

Lesbian and Bisexual Alumnae Survey: 1996
Final Report

Last January, the Advisory Committee decided to conduct a survey of lesbian/bisexual alumnae. The survey was mailed in June, and it asked questions about experiences while attending Mount Holyoke and since graduating from the College. Permission to use the mailing list for the Lesbian Alumnae Network (LAN) was obtained. The Committee is grateful to all who participated, and we believe that the information gathered will be valuable in helping us to continue the work of improving the quality of life for lesbian/gay/bisexual students, staff, faculty, and alumnae in the Mount Holyoke community.

Of the 553 surveys mailed, we received 265 (a 48% response rate) from lesbian/bisexual alumnae. Most were young and from more recent classes. Only 34.9% of the respondents graduated from Mount Holyoke prior to 1980, while 65.1% were from 1980-1995 classes (39%, 1980-89; 26.1%, 1990-95). Frances Perkins Scholars comprised 3% of the respondents, so most of them were of traditional college age when they attended MHC.

The Committee used the mailing list from the Mount Holyoke Lesbian Alumnae Network (LAN), which was begun over ten years ago. Since we do not know how many of these alumnae are from each class, we cannot make assumptions about the response rate in terms of age and class year other than to suppose that these figures are somewhat representative of the alumnae who receive the newsletter, since our response rate was high (48%). Suggesting comfort levels (based on age and class) for completing and returning the survey may be erroneous.

Nearly half (48.7%) of the alumnae were involved in political activities while attending Mount Holyoke. Over half (57.7%) of the alumnae were employed at the College, and 41.6% were involved in Athletics. Other activities were fairly represented as well, and it appears that lesbian/bisexual alumnae were very immersed in student activities.

The Committee broke down the responses to questions about social life and sexual orientation identity by class years as follows: Classes before 1970, 1970-74, 1975-79, 1980-84, 1985-89, Classes of the 1990s. As may be expected, with increased social awareness and acceptance in more recent years, it appears that the quality of life for lesbians and bisexual women at Mount Holyoke has dramatically improved. Classes prior to 1970 (44 responses) described "the availability of social life for lesbians/bisexuals on campus" as nonexistent in 84.1% of the cases, while a mere 1.8% (from 56 responses) found that to be the case in the 1990s. Curiously, the most striking changes occurred from the periods of 1970-74 (77.8% nonexistent) to 1975-79 (only 29.0% nonexistent) and again from 1975-79 to 1980-84 (only 2.6% nonexistent). These figures may reflect the increasing politicization of feminist and lesbian issues in the world at large, and the formation of socio-political groups on campus (The Women's Center, Lesbian Alliance).

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Of the 265 respondents, 71.2% were aware of their sexual orientation while attending Mount Holyoke. Again, the figures jump the most during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Over thirty-one (31.8) percent in classes prior to 1970 were aware, while only 22.2% of the 1970-74 group were aware! While this may seem like a *regression*, what we actually see here is a large increase in the "unsure" category. While 54.5% (classes prior to 1970) say "no" to being aware and 11.4% were "unsure", during 1970-74 only 33.3% said "no" and 38.9% were "unsure". This indicates the beginning of an awakening period. From 1975 on, the figures evolve much as we would expect them to, with 92.9% of the classes of the 1990s being aware of their sexual orientation while attending Mount Holyoke.

Sadly, 0% of the respondents who were aware of their sexual orientation from all classes prior to 1975 felt comfortable being open about it on campus (although a small percentage were comfortable "sometimes"). While the comfort level has improved over the years, the results of the survey indicate that Mount Holyoke is still far from perfect in providing lesbian and bisexual students with an ideal environment. Even in the classes of the 1990s, 24.5% of the respondents were comfortable only *sometimes*. Of course, that number was near 50% throughout the 1980s, so things have certainly improved; however, the Committee will continue to work towards a 100% comfort level.

The respondents who were open about their sexual orientation all or some of the time at Mount Holyoke were most open to students in their dorms. Interestingly, the respondents experienced both the most positive (36.1%) and the most negative (11.4%) interactions with this group. Second in the most positive interactions was with the faculty (33.3%), which also had the lowest negative rating (0.9%). While not all the respondents came out to faculty members, those who did clearly gained from it, and it affirms that Mount Holyoke has some worthy and supportive role models in faculty positions.

Respondents were given an opportunity to share ideas about what services and opportunities may have improved the quality of life for them and other lesbian/bisexual students on campus. While every response was helpful, in the interest of space, we will share with you a sampling that covers a wide range:

"1969-73. Anything would have helped."

"Looking back, I'd say it would have been helpful had there been a visible presence of lesbians & gays among faculty, staff and students as well as in the curriculum."

"More open campus statements that derogatory comments about lesbians/bisexuals are not acceptable."

"Having more interactions with lesbian and bi alumnae - our elders."

"Most important issue/service (and is lacking) support/understanding for women of color (Latina) who are afraid to come out because of guilt, religious reasons, and fear of negative family reaction. It is a very different experience for White, Latina, Black, Asian & Native American, even international, women. We need to address this."

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"Lesbian staff at the health center."

"More library resources, larger women's resource center, more support for students who were abandoned or harassed by their parents - including financial counseling."

"More LBA activities/socials with similar groups at other 5-college schools."

We have learned that some of the most repeated concerns are/were: a more educated staff (and actual lesbian presence) in health services (including counseling); a yearning for older, more established role models and confidantes (for students who fear ostracizing from other students but who need to talk with trusted adults); permanent space and SGA-funded organization(s) inclusive of ALL lesbians and bisexual women (not just a certain political type); a safe and supportive space and network for lesbians/bisexual women of color (dealing with issues specific to multiple identities); and a permanent paid lesbian/bisexual staff person and resource center.

Although nearly three-fourths of the respondents were aware of their sexual orientation when they were MHC students, over half (55.1%) were not out to their families during that time; however, a promising number (34.5%) were out to their families and they continued financial support. Unfortunately, 0.7% did suffer a withdrawal of financial support (and, we may presume, emotional and other familial support) as the result of coming out to their families. None of the respondents had to leave the College because of financial repercussions; however, the Committee does not assume that this reflects *every* student's experiences. If there are any such cases, they may not belong to LAN (our mailing list for the survey) because they left Mount Holyoke and do not know about the Network.

Lesbian/bisexual alumnae are "somewhat comfortable" to "comfortable" being open about their sexual orientation when they return to campus for the most part (67.7%). Only 8.6% of the total respondents are uncomfortable, while 21.3% have not returned to campus. Classes prior to 1970 are the most uncomfortable (22.7%), with classes in the 1990s being uncomfortable 0% of the time! Predictably, the level of comfort improves by increments towards the most recent classes.

While alumnae mostly have a strong (65.5%) to moderate (22.8%) continuing affiliation with the College, the affiliation with local alumnae in their areas is surprisingly weak in 74.2% of the cases. While not every area in and outside the country has a strong local Mount Holyoke alumnae club, many alumnae commented about feeling uncomfortable with mostly heterosexual members. Some of the respondents are "out" in their club, but only 6% have strong affiliations to local alumnae. Fortunately, the Alumnae Association has established a committee to address issues of inclusion, education, and resolution of conflicts concerning sexual orientation in clubs and classes. Those alumnae who are experiencing any such problems should contact the Alumnae Association; they have a resource list of club and class officers who will share their experiences and offer support.

Most of the respondents have stronger ties to specific individuals in classes other than their own, and while this may be true to some extent with the general population, as a marginalized group,

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we may presume that lesbian and bisexual students are likely to find affiliations based on comfort levels and mutual support rather than class group.

The achievements of lesbian and bisexual alumnae since leaving the College are impressive, with 65.2% receiving higher academic degrees after graduating from Mount Holyoke. Workplace environments in the "real world" are not ideal by any means, but 61.4% of the respondents find their workplaces to be at the very least supportive in some areas. Neutral and negative environments are low (4.9% and 3.0%, respectively), while 16.9% are not open about their sexual orientation.

Finally, we asked the respondents to share experiences or comments that they feel are important. Below is a sampling:

"I think MHC has become much more accepting of GLB's just in the past 2-3 years."

"I would be willing to contribute to a scholarship fund/emergency money fund to help keep lesbian/bisexual students at MHC who've been financially cut off by their families because they are gay - and I'd bet my parents would contribute, too."

"I was expelled from a Ph.d. program (elsewhere) because I was a lesbian."

"I am pleased to hear that MHC now has same-sex partnership benefits for faculty/staff. It is important for academic institutions to lead the way."

"Having a community was important; on the whole, the other students on campus were not supportive, and some downright hostile. Fortunately, there were always faculty and administrators who were supportive."

"I am the Treasurer of my class and an enthusiastic MHC supporter."

"I've been involved in a local MHC club for over 30 years. Everyone knew me as a proper, married homemaker. Since I have divorced and been with another MHC grad for 5 years, attending meetings has made me apprehensive - alumnae my age and older don't imagine that there could be lesbians among them. They make derogatory remarks. Perhaps we are slowly changing their perceptions by our continued presence."

"Two young women in the class ahead of me my sophomore year were expelled because they were lesbians. It was very intimidating."

"Overall, MHC provided a supportive environment for my coming out, and I was able to do my own thing."

The Mount Holyoke College Presidential Advisory Committee on Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Issues is very grateful for all the information that alumnae gave us in this survey. We believe that our work is crucial, and the more knowledge we have about issues and concerns, the better we will be able to carry out our mission and goals. Thank you, everyone.

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