

## **Is This Campus Gay-Friendly?**

By Stephanie Rosenbloom  
From The New York Times  
September 14, 2006

THIS fall, stacked amid the hefty new college admissions books like "The Best 361 Colleges" and "Financial Aid for the Utterly Confused" is a guide about an entirely different sort of college acceptance. "The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students" (Alyson Books) profiles 100 of the country's "best campuses" for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students, and it arrives at a time when gay students are more vocal and visible.

"It's looking more like half or most gay and lesbian Americans are coming out before they get to college," said Bruce Steele, the guide's editor in chief. "Unlike in the past, the experience they will have on a campus is something they can think about before they go to college." Among the top 20 colleges in the guide are the [University of Pennsylvania](#) and the [University of Southern California](#).

Lance Sun, 17, of Flushing, Queens, said he had purchased the glossy yellow guide as a supplementary resource to help him gauge how well he might fit in at various campuses. "I remember a few months ago I was looking for a Web site or guide," he said. "I tried really hard and I couldn't find one." But a few weeks ago he received an e-mail message from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, a national education organization, about the new guide. "I was really excited," Lance said. "It was perfect timing."

There is ample evidence that in recent years gay students have become more outspoken about their identity. Most Gay-Straight Alliances registered with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network are in high schools, and today there are more than 3,000 of them, up from 750 in September 2001.

Grant Hoover, a 21-year-old senior at the University of Southern California who was the executive director of the university's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Assembly last year, said the Advocate guide is "definitely a step in the right direction. I think it reflects growing visibility on a national level," he said. "And a growing need."

For decades college guides have offered advice on subjects as varied as tuition, dorms and even where students can buy the best marijuana. Yet books devoted entirely to gay students' experiences have been scarce. New York University Press published "The Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Students' Guide to Colleges, Universities and Graduate Schools," but that was in 1994.

Kevin Jennings, the executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network and a former high school teacher, said the Advocate guide is the first book that really takes on the questions of non-straight students comprehensively.

The Advocate guide, about 400 pages, does not rank the schools but has a Gay Point Average Official Campus Checklist, which scores campuses (up to 20 points) on their policies, programs and practices affecting lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people. That includes whether a school has non-discrimination statements, if there are housing options or themes, if there is a student group devoted to the population,

and if there is a variety of related courses. Each profile also has a “Fun Queer Stuff to Know” box that includes information like “best LGBT-cool athletic sport” and “best LGBT-accepting religious/spiritual organization.”

For many non-straight students the guide is a sign of how progressive many American campuses have become and proves that the students do not necessarily have to go to a big city college to feel comfortable. It can help parents find schools where their children will not only be safe, but welcomed. And, Mr. Steele said, it may make colleges and universities more aware of one another’s practices and foster more change.

Yet several students said they were surprised their schools were in the guide because they still have a long way to go to stem homophobia. Jeremy Marshall, a 20-year-old junior at [Duke University](#) and the president of Duke Allies, a student organization for those who support lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, said he was surprised Duke was listed among the top 20 friendliest schools. “I don’t think Duke has warranted that position yet,” he said. “We were ranked one of the most homophobic schools in 1999,” by Princeton Review.

Mr. Marshall said he believes tolerance will improve eventually, but he was unhappy with the funding to Duke Allies this year and said that homophobic slurs can still be heard on campus. The school has several gay awareness programs that make it look “good on paper,” Mr. Marshall said, yet “the real challenge is changing the hearts and minds of students.”

But Maddie Dewar, 22, of Durham, N.C., who graduated from Duke this year and was president of the Alliance of Queer Undergraduates at Duke, said that while being gay at Duke is more challenging than being gay at [N.Y.U.](#), progress has been made. “Four years ago I wouldn’t have recommended it,” she said. “Now I think it’s a prime opportunity, and a rare one.”

She said the school deserves praise for providing funding to the small group of students and faculty who wanted to stop living an “underground” kind of lifestyle amid what she described as the school’s “good old boys” culture. And when the guidebook came out, some 200 administrators, students, faculty and staff gathered to celebrate Duke’s inclusion, said Janie Long, the director of the school’s Center for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Life.

Because every student’s campus experience is subjective, the guide has a top 20 “best of the best,” but does not rank the 100 colleges and universities included. “It’s really not possible to say one university is three notches better than another in terms of total gay and lesbian experience,” Mr. Steele said. The guide is largely based on student perspectives. Nominations were gathered from 680 campuses across the country, and more than 5,500 online interviews were conducted to help determine which campuses made the cut.

Jamal Brown, a 20-year-old junior at [Dartmouth College](#) in Hanover, N.H., said he was shocked and happy to learn that Dartmouth was included. “I think that it’s showing that the work that we’re doing is actually getting done,” he said, referring to events that promote awareness and attempt to root out homophobia. Still, there is plenty of “institutionalized homophobia,” he said. “Nowadays people aren’t going to

say 'fag' or 'queer' or something outright," Mr. Brown said. "But when you get behind closed doors, you still have that."

During a welcome-back barbecue at the University of Southern California, Maureen Osborne, a 21-year-old senior who is on the executive board of the university's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Assembly, placed the Advocate guide on a table. She said many students picked it up and remarked that they had not realized they had it so good. "We had no idea how far ahead we were than everyone else," Ms. Osborne said, referring to the fact that U.S.C. and Penn were the only two schools to have a Gay Point Average of 20 out of 20. "We were really excited," she said, though she said she wished her school's profile had focused more on the activist, academic side of gay life on campus instead of the party scene. But, she admitted, "our dances are amazing."

Mr. Steele said there are probably another hundred colleges that could have been included in the book. One of those is Harvard, he said, which did not have a policy that prohibited discrimination against transgender students when the guide was being compiled, but does now.

Smith College, a liberal arts college for women in Northampton, Mass., that has a substantial lesbian population, is not in the guide, either. "Maybe it did not have enough supporters in the initial unscientific nomination process," Mr. Steele said.

But though the new guide will probably make some students' college searches easier, everyone from Mr. Steele to college advisers to students said that, as with any college guide, it is important to check out the schools in person. "What the Advocate College Guide assesses is really the effort that's being put forth by the colleges themselves to make their LGBT students comfortable," Mr. Steele said.

A Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network survey released in April that gathered reports from students 13 to 20 who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender in America's high schools found that about 75 percent of students heard derogatory remarks frequently or often at school. More than a third experienced physical harassment at school based on their sexual orientation.

"When people feel included they can focus on learning," Mr. Jennings of the education network said. "When they feel isolated and marginalized they can't. And what LGBT students want is what everyone else wants when they go to college: They want to feel like they belong."