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Angelic troublemakers: Making change on campus

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Angelic Troublemakers

Making Change on Campus

In a year from this October, West Chester University of Pennsylvania will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the formation of the Gays of West Chester, currently the LGBTQA student organization. Forty years ago a very brave group of gay identified students and allies met on the ninth floor of a residence hall and claimed their existence.


The world and the college campus are so different now, especially for those who identify as LGBTQA. We have seen the addition of non-discrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity/ expression, domestic partnership benefits, student service offices dedicated to LGBTQA awareness and support, safe space zones, gender neutral housing, and much more. In those 40 years we have seen policies such as "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" and the Defense of Marriage Act come and almost go. We have academic courses and disciplines dedicated to the critical study of LGBTQ issues. We hire openly LGBTQ faculty and staff and on most campuses don't blink an eye. We include drag shows, second chance proms, National Coming Out Day events, Trans* Remembrance Day ceremonies, Days of Silence, and Lavender Graduations as annual events. At West Chester University, we recently hosted a Gay/Straight Alliance conference for high school students and 200 young people participated. In the words of Dan Savage and so many others, "It Does Get Better."

In a year from this October, WCU of PA will celebrate the 40th anniversary of the formation of the Gays of West Chester.


In spite of all these positive changes, we must continue to create a strong presence on campus and advocate for policies and procedures that support a warm and inclusive campus climate for LGBTQ students, faculty and staff and their allies. It is easy to become complacent as we watch and celebrate the fruition of our collective efforts for social justice. Yet, every academic year WCU and other institutions are visited multiple times by groups who exercise their first amendment rights by publically preaching against homosexuality. There


are still individuals on our campuses who are disgusted by our work on issues of sexual orientation, gender identity and sexual identity. Just this month, the state of South Carolina fined two colleges for assigning books for students that are gay-themed! Reports of homophobic slurs on white boards are in the weekly reports of our residence life colleagues. LGBTQ faculty and staff have to make a conscious decision to disclose their sexual orientation and/or gender identity in the job search process. And, there still is the closeted or questioning student who walks past the LGBTQA meeting room, week after week, trying to find the courage to walk through the door.


Some of our campuses have been able to create very inclusive communities for LGBTQA students, faculty and staff. They have the support of their leaders and stakeholders. But many campuses still face cautious administrators, conservative stakeholders, and even individuals who are willing to articulate that they just don't "believe in homosexuality." It is for the Student Affairs practitioners at those campuses that I offer some thoughts on how to lead your efforts and not be the lone voice advocating for change and equity.


 Find your allies and invite them to participate. They exist in all areas of your institution. Now more than ever before, our colleagues have openly LGBTQA people in their lives. Some may be both personally and professionally motivated to help create a more inclusive campus culture.


 Don't limit your search for allies just in Student Affairs or in particular faculty disciplines. Look for allies everywhere—human resources, advancement and development, trades, custodial, food service, public safety, etc.


 As you find your allies, you will find a variety of voices to advocate for changes. Thoughtfully decide when to best use each voice. Understand that at times a faculty member, especially a tenured faculty member will be the best person to advocate for changes in the classroom.


 Survey your faculty allies to understand the types of educational programs that might complement and supplement their teaching. You will create a seamless learning environment for students and a supportive relationship with faculty colleagues.

 Look for the opportunities to make easy changes ("low hanging fruit") but keep focused on the strategic changes that are more difficult to implement. The easy changes are often an incremental step in resolving the more difficult issues.

 Do a review of university forms. Request that sexual orientation and gender identity be included when appropriate. Ask for inclusive options in the gender category. For example, when asking respondents for gender identity request that Trans* or Do Not Wish To Respond be added to the options.

 Do a similar review of publications, including your website. Examine the publications for information and messages about LGBTQA programs, services, activities, organizations, policies, etc.

 Find a mentor and confidant. Advocacy work is complicated and lonely. You will gain perspective about your work as you talk it through with a trusted colleague. Join the NASPA GLBT Knowledge Community and other similar professional groups. You will benefit from the experience of others.

 Be available for students, all students. It goes without saying that most of us will naturally be supportive and available for the students who identify as LGBTQA, who participate in the LGBTQA student organization, who are questioning and exploring their sexual orientation or gender identity. Be patient with the students who are struggling to understand LGBTQA issues and are working to move past the messages they may have learned in their homes, schools and communities.

The Borough of West Chester was the long-time home of the civil rights activist, Bayard Rustin. It is unlikely that the brave students in that residence hall forty years ago knew anything about Rustin. They would be surprised to know that at WCU's commencement this spring we posthumously awarded Rustin with an honorary degree, accepted by his longtime partner, Walter Nagle. In so many ways those students lived Rustin's often quoted words, "We need in every bay and community a group of angelic troublemakers." We can commit to living those words too.

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