

## Director's Vision Statement

My work with the UVM LGBTQA Services office for the past two years has been guided by my vision of the academic community as it could be. The community I envision would grow exceptionally rich because of its deep commitment to social and cultural integrity and inclusiveness. As I have worked through the turnover of key members of UVM's administration, I have watched to gauge the depth of their commitment, and I have carried out my work "as if" this vision could become a reality. I have held my vision of UVM becoming a place where all students, faculty, staff and alumni, including those who are members of minorities, experience in every facet of their life and work a deeply held institutional and community ethic that genuinely welcomes and celebrates every diverse human experience and culture.

Within such an environment, I envision faculty enlivened by new levels of respect and integrity in the classroom. Greater exposure to diverse cultural experience could lead faculty to expand the scope of their research to include not only dominant culture paradigms and perspectives, but also paradigms and perspectives that are particular to the lives and experiences of non-dominant cultural groups, including those of people who are members of sexual and gender minorities. I see faculty who are themselves members of minorities, including sexual and gender minorities, able to experience new levels of joy and vitality in their work and life on campus, and from this joy, finding new creativity and interest in full participation and leadership within the institution. I see members of the faculty who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and their allies actively engaging with LGBTQA students, no longer closeted by the fear that stifles them today.

In my vision students in this environment would be challenged to grow beyond provincial ideas they may have arrived with, becoming deeply engaged, not just in academic learning, but also in making personal meaning of that learning. In their interactions with faculty and staff, students would learn by example to question the simplistic, dichotomous logic that props up prejudicial beliefs and attitudes. All students would flourish in a cultural climate characterized by mutual trust, not fear, including students who are members of minorities. I see students who are LGBTQA engaging with faculty and each other with unprecedented exuberance and intensity.

I envision staff members taking a more active part in creating the campus community, volunteering for leadership roles, increasing levels of cooperation between offices and providing critical input to policies and systems in order to make our services as seamless, effective and accessible as possible to everyone, including people who are members of minorities. In this environment I see staff investing more in their jobs and staying at the University longer. I see staff members that are LGBTQA more readily providing mentoring to LGBTQA students and experiencing less stress and more well being associated with their work life.

In this vision I see all future alumni, including those who are members of minorities, remembering UVM as a place and an experience that prepared them for the life ahead of them. Because of their deep engagement with UVM, they would see the institution as a vital resource that would continue to hold their interest and support throughout their lives after graduation.

This vision has informed every workshop and classroom presentation, every public event, every meeting and every new project I have undertaken in the past two years. I have imbued each of these with my own commitment to a plurality of perspectives and have invested focused energy into transforming a fragmented

and closeted LGBTQA *constituency* into an engaged and interactive LGBTQA *community* whose members experience connection, pride and purpose. I have coaxed sometimes-reluctant LGBT faculty into forums where they have interacted with LGBTQA students. I have coached LGBTQA students on effective avenues for seeking organizational change. I have worked actively with administrators to make our campus safer and more accommodating to our transgendered students. I have expanded the visibility of LGBTQA issues and cultural events across campus. I have created the beginnings of a LGBTQA Alumni Association. Most importantly, I have started the tradition of a highly visible, annual LGBTQA Awards and Community Celebration and presented LGBTQA Hero Awards at other awards ceremonies to people in those communities who have provided exceptional advocacy to the LGBTQA community.

In these two years I have seen a modest but significant increase in the interest and participation of LGBT faculty and staff members, a dramatic increase in the leadership and effectiveness of students, and a rapid acceleration of the previously stagnant process of establishing an academic focal point for courses specific to LGBT experiences and perspectives. I have succeeded at creating moments and microcosms where people have been able to glimpse this vision of an inclusive and respectful community, but these gains are momentary and fragile and the work is far from done.

Achieving this vision as a campus wide, consistent reality will require that university leadership engage directly and actively with a number of challenges and opportunities. The following section will focus on the interpersonal and institutional challenges and opportunities at UVM that are specific to the experiences and perspectives of students, faculty, staff and alumni who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or questioning and their allies.

The first and most obvious challenge regarding LGBTQA full acceptance and inclusion is public opinion. We are in an interesting time. The recent Supreme Court decision striking down laws against sodomy across the country seems to signal a new era of tolerance. At the same time legislators are working on a constitutional amendment that would ban same-sex marriage. U.S. Senate majority leader, Bill Frist, is quoted in the June 30, 2003 news about his support for this amendment: "I have this fear that this zone of privacy that we all want protected in our own homes... is being encroached upon, where criminal activity within the home would in some way be condoned." It is still common to hear and see this type of slanderous rhetoric freely expressed in our local and national legislatures, in our news media, on the airwaves and from the pulpit. No other group of identities today is subjected to such uncensored, public condemnation. This license to condemn signals a distinctly separate class with sexual and gender-minorities portrayed as either monsters or freaks. The moral accusations, hatred and disgust expressed in these diatribes tend to keep people who are LGBTQA partially or completely in the closet and invites further anti-LGBT sentiment and actions. The homophobia, heterosexism and gender policing that exist beyond UVM create a challenge, but UVM has several advantages that bring with them opportunities.

The University of Vermont has key ingredients that could help it become a dynamic and rewarding place for students, faculty and staff who are LGBTQA. Vermont in general and Burlington in particular have long been known for their relatively progressive and supportive political and social climates. Members of UVM's current administration are more knowledgeable and supportive of LGBTQA full inclusion (in theory) than at any time in the past. The work yet to be done will require that they are also capable of, and prepared for, significant institutional growth and change which will include confronting public controversy openly and boldly when necessary. Combined with these important factors are the recent successes and growth of the LGBTQA Services program, excitement over the launching in fall '03 of the new Sexuality and Gender Identity concentration, the promise of the first ever President's Commission on LGBTQA Concerns, the surge in leadership and activism among LGBTQA students, and the slow, but steady growth of LGBTQA specific leadership activities among the faculty and staff. In short, this cultural transformation has

momentum. Any backlash that might occur must be met with a strong and clear administrative voice in order to sustain these gains and further the momentum.

A second challenge and opportunity is the current climate for LGBTQA people at UVM. Attempts to build community and pride will only be fractionally successful as long as a large majority of LGBT students, faculty and staff at UVM remain partly or completely closeted. There are many reasons that people who are members of a sexual or gender minority remain closeted at UVM, some personal, some social, and some political. It is unrealistic to expect an institution to address personal and even some social reasons people remain closeted, but only institutions can address the political reasons people remain closeted.

Over ten years ago UVM bounded ahead of the curve by including LGB people among those protected by our non-discrimination policy. Pressed by the organized action of LGBT faculty and staff, the Board and administration reluctantly decided to extend health benefits to domestic partners a few years later. In spite of a sometimes ugly, battle UVM was far enough ahead of many universities to gain even more trust and loyalty from LGB staff and faculty and more still when the office of LGBTQA services was established in 1999. UVM gets good marks within the community for the Bias Incident Protocol that has been in place for the past three years, and administrators are working actively this year to make institutional changes that will improve the experiences of transgender students, faculty and staff on campus.

In spite of all of this good news, students continue to be bombarded by hate speech every day in their residence halls, sometimes in the form of threats that target a specific individual. Faculty continue to report deep concerns about being treated with disrespect by students if they come out in the classroom, and staff report instances of suspected discriminatory statements and actions on the part of supervisors and co-workers, most of which they choose not to pursue. In working to create a vital, vibrant place for LGBTQA people to live, learn and work UVM has the added challenge of being located in a small city where minority communities are even smaller and where cultural opportunities for all minorities are limited. This of course can make it more difficult to attract and keep new students, staff and faculty who are members of sexual minorities.

Making needed changes will not be easy or simple and it will not happen overnight. Some of the work is straightforward, like adding gender identity to the non-discrimination policy. Some of it requires reviewing what we have already done and fixing what isn't yet working, like the bias incident protocol. Other necessary changes involve making bolder statements in sensitive areas, like the admissions process and UVM's public image. All of these are integral to the evolution of UVM's campus culture. We are starting from a place that is fairly positive. UVM is more fortunate than many universities in not being burdened by the aftermath of negative and in some cases tragic events motivated by hatred of LGBT people. UVM administrators are still working to recover the trust of ALANA affiliates following a racially sensitive incident last November. Since April of this year the University of Maine, Ohio State, Berkeley, Virginia Tech, Iowa State, Morehouse College, Boston University, and Indiana State have all struggled to respond to crises revolving around hatred or insensitivity toward LGBTQA people and issues, ranging from an incendiary Board decision to the severe physical beating of one student by another.

UVM and the LGBTQA Services program are fortunate to be working on LGBTQA issues in a climate of relative good will and provisional trust. The LGBTQA Services program will continue to carry out its mission to assist the university in meeting the needs of students, staff and faculty who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning and their allies by encouraging all areas of the university to act and work in ways that can evolve our campus culture *intentionally*, rather than leaving it to evolve *incidentally*. The LGBTQA Services program will continue to be guided by a vision of pluralistic integrity as if this is indeed the future we are all working toward together.

