexuality is 'abnormal, wrong, unnatural, and perverse,'" discriminate against and violate the rights of gay people, the author says. David Carlin, the author of "Gay Rights Laws: the necessary caveat," warns against those aggressive, irrational liberals like the author of the previous article: "Those who shout 'homophobia' may see themselves as champions of liberal society. In truth they are its enemies." These articles present opposing views of approaches toward gay legislation. (We expect to hear opposing view within the group, also.) The facilitators proceed to lead a discussion stemming from these articles.

What kind of institutionalized discrimination against gay people exists in our government?
How does that institutionalized discrimination affect society?
How would changes in legislation affect mainstream social mores?
What is being done to fight this discrimination?
What kind of political support for gay legislation are you aware of?
Attacks on gay legislation?
How can we, as students, help out on a national or statewide level?

The third article, "The Gay Nineties," by Stacey D'Erasmo, describes a few young gay studies programs at universities. D'Erasmo discusses the need for and concerns for the survival of gay studies programs. The comic strips B.B. and the Diva and Life in Hell portray other aspects of gay education. Perhaps

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"The Last Prejudice"
"Gay Rights Laws"
the humour with which Diva, Brown Bomber, Jeff, and Akbar treat the subject of homosexuality will lighten the topic for those who feel nervous or threatened discussing it. More discussion follows regarding gay education:

How did your high schools deal with issues of sexual orientation?
How did students, gay or straight, deal with these issues?
What kind of institutionalized discrimination do universities and colleges exert over gay students, staff, and faculty?
How can some of this discrimination be eliminated?
What institutional changes can the universities and colleges make to provide more respect and support for gay people?
Why is there a need for gay studies?
Do you think gay studies programs will grow in popularity, gain support, and spread at educational institutions?

Activity #3: How to change institutional policies

Time: 20 minutes

Following the discussion, students split up into groups of 3 or 4 students. Each group must compile a list of recommended changes to educational institutions. These recommendations should deal with curriculum, campus organizations, faculty and administrative ideological and practical support for gay people.

Lorraine Trenchard & Hugh Warren, of the London Gay Teenage Group, conducted a survey of gay youth in London, and compiled several lists of on how to make life easier for gay youth in education. After the groups generate their own lists of how to incorporate support for gay people into the institution, the facilitators hand out a combined list of recommendations to secondary schools and colleges from Something To Tell You. (See attached handout.) Students compare this list with their own ideas, and what is happening here at Swarthmore.

Week 9: Gay People Exist at Swarthmore

Objectives:

-- to become involved in the dialogue regarding "mainstream" and "alternate" sexualities.

-- to consider institutional curricular and social support of gay students, staff, and faculty at colleges and universities.

-- to realize and become sensitive to the problems gay students, staff, and faculty face on campus.
-- to rethink/evaluate their own feelings, biases, and prejudices regarding homosexuality.

-- to acknowledge the existence of and respect and support gay students, staff, and faculty at Swarthmore.

Readings:  “Friends Indeed,” Jeremy Mindich. 9
             “Loving Women,” from Adolescent Portraits, Andrew Garrod, Lisa Smulyan, Sally I. Powers, Robert Kilkenny. 10
             “A Step in the Only Direction,” from Adolescent Portraits. 11

Activity #1: A Gay Voice at Swat

Time:  30 minutes
Speaker:  George Moskos, French Department.

After having had a chance to talk about homosexuality in relation to the “real world,” students get the chance to relate the topic of sexual orientation to Swarthmore, the place where they are about to spend the next four years of their lives. The full first-year class gathers in the PAC to hear George Moskos, French Professor and Chair of Sager Committee, speak of his experience coming to Swarthmore as a gay man with a lover. We hope that actually hearing a first-hand account of a gay man’s experience on campus, students will realize that they will come in contact with the issue of sexual orientation while living here.

Activity #2: Discussion of the gay life at Swarthmore

Time:  45 minutes

After George speaks, the class meets in the regular discussion groups at assigned locations. The three readings for this week each speak of the experiences of gay or lesbian students coming out on college campuses: “Friends Indeed,” “Loving Women,” and “A Step in the Only Direction.” These readings give the students an idea of what life in and out of the closet can be like. Having heard one first-hand account of gay life at Swarthmore, the students get to hear a few more. The facilitators hand out a few personal case studies, written by gay students and staff. Reflecting on George’s speech, and the case studies, the group discusses issues with which gay members of the Swarthmore community must deal.

11 Ibid. pp135-155.
What are some problems gay people encounter entering the college environment?
What helps to alleviate some of these problems?
How is the college environment conducive to “coming out”?  
What should be expected of the community or the institution in support of/ in response to gay students, staff, and faculty?
How can we all help to provide a safe and supportive community, inclusive of and welcoming to gay members?

Activity #3: How do I feel about Homosexuality?

Time: 15 minutes

The students opened the dialogue on sexual orientation by having a dialogue with themselves, in their private journal entries. Now, after having delved into these issues a bit, students check back in with themselves. Once again, students spread out about the room, claiming personal space. Each student reads over her or his entry from the week before, then writes a reaction to the first week’s entry, and the dialogue of the first week and today.

How do I feel about homosexuality?
Where do I place myself on the gay-straight continuum?
In what light do I consider gay people I know?
Do gay people scare me?
Am I curious?
How have the week’s dialogue changed my feelings?
How do I plan to treat the topic of sexual orientation from now on?

Conclusion

We hope that as a result of this unit, gay students and students questioning their sexuality feel more empowered, valid, and supported in their daily experiences here at Swarthmore. We hope that students to whom this is a novel dialogue, as well as those who have been thinking about these issues for years, continue the conversations regarding sexual orientation outside of Critical Consciousness. We aim to trigger critical, open-minded thinking toward issues of sexual orientation and toward fostering a safe, inclusive, and supportive Swarthmore community.
Handout

Lorraine Trenchard & Hugh Warren of the London Gay Teenage Group recommend that . . .

1. The specific problems and needs of young homosexuals at school be recognised, and every effort made to meet those needs and support those pupils. This would also involve specific training at teacher training colleges.
2. The formation of lesbian and gay pupils' groups be encouraged by all local education authorities.
3. The relevance of homosexuality to many different subjects, English literature, history, social sciences, human geography and so on, be recognised and the topic be incorporated accordingly, and dealt with in a positive manner.
4. School libraries stock information leaflets, phone numbers and addresses of lesbian and gay groups, books about the lesbian and gay movement, as well as books about homosexuality and novels with positive lesbian or gay characters.
5. Anti-homosexual attitudes, statements and literature be treated as seriously as racist or sexist ones.
6. Lesbian and gay teachers be encouraged to be open about their sexuality and be supported in so doing. The formation of lesbian and gay teachers' groups should be encouraged by all local education authorities, who should work closely with such groups.
7. To ensure all the above, all Local Education Authorities issue clear policy statements concerning the treatment of sexuality, and specifically homosexuality, in schools. This should relate to the curriculum and learning resources as well as the counselling/pastoral role of teachers.
8. All colleges and Student Unions, as a matter of course, have an established and well-funded Gay Society that is permanent feature of that college and does not need to be set up again each year.
9. College Housing Departments and Officers recognise the particular accommodation needs of young homosexuals entering their college, and where possible, make provision for these students to share accommodation with other lesbian or gay students if they want to.