Homophobia in the Academy: A Report of the Committee on Gay/Lesbian Concerns

Even rank quietists are increasingly aware of the growing level of violence manifest towards lesbians and gay males in our culture. While the National Council of Teachers of English met in Cincinnati in 1980, a gunman fired randomly into a group of patrons leaving a gay tavern in Greenwich Village, killing two and seriously wounding several others; his acknowledged motive was symbolic ritual slaughter of an entire class of persons. In continuing research into hundreds of lesser known murders of gays in recent months, sociologists Laud Humphreys and Brian Miller have noted that routinely after the victim is killed, most corpses are ritually mutilated, after the fashion of lynchings earlier in the century (“Lifestyles and Violence: Homosexual Victims of Assault and Murder,” Qualitative Sociology, 3 [1980], 169-85).

These developments are not really new. Only for the last decade have a very few lesbians and gay's dared to risk the visibility required to address the issues forcefully and cogently within our profession. The professional cost of such risk-taking is suggested by the 1981 assessment a former president of NCTE (name withheld on request) recently gave in kindness to an original co-chair of the NCTE Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns: “You are fully aware, of course, that 99.9 percent of those out of 10 wouldn’t spend more than thirty seconds looking at your resume before tossing it aside and not picking it up again, despite the fact that you are a highly qualified person.”

The 1976 NCTE resolution opposing discrimination against lesbians and gay males passed by only six votes, and though for four years the lesbian-gay committee created by the 1976 resolution has labored to provide a full range of programs on...
literature and pedagogy for the NCTE conventions. Few nongay persons have sought to inform themselves. Hostility is more easily sustained in ignorance.

One of the original charges from the Executive Committee of the NCTE to the Committee on Lesbian and Gay Concerns was that the latter Committee document the discrimination faced by lesbians and gay males in our profession. In the fall of 1978 the Committee sent a questionnaire to a random sample of 696 NCTE members to determine their attitudes. The response (327, or 47%) was very good for a voluntary project requiring the return mailing of a fairly long questionnaire (forty-one items). The respondents were dispersed in about the same manner as NCTE membership as a whole. Just under one-third (28.7%) teach in colleges. Of the other respondents, 3.6% teach in elementary schools, 11.4% in junior high/middle schools, 40.1% in secondary schools, and 6.2% are not presently employed in education. Most (86.7%) of the respondents, as do most people generally, identified themselves as heterosexuals (others: 3.1% lesbian/gay, 3.7% bisexual, 3.1% celibate, 3.4% no answer). Females predominated (66.4 to 33.6%). Most respondents (75.4%) had at least an MA degree. The west was slightly under-represented:

19.1% Western Mountain and West Coast  
28.7% Central  
25.3% Southern  
24.7% Northeastern

The respondents reported various kinds of discrimination against lesbians and gay males. Fifteen percent themselves felt that such discrimination generally should be tolerated. Twenty-three percent felt that lesbians and gay men should not even be hired to teach in the elementary schools. Fifty-six percent felt that a professional who "came out" as a lesbian or gay man would be likely to experience overt job discrimination; these likely knew whereof they spoke because an almost equal number (57%) said that they had worked with colleagues whom they themselves knew to be gay.

Clearly documenting professional discrimination against lesbians and gay males is about as difficult and as mephitic a task as documenting the presence of garbage on a partially emptied sanitation truck. More poignant than the caprice indicated by the grim quantifications above were the narratives offered by the N.4 percent who reported that someone they knew personally, a student or someone employed in education, received unfair treatment because he or she was thought to be gay. These intense accounts revive something of the venerable tradition of slave narratives, vignettes of the bottomside of human history. They report people fired, talent wasted, citizens driven in disgrace from their jobs, their communities, even from their families. Some report the strain of survival for isolated individuals, usually outside the arena of academic hostility:

[She] was once actually a lover for a short time. She went to teach and got married, and we have maintained close correspondence for years. But recently she left her husband and declared herself a lesbian—rather joyfully, as if it were a release. . . . So far as I can tell, she is as happy as she has ever been. She was an English teacher, but now is rather free-floating, in search of a new profession. I think she sensed that the public schools wanted her married, period.

Some of the victims are themselves not even lesbian or gay, but persons caught in
the rush of the cultural trauma, sharing the stigma. Homophobia, a term first given wide currency in George Weinberg's *Society and the Healthy Homosexual* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1972), is indeed irrational fear, embarrasing even heterosexuals who manifest mere traces of difference: "A close friend's banking career has been severely crippled because he appeared to be gay. In fact he was not. But he loved porcelain and ballet." Or as one homosexual reported for himself: "I feel that I was eliminated from my former school because of pressure caused by a mere rumor. But it was the rumor that I was gay."

Who can begin to calculate the number of nongays who have lost their jobs merely because they risked the stigma by researching or teaching our literature?

The Modern Language Association was holding a session on gays and gay literature. The chairman of the department announced in a conversation with several faculty members that any person who would apply to deliver a paper on such a topic must be a queer himself and that he hoped no one in this department would apply.

Gay and lesbian teachers are in professional peril even when they do not publicly profess or discuss homosexuality. Consensual adult homosexual acts are against the law in one-half of the states, as are many consensual adult heterosexual acts. No one seems to expect the government to enforce these laws when the acts themselves are private, as are most, whether heterosexual or homosexual. These laws exist not so much to prohibit the behaviors as to legitimize the stigmas against those who do and tell. Since heterosexuals can proclaim their marriage vows as a license to close the bedroom door, heterosexual nonconformists do not face the fierce reprisals heaped upon lesbians and gays who tell no more than the fact that heterosexuals proclaim routinely with fanfare, tin cans, streamers, medieval wedding dress, and the like, namely, that they are trying to live in a responsible, loving, genital relationship. Society considers homosexual unions a joke by refusing to license them in any of the fifty states. In most of America, to ask for a date with the slightest overtones of a homogenital connection—the kind of dalliance that routinely defines heterosexual experience even in campus faculty lounges—is to risk entrapment, conviction, and possibly expulsion from society, almost certainly from the profession. Item: "At another college, a colleague, extremely competent, was summarily fired by the president after entrapment by a police officer." Item: "He was caught in a restroom stake-out in a department store. The full details were not made known. He left on a year's leave and was removed." Compare the near impossibility in 1981 of one's reporting: "She was caught in a quiet hallway seductively inviting the new male faculty member to her apartment for a quiet evening alone." Who would bother to snoop? Even if overheard, her revelations would hardly be grounds for firing.

When one is known to be gay, the authorities typically do not even have to entrap or otherwise to gather evidence. Our respondents suggest that again and again rumor alone is efficacious.

The department was interviewing for a faculty opening. The committee was reviewing vita's and placement folders to select candidates for the position. One faculty member knew an applicant and mentioned to the committee that the man was gay. The applicant's file folder was picked up and thrown in the garbage can.

A faculty member who was up for tenure when I arrived at this institution was often discussed as being gay in lounge conversations, etc. Although I was not present at the
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tenure meetings. I have little doubt but that this reputation affected the attitudes of those who were present.

Male teacher who resigned to leave area was unable to find employment upon returning although department chairperson gave excellent reference. Strong evidence of verbal black-balling by Principal.

The usual disparaging remarks by colleagues who felt threatened and/or didn't understand, and by students who suspected the preference of the teacher. The teacher left the school.

A lesbian teacher lived with a recent high school graduate and was later, in another context, encouraged to leave. She did.

Note the perverse irony of encouraged here, not a “giving of courage” to her so that she could affirm herself and claim a place for her affections as well as her talents, but an enablement of her cowardice through flight. Flight itself sometimes fails, as another respondent noted: “A new teacher was asked to resign because of a past court case involving a gay incident.”

Caprice routinely replaces due process in these narratives. It is as if the secrecy denied to lesbians and gays in their search for intimacy is transformed into a pall over the administrative conclaves where their punishment is meted out:

A woman was interviewed for the position of Director of Freshman English and was voted for by the faculty to receive the position. The Dean and the Vice-Chancellor told us to hold an emergency meeting and vote for someone else among the remaining candidates. Reason: the woman had asked in an interview with the Vice-Chancellor how it would be accepted in a small town like this that she was gay. A man was elected to hold her position, and the woman was never informed why she lost the position.

Lesbians and gays are not the only losers in these episodes. The academy suffers enormously, if incalculably, in the loss of lesbian/gay talent, not to mention the loss of the talent of sensitive nongay persons who elect never to teach and risk the stigma.

Teaching is a mysterious art that requires a large measure of trust. Few students are likely to allow a person to lead them out (educare) if they still identify the educator reductively as “a lezzie” or “a faggot.” A college student of one of the researchers wrote as the only remark on an anonymous teacher-evaluation form: “All queers ought to be shot.” Perhaps it is not surprising that such attitudes flourish among many undergraduates. Earlier the same researcher found that one out of four chairpersons of college English departments is clearly hostile towards lesbians and gays (see Louie Crew, The Gay Academic [ETC, 1978], pp. 4-5). The following five narratives suggest that the degrading of lesbian/gay talent reaches all levels of American education:

A very good teacher was treated with contempt by co-workers because he was gay. He no longer teaches at the same school.

The next year was one of my very best, as I continued the Latin program and taught a great many things that I loved to the tenth grade. The sophomores and I had an almost magic rapport.

And in spite of this, in spite of what were obvious successes, my job there ended in June of that year. The Latin course was mysteriously scrapped and I was told that there simply wouldn’t be enough English teaching to keep me on full time.
There are, of course, many lesbians and gay men in our profession. We are among the leaders of the profession at all levels, highly respected by students and colleagues. But if it becomes known that we are homosexuals, we stand to lose our professional standing, our livelihoods, our homes, our jobs.

Several years ago my principal stood on the stage in the auditorium and praised his Journalism teacher to the skies for being the first teacher to get the yearbook out on time, the first to have a debt-free yearbook, and several other firsts; a few days later the principal informed the teacher that he would not receive a contract for the following year.

The reason for withholding the contract?

The teacher, supposedly, could not manage his students—the man was a queer.

The incident shocked the faculty, but who is brave enough to speak out against a Principal?

In eleven years of teaching at the secondary and college level I have seen several glaring examples of unfair treatment of gays. A "beloved," male music teacher, employed by my town for over twenty years, was forced to resign as a result of police snooping and a newspaper article accusing him of "unnatural acts." His wife and his dearest friends had known about his homosexual needs for years, and he was a highly successful professional. His high school productions had won much acclaim for our town and our school system. He is unable to secure a position anywhere.

Another part of the cost of academic homophobia is the diminution of the homophobe's own capacity for collegiality, much less for friendship, as revealed in the following poignant confession:

[He was a] close friend and a year behind me in undergraduate school. I had no idea he was gay; we used to doubledate, for god's sake. After I graduated, he wrote and asked whether I could recommend him for a teaching position. I of course said I would, but a week later he wrote and said to forget it, he was flunking a methods course. I was shocked, but figured he probably didn't really want to teach anyway. (This was all in the school of music; I have a BA in vocal music.) Sometime later I learned that the administration had "cracked" a "ring" of homosexuals in the music department and told them that none of them could be certified as teachers. So they all received liberal arts BAs—and were told that they could never teach. This was in 1966, by the way. I was dumbfounded at it all, and confronted him with the rumors, and he said they were all true. Well, that was the end of that friendship, much to my shame now.

On pedagogical issues our respondents documented further discrimination. Only twenty percent felt that lesbian and gay male experiences are ever relevant to the teaching of English. Seventy-two percent felt that their community would not generally accept classroom discussions of literature and issues concerning lesbians and gay men, and sixty-one percent felt that their colleagues would not support such instruction; still, forty-four percent reported having conducted such discussions in their own classrooms, thereby risking the anathema whereof they spoke. Most respondents felt themselves to be more tolerant than their colleagues; while seventy percent professed that they could deal supportively and nonjudgmentally with a student who was lesbian or gay, only seventeen percent felt that a majority of the people on their school staff could be thus supportive and nonjudgmental. One out of ten even opposed college libraries making available any information about lesbian and gay lifestyles, and forty-six percent acknowledged ignorance about the existence of worthwhile literature on the subject.

The prognosis for reforming the institutions themselves, even in otherwise liberal
centers of urban culture, seems grim indeed if one judges from these respondents' narratives.

I have tried discussing gay/lesbian issues with my students—juniors and seniors in a suburban high school in the Chicago area—but, frankly, I think it is a hopeless cause—most students, most of the faculty, all administrators, and I know most of the community simply do not want to hear about it. They do not want it discussed, and I really believe that if we tried to present gay/lesbian literature the students/community (along with the administration and many from the faculty) would tear the school down brick by brick.

Another Chicagoan independently confirmed this report:

I think we have to be realistic about this issue—most schools in this area have eliminated or watered down sex education programs—the Chicago area as a whole still can't deal with busing intelligently—and, most important of all, gay/lesbian ideas are not just different from the values of suburban communities such as the one I teach in, but they are considered immoral, evil, and even sick. Therefore, to openly discuss gay/lesbian issues and teach gay/lesbian literature would certainly bring about the wrath of the community. In short, I believe that if the English profession pushes this issue, there very well could be a backlash from communities.

From the East came a similar diagnosis: “I work in Boston and its suburbs, a supposedly enlightened area of the country. However, I believe that this is one issue which even here is untouchable. Many ‘enlightened’ colleagues of mine have tightened at the mention of gay considerations.”

Counseling problems were a major concern of several who supplied narratives of discrimination, even as they are regularly the main concerns of persons who visit the lesbian/gay committee's literature table at the annual NCTE conventions. Most frequently persons ask how a concerned educator can help to reduce the level of violent teasing without also falling prey to the same. “[They] face persecution, ridicule, ostracism.” “[The] student [was] ridiculed by other students.” “Male teachers at school made harassing comments in the man teacher's presence to show their lack of acceptance of him although he was admittedly a fine teacher.” Another reported in more detail:

The other students in the class teased and taunted the gay student. I attempted to support the young boy in a positive way. I soon discovered, after talking with other faculty members about the problem, that some faculty members were encouraging the taunting and teasing and even participating in it. I found that by supporting the gay student, I was suspect, and because I was only a student teacher, there was very little I could do to help the young man. I was able to reduce the problem in my class but I know that the gay student had difficulties in other classes.

Many express concerns about the vulnerability that their openly lesbian or gay male students will face on the job market: “My concern was with a possibility that she might stigmatize herself for work in elementary schools, and, of course, an interest in her personal and social growth. This last concern has to do with all of us, apart from sexual preference.”

The usual counseling resources are not always dependable for lesbians and gay males, as one narrator discovered too late:

I recently had occasion to counsel with a young black girl who became aware through a "crush" on me that she had very strong feelings for women. Naively, I sent her in for
some counseling because all my reassurances that this was OK, that many women were
lesbians, etc., did not seem to be working and she was deeply troubled. At the local
mental health center here where I first took her, a psychiatrist—male, around 50, and a
known alcoholic—made an overt sexual pass at her to convince her that if she felt any-
thing she was still normal and not deviant. I was furious and went to complain via a
friend of mine who works at the center. She told me that this was most likely true
because the man was notorious for making sexual advances to women who came to the
center for treatment. She also told me that my complaints would be ineffectual because
the man had a wealthy family and many political friends who would guarantee that he
would maintain his position.

I should have known better, but I then proceeded to take her to the Student Couns-
eling Center here because I heard that the male Director was a very friendly, liberal, and
understanding man. He told her that a lesbian or a heterosexual lifestyle was a free
choice, but then he offered her some books to read on the causes and origins of homosex-
uality. The worst, a book on rational living by Albert Ellis, labelled homosexuality a
severe psycho-sexual maladaptation similar to a psychosis. . . . I was appalled that this
was the type of information any student coming in to discuss this problem would re-
ceive. Eventually, the girl refused to talk to anyone, even me, became withdrawn, and
told me later that she contemplated suicide because the whole world thought she was
sick, deviant, and abnormal.

Of course, some of our narrators argued that actions against lesbians and gays are
appropriate. A group of Mormons in Idaho wrote directly to NCTE alleging that
the study amounted to sponsorship of immorality, and they threatened to withdraw
from NCTE if the Committee were not disbanded.

One narrator’s objection has the flavor of a latter-day Jonathan Edwards dangling
the researchers by a thin thread indeed:

I would assume that some would term “unfair” treatment when other students refused to
enter the restroom with a student who was thought to be gay. I, personally, think that
the students are to be commended for their actions. I wish that my remarks would be
met with more than a quirk or smirk—but I feel assured that those of you who take the
time to read this will be entertained with the thoughts of an “old-fashioned” prude. I am
going to voice my opinion and sincere belief however—and you can laugh your way to
hell if you don’t believe. For the record, I am thirty-two years old—there are still a few
of the prudes left for a few more years.

It is my belief that God may allow some men and women to have weaknesses of
gayism and lesbianism; however, I know that he gives them the strength to overcome
these weaknesses just as he does others to overcome other manner of sin. If this were an
impossible state, my God would have never condemned these persons to hell. But I
firmly believe that for those who do not resist this urge to be gay or lesbian, an eternal
life in the fire of hell will await.

Let me say this: for my belief, there is promise for those of us who follow the teach-
ings of Christ—but for those who follow the teachings of the devil, there is either the hell
that I believe in or nothing. Either way I have nothing to lose—but for those who con-
tinue in sin, they lose an eternal life. I believe that those who sin the devil are likewise in
danger of hell fire. I want no part of promoting gays or lesbians in any aspect of our
American life—especially in the field of teaching. I would sue for my civil right to have
my child educated in a school that offered a clean, moral education—not one as described
in the first chapter of Romans.

Have you enjoyed your laugh? Laugh on. I have peace and contentment from knowing
that I have eternal life. . . . what have you? What have the gay and lesbian people?

It has been worth the 15¢ stamp that is required plus the envelope—neither of which
were enclosed as stated—but what do I expect for such an evil work?
Others thanked the researchers, as in these final three samples:

You have my sincere wishes for a winning battle, my deep congratulations for forming a committee, and my support for your efforts.

As a teacher of English and as a member of the human community, I am proud to be a member of an organization that proposes this resolution and considers it a vital issue that touches all of us. I am very happy to be a part of this random sample and NCTE. I thank the committee for the work that it is doing on behalf of us all.

I would most heartily like to commend you and the NCTE for the foresight and courage you have shown in dealing with this issue and in taking such a positive stand at a time when it could have been easier to say nothing or to espouse the middleclass hate attitudes of the Anita Bryants, etc. As one who has suffered discrimination personally over such a trivial issue as who one’s sexual partner is, it means a great deal to me that my profession and its representatives would take such a courageous stand for human rights and fair play.

It is important to remember that the specific hostility charted in this study is that of privileged members of our society, educated professionals. To assess the national scene more accurately, one must factor in the greater intensity in less civil quarters.