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Straight talk about queer issues

Allan E. Goody
The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
agoody@csd.uwa.edu.au

Jennifer de Vries
The University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia
jdevries@csd.uwa.edu.au

Abstract: Traditionally diversity in the education community has tended to focus on issues of gender, race and disability. Many universities have a policy against discrimination on the basis of sexual preference within their Equal Opportunity Policy. In all states except Western Australia, sexual orientation is included in equal opportunity legislation. Despite these anti-discrimination clauses and legislation, anecdotal evidence suggests that discriminatory behaviour and offensive comments and gestures with respect to sexual orientation continue to occur within university communities. In this regard the university community mirrors the larger community in that it can be oppressive and devaluing of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) people. There is a demonstrated need for proactive initiatives that increase awareness of issues faced by GLBT staff and students and that seek to change the culture of university campuses to one that is supportive and affirming of GLBT people. This paper explores the climate for GLBT people in the workplace and describes two projects that aim to make The University of Western Australia community safer and a more productive and positive work and study experience for GLBT people. The Rainbow Project aims to assess attitudes toward GLBT staff and students and to raise awareness of GLBT issues on campus. The Ally Network extends this first initiative by developing a support and advocacy network of Allies throughout the university community and initiating awareness and educational programs on GLBT issues.

Keywords: queer issues; diversity; gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered;

Introduction

Universities have a responsibility to provide leadership in the often controversial areas of equity, gender and diversity. Diversity among the University of Western Australia campus community contributes to the richness of campus life and enriches the experiences of staff and students as they learn to respect, respond and delight in difference. Universities do not operate in isolation from the community. Our [UWA] diversity is a reflection of that within the community and we are therefore well placed to take a lead.
(Professor Alan Robson, Deputy-Vice Chancellor, The University of Western Australia, launching the Rainbow Project, 22 March, 2001.)

Universities are often seen as liberal in their thinking and actions and tolerant of diversity. However, the university community is a reflection of the wider community. Not only does the university mirror the diversity in the community in a positive sense but it also mirrors the negative aspects of prejudice that exists toward diverse groups in the community. Legislation to provide equality for gay men, lesbians and bisexuals is currently being debated in the Western Australian State Parliament. The uninformed bigotry regarding the legislation and the issue of equality is evident in the local newspaper letters-to-the-editor, in rallies held by a vocal conservative minority and by the speeches made by members of the state parliament as they debate the legislation. The linking of paedophilia with homosexuality by some members of the public (see Harvey, 2002) and in the allegations made under Parliamentary privilege against Justice Kirby of the High Court of Australia (Walker & O'Brien, 2002) exemplify the ignorance within the community. Senator Greig, in commenting on the allegations against Justice Kirby points out that "we have a culture which makes homophobia the last bastion of acceptable prejudice" (Rose 2002).

Although no state legislation exists (at the time of writing) to support the policy, discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation are unacceptable behaviours under the 1993 University of Western Australia's Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Policy Statement (see http://www.acs.uwa.edu.au/hrs/policy/part04/1.htm). Even where legislation does exist, as it does in other states, there is often reluctance on the part of those aggrieved to take action, legal or otherwise (Irwin, 1999). At the University of Western Australia (UWA) anecdotal evidence, as well as the findings of the Working Life Survey 2000 (University of Western Australia, 2000), highlight the demonstrated need for pro-active initiatives that raise awareness of issues faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) staff and students. These initiatives are needed to change the university culture to one that is supportive and affirming of all GLBT people.

This paper seeks to explore the experience and needs of GLBT people on one particular campus in a particular state at a particular moment in time. It describes two projects that begin to address these experiences and needs in a pro-active manner. However, it also seeks to draw on research and experience, both Australian and overseas, to assist in creating the context for the UWA experience. It is hoped that in so doing and by reporting on the projects early in their implementation, the paper will provide impetus for further work and research in other universities.

Consequences of a non-friendly work and study environment

Irwin (1999), in her study of the workplace experiences of 900 gay men, lesbians, and transgendered people, found that harassment and/or prejudicial treatment on the basis of homosexuality or gender identity was widespread with 59% of the participants experiencing this in their current or previous workplace. Reported behaviours included sexual and physical assault, verbal harassment and abuse, destruction of property, ridicule and homophobic jokes. Prejudicial treatment in the workplace included unfair rosters, unreasonable work expectations, undermining of work and restrictions to career.

Individuals were affected in a number of ways by the homophobic behaviour and prejudicial treatment including increased stress, depression, illness, loss of self-confidence, increased substance abuse and attempted suicide. Their job performances were negatively effected through stress related leave, not wanting to be at work and the need to be 'constantly on guard' (Irwin, 1999, p. 6). In effect, the workplace culture created a hostile

and unsafe working environment for 'out' (GLBT people publicly acknowledging their sexual orientation) or suspected GLBT people. Irwin also reports on other Australian research with similar findings.

Many people argue that sexuality has nothing to do with the workplace. Creed and Scully (2000), in their work on social identity in workplace encounters, point out that the tacit disclosure of heterosexuality occurs constantly in the workplace, with mention of a partner's name and family photos on the desk as common examples. For GLBT people, these simple acts become difficult choices and place them at risk of stigmatisation. Gay lives and careers become characterised by a preoccupation with self-disclosure and skill in the management of sexual identity, with decisions such as naming a partner becoming a source of intense recurring concern. Invisibility and isolation in the workplace become common manifestations of these difficulties. Woodward (2000) explores the issues for gays and lesbians in Higher Education in the UK. She notes that even when Universities have a strong equity focus and record of achievement, sexual orientation is invisible in the equal opportunity agenda. With so few students and staff feeling brave enough to be out, they remain a group not readily identifiable and as such, difficult to get on the agenda. Raising the issue, challenging homophobia, making the invisible visible and making the stigmatised acceptable become necessary steps in making universities a place where GLBT staff and students can thrive.

In the USA, considerable work has been done at the high school level. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a Boston community-based, teacher-led organisation is working to end homophobia in schools. An initial report *Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth* (The Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993) has resulted in state-wide teacher training on homophobia. Work has also been done aimed at revising the school curriculum. The importance of classroom 'climate' and its effect on educational outcomes is increasingly understood (Fraser, 1991). GLBT students form a group of marginalised students whose experience is not reflected in the classroom experience or the curriculum. Not only are they not affirmed, but homophobia may be alive and well in the classroom, leaving the student with feelings of self doubt and hate (Desurra, 1994).

In Australia, responses posted to *The Australian* Forum on the question of including information on same sex relationships in the school sex education curriculum reflect the current school environment and curriculum for GLBT students (Monday, February 18, 2002, p. 16). Responses from GLBT people reflected the theme of heterosexuality being presented as the norm and the devastating effects on GLBT students of the lack of a more extensive and less judgemental approach to sexuality issues.

The Rainbow Project

The Rainbow Project is an initiative of the Guild of Undergraduates that aims to examine UWA student attitudes towards queer people and to promote a greater awareness of queer people and their issues. With knowledge of these attitudes toward GLBT students and staff, the university can take a more informed direction on issues of sexuality and diversity. The project will also better position the University to deal with the impending state legislation.

The project is led by a steering committee representing the Student Guild of Undergraduates, Office of Equity and Diversity and the Centre for Staff Development and is funded through the Diversity Initiatives Fund. The first phase of the project was to survey students to determine their attitudes to their GLBT peers and staff. The survey was distributed in large

lecture classes across faculties and year of study with 754 surveys returned. Section one of the survey sought demographic details including sexual orientation, relationship status, ethic background and religious affiliation. Sections two and three assessed attitudes towards non-heterosexual people through a number of true/false questions and a series of statements addressing GLBT people in general, gay men and lesbians. In parallel with the survey was a less formal effort to ascertain the issues faced by GLBT staff with input provided through a forum of GLBT staff and a forum of non-GLBT staff.

Table 1: Participants' experiences with and attitudes toward GLBT people in general, gay men and lesbians and how they view other people's reactions to GLBT people

Attitude Statement	Agree %	Neither %	Disagree %	No response %	Mean Score
1. Homosexuality is acceptable to me	68.1	17.0	13.7	1.3	3.82
2. I know someone who has made derogatory comments about gay people	85.6	5.8	7.4	1.2	1.78
3. I don't say anything when others make derogatory comments about gay people	35.2	25.1	38.6	1.2	3.03
4. Homosexuality is immoral	14.3	21.2	63.4	1.1	3.83
5. Organisations that promote gay rights aren't necessary	19.6	23.6	55.4	1.3	3.55
6. I know someone who has damaged the property of a gay person	10.2	20.7	67.7	1.3	3.96
7. I feel uncomfortable sharing accommodation with a gay person	22.3	16.2	59.5	2.0	3.65
8. I avoid gay men	15.7	15.1	67.3	1.9	3.85
9. I avoid lesbians	8.3	15.8	73.5	2.5	4.06
10. It bothers me to see two lesbians being affectionate in public	24.0	19.1	54.2	2.7	3.56
11. It bothers me to see two gay men being affectionate in public	39.8	20.3	37.8	2.1	3.04
12. Gay men aren't harassed at this University	19.4	57.6	20.4	2.7	3.02
13. Lesbians aren't harassed at this University	16.3	60.1	20.4	2.9	3.08

Note. A five-point attitude scale (strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, strongly disagree) has been collapsed into three categories. Data for mean scores has been configured so that the closer a score is to five, the more positive the attitude. Percentages do not total 100 due to rounding.

The Rainbow Project: Perspectives on Sexuality at UWA (Sullivan, Goody, McFarlane & Fialho, 2002, in press) reports on the outcomes of the survey and the input from the GLBT staff network and non-GLBT staff. Table 1 reports on a subset of the survey data selected to give an indication of the climate that GLBT staff and students are experiencing. Figures indicate that student attitudes were on the whole reasonably positive towards GLBT people (for example, statements 1 and 4). However, most participants agreed strongly that they knew somebody who had made derogatory remarks about gay people (statement 2) with slightly more than a third indicating that they said something when these comments were

made (statement 3). This may suggest a difficult climate for GLBT people with homophobic comments and attitudes being expressed and students exhibiting very little 'ally' behaviour, by neither challenging the remarks nor advocating on behalf of GLBT people. Some interesting differences in attitudes towards gay men and lesbians are highlighted that indicate that students are more comfortable with lesbians than gay men. The low mean scores regarding harassment of gay men and lesbians on campus (statements 12 and 13) and high use of the 'neither agree nor disagree' category may suggest that students are uninformed or indifferent to the reality of harassment.

Overall the survey results indicate a significant minority of students with homophobic attitudes and high levels of discomfort in regard to GLBT people. This is accompanied by a low level of 'ally behaviour' and ignorance in regard to harassment issues on the part of the majority of students who hold more positive attitudes. The combination of a vocal minority and a silent majority can profoundly impact on student's experiences of safety and inclusion on campus.

Comments made by staff mirrored those described by Irwin (1999). GLBT staff have experienced UWA as an unsafe place to be 'out' and experienced difficulty in attending group meetings in case they were seen with other known GLBT staff and 'outed' (having one's sexual orientation made public against one's will) by association. They also reported that they felt unable to attend the public launch of the Rainbow Project launch for fear of being identified as GLBT. Others reported 'invisibility', that is the issue is never raised in their school, while others experienced direct anti-gay comments in school and faculty settings which made the staff member increasingly uncomfortable. One member of academic staff yet to earn tenure reported being guarded in being 'out' until job security was confirmed.

The Ally Network Project

The Rainbow Project has clearly identified the need to work towards a 'safer' work and study environment at UWA and the second phase of the project is to develop an education and awareness program. The Ally Network project will be an effective follow-on strategy to the Rainbow project. This project has particular strengths in terms of creating a visible GLBT staff and student presence on campus, as well as visible support and advocacy for GLBT people.

Many North American universities have initiated programs such as *Safe Zone*, *Safe Space*, *Safe on Campus* and *Ally Network*. The first of these programs is believed to have originated at Ball State University in 1992 (Poynter, 2000) and the number continues to grow. Many of these programs exist at large research-intensive universities, many being in traditionally conservative parts of the country (see *Campuses which offer safe zone programs*). 'Safe on Campus' at Duke University (http://lgbt.studentaffairs.duke.edu/safe.html) and the 'Safe Zone' project at Iowa State University (http://www.public.iastate.edu/~lgbtss/safezone.html) are typical examples.

The types and extent of programs vary according to resources available and people with sufficient knowledge and time to develop and manage the programs. The hallmark of these 'safe' programs is the public identification of 'Allies' by placing a 'safe' symbol, usually incorporating a pink triangle or rainbow, on office doors or within living spaces. While some programs simply ask staff and students to post Ally or Safe Zone stickers as an awareness raising initiative, others require Allies to participate in training and information sessions.

Safe Zone and Ally programs reside within university counseling centres, student government or university administrative units. No similar program appears to exist in Australian universities.

What is the Ally Network?

The Ally Network Project is a collaborative initiative of the Centre for Staff Development and Student Services with support from the Guild of Undergraduates and funded by the Diversity Initiatives Fund. Collaboration recognises that the GLBT community encompasses the entire UWA community and there is a need to address the issues and concerns of <u>all</u> GLBT people. The Ally network will be an informal network that is not intended to replace formal channels for student and staff grievance on equity and diversity matters.

The broad objectives of the Ally Network are twofold: to extend the current diversity initiatives of the University into the area of sexuality and to create a more diverse and inclusive culture at UWA by promoting greater visibility and awareness of GLBT staff and students and their issues.

Specifically, the Ally Network aims to change the culture of the university by
* providing a visible network of identified Allies to the GLBT community;
* promoting a productive and positive work and study experience and for staff, a greater sense of job security;
* building a support and advocacy network;
* using education to further awareness and visibility of GLBT people and their issues; and
* negating homophobic and non-inclusive comments and behaviour.

It is anticipated that the project outcomes will contribute to the University priorities of attracting and retaining a diverse staff and student population that feels welcome, safe, supported and celebrated as individuals and community members. It is also hoped that the project outcomes will increase the University's capacity to identify and respond appropriately to GLBT staff and student issues and enhance equity. The project will continue to foster recognition within the wider community that UWA is a diversity champion and leader in cultural change.

What is an Ally?

Washington and Evans (1991) define an Ally as "a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her own personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population" (p. 195). It is only since the early 1990's that the term 'Ally' has been used to describe people who are advocates for minority populations. It has been most commonly used in the social justice issues of GLBT issues and racism (Broido, 2000). Heterosexual Allies are people who are supportive of GLBT people and are informed about, sensitive toward and understanding of GLBT people. An Ally affirms the experience and rights of GLBT people and chooses to challenge the homophobic and heterosexist values of others in a variety of ways including by individual example and personal awareness. Applying the Washington and Evans definition of Ally, "only heterosexual persons … can be allies with the real power to affect change" (Poynter, 1999, p. 8). The Ally Network will include heterosexual and non-heterosexuals. Allies will make a commitment to the Ally Network by agreeing to
* participate in an interactive training program and attend occasional Ally meetings and information sessions on GLBT issues;
* public identification as an Ally, including listing on the web site and displaying an Ally sign;

- provide a safe place to talk for members of the UWA community who seek confidential support, empathy or friendship and information on GLBT issues;
- be open to questions from and about GLBT students and staff; and
- work within and support existing policies and practices that bring equity to the UWA community and give open support for GLBT people and their issues.

The training program is a crucial aspect of the Ally Network. While some Ally and Safe Zone projects focus on visibility, the Ally Network is committed to having a network of Allies who are knowledgeable and understanding of GLBT issues and who are confident in their roles as advocates for GLBT students and staff. Initially, people who identify as Allies may have limited knowledge, skills and resources to assist them in their role as advocates. Part of the training will focus on queer culture, community and history and the resources available to Allies. As most people grow up with unexamined heterosexist assumptions, attitudes and behaviours, the process of alliance to GLBT people and their issues can take time. In this regard, another focus of the training program will be to assist Allies in their development as an Ally by reflecting on personal beliefs, the development of self-awareness of attitudes and by assisting them though the developmental stages of the process of alliance. The concept of 'Ally development' is relatively new and a number of models are proposed in the literature (Poynter, 1999). The training program will draw on these models, particularly the four-stage model of awareness, knowledge/education, skills and action proposed by Washington and Evans (1991).

Project Structure
The first stage of the project is the identification of resources through contacts with existing programs followed by the development of a training program and resource manual and the identification and training of a core network of Allies. Identification of Allies will be facilitated by existing contacts through the Rainbow Project and other diversity initiatives. The training program and resource manual will be evaluated and modified where necessary before additional Allies are identified and trained. Publicity for the Network is paramount to its success and will be achieved through a public launch of the Ally Network, the Alternative Sexuality Information Department (ASID) and the GLBT staff network. Allies will publicise the Network by their identification as an Ally with badges, door signs and posters in schools and faculties. A web site will support the Network and Allies and further awareness.

Evaluation of the Project
The successful recruitment and establishment of a large and diverse network of Allies will be a primary measure of the project's success. The number of staff and students who seek out an Ally will also be an indicator of success. A survey to assess the visibility of the network will be conducted. Monitoring data on discrimination with respect to sexual orientation provided by future UWA Working Life Surveys will assist in measuring any cultural shift within the institution. Measuring outcomes for individuals will not be easy, particularly for those 'invisible' GLBT staff and students who are not 'out' but who may feel more positive about their university experience as a result of the increased awareness and visibility.

Conclusion

The Rainbow Project has already raised the profile of UWA with respect to its leadership on diversity issues with other Australian universities expressing interest in both projects. It has taken a long time to get sexuality spoken about and 'on the agenda' at UWA. The projects are moving talk about queer issues into the wider university community. Forums such as the

HERDSA conference are important for getting sexuality on the agenda and spoken about in broader arenas. It is hoped that this forum will form part of a movement to create awareness, tolerance and celebration of all GLBT staff and students in higher education in Australia.

The Rainbow Project and the Ally Network are timely with respect to the impending state legislation on equal rights for gays and lesbians. However, "the legislation does not mean the end of prejudice against GLBT people in Western Australia. But it is a starting point" (Giz Watson, Member of the Western Australian Legislative Council on the passing of the *Acts Amendment (Lesbian and Gay Law Reform) Bill 2001* through the Legislative Council, ABC Radio News, 21 March, 2002). State legislation and UWA policy are given life and substance by projects such as these that work at the grassroots level to raise awareness and educate members of the University community. Perhaps in the not too distant future straight talk about queer issues will be a part of everyday conversations.

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