Student Attitudes Regarding the Impact of the Murder of Mathew Shepard

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Senior Honors Project
Political Science and Gender & Women’s Studies
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Personal Experience

• Loveland, CO
• Out-of-State Perspective
• Activism and the University of Wyoming
• Coursework and personal development
Matthew Shepard’s Death as a Historical Moment

- The murder that shook the nation
- Media attention and hate in Wyoming
- The trial and “Gay Panic” defense
- Aftermath and changing opinions
Research Question

• Is Matthew Shepard’s death a salient issue on the UW campus for students? If so, what discourse surrounds this issue?
Predictions

- Matthew Shepard significance greater with Out-of-State students
- Contemporary figures more salient
- In-State students starting to lose identification with Shepard
Methodology

• 2 Step Data Collection
  ▫ Goal: 250 quick surveys
  ▫ Goal: 10 qualitative interviews
Methodology - Surveys

- Union and Classroom Building
- Consent for Research
  - IRB guidelines for risk and confidentiality
- Demographics
  - Residency
  - College representation
- 2 Identification Questions
  - Matthew Shepard
  - Dave Christensen
- Voluntary Interview Section
Interviews

• Confidentiality Statement w/ Explanation
• Basic Structure
  ▫ Tape recorder
  ▫ Some structured questions
  ▫ Follow up questions
• Introductory Questions
  ▫ “Why did you volunteer for this interview?”
  ▫ “Do you know who _______ is?”
Data Results - Survey Demographics

**In-State versus Out-of-State**

**Campus Representation**
Data Results - Survey of In-State
Data Results-Survey of Out-of-State
Data Results - Interviews

- 4 UW students
  - 2 In-State
  - 2 Out-of-State
- Continued confidentiality
- Varied results to initial inquiries
  - All knew Matthew Shepard
  - 2 knew Dave Christensen
Interview Themes

- Variance in sources of information
- Out-of-State familiar with Christensen
- Importance of Shepard’s death to current students
- Language formation
  - Sympathy
  - “Homosexual”
  - Detailed accounts of Christensen and Shepard events
Initial Critiques

• Positive survey outcomes
  ▫ 302 respondents
• Good sample?
  ▫ 2 locations
  ▫ Same classes?
  ▫ Student discussion created in preparation
• Poor qualitative pool
  ▫ All aware of Shepard
  ▫ Fell short of goal
  ▫ Bias of thinking well of participants?
Conclusions

• Out-of-State students more aware of Christensen
• Shepard awareness
• Historical memory for In-State and Out-of-State students
• Differing explanations of Shepard’s death

• Further research
  ▫ Interviews
  ▫ Disciplining discourse and its origins
Questions and Inquiry

For a copy of the final research paper or other inquiries email Alex Brink at:

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