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Diversity Training: A Way to Increase Organizational Support for Sexual Minority Adolescents[1]

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Introduction

Previous research posits that it is crucial for educators and administrators to become more culturally aware, responsive, and competent if programs are to effectively serve an increasingly diverse population (Guion, Goddard, Broadwater, Chattaraj, & Sullivan-Lytle, 2003). The purpose of this publication is to provide administration and staff with specific ways to effect change in order to create a welcoming, safe environment for sexual minority adolescents.

Organizational support for sexual minority adolescents may be difficult for some organizational settings and stakeholders. Community organizations are not always supportive or inclusive of gay and lesbian issues (Keefer & Reene, 2002). The first programmatic decision that needs to be made is whether the organization and its stakeholders are prepared to openly offer support to sexual minority, or LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), youth (Regan & Fogarty, 2006).

Diversity Training

Diversity trainings generally have three objectives (Cox, 1993; Hanover & Cellar, 1998; Roberson, Kulik, & Pepper, 2001; Sanchez & Medkick, 2004):

> 1) To increase knowledge and awareness about diversity issues
>
> 2) To reduce biases and stereotypes
>
> 3) To change behaviors of individuals

In reference to diversity training for administration and staff about LGBT issues, youth-serving organizations could:

- Include experiential or hands-on exercises that deal with LGBT issues. Talking about issues helps reveal unrecognized prejudices and misconceptions. For example, have each participant pick a card out of a deck. Then tell them that each suit represents a different sexual orientation—for instance, clubs for heterosexual, hearts for homosexual or lesbian, spades for bisexual, and diamonds for transgender. This will

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help participants imagine what it would be like to have a different sexual orientation.

- Include opportunities for trainers who are LGBT to share their experiences. Research shows this has been effective in dealing with racial diversity issues (Bond, 1999; Kirkland & Regan, 1997).

- Include LGBT leaders in your list of examples when discussing leadership. These leaders could include people such as Virginia Woolf, Harvey Milk, and Oscar Wilde. Highlighting esteemed leaders promotes positive youth development.

- Include LGBT history when discussing the culture and background of the United States. Highlighting historical social movements and grassroots action surrounding LGBT issues can also help promote positive youth education.

- Include "safe space" cards for staff to put up in their offices after they attend training sessions. This will encourage adolescents to feel supported and share their feelings openly.

- Discuss the negative effects of homophobia on youth development. Use real-life examples, such as the death of Matthew Shephard, a gay teenager who was killed in a violent hate crime.

- Develop talking points based on the different stages of homosexual identity formation and share this information with adult and youth audiences. Knowledge of these stages improves youth workers' ability to support LGBT adolescents. Facilitate participants' developing a plan of action for individual and organizational changes.

Finally, there is a caveat regarding diversity training. Diversity training by itself cannot sustain long-term change. In order to transfer training objectives into reality, there must be an action plan (created by participants at the end of the training) and a supportive work environment that will allow change to take place. As shown in previous research, this supportive work environment should facilitate behavioral change by providing peer support, opportunities to learn new skills, positive

consequences for the newly learned behaviors, and adequate organizational policies and procedures (Rynes & Rosen, 1995; Sanchez & Medkick, 2004).

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