

Creating a Queer Friendly Campus: The Ally Network Project at The University of Western Australia

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Introduction

Since 1993, discrimination and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation have been unacceptable behaviours under the University of Western Australia's (UWA) Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action Policy Statement. This policy is now supported by the recent lesbian and gay law reform legislation (see Meyer, 2002 for a detailed history). Western Australia now has some of the most progressive anti-discriminatory legislation for lesbians and gays in Australia. So what? Does it really make a difference? How do we make that real in people's lives? It is obvious to many that legislation does not lead to instant acceptance, with the accompanying changes in behaviours that entails. If that were the case women would be in a more celebratory position that they now are. There is a gap between the society the law now allows for and the everyday reality of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) people's lives. (Western Australian legislation primarily addressed issues for gays and lesbians, not transgender and intersex people). The challenge for us is making a more inclusive work and study environment a reality for those studying or working at UWA.

In this paper we describe the Ally Network Project which attempts to give life and meaning to the legislation for the GLBTI community on campus and to make non-GLBTI staff and students more aware of the presence of their GLBTI colleagues and peers and the issues that they face. We have drawn on our own experiences as queer staff who have "exposed" ourselves through the development and promotion of the Ally Network Project and in so doing have managed to bring University-wide attention to GLBTI issues and concerns starting with senior university administrators.

The Work and Study Environment

Considerable work has been done both here in Australia and overseas to identify issues faced by GLBTI people in the work and study environment. Irwin (1999) reports on her own work and that of others and found that harassment and/or prejudicial treatment on the basis of homosexuality or gender identity was widespread in the workplace. For out or suspected gay, lesbian and transgender people, the workplace culture created a hostile and unsafe working environment. In their work on social identity in workplace encounters, Creed and Scully (2000), highlight the tacit disclosure of heterosexuality occurring constantly in the workplace. Acts such as mentioning a partner's name and placing family photos on the desk become difficult choices for GLBTI staff and place them at risk of outing and stigmatisation, isolation and invisibility.

Woodward and Ross (2000) explored the issues for gays and lesbians in Higher Education in the UK and noted that even when Universities have a strong equity focus and record of achievement, sexual orientation is invisible in the equal opportunity agenda. In North America, groups such as the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) are working to end homophobia in schools. GLBTI students form a group of marginalised students whose experience is not reflected in the classroom experience or the curriculum. Not only are they not affirmed, but homophobia may be alive and well in the classroom, leaving the student with feelings of self doubt and hate (Desurra, 1994).

The Rainbow Project at UWA

While the Ally Network Project was coming together in the minds of a couple of members of staff, another ground breaking project was being conducted at UWA. The Rainbow Project

aimed to determine the 'campus climate' with respect to sexuality, among both staff and students, to identify the key attitudes and behaviours which give rise to discrimination and to identify key issues faced by UWA gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex (GLBTI) staff and students (Sullivan, Goody, McFarlane & Fialho, 2002, p. v).

The results of the Rainbow project clearly identified the need for education and awareness raising as first steps to address homophobia and heterosexism. The full report provides some interesting results (see www.csd.uwa.edu.au/rainbowproject/reportfinal.pdf) but perhaps the most significant finding was that while most students reported having heard derogatory remarks made about homosexuals, few had spoken out against those comments. Many students were also uncomfortable with public displays of affection between gay men and between lesbians. Input from staff indicated that there were areas of campus where discriminatory behaviour continued to occur and some staff felt 'unsafe' in their work environment.

The Ally Network Project

The Ally Network Project is a joint initiative of the Centre for Staff Development and Student Services in collaboration with the Guild of Undergraduates and the Equity and Diversity Office. It has received two modest Diversity Initiatives Fund grants. This cross-campus collaboration is essential and recognises that the GLBTI community encompasses the entire UWA community. The Network is not intended to replace formal channels for staff and student grievance on equity and diversity issues.

The idea for the network came about as the result of personal knowledge of Ally and or Safe Zone programs at North American universities. The first of these programs is believed to have originated at Ball State University in 1992 (Poynter, 2000) and are now quite widespread particularly on the large research-intensive universities which are often in conservative parts of the USA (see *Campuses which offer safe zone programs*). These programs vary in scope and also where they reside within university structure. They may be in counselling centres, student government or university administrative units. No similar program appeared to exist in Australian universities when the project started and although interest has been expressed by other universities, no other Ally Networks appear to have started yet.

In practice, the Ally Network is a network of staff and students across campus who identify as an Ally to the GLBTI community. The broad objective of the Ally Network is to create a more diverse and inclusive culture at UWA by promoting greater visibility and awareness of GLBTI staff and students and their issues. Specifically, the Ally Network aims to change the culture of the university by

- providing a visible network of identified Allies to the GLBTI community;
- promoting a productive and positive work and study experience and for staff, a greater sense of job security;
- building a support and advocacy network;
- using education to further awareness and visibility of GLBTI people and their issues; and
- negating homophobic and non-inclusive comments and behaviour.

We hope this will contribute to the University priorities of attracting and retaining a diverse staff and student population that feels welcome, safe, supported and celebrated as individuals and community members. We also hope this will increase the University's capacity to identify and respond appropriately to GLBTI staff and student issues and enhance equity.

What is an Ally?

Washington and Evans (1991, p. 195) define an Ally as "a person who is a member of the dominant or majority group who works to end oppression in his or her own personal and professional life through support of, and as an advocate with and for, the oppressed population". The term 'Ally' has been used since the 1950's to describe people who are advocates for minority populations and commonly used in the social justice issues of GLBTI issues and racism (Broido, 2000). Heterosexual Allies are people who are supportive of GLBTI people and are informed about, sensitive toward and understanding of GLBTI people. An Ally affirms the experience and rights of GLBTI people and chooses to challenge the homophobic and heterosexist values of others in a variety of ways including by individual example and personal awareness. The UWA Ally Network has blurred the boundaries of the strict definition of an Ally and we have accepted heterosexuals and Queers as Allies.

Our Allies are asked to commit to

- participating in an interactive training program and attending occasional Ally meetings and information sessions on GLBTI issues;
- publicly identifying as an Ally, including being listed on the web site and displaying an Ally sign;
- providing a safe place to talk for members of the UWA community who seek confidential support, empathy or friendship and information on GLBTI issues;
- being open to questions from and about GLBTI students and staff; and
- working within and supporting existing policies and practices that bring equity to the UWA community and giving open support for GLBTI people and their issues.

The training program is a crucial aspect of the Ally Network. While some Ally and Safe Zone projects focus on visibility, we are committed to having a network of Allies who are knowledgeable and understanding of GLBTI issues and who are confident in their roles as advocates for GLBTI students and staff.

The UWA Ally Network Project – Nuts, Bolts and Reflections

In this part of the paper we reflect on the process of developing the Ally Network. Getting Queer issues on the agenda was only really possible due to a number of factors. Primary among these factors is having a key senior executive who is a strong pro-equity champion within a university that has a strong tradition of equity initiatives and real commitment to equity at an institutional level, which effectively provided the necessary foundations. There was also the happy coincidence of queer staff in key locations such as Staff Development and Equity. Finally there was an organizational instrument, the Diversity Initiatives Fund which provided small amounts of funding but more importantly, ensured university sanction and endorsement of the project.

The Ally Network Project began with a steering group made up of the main collaborators and in part overlapping with the Rainbow Project team. This started as a small group of six (five staff and one student) and as is customary with projects such as this, was an add-on activity that members were undertaking as additional workload. Funding was used for other

purposes, not for staff time. Several key members of the Project group left the University, leaving others of us feeling overwhelmed by the scope of the project. Together with an awareness of an urgent need to have stronger student involvement on a continuing basis, the group has recently expanded to include five students and five staff. The group has formalized somewhat in its organization, meetings and record keeping, which seems to be organizationally necessary given our varying locations on campus and capacity to prioritise the project in our workloads.

Recruitment and training (including resources)

Recruitment of Allies in the first instance was a delicate matter. For the initial cohort, we used our networks to choose high profile people known to be GLBTI friendly. This was useful for the launch, where the first group of Allies were made public and gained us some organizational credibility. Recruitment is still to a large extent based on who we know, although we will soon get to the point where we will try to recruit people on the basis of the key organizational positions they hold.

People who identify as Allies may have limited knowledge, skills and resources to assist them in their role as advocates. People in our society grow up with unexamined heterosexist assumptions, attitudes and behaviours therefore the process of alliance to GLBTI people and their issues requires time and a willingness to engage in personal reflection. The training program aims to assist people through the developmental stages of the process of alliance.

Training is compulsory for Allies and consisted of two, two-hour sessions, with some follow up Forums for the first intake of Allies. A slightly different format of a single four-hour session was used for students. Some staff also attended this session. Future training will be two sessions, totaling five hours. The gap between sessions allows for much needed reflection time and we hope outweighs the problems of getting people to attend two different sessions. There is a wealth of training materials, manuals and so forth available on the web (see previously mentioned site). However all of it has a North American focus. We have drawn on this material both to design the training program and to develop a manual of resources for the Allies. We have begun the process of customizing these materials for the Australian context.

The training followed broadly the following outline. We began by telling some of our own stories, as a way of illustrating issues such as coming out, judging 'safety' in the workplace, invisibility of our personal and family life, life choices, and the heterosexism that surrounds us. Following introductions, a warm-up exercise and setting of groundrules, we then looked at language, definitions, inclusiveness and confusions. "To be or not to be an Ally", explored pushes and pulls that people experienced in taking on the role and being publicly identified. This was followed by a personal assessment of homophobia and introduction to the process of 'alliance', leading into a discussion of cultural and institutional homophobia and heterosexism. Participants are challenged to look at UWA critically and explore their workplace, university services and study environment in order to judge it's queer friendliness or otherwise. The role of Ally is explored further through clips from videos and television and the use of role plays. The sessions close with a panel of gay, lesbian, transgender and intersex staff and students, to provide participants with an opportunity to hear stories of peoples lives and to ask questions, either directly or anonymously through a question box and to interact on an individual basis.

The training provides an extraordinary vehicle for conversation. Participants are challenged by colleagues about where they are going and why when they leave the workplace to attend, and they engage in conversations when they return to the workplace. Conversations are prompted by their willingness to publicly identify as Allies, by door signs and badges.

Participants ask questions in training and after training that are both genuine and confronting, but made possible by the creation of a safe space. *How could you 'become' lesbian after such a long marriage? I just can't get my head around a lesbian couple having a baby. How can we make the health service more GLBTI friendly? Should we re-issue Degrees for transgender people in their new name? What do we provide for same sex couples when they move to a position here at UWA? What pronoun do you use for a transgender person? Personal conversations and institutional questions are all part of the mix.*

While we conducted the first training sessions, the intention was to pilot a training format that could then be delivered by a wider team of facilitators. The issue of gender balance and queer/straight balance as well as staff/student balance all need consideration over time. We clearly identified ourselves as gay and lesbian, and used our own stories to illustrate some of the issues we were discussing. This may not work as well with a less handpicked group and future training facilitators may not identify as queer. To create a meaningful network of Allies with significant coverage across all Faculties and areas of campus, it will be necessary to train a significant number of Allies. This is a time intensive aspect of the project and given the challenging nature of the material, we found it quite draining.

We previously mentioned the process of alliance to GLBTI people and that the training program aims to assist people through the developmental stages of alliance. The process of alliance is a major focus in the training but also over the longer term as Allies grow into their role and become more knowledgeable and empathetic and take on a greater role of advocacy. Based on the work of a number of researchers including Washington and Evans (1991) and Poynter (1999), we have used a framework to help Allies in the alliance process. We have characterised it as a four stage process: from being negative and acting out on their homophobia; being neutral or passive, i.e. tolerant; taking a human rights position although still passive in their stance; to the fourth stage of being positive and proactive and taking an advocacy role. This process of alliance will continue to be a focus of training and our own research.

Publicity and promotion

Publicity for the Ally Network has been a major task for the working party and a major consumer of funds. The first task was to design a logo or identifying symbol. The final product used a rainbow as a background and included a stylized drawing of the clock tower and Winthrop Hall, the most identifiable building on campus. It combined the "sandstone" edifice of the University with the readily identifiable queer symbol, the rainbow. The logo has been used on badges, door signs and posters which publicize the network. The Network was publicly launched by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and the former Western Australian Equal Opportunity Commissioner (who played a major role in drafting the new WA legislation) in the presence of staff and students, several Federal and State politicians and guests from other universities. At the launch the first group of Allies was introduced and each given their badge and door sign which identifies them as an Ally.

Posters and information leaflets have been sent to all schools, departments and units within the university accompanied by a cover letter from the Deputy Vice-Chancellor that asked deans, heads of school and unit leaders to display the poster, promote the Ally Network and to include it as an agenda item in staff meetings. The fact that the Deputy Vice-Chancellor put his name to the letter is an indication of the support that has been obtained from senior management. The most recent publicity effort has been the production of postcards which will be distributed to all new students and staff and to all existing students and staff where possible. Word-of-mouth is also a very effective method of publicizing the network and for identifying new Allies.

A website www.uwa.edu.au/ally has been developed to provide information on the Ally Network, lists the current Allies and includes a number of hyperlinks to resources that both Allies and Queer students and staff can access. This web address is listed on all publicity material. An email address is also provided for the use of Allies, potential Allies and queer students and staff. Emails are forwarded to two members of the steering group and remain confidential. Telephone contact is available through the Equity and Diversity Office.

Conclusion

It has taken a long time to get sexuality spoken about and 'on the agenda' at UWA. We are now having 'priceless' conversations in the training room, with a ripple effect around the campus that is extraordinary. Rainbows are appearing on doors and in student diaries. These are important steps in a process that will take a long time. There has been a timeliness about this project and a level of interest internal and external to UWA that has taken us by surprise. We have been personally enriched and honoured to be involved.

We hope that others can be encouraged to join us in this work and that we will all form part of a movement to create awareness and celebration of all GLBTI staff and students in higher education in Australia. And why stop with higher education? While that is our particular location, there is an imperative to change all educational and work environments.

Formal legislation and existing institutional policies are given life and substance by a project such as the Ally Network. The Ally Network Project works at the grassroots level to raise awareness and educate members of the University community. Winning support from senior administration has been a major achievement as we begin to create a queer friendly campus. As Giz Watson, Member of the Western Australian Legislative Council, said "legislation does not mean the end of prejudice against GLBTI people in Western Australia. But it is a starting point" (as reported on ABC Radio News, 21 March, 2002 on the passing of the *Acts Amendment (Lesbian and Gay Law Reform) Bill 2001* through the Legislative Council). With the Ally Network we hope that we have built on that starting point and are beginning to notice a real difference in our quest for a Queer friendly campus.

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See <http://www.ecu.edu.au/conferences/herdsa/papers/ref/pdf/Goody.pdf>

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