

QUEER POLITICS: WRITING FOR COLLABORATION AND DIALOGUE

Salena Ashanti Farris and the Gay Straight Alliance

Note from the Editorial Board: The following is a series of artifacts from the Gay/Straight Alliance at the University of Washington Bothell. The first document, "Queer Politics: Writing for Collaboration and Dialogue," is a synopsis of the process that the Alliance was involved in with the Chancellor of the UW Bothell, Dr. Kenyon S. Chan. Following are the GSA's cover letter to the Chancellor and their letter stressing the need for change at the university, as well as Chancellor Chan's response..

The students involved with the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) at the University of Washington Bothell are committed to creating an atmosphere of safety and respect for all persons, regardless of gender expression or sexual orientation. One aspect of doing this is to create awareness of our diverse population here at UW Bothell and to offer support and educational opportunities for those who wish to learn more about the subject. Another aspect of our mission is to be proactive on campus, and bring attention to areas where we can work together in order to improve our University in the hopes of making this a safe school

Since UW Bothell has grown so much in recent years, we felt the need to initiate contact with faculty, staff and administration concerning some issues we came across in our classrooms and shared spaces. After discussing possible avenues, we decided to write an official letter to the Chancellor regarding these incidences and what might be done in order to counteract homophobia at UW Bothell. We drafted the letter and met with a few professors for feedback and encouragement. We submitted this letter together with resources that professors said would be helpful, to the Chancellor. He followed up with us on next steps and scheduled a meeting to discuss our concerns and

suggestions, one of which was a way to hold more Safe Zone Trainings in order to bring awareness to our campus of queer issues.

Safe Zone Trainings are conducted by the Q Center at the University of Washington Seattle, and we received much needed support from the director, Jennifer Self. She has so far conducted three trainings this year and we hope will continue with this work in the future. The Safe Zone Project, as stated on their website is, "designed to radically reduce prejudice and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression at the University of Washington campus and create a safe and affirming campus through education, skill development and advocacy" ("Safe Zone," 2010). The Alliance felt that a great initial step in creating a safe campus would be to ask for more trainings in the hopes of raising awareness, and giving faculty some concrete skills to counteract the homophobia they face in their classrooms and offices. The University has been extremely helpful and supportive in our efforts and we thank them for entering into this collaborative process with us.

Cover Letter to the Chancellor

Dear Chancellor Chan,

In the hopes of scheduling and participating in an open and collaborative process with University of Washington Bothell administration, faculty and staff, the Gay/Straight Alliance at UWB are sending you this letter that we have drafted in response to some of our experiences on campus.

Let me say that this is not intended to be negative in any way, but rather an opportunity for student-led action that can positively impact our community. Instead of focusing on the things that have been road blocks for some of our fellow students, we would like to see these moments as spaces for learning, growing and healing. We believe that all faculty and administration will be supportive, as this move is in line with the very values set forth by the University:

- Mission: UW Bothell holds the student-faculty relationship to be paramount
- Vision: To serve as a catalyst to enhance the quality of life throughout our region
- Core Values: Transformational education, engaged scholarship, and an inclusive culture

These are a few of the reasons we chose to attend this university and we are very proud of our campus because of the freedom students have in transforming our community for the better. This is also our motivation for requesting a meeting with those who have the power to ensure student success.

I look forward to meeting with you and your staff in order to further discuss this amazing moment in our campus history.

Sincerely,

Salena Ashanti Farris in collaboration with the Gay/Straight Alliance at UW Bothell

Letter to the University of Washington from the Gay Straight Alliance

To the University of Washington Bothell Staff, Faculty, and Administration,

The students involved with the Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) at UW Bothell, are committed to creating an atmosphere of safety and respect for all persons regardless of their gender expression or sexual orientation. One aspect of doing this is to create awareness of our diverse population here at UW Bothell and to offer support and educational opportunities for those who wish to learn more about the subject. Another aspect of our mission is to be proactive on campus, and bring attention to where there is room for improvement in making this a safe campus.

One of the University's goals is to "build an inclusive and supportive community of learning and incorporate multicultural content and diverse perspectives on ethnic and racial groups, gender, sexual orientation, social class, and special need" ("Mission Statement," 2010). We feel this can be included in all of our departments, and while diversity is often stressed and many common themes are enthusiastically discussed, such as feminism and critical race theory, we have found that queer theory is constantly excluded, or certain assumptions are being made in the classrooms and be-

yond. Our hope is that we can be consistent across curriculums. While we recognize that issues of gender and sexuality will not fit in with all of the classes offered here, and we also recognize the professors' right to teach their subjects how they see fit, there are many opportunities to be inclusive and to be open and explicit in creating safe classrooms.

We are asking for everyone's support in order to actively work towards a safe and inclusive campus, as phobia perpetuates itself when there are no interventions. In order to maintain a healthy learning environment, we are offering some concrete suggestions for all involved to be successful in these discussions:

- Please do not assume that all of your students identify as heterosexual: there are a wide range of sexualities and preferences on our campus.
- Refrain from using gendered language such as sir and ma'am. It is okay to ask how the students prefer to be identified.
- Let your students know you are an ally and will not tolerate harmful speech acts in the classroom ("faggot," "dyke" and "that's so gay" are often heard).
- Include diversity in your handouts, films, books, and articles.
- Be explicit in your syllabi that homophobia is not allowed in the classroom.
- Know that you do not have to know everything or be comfortable speaking about this subject in order to be an ally.

If you have any questions or other suggestions/examples of how you create a safe learning environment, please feel free to let

us know so we can share this with other professors. Below are resources and information if you would like to learn more.

Thank you for all your hard work and dedication to providing a safe space for all to be successful learners.

The Gay/Straight Alliance at the University of Washington Bothell

Here are a few helpful websites:

1. American Civil Liberties Union, LGBT project. www.aclu.org/lgbt/
2. Bisexual Resource. www.biresource.net/
3. Equal Rights Washington. equalrightswashington.org/
4. Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network. www.glsen.org
5. Human Right Campaign. www.hrc.org/
6. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. community.pflag.org
7. Polyamory Information and Resources. www.polyamory.org/
8. Project 10. www.project10.org/
9. Safe Schools Coalition. safeschoolscoalition.org/
10. Seattle Young People's Project. www.sypp.org/past-sypp-initiatives/queer-youth-rights/
11. Sex Educator Tristan Taormino. www.puckerup.com/EN/home/
12. Sexuality Education by Marshall Miller and Dorian Solot. www.sexualityeducation.com/safe_sex.php
13. Voice of the Shuttle website. vos.ucsb.edu/browse.asp?id=2711
14. University of Washington's Q Center, directed by Jennifer Self. depts.washington.edu/qcenter/

**Letter from
Chancellor Kenyon S. Chan and Vice
Chancellor Susan Jeffords
to the University Community**

Dear Colleagues,

We would like to call your attention to the letter attached to this email. This letter has been sent to us by students in our Gay/Straight Alliance. Their letter reminds us of the important role we play in ensuring an open and safe educational climate in our classrooms and other settings throughout the campus.

The letter offers some concrete suggestions for us to consider and prompts us to reflect on our own experiences and behaviors on campus. They also provide some resources that you may find useful.

In our meeting with students, we fully endorsed their efforts to continue to improve our campus climate. They reminded us that we must continue to provide training for faculty, staff, administrators, and students to recognize difficult and inappropriate words and deeds and training on how to continuously assess and improve our campus climate for all students, faculty and staff.

We are committed to providing resources for training and monitoring around these issues. We will ask our Teaching and Learning Center to continue to develop specific training about these issues for our faculty and will ask Human Resources to develop training opportunities for staff and administrators. Further, we will ask the new Council on Diversity to include these discussions in their agenda.

We support the Safe Zone Project and

urge all of us to participate in the project's training (see depts.washington.edu/qcenter/?q=safezone). The next UW Bothell training is scheduled for Friday, February 19 from 11:00-2:30.

Hurtful and inappropriate language, bullying and harassing behavior, and other forms of exclusion and disrespect are all things that this UW Bothell community has never tolerated. We would like to thank the Gay/Straight Alliance for reminding us that we must continuously examine our environment and renew our commitment to a safe and inclusive campus.

Best wishes,

Kenyon Chan and Susan Jeffords

References

- University of Washington. (2010). Q Center. *Safe Zones*. from depts.washington.edu/qcenter/?q=safezone
- University of Washington Bothell. (2010). Mission Statement. from www.bothell.washington.edu/about/mission.