

Gays and lesbians have poor representation at UPEI

by Sarah Murphy
NEWS EDITOR

UPEI students, faculty, and staff members are being left out of the loop.

Increasingly, campus community members are speaking out on rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual (GLBT) individuals, attending or employed by UPEI. Many believe something should be done to cater to the needs of this population.

UPEI insures protection against discrimination based on sexual orientation, and in 1999, UPEI extended same-sex partner benefits to their employees.

"Most Universities and Colleges have support groups for their GLBT students. These groups facilitate a sense of community and acceptance," says Mike* a 3rd year UPEI student. "It allows GLBT students to talk to their peers about life issues, romantic issues, and many other issues that heterosexuals take for granted, but that homosexuals must usually censor."

Presently there are no groups or designated meeting space for GLBTs at UPEI, so most are forced to find alternatives such as the Women's Centre or UPEI Student Services.

"If a student requires counselling, then

UPEI has an excellent counselling team at the University's Student Services", says Mike. GLBT students can also find a supportive atmosphere at the Women's Centre, however, the Women's Centre isn't designed to cater to the GLBT student."

Student Services attempts to facilitate the growth and development of all students, to extend the benefits attained by being at UPEI beyond those gained in the classroom. Bob Gibson, Director of Student Services, says he would be pleased to help any group of students who were interested in pursuing activities which they feel are important, such as these.

"I think the issue...address[ed] is one of the real or perceived need for such a group to be operating," Gibson says. "If such a group, and the purpose of such a group is appropriately defined, is desirable, then there are steps that could be taken to see this happen."

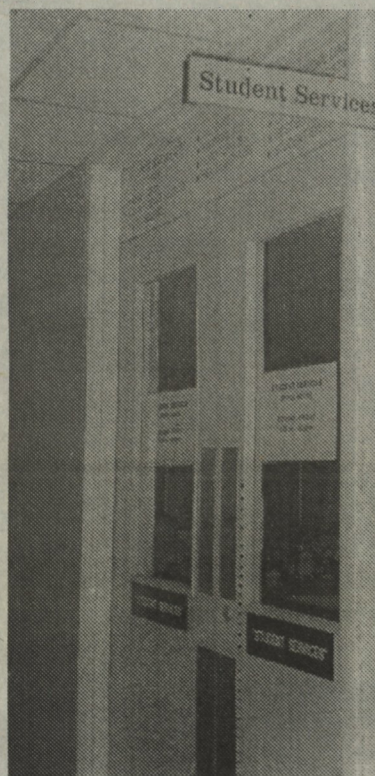
Gibson believes such a group would likely influence the climate on campus, by appealing or making an impact on a significant proportion of the campus community.

"I am sure there are many groups on campus...that owing to a

narrow appeal in terms of interest, do not exert a major influence," Gibson continues. "Conversely, others may be [more] influential and indeed serve to 'shape' the campus."

Also, Gibson added that there can always be benefits for people who share particular interest or beliefs to gather for support, for meeting, and for shared goals.

Ann Braithwaite, Professor and Coordinator of UPEI Women's Studies, believes that lack of such a



group may have a profound influence on campus by encouraging a myth of homogeneity which is not there, and excluding a large number of people at UPEI.

"[The lack of a GLBT group] maintains and perpetuates silences that universities elsewhere explode and explore, and does a disservice to all university community members, both GLBT and straight, by delimiting the

concept of an intellectual learning community that supposedly characterized the university," says Braithwaite.

Efforts and resources to create such a collective may not only stem from Student Services thought.

"The SU [Student Union] maintains a sub-organization policy and I would suggest this is one avenue to explore," says Gibson.

Although UPEI's Student Union has not heard of any interest for a GLBT organization on Campus, the Union supports any efforts made by their students to initiate such services.

"This group would receive the same support and attention that any other group [sub-organizations] gets," says John Desrosiers, UPEI Student Union President. "The Student Union has some support in place for new groups, and I don't think there would be a problem in helping them.

Desrosiers will not "get out and search" for new campus organizations, be it sports group, GLBT group or other, but maintains that the Union will have no problem helping if interest is shown.

The support of such an organization would likely come as a breath of fresh air, to UPEI GLBTs, and would increase awareness of such GLBT issues.

"Being a GLBT youth growing up in today's society can be really difficult," Mike adds. "In large cities,

some GLBT youth wait until high school before exploring their sexuality. However, most youths still wait until they are financially secure, have moved out of their parent's house, or until they start attending a University or College."

Help from the university community is not enough though, a member of the GLBTs will have to take action if any organizations are to be introduced to UPEI. Mike is conscious of the implication of introducing an organization of this kind to UPEI.

"Many GLBT groups have asked me why there wasn't a (GLBT) group at the university," says Mike. "The answer is simple. No one wants to take charge and start one. Such a group would have to be advertised to get members, therefore there would be a fear of gay bashing."

Although a GLBT group is not present at UPEI, this absence cannot be attributed to homophobia. UPEI can be better characterised as heterosexist.

"The Community as a whole might not be homophobic," says Mike. "But the atmosphere of the University is one of traditional, conservative, heterosexism."

Braithwaite, agrees.

"Homophobia is a word to describe fear and hatred of GLBT, often [and usually] expressed through violence against people perceived or