Welcoming Community Colleges Initiative:  
Supporting Educational and Labor Market Success  
for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

Concept Paper

Introduction and Background
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, ninety percent of the fastest growing jobs in the United States require some level of education or training beyond high school to succeed in the global economy. The accessibility and affordability of community colleges make them a critical entry point and resource for many workers to help them prepare for these good jobs with good wages. According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), across the United States nearly 1,200 community colleges play a vital role in higher education: enrolling more than 11.5 million students and serving almost half the undergraduate students in the country. These important postsecondary institutions serve a diversity of students, including many who are low-income, minority, and first generation and provide a range of services including open access to education, preparation for transfer to 4-year institutions, workforce development and skills training, and noncredit programs.

Increasingly, however, it has been recognized through studies that there are large and growing barriers to educational access and success of community college students, particularly based on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. According to the Lumina Foundation, these barriers include unmet financial need, inadequate academic preparation, and insufficient information, guidance and encouragement. Further, students who do overcome these barriers often face additional institutional barriers to success. Foundations such as Lumina (www.luminafoundation.org), Mott (www.mott.org), and KnowledgeWorks (www.kwfdn.org) have begun to address these obstacles with large scale important efforts including Achieving the Dream: Community Colleges Counts, Breaking Through, and Ohio College Access Network to help more community college students succeed, particularly students of color and low-income students.

As innovative solutions to educational access and success have begun to take hold focused on race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status, there has been a notable absence of solutions to barriers to educational success for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students on community college campuses. Baker in 1991 first called attention to the “invisible minority” of LGBT students at two year colleges. As a consequence, there may be far less attention on the needs of LGBT students at community colleges in contrast to four-year institutions. For example, the National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education (2005) reports over one hundred formally staffed LGBT resource centers operating in four-year institutions throughout the U.S. and Canada, yet only one such center at a two-year community college. Since there is a notable absence in higher education literature on LGBT students, it is difficult to truly understand their campus experiences (Ivory, 2005). While research of post-secondary LGBT populations is very limited, there exists some evidence to suggest that LGBT students in secondary schools may be at greater risk for a number of health and mental health concerns (e.g., depression, substance abuse) which may negatively impact their school performance (Blake, Ledsky, Lehman, Goodenow, Sawyer, & Hack, 2001). Thus, post-secondary LGBT students may experience similar health and mental health concerns that are not adequately addressed in post-secondary environments. Relatedly, several studies of campus climate have indicated that LGBT students do experience harassment, discrimination and fear (Evans, 2001; Rankin, 2003). One campus climate study, by highlighting the differences in perspectives about LGBT issues among types of students,
faculty and campus groups, suggests that varied approaches may need to be taken toward improving climate among such groups (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004).

In addition, compared to heterosexual students, LGBT students may experience an additional, unique, and potentially challenging sexual identity formation process (Leider, 1999), and many of them may seek the services of student development professionals for help with these issues (Sanlo, 1998). Therefore, it becomes critical that student development professionals on community college campuses have the training or access to referrals to help students who seek out these services, otherwise, LGBT students may be reticent or fearful of disclosing their sexual identity. In such circumstances, LGBT students would be challenged in making social connections and forming relationships with their peers, both with other LGBT and heterosexual students (Ivory, 2005). Indeed, integration into the larger community college social milieu may present challenges to sexual minority students similar to those that have been encountered by many racial and ethnic minorities (Ottenritter, 1998). Thus, the combination of a campus climate that may not be adequately supportive and inclusive, social isolation, and lack of institutional support and campus services for LGBT students, may adversely impact these students' ability to persist and achieve in post-secondary education.

The Lumina Foundation through its research-based evidence views postsecondary access and success through four dimensions: preparation (individual motivation and skills), awareness (about academic requirements, application process, fields of study), financial issues (costs, financial aid) and challenges, and institutional responsibility. While research is not available on whether or not LGBT students experience different types or intensities of challenges in terms or their preparation, awareness, or financial means relative to accessing and succeeding in post-secondary environments, it is possible that risk factors documented for secondary school LGBT students may influence these dimensions. For example, since studies have shown that some LGBT secondary students are more likely to experience mental health concerns than their heterosexual counterparts, these concerns could negatively affect their attention to preparing for post-secondary education. In addition, LGBT students who experience alienation from their parents because of their sexual identity may not receive adequate financial support to further their education.

The institutional responsibility dimension is directly related to improving access and success for LGBT students. This project, therefore, would focus mainly on this dimension; specifically, the academic and social services, developmental education programs and campus climate that postsecondary institutions offer to meet their students' needs. Lumina states on its web site “more than any other entity, higher education institutions directly influence access and success. Ultimately, postsecondary institutions must develop programs and services to ensure equitable opportunity for their students. These services and programs require administrative policies and resources geared toward access, retention and attainment for an increasingly diverse student body.” Lumina acknowledges that even when students can overcome challenges related to the preparation, awareness, and financial dimension, additional obstacles may be encountered when post-secondary policies do not prioritize students' needs.

**Goals of the Initiative**

There are four main goals of the Welcoming Community Colleges Initiative: 1) to increase awareness and build a baseline of knowledge of institutional policies, practices, and partnerships that promote or detract from LGBT students’ educational success 2) to identify and address barriers for strengthening postsecondary outcomes for LGBT community college students, 3) develop technical assistance tools and guidance that will help to promote and sustain institutional change, and 4) implement and evaluate a model of policies, practices, and partnerships that create a Welcoming Community College.

**Partners**
The Academy for Educational Development, Human Rights Campaign, and National Council on Student Development
The Academy for Educational Development (AED) is an independent, nonprofit organization committed to addressing human development, educational and workforce needs in the United States and throughout the world through education, research, training, policy analysis, and innovative program design. AED has more than 40 years of experience in the design, delivery, and evaluation of programs for youth and adults, strategic planning, technical assistance, research and evaluation, organizational capacity building and facilitation of public/private strategic partnerships.

Human Rights Campaign (HRC) Founded in 1980, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC) advocates on behalf of LGBT Americans, mobilizes grassroots actions in diverse communities, invests strategically to elect fair-minded individuals to office and educates the public about GLBT issues. The HRC Foundation was established in October 1986 as a non-political, educational organization and is a tax-exempt, 501(c) (3) organization. The HRC Foundation delivers effective programs to address pressing issues including: adoption and foster care, safe schools, access to quality healthcare, youth leadership, workplace equality and faith-based advocacy.

The National Council on Student Development (NCSD) is an affiliate council of the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) and the only organization solely dedicated to serving the needs of student development professionals in the community college. NCSD is the nation’s primary voice for sharing knowledge, expertise, professional development and student advocacy for community college student development professionals.

Welcoming Community Colleges Initiative Approach
To kick off the Initiative, a National Convening on Welcoming Community Colleges for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Students to Support Educational and Labor Market Success will be held with community college leaders, faculty, students, advocates, researchers, policy makers, funders and other key stakeholders. The Convening, the first of its kind in the nation, will seek to build the foundation of knowledge about the community college climate and experiences of LGBT populations, identify the barriers of access and academic success for these students, explore policies, practices, and programs that address those barriers, and begin a national conversation on changing the paradigm that LGBT students are the invisible minority on campus and seek solutions to advance the needs of LGBT students to ensure academic and labor market success. At this meeting, the new Welcoming Community Colleges Initiative will be fully discussed to gain valuable input by thought leaders and stakeholders to inform the implementation of the Initiative.

Once the convening is over, a Welcoming Community College Advisory Board will be established consisting of community college leaders, faculty, and several LGBT community college students. The advisory board will help to provide strategic insights on the Initiative and offer suggestions on the Initiative’s requirements, implementation of key tasks, evaluation approach and tasks, potential impacts (e.g., on policy, institutional reform), and dissemination strategies and products. Once the advisory board is formed, there are potentially three phases of the Initiative, depending on level of interest and funding. The following is a brief description of each phase:

Phase I: Develop and Implement Community College Surveys and Convene Community College Focus Groups with Leaders, Faculty, and Students
The main goal of the first phase of the project will be to collect information and data through numerous sources and methods in order to analyze and examine current institutional policies, practices, and partnerships regarding LGBT students at community colleges across the country. To implement this phase, the following activities will take place:

- A literature review will be completed to describe current studies, initiatives, and activities geared at LGBT students in two-year institutions.
A sampling strategy will be designed to select a stratified sample of approximately 20% of the 1200 community colleges within the U.S. for a total of 240. Strata will include geographic representation within the U.S., type of community college (e.g., academic and professional preparation focus), public vs. private, and presence or absence of LGBT student support groups.

A Community College Leader survey (n = 240) will be developed and implemented to broadly assess the status of key dimensions of policies, training and development, services, and curriculum/educational materials/academic affairs described above. A set of criteria along with a data collection plan will be devised to ensure that the appropriate personnel are targeted for survey completion. A single individual at each campus will be initially targeted; however, it will be explained in a cover letter that that individual may decide that another person(s) would be more qualified to complete the survey.

A Faculty Member survey (n = 480) will be developed and implemented to assess perceptions of campus climate and support for LGBT students and staff; awareness of and exposure to relevant college policies, trainings and services; and extent to which LGBT topics and issues are integrated in the faculty member’s course of study. At each of 240 campuses, two faculty members will be selected based on an overall stratified sample (at the campus sample frame level) across all 240 campuses. Strata will include different courses of study (e.g., nursing, history).

A LGBT Student Support Group survey (“n” is unknown at this time but less than 240) will be developed and implemented to assess the perspectives of members of these support groups at community colleges where such groups are currently established. More specifically, support group members will be asked to respond about campus climate; adequacy of policies, training opportunities, services, and curriculum. If there is more than one LGBT support group at a single community college, one group will be randomly selected.

A series of on-site focus groups at a small number of community colleges, selected to reflect variability found in survey results, will be conducted with college leadership, faculty, and students to gain a more detailed understanding of the campus environment and commitment to issues of sexual orientation, activities that support, encourage, and protect LGBT students, barriers to achieving that support, and promising practices.

Phase II: Highlight Promising Practices, and Create the “Model Welcoming Community College” and Technical Assistance Tools

Through the data collection and analysis in Phase I, current practices and policies, promising practices, and partnerships will be identified and individual interviews with targeted individuals (e.g., college leaders who has championed specific initiatives) will be undertaken, if more detail is needed. A “Model Welcoming Community College” will then be created; made up of a composite set of identified promising practices, policies, and partnerships that support LGBT students to successfully advance into and through community college level programs, to additional post-secondary education, or into employment. This model will provide the basis for creating a Resource Guide for Community College Leadership that will include recommendations and resources on policies, practices, and partnerships that can serve as the foundation for a supportive, welcoming, and safe environment for LGBT students that, ultimately, will lead to improved student retention and academic and labor market success. In addition, a self-assessment tool will be created that will allow community college administrators to analyze current strengths and weaknesses regarding practices, policies, and partnerships that support LGBT students’ college success and develop an action plan for addressing those gaps and advancing identified promising practices/strengths. A LGBT Student's Guide to Community Colleges may also be written to help students navigate the world of education and to give them concrete tools and guidance to foster success, which may be particularly needed if their school experiences were negative and the academic, financial, and psychological support is not readily available from their families.
Phase III: Implement and Evaluate a National Multi-site Pilot Initiative with a Peer Learning Community Based on the “Welcoming Community College Model”

The “model” created in Phase II will be the basis of a national pilot with 5-7 community colleges that vary based on findings obtained in Phase I. The community colleges in the pilot will need to have a commitment from leadership and other important stakeholders to improving the campus climate for LGBT students through changes in policies, practices, and partnerships to strengthen postsecondary academic and employment outcomes for these students. Several strategic areas will be the focus of the pilot including institutional culture and policies, professional development, comprehensive student services and systems, and academic preparation and instruction. Participating colleges will be asked to sign a letter of commitment that outlines the pilot Initiative’s objectives and tasks that need to be accomplished. Their activities will be monitored and technical assistance to meet project objectives will be provided, if needed.

As the Initiative is implemented, a peer learning community will be created with the 5-7 colleges chosen for the pilot to allow for the opportunity to learn from one another and to access technical assistance. Technical assistance may be in the form of quarterly peer networking calls, shared workspace, webinars, and mentoring as well as annual institutes with a cadre of experts in the field.

A pilot program evaluation of the Welcoming Community College National Pilot will assess and document implementation and investigate programmatic outcomes in terms of how and the extent to which participating colleges have developed and/or reshaped their policies, practices, and strategies to promote a welcoming environment intended to enhance LGBT student success and progress.
References


