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### Authors

Schott-Ceccacci, Melinda

Holland, Laurel

Matthews, Todd L

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# Attitudes Toward the LGBT Community in Higher Education

MELINDA SCHOTT-CECCACCI, B.S.  
University of West Georgia

TODD MATTHEWS, PH.D.  
University of West Georgia

LAUREL HOLLAND, PH.D.  
University of West Georgia

## ABSTRACT

*This work examines the significance of class standing and college affiliation on attitudes toward the LGBT community. Data were collected at a medium size, public Southeastern University using an electronic survey instrument. A total of 1768 students responded to the survey. Results show that students in the College of Arts and Sciences and, to a certain extent, upper-level students exhibit more support for the LGBT community than students in the College of Education and College of Business and their first and second year peers respectively.*

## INTRODUCTION

Traditional college students, those students who matriculate to college immediately upon graduation from high school, are very likely to be exposed to alternative social norms and unfamiliar subcultures that promote a rapid (re)socialization of core beliefs (Gurin, 2005). Attitudes toward race, gender, politics and religion are some of the most prevalent ideologies that are explored, expanded, and often altered in the college years (Braungart & Braungart, 1989). For students with minimal prior experience of being in the company of diverse groups, much of this adjustment comes about through close association with peers and others in the academic community who are different from themselves. For some, close contact with members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered (LGBT) community is first appreciated on the college campus. Coming directly from high schools, places that Unks (2003) calls “the most homophobic institutions in American society,” acquaintance with LGBT individuals may be new and surprising for some traditional students (p 323). Research on homophobia or anti-LGBT attitudes and behaviors largely focuses on the importance of religious affiliation and religiosity (Finlay and Walther, 2003; Laythe, et al,

2002, Lottes & Kuriloff, 1992) with other socio-demographic variables such as race (Herek & Capitano, 1995), gender (D'augelli, 1989b; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Kite & Whitley, 1996), and levels of education (Moore & Ovadia, 2006) used to help explain attitudes toward LGBT individuals. A smaller subset of this research focuses on attitudes toward the LGBT community in the context of institutions of higher education (Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Nelson & Krieger, 1997; Sanford & Engstrom, 1995). Existing research reveals that upon entrance into college, students are very likely to mimic their parental influences in levels of tolerance (Ousley, 2006). However, the college years are marked by transitions that may serve to resocialize students away from mainstream attitudes and parental influences, even prompting them to become actively engaged in promoting social change (Renn, 2007). Still, little research exists that examines pre-college and post-college experiences and attitudes on diversity (Gurin & Nagda 2006). We seek to expand on the existing research with an examination of two variables that may be influential in the ideological shift toward favorable attitudes of the LGBT population. Specifically, in this work we investigate the relationship of college affiliation and class standing on attitudes toward the LGBT community on a mid-size college campus in the Southeastern United States. On a broad societal level this work is important because of high levels of homophobia in American society. According to the FBI (Hate Crime Statistics, 2008) there were nearly 8,000 incidents of hate crime offenses in 2007 with 16.6% motivated by sexual orientation bias. This work is particularly important to the higher education community as it is common for college students to begin a "coming out" process (Evans & Broido, 1999; Lance, 2008).

### *Re)Socialization and the College Experience*

(Re)socialization of core beliefs in the college years can occur in numerous ways. Historically, college campuses have played a pivotal role in creating change and promoting diversity. Milem et al. (2004) found that greater exposure to diverse information in college plays an important role in increased diversity related activities outside the classroom. Early research on college major as an indicator of the likelihood of student engagement in diversity initiatives has been inconclusive but more recent studies indicate that students who are exposed to diverse ideas in the classroom during their first two years of college are more likely to break the perpetuation of discrimination (Milem, et al. 2004).

### *Interpersonal Contact*

Religious affiliation and religiosity, race and gender are among the most frequently researched correlates of attitudes toward the LGBT community. By far the main determinate for high levels of homophobia is found among conservative Protestant

Christians and Christian Fundamentalists (Finlay & Walther 2003; Laythe, et al, 2002). Studies on the relationship between race and ethnicity and negative attitudes are incongruous (Herek & Capitanio 1995; Schulte & Battle 2004). Gender tends to be a more consistent variable in predicting attitudes toward the LGBT community with males having more homophobia (Hinrichs & Rosenberg 2002; Whitley 2001). We propose that one of the least studied variables, interpersonal contact, is likely to be related to attitudes on the college campus where individuals are exposed to people outside of their primary associations and are more likely to have affiliation with LGBT students as dictated by the intimacy of the college setting.

Finlay & Walther (2003) suggests that a chicken-and-egg dilemma may be at work when assessing the relationship between interpersonal contact and homophobia. That is, the “coming out” process is largely determined by the known attitudes of acquaintances. The researchers state that “the association between contact and intolerance may be two-way, or in the opposite direction from the way it is usually interpreted---that is, greater acceptance may lead to greater interpersonal contact” (p. 374). Still, the prevailing research does show that greater contact with the LGBT community lowers levels of homophobia. More intimate relationships are more likely to produce a positive result. For example, having LGBT friends or peers is more likely to produce more positive attitudes than do secondary relations (Eldridge, et al, 2006; Herek, 1988; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002). In a telephone survey of data from a national AIDS study, Herek & Glunt (1993) found that interpersonal contact was the best predictor of attitudes toward gay men. They reported that participants who knew someone gay were more likely to have positive attitudes.

## DATA AND METHODS

Data was collected from college students at a mid-sized Southeastern public university. This university has considerable diversity across the student population on a variety of demographic dimensions, due to its location on the fringe of one of the largest metropolitan areas in the Southeast. The data were collected via electronic survey and were distributed to all 8,798 undergraduate students via their student email accounts. Incentives for the students to respond to the survey were offered, including four drawings for small cash prizes. One thousand two hundred forty eight female (1,248) and five hundred twenty male (520) students (N=1,768) responded to the survey, for a response rate of 20.1%.

Prior to administering the survey, the questionnaire was pre-tested with a sociology class of approximately 40 students. Students were asked to answer the survey while paying particular attention to clarity of wording and return their comments during the next class meeting. The observations of the class were helpful in identification of language that might be construed as ambiguous. The survey questions were adapted from the Lamar and Kite Component Measure

which originated with Kite and Whitley (1996) in a study of the attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals. For this study adjustments were made to the Component Measure (LaMar & Kite, 1998) to include members of the bisexual and transgendered communities. For each of the following indices: Condemnation-Tolerance, LGBT Social Norms/Morality, and LGBT Contact, two questions were altered from the original. One question was altered to replace the identifier gay or lesbian with the word transgendered and one question was altered to replace the identifier gay or lesbian with the word bi-sexual.

Respondents were asked nine socio-demographic questions, including the college in which they were enrolled (college) and their length of time in college (class standing). The options for college include Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, two or more of these, or undecided. Class standing categories include first-year, sophomore, junior, and senior. Breakdowns of these variables are available in the next section. These socio-demographic questions were asked to examine the relationship between each characteristic and attitudes towards lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered persons. Forty-nine statements relating to LGBT individuals were designed using the Component Measure (LaMar & Kite, 1998) with the changes discussed above to include the bisexual and transgendered population. Within the forty-nine statements, several components were derived to assess attitudes on Condemnation/Tolerance (e.g., “Job discrimination against lesbians is wrong”), LGBT Social Norms/Morality (e.g., “State Laws regulating private, consenting behavior between gay men seems ridiculous to me”), Contact (e.g., “I would feel comfortable working closely with a gay man”), and Stereotypes (e.g., “The love between two lesbians is quite different from the love between two persons of the opposite sex”). Participants responded to each statement using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from ‘strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘strongly agree’ (5) with a 5 indicating high levels of support for the LGBT community (some questions required reverse coding for this to be maintained).

### CONSTRUCTION OF INDICES

Based on previous research addressing levels of tolerance in the population, the questions asked in this study were potential candidates for index construction (D’augelli, 1989, 1989b; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002; Finlay & Walther, 2003; Lance, 2008). Reliability analyses were first conducted to determine if the variables were appropriately inter-correlated for index formation. Results for the potential indices are reported in Table 1. For each of the six possible indices, the Cronbach’s Alpha score indicated that there was sufficient internal consistency to construct the indices and use them in subsequent analyses. The alpha scores were very high for each index, ranging from 0.823 to 0.948. The indices were then constructed by averaging the responses to each question under the umbrella of the theorized construct. For example, all responses for questions under the rubric of Condemnation/Tolerance were averaged. This created non-categorical

indices that ranged from 1 to 5 and were similar to the original Likert answer options in that a 5 indicated a high level of support and a 1 indicated a low level of support. Although the indices were non-categorical, they were not truly interval level either, so in an effort to preserve the true categorical nature of the variable, the indices were converted into categorical variables.

**Table 1. Reliability Statistics for Indices**

<b>Index</b>	<b>Cronbach's Alpha</b>	<b>N of Items</b>
Condemnation-Tolerance	0.887	11
LGBT Social Norms-Morality	0.823	10
Neutral Morality	0.862	3
LGBT Contact	0.948	14
Neutral Contact	0.865	4
Gay Male-Lesbian Stereotypes	0.866	7

### *Results*

In this section, the results of analyses performed with the class standing and college variables, and the attitude indices described above are presented. The frequencies for class standing and college were computed. First year students were the most frequent respondents, and students in the College of Arts and Sciences were most highly represented. In each case, the distribution of these variables generally conforms to the distribution of students in this mid-sized, Southeastern public university.

While the index means vary substantially (from a low of 3.00 on the Gay Male-Lesbian Stereotypes index to a high of 4.25 on the Condemnation-Tolerance index), respondents generally reported relatively high levels of overall support for the LGBT community (seen Table 2).

**Table 2. Descriptive Results for Indices**

<b>Index</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>S.D.</b>	<b>N</b>
Condemnation-Tolerance	4.25	0.78	1660
LGBT Social Norms-Morality	3.41	0.86	1616
Neutral Morality	3.08	1.37	1658
LGBT Contact	3.87	0.96	1566
Neutral Contact	3.61	0.80	1610
Gay Male-Lesbian Stereotypes	3.00	1.22	1636

In this work we base our hypothesized expectations on the existing literature discussed in the prior sections. Based on this prior research, we expect that generally: 1) levels of LGBT support will vary by class standing; and that 2) levels of LGBT support will vary by college. The Chi-Square Test of Independence is used to test these expectations to determine whether the variables are independent or related. In Table 3, results are reported for the chi-square tests examining the relationship between class standing and each of the attitude indices. The chi-square results for class standing and each of the attitude indices indicate that there is only one significant relationship: class standing and the Condemnation-Tolerance index. Based on these results, it appears that levels of Condemnation-Tolerance vary by class standing. Observing the cross-tabulations, upper-class students (juniors and seniors) seem to exhibit more support for the LGBT community on this measure than do first-year students or sophomores. The other results are non-significant for class standing.

**Table 3. Chi-Square Tests of Independence for Class Standing**

Variable	$\chi^2$	df	Sig
Condemnation-Tolerance	18.24	9	*
LGBT Social Norms-Morality	7.29	9	
Neutral Morality	12.75	9	
LGBT Contact	9.48	9	
Neutral Contact	7.33	9	
Gay Male-Lesbian Stereotypes	8.09	9	
Note: Significance (* $p < .05$ , ** $p < .01$ , *** $p < .001$ )			

The results of the Chi-Square Test of Independence examining the relationship between college and the attitude indices are presented in Table 4. Significant relationships were found for all six attitude indices ( $p < 0.001$ ). This means that for each index, support for the LGBT community is different depending on what college students are in. Examining the cross-tabulations, students in the college of Arts and Sciences generally exhibit higher levels of support on each of these indices than students in the other colleges or undecided students. For example, on the Condemnation-Tolerance index, 74.5% of the students in the College of Arts and Sciences exhibited high levels of support where as in the College of Business 60.8% of the students displayed high levels of support (see Appendix A).

**Table 4. Chi-Square Tests of Independence for College**

Variable	$\chi^2$	Df	Sig
Condemnation-Tolerance	43.23	12	***
LGBT Social Norms-Morality	60.64	12	***
Neutral Morality	56.80	12	***
LGBT Contact	67.34	12	***
Neutral Contact	50.61	12	***
Gay Male-Lesbian Stereotypes	76.61	12	***
Note: Significance (* p<.05, ** p<.01, *** p<.001)			

## DISCUSSION

In summary, findings indicate that there is a significant relationship (at the <0.05 level) between class standing and condemnation-tolerance attitudes toward LGBT community with upper-level students showing evidence of more LGBT support than first or second year students. Of greater significance is the relationship between college affiliation and each of the attitude indices where students in the College of Arts and Sciences generally exhibit higher levels of support (at the p<.001 level) than their peers in the College of Education, College of Business, or undecided category.

Our findings suggest that students in the College of Arts and Sciences and, to some extent, students in the later years of study have higher levels of support for LGBT individuals. These findings corroborate the research that indicated that interpersonal contact with the LGBT community lowers levels of homophobia (Eldridge, et al, 2006; Herek, 1988; Hinrichs & Rosenberg, 2002). The higher support among students in the College of Arts and Sciences is also upheld by prior research that indicated that students who are exposed to diverse ideas in the classroom are more likely to be tolerant (Milem et al., 2004). Students in the College of Arts & Sciences likely experience a more liberal education than those, for example, in the Business College.

We would like to encourage social scientists to consider the works of curricular researchers when studying LGBT populations within the educational system (Gay, 1995, Nieto, 1995). Nieto & Bode (2008) utilize a social justice and equity framework stressing that: "All students, including members of non-dominant groups, bring with them a multiplicity of experiences, talents, and goals that can, and indeed should, become an essential part of the total educational environment" (p. 176). Collaboration among researchers from various disciplines open new spaces for exploration and understanding of an expanding diversity of students.



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*Appendix A. Cross-tabulations of Class Standing and College  
by Categorized Attitude Indices*

Class Standing by Condemnation-Tolerance Index Categorized					
	<b>1-1.99</b>	<b>2-2.99</b>	<b>3-3.99</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>First year</b>	1.8%	9.7%	20.1%	68.4%	548
<b>Sophomore</b>	1.3%	8.9%	26.1%	63.8%	395
<b>Junior</b>	0.8%	6.7%	19.8%	72.6%	358
<b>Senior</b>	2.2%	5.6%	18.4%	73.8%	359

Class Standing by LGBT Social Norms/Morality Index Categorized					
	<b>1-1.99</b>	<b>2-2.99</b>	<b>3-3.99</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>First year</b>	7.8%	29.8%	33.8%	28.5%	523
<b>Sophomore</b>	9.1%	26.6%	34.8%	29.4%	394
<b>Junior</b>	6.2%	30.4%	36.4%	27.0%	352
<b>Senior</b>	7.2%	26.8%	32.6%	33.4%	347

Class Standing by Neutral Morality Index Categorized					
	<b>1-1.99</b>	<b>2-2.99</b>	<b>3-3.99</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>First year</b>	30.3%	20.7%	18.7%	30.3%	545
<b>Sophomore</b>	30.7%	22.9%	20.9%	25.6%	398
<b>Junior</b>	29.9%	26.3%	15.5%	28.3%	361
<b>Senior</b>	25.7%	26.6%	16.4%	31.4%	354

Class Standing by LGBT Contact Index Categorized					
	<b>1-1.99</b>	<b>2-2.99</b>	<b>3-3.99</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>First year</b>	6.3%	14.5%	30.3%	48.9%	509
<b>Sophomore</b>	6.3%	14.5%	26.1%	53.0%	379
<b>Junior</b>	3.8%	14.9%	26.6%	54.7%	342
<b>Senior</b>	4.2%	11.9%	27.7%	56.2%	336

Class Standing by Neutral Contact Index Categorized					
	<b>1-1.99</b>	<b>2-2.99</b>	<b>3-3.99</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>First year</b>	29.6%	27.3%	21.9%	21.2%	534
<b>Sophomore</b>	29.9%	27.9%	23.6%	18.5%	394
<b>Junior</b>	29.4%	24.6%	23.8%	22.1%	357
<b>Senior</b>	24.5%	25.4%	27.1%	23.1%	351

Class Standing by Gay Male/Lesbian Stereotypes Index Categorized					
	<b>1-1.99</b>	<b>2-2.99</b>	<b>3-3.99</b>	<b>4-5</b>	<b>N</b>
<b>First year</b>	2.1%	28.7%	38.6%	30.6%	526
<b>Sophomore</b>	1.8%	32.8%	36.4%	28.9%	387
<b>Junior</b>	1.1%	27.1%	41.0%	30.8%	354
<b>Senior</b>	0.9%	28.3%	37.3%	33.5%	343