May 1, 2015

We're all about Voice and Visibility: The KFA's LGBTQ2S+ Committee

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May 2015

Educational establishments have never been merely about academic learning; a host of non-academic agendas for teaching and learning are part of the school and university experience, whether or not they are officially recognized in the formal curricula. They perpetuate class, market values, dominant gender scripts and, above all, heterosexuality as the only way of interacting with one another. The educational establishment has been very much a part of creating and maintaining heteronormative hegemony, and Kwantlen Polytechnic University is no exception to that.

It does not take too long to realize that gays, lesbians, transgendered, questioning, and two-spirited (LGBTQ2S+) people are an invisible minority in the faculty, staff and students at KPU. We can assume 11% of the total of these groups are LGBTQ2S+, as that’s the usual figure, but it’s just an assumption as we have little information about the numbers of or needs of this population within KPU.

Furthermore, few faculty in KPU teach a queer inclusive curriculum or recognize the need to do that, and KPU pays only lip service in terms of space, events and programs for LGBTQ2S+ people. As a matter of fact, and illustrative of this invisibility, was Kwantlen Pride’s attempt to get physical space allotted which instead resulted in a Social Justice Space for student clubs of all kinds, and not in an openly gay, lesbian, transgendered and queer space as originally planned. However, our LGBTQ2S+ students want a transformation of this, noting as they do that KPU is housed in districts not traditionally sympathetic to them: Richmond, Langley, Cloverdale and Surrey. These students need and want role models (which, unlike other minorities, they are not likely to get at home), inclusion and acceptance.

Similarly, our LGBTQ2S+ faculty need support to be open about who they are and encouragement to develop an inclusive curriculum. As educators and members of the Canadian academy, we should address this situation in whatever ways we can. But none of this is going to happen without a driving force to change the status quo.

And precisely, that is the role of the KFA LGBTQ2S committee – a group (led by the LGBTQ2S Representative to the KFA Executive) which takes on this responsibility, liaises with faculty, the Kwantlen Student Association, Positive Space, Pride Kwantlen, and the President’s Diversity and Equity Committee (PDEC). As a committee of the KFA, the committee ensures voice and visibility for LGBTQ2S faculty members within the Faculty Association’s executive and makes sure that issues and actions important to these members are brought forward and championed. The purpose of the committee’s work within the context of the whole institution is to raise awareness and begin to make change happen, so that KPU becomes an institution committed, not only rhetorically, but in action, to making LGBTQ2S+ faculty, staff and students feel truly welcome, included and supported. In other words, by supporting unity and cooperation

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1 The research is solid on this: See Apple, Pinar, Gramsci, Williams, Kinsman, McCutcheon, Walton, Rich, Weiss and Fine, Wells and many others.
among all working and committee groups at KPU, the KFA LGBTQ2S Committee will make strong allies.

Visibility and support at KPU

Over the spring 2015 semester, the KFA LGBTQ2S Committee has been very active. The committee helped organize two major events, sponsored in whole or in part by the KFA. The first was an intergen(d)erational reading and performance by old and young queers. The groups involved were Quirk-e (the queer imaging & writing collective for elders, facilitated by Claire Robson and Kelsey Blair) whose members range in age from 55 to 86; and Youth for a Change, ages 13 to 22. They are advocates, activists, and educators who offer workshops and training, monitor government policies, and lobby local politicians, among many other activities. The event was entitled “Call & Response!” and it took place on February 19th, 2015 at the Surrey Campus. The second event was a panel discussion entitled ‘Queer Voices at KPU’ on April 9th, 2015, where students, faculty, administration, and community members had an opportunity to share their coming out stories. In the first round, each panelist also took a few minutes to share their experience at KPU and in the community as a whole. In the second round of the discussion panel, the attending public was asked to help brainstorm ideas and actions that could be taken to transform the current state of invisibility of LGBTQ2S+ issues at KPU and in general. From multicolor painting on campus cement pillars and benches to furthering expanding the discussion panel to all KPU campuses every semester, the ideas and comments were all written down on a flip chart and e-mailed to everyone who left an e-mail address. The ideas will also be taken into account for the next round of events in the upcoming months. The panelists involved were: Val Innes (Retired KPU faculty), Diane Naugler (Associate Dean of Arts at KPU), R.P. Jey (KPU student), Kimberly McMartin (KPU student), Jazmine Khan (Community Member and the current main face of the Vancouver Parks Board’s Trans and Gender Variant Inclusion Act), and me, Juan Carlos Rocha Osornio (KPU current faculty member). Tanya Boboricken (KPU current faculty member) served as the moderator. Both of these events were highly successful and served to convey a very important message: diversity and inclusivity is the aim for all of us, faculty, students and administrators alike. In addition to that, the KFA provided pamphlets and posters that were distributed and posted across all four campuses in an effort to maximize and attract as much visibility and support as possible.

Plans for the future

The committee will continue to work hard and effectively during the summer months ahead. We have a variety of things planned, including an anti-homophobia poster that will be circulating soon in commemoration of the International Day against Homophobia and Transphobia, held on May 17th every year. This is a rallying event offering an opportunity for people to get together and reach out to one another at KPU.

On a last note, it is also very important to highlight that the KFA is one of the first of the FPSE locals to support executive representation for our LGBTQ2S+ members, and we can all be proud that we are leading in this effort to bring positive change by giving voice and visibility to those who have been historically marginalized and made invisible.