

How to Find a GLBT-Friendly College

by Adrian Shanker, Muhlenberg College '09

The college decision making process is never easy...for anyone. There are so many factors to consider. For GLBT students, the college decision process becomes only "that much" more difficult.

As a campus tour guide at Muhlenberg, I am often asked if students are happy - if Jewish students are happy, if students of color are happy, if students with learning disabilities are happy. I have never once been asked if GLBT students on campus are happy. In my opinion, this is the result not of uncaring parents and closeted prospectives, but of people just not knowing what to ask.

So what are the important things to look for? For starters, I recommend reading the potential school's anti-discrimination statement. Most schools include "sexual orientation" as a protected status. The more progressive schools list "gender identity," and some explicitly protect students based on their "gender expression." If the school you are looking at does not have any of that, it may be a signal that the climate on campus is more conservative than elsewhere.

Secondly, ask around the campus to see if there is some form of GSA, Queer Student Union, or GenderYouth Chapter. If a school has no student-run organization serving GLBT students, there might be a good reason for that. Maybe students at that school are so comfortable they don't feel that they need one, or more likely, maybe the climate on campus is hostile towards GLBT students.

It is not inappropriate to ask a tour guide if there are any "out" professors or faculty on campus. In fact, if you can contact them beforehand, you may be able to get a good information about the GLBT climate on campus without ever talking to a student. These professors can answer questions about GLBT resources in the library, academic courses on GLBT topics, and about guest lecturers on campus. Along the same lines, it is equally important to make sure that your campus -- if there is stuff to do off campus, will be safe for GLBT students. Is there a gay club in town? Does the town/state/county have a comprehensive anti-discrimination or hate crimes law? Are there local GLBT organizations offering college students internships or volunteer work? And is there an active GLSEN/PFLAG/HRC (or other GLBT organization) chapter in the area near campus.

All these questions, while not every tour guide can answer, are the important ones to ask. Most of the time, if tour guides don't know a specific answer, they can easily find out. And it is so much better to be assured beforehand that the school you will be attending will be embracing and accepting of diversity on campus.

For more information on colleges and universities, consult www.gpac.org/genius

Adrian Shanker, a sophomore at Muhlenberg College and a graduate of Fox Lane High School in Bedford ('05), has been involved in GLBT activism since the 10th grade. He co-founded his High School GSA and has been active in the GSA at Muhlenberg. Adrian recently completed a summer internship in Washington DC at the Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, where he was just hired as a field trainer. He wishes you luck in your college search. Adrian can be reached at AS233422@muhlnberg.edu