Guest Column: Somewhere Over the Rainbow - The Long Road to LGBTQ Inclusion

Dean of Students Office, Office of LGBTQ Affairs
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The rainbow is a common symbol for the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community. It represents the immense diversity within the LGBT community and, perhaps more importantly, it represents pride in being a member of this diverse community. I think diversity is our greatest asset. Diversity is a critical resource, and it is necessary to provide high-quality education.

At the University of Arizona, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning students comprise an estimated 1,900 to 3,800 students, who are an important part of our campus community. To better serve students who identify as LGBTQ, the UA established the Office of LGBTQ Affairs in 2007. This momentous decision was brought about after nearly 20 years of advocacy by LGBT students, faculty and staff. They devoted hour upon hour to promote equity in University policies and practices. They worked equally as tirelessly to sponsor educational opportunities to build an inclusive campus climate.

We are at a dynamic point in history in regards to LGBTQ rights and we see this playing out on the national stage, in schools and on college campuses across the nation. Research shows that LGBTQ students nationwide experience harassment and violence on a profound level in their K-12 school experience. The Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network's 2007 School Climate Survey found that "nearly nine out of 10 LGBT students experienced harassment at school in the past year and of those who were harassed, 44.1 percent experienced physical harassment and 22.1 percent reported being physically assaulted (e.g. punched, kicked or injured with a weapon) at school." Such experiences have the potential to have a lifelong impact on students' education and learning, which has clear implications for college students. Likewise, hate crimes, bias incidents and safety continue to be a concern for college campuses as well, because universities can also be dangerous places for LGBTQ students. So, LGBTQ students today have more visibility and resources than ever before, but they are also coming out into a hostile, politicized environment. Fifty years ago there was barely a name or understanding of same-sex desire or transgender identities. Now, all students understand clearly that to come out as LGBTQ is to risk being rejected by family, friends and religion, and to risk being targeted for harassment and violence.

In recognition of the significant needs of this marginalized community, the UA president's LGBT Advisory Council recommended that President Robert N. Shelton hire a director of LGBTQ affairs, which he did in 2007. The council also recognized that to achieve our goal of becoming a top 10 public research institution, we need to be able to retain world-class faculty and staff, and therefore we must be inclusive of LGBTQ colleagues. I am proud to report this position brings the UA in line with 149 other college campuses across the country that have professional staff to serve the LGBTQ campus community (National Consortium of Directors of Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgender Resources in Higher Education 2009 Annual..."
As the second-ever program director for LGBTQ Affairs, it is my role to help sustain a safe and inclusive environment for everyone—faculty, staff, appointed professionals, students, alumni, parents and guests of all gender identities and sexual orientations. I do this through serving as a campus resource, providing direction to LGBTQ student groups, providing training on LGBTQ issues, actively engaging in outreach and advocacy, conducting research and providing support for LGBTQ students, staff and faculty. It sounds like a lot, and I guess it is, but by collaborating with LGBTQ colleagues and allies, I know the kind of inclusive community we strive to become is within our grasp.

**Initiatives and Plans for the Future**

I am particularly pleased to share that I will be re-launching a support group for LGBTQ students this spring in collaboration with Martie van der Voort of the UA's Counseling and Psychological Services, or CAPS. This group will meet weekly with the specific purpose of supporting LGBTQ students around the unique issues they face. For example, LGBTQ college students often need support around the "coming-out" process. Some students question their sexual orientation and gender identity, some are just beginning to come out to themselves, some are navigating the terrain of unsupportive families and some are completely out in their lives both on and off campus. I have encountered students who have amazing and supportive coming-out stories, and students who have been disowned by their families. Coming out is a lifelong process and will continue to be an issue for which LGBTQ college students need support.

One of my main areas of focus is the revitalization of our campus SafeZONE program. The goal of SafeZONE is to provide information and resources that prepare allies to be effective supporters of and advocates for LGBTQ students. Ultimately, this will contribute to a more LGBTQ-friendly campus climate. I plan to reinvigorate this important program and we will begin holding regularly scheduled SafeZONE trainings in the spring.

Lastly, I am working with the student leaders of Pride Alliance on an internship program that will launch this spring. Internships are important leadership opportunities for students, and these internships will focus specifically on the development of programming for LGBTQ and allied students, staff, faculty and alumni. Interns will coordinate social events, develop campuswide educational initiatives and plan large events like our Third Annual Lambda Graduation Ceremony.

**The Road May be Long, but the Path is Paved in Rainbows**

There is still a lot of work to do and we should take pride in continuing with this institution's history of valuing diversity, equity, access and inclusion. All college students need a sense of belonging and community, and this need is particularly important for LGBTQ students who, as a group, are at a higher risk of isolation and even suicide. In this way, it is especially significant for LGBTQ students to be able to find other LGBTQ and allied students, to develop friendships, and to foster a sense of community and belonging.

Every college student has the right to a safe learning environment where she or he can learn, grow and succeed. Every staff and faculty member has the right to feel protected and valued. By building, sustaining and strengthening a visible LGBTQ campus community, the UA ensures all students, staff and faculty can attain the University's mission to discover,
educate, serve and inspire.

As a member of the LGBTQ community myself, it is particularly meaningful to make a difference in the lives of LGBTQ students, to help them develop as leaders, to help them educate and grow effective allies, and to work with them to create a more inclusive campus environment. I am honored to serve the UA campus and Tucson community in this capacity.

To learn more, please visit the Office of LGBTQ Affairs[1] Web site.

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