

Diversity Statement from the Program in Lesbian, Bisexual, and Gay Studies

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There are a number of problems faced by gay people and other sexual minorities on campus. We would like to make faculty and administrators aware of these problems and suggest some solutions. Some of the difficulties have to do with the curriculum and the classroom environment in particular, and others have to do with homophobia in campus life more generally. First, when students who are members of a sexual minority come to Cornell, they are often leaving an environment hostile to their sexuality and are actively trying to create for themselves for the first time in their lives a sexual community, identity, and politics they can live with. They are, in other words, accustomed to a profound silence and hostility around their sexualities that is often reinforced by their family and community at home. For this reason, they come to college with a peculiar and acute sense of alienation; their defenses are up, their anxieties aggravated, and their desire for self-affirmation easily intimidated. We have been successful over the past several years at making Cornell a more welcoming place for sexual minorities, and yet we hear an abundance of complaints from our students about unfair discrimination, harassment, and hate speech from their peers, from leaders in ROTC, from the Cornell Review and other vocally anti-gay Cornell organizations, and even from faculty.

The best way for faculty to counteract homophobia at Cornell is to address it in the curriculum, especially by hiring and retaining scholars devoted to studying the history of sexuality in all its cultural forms. Part of the impetus for lesbian and gay studies is personal -- a strategy to counteract sexual oppression even as it functions in the lives of our students. As a scholarly program, its main intentions are to reverse generations of academic silence and conservatism on the question of minority sexual politics, and to create a more politicized, more tolerant scholarly and cultural discourse about sexuality that would not be limited merely to biological or psychological research. Cornell has a relatively underfinanced gay studies program that nevertheless channels an enormous amount of faculty energy and commitment at present. This opening up of the classroom to inquiries into sexuality that would have been deemed unacceptable in past decades has had a wonderfully liberating effect on students, who can finally see sexuality and sexual oppression addressed as an intellectual issue in the classroom, rather than relegated to social events or counseling services. The courses in this program also serve to engage students who are not lesbian or gay in the same academic project, so that issues of sexual oppression, sexual identification, and the erotics of culture more generally become questions of universal concern.

The program at present faces a number of problems. First, the onus of teaching sexual issues has fallen to a relatively narrow range of courses taught by a few faculty who are obliged to have other professional commitments. As a result, we have seen the pigeon-holing of a field which should be of much broader interest in the humanities and sciences, which should indeed be a department unto itself, given the centrality of sexuality to human experience. Also, our students have encountered homophobic responses from faculty who feel that sexual desire between men or between women is irrelevant to the study of (to cite a few examples that have come to our attention) Plato, Oscar Wilde, African American communities, or the structure and history of the family, despite copious research to the contrary. Because of the prejudices of individual professors (who claim ignorance, lack of interest, or lack of resources as their excuse), students have been discouraged from doing gay studies work in courses outside the program, and this resistance should be construed as sexual harassment. We also feel it would be wise to develop university-wide guidelines and curricular resources for the equal and affirmative representation of lesbian and gay people in relevant courses.

Faculty in the gay studies program have experienced resistance to their participation in the field. Beyond the usual homophobic slurs from colleagues, students, and critics of the university, they are obliged to teach so many courses outside the field that their contribution to the program is usually minimal or nonexistent. In the worst cases, they experience explicit hostility to their field in tenure and hiring considerations. Faculty have also experienced discrimination with regard to "spousal" contract negotiations, the inclusion of same-sex partners in departmental social functions, and the wording of departmental procedures and policies, as well as the unfair taxation of same-sex benefits (against which Cornell might lobby through its liaison with the federal government). We would especially like to see hiring initiatives in a variety of departments that, unlike English or HDFS or Women's Studies, have done little to incorporate gay studies, or even sexuality studies more generally, into the curriculum. These initiatives would be particularly welcome in the social sciences in departments such as government, sociology, anthropology, and economics, where the field is flourishing far more impressively at other institutions of Cornell's stature.

At present, Ellis Hanson in the English department is the only member of the Cornell faculty to have been hired specifically to teach gay studies, and even he is called upon to teach outside the field. The rest of the program consists of faculty who have generously volunteered to teach gay studies courses, even though they have other demands made on their time and were hired through searches in other fields. The program would benefit immeasurably from a tenure line or endowed chair specifically in the gay studies program, a professor who could devote him or herself to the field and to the administration of the program full time. It would also benefit from a staff person to handle the considerable administrative work of organizing speakers, managing the budget, and keeping records, all of which is done now done, all too haphazardly, by a series of graduate students (creating problems of time commitment, training, and continuity) and a decidedly overworked and usually untenured member of the faculty. We cannot organize a coherent gay studies or sexuality curriculum if we have to rely only on the volunteered services of a small number of faculty whose primary professional allegiances must be outside the field.

The study of sexuality depends upon material resources. A recent bequest to the LBG Studies Program from an alumnus has allowed us to endow funds toward two student prizes and to sponsor a series of symposia, the first of which took place in the fall of 1999 on sexual politics and the media. These activities make the program more visible, honor the work of our students, take seriously the necessity of junior faculty development, and foster a climate of rigorous intellectual exchange among top scholars in the field. Cornell's program rivals those at peer institutions, but in order to guarantee the its future excellence, we -- as do other units in the university -- face the need to do direct fundraising with Cornell alumni/ae. There exists, however, no formal mechanism through which to identify lesbian and gay Cornellians and their allies, and the task can be accomplished only through campus-wide efforts to build the program through an alumni/ae database and network. Top-notch scholarship also depends, of course, upon fine library collections, including the Kroch Library's Human Sexuality Collection. There are specific obstacles to curating library resources on sexuality: many publications are defaced, destroyed, "lost," or otherwise unavailable to students and faculty. Replacement fees and staff salaries are thus crucial to maintaining current and extensive collections. We also feel that Brenda Marston should be given the financial support to continue her efforts to create research resources and databases on the history of sexuality in general, and lesbian and gay people in particular.

Notable among the unresolved political issues that merit a more serious response from the faculty and administration is the status of ROTC on campus. Many of us are very angry about this issue and wonder why so little has been done about it. In past years, the ROTC program has engaged in outrageous homophobic practices with impunity. Two recent cases were particularly egregious, those of Mark Navin and Robert Gaige, two students who tried to no avail to live by the U.S. military's "don't ask, don't tell" policy. They were repeatedly harassed with physical threats and verbal abuse by both ROTC leaders and fellow students

in violation of Cornell's rules, and they were officially interrogated about their sexualities, which is even in violation of the Pentagon's rules. In short, they were hounded out of ROTC, and now they are reluctant to pursue complaints for fear they will be sued for tuition money by the military. In their senior year, they were unjustly left without the government financial resources they had relied on and were further burdened with the emotional strain of harassment, coming out to parents and hostile peers, and facing a job market that would presume they had failed out of the program. To complete academic work under such circumstances was extremely difficult. Thusfar, the university has done nothing to make up for these unfair financial and emotional burdens, to act on the complaints, or to prevent the occurrence of future harassment and unfair discrimination in the ROTC program.

We were very pleased by the recent appointment of Biddy Martin, an out lesbian, to the position of provost -- one way in which the President has set a gay-affirmative tone throughout the Cornell community. Official appointments of lesbian and gay faculty, staff and administrators, as well as official statements from the president condemning homophobia and homophobic attacks on faculty, students and staff are vital to preserving a climate in which lesbian and gay people can thrive. We appreciate this opportunity to discuss with you some of the problems the community is facing on campus.