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Student Protest Article

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Article in Quadangles, April 2011

The University of Rhode Island doesn't make national news every day. But last September, while President David Dooley was meeting with alumni in California, the University was in the national spotlight. A group of about 10 students had staged a sit-in protest in the 24-hour study room of the URI Library, declaring that they wouldn't leave until the administration met their demands.

The students were gay and lesbian, bisexual and transgender, and included some who were still struggling with their sexual or gender identity. They were ready to make their stand despite fears about harassment and threats of physical attacks. A few of them had been targeted earlier in the semester, called names, and threatened. It wasn't the first time they had made their concerns known.

"I didn't come out until I was 25 and working in Chicago, where there is a very strong gay community."

Andrew Winters, who was hired by the Office of Student Affairs in 1995 as assistant director for residence education, said he detected problems in the campus climate for sexual minorities soon after arriving here. An openly gay man, Winters said he brought the issues up to administrators but saw little progress in addressing them. In 1999, when the University was establishing the Rainbow Diversity House, there were incidents where epithets were shouted at him and at students, and someone spray-painted "No Fags" on the side of the building. Several months later a gay student working on a seminar with Winters was attacked. At about that time, URI was twice listed among the 10 most homophobic campuses in the country by The Princeton Review.

At that point, Winters said he went to Vice President for Student Affairs Thomas Dougan and urged that his job make him a more direct administrative liaison with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. Dougan agreed, and Winters was promoted to assistant to the vice president for GLBT programs.

"The climate problems persisted," Winters said. "We were able to get the GLBT (Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender) Center established, and that has become a vital place for programming and a place where students, faculty, and staff can meet and share concerns. But the center has been under-staffed and under-resourced, and progress in other areas just wasn't happening."

"I was accused of being gay because of the cologne I used."

A student-organized silent vigil took place on the Quad in the fall of 2009 to protest incidents of racial and sexual bigotry. The following year, in late winter, students

gathered with faculty, staff, and administrators for a retreat to examine the climate on campus. During the summer, student leaders issued a report to administrators detailing problems for GLBT students, racial minorities, and disabled students. They received a written response, and administrators said they would address many of the issues, but this past fall the students felt that nothing was being done to move their concerns forward. That is when they decided to stage the library sit-in.

They submitted a list of demands that included stronger responses to harassment and bullying, better and more training for residence staff and others on campus, hiring of an upper level administrator responsible for diversity and equity issues, and a new, better-staffed GLBT Center. They argued that the current center, a small portion of the first floor in Adams Hall, invited harassment and attack. They were dealing every day with other students calling them names, insulting them, and making them feel unsafe. They had had enough.

“You have to hold people accountable, and it has to start with the leadership of the University from the president to the provost to deans and faculty.”

The sit-in lasted eight days. During this period a Rutgers University freshman committed suicide after his roommates circulated video of him engaging in sexual activity with another male student. That incident stirred a national debate on bullying and the treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students at colleges and high schools nationwide. URI's student protest became part of the story highlighted in national news reports.

In response, the University agreed to create a new GLBT center in a house on Upper College Road, to hire more staff, and to provide more staff and faculty training. In December the University hired Kathryn A. Friedman, former executive director of diversity and equity at the University of Vermont, as interim associate vice president for community, equity, and diversity. Winters' direct reporting line to Dougan was also restored.

President Dooley said that the administration had been making a good faith effort to address complaints and that the protest resulted from “too infrequent communication.”

“The perception was we weren't moving fast enough,” he said. “We were working on some of these issues before last summer. The fact is, what they were asking for resonates with my vision for the University as a community. We believe the University should be a safe, nurturing place for all students.”

Easier said than done.

According to experts who have examined the climate for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender students, faculty, and staff at colleges across the country, URI is not

atypical. The civil rights of sexual minorities have not been as protected as those of other groups, the studies conclude. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students suffer harassment and bullying on a regular basis, and faculty and staff suspect discrimination. Ironically, things might actually have become worse as these students have become more assertive in demanding their rights in the national arena. A backlash has occurred on a personal scale, and college students who are often isolated amid opponents of gay rights say they feel unsafe and unwelcome at many institutions.

“The challenging nature of the climate surprised me,” said Susan Rankin, a lead researcher for the “2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People” conducted for Campus Pride, a national organization focused on gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender issues. “The most surprising result of this survey to me was how many people said they have considered leaving their schools because of the climate. They don’t feel safe or welcome.”

Rankin, a professor at Penn State University, has researched these issues for three decades. She agrees that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender students have become more visible since a similar study done in 2003, but most college campuses have not made significant changes to improve the climate. Few schools have centers where gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender students can gather to socialize and discuss issues in a safe place, she noted. “Only 13 percent of schools have sexual orientation and gender identity in their equal opportunity clauses,” she said.

URI has been ahead of many other schools in some ways, but perhaps not far enough ahead. Several alumni interviewed for this story said they felt the same way that today’s undergraduates feel. James Moore ’88, an attorney in California who was the 1988 Commencement student speaker, said he wanted to come out when he was at URI, “but it wasn’t the right place to do that. My roommate freshman year was extremely homophobic. I was in the closet, but believe it or not, I was accused of being gay because of the cologne I used.”

Moore served on the Student Senate and says he remembers feeling torn when confronted with a committee decision on whether to fund a gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender student organization: “I was worried that if I supported them, I would be outed, but at the same time, I admired what they were doing. I worried that if I opposed them, I’d be accused of over-compensating. It was a terrible dilemma for me.”

His experience parallels others gathered for this story. A 2007 alumnus (who asked not to be identified) said he had to move from his residence hall as a freshman because of harassment from his roommate. Current students said they knew of cases where gay students or non-white students who have complained about roommate harassment have been moved rather than the student who caused the problem.

Partly in response to campus incidents, Vice President for Advancement Robert Beagle and the Alumni Association have formed a new chapter for gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgender alumni and friends called the LGBTIQ2 Alumni and Friends Chapter. Marc Archambault '73, who co-chairs the chapter, said, "I should have pushed for this much earlier. I had a good experience at URI, but it did not encourage me to identify as gay. I want to make sure my University is a safe place for gay students."

Jessica Raffaele '04, M.S. '09, the Alumni Relations staff member coordinating the chapter, said mentoring has been identified as a primary activity for chapter members as has advising administrators on improving the campus climate. She also said the chapter, which held its first networking event at the Alumni Center on February 4, will encourage connections between alumni, faculty, and staff.

Alumni and students interviewed for this article all said that fear of being outed is a constant condition for gay men whose families would not support their decision. It was in the 1970s when Marc Archambault was an undergraduate, and it was for Jim Moore a decade later as it has been for other students ever since. Other alums, including those who said they had a great experience at URI, said they chose not to come out as undergraduates because of the climate on campus. "I wasn't ready, and I wouldn't have been ready even had Rhode Island been the most gay-friendly environment," said Kate Chesley '79, who was among alumni who met with Dooley in California.

Even current students who are out say they wouldn't recommend such disclosure to others because of the harassment they'd suffer.

"Absolutely not," said Brian Stack, a junior who was one of the leaders of the September protest. "Disclosure just invites too much harassment. We held the protest out of frustration. Ultimately, we want the University to specifically say that it does not and will not tolerate homophobic actions."

Riley Davis, a sophomore leader of the protest who hopes to become a doctor, said she just accepted mistreatment. "I was always laid back about it," she said. "I considered that that was the way people were. But things seemed to get worse here, and more kids were coming to the GLBT Center and talking about problems they had. Incidents where people were attacked just made me furious, and I felt we had to do something about it."

Winters understands the students' frustrations: "They know that I've been bringing these things up for years. Some efforts have been made, but students have still been attacked, and the environment does not feel safe to them because it isn't safe. We've never really had a full and open discussion about this on campus."

Among other points, Winters and others note that if a gay student is attacked, he or she faces the dilemma of having to come out in order to report the incident. At 18 or 19 years

old, without support from family, that can be extremely difficult. “Even last year, when the silent protest was held, administrators didn’t believe the extent of it,” Winters said. “It’s hard for good people to believe this and to face up to it. But we have to own it in order to change it.”

It took students to do the convincing. At a meeting with President Dooley at his home, students recited incidents of harassment, bullying, and vandalism. Marc Archambault, who attended that meeting, said administrators didn’t seem to believe that it could be so widespread. When one of the students showed a YouTube video posted by a URI student who was shouting epithets as he passed by the GLBT Center in his car, “administrators understood what the students were telling them,” Archambault said.

Several steps to address the climate are in early stages. Provost Donald DeHayes has asked the Faculty Senate to examine general education curricula to incorporate more diversity and multicultural material. A bias response team formed last year to track complaints of harassment and assault has been altered to make certain that victims can learn the disposition of cases even though student discipline records are private. Diversity task forces now exist throughout the University. In January, resident assistants underwent training about issues concerning sexual minorities, and faculty in several of the University’s colleges attended diversity workshops as part of an effort to raise awareness of issues of power and privilege campus-wide.

Kathryn Friedman, the new interim associate vice president for community, equity, and diversity, said these steps have put URI ahead of other campuses, but there’s still a long way to go “to institutionalize inclusion.” She recommends a structure to bring all the diversity task forces together and to assign various University departments with moving on inclusion and anti-discrimination issues. “That is how you institutionalize inclusion,” Friedman said. “You have to hold people accountable, and it has to start with the leadership of the University from the president to the provost to deans and faculty.”

Does Friedman, who has held similar positions at other schools, worry about backlash? “There is always backlash when you are engaged in social justice and social change,” she said. “But the only way to achieve the change is to move forward.”

The student protest instigated some movement. “There’s no doubt that the protest made the University pay more attention to these issues,” Winters said. “During the protest over 1,000 people came to talk to the students. It focused the conversation on campus for over a week.”

Ironically, Vice President Thomas Dougan, one of the first officials to arrive on the scene of the protest, told the students that if they left to go to class, they should take a campus police escort. Some agreed; others did not and faced harassing remarks and insults. “It happens all the time,” said Brian Stack. “Now, at least, people are aware of it.”

Dooley agreed that the protest, while it might have cast URI in a negative national light for a time, “was good for the campus. It helped us all understand what these students are facing and what we need to do to make the campus more supportive and welcoming. It is our responsibility to make sure that every student feels safe and can enjoy an atmosphere that encourages learning and development.”

— John Pantalone '71