



UNIVERSITY of WISCONSIN - EAU CLAIRE

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Statement to the University Senate October 12, 2010

The past few days brought us the concluding work of a group of students and faculty who had undertaken an immersion program in San Francisco funded by differential tuition. The film festival that resulted, the Eau Queer Film Festival, also partly funded by the UW-Eau Claire Foundation, brought moving and important films to our campus and community. This awareness and commitment to inclusiveness and social justice carried over into Coming Out Day yesterday. These activities, along with social and educational activities at the beginning of the semester, such as Safe Space with Bass, represent the living of our vision and the affirmation of our value of Equity, Diversity and Inclusiveness.

Many have become aware of an e-mail response by a department chair to an e-mail from the student director of the Eau Queer Film Festival. The student had sent an e-mail to the women's studies distribution list requesting assistance in publicizing the festival. In response, the chair's e-mail urged the student to reconsider publicizing aspects of the immersion experience that culminated in the festival. This e-mail and the consequent furor raise many conflicting issues.

First, there is the question of a department chair urging a student to cease and desist in the promotion and implementation of the academic work that resulted from a duly registered class. On its face, this is a problematic suggestion from anyone to a student or group of students, but it is made more serious by the disparate authority relationship of a department chair to an individual

student. Such an e-mail can neither educate nor contribute to dialogue or understanding. This will be addressed administratively. A second element of this e-mail is that to some it carried the appearance of authoritative pronouncement, coming from a department chair. The content of the e-mail to the student is strictly the personal viewpoint of the individual sender. The views of that writer are not my views nor those of my administration.

Let me be perfectly clear: I have worked since coming to UW-Eau Claire to further equity, diversity and inclusiveness at this university. EDI has been a cornerstone of my administration and is now firmly embedded in our strategic plan and our values.

Provost Kleine champions immersion and other academic experiences that further our commitment to EDI. Vice Chancellor Hellwig continues to fulfill her commitment to me to work to affirm and give voice to the LGBTQ community on this campus. We will never be finished with this responsibility, neither will we shrink from it.

As part of our commitment, I have created the Chancellor's Diversity Advisory Commission and the EDI Fellowship. Vice Chancellor Hellwig chairs the LGBT Advisory Board and the Hate and Bias Incident Response Team. These, along with our Affirmative Action Office, are the duly appointed and recognized bodies through which concerns about overall campus climate and specific incidents should be brought, and which will advise me on improving that climate.

Third, there is anger over the words of the e-mail, hurtful and condescending to the intended audience and beyond. These words

are such as to deny the individual worth and experience of LGBTQ students, faculty and staff. They deny the very difference that requires inclusion, and they make difficult at best a conversation with natural and behavioral science research. Others more familiar with this research than I am have and must continue to respond to such statements. If there are grounds for evidence-based or faith-based debate, this should be conducted in a forum that is civil and educational.

It is not the prerogative or the role of the administration to censor or prevent freedom of expression or to forbid the expression of ideas, however offensive they might be to others. Doing so threatens everyone's rights and fails to prepare our students for the world they will live and work in after their degree studies are completed.

It is our responsibility to address the appropriateness of the time and place of expression and whether the intent or result of the speech inhibits the educational process with which we as faculty and staff are entrusted. Administrative response and timelines will not be formulated to satisfy individual or group demands for specific reactions to events, but rather will be guided by respect for due process and the rights of all individuals.

We are fortunate that our students, and one student in particular in this instance, have the strength of their commitments, the courage, and the support of their mentors to remain undeterred by attempts to discourage them. Let's all take a lesson from their determination and perseverance, because this is, in the end, about our students.

Excellence. Our measure, our motto, our goal.

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