

LGBT Studies at Hofstra University

If one of the goals of a university is to provide students with a set of tools with which to examine, explore and question the world around them, then the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Studies Program at Hofstra University is yet another tool to help students arrive at a greater understanding of our society.

“Part of a well-rounded, liberal arts education is to contemplate the world around us and to determine with some degree of precision the various components that make up society and how they interact,” said Dr. David Powell, who founded and directs Hofstra’s new interdisciplinary LGBT Studies Program. “The LGBT Studies Program offers students at Hofstra the opportunity to examine just one more segment of society, alongside women’s studies, African studies, Asian studies, Jewish studies, etc. At the same time, for LGBT students this may be one of the few instances in their formal education they can see their lives represented and validated.”

The LGBT Studies Program focuses on the political, historical, cultural, and psychological contexts in which gender identities and sexualities have been and are currently being expressed. As Dr. Powell sees it, gender itself is not necessarily polarized between femininity and masculinity, but may always be in flux, while transgender people may be so depending as much on personal identity as on social situations and ethnic identities.

“The social and personal meanings of such terms as sexuality and gender, and sexual and gender preference, orientation, and choice, all need to be more richly understood, and the areas of their significance, exclusivity, interconnection, and dependency need to be explored,” Dr Powell explained.

An Interdisciplinary Seminar

To mark the launch of its new LGBT Studies Program this fall, Hofstra University hosted a one-day seminar that posed the question: “What Does Gay Mean Today?”

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The seminar, like the LGBT Studies Program itself, was a diverse and interdisciplinary affair, challenging old definitions and exploring new ways of looking at the LGBT community. And that’s just what Dr. Powell had intended.

The seminar examined “Labels, Meaning, and Self-Identification at the Start of the New Millennium.” Hofstra invited individuals whose fields of expertise included gay and lesbian studies, gay journalism, diversity, communication, comparative literature and languages, education, English, performance studies and Spanish. Workshops included: “What Can the Gay Press and Queer Studies Learn from Each Other?” “From Liberation to Coercion? Reflections on Gay Culture,” “Same Sex Marriage and the Argumentative Trajectory of Gay Rights: Normalizing and Regulating Gender Formation,” “When Black Meets Queer” and “What’s Gay About the Greeks? Constructions of ‘Queer’ Identity in Antiquity.”

To fashion an LGBT Studies Program, Dr. Powell drew on existing courses at Hofstra that explored some of these issues in the context of anthropology, biology, English, film and video, literature, history, political science, psychology, religion, sociology, and women's studies.

The LGBT Studies program's first seminar looked at labels and definitions of "queerness" because those labels have long reflected how society views sexual differences, which today is commonly called lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered and/or just queer.

"In other historical periods it could have been, and was, termed Uranian, inversion, sodomitical, Sapphic, butch, Wildean, homosexual, homophile, and a host of other expressions," Dr. Powell notes. "More often than not over the course of human history, however, it was simply not called anything at all, a testament not only to repression but to the potential for a different conceptual scheme that did not see same-sex sexuality as defining what a person was so much as something so normative that it warranted no additional name."

The Growth of LGBT Studies

The notion of a variously labeled LGBT identity is historically a relatively recent phenomenon, according to Dr. Powell. Hofstra's interdisciplinary program explores why a set of erotic practices eventually cohered into a defining (and constraining?) identity that was set in opposition to a subsequent neologism: the heterosexual. Given the peculiar and particular array of pressures governing the social manifestation of queerness – political, religious, juridical, among others – an investigation into its historical past can open a window onto a range of broader ideological investments seemingly far removed from sexuality.

In the last decade of the 20th century, the study of gender and sexualities became a vital and active field of academic inquiry and scholarly research.

What Does Gay Mean Today?

Labels, Meaning, and Self-Identification

at the Start of the New Millennium

A Symposium in Celebration of the New LGBT Studies Program at Hofstra University

Wednesday, October 11, 2006

David Gerstner, Associate Professor of Cinema Studies, CUNY Staten Island: "*Queer Internationale: Modes of Cultural Production in the 21st Century*"

Paul Schindler, Editor, *Gay City News*: "*What Can the Gay Press and Queer Studies Learn From Each Other?*"

Carolyn Dinshaw, Professor of English, Acting Chair, Department of Social & Cultural Analysis, New York University: "*Born Too Soon, Born Too Late: The Female Hunter of Long Eddy, circa 1855*"

Cheryl Clarke, Director, Office of Social Justice Education and LGBT Communities, Rutgers: "*Black Feminist Vexing of Black Macho in the Work of Black Gay Men, or Afro Homo Pomo Vexing of Black Macho*"

Robert Schwartzwald, Chair, Department of English Studies, Université de Montréal: "*Post-national, Post-queer? Dispatches From the North*"

Luciano Martínez, Assistant Professor of Spanish, Swarthmore College: "*From Liberation to Coercion? Reflections on Gay Culture*"

Jonathan D. Katz, Senior Fellow, Smithsonian American Art Museum, and Former Executive Coordinator, Larry Kramer Initiative for Lesbian and Gay Studies, Yale: "*The Politics of Eros*"

Gui Caliendo, Assistant Professor of Speech Communication, Hofstra University: "*Same Sex Marriage and the Argumentative Trajectory of Gay Rights: Normalizing and Regulating Gender Formation*"

Gema Pérez-Sánchez, Associate Professor of Spanish, University of Miami: "*One Big Queer European Family? Immigration in Contemporary Spanish Gay Films*"

Steven Smith, Special Assistant Professor of Comparative Literature and Languages, Hofstra University: "*What's Gay About the Greeks?: Constructions of 'Queer' Identity in Antiquity*"

Tavia Nyong'o, Assistant Professor, Performance Studies, Tisch School of the Arts, NYU: "*When Black Meets Queer*"

LGBT grew out of feminist scholarship into a distinct field of investigation. It focuses on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people, their history and culture. LGBT studies considers sexualities and genders as identities, social statuses, categories of knowledge, and as lenses that help us to frame how we understand our world.

At Hofstra, Dr. Powell crafted a program that has a central core of a few courses, complemented by courses that our faculty regularly teach or will design or by specialized syllabi for students taking a course that could lend itself to queer studies in the context of a broader syllabus.

The fact that LGBT is by nature an interdisciplinary program reflects the development of these studies since their inception. In the last decade of the 20th century, the study of gender and sexualities became a vital and active field of academic inquiry and scholarly research. Initially situated more than a century ago in the disciplines of psychology, sexology, and sociology, deliberate inquiry into the personal and cultural nature of sexuality has now become so thoroughly interdisciplinary that issues of sexuality and gender are researched and debated in such diverse areas as genetic science, cultural anthropology, psychology, history, art, classical studies, philosophy, public policy, literature and law.

The Study of Gender and Sexuality

Because gender and sexualities are biologically as well as culturally construed, the effects of their determinations and expressions are felt in every aspect of personal and social life. As the study of gender and sexuality continues to be explored as expressed in the arts and sociologically verified groups, as well as the psychological studies that have blossomed since “homosexuality” was removed from the psychiatric manual by the APA in 1973, so too will public policy and law be tested, as demonstrated by the current increase in the number of cases concerning same-sex couples wanting to adopt and marry. In turn, then, these issues manifest themselves anew in artistic and cultural expression. These are some of the issues that make up LGBT studies, and that make of these studies an interdisciplinary matter.

The LGBT Studies Program was launched as a minor, which requires students to complete 18 credits through one required introductory course in LGBT studies and related courses in other academic programs.

Prior to the creation of LGBT Studies, but now a part of it, is a fellowship program for students engaged in advocacy on behalf of the LGBT community. This program, unprecedented at the time it was established in 2002, is designed to demonstrate Hofstra's commitment to equality and support for LGBT individuals, and now includes the Hofstra Law School Fellowships for Advocacy for the Equality of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People, as well as other scholarship for undergraduates.

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ABOUT DAVID POWELL

In addition to his leadership of the LGBT Studies Program, David Powell is a professor of French and chairperson of the Department of Romance Languages and Literatures. He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania. His areas of specialization include 19th-century French narrative, particularly the novels of George Sand, autobiography, and interdisciplinary criticism on the relationship between literature and music. Dr. Powell has been a regular director of the Hofstra in Nice program.

LGBT Studies Fellowships and Scholarships at Hofstra University

Law School Fellowships

The Hofstra School of Law awards fellowships to up to three students from the entering J.D. class who have demonstrated a commitment to and intend to pursue careers advocating on behalf of the LGBT community. The fellowship is open to persons of all sexual orientations in recognition of the diversity of individuals who may ally themselves with sexual equality, and to underscore the importance of alliances between the LGBT community and the community at large.

Scholarship awards include a maximum \$20,000 tuition fellowship each year over three years of law school and up to two \$5,000 summer stipends to support a summer externship. The LGBT fellowships are awarded for one year, but are renewable annually.

Students are required to complete two 10-week summer externship programs that place students with nonprofit organizations devoted to legal advocacy for the LGBT community. Each externship is supported by a fellowship stipend.

Fellows enroll in a comprehensive course of study devoted to equality, including courses in sexuality and the law, sex discrimination, jurisprudence, and an independent study and tutorial designed to address issues of particular concern to the LGBT community. Additionally, fellows participate in a mentoring program with LeGaL, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Law Association of Greater New York.

Upon graduation, fellows are expected to use their specialized training to represent the legal interests of the LGBT community for at least three years.

More information is available at:
www.hofstra.edu/Academics/Law/law_lgbt_fellowships.cfm

Undergraduate Scholarships

In 2002, Hofstra University established an unprecedented scholarship program for students engaged in service to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community. The program is designed to demonstrate Hofstra's commitment to equality and support for LGBT individuals.

The intent of this scholarship is to promote activism in support of the LGBT community. This scholarship is open to any applicant, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, who has a demonstrable record or strong potential in support of LGBT activism. The award committee recognizes that so-called "straight allies" can have a dramatic impact on LGBT issues, and strongly encourages their applications.

Scholarship recipients are selected on the basis of academic ability and experience promoting activism in support of the LGBT community. High achieving students will be eligible for full tuition scholarships and summer stipends for academic or activist pursuits. Recipients of the scholarship will choose a faculty mentor who will serve as a source of support and advice in addition to the student's academic advisor.

Another scholarship, the Mildred Elizabeth McGinnis Endowed Scholarship, was established to assist LGBT students in the humanities. The scholarship will be awarded on the basis of demonstrated economic need to an undergraduate LGBT student majoring in any humanities discipline with at least a 3.0 GPA. (If no suitable LGBT student is identified, the scholarship will be awarded to a student who can show assistance to the LGBT community along with all the other terms of the requirements.)

More information is available at:
www.hofstra.edu/Administration/Provost/pro_scholarship_lgbtact.cfm