

Rainbow SIG Newsletter

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One Reward of Being an "Out" International Student Advisor

By Peter Voeller, International Student Advisor, English as a Second Language, University of Washington and an anonymous international student.

By the Advisor:

It started out as a typical advising appointment. The student needed help in filing an insurance claim and then had some questions about taking a regular class during his ESL studies. Then, the standard business being finished, he started to fidget a bit, and asked "Can I ask you a personal question."

"Oh, shit," I thought, "here it comes." When I relate this first reaction to colleagues, they ask me,

"How did you know something was coming?"

"Years of experience," is my answer.

So back to the question...I have the rainbow flag on my desk, my lavender "Everyone has a sexual orientation" button hanging on the Moroccan carpet above my desk, an "Equal Rights Not Special Rights" flyer propped under my computer screen and the University of Washington's "Valuing Diversity" poster on my front door (with male/male and female/female signs on it). These are my subtle clues that mine is a gay/lesbian/bisexual friendly office.

"Sure, go ahead," I say as friendly as possible, though these questions still make me nervous, not knowing their direction.

"Well, I don't want to get you mad," the student continued.

"Don't worry," I lie. "I won't get mad."

"Are you gay?" He's pretty direct.

"Well, I don't usually talk about it a lot or advertise it (I don't), but yes, I am."

"So am I." We both smile and relax a little.

My memory went back to similar conversations I've had in my office over the years, one with a young man from Turkey, another with a Japanese student, still another with a man from the Czech Republic. I felt glad to be able to give advice and information in a way I as a student never had access to.

"I've been here for six months," he continued, "and I haven't been able to meet anyone like me. Where can I go?"

Fortunately, I know the community well enough to be able to give him something more substantial than bars or gay hang out areas. "What would a regular het advisor have been able to tell him?" I wonder.

I told him about POCAAN, the People of Color Against AIDS Network, which includes blacks, Hispanics and Asians. I mentioned the bookstores where he could go to read about other "people like me" and the SGN (Seattle Gay News). I told him to be careful. He left feeling not so alone and hopeful about meeting more people.

My "reward" came about a month later when this same student returned to my office. He was beaming and full of thanks for the information and contacts I had given him. He'd gone to a POCAAN meeting and met a lot of nice people. He was planning to volunteer and help out in their community outreach programs. He'd bought some books and picked up a copy of the SGN. He was gushing about how accepting people in the United States were of gays. I flinched and told him that they may be more accepting in some places, but not to think that everyone feels that way. I again cautioned him to be careful. He left me feeling for the first time like a role model.

I asked him if he was planning to go to the Gay Lesbian Bisexual and Transgender Pride Parade that weekend. He said that not only was he going, he was going to march with the POCAAN entry. After he left, I felt the heavy burden of advice. What if something happens at the parade? It never had, but what if the Neo-Nazis or radical right fanatics cause trouble and this student comes to harm? My colleagues tell me that I'm paranoid and that I worry too much. It has to do with my generation, my background, my own fears, but each reward in this area is accepted with some trepidation.

By the Student:

Nobody can live without being given care, advice and understanding. Most people try to find someone who can give those things to them and I am one of those people. I am

also gay and I had been looking for someone who I could talk to about being gay in the United States.

Nine months in Seattle, I found nobody. I tried to go to Broadway, where my friends told me that there were lots of men who walked on the street and held hands with each other, several times to find some people I could talk to. However, I still couldn't find anyone. Maybe because I didn't know how to meet people or where I should go, I thought. But I still hoped that I would meet them someday. It was my big hope.

More time went by and I became more lonely. One day, something made me think about my school advisor and it was telling me that he might be a person who had the same kind of preference as me. Suddenly, I was feeling that he had to be like I am. I had been thinking about the possibility of being gay for a couple of days and then I decided to ask him, no matter what might happen. I went to his office and got some advice about my studies from him. After that, I got very nervous and I wasn't sure if I could ask him a personal question, if he would get angry with me or not. Consequently, to make sure, I asked him, "I have a question to ask you, but I'm not sure if you will get angry or not."

He smiled a bit and said, "It depends on the question."

It made me feel more nervous, but I had already decided I had to ask him, so I asked him directly, "Are you gay?"

He seemed a bit uncomfortable and replied, "Yes, I am." After everything was clear, we relaxed, looked at each other and smiled. This was the first time for me to be so very comfortable since coming to Seattle. I was happy to meet him, and I told him a lot about myself. He gave me lots of advice, such as how to get information about gays by giving me the addresses of gay bookstores, and how to make friends by giving me information on POCAAN (People of Color Against AIDS Network) and API (The Asian Pacific Islander group). In addition, he told me about the gay community in Seattle which was going to have a "Gay Pride" day soon. I talked to him a long time and could get a lot of information. After I left his office, I felt more comfortable and had more hope about living in Seattle. I thought that now I could find a person who I could talk to and who could give me some advice. I never felt lonely any more.

I went to the bookstore and bought some newspapers and books that helped me to get to know about gay society in Seattle. I called POCAAN and met lots of nice people especially a man who came from Hong Kong. He was very friendly and told me about POCAAN and API's activities. I told him that I wanted to help them as a volunteer to do anything they wanted me to do. He said that he would let me know if they needed help. After I met these people, I felt stronger and I want to do anything to support the gay community, because I believe, "We are gay and we are right."

School for International Training Launches First Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Studies Abroad Program

The School for International Training (SIT) has announced the first-ever undergraduate lesbian, gay and bisexual study abroad program to begin in February, 1994. It will be held in the Netherlands.

The semester-long program, open to students attending colleges and universities throughout the United States, will feature interdisciplinary seminars on life and culture of the Netherlands, a country with a long history of tolerance. Faculty from the University of Utrecht and the University of Amsterdam will lecture on lesbian, gay and bisexual studies and local activists. Representatives from numerous organizations, including the military and police, will participate as well. There is no ban on openly homosexual personnel among Dutch military or police.

Students will also receive language training and will have homestays with Dutch families, including lesbian and gay families. Field trips are planned to Copenhagen and/or Berlin, homes of Europe's largest gay communities. In Denmark, students will learn about a culture where same-sex marriage is legal. In Berlin, a center of gay culture since the 1920s, students will learn, among other things, about the effect of Hitlerism on the gay community during the Third Reich and beyond.

The curriculum will include such topics as social theories of sexuality; homosexuality and law; study of lesbian and gay families; AIDS and the lesbian and gay community; as well as a survey of lesbian and gay literature. Students will also complete a self-designed independent study project.

"The work of the School for International Training and its parent body, World Learning, is to provide a place where students come to understand their culture through immersion in an unfamiliar setting," said Neal Mangham, SIT's president. "The place of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in Dutch society is very different than in the United States. Understanding why those differences exist profoundly effects the individual's understanding of his or her own society."

SIT chose the Netherlands as the site of the program because of the country's long history of tolerance. Furthermore, the University of Amsterdam and the University of Utrecht are recognized throughout Europe as leading centers for lesbian, gay and bisexual studies and research. Both have programs dedicated to "Homo" studies--a Dutch term whose meaning reflects the full continuum of sexuality that the English word "homosexual" does not capture.

The cost of SIT's program is about \$9,000, and includes tuition, room and board, international air travel, program travel and insurance.

Conference Site Selection

From Volume 1, Number 2, Fall 1993

How should NAFSA react when a potential or planned conference site passes regulations which allow discrimination based upon sexual orientation? This was the charge given by President Jerry Wilcox to a committee of the association's Board of Directors. This committee, consisting of Peggy Pusch of Intercultural Press, John Booth of the University of Minnesota and Archer Brown of the NAFSA staff, considered the ethical and financial considerations of conference locations. Due to the current concern with gay/lesbian/bisexual issues, the committee also discussed options with Scott King, coordinator of the Lesbian SIG.

NAFSA has long had a tradition of holding its annual conference only in locations which respected the diversity of its individual members. However, potential response to current initiatives is complicated as the association selects conference sites several years in advance, and signs contracts which obligate NAFSA to potential financial penalties if broken.

In October, 1993, the NAFSA Board of Directors approved the following resolution, regarding conference site selection:

1. That NAFSA neither sign a contract for a national conference nor hold national conferences (subject to item #4 of these guidelines) in cities or states which laws that discriminate against anyone on the basis of race, national origin, color, gender, religion, sexual orientation, age, political opinion, immigration status or disability.
2. That a statement indicating NAFSA's position regarding discrimination (as listed in the previous statement) be added to any documents sent to hotel chains and conference/tourist/business councils who solicit our conference business (i.g. we will not hold a conference in a city or state that discriminates against...).
3. That a watch list of states and/or municipalities that anticipate passing a discriminatory referendum be maintained with the assistance of BPIE, Lesbian SIG, and the Committee on Women International, who also will be asked to review and comment on or add to this list.
4. That the following guidelines be used to decide on an appropriate response when a state or city, where NAFSA has signed contracts for a conference, subsequently adopts discriminatory legislation.
 - a. that due consideration be given to the financial and human resources that have been invested in preparation for the conference,
 - b. that a conference not be relocated within 18 months of the conference dates,

c. that at nineteen or more months prior to the conference dates, a decision be reached about moving the site, by the Board of Directors, based on a realistic review of the costs incurred in relation to the NAFSA financial resources.