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S. Wade Taylor

Kevin J. Mahoney

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Being Gay at a Jesuit University

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Resource Center at Georgetown University: A Case Study

By **S. Wade Taylor and Kevin J. Mahoney**

In June, 2009, with funding from the provost's task force on "The University and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition" at Boston College which encouraged each of its members to take on a salient project relevant to our university and its Catholic identity, we chose to investigate policies and structures that Jesuit universities have established to welcome and foster the growth, health and welfare of our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students, faculty and staff. This report resulted from that funding.

Around 2:30 AM on September 9, 2007, a 19-year-old gay, male student at Georgetown University was verbally assaulted and physically attacked by three men on 36th Street near the campus. The victim identified one of the attackers as being another Georgetown student, and that student was later charged with simple assault on September 27th in connection with the attack. The university did not alert the Georgetown community until the arrest was made. In response to this incident, a group of students protested what they considered the university's failure to alert its community of a reported hate crime.

This attack on a GU student and the pro-active response from students were the major precipitating events that led President John J. DeGioia to meet with student leaders and discuss the

needs of LGBTQ students at Georgetown in early October. Students suggested four major areas of improvement for the university, and as a result, the President called an open town hall discussion on October 24, 2007, proposing "that our community work together on a more comprehensive initiative to strengthen Georgetown's approach to addressing the needs of LGBTQ students."

President DeGoia appointed two vice presidents to provide senior administration leadership for this coordinated effort. They were in charge of developing and staffing four working groups covering: Reporting Incidents; Resources; Education and LGBTQ Issues, while also reporting all findings via reports to the provost and the president. Members of the groups broadly represented the Georgetown community, as students, staff and faculty volunteered their time toward this LGBTQ campus-wide initiative. All groups were charged to complete their work in the fall 2007 term, so that in the spring 2008, recommendations from each group could be considered and implemented.

Within a year after the hate crime, Georgetown University established its LGBTQ Resource Center staffed with a full-time director. It took only three months after President DeGioia addressed the Georgetown community on October 24, 2007 for all three work-

ing groups to generate reports with recommendations that would help implement the LGBTQ university initiative.

For the remainder of this report we will closely examine the LGBTQ Resource Center (which grew out of the Working Group on Resources) and possible lessons for other Jesuit universities.

The Working Group on Resources was encouraged by President DeGioia to "evaluate the nature and level of support for coordinating LGBTQ community resources." The group initiated three interest groups, consisting of members who had been known in the past for being supportive of LGBTQ students, their issues and concerns, and for having a deep intellectual understanding of the Catholic tradition. Each group was encouraged to be inclusive of all perspectives and to participate transparently with openness and honesty, as well as to have group members representing faculty, staff, undergraduate and graduate students.

The Internal Evaluation Group focused on reviewing and implementing the teaching of the Catholic Church, Georgetown's

S. Wade Taylor and Kevin J. Mahoney are in the Boston College Graduate School of Social Work. This essay is a condensation of a longer report.

mission and identity as a Jesuit school, the importance of access to equal education, the care of the whole person (*cura personalis*), and the need to provide necessary resources for all students, including at-risk populations. Members addressed issues that pertained specifically to the internal climate of the university, including both negative and positive reactions to creating a LGBTQ Resource Center. They discussed the history of LGBTQ issues and concerns on campus, the needs of all students on campus regarding LGBTQ resources, and LGBTQ education and its implementation across campus and with other student support groups.

The External Resources Group investigated what and how other universities had created resources specific to LGBTQ students and their needs. Some of these schools (including Duke, Princeton, Syracuse and the University of Pennsylvania) were invited to attend a two-day symposium at GU to discuss the mission of their centers, results to date, and the timelines in which these results had occurred. In addition, one executive administrator from GU visited selected schools to identify in more depth how these colleges met the needs of LGBTQ students.

The Allies/Friends Group focused on gathering information on alumni attitudes. Alumni support was crucial for a successful project. Allies and friends and a number of LGBTQ alumni responded positively to providing not only their professional expertise on identifying resources, but also their personal stories as students who once attended Georgetown. Though not directly related, in the Spring/Summer 2008 the official



Georgetown University students participating in March for Community.

alumni supported *Georgetown Magazine* (Spring/Summer, 2008) published an article entitled “Out on the Hilltop.” This article provided personal stories about the lives of LGBTQ alumni and their lived experiences while being students at the university (*Georgetown Magazine*, Spring/Summer, 2008). Also, a special reception for LGBTQ alumni, attended by the President and many members of Georgetown’s board of trustees, was held at the annual alumni gathering.

Each interest group reported their findings to the larger working group, and the information helped the working group to develop a proposal for creating an LGBTQ Resource Center, and to hire a full-time director and a program coordinator. The products of their efforts included a description of the director’s position, a budget for staffing and managing the Center, and suggestions for necessary liaisons and connections for the Center to be effective. From beginning to end, it took about three months for the working group on LGBTQ resources and its interests groups to complete its work.

In less than a year after the initial hate crime was reported by a GU stu-

dent, the LGBTQ Resource Center was in place. In August, 2008, it opened its doors with a full-time director, and in spring, 2009, a full-time program coordinator was added. It now has student interns who staff various programs and help provide leadership around campus. It is the first known LGBTQ resource center in the nation at a Jesuit university that has a full-time director. The director of the LGBTQ Resource Center reports directly to the vice president of student affairs.

Determining the best location for the Resource Center was very important. After a rigorous decision-making process, the group decided locating the center on campus would provide an easily accessible center for the entire Georgetown community. It is a resource center for all persons affiliated with the university, regardless of sexual orientation and gender expression.

The Resource Center mission statement, its vision, and the values and statements of values and action are described below and can also be read from the LGBTQ website at <http://lgbtq.georgetown.edu/about/mission.html>.

Interviewees identified four themes which describe the gestalt of how and why the center functions positively within a Jesuit university:

The Care of the Person: The Catholic Jesuit ideal of *cura personalis* encourages us not only to strive to care for the whole person, but also to help provide the means and opportunities for that person to succeed holistically. This care must occur within a free and respectful environment where adequate resources are available equally for all persons. For students, staff and faculty at a Jesuit school, these resources are considered a necessity to identify and preserve our God-given talents.

Internal Partnership across the University: The ongoing internal partnerships across the university are also a theme that continues the success of the LGBTQ Resource Center. It was important for all issues and concerns from all departments and schools to be heard and synthesized, as well as to be considered important feedback for consideration. This openness and transparency lead to a stronger internal partnership. This internal partnership was further strengthened by creating multiple LGBTQ working groups that included students, staff and faculty from different departments and schools across the university.

Active Involvement of Alumni: As a stakeholder group, alumni were invited to participate through the entire process of creating the LGBTQ Resource Center. Prior to the hate crimes of the Fall 2007 term, a small group of LGBTQ alumni had been actively encouraging the university to develop a more inclusive and safe environment for LGBTQ students. The resource committee inquired about alumni attitudes and concerns from alumni who were homosexual and heterosexual. These alumni were satisfied that their voices were finally being heard by executive administration.

Relationship with Campus Ministry: Since the inception of the LGBTQ Resource Center, the director has been working closely with campus ministry and chaplains (a total staff of 45-50 people). For both departments, it was important for students, staff and faculty, regardless of sexual orientation and gender-variant expression, to continue developing an intellectual and meaningful understanding of faith development. LGBTQ students, staff and faculty are also spiritual persons, and they require resources that will help them to continue their faith development across the lifespan. The resources campus ministry and its chaplains provide have been salient education about faith development and the dignity of the person. They joined in partnership to help create safe places where people can pursue their sexual identities in relationship to their own spiritual journey.

Considerations for Other Jesuit Universities

Every university has a different tradition, environment, culture and leadership. Given that the relationship between Catholicism and homosexuality has often been seen as problematic, this case study focused on the pioneering work at Georgetown University, one of our sister Jesuit institutions. For the administrators and faculty interviewed, responding to the needs of LGBTQ students was seen as an opportunity, not as a threat. Moreover, it was an opportunity for them to further the principle of *cura personalis* because of, not in spite of, their faith and beliefs.

With great dedication and persistence, GU implemented a resource center which now provides the entire Georgetown community with diverse education, intellectual dialogues, and social support regarding LGBTQ persons, their families and friends. As with all diversity initiatives, the process of implementation usually results in lessons

learned, and developing a LGBTQ Resource Center at GU is no exception. Completing the case study provided the following insights that may be considered for any Jesuit institution interested in conducting similar steps to provide adequate resources for LGBTQ students.

A transparent and an inclusive approach to implementing an LGBTQ initiative may be the best policy. President DeGioia and his administration demonstrated this approach in the following ways: Calling the town hall meeting and inviting students to provide insight and potential leadership as the university conceptualized the LGBTQ initiative; presenting to the Board of Trustees the need for an LGBTQ Resource Center and informing the leadership of the archdiocese of Washington, DC; and, inviting both internal and external evaluation groups, including alumni, to participate in creating the resource center. These examples established a spirit of transparency and inclusivity that ultimately helped to create and implement a resource center expeditiously.

An LGBTQ Resource Center should work closely with other educational and intellectual avenues on campus. When hired, the director immediately invited faculty and staff in the chaplain's office to join an intellectual conversation on faith development within all persons at Georgetown, including LGBTQ students. A relationship with campus ministry is imperative for a center to provide resources particularly in regards to intellectual faith development. LGBTQ students deserve a safe space to be able to address similar questions associated with faith development as any other student regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression. At this time, the chaplain's office has an explicit goal to assist the LGBTQ Resource Center in its mission.

The LGBTQ Resource Center and its leadership should consider whether or not it wants to include in its mission a political agenda. It was important for GU that their center focused on providing education and resources for the community while not using the center

as a political platform. For example, some student groups may want to use the LGBTQ Resource Center as a platform to push a particular perspective about sexuality that may or may not be in concordance with the Catholic Church. At the university, some students wanted the resource center to endorse a “Sex Positive” week, which was hosted by GU Pride, United Feminists and the Georgetown Solidarity Committee. The week advocated particular perspectives about sexuality, and the resource center chose not to endorse this agenda. It did, however, continue its mission by providing resources and education, when necessary, for those students, faculty and staff associated with or affected by “Sex Positive” week.

The implementation of any LGBTQ initiative at a Jesuit institution may be most effective if it is supported by the executive administration of the institution, starting with the president. One of the major strengths that helped GU to create and implement a LGBTQ Resource Center was the support and leadership coming from the top. The administrators modeled for other staff and students working with them the Jesuit principle of *cura personalis* and a spirit of love and equality. It was this leadership which also required a transparency and inclusivity throughout the entire process.

These insights and lessons learned may be utilized strategically in any Jesuit-affiliated university that desires to implement a LGBTQ initiative or resource center on campus. The administrators and faculty

of GU shared their ideas and insights openly, and have assured us they are interested in sharing this experience with fellow Jesuit institutions. They acknowledge that the creation of the resource center is not a panacea; homophobia and



Sivagami Subbaraman, director of the LGBTQ Resource Center, Georgetown University.

hetero-sexism cannot be conquered overnight. Still, they unanimously agreed that the results were worth the effort. We would like to thank specifically those members of the Georgetown community who agreed without reservation to talk with us about the LGBTQ Resource Center, its implementation, and what they believe contributes to its success. Without their help we would not have been able to compile this report, and we are grateful for their time, energy and willingness to engage in further conversation about implementing LGBTQ initiatives at other Jesuit universities. ■

Addition to the Report “In Dreams Begin Responsibility”

By Sivagami Subbaraman

The line comes from an old Irish Catholic play serves as touchstone for how we envision the work at the Center. It has been a dream for many, over many decades to have space, value, permission, and belonging on the hilltop.

No dreams, no vision for this work is possible without both an individual and a collective sense of responsibility—to create a community that speaks to all of who we are — a community that gives expression to the full range of our humanity and dignity, which is a fundamental principle of the Ignatian tradition. Central to this work is our ability to grasp and make tangible the central paradox: to hold in place equally the sense of an

impossible dream, and an *intractable responsibility*, in order to do this work.

The Center opened its doors in the Fall of 2008, and in our three years here, we have become both integral and integrated into the campus community. We participate in the full range of pre-orientation, orientation, and leadership programs at the start of the year, and close with Lavender Graduation, and between offer Coming Out Week, Gender Liberation Week, Pride Week, and special speaker series. We also collaborate with many academic units to deepen the conversation on campus. Lavender Graduation honors LGBTQ and allied students and their contributions to the community; and it has grown from 30 students to 70 students with more than 200 attending the event. It has become a central community celebration to start off our Commencement week, and a way to rejoice in all of who we are. We have worked very hard to find and re-engage our LGBTQ alumni, and we now routinely participate in Homecoming, Reunion, and John Carroll alumni week-ends. For many of our alums who have felt dis-engaged or not welcome, this has been a huge sea change, and feel they can now truly call the Hilltop their home.

Sivagami Subbaraman is director, LGBTQ Resource Center, Georgetown University.: ss826@georgetown.edu.