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Running Head: STUDENT PROTEST

The University of Rhode Island's Response to Student Protest: Supporting Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, and Transgender Students

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**Abstract**

This paper describes and analyzes a crisis at the University of Rhode Island. The university had a reputation as a very homophobic campus, and some students and staff felt that the administration was not doing enough to combat harassment and discrimination. For eight consecutive days in September 2010, ten students occupied a space in the campus library, demanding that the university enact specific measures to improve the campus climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender students. This paper presents how the crisis unfolded, details the university's response, and offers a critique of the response.

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### Introduction

The University of Rhode Island (URI) is a public research institution located in Kingston, Rhode Island. URI offers over 80 undergraduate majors, over 50 Masters and Doctoral programs, and 18 professional degree and certificate programs. The university mission states, "Students, faculty, staff, and alumni are united in one common purpose: to learn and lead together. Embracing Rhode Island's heritage of independent thought, we value: Creativity and Scholarship; Diversity, Fairness, and Respect; Engaged Learning and Civic Involvement; and Intellectual and Ethical Leadership" (Mission, 2012, para. 1). David Dooley became president of the university in July 2009.

### The Crisis

URI had a history of threats, harassment, and an overall negative campus climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students. Students and alumni had reported that they experienced the campus as an extremely homophobic environment (Pantalone, 2011). In fact, URI was twice listed among the ten most homophobic campuses in the United States by *The Princeton Review* (Pantalone, 2011).

Despite the visibility of these problems, many LGBT students and staff, and their allies, felt that the administration did not do enough to improve safety and fight discrimination of LGBT students. The university's LGBT Center was located on a small portion of the first floor in a residence hall, which students said invited harassment and attack (Pantalone, 2011). The Center remained under-staffed and under-resourced. Assistant Director for Residential Education Ariel Winters said he notified administrators about the campus climate issues for LGBT students,

but the administrators “didn’t believe the extent of it” (Pantalone, 2011, para. 24). During the summer of 2010, student leaders issued a report to administrators describing problems for LGBT students, racial minorities, and students with disabilities. They received a written response stating that the administration would address many of the issues raised, but during the fall, students felt that not enough was being done to move their concerns forward. At this point, a group of ten LGBT students decided to stage a protest.

For eight days in September 2010, the students staged a peaceful sit-in in the 24-hour area of the campus library. The students declared that they would remain there until the university met their demands to improve the campus climate. Specifically, these demands were that the university respond more strongly to harassment and bullying; provide more and better training for residence hall and other staff; hire an upper-level administrator responsible for diversity and equity issues; and establish a new, better-staffed LGBT Center.

The sit-in constituted a crisis because students were protesting the university’s lack of support for LGBT students, which is a civil rights issue. In addition, the suicide of gay student Tyler Clementi at Rutgers University during the sit-in put LGBT issues on college campuses in the national spotlight, leading to greater news coverage of the situation at URI. On URI’s campus, more than 1,000 people engaged in conversations with the protestors during the week-long sit-in, indicating that many campus community members became directly involved in the situation. The URI Multicultural Center sent pizza, and university dining services delivered other food to the protestors. Vice President Thomas Dougan, one of the first officials to arrive at the protest, advised students to use campus police escorts if they left to attend class. Some students agreed, and those who did not faced harassing remarks and insults.

### **The University's Response**

The University responded to the sit-in by agreeing to meet the students' demands through the following actions:

- Turning the Ruggles House on Upper College Road into the new LGBT Center, with apartments available to rent to students;
- Adding more sensitivity training for students, staff, and faculty;
- Giving LGBT students a voice on several university committees;
- Accelerating the schedule for adding a chief diversity officer to the administration and another staff member to the LGBT Center;
- The previously-established Bias Response Team was altered to make certain that victims could learn the disposition of cases even though student discipline records are private; and
- Creating an advisory commission to explore and advocate for LGBT issues.

In addition, Provost Donald DeHayes asked the Faculty Senate to incorporate more diversity and multicultural material into the general education curriculum. Diversity task forces now exist throughout the university. In February 2011, chaplains of the university honored LGBT students for raising awareness of inequities on campus during the sit-in at the library.

President Dooley, Vice President for Student Affairs Dougan, and Provost DeHayes met with the protestors several times during the sit-in to discuss the students' objectives. President Dooley praised the students' efforts and said he agreed that the university should be a safe, welcoming place for all students. President Dooley said that the administration had been making a "good faith effort" to address student complaints and that the protest resulted from "too infrequent communication" with students (Pantalone, 2011, para. 10). While the protest cast URI

in a negative national light for a time, President Dooley stated that it was good for the campus because it helped the administration understand the issues and what needed to be done to improve the campus for LGBT students.

### **Analysis of the University's Response**

Despite his relatively short tenure as President of the university at the time of the protest, President Dooley responded well overall to the crisis. He acknowledged that the university had been doing too little, too slowly to combat harassment and discrimination. As Farrington (2006) notes, it is critically important that a university president "engage the community personally" during times of crisis (p. 61). By meeting with the protestors several times during the sit-in, President Dooley demonstrated how seriously he took the situation and the issues being raised. He acknowledged that changes to improve the campus climate for LGBT students would make URI a better living and learning environment for *all* members of the university community, which resonates with Hrabowski's (2006) assertion that "what works for minority students tends to work for students in general" (p. 140).

One of the strengths of President Dooley's response to the crisis was how he affirmed the students' views by connecting them to the university's mission and values, including diversity, fairness, and respect. In a letter to the university community about URI's response to the protest, President Dooley stated, "Building a community at URI in which every member is welcomed, respected, supported and valued is central to our identity and mission" (President Dooley: LGBT Update, para 1). While it is regrettable that it took students protesting to initiate a campaign to transform the campus climate, university leadership successfully used the protest as an opportunity to focus on diversity and inclusion.

University leadership did a good job of involving students, faculty, and staff in efforts to create a more inclusive and welcoming campus. A LGBT Ad Hoc team was created in which students, faculty, and staff all served together to address campus climate issues. Provost DeHayes engaged the faculty in incorporating more diversity and multicultural material into their courses, and the university initiated faculty and staff diversity trainings.

The university missed an opportunity to learn from other campuses about best practices for promoting a positive campus climate for LGBT students. Dubois (2006) advises university leaders, "When facing a crisis, look to the institutions that have been there and done that" (p. 49). For example, Brown University, also located in Rhode Island, has an established Safe Zone Program that could likely have served as a valuable resource for URI.

Despite URI's efforts to become a more inclusive and welcoming campus, some campus climate issues have persisted. For example, current students who identify as LGBT say they would not recommend such disclosure to others because of the harassment they would suffer. The continuing fear within the LGBT community suggests that the university must continue working toward creating a culture of safety and acceptance. The university's response to the sit-in demonstrated that it is willing to invest resources in fighting harassment and discrimination. However, it is essential that URI continue to prioritize campus climate issues for LGBT students and other minority groups without relying on students to press for change.

### **Conclusion**

It is unfortunate that URI did not dedicate sufficient resources to combating harassment and discrimination against LGBT students until the protest. However, URI's response to the protest serves as an example of how crisis can serve as a catalyst for change to benefit an entire university community. President Dooley and other campus leaders used the crisis as an



opportunity to refocus on the university's mission and values of diversity, fairness, and respect.

Other university leaders can learn from URI's example of centering crisis response efforts around a university's mission and identity.

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