Assessing the Readiness to Reveal: Resume Writing Strategies for LGBTQ Students

By Rayna A. Anderson

Well-informed career services practitioners should challenge LGBTQ students to consider how far they are willing to go to get the perfect job. Counselors can help students identify how integrated their personal and professional identities are, and how coming out—or not—could influence their workplace experience.

Imagine this: It's a typical day in University College's career development center. Students are pouring in for career planning sessions with hopes of leaving prepared to conquer the world of work. Then, in walks David Flinn, a bisexual junior majoring in business management. David is an active member of Pride, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) student organization.

David has a resume drafted but makes an appointment to see Veronica, a career planning specialist, to find ways to incorporate his study-abroad coursework. Veronica gives David several tips on how to strategically construct his resume, and makes him seem even more appealing on paper than he is in person. Just before their session ends, Veronica notices Pride listed as one of David's leadership activities. She cautiously explains to David that while hiring discrimination is illegal, it still occurs within some organizations. David learns that any personally identifiable information on his resume may be used as a reason for rejection. In fear of missing out on an employment opportunity, David opts to remove Pride from his resume.

David's decision and career center experience represents the job-search process for many LGBTQ college students across the country. While many career counselors have good intentions when warning students of discriminatory practices, some advice can be to the students' developmental detriment. Furthermore, it is widely argued that optimal career development will not occur if the employee is encouraged to suppress the parts of his or her identity that are not accepted by society.[1] Kenji Yoshino, author of Covering: The Hidden Assault on Our Civil Rights, defines covering as a strategy of assimilation used to "tone down a disfavored identity to fit into the mainstream."[2] Like David, students in impressionable phases of their development could-without thoughtful guidance-sacrifice salient aspects of their identity to get their dream job. The daunting question is not whether David should have listed Pride on his resume, but rather, was he provided with enough information to make an informed decision? Or, was David inadvertently scared into hiding Pride?

Resume Writing for LGBTQ Students

It is no secret that the job-search process depends heavily on an interview and the perceived fit of a potential employee with the organization. But at the most fundamental level, the process begins with a resume. Interestingly enough, despite how well a candidate might interact with the company culture, the way that person first appears on paper can be the be-all and end-all. Perceptions of this document are not always based solely on qualifications, but can sometimes reflect the personal prejudices of an employer or hiring manager. Thus, marginalized job applicants who suspect that there is some bias against them must pay special attention to the socio-political climate of that workplace.[3]

For members of minority populations- and in this case, LGBTQ students-information provided on a resume can be a shortcut to rejection. András Tilcsik conducted a study on openly gay male job applicants and found that resumes with obvious LGBTQ affiliation had a 40 percent less chance of receiving a response back from a potential employer. These findings suggest an alarming message that openly gay job seekers are at risk of experiencing significant stereotyping and overt rejection more often than their heterosexual counterparts. This double standard was found to be especially prevalent in the southern region of the United States, and for jobs that required assertive or aggressive employees. This research unearthed the fact that alluding to one's homosexual orientation via the resume is a legitimate concern for LGBTQ students preparing to enter the work force.

Similar to this study is that of Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan, who found that applicants with traditionally white names were 50 percent more likely to receive a callback from an employer than an applicant with a traditionally African- American name.

But where exactly is the line separating acceptable and detrimental information? Not only is this definitive line blurry for higher education students but also for career services professionals who direct students' job-search endeavors. Deciding which information to provide on a resume is difficult for any aspiring professional, but can have an even longer-lasting effect on students who are less salient in their sexual or gender identity. Studies show that students that do not have supportive networks during the earlier stages of their sexual identity development are prone to developing devalued self-perceptions.4 A large part of this support network could be comprised of university administrators, who are expected to be knowledgeable on such issues.

Unfortunately, counseling techniques designed to assist LGBTQ clients can be less helpful to the student affairs practitioner, as most career development literature lacks consideration for the unique developmental process of college students. Even worse is the forced application of existing research. The intersection of identity and career development is a focus unique to student affairs practitioners in higher education and cannot be easily be addressed by a one-size-fits-all approach.

LGBTQ Career Development

Career development is very closely related to the student's personal development, including his or her sense of purpose or vocational identity.5 Given this parallel, it can be expected that a student in limbo about his or her personal or sexual identity will have less direction in professional or career development. This concept alone denotes the importance of college career center professionals. These specialists are directly responsible for taking into consideration how far a student has come in identity development and advising him or her accordingly. In the event that this professional prematurely disrupts a student's personal identity development, his or her career development can subsequently falter. However, a counselor's predisposition to encourage covering is typically the reflection of a historically homophobic culture, and not of personal beliefs. Campus and regional culture can also greatly impact the impetus for discouraging a queer-identifying student from alluding to his or her sexual orientation during the job search.

Tomilson and Fassinger declare that campus climate is particularly relevant to lesbian students due to the prevalence of homophobia and heterosexism found on most college campuses today. This sort of heterosexism is especially significant at institutions located in the proverbial Bible Belt. It is in this region that don't-ask-don't-tell doctrines have been readily accepted and explains Tilcsik's finding of high levels of discrimination in southern states. The fact is that personal practices are bound to become workplace issues because organizational America is characterized by heterosexual norms.6 While the risks are obvious and it may seem like covering is the most viable option, many claim that being out on the resume is still the best option. Resumes that openly affirm LGBTQ identity or alliance can be used to weed out potentially hostile work environments. If at some point during the interview, the student can tell that his or her sexual orientation is at odds with employer or workplace views, there is enough reason to pull out of the interview process. This is a great notion to reference, but it is also important for counselors to remember that, ultimately, the decision has to be made by the student.

Passing, Covering, and Coercion

Assimilation into the heteronormative lifestyle is no new concept or practice. First cousin to covering is the better known "passing," a custom spawned from a post-slavery South. During the Jim Crow era, biracial free people adamantly disassociated with their African and slave ancestry in an attempt to gain access to rights and favorable opportunities.7 Those able to pass as white were of good fortune and those with overt physical attributes associated with African descent suffered the brunt of discrimination.

But under today's societal pressures, some aspects of identity are not so evident that they need to be suppressed by passing; they simply need to be temporarily covered. Heteronormativity asserts heterosexuality as the right way to live and creates the assumption that all other types of sexual experiences are abnormal. 8,9 Covering practices help alleviate

organizational discomfort and help maintain the separation of self-identify and social perception.10 Ultimately, the notion of abnormality leaves members of the LGBTQ community to choose between covering or being categorized as abnormal.

According to Yoshino, to cover is to minimize race-salient traits.11 Yoshino cites the 1963 findings of Erving Goffman for people who admittedly possess a stigma as well as the way they try to divert attention away from that stigma, Goffman distinguishes the difference between passing and covering by pointing out that passing relates to the visibility of a trait, while covering relates to its prominence. The response to homophobic or heterosexist beliefs is to either to produce a heterosexual façade, avoid the topic of sexuality all together, or integrate the professional and personal LGBTQ selves.12 Furthermore, the disclosure dilemma is not a problem confined to only the campus or workplace, nor is it one that only impacts the resume-writing process. A secret on the resume can eventually begin to invade one's entire professional future and denying the sexual and/or gender identity may not be a temporary or one-time experience.

As members of the LGBTQ community begin establishing professional careers, they are faced with decisions about how to effectively manage their conflicting identities.13 Unfortunately, self-marginalization through suppressed homosexuality is usually the chosen response.14 As unfair as this alternative is for LGBTQ job seekers, it is a decision that career services professionals sometimes unintentionally uphold during resume reviews with students.

Yoshino describes the external pressure to cover as a form of coercion and says that he is not against all covering, only coerced covering. By these standards, it means that it would be more acceptable for the student to initiate the decision to withhold certain information than it is for the counselor's advice to prompt a decision to remove certain information from the resume.15 It is a hard question to reflect on, but career counselors should ask themselves, "Have I encouraged my students to hide their sexual or gender identity?" If you answered "yes" to this question, keep reading. If you are not sure, keep reading. And even if you have answered "no," keep reading.

Yoshino's contempt for coerced covering may stem from the proposed harm it imposes on student development. According to Cass's Model of Homosexual Identity Formation, a homosexual individual will progress from having only minimal awareness and acceptance of his or her identity to the advanced, final stage in which the homosexual self is integrated with other aspects of identity. If the initial phase of homosexual identity development includes apprehensive acceptance, student affairs professionals introducing covering options can significantly disrupt the final stage of development that includes identity integration. Similarly, the third phase of D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Development is key to establishing a LGB social identity. During this time, it is encouraged that members of this sexual and gender minority group identify a supportive network that accepts their sexual identity.

For students, conflicting ideologies from professional staff members could mean the difference between confidently emerging into the LGBTQ professional community or remaining closeted in the workplace. Openness is crucial to forming healthy, interpersonal relationships, but gay and lesbian people are at constant odds in their professional interactions. Their options are to remain closeted and inauthentic to their true identities or to come out to coworkers and face possible rejection.16 If nothing else, LGBTQ professionals do a disservice to the organization when they choose to further marginalize their sexual identity as this could potentially hinder their contribution and performance. Though the disclosure dilemma is a challenge indeed, it is also one that career counselors can actively help students resolve.

LGBTQ Resources for Career Counselors

A large part of the work that goes on in college career centers is restorative. Career counseling professionals are in the business of being morally supportive and assuring students that their jobsearch efforts are achievable. It is helpful if the moment concern arises, career counselors are armed with information to combat that student's conflict. Certain self-esteem interventions, including positive self-talk, could be used to revert internalized negative stereotypes,17 but it helps if counselors can also provide some tangible resources.

To provide this support, students should first be made aware that while discriminatory practices can and do occur, there are statutes in place to protect LGBTQ.

Next, to establish honest rapport and transparency, counselors should beware of LGBTQ-related research studies and legal proceedings. Some fundamental information to know offhand could include the decisions of Shahar v. Bowers and Gill v. Delvin and Howell, and the research findings of Tilcsik or Bertrand and Mullainathan.

Lastly, and most importantly, career center professionals should facilitate more in-depth discussion on resume identity disclosure. Making the decision to come out on the resume cannot be decided upon in only one counseling session. LGBTQ students should be given thought-provoking questions that will follow them beyond the confines of the career services office. Though these students should not be swayed one way or the other, they do need to fully consider all of their options as well as the implications of their final decision. Thus, career counselors should be prepared to help students weigh the advantages and disadvantages of coming out on the resume, and eventually, in the workplace.

Why Assess the Readiness to Reveal?

The inquiries in "Questions for Self-Assessment" facilitate proactive thinking and can prevent the student from facing undesired backlash in the future. In itself, holistic thinking will allow the student to identify how integrated his or her personal and professional identities are and how covering could influence the workplace experience. Ultimately, the student should consider the implications for being any less queer on the resume than he or she plans to be in the workplace. But what's at stake if the student does not complete this short assessment? It could mean accepting a position in an unsupportive environment or having to pack a façade along with a lunch every morning before heading to the office, both of which can be prevented when well-informed career services professionals challenge students to take a moment away from the job search to consider how far they're willing to go to get the perfect job.

Until it can be decided how important being out in workplace is to the individual student, counselors should steer clear of encouraging the same practices that have long plagued history. So, dear good-intentioned career counselor, check your biases at your career center door and invite your students in for some serious discussion about identity disclosure.

Questions for Self-Assessment
Career services professionals can use these questions to help LGBTQ students think proactively.
1. If I choose to (withhold/disclose) this information, I might (feel/experience/be able to) _____.
2. If I choose to (withhold/disclose) this information, my (employer/co-workers) might (feel/experience/be able to) _____.
3. If I choose to (withhold/disclose) this information, my partner might (feel/experience/be able to) _____.
4. My professional life is (an extension of/completely separate from) my personal life.
5. I am (very/somewhat/not very/not at all) open about my personal life with co-workers.
6. It is (very/somewhat/not very/not at all) important for me to develop interpersonal relationships with my boss or co-workers.
7. It is (very/somewhat/not very/not at all) important for my partner to attend company social events.
8. It is (very/somewhat/not very/not at all) likely that I will share details of my weekend or holiday experiences with co-workers.
9. Rate your perception of overall diversity within this workplace (1 being "not at all diverse" and 5 being "very diverse").   1 2 3 4 5
10. Rate your perception of the overall climate/culture within this workplace (1 being "very hostile" and 5 being "very welcoming").   1 2 3 4 5
11. Rate your overall readiness to "come out" in the workplace (1 being "not at all ready" and 10 being "completely ready").   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

Online Resources for LGBTQ Students
For more information on how and in what states their rights are protected, direct students to websites such as:

Lambda Legal: www.lambdalegal.org
National Gay and Lesbian Task Force: www.ngltf.org
Pride at Work: www.prideatwork.org
Transgender Law and Policy Institute: www.transgenderlaw.org

Rayna Anderson is a career services fellow at Elon University, where she facilitates educational and career planning with a focus on self-reflection, values assessment, and motivational goal setting. She holds a bachelor's degree in health studies from the University of Louisiana at Monroe and a master's degree in higher education and student affairs from Louisiana State University, where she worked as a graduate assistant in career services. Anderson can be reached at Rayna Anderson@yahoo.com.

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