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Gender Perspectives: A Case Study of Co-curricular Programming and its Effect on Identity Development and Anxiety

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While all college students experience anxiety at certain points in their college journey, campuses are noting a definite rise in students who struggle with anxiety to the point that it interferes with their educational success. In a survey of over 73,000 college students by the American College Health Association, 64% stated they felt “overwhelming anxiety” within the last twelve months and 22% stated they were diagnosed or treated by a professional for anxiety. Fifteen percent of students stated they were diagnosed with a combination of anxiety and depression. Academics was listed highest (51%) for being traumatic or very difficult to handle in the last twelve months followed by finances (36%) and relationship and family problems (32%). Higher education professionals will need to continue to provide tools and environments to help students manage anxiety if they are committed to student success and completion.

In my role as a student affairs administrator, I have been involved in supporting students of various intersecting identities as they navigate diverse higher education environments. At Bluffton University, a small, Christian, Mennonite affiliated college in northwest Ohio, I currently advise the student organization Gender Perspectives. I also was highly involved with a group of students and faculty who re-instituted and received official student organization status (not previously held) for Brave Spaces, a LGBTQ+ focused student organization. My role has provided me the opportunity to ask a few questions of current and past Bluffton University students who started and/or participated in these groups. I received responses from nine students

through texting, Facebook and email. While not an exhaustive qualitative study, the data collected provides a case study and discussion starter of the importance of affinity-related student organizations in helping students manage anxiety and learn about their identities.

Multiple and intersecting identities held by students can increase and complicate these anxieties (Benton & Benton, 2006; Ortiz & Santos, 2009). Or at the very least, students may experience anxieties differently based on the identity lens through which they experience their environment or where they are in their various identity development. This is especially true for students who hold marginalized identities within the institutional contexts in which they are studying. With decreasing enrollments and resources in many liberal arts institutions and the increasing needs of students, it is more important than ever to examine and discuss the important role of these co-curricular experiences to support students in managing their anxieties while also challenging them in new growth in their various identity developments. This paper will begin the conversation by examining student organizations created and utilized by faculty and student life staff at Bluffton University to facilitate student examination and processing of their experiences. The challenges and considerations in creating these environments will be discussed including how to provide effective environments that allow for students to integrate multiple identities.

When students and alumni were asked why they initially decided to join the Women's Circle (recently renamed Gender Perspectives so these terms will be used interchangeable based on the name of the group at the time the student participated), they stated they were interested in learning more about issues such as women's health, feminism and global women's social issues. The women also wanted a community that provided a "space that felt safe and welcome to talk about anything" to "talk about all things women" and to "hang out with other strong and

wonderful women.” The group offered a low risk opportunity for women to learn about these topics as stated by a student who said “I was always interested in women’s issues but was never exposed to it in my hometown. I was able to dip my toes in the feminism water.” While the presenting reasons for joining the group varied, the desire to connect in community while examining issues facing women connected those who participated.

The student who recently re-started the Brave Spaces group also reinforced the importance of having dedicated, identifiable groups for students who are examining their gender identities. When asked why he was motivated to go through the official process of creating a student group, the student replied:

“I originally created Brave Spaces because there was not a place on campus for LGBTQ students to connect on campus. And as someone who was not out yet, it was scary to think of how I would be treated of campus if and when I did come out. Creating the group was a way I could provide that representation for myself and others on campus, as well as find like-minded people, allies, and have a safe space”

This student highlights the importance of student organizations in signaling that campuses are safe for identity development and revealing those identities to others. An alumnus involved in the earlier formation of the LGBTQ+ student group shared that telling her story in the group helped her share her story in other settings.

It was in that group that I was able to tell my whole story for the first time. That I was able to vocalize things I had struggled with for a long time. Surrounded by my peers I started to process things in a way that I never had before. Telling my story for the first time gave me the strength to be able to share my story in other settings as well.

Having a focused space with peers allowed the student to reflect and examine her identity in ways she had been able to previously.

A challenge for institutions is also exemplified in the history of this student group as a group did exist previously on campus but membership declined over the years to the point where the group was not functioning. The loss of an advisor with a shared identity was especially

damaging to the group. Several factors needed to come together to support the group's reformation: hiring of a new faculty member who shared the group's identity; the motivation of the student mentioned; the evolving membership of the approving institutional committee. This example highlights the importance of on-going support and the hiring of diverse faculty and staff needed to sustain these vital safe spaces for students.

Even with consistent staffing, creating safe learning environments outside of the classroom setting can be challenging. The natural rotation of students coming to college provides new needs and perspectives each year as students join and leave the group. Meeting the developmental needs of new students through seniors in ways that keep students equally engaged is challenging. Returning students want to discuss new topics or topics in more depth but new students may need the foundational information. Lack of specific curriculum to be covered and balancing the need to support students with the need to challenge them to learn and grow can leave advisors and student leaders tired and disillusioned.

Some students were looking for increased advocacy when creating groups that brought a sense of empowerment. The student who helped restart Gender Perspectives stated she helped get the group going again because she "felt women were often overlooked at Bluffton and were dismissed when they raised concerns about sexism" and current members of the group want to address sexual violence and unhealthy relationships for women on campus. The founder of Brave Spaces wanted to ensure Safe Spaces training for faculty, staff and student leaders. His consistent follow-up pushed me to move forward with finding the resources to bring the topic to the campus diversity committee who sponsored the training. These perspectives highlight another of the challenges for advisors leading groups in balancing the desire of groups to discuss, examine and create community while others want to focus on "doing something" and advocacy.

This is especially challenging when the ways in which the students want to be an activist are not comfortable for the institution where they reside. A current member of Gender Perspectives shared the following related to this tenuous balance in the group: “I also found a passion in me to be a part of justice movements and stand for what I know is right. Women's circle seemed like a platform of which I could do that. Upon joining the group I found it to be different than what I had expected. There was more talking than doing in my opinion.” This student is clearly dissatisfied with the balance that currently exists in the group between developing community and taking action. And yet uninformed action can cause harm to the very causes and individuals for whom they wish to advocate. Discussing this balance and deciding with the group what activities to plan and what information is needed before moving forward are two tools I often utilize in an attempt to bring balance between thoughtful conversation and action. Advisors can help student leaders find the balance needed to keep students who want to do, also realize the importance of being and those that want to discuss find ways to put their new found information into action.

The spectrum of identity development was represented when students were asked if involvement in their student group helped them learn more about their gender identity. Responses were split as those who became involved later in their college career (senior year) stated that it did not help them learn as they were secure in their identity and were focused on creating an opportunity for others. One student shared that working with a professional empowered her “to take the risk to live out being my authentic self.” Others stated that participation did help them learn about gender identity by having conversation within the group, with mentors and with guest visitors to the group. One student highlighted how hearing the stories of others experiences can empower and affirm. She stated:

I would say yes. It was my first time being a part of a group of women (though I think I remember us talking about this group being open to all gender/non-binary folks... it just so happened to be all women attending when I was there) where we talked explicitly about our stories and experiences of being women. One thing I learned through our conversations and activities were the significance of our stories. I know I have experienced micro-sexism and I always sort of just accepted it because I guess I just knew that that's what came with being a woman. Having an opportunity to share our stories and vulnerabilities with one another created a space of empowerment and affirmation. I was reminded that my gender is not a ground for micro-sexism simply because I'm a woman, and Women's Circle gave me space to speak and listen to my fellow ladies.

Another student shared the sense of empowerment stating that women's circle taught her "how to be politely fierce about my rights" after hearing the mentor of the group share about a study that found one reason for the gender pay gap was because women did not negotiate when receiving job offers.

The challenge presented to advisors of groups highlighted in the examples above is that it could be argued that by acknowledging the micro-sexism experienced by women as well as pay inequities, anxiety could increase for the students participating in the group rather than decrease. Yet students stated that while their involvement often educated them to struggles associated with various identities; they stated overwhelmingly that involvement in the groups helped them handle anxieties associated with college. One alumna involved in Gender Perspectives stated:

I was lucky enough to have positive experiences on campus - and/or was naive to the negative things. I think that's also why I enjoyed women's circle. Enlightening to some of struggles that do occur on campus. A way to empathize when you don't notice it happening because it does. I think I notice things more now outside of college because of it as well.

Another alumna stated the group was helpful "in providing a social group to discuss frustrations and concerns" and another stated it was a place to talk about anxieties.

The student who re-instated the Brave Spaces group stated involvement was helpful in his process of coming out about his sexual identity.

It definitely helped my anxieties. By having supporters from faculty, staff and students help create the group and joining the group, I felt very liberated and at home at Bluffton. It also helped me to make meaningful friendships. The few months following me coming out and starting Brave Spaces spent at Bluffton are some of the happiest times in my life so far. I remember after starting the group there was an article in *The Wit* which essentially outed me to everyone on campus (which I was very okay with). The day the article was produced faculty, students, my professors were all hugging me and thanking me for the work I had done for the campus and making it a more open and accepting place. That REALLY reduced all my anxiety about it. It was great.

All of these examples highlight the ways in which sharing the anxieties and showing support seemed to help those involved deal with some of the anxieties faced in college. Yet others who were facing clinically diagnosed levels of anxiety and depression did not experience the same level of support from sharing with the group. Three students in the group shared that they were diagnosed with anxiety in high school and for all of them it had gotten worse in college. One student in this category stated that the training she participated in off campus on behalf of the group initially caused her to experience greater anxiety because she did not know what to expect and did not know the other people when entering the training. But ultimately it helped her to see she was in an unhealthy relationship and motivated her to want to provide the training on campus for others (which she did on more than one occasion). For these students, participation appeared to help with more generalized anxieties but the training and events hosted by the group provided more concrete tools.

While these identity affiliated groups provided important experiences for female and LGBTQ+ students, the literature and my personal and professional experience support that students experience multiple identities that intersect and are more salient in certain contexts (Jones & Ames, 2013; Jones & McEwen, 2000; Jones, 1997). While our groups often focus on a single identity on small campuses, the lived experience for many students is a combination of multiple identities. Bluffton University is a predominantly White institution with a slight

majority male. Attempts to include majority identity groups at Bluffton, such as White students in Multicultural Student Organization (MSO) and men in Gender Perspectives are marginal at best. How do smaller higher education institutions provide meaningful structures and events to meet the needs of the increasingly diverse student body without forcing them to choose one identity on which to focus? Bluffton University might offer some examples for discussion and further thought.

The Gender Perspectives Group has involved mostly White, cis-gendered women with a small number that identified as bi-sexual or lesbian. This lack of diversity within individual groups is not unusual on our campus as it appears that students participate in and identify with the group to which their identity is most salient. This saliency is influenced by many things but two possibilities include identifying with which identities they may feel are marginalized in their campus context and where individual students are in their ethnic, racial, gender and other developmental processes. In addition, peers are very important in ethnic identity formation (Ortiz & Santos, 2009) and “like minded” peers are often found in identity affiliated student organizations. On a campus that is predominantly White, many of the women of color at Bluffton are active in the Multicultural Student Organization (MSO), even though they are strongly in the minority as women in the group. I hypothesize that they gravitate toward the MSO group because their racial identity on a predominantly white campus is more salient than their gender identity.

The few students that openly identify as LGBTQ+ on Bluffton’s campus most often connect with the Brave Spaces organization as their gender identity and attractional orientation are likely more salient in their identity formation. Although because this organization is more recent and the campus presents a heteronormative culture, it may not feel “safe” for students to

identify with this organization so recently they have participated in other student groups. Participation may also fluctuate based on where students are in their gender identity development. The former advisor of the Safe Spaces group noted that past leaders were in and out of the group as their position on the continuum shifted to heterosexual relationships resulting in them at times not feeling connected to the mission and goals of the group.

Providing spaces that allow for multiple identities to be present for students and students not having to “choose” one group continues to be a challenge to be addressed by administrators and faculty on smaller liberal arts campuses. To try to embrace multiple identities, Gender Perspectives has hosted joint meetings/meals with the women from the Multicultural Student Organization, co-hosted events with Brave Spaces, social work club and MSO and were cognizant of including perspectives from diverse individuals when at campus-wide events. Student Senators who are active in these groups also have pushed Senate to provide campus-wide programming focused on difficult dialogues such as an event focused on examining the role of race in society and hosting an LGBTQ+ panel discussion.

Events hosted on campus have also provided contexts where multiple identities are expressed more fluidly. *The Beaver Monologues* is an event that evolved from a performance of Eve Ensler’s *Vagina Monologues* which was hosted on the Bluffton campus as a result of an honors project. *The Beaver Monologues*, named after the Bluffton mascot, was a performance of anonymously submitted stories from Bluffton students about their lives. This format brought forth stories that represented multiple gender, racial and attractional orientation identities in ways that were real to the lived experiences of students. Additional campus presentations by students in the Gender Perspectives group focused on the origins and current issues of the #metoo movement and Women’s March brought forth examples from multiple and intersecting

identities, with the commonality of experiences of harassment, inequity and sexual violence. A faculty member on campus started a *Theatre for Social Change Class* which utilizes theatre techniques to engage students and communities in problem solving and dialogue (Rohd, 1998). Students pick an issue of social concern or importance, create an interactive theatre project and present the project in a campus or community setting. The faculty member then engaged the students to continue providing these opportunities at presentations outside of class. These events allow students to represent and examine the multiple identities through which they view their experiences, current events to try to create social change and empower them to engage others in the discussion.

Anxiety will remain a challenge for college students but providing outlets such as affinity focused student groups helps provide a community of like-minded individuals and a safe place for students to learn and grow. Having these groups signals to students that the institution welcomes them and values their identity. Advisors will continue to struggle with balancing the need for processing with advocacy as well as the challenge of meeting the developmental needs of first year students through seniors without a concrete curriculum. Offering events and collaborating across groups allows venues for students to engage through the lens of their multiple identities without having to choose a single identity on which to focus. While these opportunities will not guarantee student success, they are essential in providing time for reflection and growth.

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