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From Where I Sit: The ABC of Tolerance and the 'Alphabet Community.

Deborah D. Rogers

University of Maine - Main, DRogers@maine.edu

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The ABC of tolerance and the ‘alphabet community’

Universities have a vital role to play in recognising complex sexualities, says Deborah D. Rogers

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In 1984, in my hometown of Bangor, Maine, three homophobic teenagers threw Charlie Howard, an openly gay 23-year-old man, off the State Street Bridge to his death in the Kenduskeag Stream below. Stephen King, who lives nearby, fictionalised this appalling incident in his 1986 novel *It*.

Bangor is eight miles from the [University of Maine](#), where I teach, and since this murder happened in our backyard, our campus is especially aware of the need to understand and appreciate diversity. Even though we are located in a largely working-class, independent (read conservative) state, we are largely supportive of the LGBTQAI community. Commonly referred to as “alphabet soup”, this acronym, with variations in the order of the lettering, signifies lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, ally/asexual and intersex.

To encourage inclusivity, in 2013 our women’s studies programme jeopardised its hard-won successes by changing its name to women’s, gender and sexuality studies. This rubric provides a haven for queer studies, which goes beyond the gay-straight

binary to recognise complex sexualities and ways of enacting gender. Such protection is especially important here and at other public universities, which are funded in large part by taxpayers.

Along with many of my colleagues, I attempt to teach tolerance. For example – teaching moment alert – when I examine Willa Cather’s short story “Paul’s Case”, which concerns a gay student, I contextualise the work by discussing gender in terms of a continuum (think Kinsey Report, think Adrienne Rich). According to this view, sexual identity is socially constructed along a range from heterosexual to gay. This model can accommodate non-binary possibilities such as trans, questioning and agender.

I often segue to the [It Gets Better Project](#), which was created in 2010 in response to the suicides of bullied LGBT teenagers. Now international in scope, this movement has collected thousands of user-created videos of personal stories that inspire hope. Although the project initially consisted of gay stories, it broadened to embrace submissions by all individuals. Contributors include celebrities, ordinary people and politicians. Even [Barack Obama offered a video](#) describing his experience of “what it’s like to grow up feeling that sometimes you don’t belong”.

The come-to-Jesus moment usually arrives when students recognise not only their own vulnerability, but also their own role in creating cultures that shun difference. Sometimes a student will feel comfortable enough to come out. And, although we can find much fault with American universities, it is hard to fathom a better place to be who you are. Granted, we do have our share of unenlightened (for the most part fundamentalist) institutions. But many American colleges resemble oases that offer the alphabet community insulation from prejudice.

I’d like to say that it gets (even) better after university, but we live in a world where homosexuality remains illegal in 78 countries and punishable by death in five, and where millions are persecuted for their sexual orientation. To effect real change, we must not only radiate tolerance from the university to an outside world that may be harsher and less open-minded, but we must also take action, at the very least in the form of legislation protecting civic rights. After all, to quote a maxim of *Downton Abbey*’s Mrs Patmore, “sympathy butters no parsnips”.

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<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/comment/opinion/the-abc-of-tolerance-and-the-alphabet-community/2018693.article>