

Gay students demanding equality on



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SPECIAL REPORT

This is the last in a series of U. special reports. This package examines campus issues important to an emerging minority group and how administrators are responding to their concerns.

Report by
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Southwest Missouri State U. student Brad Evans drove home last fall after a candlelight vigil supporting the presentation of a play about homosexuals and found his home engulfed in flames. Fire department officials concluded the blaze was an arson and linked it to Evans' support of the play. Springfield, Mo., community members had vehemently opposed the play, which was fully supported by university administrators.

Only six days earlier, more than 1,000 miles away, Rutgers U. officials released what gay rights leaders have heralded as the nation's most comprehensive study of gay and lesbian needs on campus. The 107-page report took 18 months to compile and provides 130 detailed recommendations on how to improve the quality of life for all Rutgers gays and lesbians — students, faculty, staff and alumni.

These unrelated events represent polar extremes in the treatment of gay and lesbian students nationwide. There are few reported incidents of physical violence, but most university communities are far from the open atmosphere that spurred Rutgers officials to initiate such a progressive project.

But national gay rights leaders predict the 1990s will be a transition period for the movement. "I think there's a growing sense of empowerment," said Kevin

Berrill of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force in Washington, D.C. Berrill heads the NGLTF's Anti-Violence Project and Campus Project, which helps organize gay students to combat homophobia, an irrational fear of homosexuals.

"Rutgers is a classic case," Berrill continued. "The students persuaded the president to initiate a task force on gay and lesbian concerns. The report looks at every aspect of gay and lesbian life on campus. The fact that such a needs assessment took place is amazing."

A handful of schools — including U. of California, Santa Cruz; U. of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign; Vassar College; and U. of Massachusetts, Amherst — have conducted or are conducting similar "climate assessments." But none have matched the Rutgers study.

"Most of the efforts have focused just on academics or just on services, but what we've done is look at everything from employee benefits to alumni support," said Ron Nieberding, a Rutgers graduate student who served on the committee and edited its report.

The late Rutgers President Edward J. Bloustein formed the President's Select Committee for Gay and Lesbian Concerns after gay students criticized the administration for being more attentive to racism than homophobia.

"We cannot comprehend . . . your total lack of positive action in the realm of support of the gay and lesbian community," a letter to Bloustein from the Rutgers U. Lesbian/Gay Alliance reads.

An administration official agreed that homosexual concerns inadvertently were given less attention. "The implication to gay and lesbian students was that the university was not taking issues of homophobia as seriously as issues of racism. It's safe to say they were correct in assuming that," said David Burns, assistant vice president for Student Life Policy and Services.

"We responded very quickly to their concerns because we had an intellectual obligation to do so, and because we had just talked about our desire to improve conditions for people who are viewed as different in some way," he said.

Formed in February 1988, the committee was made up of 28 Rutgers students, faculty, staff, administrators and alumni. The committee met 71 times in the course of a year and a half, and established five fundamental objectives for Rutgers.

The report calls for the creation of an office for gay and lesbian concerns, sensitivity programs to combat homophobia, a safe space free of racist, sexist, anti-Semitic or homophobic bigotry, assur-

ance of equity in access to employee benefits and services, and integration of diverse disciplines — such as women's, Afro-American and gay/lesbian studies — into already required courses.

Senior Suzy Bibona, RULGA secretary, said the progress at Rutgers has been substantial. "Rutgers has come pretty far in a short period of time. Now, people are at least listening — attitudes don't change overnight — but they've started to listen and started to name a thing called homophobia where they didn't



DON BIBB, THE UNIVERSITY STAR, SOUTHWEST TEXAS STATE U.

An unidentified U. of Texas student protests at a gay rights march in Austin, Texas, last year.

know what that was before," she said.

But Evans knows all too well what homophobia is. For him, it resulted in an arson that robbed him of his home and possessions, and killed his two cats.

Last fall, SMSU's theater and dance department scheduled a production of the play "The Normal Heart." The Advocate, a national gay magazine, described the play as an examination of "the lives of gay men in New York City during the early 1980s, at the onset of the AIDS crisis. The play includes profanity, and in several instances, gay men show affection for each other and kiss."

Although Evans, a senior theater and performance major, was not involved in the production of the play, he helped form People Acting with Compassion and Tolerance — a group that supported production of the play — in response to Citizens Demanding Standards, a community group opposed to the play.

"The main thing that they found offensive was that the play dealt openly with homosexuality and homosexual

lifestyles," Evans said. "They didn't feel like tax dollars should be spent to produce the play. They called it pornography."

Led by state Rep. Jean Dixon, CDS met with university officials asking that the production be cancelled.

Dixon did not return four phone messages left at her Jefferson City, Mo., office.

University officials remained steadfast in their decision to support the play. On opening night, Evans attended a PACT-sponsored candlelight vigil in support of the play. Afterward, he drove home to set his VCR to tape news coverage of the vigil only to find 12 fire trucks in front of his house. "At first, I couldn't drive close enough to see it was my house."

Within 15 minutes after the blaze was doused, fire department officials knew that it was an arson and linked it to Evans' pro-play stance. But to this day there are no leads in the case.

After the shock, Evans said he felt angry. "But I feel more sorry for the people who did it. That someone can let fear force them into doing something like that is very sad," he said.

Although his case may be one of the most violent, Evans is not alone in the harassment he received from being associated with gays or gay issues. Last year, a U. of Pennsylvania freshman who devoted his bi-weekly student newspaper column to gay issues, received threats on his answering machine. At Columbia U., members of the campus gay and lesbian organization received death-threat letters with actual bullets attached. Most gay and lesbian student organizations report receiving harassing phone calls.

According to the 1988 NGLTF Report on anti-gay violence, 34 gay and lesbian student groups in the United States reported 1,124 cases of verbal harassment, 177 cases of vandalism, 97 violent threats, nine physical assaults and four bombs threats in 1988. The report acknowledges, however, that these figures represent only the tip of the iceberg since many colleges do not have organizations to document harassment.

"Most administrators will say there isn't any anti-gay harassment on their campus but that is because the environment is so oppressive that gay students are afraid to come out," Berrill said.

Those students who do choose to be openly gay and become involved in gay and lesbian campus organizations must learn to deal with the threat of violence. Jeff Nickel, co-president of Boston U.'s Lesbian/Gay Alliance and a senior psychology major, gets harassing phone calls almost daily. But he keeps his number listed so he can be accessible to people.

ACADEMICS

Gay studies movement...The City College of San Francisco is the nation's first college to have a department devoted to gay and lesbian studies, offering 11 courses in literature, psychology, history and other subjects. The need for such courses is the same as that for other minorities, said Walter Williams, a U. of Southern California professor. "Perhaps it's even more important for gay students because at least with every other minority group in America people have their family background and have been raised with their heritage whereas gay students have not," he said. Mark Von Destinon of the American College Personnel Association said the gay studies movement is "where black studies and women's programs were at the end of the 1960s." Among the schools with classes devoted to gay studies are: U. of California, Berkeley; City U. of New York; Princeton U.; and Yale U. — HV

HOUSING

Married housing for gay couples...Stanford U. is one of the few universities offering gay and lesbian students equal access to married and family student housing. To be eligible for this housing, a couple must be legally married under California law, but Stanford recognizes that not everyone — for whatever reason — can be legally married. Stanford allows these couples to petition for special housing consideration. Student Housing Director Rodger Whitney said a handful of gay and lesbian students have applied for and received housing under the special consideration. "We simply have seen a problem and students had raised the issue, and we were responsive to that," Whitney said. "I think it's a policy that many are starting to pay attention to." Other colleges with similar housing policies include: U. of Massachusetts, Amherst; U. of North Dakota; U. of Pennsylvania; and Yale U. — HV

PUBLICATIONS

Gay community newspaper...U. of California, Los Angeles, is the only university in the nation that has a student newspaper devoted to gay and lesbian concerns, said *TenPercent* Editor Adam Ross. The newspaper, which receives all its funds from advertising revenues, serves to inform the gay and straight communities of gay issues and events. "It's got an advocacy bent that a regular newspaper wouldn't have," Ross said. But that doesn't mean the newspaper and the UCLA gay and lesbian student organization always agree. "There's always been a tension there because the newspaper tends to scrutinize the group and the groups are always afraid of scrutiny," he said. A recent representative survey of the UCLA community revealed *TenPercent* has the third highest readership of the campus' special interest publications. Established in the late 1970s, *TenPercent* is published six times a year. — HV