California State University, Monterey Bay

Digital Commons @ CSUMB

Capstone Projects and Master's Theses

2009

Addressing sexual orientation and gender identity harassment in schools through community building

Katherine Gray Asplund
California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes

LS 400 Project Proposal

Katherine Gray Asplund

CSU Monterey Bay

Dr. Scott Waltz

Spring 2009

Introduction

According to the *Safe Place to Learn* study conducted by the California Safe Schools Coalition and the 4-H Center for Youth Development at the University of California, Davis, harassment in schools based on actual or perceived sexual orientation is pervasive (2004).

A local instance of this came to light in 1998 when the Morgan Hill Unified School District (MHUSD) was sued by six students who attended three different schools in the district: Live Oak High School, Britton Middle School, and Martin Murphy Middle School. The students charged that "school district employees repeatedly ignored or minimized many reports by the students that they were being abused by others who thought they were gay" (American Civil Liberties Union, 2004).

As part of the settlement terms of the lawsuit brought against them, MHUSD has taken action to prevent such harassment by implementing a court mandated training program for faculty, staff, administrators and students regarding issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. At the end of this 2008-2009 school year, the school district will be released by the courts and will no longer be required to continue with the training program.

My concern and the focus of my project is how to continue the discourse regarding issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in the schools once the district is released from the court ordered mandatory training. Through interviews with school faculty, administrators, district personnel, community partners and students I have concluded the most effective way for me to address this need is to work directly with members of the Gay-Straight Alliance club at Sobrato High School to create a club website which will increase the club's visibility and accessibility.

Following is my personal background and motivation for addressing the needs of sexual minority youth in the Morgan Hill Unified School District, a review of information regarding

sexual orientation/gender identity based harassment in California and its effect on students,

actions that California, in general, and Morgan Hill, specifically, are taking to change school

environments, and lastly, the specifics of my project.

Background and Motivation

My motivation for addressing this topic in my Capstone evolved out of a personal

experience I had in high school that greatly impacted me. As a sophomore at Live Oak High

School in Morgan Hill, I observed a group of students gossiping and making derogatory

statements about an openly lesbian student on campus. This verbal harassment occurred during

class, all well within earshot of the teacher who did nothing to stop it. After I spoke up to defend

this student, the group quickly turned on me, saying I must be a "dyke" too. I looked to my

teacher to do something; but again, he did nothing to stop the harassment. After learning of the

lawsuit brought against MHUSD eleven years after my own personal experiences, I thought

clearly, not much had changed since my days at Live Oak.

Specific Nature of the Problem

School is intended to be a safe and supportive place for all students. However, in reality,

school is too often neither safe nor supportive for sexual minority youth or those *perceived* to be

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning (known as LGBTQ throughout the rest of this

document). The 2003 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey, conducted by the California

Safe Schools Coalition and Gay-Straight Alliance Network, examined school climate and

harassment based on sexual orientation and gender non-conformity.

According to the PSH survey, 91% of students reported hearing other students make negative comments based on sexual orientation, 44% reported hearing the same from teachers or staff; 46% of students said their schools were not safe for LGBT students; and two of every three self-identified LGBT students reported being harassed because of actual or perceived sexual orientation (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

The 2001-2002 California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) surveyed student health risk and resilience factors and included one question about sexual orientation harassment. The CHKS survey concluded that over 200,000 students in California are the targets of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation every year and that 32% of these students are harassed repeatedly throughout the school year (O'Shaughnessy et al., 2004).

These unsafe and unsupportive school environments may put LGBTQ students at increased risk of depression, alcohol and drug abuse, poor grades, truancy, dropping out, verbal or physical abuse, risky sexual behaviors, and suicide. It is important to clarify that LGBTQ students are not at risk because of their sexual orientation but rather they are at risk because of homophobic attitudes present in schools and society. Daily exposure to homophobic attitudes and harassment leads to feelings of isolation and invisibility. It is this sense of isolation and invisibility that puts LGBTQ students at risk.

Stader and Graca (2007), in their article about sexual orientation harassment, found a majority of teachers and school personnel almost never intervened to stop the harassment. Teachers, as well as other school personnel, often lack awareness and understanding of LGBTQ issues, their ignorance may be compounded by prejudices they hold against sexual minority youth (Elia, 1993/1994; Harbeck, 1994; Rienzo, Button & Wald, 1997; Robinson, 1994 as cited in Athanases & Larrabee, 2003).

On a positive note, Galliher, Rostosky and Hughes (2004) report "…psychosocial and academic functioning is facilitated by a perceived sense of belonging, support, and acceptance from important peers and/or adults in adolescents' school contexts" (p. 235). Teachers and fellow students can play a very important role in the life of LGBTQ students by simply acknowledging their existence and reaching out to them, providing support and understanding. As Mathison (1998) so poignantly states, "It is painful to be devalued, but devastating to be invisible" (p. 155).

LGBTQ students should feel, at the very least, safe when they are at school. If schools are not safe places for sexual minority youth, then they are most likely not safe for other minority students. Formally and informally addressing issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools will lead to a safer and more supportive environment for *all* students and youth in the surrounding communities.

Review of Current Action

In the past ten years California, as a whole, and many school districts, individually have taken measures to begin insuring safe and supportive school environments for sexual minority youth. At this time, California is one of only nine states that have laws in place against harassment in schools based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

In 2000, the Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act was passed. It prohibits discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity in California public schools. The law amended the state Education Code by adding actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity to existing sections on discrimination. Since 2000, two additional

laws have been passed to support the Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act; they are the Safe Place to Learn Act and the Student Civil Rights Act.

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs are another important factor in creating safe and supportive school environments. According to the *Safe Place to Learn* study (2004), "Students whose schools have a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) or similar student club felt safer at school, reported safer school climates in general, and were less likely to be harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation" (p. 20). GSA clubs take on many different forms; some are purely social in their function, while others take on issues of social justice and action in their schools and communities. Regardless of their form, GSA clubs are a welcoming place for all students, gay, straight or otherwise.

At the local level, policy changes and district wide training came as a result of litigation. As part of the settlement terms of *Flores v. MHUSD*, the school district added policy BP5751 (see Appendix A) and put in place a mandatory training program for administrators, staff, faculty and students addressing issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition, both high schools in Morgan Hill have Gay-Straight Alliance clubs.

Unfortunately, homosexuality, especially in the context of adolescents and education, is still a taboo subject for many people. It has been challenging to open a dialogue about sexual minority youth in my community and this initially impeded my Capstone progress.

Eventually, I connected with three people employed by MHUSD who were all very willing to discuss the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity in schools. They are Dr. Jay Totter, director of Human Resources and the coordinator of the sexual orientation and gender identity training program, Ms. Fawn Myers, an assistant principal at Ann Sobrato High School, and Ms. Sybil Smit, a teacher at Sobrato who is the advisor for their GSA club. From my

interviews and discussions with these three individuals, I learned a great deal about what is

already being done to serve sexual minority youth and what areas still need some work.

Dr. Totter is very proud of the sexual orientation and gender identity training program he

has helped develop and put into place. During our discussion, he mentioned that Morgan Hill

Unified School District is one of only a handful of districts which have a similar program in

place. According to Dr. Totter the initial phase of the sexual orientation and gender identity

(SOGI) training program was inconsistent with the settlement terms and the ACLU was

unhappy. He took charge of the program in 2006, made extensive revisions and is now quite

pleased with the results. He believes the training is effective and the district is meeting the goals

of the SOGI program; please see Appendix B for all the program details.

From my interview with Fawn Myers and informal discussion with a friend who teaches

in the district, it is apparent that the personal, humanizing element which was part of the training

during the first year, in the form of panel speakers of lgbtq youth sharing their individual stories,

is now missing. As Ms. Myers explained it, the district has taken the first step of changing

behavior, but still has a long way to go to change mindset (see Appendix C).

Lastly, I spoke with Sybil Smit about the environment at Sobrato High School and the

Gay-Straight Alliance club for which she is the advisor. She too expressed the opinion that

change needs to go beyond behavior and include mindset. This is part of her reason for agreeing

to be the GSA club advisor. She sees the students as the agents of change on campus. When we

spoke about the GSA, she said it began primarily as a social club, but she has seen a desire in the

members to take it more in the direction of social justice. From our discussion came the idea for

my project.

Project Description

I propose to work with the Sobrato High School Gay-Straight Alliance club to produce a website for their club. The club website will be linked to the school website, thereby increasing visibility and accessibility of the club. A website would allow those students hesitant to join the club in person out of fear or embarrassment to feel supported and have a sense of belonging. A presence on the World Wide Web would also foster a sense of connectedness to the larger community of GSA clubs in California and across the country, encouraging the Sobrato GSA club to make the transition from a social club to a social justice organization.

In working with the club, I hope to help them focus and strengthen their mission on campus. The behavior exhibited in cases of sexual orientation and/or gender identity harassment is being addressed through the SOGI training program, my efforts with the GSA club will begin to address mindset.

Project Details

I will work directly with students at Sobrato High School who are members of the Gay-Straight Alliance club and the faculty advisor, Ms. Sybil Smit. My initial role will be designer and administrator of the website. After the website is up and functioning, administrative duties will be passed to the club advisor and officers. I will follow the guidelines of the MHUSD technology agreement regarding website content and Ms. Smit will have final approval on all content.

In order to accomplish this project, I will need a reliable computer with internet access. I will also need to choose a domain name and a web hosting company, most likely one that is free

of monthly service fees. I will collaborate with the club members about layout and content of the website.

The deliverables of this project will be the website itself as well as the agendas I set forth for each of my meetings with the GSA club. These agendas will function as blue prints of the process and be a record of the work done.

Timeline

3/25/09

Attend GSA club meeting; introduce myself and my Capstone, handout surveys

4/1/09

Attend GSA club meeting

4/3/09

Meet with club officers to discuss specifics of website content

4/24/09

Website presented to GSA members and advisor for approval, make any necessary changes

5/1/09

Website finalized and GSA members publicize it over morning announcements

5/8/09

Submit project deliverables

Conclusion

This project was born of personal experience and a desire to inform people of the mistreatment and abuses facing sexual minority youth everyday on our school campuses. My original intention was for my project to revolve directly around the sexual orientation/gender

identity training program in place in MHUSD. While I am disappointed that is not an option at this point, I am pleased to get to know Ms. Smit and the members of the Sobrato GSA club. The creation of a club website will enhance the GSA club's visibility and accessibility, thus increasing the impact they may have on creating a safe and supportive environment for LGBTQ students on their campus and in their community.

References

American Civil Liberties Union: Case background: Flores v. Morgan Hill Unified School

    District. (2004, Jan.). Retrieved February 15, 2007 from

    http://www.aclu.org/lgbt/youth/11947res20010106.html

Athanases, S.Z. & Larrabee, T.G. (2003). Toward a consistent stance in teaching for equity:

    learning to advocate for lesbian-and gay-identified youth. *Teaching and Teacher*

    Education, 19, 237-261. Retrieved March 2, 2007 from ERIC database.

Galliher, R.V., Rostosky, S.S., & Hughes, H.K. (2004). School belonging, self-esteem, and

    depressive symptoms in adolescents: an examination of sex, sexual attraction status, and

    urbanicity. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence, 33*, 235-245. Retrieved April 20, 2007

    from Expanded Academic ASAP database.

Gill, K. & Marshall, M. (2001). *Assembly bill 537 advisory task force report.* Sacramento, CA:

    California Department of Education.

Hunter, D., Gless, L., & Woest, H. (2005). Counselors' perceptions of sexual minorities.

    Academic Exchange Quarterly, 9, 350-354. Retrieved April 20, 2007 from Expanded

    Academic ASAP database.

Mathison, C. (1998). The invisible minority: preparing teachers to meet the needs of gay and

      lesbian youth. *Journal of Teacher Education, 49*, 151-155. Retrieved April 20, 2007 from

      Expanded Academic ASAP database.

Mudrey-Camino, R. (2002). *The educational isolation of sexual minority youth.* Paper presented

      at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-Western Educational Research Association, Columbus,

      Ohio. Retrieved February 5, 2009 from ERIC database.

O'Shaughnessy, M., Russell, S., Heck, K., Calhoun, C., & Laub, C. (2004). *Safe place to*

      learn: consequences of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and

      gender non-conformity and steps for making schools safer. San Francisco, CA: California

      Safe Schools Coalition and the 4-H Center for Youth Development, University of

      California, Davis.

Stader, D.L. & Graca, T.J. (2007). Student-on-student sexual orientation harassment: legal

      protections for sexual minority youth. *The Clearing House, 80*, 117-122. Retrieved April

      20, 2007 from Expanded Academic ASAP database.

Appendix A

STUDENTS   **BP 5751**

Sexual Orientation/Gender Identity Harassment:

The Morgan Hill Unified School District is committed to maintaining a safe and supportive school environment in which all members of the school community are treated with dignity and respect. It is the policy of this District that harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, including perceptions of a person's identity, appearance or behavior, is expressly prohibited.

The Board considers harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity to be a major offense. The District shall investigate all complaints of discrimination and harassment, and take appropriate action against any student or employee who is found to have violated this policy.

Harassment of a student by another student in violation of this policy constitutes cause for disciplinary action. Students shall be advised that harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity are unacceptable conduct and will not be tolerated. Students shall be informed that they should contact the school principal or designee if they experience such harassment or discrimination.

Harassment by an employee in violation of this policy constitutes cause for disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

The Superintendent shall adopt, and may periodically revise, administrative regulations necessary to implement and enforce this policy. The regulations shall provide an adequate description of this policy to parents, students and employees, provide appropriate complaint and resolution procedures, and establish due process for persons accused of harassment or discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The Superintendent shall ensure that students receive age-appropriate information and education related to sexual orientation and gender identity. In addition, the Superintendent shall designate qualified individuals to provide appropriate training and educational programs on the issue of harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

This policy is intended to supplement, and not replace, state and federal laws prohibiting sexual harassment. Complaints under those laws shall be processed through the procedures established by appropriate state and/or federal agencies.

Cross References:
BP/AR 4121 PERSONNEL: Sexual Harassment
BP/AR 4123 PERSONNEL: Complaint Procedure
BP 5130 STUDENTS BP 5130: Pupil Discipline: Suspension and Expulsion
BP/AR 5750 STUDENTS: Sexual Harassment

STUDENTS **BP 5751**

Legal References:
EDUCATION CODE
200 State policy; purpose
212.6 Educational institutions; written policy on sexual harassment
48900.2 Sexual Harassment as ground for suspension or expulsion

48980 Article 6. California School Information Services
California Constitution, Article 1, § 28 (c)
California Fair Employment and Housing Act
California Labor Code Sections 1101 & 1102
Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 1991
Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972

Original Adoption: December 20, 2004

Appendix B
Summary of Phone Interview with Dr. Jay Totter, Human Resources Director of MHUSD

I spoke with Dr. Totter for almost one hour. My initial request was for more information about the training the district has done surrounding sexual orientation and gender identity issues.

Dr. Totter began by giving me some background information. He was hired by MHUSD in October 2006. He shared with me that when he started, the ACLU was not happy with the way the settlement terms of the Flores case were being implemented.

In Dr. Totter's opinion, each school and administrator was doing its own version of the training, some more diligently than others, and there was little follow through. Because there were zero formal complaints pertaining to sexual orientation and/or gender identity issues, the superintendent thought the district had done a great job and the problem was resolved. Dr. Totter felt strongly the problem had not been resolved and asked the superintendent if he could take the reins of the program and be in charge of the whole thing.

Dr. Totter worked with the ACLU to revise the training program that had been in place. Two major changes were scripting the training and eliminating peer advisors for the student training. By scripting the training, Dr. Totter could insure that all employees and students were receiving the same instruction, contributing to a district wide culture of zero tolerance for sexual orientation and gender identity harassment. The peer advisors were eliminated because the students in those positions were having difficulties overcoming the homophobic nature of the students they were training. He felt adults would be taken more seriously and be better equipped to deal with resistance on the part of students.

Originally, the terms of the settlement stipulated the mandatory portion of the training would end with the 2007-2008 school year; however, because the MHUSD failed to live up to the terms the first couple of years after the settlement, the mandatory portion was extended through this school year. The ACLU has been very pleased with the turn around since Dr. Totter has taken over the SOGI program and MHUSD will be released from the court order this June.

Now having given some of the background, I will lay out the specifics of the training as Dr. Totter explained them to me. Throughout the rest of the document, I will refer to the program as SOGI (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity).

SOGI goals:
- Provide employee training to all administrative, certificated, and classified positions.
- Provide student training to all 7th and 9th grade students.
- Investigate all complaints/incidences of sexual orientation or gender identity harassment.
- Monitor all incidences
- Monitor school wide climate
- Maintain a district wide culture of zero tolerance for sexual orientation or gender identity harassment.

SOGI training pieces:
- Sensitivity training
- Learner objectives – understanding legalities and incident reporting
- Reporting of the specifics of the *Flores* lawsuit and settlement
- Actual incidents and their handling used as what-to-do-differently scenarios
- Above & Beyond Activities – these are up to individual principals to come up with, taking into account what will work best for their campus and students, some examples are "Say Another Word" campaign.

SOGI schedule:
- Dr. Totter facilitates 2-3 hours of scripted training for administrators during their summer retreat. The administrators also use scenarios based on real situations from the previous school year for hands-on learning; working in small groups, they discuss the scenario, look at how it was handled and then agree on a corrected action plan based on the training. Once a month, school principals meet with Dr. Totter and SOGI is an agenda item.
- During the first months of the school year, the principal leads all certificated staff in a one hour scripted training session.
- Classified staff receives scripted training in August.
- Seventh and ninth grade students receive 45 minutes of scripted training from either the principal or vice principal of their school.
- Records are kept of all training sessions, including make-up sessions held for those absent from the original training sessions and verification forms are sent to the district office. Principals are also required to sign an affidavit regarding the verification forms. Students are not allowed to be exempt from this training as they are from sexual education.

SOGI monitoring:
- Every campus has a Compliance Coordinator to whom complaints of harassment are brought.
- The Compliance Coordinator has 15 days to complete an investigation of the incident, mete out discipline, and send the complainant a letter stating results of the investigation.
- If the complainant is unhappy with the investigation or actions, they may file an appeal.
- The patterns and severity of the incidences are monitored.
  - Pattern one – inappropriate use of the word "gay"
  - Pattern two – use of words such as gay, homo, queer, lesbian with malicious intent
  - Pattern three – graffiti on personal property involving words such as those in pattern two
- Progress reports are given to the ACLU and the Board of Education

Changes to the SOGI program beginning next year:
- District participation becomes voluntary rather than court ordered
- The program will continue as part of the Safe Schools Plan and will expand to include issues of bullying

- The program will be downsized – there will no longer be student training, but SOGI will be part of the student handbook
- Summer training sessions will continue for administrators who will then continue to train staff and faculty
- Patterns 1 and 2 will continue to be monitored, but there will no longer be reports made to the courts or the ACLU.

Appendix C
Summary of Interview with Fawn Myers, Assistant Principal at Sobrato High School

Ms. Myers has been employed by the Morgan Hill Unified School District since 1996. Before obtaining her current position, she worked at both middle schools that are part of the district.

Ms. Myers reiterated the basics of the SOGI training that Dr. Totter provided me with during our earlier interview. She went into more detail about how an incident is handled by her office.

When an incident report is filed by staff, faculty or a student, it is investigated. The complainant, victim and aggressor are interviewed. The complainant may be the victim or it could be a teacher or student who witnessed the incident. The anti harassment policy is reviewed; emphasizing that everyone has the right to feel safe at school. Ms. Myers makes it clear that the behavior being reported is unacceptable, no matter the intention of the aggressor. She referred to this as warning counsel and it is logged in the student's record.

When I asked Ms. Myers if there were fewer incidents of sexual orientation or gender identity harassment since the SOGI training was put in place she said she didn't think there was less harassment of that nature. However, she sees a dramatic increase in the number of students coming forward to report harassment based on perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. And this shows her that the policies and training put into place since the settlement of the Flores case are making a difference.

When asked if she believes her campus is safer and more supportive of lgbtq youth today, Ms. Myers responded she believes in general, her campus is safer for all students. She went on to say as a result of the Flores settlement there is now a "formalization of institutional policy" regarding any type of harassment which was not previously in place within the district. More specifically, she did state the school climate at Sobrato is very accepting of lgbtq students.

I asked Ms. Myers what resources are available on campus to support lgbtq students. She told me about the safe place posters which denote offices and classrooms on campus where a student can find a safe place and a supportive staff or faculty member. She spoke of the Gay-Straight

Alliance club on campus as a resource. Lastly, she told me the school counselors are the best resource because they have the professional training to deal with the host of issues that lgbtq students may be facing and know which local agencies would be most helpful to the student. Most importantly, the counselors are trained to recognize a crisis situation and obtain the appropriate help needed.

My last question for Ms. Myers was what more could be done to support lgbtq students. She said she feels the SOGI training and reporting has done a good job changing behavior, but she feels more needs to be done to change the mindset regarding issues of sexual orientation and gender identity. She went on to say during the first year of SOGI training staff, faculty and administrators were required to see a panel presentation of lgbtq youth who spoke about their experiences in schools. This element has not been part of the training since that first year and she feels the SOGI training has lost the personal dimension necessary to change mindset. She believes exposure to real people willing to share stories of their experiences growing up lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender would go a long way to opening the minds of both students and teachers.

After Ms. Myers shared what she feels is missing from the current SOGI training, I took the opportunity to share my idea of bringing in panels of speakers who would address both faculty and students. I also mentioned my belief that it is important to get students involved; she believes there would be current lgbtq students in the district who would be willing to participate as part of a panel discussion. She suggested I contact the GSA club advisor and work with her to initiate my action.

LS 400 Final Reflection

Katherine Gray Asplund

CSU Monterey Bay

Dr. Waltz

May 1, 2009

My Capstone experience has alternately been daunting, surprising, frustrating, rewarding and inspiring. In the end, I came away with a finished project that took me in a direction I had not expected, but am grateful for. My original intentions were to focus on a program but my course of action instead lead me to a wonderful, courageous group of students, the members of the Sobrato High School Gay-Straight Alliance Club.

At the beginning of the Capstone experience, I wanted to investigate the sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) training program in place in the Morgan Hill Unified School District. I wanted to learn more about it, how it is implemented, whether or not it is successful, and how I could take action to further insure its continued impact and success. What I encountered instead was fear, resistance and denial. Fear and resistance to open dialogue about the issue of sexual orientation and/or gender identity harassment and denial that it is still an issue in Morgan Hill schools.

After a frustrating start, I finally connected with the right people in the district and had some very informative and helpful discussions about the issue of sexual orientation and/or gender identity harassment. From those discussions, I learned the SOGI training program has been successful at addressing and changing the behavior of students and school personnel, but not their mindset.

I had some ideas for a project based on changing the mindset that involved bringing back the student participation element of the training and the personal element in the form of panel speakers sharing their own stories and experiences. Unfortunately, there was no way to be sure my efforts would continue to be carried out after my project was complete, so I chose to take another route; helping the Gay-Straight Alliance Club at

Sobrato High School build community by increasing their visibility and accessibility through the development of a website.

Working with the members of the GSA and their faculty advisor was a wonderful experience. They were very open and welcoming. I gave them a brief, informal survey at our first meeting and their answers indicated to me that the group had a desire to be a larger, more visible presence on campus and to make more of an impact in terms of changing mindset. I presented the idea of creating a website to facilitate greater visibility and accessibility.

Over a period of several weeks, I worked with the students to develop the content of the website and also worked with other staff members on the logistics of linking the website to the district and high school's websites and following district protocol for technology. The faculty advisor for the club has final approval of the content so I was sure to include her in the process. Upon completion of the website, the web address will be published on the school's morning announcements, encouraging staff and students to visit the website.

During the process I had some revealing conversations with both the faculty advisor and the students. I saw in them a desire to take their club from one of a social nature to one more social justice in nature. I like to think having someone from the community come in and say your voices matter and you can make a difference may help propel them to the next level.

I am very pleased with the how the website has turned out. In order to accommodate the club's request of not using much, if any, of their funds I decided to use WordPress to host the website. By using WordPress, the site has some features I had not

initially planned on including, a blog for club members and site visitors to comment, a stats feature which allows the club to see how much traffic the site is getting, and a polls feature which will allow the club to design opinion polls, all of this for free.

I believe these features will help demonstrate whether or not the website is successful at building community. Through the blog, the club will be able to comment on issues and events they feel are important and they will get immediate feedback via the comments posted by visitors to the site. The stats feature will show the club how many people are visiting the site, an indicator of whether their visibility and accessibility have truly increased. The polls feature could be used to periodically measure the campus environment regarding issues of sexual orientation and/or gender identity. For instance, a poll could be designed that asks how safe students feel on their campus or how often they witness harassment. Another measure of success will be whether there is an increase in meeting attendance or club membership.

For the time being, myself and the faculty advisor will be the administrators of the website. I plan to continue to be involved with the club, hopefully building a stronger connection to the community at large. One of the current club officers is technically savvy and showed interest in being responsible for the website. He is a junior and would therefore be able to continue that responsibility next year. Upon his graduation, he would pass the responsibility to another member. So, all in all, there would be three of us with administrative capabilities. We also discussed creating a new officer position whose sole responsibility is updating and maintaining the website.

Looking back, I am happy with the results of my project effort and to have developed a relationship with the faculty advisor and students at Sobrato. Although it was

stressful at the time, I think being flexible going into this process allowed me to find the right path. Had I begun by stating this is my idea and I am not open to any others, I would have had a very difficult time accomplishing anything. If I had to change any part of the process, I would have been more persistent at the beginning. There were some people who appeared to not want to speak with me and I could have been more insistent that they did.

The hardest part of this process for me was making contact with people I did not know and presenting my ideas to them. I have always been insecure in that type of situation, so this experience allowed me to grow and gave me some confidence I can use as I move forward and pursue the next step in my education and career.

More importantly, I learned a great deal about my community. Morgan Hill is definitely on the conservative end of the political spectrum and is heavily influenced by religion. Many citizens of Morgan Hill do not believe issues of sexual orientation should be discussed in public, let alone in the schools their children attend. My Capstone work has spurred in me a desire to be more actively involved in my community and speak for those in the minority who may not speak up for themselves.

I have also witnessed the difference one teacher can make in the lives of her students. Ms. Smit, the faculty advisor, gives all her students a safe and supportive environment allowing them to be themselves. I could see it in the way she interacted with them and the general character of the classroom. Within the club, I noticed some social hierarchies at work, but never once did I hear any of the students being disrespectful towards one another.

All students deserve to feel safe and supported and respected, but for sexual minority youth, this need may be even greater. Studies have shown the isolation, invisibility and harassment they experience can lead to detrimental behaviors. One teacher reaching out and providing a haven can make all the difference between isolation and belonging for these students. This is the greatest lesson I will take away from my Capstone experience.

http://sobratogsa.org

Capstone Project Action Plan
Katherine Gray Asplund

Wednesday, March 25, 2009

Agenda:
- Introduce myself to the members of the Gay-Straight Alliance Club
- Explain Capstone – specifically my topic, background and motivation
- Distribute surveys to GSA members (See Appendix A)
- Present project idea of a club website

Summary:
My first meeting with the GSA club went extremely well. The students were open and responsive. I think the fact I am an alumna of their rival high school made me more interesting. After explaining Capstone, several students mentioned they too have a senior project they must complete for graduation. I believe sharing my personal experience with sexual orientation harassment helped them trust me.

After my introduction, I asked if they would be willing to complete the brief, anonymous survey I wrote. The exercise was an eye opener for me; I had assumed the students would know what I meant when I asked about the SOGI (sexual orientation and gender identity) training in place in all the schools, but they had no idea what I was talking about. Ms. Smit, their faculty advisor, kindly reminded them they'd all been through the training and this jogged some of their memories. It was an interesting occurrence, because I had been lead to believe I could walk into any Morgan Hill school, mention SOGI training and all students, faculty and personnel would be able to rattle off all the details.

After the students completed the surveys, I presented my idea of creating a website for their club and explained why I thought it was important to have one and how I thought it could help them grow and define their GSA. They were receptive to it and one member in particular approached me and let me know he was the tech savvy member of the group. Later, when I was able to review the surveys, I was pleased to see several members said they wished their club was bigger and more visible because I believe the website can help in those two areas.

The club had other business to attend to, so I agreed to return the following week to begin discussions of the website specifics. I asked Ms. Smit about any district guidelines or permissions I might need and she referred me to Molly Edgar, the principal's secretary. I explained the project to Molly and she said she would find out what permissions might be necessary. She also gave me a copy of the Morgan Hill Unified School District's computer system/internet/e-mail acceptable use agreement.

Wednesday, April 1, 2009

Agenda:
- Website content
- Website logistics – webhosting technologies, linking to school website and GSA Network website
- Responsibilities – who will work with me directly and make decisions
- My timeline and schedule

Summary:
The club had a fairly full agenda this meeting, separate from my agenda. They were preparing for the National Day of Silence and still had much to do. In the midst of their planning, someone realized the National Day of Silence is April 17, 2009 which is during their spring break. So they were scrambling to get organized and observe National Day of Silence on their campus before spring break begins.

I thought it best if I delayed my agenda. I made arrangements to meet with the faculty advisor and club officers on Friday, April 3, during lunch so they could use the rest of this meeting to plan for the National Day of Silence. I offered my help in whatever form they could use.

Before leaving campus I checked in with Molly Edgar to thank her for her prompt attention to my questions. On March 31, she left me a voicemail and also sent Ms. Smit and e-mail with information about guidelines for creating the website and linking it to the school website. (See Appendix B)

Friday, April 3, 2009

Agenda:
- Website content
- Website logistics – webhosting technologies, linking to school website and GSA Network website
- Responsibilities – who will work with me directly and make decisions
- My timeline and schedule

Summary:
I met with club officers Vicky, Sara and Logan, as well as faculty advisor Ms. Smit during lunch. We were able to cover the entire agenda, plus discuss how to promote the website on campus. Ms. Smit also mentioned some discrepancies she discovered on the both the school's website as well as the district's website regarding their GSA club.

The officers and advisor stated their preferences for using a free webhosting service, rather than a service with a monthly or annual fee. They explained the club funds are not consistent and they were uncomfortable with the idea of paying a monthly fee.

We agreed the content of the website would include the club's by-laws and mission statement, faculty advisor and officer names, contact information for faculty advisor, meeting day, time and location, upcoming events, and links to local resources. We discussed the possibility of posting some pictures as well.

Ms. Smit then explained the discrepancies she noticed. The Sobrato website lists the mission statements of all the clubs on campus, but the GSA's mission statement was not listed. On the district's website, under the sexual orientation and gender identity harassment policy section, the other high school's GSA club information is listed, but Sobrato's is not. I told Ms. Smit I would be happy to work on correcting these issues, but as I am not an employee of the district I may not be able to.

I shared my timeline with them. We then decided initially I would be the administrator of the website, but eventually Ms. Smit and one of the officers would assume responsibility for it.

I agreed to return next Wednesday to help them with preparations for their observation of National Day of Silence.

Wednesday, April 8, 2009

Agenda:
- Help with National Day of Silence preparations
- Get to know club members better
- Broach idea of social justice and what that might look like for them

Summary:
I spent an hour today with various members of the GSA club. I helped them make bracelets and necklaces with rainbow colored beads to hand out to students who are willing to participate in the National Day of Silence. And I also helped cut apart the cards they will hand out to explain why they are not speaking.

I listened to them talk about how the event has gotten a little bigger each year; this is the third year they have participated. I was saddened to hear not all the teachers at Sobrato are supportive of National Day of Silence. Vicky told me last year one of her teachers insisted she speak or she would be given detention. I took this opportunity to bring up the idea of changing mindset and how they have the power to make their campus what they want it to be.

Vicky told me she was disappointed because tomorrow, the day they are going to observe National Day of Silence, is also a rally day and all students are expected to participate. I suggested they ask if all the students choosing to partake in National Day of Silence could sit together at the rally and remain silent. I told her I thought it would be a great way to make a big impact on the student body. Hopefully, the administration will support this.

Our next meeting will be April 24, after spring break.

April 9, 2009 – April 28, 2009

After much too much time in front of the computer and with some help from my brother, Matt Gray, I decided to use WordPress to host the website. WordPress is primarily a blog site, but its features can be set up to closely resemble a more traditional website. While I was not planning to include a blog feature, I am pleased it has worked out that way.

Having a blog feature will make the site more dynamic and interactive, it will also allow the club advisor and officers to monitor traffic to the site and get feedback about their club. Another bonus of using WordPress is that it is free, although I did choose to purchase the domain name sobratogsa.org, allowing the website to be found more easily if someone were to do an internet search by the club name. I covered the initial cost of $15 per year for the domain name and the club will pick up the tab when it is time to renew.

The website is functional and just needs some minor adjustments, such as adding the club officers' names, updating the events section, and improving the quality of the header image, which may be replaced with a photo of club members.

I did not meet with club members or Ms. Smit on April 24, but plan to on April 29.

Wednesday, April 29, 2009

Agenda:
- Present website for approval, discuss any necessary changes
- Take picture for header or discuss other images
- Record officer names and positions
- Ask about any upcoming events and response to National Day of Silence
- Discuss plans for advertising website on campus
- Who will blog and/or update site?

Summary:
My plans to meet with the GSA club were thwarted. They are taking the STAR tests this week and the schedule is different, so they are not having a meeting today. ☹

I e-mailed Ms. Smit and asked her to check out the website and shared the above agenda with her. She told me using students for a picture could be problematic because we would have to check their records to see if their parents signed a waiver stating their image could be used on the internet. We decided it makes more sense to stick with a graphic for the header right now. We plan to meet next week to wrap things up.

Wednesday, May 6, 2009

Agenda:
- Present website for approval, discuss any necessary changes
- Record officer names and positions
- Ask about any upcoming events and response to National Day of Silence
- Discuss plans for advertising website on campus
- Who will blog and/or update site?

Summary:
I showed up today and Ms. Smit forgot I was coming. She explained she is overextended and very stressed out and simply forgot about our meeting. She had some other students in her classroom she was tutoring and said I was welcome to wait around and see if any of the GSA members came by.

I waited for 15 minutes and left.

I e-mailed Ms. Smit explaining that I have deadlines and need to get the website and links finalized. She responded and apologized for her lack of availability. She told me she viewed the website and thought everything looked fine. She also said she had put the word out that I needed to meet with them in the next few days and would get back to me as soon as she knew when everyone could get together. Apparently, I am not the only one with a lot to do right now.

Status Update:
As of Friday, May 8, I am still waiting to meet with the club members to go over the above agenda. I told Ms. Smit that Tuesday was the last possible day for it to happen. I also asked that she provide me with the information I need to make the final updates via e-mail, if necessary. I plan to make the requests myself for linking the GSA website to the both high school's website and the GSA Network's directory. I will c.c. Ms. Smit on those emails and hopefully that will be taken care of early next week.

Appendix A

Anonymous survey of GSA club members at Ann Sobrato H.S.

Please indicate what grade you're in by circling one of the choices:

9th   10th   11th   12th

How would you characterize the environment for LGBTQ students at Sobrato?

Please rate the overall effectiveness of the SOGI training in creating a safer and more supportive environment for all students, especially LGBTQ.

          1   2   3   4   5

 Not effective   Somewhat   Very effective
                                      effective

In your opinion, is there more that could or should be done to build a supportive school environment for LGBTQ students? Please be specific.

Why did you join the GSA club?

Survey Results

Grade Level
| 9th | 10th | 11th | 12th |

9th   10th   11th   12th
2 students   2 students   9 students   1 student

Characterization of campus environment for LGBTQ students at Sobrato.

Five respondents said that heterosexual students were not supportive or tolerant of LGBTQ students.

Three respondents said LGBTQ students are open about their sexuality.

Two respondents said everyone on campus is safe.

One respondent characterized the campus environment as semi-friendly for lgbtq, another said somewhat tolerant of lgbtq, another said somewhat comfortable for lgbtq, and another said there was not much support for lgbtq students.

Only one respondent characterized the campus environment as good, no discrimination toward lgbtq students.

Overall effectiveness of SOGI training in creating a safer and more supportive environment for all students, especially LGBTQ.

Six respondents rated the SOGI training less than somewhat effective.

Five respondents rated the SOGI training somewhat effective.

One respondent rated it greater than somewhat effective.

Two respondents rated it as very effective.

What more could or should be done to build a supportive school environment for LGBTQ students?

Answers fell into two general categories: things the GSA and students could do and things the school could do.

GSA could be bigger and advertise more, while students could be heard more and put rainbows everywhere.

The school could have more supportive teachers, more people for lgbtq students to talk to, place more emphasis on lgbtq student needs, and provide more lessons and more discussion about lgbtq youth.

Why did you join the GSA?

-Informative and does a lot.

-Openly bisexual young woman who believes no one should be afraid because of who they are.

-To support gay people (answer given by 4 respondents)

-Supportive of any kind of difference

-Have a lot of gay, questioning, bisexual friends (2 respondents)

-No one should be treated differently

-To promote tolerance, change peoples' thoughts about gays and lesbians

-To fight for rights of minorities

Appendix B

Molly Edgar

From:	Molly Edgar
Sent:	Tuesday, March 31. 2009 12:21 PM
To:	Sybil Smit
Cc:	Debbie Padilla
Subject:	GSA club website

Sybil,

Katie, the student at CSU Monterey Bay who is working with the GSA Club, asked me for guidelines on creating a GSA website, and having that linked to the Sobrato website. After talking with Debbie about it, this is the answer:

- As the advisor of the club, you are responsible for approving the website and its content. The content must be appropriate for high school aged children and within Board policy.
- Any questionable content must be reviewed and approved or not approved by you.
- Once Katie has the GSA website up and running, you may through Teresa Desmond or me that a link be put on our Sobrato website.

I gave this same information to Katie via voicemail on her cell today.

Thanks,

Molly Edgar
Secretary to Principal Deborah Padilla
Ann Sobrato High School
401 Burnett Ave.
Morgan Hill, CA 95037
Phone: (408)201-6201 Fax: (408)465-2187

gay straight alliance
OF SOBRATO HIGH SCHOOL

Welcome to Sobrato High School's Gay-Straight Alliance website and blog!

April 30, 2009 at 11:05 am · Filed under

Uncategorized

This site is intended to give information about our club such as upcoming events and meetings. We've also included links to local resources for LGBTQ youth and their straight allies. Have a look around and let us know what you think.

💬 Comments

Pages

- By-Laws of the Sobrato GSA
- Calendar of Events
- Club Officers & Faculty Advisor
- Local LGBTQ Resources
- Meetings
- Mission of Sobrato GSA

Archives

- April 2009

Categories

- Uncategorized

About

Links

- Billy DeFrank LGBT Community Center
- California Safe Schools Coalition
- Community Solutions
- GLSEN
- GSA Network
- PFLAG San Jose

Search

Search

Meta

- Log in
- Entries RSS
- Comments RSS

Credits

Get a free blog at WordPress.com

| Theme: Fjords by Peterandrej