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An Analysis of Asexual Identity Clubs and Their Role on College Campuses

By

Ellen Yope

Abstract: Identifying the lack of college asexuality clubs and the positive influence they have on students. Advocating for the creation of asexuality clubs at colleges and universities and the benefits they provide for students, socially and academically.

College is a time of unprecedented stress for most young adults. For most students, it is the first time in their lives where they are individually responsible for their own success. In *Thriving in Transitions: A Research-Based Approach to College Student Success*, the authors note that “first-year students transitioning from high school to college experience multiple changes in roles, routines, and relationships that continue throughout the first semester and even through the first year.”¹ They go on, “A student with a strong repertoire of coping skills and a significant support system who perceives the changes as a necessary part of a positive new future will experience a less traumatic stress reaction than will a student who lacks adequate coping skills and sufficient support...”² With students being so vulnerable in college, it seems only rational that colleges would be seeking any and all ways to retain students and make sure they thrive academically. One approach to this is student groups, more specifically student identity groups. Student groups of various kinds thrive in higher education institutions, and student identity groups are one subcategory of these. Identity groups are formed around affiliation with a similar chosen or assigned identity. These identities could include race, gender, religious affiliation, sexuality, etc. Some common examples of student identity groups include the African Student Association and Campus Crusaders for Christ. The organizations’ specific activities--activism, discussion, or evangelization, for example--matter less than that their membership is based on a common identity. College is perhaps the first time a student is discovering parts of their identity that were previously unknown to them. Student identity groups provide the double benefit of creating a

¹ Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions : A research-based approach to college student success*, 3.

² Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions : A research-based approach to college student success*, 3.

support group for students and reaffirming a student's identity. Both of these outcomes can improve student academic success, thus benefiting the university or college by extension. At this time, institutions are not recognizing the multitudes of identities students can identify with. One example is the lack of student identity groups surrounding asexuality.³ Higher education institutions that do not have asexuality student groups are missing out on the benefits they provide to both students and the school as an institution, and they are doing a disservice to their students if they are not competent allies.

Before arguing for the benefits of asexuality clubs on college campuses, it is necessary to provide some basic information on what asexuality is and why it is necessary to represent it. The Asexuality Visibility Education Network (AVEN), the most prominent educator and forum website on asexuality, defines asexuality this way:

“An asexual person does not experience sexual attraction – they are not drawn to people sexually and do not desire to act upon attraction to others in a sexual way. Unlike celibacy, which is a choice to abstain from sexual activity, asexuality is an intrinsic part of who we are, just like other sexual orientations.”

Asexuality can also be used as an umbrella term to include others who experience a lack of romantic attraction, or aromanticism, as well as other feelings similar to asexuality.

For the purposes of this paper, asexuality will be used as an umbrella term to refer broadly to these identities.⁴ Asexuality is a relatively new term. The identity as it is

³Rodriguez, N. M., Martino, W. J., Ingrey, J. C., Brockenbrough, E., & SpringerLink (Online service). (2016). *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (1st 2016. ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 19.

⁴Bogaert, A. F. (2012). *Understanding asexuality*, 85.

defined now, only began to appear in the early 1990s with the spread of the internet. Before the internet, people who were experiencing asexual feelings had little access to learn more about these feelings or connect with others who felt similarly. Thanks to the internet, people experiencing asexual feelings were able to connect and realize that there was no terminology to explain how they felt. This led to the creation of the asexual identity and internet communities devoted to asexuality. Because it is so relatively new in comparison to other identities, a large part of society does not know about the identity or understand that people can feel no sexual attraction. At face value, the asexual community may seem small, but the number of possible asexuals is surprisingly large. Researcher Anthony Bogaert theorizes that about 1% of the total human population is to some degree asexual⁵, meaning that 1 person in 100 experience some level of asexuality. Because asexuality is not at the forefront of our society, asexuals often feel alone or abnormal: "Our rarity forces many of us to go through life without the understanding and support of others like ourselves."⁶ To combat these feelings of isolation, asexual identity groups are necessary to educate and connect people who feel they might be part of the asexual community. In an interview, David Jay, the founder of AVEN, explains his thoughts on why creating community is so important:

"[Jay] explained at various times why he began the site. His reasons seem to reflect a number of the identity issues mentioned above. For example, one reason was personal: 'He was driven by memories of feeling alone.

As a teenager in St. Louis, he searched the Web for asexual and found

⁵ Bogaert, Anthony F. 2004. "Asexuality: Prevalence and Associated Factors in a National Probability Sample." *Journal of Sex Research* 41 (3): 279-287.

⁶ Bibr, C. (2018). *Julie sondra decker, the invisible orientation: An introduction to asexuality*. London, England: SAGE Publications. doi:10.1177/1363460717724156

only research on amoebas' (Bulwa, 2009, August 24). Another reason was educational—to help other asexual people understand more about themselves (Bulwa, 2009, August 24). Indeed, there are various stories of asexual people 'discovering themselves' through AVEN...It is also clear that, over time, Jay wanted to build a community that would enable asexual people to change the way the world (especially the medical world) views them. Thus, this last reason for developing AVEN is in line with (public) identities being a means of social and political change."⁷

This is why colleges and universities should consider creating asexuality groups, if not for their own benefit, for the benefit of the students so they do not feel isolated, and to foster desire for political and social change. One example of a university taking a step to support the asexual community is Grand Valley State University.

Grand Valley State University is one of the few higher education institutions that has an identity club centered around asexuality. The Ace of Clubs organization through the Milton E. Ford LGBT Resource Center is an asexuality organization and support group that has few counterparts across the United States. Collegiate and university level asexuality clubs are not as common as other groups that organize around minority identities. According to the Asexuality Visibility Education Network wiki, there are only 8 widely recognized college asexuality clubs in the United States⁸, as compared to the countless other identity programs like gender, sexuality, ability, racial and ethnic groups that exist at almost every single higher education institution. There are more than eight total asexuality clubs in the US, considering there are at least three in Michigan alone

⁷ Bogaert, A. F. (2012). *Understanding asexuality*, 92.

⁸ Student Groups. (n.d.). Retrieved from http://wiki.asexuality.org/Student_Groups.

that are not on the list. Without knowing how many asexuality clubs there are in total, the assumption can be made that they are few and far between, when you consider the amount of institutions and the amount of other identity clubs in comparison.⁹ When I attended the Midwest Bisexual Lesbian Gay Transgender Asexual College Conference of 2020, I attended an identity forum for people who identify in the asexual community. I asked the room of roughly forty people how many of them had an asexual specific identity group at their institution. Of those forty people, only seven people said they had such a club at their college. When searching the websites of the fifteen largest four-year public universities in the State of Michigan, only three mention having a student group specifically for asexual individuals. Another two mentioned have ace specific events. This is in comparison to the fact that almost every major institution, two year and four year, have some sort of center, programs, or groups set up for general LGBTQ+ individuals. One could argue the reason these institutions do not have these organizations is there is no student need, but with 1% of the population being Ace, that means any average size university is likely to have more than one person who identifies this way. This is why groups like Ace of Clubs were created by students to fulfill a student need for a community surrounding this identity.

While most asexual student groups have been student made, it is important that institutions consider supporting or forming these groups of their own volition as they can benefit the school. Things like a sense of belonging, school pride, improved social experiences, and connections to other students often improve students' grades and

⁹ Asexual student groups growing more common on campuses. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/11/10/asexual-student-groups-growing-more-common-campuses>.

make them more willing to stay at the school. The authors of *Thriving in Transitions* posits that,

“Campus involvement is the second noteworthy predictor of thriving among first-year college students...Not only are involvement and sense of community both predictive of thriving, but their connection to one another, while not examined in depth in the current study, seems apparent.”¹⁰

By forming identity groups for specific demographics, institutions are providing opportunities for campus involvement and a sense of community, factors correlated with student personal success which will translate to academic success. This benefits the school because their average scores will increase, they will have a better retention rate, and students will continue to pay tuition.¹¹ *Student success in college* makes the connection between input versus output of student success:

“The likelihood of a successful transition increases with the amount of appropriate support provided. Institutions have designed a wide array of programming for students in transition with this premise in mind. Support during transition is most effective when it meets students’ emotional needs, providing assurance and generating positive emotions, but also when it meets their needs for information and feedback.”¹²

¹⁰ Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions : A research-based approach to college student success*, 50-51.

¹¹Kuh, G. D., Kinzie, J., & Schuh, J. H. (2005). *Student success in college : Creating conditions that matter*, 116

¹² Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions : A research-based approach to college student success*, 12.

Making ace spaces a priority improves the queer community, the college community, and society as a whole. Allowing for diversity and promoting the acceptance of lesser known identities creates an environment for learning and education. As the authors explain in *Thriving in Transitions*,

“Diverse Citizenship is a combination of openness and valuing of differences in others, along with a desire to make a contribution to one’s community and the confidence to do so. Thriving students give time to help others and respond to others with openness and curiosity, believing that the other has something important to contribute to the relationship. They want to make a difference in their community and the larger society.”¹³

Education around asexuality should be a determining factor as to why a college would consider creating an asexual identity group. While it is not the job of those with asexual identities to educate others, by creating a group there is the opportunity to begin a conversation around the lack of knowledge concerning asexuality. Steps like providing visibility allow for more common knowledge of asexuality and encourage mainstream conversations. One way the Milton E. Ford LGBT Center, the center that hosts Ace of Clubs, has done this was the creation of an event for Asexuality Visibility Week. The Ace of Clubs community wanted something to celebrate this week, while also creating more widespread knowledge of the identity. Ace of Clubs as a student group did not have the bandwidth necessary to put on the event, so the center offered to do it. This is a prime example of Asexual allyship, because it is not the job of asexuals to educate others, and

¹³ Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions : A research-based approach to college student success*, 8-9.

it is helpful when an educated group offers to do the community education. This event, Aces and Cakes, was advertised as a LIB 101/201 event, meaning that it could be used to fulfill a class event requirement and had to prove it was educational in nature. Participants would go to stations with informational activities, and completing each station earned them an ace playing card. Activities included watching an educational video, filling out a crossword, going on a scavenger hunt, etc. Participants who collected ace cards of each suit received cake. All aspects of this activity were meaningful as cake and the ace playing card are symbols associated with the asexual community. The center has held this event for two years now and we have been pleasantly surprised by the large turnout each time, in addition to the positive feedback we received from participants on how much they learned. Events like this are active efforts on the part of the queer community to encourage ace acceptance and visibility, which benefits all students, not just the asexual ones. Julie Sondra Decker, a blogger, activist, writer, and award nominee for her book *The Invisible Orientation* about asexuality, describes this coalition between queer communities and ace communities as such,

“Asexual people allying with queer communities are learning about inclusivity, fellowship, organization of marginalized groups, and visibility, and they are also offering valuable insights to queer organizations... This is part of the reason why some asexual people feel comfortable joining or working with local LGBTQ chapters or Gay/Straight Alliances (GSAs); people who are non normative in sexuality, romantic orientation, or gender tend to have some of the same problems and experiences asexual people

do and might be able to understand other forms of discrimination and alienation more readily.”¹⁴

Because of similar shared experiences, it is easier for LGBTQ+ communities to adapt and incorporate ace individuals into their communities. This, however, can be controversial as not all LGBT spaces have decided that asexuals are members of the queer community and have accepted them into their spaces. This stresses the importance of ace specific spaces that support the validity of the ace identity while also stressing that aces deserve their equal representation in all queer spaces as the “A” in LGBTQIA+. ¹⁵ The Milton E. Ford LGBT Center has done an excellent job of being an ace ally over the years and including aces in their other queer spaces. It is now time for other universities and colleges to do the same. It is easy for large institutions to say they are promoting acceptance and support but tangible, specific actions that help the community are necessary for an institution to consider itself an ally to a group. Paulina Abustan and A.G. Rud contributing to *Critical concepts in queer studies and education* explain it another way:

“We often encounter educational leaders in higher education demonstrating support for Queer students. University administrators, faculty, and staff place ally signs on their doors and hang rainbow flags in their offices. Educational leaders who support Queer identities and struggles attend events and participate in campaigns organized by Queer students. Although it is important for educational leaders to become Queer

¹⁴ Bibr, C. (2018). *Julie sondra decker, the invisible orientation: An introduction to asexuality*. London, England: SAGE Publications. doi:10.1177/1363460717724156

¹⁵ Canning, Dominique A. “Queering Asexuality: Asexual-Inclusion in Queer Spaces.” *McNair Scholars Research Journal* 8, no. 1 (2015).
<https://commons.emich.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1090&context=mcnair>.

allies who support Queer identities and struggles, becoming a Queer ally is not enough when Queer students live and experience multiple, complex, and fluid identities.... Queers resist dominant and normative expectations and instead act as creative agents who authorize their own experiences (Honeychurch 1996). Since definitions of what it means to be Queer differ for each individual and community, it is important for Queer allies to acknowledge and validate diverse identities.”¹⁶

By ignoring the needs or existence of the asexual community, schools are invalidating themselves as queer supportive institutions. Later in their piece, Abustan and Rud write,

“Allies of Intersectionalities are in the continuous process of identifying ways they can support marginalized people and communities. Freire (1970) discusses the importance of those committed to social change to constantly re-examine and educate themselves. ... It is important for allies to communicate their ongoing education and evaluation of themselves through the usage of inclusive language....”¹⁷

Then the author of another piece in the anthology, Barbara Jean A. Douglass, a social worker, activist, and Assistant Professor of Social Work at Nazareth College, says,

“I assert that schools of education have a legal and moral obligation to provide the necessary training to their students regarding LGBTQ issues,

¹⁶ Rodriguez, N. M., Martino, W. J., Ingrey, J. C., Brockenbrough, E., & SpringerLink (Online service). (2016). *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (1st 2016. ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 15-16.

¹⁷ Rodriguez, N. M., Martino, W. J., Ingrey, J. C., Brockenbrough, E., & SpringerLink (Online service). (2016). *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (1st 2016. ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 18.

so as to equip them with the knowledge they will need to create socially just and safe schools.”¹⁸

Thus, Douglass argues that a school also fails to educate its other students by not continually attempting to include all forms of inclusivity, in this case ignoring the emerging identity of asexuality.

As for individual students, they benefit beyond the things that affect the school. Students will more likely feel validated in their marginalized identity when supported by their identity community. They will meet others with a shared experience which makes them feel less alone. They may feel connected to the larger queer community or the larger asexual community. *Thriving in Transitions* connects this socialization to success: “Also critical to thriving is the sense of mattering, which is the belief that others care for and appreciate a person, valuing that person’s contribution and taking time to understand him or her.”¹⁹ Identity based groups give students the opportunity to explore their identity, ask questions, and learn with others in a safe space that is probably more educated on asexuality than any other campus resource. These community supports often help with mental health which can correlate with how well a student succeeds at college academically and socially. *Thriving in Transitions* says,

“Whether the research is on psychological well-being, physical health, or student success in college, most studies conclude that relationships play an important role in positive life outcomes... The ability to form and

¹⁸ Rodriguez, N. M., Martino, W. J., Ingrey, J. C., Brockenbrough, E., & SpringerLink (Online service). (2016). *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (1st 2016. ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 89.

¹⁹ Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions : A research-based approach to college student success*,8-9.

maintain healthy relationships is an important element in college students' growth."²⁰

Having important social connections, such as an asexuality club, can improve a student's overall college experience and success.

Once an institution decides it is in the best interest of their students and themselves to create an asexuality group, they must decide how to structure it. While the needs of the students will differ from place to place, the student needs should be the main factor in how the group is structured. In my work with Ace of Clubs, we tried as much as possible to let the student participants choose how the group spent its time. The group, before I was a member, started as a movie night. This was in an attempt to see if there was even interest in a sustained group for asexuals. The movie nights consisted of a movie that did not involve a romance plot to make all aces comfortable in the space. This looser structure allowed for comradery to form and there was a decision to move to more asexual focused activities. From there, Ace of Clubs became a discussion group, where the facilitators would choose a discussion topic that was relevant to the ace experience for the group to dissect or commiserate over. During my time as a facilitator, my co-facilitator and myself put a heavy emphasis on crowdsourcing our discussion topics from the group ahead of time, so we could prepare talking points to keep the conversation going. Ultimately, however, having a discussion only group led to some problems. We would eventually run out of topics, get off track repeatedly with non-ace conversations, and we even had a large drop in attendance at one point. We needed to find a way to reincorporate spaces and times that were

²⁰Schreiner, L. A., Louis, M. C., & Nelson, D. D. (Eds.). (2012). *Thriving in transitions : A research-based approach to college student success*, 8-9.

appropriate to just build relationships not purely based in conversation around our identities. After floating it by the group we created a hybrid structure to have activity meetings following the model of the original movie night intermixed with meetings that remained in the discussion style. We tried many different activities, some more popular than others. A real hit was game night. Crafting night, not so much. However asexual groups are structured, it is important that it works for the asexual community in your area and crowdsourcing ideas never fails to make the community feel involved.²¹

The benefits of creating an asexual identity group for members of a college or university are plentiful and real. The results may be hard to see as some of the benefits are intangible and therefore difficult to measure, but they provide positives nonetheless. Through my experience with Ace of Clubs, I have heard responses that strengthen the claims I have made previously in this paper. Participants mentioned wanting to find others with similar experiences, questioning their identity, and desire for community as reasons they first came to and kept coming back to Ace of Clubs meetings. The club validates their sense of identity by making it a concrete concept that does not just exist on the internet. They mention feeling better about themselves and their identity after becoming a part of the group. Participants of Ace of Clubs often refer to it as a method of stress relief or self-care to attend meetings and recommend it to others by encouraging other asexuals or questioning individuals to attend. When discussing how an asexuality club affected their college experience, participants, myself included, refer to it as a positive experience that greatly enhanced their time at college. One person

²¹ Rodriguez, N. M., Martino, W. J., Ingrey, J. C., Brockenbrough, E., & SpringerLink (Online service). (2016). *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (1st 2016. ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US,254-255.

said, "Without this club I would not have been able to really see that what I was feeling was something that had a name and was a real thing people experienced. Online definitions didn't really click for me but talking to other Ace people did." My experience was also a positive one. Without the community I formed during my freshman year with Ace of Clubs, I doubt I would have continued my education at Grand Valley. It was the launch pad that made the rest of my college experience happen because of the social support it provided for me during my time of transition. These personal testimonials alone are reason enough for me to argue that higher education institutions should have asexual identity groups for the benefit of the students.

With society constantly changing and evolving, it is only reasonable that institutions do everything in their power to work with these groups for the mutual benefit of both. I find this best explained in this quote,

"To engage queer thrival is to ask that we investigate, uncover, and invent ways of thriving upon and amid our surviving. However, it does not replace the continued need to address and advocate for survival. Rather, queer thrival looks to help guide queers into a twenty-first century in ways that do justice to our existence utilizing our survival to cultivate our queer thrival. By developing and arguing for queer thrival, we might more forcefully promote agendas and contributions to open up space and time outside of the changing social norms."²²

²² Rodriguez, N. M., Martino, W. J., Ingrey, J. C., Brockenbrough, E., & SpringerLink (Online service). (2016). *Critical concepts in queer studies and education: An international guide for the twenty-first century* (1st 2016. ed.). New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 310

It is the inherent responsibility of an institution that they must constantly be looking for ways to promote queer survival and thriving. Asexuality has been an underserved demographic of the queer community and their survival/ thriving has been proven to benefit from identity groups, such as Ace of Clubs. The continued ignorance or inaction of colleges and universities to create these groups is a disservice to their students.

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