

# Proposal to Hire an Associate Director of Common Ground for LGBTQ Campus Life at the University of Richmond

November 2011

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## Overview

This proposal requests institutional funding to support the continuity and professional coordination of LGBTQ-related campus initiatives. In particular, we request budget allocations to hire an Associate Director of Common Ground for LGBTQ Campus Life, as well as a support programming budget and funding for two student employees. Hiring the Associate Director will enable

- strategic oversight of existing LGBTQ initiatives such as Safe Zone, Icebreakers, and the LGBTQ/Ally Living Learning Community
- development of more advanced initiatives such as academic programs and sustained civic engagement relationships with local organizations
- continuous on-campus support for LGBTQ-related individual concerns, student organizations, and policy issues
- development and management of an LGBTQ Center that would provide crucial safe space for LGBTQ students

Conversations are underway about the Center's location, ideally as an integrated complement to the current footprint of Common Ground and Multicultural Affairs in the Tyler Haynes Commons.

## Rationale and Background

Recent studies confirm the ongoing vulnerability of LGBTQ people in relation to their straight peers.<sup>1</sup> Because being “out” or socially visible as lesbian, gay, transgender, or queer too often elicits discrimination, ostracization, or even violence, LGBTQ people often feel compelled to pass as straight or otherwise cover their identities. This invisibility, in turn, impedes the vision of an inclusive community, both among LGBTQ people and with the wider straight world.

LGBTQ vulnerability and the importance of safe space tend to be elevated for college-aged young people, whose gender and sexual identities are forming amid heightened peer pressures to conform and belong. Indeed, study upon study confirms LGBTQ college students' sense of belonging as routinely challenged and undermined. One recent report, *The 2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, & Transgender People*, affirmed the findings of many previous studies, namely that LGBT people are the least accepted group when compared with other under-served populations, and as a result,

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<sup>1</sup> Rankin, S., Weber, G. Blumenfeld, W., Frazer, S. (2010). *State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Grant, J., Mottet, L., and Tanis, J. (2011). Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

LGBT people are more likely to encounter negative experiences and less than welcoming campus climates.

On most college campuses—and certainly at the University of Richmond—norms of heterosexuality and binary gender conformity are pronounced. This reality means that LGBTQ people’s sense of belonging is depends on their access to identified resources (professional staff, programs, and physical spaces) that provide freedom and strategic distance from those norms and threats that otherwise restrict their full inclusion in the community. Consequently, many universities have advanced their commitment to supporting LGBTQ people by providing *staff* to oversee the coordination of LGBTQ programs, *programming* budgets, and physical *space*. By fostering an empowered LGBTQ community, well-conceived LGBTQ centers also help to strengthen the intellectual and social aspects of the larger university community by making more *visible* the needs, experiences, and contributions of LGBTQ people.

In 2010, the University of Richmond participated in Campus Pride’s national benchmarking study of LGBT-related best practices for creating an inclusive campus, the “LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index.” Serving as an advisory body, the University’s Community Board for Gender and Sexuality or CBGSD—a student, staff, and faculty group—spearheaded the gathering of data with the Office of Institutional Effectiveness for the institution’s participation in the study, co-hosted campus forums with the President’s Chief of Staff to share the results and discuss priorities, and ultimately proposed its own short list of recommended priorities.

The institutional review facilitated by the LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index revealed the University of Richmond’s relative lack of coordinated oversight of LGBTQ programs, organizations, and information. Thus the CBGSD’s top recommendation was for the University to develop an LGBTQ center for the campus. In support of its recommendation, the CBGSD developed a vision for an LGBTQ center at the University of Richmond after benchmarking a dozen campus LGBTQ centers sampled from among 1) campuses earning four or more stars (and with student populations under 8,000) on the LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index, 2) the top twenty colleges attended by our non-enrolling students, and 3) the top twenty colleges in cross-admissions.

In May of 2011, the Student Development division endorsed the pursuit of an LGBT Center as one of its top priorities for the coming year.

### **Vision and Proposal Details**

The benchmarking and campus discussions that shaped our vision for the Associate Director and the LGBTQ center emphasized 1) incorporating the best features of high-functioning and mature LGBTQ programs on other campuses and 2) building on existing strengths at the University of Richmond in general and the *Richmond Promise* in particular. These emphases led to a vision of LGBTQ programs at the University of Richmond that will

- provide a vibrant array of resources, support, and programming centered on the needs of LGBTQ students and student organizations, as well as staff and faculty
- contribute in broad and visible ways to the social and academic life of the campus
- model the value of civic engagement on- and off-campus, through vigorous advocacy for LGBTQ students and policies, and by fostering sustained civic engagement opportunities through the CCE and directly with local LGBTQ organizations
- integrate with the structure and programming of existing diversity initiatives on campus, with particular attention to the “intersectional” nature of identity

In addition to the benchmarking and campus forums shaping this vision, the proposal has been discussed and endorsed by Admission, the Bonner Center for Civic Engagement, LGBTQ student organizations, and the Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Advisory Board.

### *Staffing and Space*

The emphases described in the previous section are reflected in the attached position description for an Associate Director of Common Ground for LGBTQ Campus Life. We also envision and request funding for two student employees.

The optimal location for the LGBTQ Center in the University’s organizational chart is within Common Ground. For years, Common Ground has served as the default hub of LGBTQ support and programming on campus. Common Ground is located within Student Development, and has a programming reach that extends to staff and faculty.

Conversations are underway with the University’s architect about the physical location of the Associate Director’s office as well as the Center. Ideally, these spaces should be centrally located on campus, house resources (books, videos, etc.), furniture, and décor sufficient for encouraging informal socializing; include private professional space for counseling/advising closeted or questioning members of the community; and a larger meeting area for hosting academic talks and social gatherings. We envision the latter as a resource shared by Common Ground and the Office of Multicultural Affairs.

### *Existing Financial Support*

In spring 2011, a University trustee donated \$50,000 over the past two years to assist with start-up costs related to such a center.

The \$50,000 would cover all of the one-time costs associated with establishing the office and hiring the associate director, including computer, furniture for the office and living room, and the resource library. In addition, these funds can also cover some of the continuing costs for the first year. Those latter items are noted below as “covered, gift until FY14.”

### *Budget Request Summary*

Note: Budget details deleted.

### **Additional benefits to the work of Common Ground and the University**

As the de facto LGBTQ office on campus, Common Ground currently expends a disproportionate amount of staff time relative to other office priorities maintaining the Safe Zone program (which is expanding to include CCE community partners), the LGBTQ/Ally Living-Learning Community, advising students and organizations, funding LGBTQ-related student programs, coordinating data collection for the LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index, policy advising (especially related to transgender issues), coordinating programs with the LGBTQ Spiders (alumni group), and supervising student coordinators.

Together, these efforts exceed 25% of the Common Ground Director's time.

Beyond the direct benefits related to LGBTQ issues, hiring an Associate Director of Common Ground for LGBTQ Campus Life would enable Common Ground to enhance its efforts to

- increase the academic relevance of inclusive community and diversity studies through the development of academic courses
- advance campus initiatives on crucial topics, especially race and racism
- engage and support particular campus populations with emergent interests in diversity issues—for example, Athletics and faculty

The University of Richmond is the only college or university in the state with sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in its Non-Discrimination Statement (NDC). Obviously, committing the additional resources outlined in this proposal will help the University to deliver on the promise of its NDC. Doing so will also distinguish the University as regional leader when it comes to LGBTQ issues, especially given Virginia's economic and political climate, which impede many schools from taking such steps.

The University's recruitment efforts would also benefit from having in place the resources we propose. According to Gil Villanueva, Assistant Vice President and Dean of Admission,

Given its current trajectory...the University of Richmond will necessarily find itself in the position to build systems and resources to promote and support the growing diversity on campus. Richmond, including current and future faculty, staff, students, and alumni, can only benefit from having a space dedicated to an increasingly powerful voice within and for the University. What an important and inspired message for the Admission staff to share with students of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century that Richmond has an LGBTQ center.