

History

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Olum decided to convene a task force to address campus homophobia the next school year.

Less than ten years have passed since those days, but campus officials say nowadays students perceive a drastic change in the environment for gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered persons on campus in terms of harassment, safety and academic concerns, among others. With National Coming Out Week concluding Saturday and the news of an openly gay University of Wyoming student brutally beaten and killed last week, the environment for gays on this campus is once again evaluated.

History

While gays had experienced homophobic harassment throughout the '80s, the Hughes affair drew much greater attention from the campus community, said computer science professor Sarah Douglas. As a co-chair for Olum's Task Force on Lesbian and Gay Concerns, Douglas was involved with 21 students, faculty and staff in evaluating the administration and campus agencies as well as developing three campus-wide surveys to determine the student life, academic life and overall environment for gays.

The surveys showed the University was "somewhat unacceptable" to 38 percent of the gay students who responded. In addition, 54 percent said they had been verbally harassed or threatened, and 24 percent had experienced physical confrontation. Most striking to task force members was that 61 percent of gay students thought that anti-gay and

anti-lesbian harassment on campus was prevalent enough to make them fear for their safety.

And this was the era before the Oregon Citizens Alliance had launched several statewide campaigns to "target gays and lesbians" and promote homophobia politically, Douglas remembered.

Douglas, a University professor of computer science since 1983, said through the task force's findings, the University established a standing committee to monitor gay and lesbian concerns in the University Senate and created a position within the Office of the Dean of Student Life to address educational and support service issues.

Douglas praised the University for changing its policies regarding family housing and domestic partner benefits. In 1990, the University opened family housing to heterosexual, lesbian and gay couples in a committed relationship. This year, as of July 1, gay partners of University staff began to receive health coverage.

"The campus has been amazing," Douglas said. "I am very grateful to be here. I'm very respectful of the people here."

In 1995, Stephanie Carnahan took over as the coordinator of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Educational and Support Services Program. The position entails education through advisements, peer presentations and off-campus speakers as well as support of student organizations and drop-in groups.

In 1996, Carnahan used the Oregon Survey Research Laboratory to reassess the campus environment for gays. Those results showed progress. Reports of ha-

arrassment were way down among gay respondents, and a majority — 72 percent — found the campus environment to now be "somewhat accepting." She notes fewer gay students participated in the survey than in 1990, but the findings are still very positive.

"I wish I could say [harassment] has gone away completely," she said.

Yet, what hasn't changed is the large numbers of gay students who still fear harassment on campus, Carnahan said. "I'm still at a loss to why that is," she said, but she speculated that homophobic hate-crimes portrayed in the media help perpetuate the fear.

In the classroom

Harassment in the academic environment also "needs drastic improvement," Carnahan said, pointing to survey results that show anti-lesbian, gay or bisexual remarks reportedly made in classrooms by professors or graduate teaching fellows.

Douglas, a lesbian, said that's not a surprise considering her feeling that some faculty have "learned to be socially acceptable" and to "not make overt jokes in the classroom" but generally are prejudiced and want gay people to keep their sexuality to themselves.

"I think the students are a lot further ahead than the faculty," she said.

In addition, both Douglas and Carnahan say the administration hasn't developed any gay studies curriculum, and many gay issues are often left out in classroom discussion.

"We're where we were 10 years ago," Douglas said.

The administration says it ad-

dresses the issue of sensitivity to community in its correspondence between faculty and the president in addition to raising classroom sensitivity issues during new faculty orientation.

Lorraine Davis, vice provost for academic affairs, said she wasn't aware of the context of the 1996 survey but said, "I would hope that we didn't have that degree or amount of homophobia [in the classroom]."

"We certainly want to have an environment conducive to all people," Davis said. "I think we promote that."

Residence halls

They often come to Kelly Matchett-Morris with the mindset that "my roommate is a big old queer and I want to move," he said. Matchett-Morris, the associate director of residence life, deals with at least a few students every year who are homophobic or uncomfortable with gay — or people they perceive as gay — roommates.

He remembers one case in the fall of 1996 when a student complained and wanted to move but didn't know if his roommate was gay. The next day, the gay roommate approached Matchett-Morris about telling his roommate about his sexual orientation, telling Matchett-Morris that "I don't want [my roommate] to be uncomfortable."

The two finally talked about it, and they ended up being friends, Matchett-Morris said. The heterosexual roommate even came to Matchett-Morris to ask if it was appropriate to make a sign in support of his gay roommate during gay pride week.

"I told him 'Yeah, that's great,"

he said. "I would make that sign and give it to him and say I support [you]."

It doesn't always work that way, though, he said. Passive homophobic harassment, notes under doors and verbal harassment do occur, and most cases aren't resolved unless offending persons can be identified. Sometimes it's more direct, he said, as in a 1994 case in which someone lit a fire outside the door of a gay University Inn student.

If students feel threatened, Matchett-Morris said they have the option of temporarily moving to make them feel safer. This year, a group of students coordinated a "Safe Hall" on the fourth floor of Carson Hall for gay and gay allied students to live in. Next year, housing could offer a "Pride Hall" as one of its many themed halls, he said. The idea is awaiting administration approval, but Matchett-Morris said it is a "movement in the right direction. [Housing] is open to it, and we're willing to hear it."

Where we're headed

Carnahan, of the Office of Student Life, said she'll probably assess the campus environment every five years, next in 2001. In addition to focusing on ridding the classroom environment of homophobia, she said more education in the greek system and in University athletics are projects she'll concentrate on in the future.

For professor Douglas, who has seen major changes in campus attitudes since the Tim Hughes homophobic incidents, she knows unspoken homophobia still exists.

"We haven't solved the gay problem," she said.

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