

# College applicants to list orientation

The Associated Press

ELMHURST, Ill. — Gary Rold didn't necessarily consider himself a pioneer when he decided that Elmhurst College would begin asking applicants about their sexual orientation.

"I thought from the recruitment standpoint we might be more proactive" in attracting gay and lesbian students, said Rold, admissions dean at the small, private liberal arts school tucked in a middle-class Chicago suburb. He also wanted to make sure the students got any help they needed. "I realized that many of them come to college feeling really isolated and alienated."

Rold's decision touched off a flurry of publicity after advocates for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students lauded Elmhurst as the first in the nation to ask applicants about sexual orientation — an idea that has gotten little traction elsewhere. Now the question is, will other colleges follow suit?

Advocates say that besides being a recruiting tool to help diversify campuses, openly assessing a school's LGBT population would make colleges more aware of needs such as finding tolerant roommates and providing appropriate health care. And it would send a positive message to prospective students who may have faced discrimination in high school.

But officials at other colleges, especially those that are large and well-known, say they don't need to ask because they already have reputations for being diverse and inclusive, and a student's sexual orientation would have no bearing on admission. Others wonder if some schools worry about the controversy such a question might generate.

Nevertheless, the idea of asking about sexual orientation is not likely to go away.

"Colleges have a responsibility to take care of students they admit so all can succeed academically; a lot of (LGBT) youth get to campuses ... and are largely invisible," said Shane Windmeyer, executive director of the national advocacy group

Campus Pride, who said asking applicants about sexual orientation should be as common as questions about race and ethnicity.

His group pushed for adding the question to The Common Application — a uniform document used by more than 450 colleges and universities, including some of the nation's most exclusive — but that group's board of directors rejected the idea earlier this year.

Schools already had other ways to signal support for LGBT students and for students to indicate their sexual orientation, said Rob Killion, executive director of The Common Application. What's more, some admissions officers and high school counselors worried the question could cause anxiety for some students, even though it would be optional.

"I think places like Elmhurst will be the vanguard," said Killion. "It will be good to get feedback from their applicants on whether the question is appealing or not. We're constantly changing as a society, so we'll see what happens."

Rold said Elmhurst, affiliated with the United Church of Christ — which officially supports same-sex marriage — will use the optional question to help increase diversity at its 2,900-student campus about 15 miles west of Chicago, to ensure it has the services LGBT students need and to consider them for scholarships.

The bottom line, he said, is to enrich the college experience for all students. A diverse environment is "the real world," he said.

The college received some complaints, including from within the conservative-leaning community and some supporters, but most feedback was positive, officials said.

Elmhurst students Ally Vertigan and Emily Ponchinskas, who is president of a campus group called Straights and Gays for Equality, say they're proud of their school.

"It's important if for the sole reason that Elmhurst is letting people know that diversity is more than just what color your

skin is or what language you speak," said Vertigan, a senior majoring in religion and Spanish.

Shannon Sullivan, executive director of the Illinois Safe Schools Alliance, a nonprofit that works with high school gay-straight alliances, said some colleges may be uncomfortable with the topic or afraid of offending people. "People sometimes think it's easier not to deal with it," she said.

Doris Dirks, coordinator of the Northwestern University LGBT Resource Center, said a campus advisory group has asked the private school to consider adding a sexual orientation question to its supplemental application.

"It's one of those potentially touchy issues," Dirks acknowledges, "but to my mind it's a diversity issue."

Penn State discussed whether to add the question "with some in favor and some suggesting it's not the best decision to make at this time," said Terrell Jones, vice provost for educational equity. So far, the university doesn't see the need, he said. Instead, the school touts its gay-friendly atmosphere in recruitment brochures, has a strong LGBT student resource center, "pride" ambassadors who give tours to prospective students, a scholarship for LGBT students and a presidential advisory commission on LGBT equity.

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