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Living, Learning, and Activism: Possibilities for Collaboration between Stonewall Hall, LGBT Studies, and the LGBT Resource Center at the University of California, Riverside

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Introduction

*[The] residential nexus can cultivate new and creative opportunities for students to connect with one another and with faculty around student learning. Innovative curricular and cocurricular programs can emerge from these connections. To achieve this, partnerships must be formed among faculty, student affairs staff, and students with the primary commitment to enhance student learning. To ensure that these relationships are mutually beneficial, common educational goals and objectives should be developed between these three areas. **Student learning must become the core value of all partners** (Association of College and University Housing Officers International, 1998, p. 4).*

As described in the above quote, a deliberate incorporation of learning into residential communities at colleges and universities can open new educational possibilities for students, faculty, and staff. This kind of intentional living-learning environment requires an articulated connection between an academic program and the living community. Examples of successful living-learning models at the University of California Riverside (UCR) include the Pre-Business Hall and Enginuity, a hall for first year students in the Bourns College of Engineering. According to Jack Saxon, a Resident Director at UCR, these halls have been successful because they build on their academic theme through programming (personal communication, July 14, 2008). For example, the Resident Assistant and Program Coordinator in the Pre-Business Hall hold résumé writing and business school application workshops for the students. In halls such as these it is likely that students will be enrolled in academic classes together. This overlap provides an opportunity for learning to extend from the classroom into the residence hall.

UCR offers a ripe environment for such living-learning collaborations in the realm of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) issues. UCR's LGBT Resource Center "became the first professionally-staffed campus office of LGBT resources in the state of California in 1993" (LGBT Resource Center, 2008). Since that beginning, the LGBTRC has been going strong, providing "support, education, and advocacy" to members of the LGBT and allied communities. In addition to this rich student affairs history, UCR is also the home of a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersexual, and Transgender (LGBIT) Studies Program, complete with an LGBIT Studies minor. The minor was established in 1996 (CHASS College Computing, 2007). While many institutions offer LGBT or Queer Studies, this discipline is often housed in the Women's and/or Gender Studies Program.

Stonewall Hall – UCR’s special interest hall dedicated to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, questioning and allied issues – opened in 2005.¹ Stonewall adds the living component, completing the triangle of living, learning (LGBIT Studies), and support/education/advocacy (LGBT Resource Center) for LGBT issues at UCR. Ideally these three branches would work closely together to integrate living, learning, and student affairs support. However, Stonewall Hall was established as a special interest/culturally themed hall, rather than a living-learning community. The stated connection between Stonewall Hall and the LGBIT Studies Program is open to interpretation. The only mention of LGBIT Studies in the 2004 theme hall proposal is that the hall will have a strong relationship/affiliation with the LGBIT Studies minor.

Like at other institutions, such collaboration requires partnerships between individuals in both academic affairs and student affairs. Of this phenomenon, Sandeen (2004) wrote: “New reporting arrangements or organizational structures may be useful, but the knowledge and skills of student affairs staff and the willingness of academic affairs staff to view undergraduate education as the total life experience of students during their college years are far more important to improving student learning” (p. 33). Central to living-learning are institutional collaboration and a shared vision for student learning. This research project involved an investigation of UCR’s LGBIT Studies Program, Stonewall Hall, and other living-learning models in an effort to find ways for such collaboration to exist.

Project Objectives

- To analyze the relationship between the academic and housing approaches to LGB(IT) concerns in a university environment.
- To explore the possibilities for collaboration between the programs sponsored by UCR’s LGBT Resource Center and LGBIT Studies Program, specifically focusing on the possibilities of integrating LGBIT Studies as an academic discipline in LGBT themed housing.
- To investigate the interrelationship between learning about activism and LGBT issues in the classroom and living in an LGBT themed residence hall.
- To provide tangible programming suggestions for staff and students to better integrate learning about LGBIT issues in an LGBT themed residence hall.

Methods

In order to ensure that this project was representative of the many different perspectives involved in LGBT issues at UCR, I conducted targeted interviews with people involved in three specific areas: the LGBT Resource Center, Stonewall Hall, and the LGBIT Studies Program. I also interviewed representatives of other universities that have LGBT themed living-learning

¹ *Stonewall Hall welcomes students of all gender identities and sexual orientations who wish to join an intentional living community. Stonewall Hall celebrates and affirms the cultural experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and questioning students, as well as their allies, while welcoming the diverse and complex identities of every resident. Working closely with Housing Services, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Resource Center, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersex, and Transgender Studies Minor, and UCR student groups, a community of respect and a sense of family for all residents has been created. Staff-initiated programming reaches out to all Residence Hall students with cultural, educational, and social programming throughout the year. Stonewall Hall is located in Pentland Hills and is a gender-neutral housing community (Housing Services, 2008).*

communities and other student affairs professionals who work with similar culturally-themed housing at UCR (specifically the Pan African Theme Hall). Furthermore, I deliberately interviewed students, staff, and faculty in an effort to incorporate all of these perspectives in the project. Some interviews were in person and others were via email (depending on location and availability). Please see supporting documents for specific information on the interviewees.

Findings

Responses from Other Universities

The University of Minnesota-Twin Cities and Syracuse University both have models of living-learning LGBT residence halls. While representatives of these two schools' programs describe the halls' activities as very similar to those of Stonewall Hall and the Resource Center at UCR, the one distinct difference at these schools is the explicit connection between academics and the halls. At Syracuse, "Students are encouraged to register for QSX 112: Sexualities, Genders, and Bodies (3 credits). Students who have already taken QSX 112 or any other course in the LGBT Studies Minor can still join the learning community" (Learning Communities, Syracuse University, 2004). U of M has a similar model in that they have encouraged that students take a course in Gender, Women, and Sexuality Studies before or while living in Lavender House. They are considering making this course a requirement (Falter, personal communication, July 14, 2008).

Another feature of these two models is an institutionalized connection between the residence hall and the LGBT centers. At U of M, the GLBTA Programs Office creates an academic connection for Lavender House in that the office's graduate assistant has specific obligations to work directly with the theme hall (Falter, personal communication, July 14, 2008). As evidenced by U of M's model, having specific paid staff support (i.e. a graduate student) helps solidify connections between the theme hall, the LGBT center and the academic realm.

Responses from Staff in Residence Life-Housing and Other UCR Programs

When interviewed about living-learning possibilities for Stonewall Hall, Saxon of Residence Life-Housing at UCR emphasized the necessity for having partners on all sides of the collaboration, i.e. Stonewall Hall, LGBT Studies, and the LGBT Resource Center (personal communication, July 14, 2008). In the case of Stonewall Hall, this would require a faculty member (most likely in LGBT Studies, or possibly Women's Studies) to take a specific interest in working with the hall. While a natural collaboration exists between Stonewall and the LGBT Resource Center, Saxon also mentioned the opportunity for collaboration between Stonewall and the two other culturally themed residence halls: Pan African Theme Hall (PATH) and Unete al Mundo Hall. Regular meetings between the Program Coordinators (PCs) in these three halls can help facilitate collaboration.

Saxon provided many other programming suggestions for Stonewall (see Interview Responses: Responses from Staff in Residence Life-Housing and Other UCR Programs). Of particular note was the idea of a certificate-based academic program for Stonewall residents. Saxon described this possibility as an achievement model in which residents are required to participate in a certain combination of activities, workshops, and/or academic classes to receive a scholarly certificate (personal communication, July 14, 2008).

Rhiannon Little of African Students Programs at UCR provided the perspective of an alumna of a special interest theme hall who is a current staff member at the university. Little lived in PATH during her first and second years as a student at UCR. While PATH faces some different issues from Stonewall, Little provided several applicable suggestions. She mentioned that while she was a student, African American staff on campus (particularly those who worked in African Student Programs) greeted the PATH residents on move-in day (personal communication, July 22, 2008). She is hoping to bring back this tradition this fall because of what a positive impact it had on her as a student. Little also discussed the importance of building community around the history of the theme hall. PATH used to be in a different dorm and had multiple murals representing African American history on the walls. Applying both of these suggestions (staff greeting residents and the theme hall taking pride in its history) to Stonewall Hall could strengthen connections between the LGBT Resource Center, the greater LGBT community, and the residents.

Responses from Students and Alums of LGBT Studies and Stonewall Hall

When asked about how Stonewall Hall could be more academically geared, the three students interviewed for this project articulated a common theme: to focus on LGBT history. Learning about the history of the LGBT rights movement, nationally, internationally, in California, and specifically on UCR's campus would provide an interesting and educational opportunity for programming in Stonewall Hall. As Sandra Meza wrote, "just because one identifies with the LGBT community does not mean we are knowledgeable about it" (personal communication, July 20, 2008).

Noah Silas shared another suggestion of organizing a speaker series in Stonewall (personal communication, July 29, 2008). Such a program could repeat, being held once a month or once a quarter. He envisioned bringing faculty from LGBT Studies and/or local LGBT community leaders to the hall for a casual discussion about their work. Silas mentioned that the key to this kind of program being successful is to give it a catchy title and make sure that the topic is interesting to the hall residents. (See Interview Responses: Responses from Students and Alums of LGBT Studies and Stonewall Hall for more of Silas's suggestions).

Silas also discussed his experiences working as both the Program Coordinator (PC) and Resident Advisor (RA) in Stonewall during his sophomore year, which was the first year that the hall existed. He mentioned the delicate balance between making Stonewall a safe space (a more secluded alternative to the LGBT Resource Center) while simultaneously building a connection with the Resource Center and collaborating on programs (personal communication, July 29, 2008). In discussing collaborations between Stonewall, the LGBT Resource Center, and the LGBT Studies Program, one must remember that each of these entities serves a specific purpose and a specific group of students.

Responses from UCR Faculty and TA in LGBT Studies

Introduction to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersexual, and Transgender Studies (LGBS 001), like Stonewall Hall, provides an opportunity for students to gain exposure to LGBT issues and

history without needing to “come out” or to walk into the LGBT Resource Center.² Noel Mariano, a graduate student at UCR, has served as the course Teaching Assistant for the past two years. Mariano stated that in each class he has had students come out to him, either through written work or in person during office hours. He mentioned that for several of these students, he was the first person they told (personal communication, July 17, 2008). Mariano also commented that while most students who take the class are already political activists, most do not identify as LGBT. He stated that the course provides a good opportunity for students to “test the waters” of LGBT activism before getting involved with the LGBT Resource Center on campus (personal communication, July 17, 2008).

From the faculty perspective, there is a difference in teaching approach between small, upper-division LGBT courses and the large introductory course. In an email interview, Carole-Anne Tyler wrote that in her upper-division course on transgender issues she encourages students to attend a drag show either on campus or at a local venue (personal communication, July 14, 2008). Similarly, John Master, who has been teaching the introductory course for the past two years, requires that students watch a film of their choice (checked out from a movie store or the LGBT Resource Center) or attend a live LGBT-related event. Master and Mariano both discussed the limitations of the introductory course as far as experiential involvement. Some of these limitations are due to the large size of the course and the fact that many students take it to fulfill a breadth requirement. Other limitations are more conscious on the part of Master as the instructor. He stated that he is very clear about making the course academically rigorous to avoid having LGBT Studies being accused of being an un-intellectual discipline (personal communication, July 21, 2008).

Master stated that he would be reluctant to incorporate the LGBT introductory course with Stonewall Hall out of respect for the safe space being created in Stonewall. According to Master, the best vehicle to articulate an academic connection between LGBT Studies and Stonewall Hall would be a smaller, intermediate level course rather than the introductory survey (personal communication, July 21, 2008). He stated that such a course does not exist right now. In thinking of models that create this academic/residential link, Master referenced Leela Madhavarau’s current work at the University of Redlands. Madhavarau is not only the Director of the Office of Diversity Affairs, but she is also faculty at Redlands. She has used this dual role to develop a “social justice” residential theme hall. The hall is tied into a first year seminar such that students taking the course live together. Echoing many aforementioned sentiments, Master stated that this kind of model requires a faculty member who is committed to making it work (personal communication, July 21, 2008).

Among other suggestions, Master mentioned the internal difficulties that the LGBT Studies Program has with funding and staffing courses (personal communication, July 21, 2008). For example, to his knowledge the program has not made a dedicated faculty hire in its twelve years of existence. Likewise, faculty hired in other departments, whose teaching or research included queer issues, had little opportunity to build up LGBT Studies because their primary

² *[Introduction to LGBT Studies] Introduces students to basic issues in lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender studies. Topics include the history of sexuality, identity politics and community activism, the relation between sexuality and gender, the theories of sexual identity, and the globalization of lesbian, gay, bisexual, intersexual, and transgender issues* (Master, 2008).

responsibilities were to the home department. Without any faculty solely devoted to the program, it is difficult to envision a single faculty member emerging to as a leader in building a relationship between Stonewall Hall and LGBT Studies. Master advised that students advocate for LGBT Studies if they wish to see it develop. Following the models of Women's Studies and Ethnic Studies Programs, students must demand more resources (personal communication, July 21, 2008).

Conclusions and Suggestions

I recommend that Stonewall Hall transition to more of a living-learning model. It is difficult for Stonewall to completely adopt the living-learning model in its fullest capacity because there is not a direct tie in to an academic program as is the case in the earlier mentioned Pre-Business Hall and Enginuity Hall at UCR. Since its inception in 2005, Stonewall has been working to recruit more residents. While it would be helpful in connecting the living and learning realms, making an LGBT Studies course required of all Stonewall residents could hurt the effort to up the number of residents. In cases like this, Inkelas, Zeller, Murphy, and Hummel (2006) suggested that "Campuses that are unable to create new living-learning programs can adapt some of the practices of these programs for use in current campus offerings" (p. 15). For Stonewall Hall to transition to a living-learning community, a strong partnership needs to develop between the faculty in LGBT Studies and the hall.

Some LGBT Studies faculty members, such as Carole-Anne Tyler, are happy to be involved with Stonewall as guest speakers and visitors (see Interview Responses: Responses from UCR Faculty and TA in LGBT Studies). Since it seems unlikely that a sole faculty member will emerge as a point person connecting LGBT Studies and Stonewall Hall, there are programs that the PC and RA in the hall can do to incorporate an academic and historical focus to the hall. Please see the document titled "Programming Suggestions for Stonewall Hall RA and PC" for a grid containing some suggestions for programming that falls in line with the Residential Life-Housing program model.

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