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From left, queer students Beth McGinnis, John Sykes, Ellen Weigant and Carolyn Dishman discuss campus life

**OPEN MINDS,  
OPEN DOORS?**

**OSU campus faces vocal opposition to Queer Resource Center**  
by Jonathan Kipp

Two months ago, Oregon State University's tranquil winter term was interrupted by one of the biggest controversies to hit the campus in years. The notoriously conservative Corvallis college is in the midst of a heated public debate regarding its sexual minorities community.

The *Barometer*, the university's daily newspaper, reported Feb. 27 that an upcoming student fee committee meeting would consider funding a Queer Resource Center. The \$7,000 allocation would provide for part-time staff, office supplies, advertising, books and other resources, costing each student about 15 cents a term.

It would be housed in the Women's Center near the campus library, according to the proposal. Supporters said the demand for information, referrals and resources had stretched volunteers thin.

The newspaper also reported that student body vice president Chala Barrington spoke out against the center in a letter to the committee: "One thing that has to be realized is if you are in the LGBT lifestyle, you are self-identified. The consequences come with that self-identification."

Barrington, who is African American, wrote that gays and lesbians do not have the same status as ethnic minorities on the OSU campus. Outraged students started sending letters to the editor admonishing her and demanding her resignation; others defended her, expressing their belief that homosexuality is a choice.

The barrage of submissions continued to pour in for 17 days, and the paper printed almost every one, editor in chief Scott Johnson says. Soon, the controversy caught the mainstream media's attention.

Barrington didn't have to stand alone in opposition for long. The OSU College Republicans, a student-supported group in the Office for Student Involvement, blasted the proposal on moral grounds.

"OSU is highly revered in our state as a place of strong values and strong moral convictions," president Lee Vasche told *The Barometer*. "This is going to tarnish Oregon State University's

reputation around our state, among conservative families who have moral objections to homosexuality."

Johnson says the College Republicans felt an immediate backlash for playing the morality card. Within days, they shifted their strategy and began basing their opposition on fiscal responsibility.

Proponents of the center claim that if they are so concerned about fees, why didn't they speak out against a recent 50-cent-per-student increase to pay for athletics? Junior Ellen Weigant, LGBT Task Force director, says a College Republican leader admitted in a private meeting April 11 that the group is masking its moral and religious objection with rhetoric about fiscal issues.

"What got me was their reason to oppose," she says of the organization, which couldn't be reached for comment. "They said anyone could get a center: left-handed...disabled people.... They tried to make it sound as ridiculous as possible."

Johnson says the GOP group doesn't represent all Republican students. That fact has caused some resentment on campus, he adds.

"They are far right," Johnson says. "They are a very small minority but a very vocal minority."

Junior Carolyn Dishman is co-director of the Rainbow Continuum, the university's student gay group. She is outraged that the College Republicans expect sexual minorities to offer proof that the campus is oppressive.

"Have they felt unsafe?" Dishman asked. "Have they ever walked through campus and worried?"

The Queer Resource Center passed its largest hurdle March 14, when the student fee committee unanimously approved the proposal. More than 350 people attended the meeting.

The proposal now faces both graduate and undergraduate senates. Votes are expected sometime this spring.

University president Paul Risser and the board of higher education must approve the center before the funds are released. He has remained silent about the controversy and says he will not comment until the proposal reaches his desk.

Johnson says that Risser never has vetoed a program that has cleared the approval process and that he is a strong supporter of diversity. The editor estimates that between 60 percent and 80 percent of students support the center.

The university's final exam week and subsequent spring break put the issue on hold. Although students are back on campus, Johnson says the issue has not resurfaced. [K]