
A Historical Approach to the Progression of LGBTQ Treatment and Acceptance at the University of Central Florida

JACOB SMITH

Produced in Angela Rounsaville's Fall 2013 ENC 1102

Introduction

In today's society there is often a stigma surrounding the people that identify as homosexual and they frequently find themselves labeled as second-class citizens in a majority of the United States of America. Before I introduce my research about the University of Central Florida's (UCF) history, I have constructed a timeline of the major Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning (LGBTQ) community's milestones in the nation's history from 1952 to 2013. I think that it is important to show the milestones the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning community has made over the years as a way to relate the nation's history to the local history of UCF. Research into the development and behaviors of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Questioning community is just starting to receive more attention. In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association listed homosexuality as a "sociopathic personality disturbance" in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) that needed treatment from board-certified doctors and psychiatrists who often used electroshock conversion therapy in insane asylums. It was not until 1974 that the American Psychiatric Association stopped considering homosexuality a psychiatric disorder. Now, society is progressing towards changing the rights of and attitudes held towards homosexuals.

The next major milestone was the United States of America's military acceptance of homosexuals, which ultimately led to the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" (DADT). The U.S. military did not discriminate against closeted homosexuals by denying them the right to serve their country; however, under DADT policy enacted in 1993 under the Department of Defense, the military barred openly gay or bisexual men and women from serving. This policy prohibited senior officers from asking soldiers their sexual orientation (hence the "Don't Ask" part of the name). This policy also prohibited existing soldiers from disclosing their sexual orientation or discussing homosexual relationships while they served in the military (hence the "Don't Tell" part of the name). "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" was repealed on September 20, 2011 by a federal appeals court which allowed openly gay or bisexual men and women the right to serve their country.

The path towards adoption equality has taken longer than the military's acceptance of the LGBTQ community; however, there has been significant movement towards adoption equality. Since it was previously not even considered an option because of the fear that having two homosexual parents would increase the likelihood that a child would be gay, many states passed

legislation to prohibit homosexuals from adopting (LeBlanc, 2006). But now states are allowing homosexuals the right to adopt children because it is being considered a hidden resource (Ryan & Cash, 2004). There are thousands of children in orphanages and the foster care system, so why not let couples that are not biologically able to have children adopt and raise some of these children? It has been estimated in the 2010 national census that there are 48,500 same-sex couples in Florida alone who could have the desire to adopt children.

Much like the path towards adoption equality, the fight for approval of same-sex marriage has also not been an easy task. Following the passage of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) in 1996 under then-President Clinton, the federal definition of marriage was limited to a marriage between two heterosexuals (one man and one woman). This federal law lasted for nearly seventeen years before the Supreme Court declared it unconstitutional under the Due Process Clause of the Fifth Amendment. Thus, as of June 26, 2013, same-sex couples would receive rights, including a long list of protections and responsibilities, which were previously reserved only for heterosexual couples; however, due to the broad decision that was made by the court, there are still many unanswered questions (Soubly & Walsh, 2013). Now that the federal government is allowing homosexuals the right to get married and states are allowing them to adopt, homosexuals can start the family they may have always dreamed about.

Just within the past nine years, more and more people have been going to search engines like Google to search about topics such as gay marriage because of the increasing amounts of media coverage. The reason behind this surge in search queries includes Massachusetts' approval of same-sex marriage by a court decision in 2004. Since then, thirteen more states have approved same-sex marriage. Connecticut (2008), Iowa (2009), California (2013), New Jersey (2013), New Mexico (2013), and Utah (2013) approved same-sex marriage by a court decision. Vermont (2009), New Hampshire (2010), New York (2011), Delaware (2013), Minnesota (2013), Rhode Island (2013), Hawaii (2013) and Illinois (2013) approved same-sex marriage by state legislature. Washington (2012), Maine (2012), and Maryland (2013) approved same-sex marriage by popular vote. Those states along with the District of Columbia and several Native American tribal jurisdictions cover over 36% of the United States of America's population.

As Figure 1 shows, I have limited my analysis of the number of searches for the term "gay marriage" to the city of Orlando and Florida because these areas are in direct contact with the UCF community. Since Florida is one of the most populous states in the country, I am interested to see its outlook on homosexuals. Even though the graph shows progress, homosexuals still do not have full equality. It is important to look into my own local history because it can provide the community with a sense of how the community fits into their nation's history.

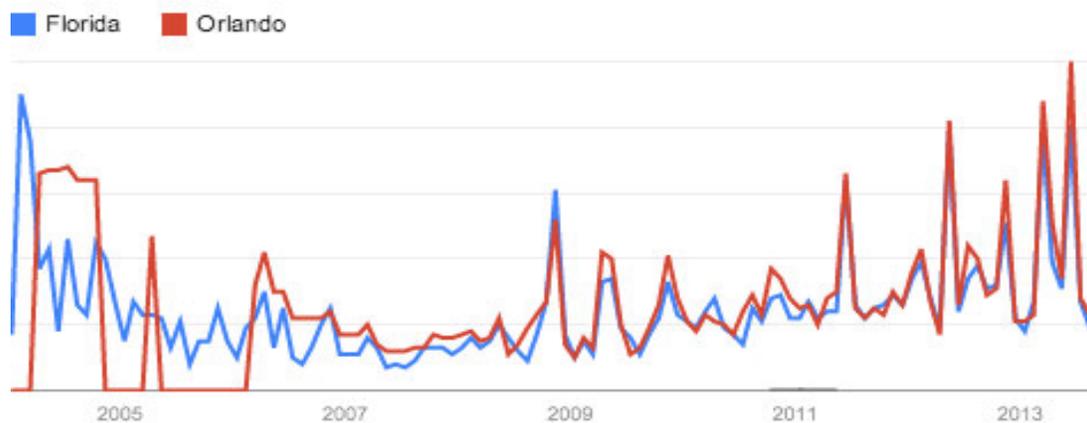


Figure 1: A graph describing the number of Google searches over time for the term "gay marriage" from 2004 to the present.

Specifically, I am interested in determining if UCF has progressed in terms of fair treatment and acceptance for the LGBTQ community. I am focusing on UCF because it was established after the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, so that means it should have had a clean slate free of previous decades of preconceived notions and traditions. To do so, I have conducted a year-by-year historical observation of UCF since it first opened its doors to students just fifty years ago. I have found that while it took some time for the LGBTQ community to feel confident enough to “come out of the closet,” they have received a substantial amount of support and acceptance from the enormous community that is UCF.

Methods

How has UCF changed in terms of fair treatment and acceptance for the LGBTQ community? To answer this question, I first made a visit to the Special Collections and University Archives located in the John C. Hitt Library on campus. I sorted through expenditure reports and general interoffice memos from the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Union (GLBSU) all while taking down jottings and pictures of important figures. The material I was sorting through was not giving me the information I desired. I honestly felt a little discouraged and thought that maybe there was not going to be enough information to write a paragraph, let alone an entire research paper.

Upon my second visit, I found two interesting documents: a lawsuit and a Newcomer’s Packet. The lawsuit was a short feud between UCF and Gay Community Services over the right to hold a three-day conference on campus. The Newcomer’s Packet was a collection of important and significant historical information given to new members of the GLBSU in 1994.

It was not until my third visit to the archives that I found the articles I was looking for. I found a film made by the then GLBSU faculty advisor Ken Kazmerski which essentially had a timeline of the club’s activities and breakthroughs from 1976 to 2009. I used this film as my primary source of information detailing the account of the club to relate how UCF was progressing in terms of fair treatment and acceptance.

Because UCF is a relatively new school, it is also important to look at the years leading up to its founding in order to understand the environment in which the college was built. Since the GLBSU film did not cover material prior to 1976, I kept searching in hopes of finding more information. A professor of mine mentioned a film that was made by a student and his professor in an honors course right here at UCF called *The Committee*. The film covered the period between 1956 and 1964, which were the years leading up to UCF’s founding. I decided to include this information because it would provide information about the environment in which the university was founded.

Through the two films and the Newcomer’s Packet, I have constructed a timeline of the LGBTQ community here at UCF in order to understand the progression of the community’s acceptance and fair treatment.

I have found that while it took some time for the LGBTQ community to feel confident enough to “come out of the closet,” they have received a substantial amount of support and acceptance from the enormous community that is UCF.

Results

In this section, I will give a more detailed breakdown of all of my findings in order to

understand how UCF has progressed in terms of fair treatment and acceptance of the LGBTQ community. I will then use this information to decide if the UCF has progressed at a level that was equivalent to, if not ahead of, the nation's progression.

The Committee was about the Johns Committee. Between 1956 and 1964, the Johns Committee fired and expelled more than 200 suspected gay and lesbian professors and students from Florida's state universities. While the "witch-hunt" was happening, suspected gay and lesbian professors and students would be taken into interrogation rooms to be questioned for hours on end, often without food, water, or bathroom breaks. The suspected individuals would be told that someone had outed them and that they were already facing firing or expulsion, so they might as well come clean even though no one had, in fact, outed them.

This "witch-hunt" continued for nearly 8 years before the Johns Committee was disbanded because media exposure led to public outrage that the committee had overstepped its mandate. After this disbandment, Florida singer and beauty queen Anita Bryant brought on a new wave of attacks on homosexuals during the 1970s (Frank, 2013). Bryant thought that if children saw a homosexual male, they would consider him a role model to look up to. Bryant was considered by many gay media outlets to be the embodiment of homophobia and using her publicity as spokesperson for the Florida Citrus Commission negatively. This ultimately led to the lapse of her contract with the Florida Citrus Commission in 1979. While *The Committee* was being made, a number of Johns Committee and Bryant survivors were interviewed; however, a majority of them declined to be filmed out of fear of reprisal.

The reason why I include *The Committee* in this discussion was because I knew that it was going to cover the decade leading up to the founding of UCF as well as its first few years in operation. As the film showed, the decade leading up to the founding of the university was not an easy one. Any person suspected of being a homosexual could be fired or expelled without any solid evidence from the police. The aftermath of this witch-hunt was felt for decades, which is why it took the GLBSU so long before it began its activism and presence on campus. Also, some of the aftermath is being felt today as some people are still afraid to come out of the closet as a homosexual because it's had such a stigma for so long.

Ken Kazmerski's film about the GLBSU provided the majority of the information about how UCF has progressed in terms of fair treatment and acceptance for the LGBTQ community. The film covered the years between 1976 and 2009, which are represented in the timeline in the appendix. In order to cover such a large span of time, I am going to break down the events of the GLBSU by four sections of importance: pre-coming out, coming out, community support, and current times in order to better understand both the progression of the GLBSU community and also the rest of the university community.

The pre-coming out era lasted from 1976 until 1993. It is characterized by the GLBSU (formerly called the Gay Student Association and officially sanctioned on March 10, 1976) having to deal with the aftermath of the Johns Committee witch-hunt and the anti-homosexual attacks led by Anita Bryant. During these almost two decades, members of the GLBSU met off campus at members' apartments to hold their meetings and festivities. They held their meetings off campus because they desired anonymity and feared harassment from their peers and community. Unfortunately, this led to an absence of information regarding this large period of time.

The coming out era lasted from 1993 until 1995 where the GLBSU came out of the closet (like many homosexuals must do) and began to mark their presence on campus. On October 11, 1993, the GLBSU set up its first table promoting National Coming Out Day in front of the library on campus. This marked the club's first major step towards more visible university involvement in the nearly two decades since its official sanctioning. After this the club began participating in

events that would inform the community of the LGBTQ community through special events such as Orlando's Pride Parade, LGBTQ history month, and UCF's Diversity Week. These events not only served to inform the broader community of Orlando but also functioned as an important way for the GLBSU to transition into a notable influence on campus and in the community.

During the coming out era, the GLBSU gave new members Newcomer Packet in 1994. This packet included several sheets of paper each a different color of the rainbow, just like one of the LGBTQ community's symbols. These documents not only listed the club's bylaws but also included some interesting facts about the LGBTQ community. The reason behind including facts about the community was that, in 1994, coming out as homosexual was still taboo. The Newcomer Packet functioned as an encyclopedia of sorts for new members to learn vital information, such as the major gay symbols and two pages debunking common myths about homosexuals.

The community support era lasted from 1995 until 2008 and is defined by when the UCF community truly began to accept the GLBSU by offering both financial and moral support. On April 6, 1996, the GLBSU held its first gay prom ("the Gayla"). Since a majority of the club members could not go to their high school proms with their desired partners, the GLBSU prom was an attempt to make up for that.

November 13, 1997 marked yet another major step for the GLBSU when the Campus Activities Board provided funds for the second annual Diva Invasion. This event brought awareness about issues within the LGBTQ community by having a night filled with drag queens performing dance routines and comedy. Such progress continued on in 1999 when the GLBSU received its first major budget from the Student Government Association. From that point on, the GLBSU increased its participation on campus by demonstrating for equal rights for gays and participating in its first homecoming parade in 2008.

The current era is from 2009 to the present and is marked by the club's reassessment of its role on campus and its name. Previously, the GLBSU's name only indicated that it was for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals, but the club realized that there was so much more of their community. This sparked the club to rethink their name and change it to EQUAL because they felt that it would better reflect the club's goals of equality and include all of the LGBTQ community. In 2013, EQUAL partnered with the Student Government Association's Pride Coalition to develop places on campus that the LGBTQ community could feel safe in. Together, they created Pride Commons, which is an entire room, much like a dormitory's common room, in which the community can gather. For the transgendered and questioning community, EQUAL and Pride Coalition also established several gender-neutral bathrooms on campus as an anti-discrimination policy.

Just within the short fifty years since UCF's founding, the club that was once known as the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Union has changed its name to EQUAL and transitioned into a prominent role on campus. While in the beginning they would meet off campus due to a desire for anonymity and a fear of harassment, EQUAL now holds all of their general meetings on campus.

Conclusion

After looking at fifty years of UCF history and the decade or so leading up to its founding, it is safe to say that the university has had quite an interesting history. My original idea—that, because UCF was established after the Civil Rights of the 1960s, it should have had a clean slate free of previous decades of preconceived notions and traditions—did not hold up. While I can't be sure if that was because of policies the university had enacted or just the general environment and times, it took the GLBSU nearly two decades for its members to feel confident and safe enough to show their presence on campus.

The history of the LGBTQ community has not been an easy one. The community has faced countless attacks just within the past several decades. From a witch-hunt to attacks led by a beauty queen and everything in between, the LGBTQ community has survived it all. Because of their ability

to make it through these hard times, society is now progressing and slowly giving these individuals the rights they desire.

While it did take some time for the GLBSU to feel comfortable enough to announce their presence on campus, they have made huge steps forward. The GLBSU has informed the broader community in Orlando about issues within the LGBTQ community through events such as Diversity Week and Diva Invasion. The GLBSU has even come so far as to notice the need to change their name to EQUAL in order to better reflect members' goals and community.

If it had not been for clubs and activists like the GLBSU then none of the accomplishments listed earlier may have happened. The reason why society has progressed towards more equality is because clubs and organizations have stopped letting homosexuality be taboo. They have brought it up to the forefront of the media's focus and therefore have forced the change that should have never been denied in the first place. We are now seeing some legislation passed that benefits the LGBTQ community, but behind all the national attention, are there other clubs and organizations acting at the grassroots level in order to facilitate this change, similar to the role played by the GLBSU at UCF?

Works Cited

- Cassanello, R., & Mills, L. (Directors). (2011). *The Committee* [DVD]. United States of: University of Central Florida.
- Frank, G. (2013). "The Civil Rights of Parents": Race and conservative politics in Anita Bryant's campaign against gay rights in 1970s Florida. *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 22(1), 126-160. University of Texas Press.
- Kazmerski, K. (Director). (2010). *The History of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Union* [DVD]. United States: University of Central Florida.
- LeBlanc, J. (2006). My two moms: an analysis of the status of homosexual adoption and the challenges to its acceptance. *Journal of Juvenile Law*, 27, 95-107.
- Ryan, S. D., & Cash, S. (2004). Adoptive families headed by gay or lesbian parents: a threat. .or hidden resource?. *University of Florida Journal of Law & Public Policy*, 15(3), 443-65.
- Soubly, D. M., & Walsh, N. (2013). Do the Supreme Court's same-sex marriage decisions raise more questions than they resolve? *Benefits Law Journal*, 26(3), 4-34.

Jacob Smith

Jacob Smith is a junior in the Burnett Honors College at the University of Central Florida. He is currently majoring in Biomedical Sciences with a minor in Health Sciences. He hopes to one day go to dental school upon graduation. Jacob was his high school's salutatorian and has been recognized for earning places on the Dean's List and President's Honor Roll since his start at the University of Central Florida. He is also excited to continue his education at the University of Central Florida and to see where that takes him.

Appendix: Timeline of the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Union (1976-2009)

