05 May 2021

From: URI LGBTQ+ Union
Co-signed: | CELS SOS LT | Feminists at URI | SAGA |

To: The University of Rhode Island Departments
[University of Rhode Island] | Kingston | RI | 02882

To the University of Rhode Island’s Department:

This is a formal letter of grievances concerning the inequity experienced by LGBTQ+ students at the University of Rhode Island. This inequity has been perpetuated by inaction and a lack of support for trans and non-binary students in particular. In light of recent events, specifically the transphobic rhetoric of Donna M. Hughes, Professor and Endowed Chair of the Gender and Women’s Studies Department, we call on the administration to stand with its students and take meaningful action towards justice and reconciliation. Below we have outlined several grievances alongside action steps the University should take to protect and uplift its LGBTQ+ student community.

Professor Donna Hughes, Gender and Women’s Study Department

Professor Donna Hughes of the University of Rhode Island published an article on February 28th, 2021 spewing inaccuracies about the transgender community. The article likened the trans community to a terrorist group, accused positive transgender movements of causing harm to cisgender women, and overall framed and villainized the transgender rights movement as “[a fantasy] ruining lives and political systems”.

The statement released by the administration in response to Donna Hughes’ article was dismissive of students’ concerns. While URI has an obligation to protect the faculty’s right to free speech, defamatory statements about a community that can incite violence towards that community are not a protected form of speech. When a tragic or troubling event occurs that affects a minority group, the university usually publishes its statement to the university-wide email listserv. The statement regarding Donna Hughes was not broadcast this way, and we believe that the university is trying to keep these events from attracting attention, as to not face negative publicity. In this approach, the university failed to properly reach and support its trans community.

Donna Hughes’ article contains factual inaccuracies regarding the transgender community.
Specifically, implying that the trans-rights movement was a threat to women’s rights stating, “The trans-sex/“gender identity” ideology challenges same-sex rights, particularly those of women and girls”. Hughes claims that introducing inclusive language—such as the term, “people who menstruate” in place of [women with] periods is, “...hatred targeted at women’s bodies and their rights”. This fabricated claim seeks to target trans and nonbinary people for simply using inclusive—yet still biologically sound—language. This shift towards normalizing menstruation regardless of gender identity is not an attack on cis-gendered women, nor is it policing their rights. In fact, the trans-movement is positively impacting feminism both directly through pusing for bodily autonomy, and passively through allyship. The University of Rhode Island’s Affirmative Action, Equal Opportunity, and Diversity Policy Statement reads, “It is the policy of the University of Rhode Island not to discriminate on the basis of race, sex, religion, age, color, creed, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression...in the recruitment, admission or treatment of students, the recruitment, hiring or treatment of faculty and staff, and in the operation of its activities and programs, as specified by State and Federal Laws...” Yet, this article with its discriminatory anti-trans messaging has not been explicitly addressed and disputed by the University. This harmful and false narrative pushes the villainization and dehumanization of trans and nonbinary people, especially at URI as it is being projected by a faculty member from a place of power in a traditionally queer-inclusive department. Presentation of inaccurate information as fact constitutes misinformation, and is not something to be supported in a faculty member. The initial statement from URI dismisses the grievances of transgender students, stating, “faculty have a special obligation to show due respect for the opinions of others and to “exercise critical self-discipline and judgment” and “appropriate restraint” in transmitting their personal opinions.” In this statement, the university reduces the identities and life experiences of their transgender students to “opinions” that must be shown respect. The existence of transgender people is not an opinion; their humanity is not an opinion. It is not opinions we are asking to be respected—it is people’s identities.

In the classroom, students should expect to learn factual information or information that is widely regarded by the academic community as the best that is available at the time. Multiple reports from Hughes’ students indicate that she is teaching anti-transgender material in the classroom. There have been complaints from former students of Donna Hughes that felt unable to challenge her behavior and rhetoric in her classes, out of fear that their grades would be negatively impacted. One former student reported that Hughes lowered her grade based solely on the students’ viewpoint, and then refused to meet with the student to discuss the matter. Other students reported that this professor refused to respect their gender identity and refer to them with their preferred pronouns. Misgendering students is not academic freedom: it is an abuse of power.
that encourages and perpetuates violence and discrimination against LGBTQ+ students. Transgender people are widely supported by the medical and psychological community - they are not mentally ill, and gender-confirming treatments are genuinely beneficial to people who seek them. There are also transgender historical figures reaching back into history and across cultures worldwide. To attribute the transgender community to a “left-wing fantasy” is to dismiss the existence of queer and non-binary gender identities in indigenous cultures around the globe. To teach anti-trans rhetoric at a university is to teach false information and endanger the lives and wellbeing of students.

The entire Gender and Women's Studies department must be investigated and made aware of the systemic biases against transgender and non-binary people ingrained within the department. Someone holding discriminatory views towards transgender individuals should not hold a position of leadership in a Gender and Women’s studies department. Someone who teaches inaccurate, misleading, and harmful material in the classroom should not be in a teaching position at this university.

*Systemic Discrimination at URI*

The issue of lack of support for trans and nonbinary students exceeds just one faculty member; the university as a whole has failed our trans and non-binary students. There are systemic biases throughout the university. The Counseling Center and Health Center have provided trans-exclusive healthcare when treating transgender people. These centers are clearly uninformed on how to best treat and support trans individuals, as medicine has a history of catering to the cis-gendered, white, and heteronormative majority. One transgender student was told that the Counseling Center was not equipped to give them care because of their gender identity, and the student was told to find counseling elsewhere. At Health Services, one student reported being continually called by their legal name instead of preferred name by employees of Health Services, even though their preferred name was listed in E-Campus. Another student reported that Health Services had an issue with the student’s intake form, where “transgender” would be read after their first name in their file. Health Services failed to realize how this was an inappropriate place to make note of said information in the student’s file. In addition, while URI has a preferred name policy, students frequently encounter their legal (non-preferred) names in contexts where this is completely avoidable. In the worst of cases, this can result in public outing of students who wish their legal name to remain private. One student employee, who had changed their legal name during their freshman year, found that they were not receiving part of their compensation because URI’s payroll system had not updated to their current legal name. This resulted in a five-month delay in payment that was only processed thanks to intervention by the Vice President of Student Affairs. Another example of the potential harm URI’s sloppy
handling of names can cause, is class lists in e-campus and who sees them. Students may go out of their ways to make arrangements to ensure their correct names are understood and used by their class instructors, but this often does not reach a graduate TA who may be grading their work from the e-campus list. This does not allow TAs access to critical information about their students and sets up an unnecessary opportunity for discrimination. These missteps are clumsy and reflect a carelessness towards transgender students throughout the university. The URI Gender & Sexuality Center alone provides almost all support that is given to transgender students on campus. Therefore, we implore the university to increase the budget of the Gender and Sexuality Center.

On March 23, 2021, a speaker from outside the URI community came to the Quad with the specific intention of targeting and harassing queer-presenting students. This individual did not wear a mask despite approaching people to talk to them, and did not reserve the Quad for his demonstration. URI Campus Police watched the situation from their squad car as this individual instigated arguments with students. The police only stepped in when a student took one of the speaker’s signs and walked off with it. We are disappointed by the lack of intervention and support from our campus police. This individual was not abiding by our campus mask mandate, which protects the health and safety of our students during the COVID-19 pandemic, and was specifically targeting our LGBTQ+ students. We do not believe that it was a coincidence that the recent attention to Donna Hughes’ article and the appearance of this speaker on the Quad occurred within a matter of days; transphobic rhetoric such as what was written in the article, combined with university inaction, invites outside agitators to our campus.

*Gender-Inclusive Restrooms on Campus*

For years, the trans and non-binary students at URI, with support from the Gender and Sexuality Center, have been working to get more specifically-designated gender-inclusive restrooms on campus. Gender non-conforming students who face harassment in gendered restrooms require safe bathrooms that are located near their classrooms. Many students report long wait times at existing gender-inclusive restrooms, or must walk from the building their classes are held in to a different building on campus that has a gender-inclusive restroom. After students organized for this cause in 2019, culminating in a protest on the Quad and a petition with over 1,300 signatures from the URI community, the university agreed to change signage on existing single-person restrooms to be gender inclusive, and to increase the number of gender-inclusive restrooms in high-traffic areas such as the Memorial Union.

At first, the university succeeded in putting up temporary signage at some restrooms, awaiting permanent signage. However, some of this temporary signage inadequately covers existing
signage, so the restrooms are not clearly designated as gender-inclusive and still have “Men” or “Women” visible on the door. Since early Spring 2020, progress on this issue has halted entirely. While this is partially understandable due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and resulting closure of campus, a full year has passed and it is time for the university to follow through on its promise to its trans and non-binary students, and their many allies.

Closing Remarks

During the pandemic, support for the queer community at URI has only gotten worse. With many of us forced to leave the security of on-campus housing due to limited spots, trans and non-binary students especially have been subjected to hostile living environments with continued erasure of their identities when subjected to live amongst unsupportive family members. The inequality faced by the queer community being dismissed and perpetuated by the University is not acceptable. It is exemplified in every day instances such as the initial URI-required COVID tests, which put trans and non-binary students at risk by requiring the use of legal names. Alongside other issues such as microaggressions, lack of representation, and limited support, the queer community, specifically trans and nonbinary students of color, have been negatively impacted by the pandemic with little to no support from the university.

Overall, the University needs to better support the LGBTQ+ community, especially their transgender and nonbinary students. The grievances listed above, including tolerance of the transphobic writings by Donna Hughes, delay of gender-inclusive restrooms, and a lack of support and protection for the trans and non-binary community as a whole, violate the university’s policy to not discriminate based on gender identity and expression in the treatment of students and operation of its activities and programs. If URI wants to celebrate the diversity of its student body and inclusive and welcoming campus environment, it must also stand with and protect its minority and targeted communities.

We urge the university to work with LGBTQ+ and minority students on eliminating these grievances. The LGBTQ+ community, specifically trans/nonbinary students, deserve better funding and support, and we are willing to assist in facilitating the changes that need to be made. In the future, we look forward to all students feeling welcomed and respected at the University of Rhode Island.
Sincerely,

URI LGBTQ+ Union

URI LGBTQ+ Community Union

CELS SOS LT

CELS Seeds of Success Leadership Team

Feminists @ URI

Feminists at URI

URI SAGA

URI Sexuality and Gender Alliance