

Guide grades colleges on gay-friendly factor

By Jo Napolitano

Tribune staff reporter

Forget the traditional grade-point average. The creators of a college guide geared toward gay students have a new ranking system for universities: the gay-point average.

It's based on 20 factors, including whether or not the school has a coming-out week or if it extends domestic partner benefits to same-sex couples.

The book, "The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students," evaluates 100 colleges and universities across the country for their inclusiveness. Though it does not rank colleges against one another, each is given a G.P.A. of 1 to 20. The schools were recommended for inclusion by their gay students.

Locally, Columbia College rated a 10, while Northwestern and the University of Illinois at Chicago scored a 17. Northern Illinois University and U. of I. at Urbana-Champaign scored a 16, and DePaul got a 12.

The reference guide—published by Alyson Books in August, in conjunction with The Advocate, a gay-themed news magazine—offers a unique glimpse into each college with "outrageous factoids," highlighting noteworthy moments in lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender history at each school. According to the notation for Northwestern, the university "has a bit of glam for everyone. Even the College Republicans get a piece of the action by judging the annual drag show."

Each university profile includes the best party locale—for NIU Huskies, that would be Gay Night at Otto's Dance Club and Underground—as well as the best hangout, eating place, dorm and religious organization for LGBT students. It also lists the best place to check out the guys and ladies and includes quotes from students about life on campus.

The book features a top 20 list, but no Illinois schools made that ranking. Still, area university officials say they've made gay students a priority.

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—Helen Wood, director of Northwestern's Center for Student Involvement

Helen Wood, director of the Center for Student Involvement at Northwestern, said the university has an LGBT resource center and two LGBT groups on campus. The 2-year-old resource center attracts a growing number of visitors, she said.

"It's always important for students to feel comfortable, regardless of their affiliations," she said. "We see a lot of students asking for services and a lot of parents as well."

Jason Eby, 19, a sophomore at Northwestern, is a resource and outreach assistant at the LGBT center and an executive member of the school's Rainbow Alliance, an undergraduate advocacy group.

He said many gay students feel so comfortable at the university that they don't always seek assistance or membership in the school's LGBT groups.

"I think that's a testament to the greater [school] community," he said.

Chris Bylone, a graduate student at Eastern Michigan University, which earned an 18 in the guide, said he and many other gay students select colleges based in large part on the schools' interaction with the gay community.

"[LGBT students] select universities based on their inclusiveness... before they look at academic standings," Bylone said. "Even if it's the No. 1 school, if it's not safe, we won't go there. When I was applying to graduate schools, they had to have an LGBT center or I was not applying." Margie Cook, director of the LGBT resource center at NIU, said her school's group is particularly active. Students spent Wednesday handing out "Do Ask, Do Tell" buttons in honor of National Coming Out Day. The jab at the established military policy was meant to get students talking

about sexuality and acceptance, Cook said.

But the campus was not always so gay friendly.

Cook, who is a lesbian, attended the school in the mid-1980s, when many students weren't so eager to come out as gay. Back then, the campus' gay/lesbian student group wouldn't post the locations of any of its events for fear of harassment, she said. Instead, students had to call for information.

Many students who were involved in the school's lone gay advocacy group shied away from using their full names, Cook said.

Bruce Steele, editor of The Advocate at the time the guide was published, said LGBT students are more self-assured today than in previous generations.

"They're not so easily intimidated," he said. "They are looking for a book like this because they are so determined to be themselves that they want to go to a place where they will have a constructive and positive experience that will encompass their sexuality."

Vianny Saucedo, 16, a student at Taft High School in Chicago, said she isn't worried about safety. Everyone at her school knows she's a lesbian, and she has no plans to hide her sexuality from anyone in college.

"I'm pretty out there," she said.

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