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### Report on ACS Gender and Sexuality Workshop, Hendrix College

Nick Radel

*Furman University*

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Report on ACS Gender and Sexuality Workshop, Hendrix College, Oct. 27-28, 2012  
Nick Radel

Dear John,

Now that I am able to catch my breath, I can finally find time to report on my experiences and what I learned last week at the ACS Gender and Sexuality Workshop at Hendrix. I am grateful for the chance to have gone, and appreciate your willingness to support this kind of project. I think that this group of people is likely to sponsor more such workshops in the future, and hope that I (or someone from Furman) will be a regular participant.

I learned a lot about directions that Furman could and perhaps should be taking with regard to the recruitment and retention of LGBTQ students—and about what we can and perhaps should do to facilitate their integration into the college. Although I went to Hendrix with a sense that Furman was finally moving positively on these issues, I learned as well that we have a lot of catching up to do to maintain a degree of equity even with some of the lesser ranked schools in the consortium.

What struck me overwhelmingly was the way schools such as Davidson, Richmond, Rhodes, Rollins, Southwestern, Hendrix, and even tiny Centenary College seem to have wholeheartedly embraced the notion that LGBTQ students represent an important constituency of students in an era of declining or potentially declining enrollments. One colleague from Rollins made the quite pointed statement that even if we think in terms of having only ten LGBTQ students on campus, that represents one percent of the total population of students at a school like Rollins—and of course Rollins probably has more than ten such students. So, if we are talking about 27 students at Furman, we are talking about one percent as well—and no doubt there are many more than 27 LGBTQ students among us.

I think that the matter of addressing LGBTQ students is a social, cultural, and moral issue more than a numerical or economic one. But the numbers suggest that it makes economic sense for us to address this constituency. Indeed, the admissions department of one of the schools (I think it was Davidson) located five transgender-identified students whose academic and extra-curricular records were extraordinary, and then went out of its way to bring those five students to campus to sell them on the advantages of their attendance at the school. But the lesson I took from this is that the college saw the advantage to itself of these students' presence among its student body.

Another point made frequently struck me as perhaps the most important lesson for us at Furman: greater visibility of LGBTQ issues on campus leads to greater student identification with these issues. As you know, all of us associated with LGBTQ issues have been talking for a long time about the need for greater visibility on these issues, and one of the sociologists at Hendrix pointed out that the sociological data clearly supports the idea that if, for instance, you open an LGBTQ Resource Center, more LGBTQ students will come out and take advantage of this resource. Making people aware that they are present and valued in an institution provides them a stake in the institution, and conduces to their health and well-being as part of it.



What struck me most about nearly all the schools that attended the conference last week was the far greater level of commitment to LGBTQ issues than we currently see at Furman. Davidson and Richmond in particular have addressed these issues head on—and I invite you to take a look at the web page for the diversity initiative, Common Ground, at the University of Richmond to get a sense of what the possibilities are: <http://commonground.richmond.edu/>. Richmond has created a number of vibrant, highly visible diversity initiatives that include LGBTQ issues, and the university has hired Ted Lewis, a special resource officer to handle LGTBQ student affairs. Indeed, Richmond engaged in a rather competitive search for such an officer and lured Ted away from UNC-Charlotte. Ironically, in his position at Charlotte, Ted had dealt with some of our Furman students who had gone there for information and support.

Other schools also had similar web page visibility as well as in-place support institutions for LGBTQ students. In our meeting with Mark Kelly, we saw that Davidson had links to sites of interest to an LGBTQ constituency on the opening page of its website. Rollins has a Women's and Sexuality Center with a full-time director. In many of the other schools, the diversity or multicultural affairs officers take over the functions of such directors and act on behalf of LGBTQ students and their interests.

But it was also clear that none of these institutions expects all this work to be done by a single, unassisted director. I was struck, in this regard, by the work of Terri Johnson at Southwestern, who has assistants to help her co-ordinate and plan programs for a diversity of diverse students, whereas it seems to me that Idella Glenn has very little such support. AND to be clear about it, in every single school that attended this ACS Workshop, the majority of the work being done in support of LGBTQ students was originating in student services and counseling—and NOT among the faculty and/or students (as seems to be the case at Furman).

As to the role of faculty at these schools, open LGBTQ faculty members may or may not have been actively involved in LGBT issues. When they were, however, they were most often involved at the level of curriculum, and not at the level of trying to negotiate matters that were better left to student services and counseling. What was shockingly noticeable (at least to me) is that many of these schools had a far greater presence of open LGBTQ faculty than we have. Little Centenary College has 5 out of 55 openly gay faculty members; Rhodes has about 15 for a student population of 1800. Furman has 4, and no self-identified lesbians.

A simple list of other initiatives already underway at different ACS institutions indicates both possibilities for Furman and perhaps the ways we compare unfavorably with these members of the consortium: some of the schools have "lavender graduations" for their LGBTQ students; some have LGBTQ receptions at Homecoming and other such events; nearly all of them have effective, and effectively managed safe-zone projects; many have safe zone/resource centers for WGS students and issues; some have LGBTQ dorms and increasingly there is a trend toward gender-inclusive housing; some have mentoring programs to help new LGBTQ students; schools other than Richmond are seeking LGBT staff members; some have both LGBTQ groups and "allied" groups; some have large LGBTQ only parties; Davidson has two restricted LGBTQ endowment funds; Rhodes has a "Queer Advocacy" group that does works on advocacy issues in the community.

There is clearly and obviously an effort across the schools in the ACS Consortium to make LGBT issues visible and acceptable. Given that these are the schools with which we compete for students, I am afraid that if we cannot and do not begin to achieve some equity with them on these issues we are going to begin to lose students to them.

Terri Johnson at Southwestern told an interesting story about how the parents of a transgendered student came to her to try to understand how the university might help make her child's transition into adult life a better and more meaningful one. I was surprised to think that any parent would be so aware of the role of the university in helping facilitate such a transition—that is, I was surprised that the parents would understand the school itself to be a potentially enriching environment for their child. So, I asked Terri what Southwestern was doing to create this situation in which parents could feel empowered to approach the university with the confidence that the school would respond well to them and the needs of their child. Her response was that when parents and students visit Southwestern they are given information that informs them about the university's commitment to diversity—including LGBTQ diversity—and that makes clear to them that the university sees it to be part of its responsibility to address the needs of a diverse population. So, Southwestern actually seems to educate both its students and their parents about the need for diversity, its importance for the school, and its nurturing possibilities for students who attend. I think there are valuable lessons for Furman to learn from this anecdote.

One final note: at this point in their history of involvement with LGBTQ issues, nearly all these schools were beginning to turn their attention to transgender issues. To this end, the workshop featured an excellent speaker, Dr. Genny Beemyn, who laid out in a clear way what the multiple issues around transgender students are. I think we should consider bringing Dr. Beemyn to Furman's campus. But we need to do so in a context in which we ask the whole faculty (and not just the interested parties) to engage these issues. Perhaps we could do so as part of our next faculty retreat—and not on an optional or alternative basis.

If I were to give you a wish-list of things that Furman should begin to do, it might look something like this:

1. We should immediately hire an assistant for Idella Glenn. This person would be responsible for setting up a clear and visible program for LGBTQ students and issues. She or he would work with (and offer advice to) the Development office to identify sources of income for LGBTQ issues; he or she would assist Marketing in publicizing the significance of diversity to Furman's educational goals—including specific and detailed information to be distributed as part of our recruitment and admissions programs; and such a new person would assist the Admissions staff with creating a study to understand how other admissions departments at ACS schools have handled the recruitment of LGBTQ students and with implementing the results of that study.
2. We should find monies to support our proposed new WGS resource center—it needs to be furnished, supplied with resources, provided with someone to keep it open and running.

As I suggested above, it would seem that both practical experience and academic research endorse the salutary benefits of our plan for creating a WGS resource center, and for doing so in the present Lily offices. The high visibility of the location (recognized as a plus by all my



colleagues at the workshop) should serve us in many ways—not the least of which will be the advantage that it will encourage students who might otherwise continue to live in secrecy to avoid the shame that so often attends such secrecy.

But something else was also made clear in the workshop at Hendrix—such a center needs some kind of viable financial and institutional support. That is, there needs to be provision made to have someone actually attend to this office, so that it is open and available to students for most of the day and perhaps even into the evening. Some schools have used work-study students; one school hired a graduate student half-time worker (probably not an option for us). The WGS Oversight Committee has begun to think about this issue, and I have made (indeed have been making for several years) the argument that we need to turn our co-chairs into three-year appointments and then perhaps the senior co-chair could maintain some kind of presence in our new center. But that would have to be supported, I think, by some kind of course reduction and/or stipend. At any rate, it was made clear that a key issue should be the maintenance of this facility, and that the development office might take the lead in helping to identify donors and funds to begin endowing such a center.

Indeed, several schools had begun to locate and identify LGBTQ alumnae and interest them in supporting the university's activities on behalf of LGBTQ students—a goal that I believe we outlined in our discussions with Mark Kelly. Davidson, as I said, has two restricted endowment funds for sexuality and LGBTQ issues.

3. In the near future, we need to begin to implement a series of events disbursed throughout the university that make LGBTQ issues and students visible and presents them in salutary relation to the centers of the university (ideally this series will begin in and be overseen by student services).

4. We need to create a push to hire more open LGBTQ faculty who will be primarily committed to teaching courses relevant to the understanding of sexuality—ones whose obligations to the university are not divided among other disciplinary fields, as the current few faculty members who teach sexuality studies are. Most important, we need faculty who understand that sexuality is an essential epistemological category of inquiry, that is, that sexuality, like gender, impacts the ways we know and understand within nearly all our narrow disciplinary modes of intellection.

Forgive me for creating such a long report, but I thought it would be important to create as full as possible a record of what I learned while at Hendrix. It was eye-opening in no small part because it helped make clear to me how limited has been my own imagining of the possibilities of work still to be done. But I think my experience, too, made clear to me that we absolutely must cease thinking about sexuality issues as marginal and the provenance of a problematic minority. Instead, we should see them as issues central to our mission as a university, issues that go to the heart of our recruitment strategies and identity as an institution prepared for the future. Because this is so, the responsibility for implementing change around these issues belongs to centralized structures of power in the university.

Again, many thanks for sending me to the workshop. I think this kind of workshop is essential and will lead us to a better environment for LGBTQ students in the future.

Best,  
Nick

PS. I would recommend that you distribute this report to all senior officers of the administration and to all department and minor chairs. I think it would be helpful for all to see just what is going on at other schools.