

# Information and Research Needs of GLBT/Sexual Diversity Studies Students

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## **Introduction**

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) students and faculty have become far more visible on university campuses in recent years, and the number of programs and courses related to GLBT and Sexual Diversity studies has grown considerably. At the same time, there has been a significant increase in research activities related to this area of study. This has led to a marked growth in the number of books, journals, and other resources available. How are academic libraries responding to this emerging discipline and how do students and faculty feel about how their research needs are being met? Are academic libraries making an effort to collect relevant materials and develop some level of expertise in this evolving area of research? Do students and faculty involved in GLBT/Sexual Diversity feel comfortable using reference services? Do they have access to information literacy instruction to help them find and navigate through the increasing number of resources available? There is currently little research available to answer these questions.

Librarians must think about how minority groups perceive library resources and services. Understanding these perceptions can help to better respond to the in-

formation needs of traditionally underserved minorities. Academic librarians must also respond to evolving teaching and research needs. In terms of GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies, limited research means that it is unclear whether libraries are responding to these needs with respect to collection development, staff training and awareness, and creation of a positive environment for students conducting research in GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies.

The purpose of the study is to determine whether students enrolled in GLBT/Sexual Diversity related university programs and courses feel that their information needs are being met by their academic library. Results should help to inform academic libraries so that they can better serve students and faculty in this area of study.

## **Literature Review**

There is a relatively small body of library and information science (LIS) literature on GLBT issues. Much of this consists of bibliographies, studies of library holdings, and strategies for locating sources. The number of user studies remains small and the number of studies related to academic libraries is even smaller. The bulk

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of the articles that have been published over the past fifteen years have focused on public libraries, with relatively little being written on the needs and perceptions of university students. In 2000, Steven Joyce produced a review of the library literature on GLBT service in libraries up to that point.<sup>1</sup> Although this paper does not attempt to provide a comprehensive literature review, a few of the most relevant user studies are mentioned here.

A number of (mostly Canadian) user studies examining the information needs of GLBT populations were produced in the early to mid 1990s.<sup>2</sup> These tended to focus on the information seeking behaviour during the coming-out process. They found that GLBT individuals were aware of libraries as a source of information on GLBT issues and were likely to use library resources, but were generally not satisfied with the quantity and quality of sources available in libraries. While these studies have made a significant contribution to the literature, most were conducted before the explosion of the Internet, and would likely produce different results today. Other articles have dealt with prejudice against GLBT people in libraries and how this has occasionally had a negative impact on collection development or other services. These authors have also looked at how librarians can overcome these “myths”.<sup>3</sup>

In 2005, Ann Curry conducted an “unobtrusive observation study” of reference services provided at public libraries in British Columbia. A proxy posing as a high school student was sent to various libraries and instructed to ask certain reference questions related to GLBT topics and record the reactions of reference staff. Curry found that in at least some of the libraries visited, there was definite room for improvement in terms of how reference staff dealt with GLBT related questions.<sup>4</sup>

Fikar and Keith developed an Internet survey that assessed the opinions and perceptions of health care providers and health science students, as well as medical librarians and library science students with regards to the information needs of GLBT people. This study found that medical librarians and students felt that access to GLBT-related information should be made easier and respondents noted various methods for making services and resources more visible, such as pamphlets, exhibits, and a more prominent website presence. The study also found that the majority of GLBT health care professionals and students would feel comfortable asking a reference question related to a GLBT topic, but would still prefer to approach a known GLBT person.<sup>5</sup>

The few user studies that have been done on GLBT library users’ perceptions of the library suggest that these patrons feel libraries are an appropriate place to find information, but that the materials that do exist may be insufficient, outdated or difficult to find, and that people may not always be comfortable asking for research help in a library setting. While several researchers have tried to address this gap in the literature, there is still little information about how university students perceive their experience in the library.

### Methodology

Data was collected using a written questionnaire that was distributed to students, faculty and staff involved in GLBT/Sexual Diversity programs and courses at three large Canadian universities. The self-administered questionnaire asked participants about their experience with their academic library, both in terms of access to collections and research help services. The questionnaire involved both qualitative and quantitative responses. Participants were asked specific questions and were given the opportunity to comment further when appropriate.

The researcher first identified several Canadian universities that offer GLBT/Sexual Diversity Studies programs. The coordinators of these programs were contacted, advised of the project, and asked to identify a faculty or staff member who could serve as a contact person. Coordinators at three of the identified institutions agreed to participate and to assist the researcher. Surveys were distributed in class to students enrolled in GLBT/Sexual Diversity Studies courses, as well as to staff and faculty in these programs.

### Results and Discussion

The study took place during the winter 2006 term and data analysis was completed during the spring. A total of 148 survey forms were returned and analyzed out of a total of 410 surveys distributed. Undergraduates made up 90 percent of the respondents and the remainder were faculty, staff or graduate students. The majority of respondents (72%) were GLBT people, while 28 percent identified themselves as non-GLBT. The vast majority (94%) reported having conducted academic research on a GLBT topic, and 89 percent reported having used their university library to pursue this research. The results, summarized below, suggest several ways that academic libraries can better meet the needs of these individuals.

### ***Collection Development***

Respondents were asked if they feel their academic library provides good, adequate or poor coverage of print and electronic GLBT studies materials. Although 56 percent felt that coverage of print GLBT studies materials is adequate, only 24 percent answered that the library provides good coverage, and 20 percent felt that coverage provided is poor. For online GLBT studies materials, such as e-journals and e-books, 47 percent felt that coverage is adequate while 30 percent answered that the library provides good coverage and 20 percent felt that coverage provided is poor. While respondents appeared to be marginally satisfied with the resources available to them, there is clearly room for improvement. Respondents were asked to elaborate by providing comments on their perceptions of the library collection. The largest number of complaints involved outdated materials. These comments were made by participants at all three institutions involved in the survey.

As with any subject, libraries must make an effort to keep up to date with the literature. This is perhaps even more important, however, with respect to GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies. Public perceptions of GLBT people have evolved significantly in the past decade, and the legal and political situations have evolved tremendously, at least in some parts of the world. In addition to updating the collection to reflect this reality, librarians may need to consider weeding materials that are significantly outdated or no longer relevant. They must also provide increased access to relevant periodicals. Some studies have shown that libraries in general do not do a good job in collecting GLBT-related periodical titles, although they are more likely to carry academic titles.<sup>6</sup> Much of the GLBT-related literature can be found in non-academic publications that libraries are less likely to subscribe to. Magazines and other popular publications, while not scholarly, are important sources for GLBT culture, literature and politics and may be valuable for collections of institutions with GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies programs. It may become necessary for a dedicated collections librarian to re-evaluate the needs of students and researchers in GLBT programs by thinking about the types of publications they require.

### ***Promotion and awareness***

When asked whether they are aware of anything the library has done to make students aware of what GLBT resources are available, over 85 percent of respondents said no. Participants were asked to state what they feel the library could do to increase awareness of GLBT re-

sources. The responses were varied, but the most commonly recurring suggestions involved handouts promoting GLBT resources (several students pointed out that their library produced such handouts for other areas of study, but not for GLBT/Sexual Diversity); developing a webpage pointing to all GLBT/Sexual Diversity research resources, including links to databases, e-journals and relevant websites and creating displays in the library showcasing GLBT research resources.

### ***Reference Services***

Participants were asked if they had ever approached staff at their library's research help desk when in need of information on a GLBT related topic. A minority (38%) had done so, while 61 percent had never asked for help with a related topic. Those who had never done so were asked to explain why. The largest group (over one half) had never used research help because they simply felt that they did not need help. Many of these individuals claimed that they can find what they need without help, while others responded that they simply go to the Internet to find information. This, however, has nothing to do with GLBT studies specifically, as these attitudes can be found across disciplines. The second largest group of respondents explained that they had avoided using research help because they were uncomfortable asking reference staff a GLBT-related question. Over one third of participants provided these types of responses. Some of these people were afraid of being judged by the staff member, while others feared that other students would overhear their question.

Fortunately, those who did use research help services were generally very satisfied with how their question was received by staff. Over 90 percent of respondents who had approached the research help desk for assistance felt that staff appeared to be comfortable with providing research help for a GLBT-related topic. Only 5 percent of these respondents felt that staff appeared uncomfortable with their question. While participants were satisfied with the comfort level of staff, they were less satisfied with the staff's level of knowledge on GLBT-related topics. Of those respondents who had used research help services, only 17 percent considered staff to be very knowledgeable with respect to finding information on a GLBT-related topic, 39 percent felt that staff was somewhat knowledgeable, while 44 percent felt that staff was not knowledgeable about providing research help for a GLBT-related topic. Those who chose to elaborate by providing commentary generally stated that while library research staff had always ap-

peared open to questions on any GLBT-related topic, they generally did not seem to know where to look to find relevant information in this area. Most library staff members have never been trained in GLBT studies as it is a relatively new academic discipline. They need to become more familiar with the tools, the literature and where to find it.

It does seem clear that students would feel more comfortable asking for research help on a GLBT-related topic if they were able to go to someone they could identify as a GLBT-positive person. When asked if they would be more likely to ask for assistance at the library in finding information on a GLBT-related topic if they knew that there was a liaison librarian for GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies, 76 percent of respondents said they would be much more or somewhat more likely to ask for help.

### ***Library environment***

Participants were then asked if they feel that the library does enough to create an environment that encourages users to be comfortable asking for GLBT-related information. Those who felt the library does not do enough were encouraged to discuss how they feel the library can do more. The largest number of respondents (41%) felt that their library tries but could do more to encourage students to be comfortable asking for GLBT-related information, 28 percent of respondents said the library does enough, while 27 percent felt that the library doesn't do enough to create a comfortable environment. Furthermore, although they are in the minority, the significant number of respondents who chose not to approach the reference desk out of fear of asking a GLBT-related question suggests that academic libraries could do more to promote an environment in which everyone feels comfortable asking about any topic.

A variety of suggestions were given on how the library could foster a more GLBT-positive environment. The most common responses had to do with providing more visibility for GLBT library resources on campus, by creating promotional materials. Another suggestion was to create information packages targeted at students in the GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies programs. These packages would highlight resources, but also tell students that the library is a GLBT-friendly place and that they should feel free asking for help on any topic. Others suggested signs or symbols within the library itself to promote the building as a GLBT-friendly space. Many students liked the idea of having a specific GLBT section within the main library, or an off-site GLBT li-

brary where students could go and feel completely comfortable asking for help and looking for resources.

### ***Instruction***

Participants were asked if they have ever received any instruction, such as an in-class session given by an academic librarian on finding GLBT-related information or doing research in GLBT studies. The vast majority (91%) of respondents could not recall having received any instruction. Participants were also asked if they feel that receiving this kind of instruction would be helpful. A strong majority (63%) responded that this kind of instruction would be useful to them. It is important to remember that the universities involved in the study all offer courses and programs in GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies. It is impossible to determine why so little instruction has been offered. Perhaps librarians do not feel they have adequate expertise in this area of study, or perhaps they are simply unaware of the potential demand for instruction. In any case, there appears to be a need which is not being met. This is perhaps another argument in favor of having a dedicated librarian for GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies.

### ***Conclusion***

Given the growth of GLBT-related courses and research programs, it is important to examine how libraries are meeting the needs of students and faculty involved in this discipline. This study is a first attempt to explore the perceptions of these individuals. Findings suggest that students and faculty are generally satisfied with the resources and services provided, but there is room for improvement. Collections must be updated to reflect the emerging status of GLBT/Sexual Diversity studies as a discipline, and the evolution of GLBT issues more generally. Reference services must provide knowledgeable research help in a safe environment and libraries must promote themselves as places where everyone can feel comfortable conducting research.

Future research could perhaps use focus groups to study how GLBT students more generally feel about library resources, services and the environment fostered by academic libraries. It would also be interesting to explore how librarians themselves feel about their role in providing resources and services to GLBT students and to relate this to traditionally underserved minority groups more generally.

### ***Notes***

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