

**University of Minnesota  
Transgender Commission**

**Annual Report 2008-2009**

*Submitted to the Vice President and Vice Provost for Equity and Diversity  
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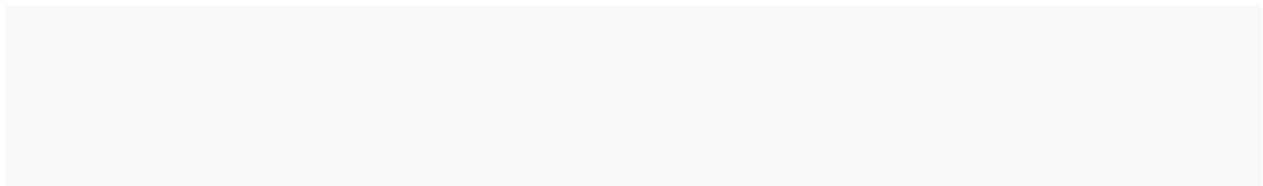
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## I. Introduction

The University of Minnesota Transgender Commission is pleased to submit this report of its activities for the 2008-09 academic year, and goals for the coming year.

The Transgender Commission's mission is as follows:

*The University of Minnesota Transgender Commission works to create equity, access, and an inclusive environment for people of all genders through education, advocacy, and institutional change.*

*The Commission strives to honor transgender people and celebrate gender diversity, make visible the systems of gender that profoundly affect all our lived experiences, and eliminate the discrimination faced by transgender and gender non-conforming students, staff, faculty, alumni, and community members.*

In our 2007-08 report, the Commission identified two key strategies for our work during the 2008-09 year: community building and the inclusion of gender identity and gender expression in the University of Minnesota's Equal Opportunity Statement.

## II. Community Building

One of the priorities of the leadership team has been to consider who the Transgender Commission does and does not reach, who feels ownership in the Commission's work, whose voices get heard, and how to make the Commission's work fit within a larger vision for social justice. The Commission has engaged in a series of conversations and experiences aimed at better understanding these questions.

**A. Internal and Public Conversations:** Two of the Transgender Commission's monthly meetings focused on discussions of gender and culture. The first, led by Richard LaFortune of Two Spirit Press Room, focused on indigenous conceptions of gender, how these conceptions were impacted by colonialism, and what this can teach us about the conceptions of gender within the dominant culture in the United States. In the second, Haven Herrin, formerly of Soulforce Q, led us in exploring the intersections of gender with faith and spirituality, and facilitated reflection by Commission members on our own spiritual journeys.

The Commission was very pleased to sponsor two public conversations about culture and race in LGBTQ communities. During Spring Pride Week a screening of the documentary *STILL BLACK: a portrait of black trans men* engaged a group of students, staff, faculty and community members in discussions about the complexities of racial and gender identities at the intersections of institutional racism and transphobia as described and embodied by black trans men. The April 22, 2009 event *Access Denied: Conversations about Racism in our LGBTQ Communities*, held at the Sabathani Community Center, created space to hear and honor voices of people of color, to allow white folks to explore white culture and privilege, and for all to speak honestly about how to build a social justice movement that truly works for the liberation of all our communities.

**B. Annual Retreat:** On Friday, May 8, 2009, members of the Transgender Commission met at McNeal Hall on the St. Paul campus for our 4th Annual Retreat. The retreat focused on how the Commission's work intersects with other social justice movements, considering our work through a lens that is culturally grounded, addressing whole people, communities, histories and needs rather than tokenizingly "bringing in individuals," and making specific plans and commitments to reach out to potential stakeholders and engage in both dialogue and listening. The goal was to learn what people want from the Transgender Commission moving forward, and how we can build new connections with people of color and isolated trans folks who may not currently feel a sense of ownership in the work of the Commission, and with other communities working for collective liberation.

The retreat began with a version of the "Power Shuffle" exercise led by Commission member and graduate student Daniel Nidzgorski, considering in detail "who we are" along multiple dimensions of power and privilege, what brings us together and holds us apart, and importantly, who is *not* in the room. Co-Chair Sara Axtell then led a discussion on "cultural self-study" in which we considered the interplay of culture with how we understand and conceptualize trans communities, as well as what we see our work being and how we do it. Finally, teaching specialist Kelly Knochel facilitated a discussion around the intersections of gender, race and class which aimed to move beyond well-meaning words and plans, and asked Commission members to make specific commitments to engage in conversations with potential stakeholders and allies we know who are not currently engaged with the Commission's work, in order to learn how the Transgender Commission can authentically expand, shift and share its power circle and set a multi-issue, multi-community, social justice agenda.

The day was intense, moving, and productive, and signaled what we hope to be an exciting transition from the "beginning phase" of the Transgender Commission's work into a new era of broadened vision, inclusion, and intersectional justice work.

**C. Conversations Project:** Work at our annual retreat initiated an ongoing project of the Transgender Commission, where members seek out authentic relationships and conversations with people who have an interest in the work of the Commission, but are not currently engaged with the organization. At each full Commission meeting, members will be asked to share what they have learned from their conversations, and how these experiences and relationships might shape the work of the Commission. The conversations are focusing on the following questions:

- What could the Trans Commission do or work on that would be meaningful for you?
- What would make you feel welcome/want to get involved in the Commission?
- What kind of gatherings work best for you (meetings, less formal gatherings, daytime, evening, locations)?
- Can you share with us about experiences you've had (good and bad) with the Transgender Commission or other University-related groups that could provide us with some insights about how we might make our work more meaningful, relevant and accessible?

### **III. Amendment of Equal Opportunity Statement**

The Transgender Commission reports with great pride and gratitude that its partnership with the Office for Equity and Diversity has achieved the goal of bringing the University of Minnesota into the coalition of nearly three hundred (300) United States colleges and universities that recognize the importance of gender equity by including gender identity and gender expression in their equal opportunity equity and/or non-discrimination statements. We believe the University of Minnesota may be the *first* institution of higher education in the state of Minnesota to take this essential step.

Since the inception of the Transgender Commission, amending the University of Minnesota Equal Opportunity Statement to include gender identity and gender expression has been seen as one of the most fundamental needs of gender non-conforming students, staff, faculty, and community stakeholders. Over the last three years, we have held multiple discussions and strategy sessions around how to create this change (and indeed this need was voiced and work was being done long before the Commission was founded). There was a time when we received the message that movement on this front was politically dangerous and unlikely. This achievement is the culmination of years of work on the part of trans people and allies, inside and outside of the Commission and the Office for Equity and Diversity.

The amendment of the Equal Opportunity Statement was achieved by a vote of the Board of Regents on July 8, 2009, following a report to a committee of the regents by Vice President and Vice Provost Nancy "Rusty" Barceló and Associate Vice President Kris Lockhart from the Office for Equity and Diversity. This report, informed by documents and input from the Transgender Commission, made a powerful and articulate argument that the explicit inclusion of trans and gender non-conforming people in the University community is vital to its achieving its goals as an institution of discovery, learning, research and excellence.

The Transgender Commission will be celebrating this achievement throughout the year, and focusing on how it can help the University of Minnesota fulfill the promise of inclusion it makes to gender non-conforming people and other historically oppressed people as embodied in the new policy statement.

### **IV. Transgender Commission Workgroups**

**A. The Facilities Workgroup** continued its work to identify and map accessible restrooms on campus, and the Google Maps Gender Neutral Restroom Map has been updated regularly. The Workgroup submitted East Bank gender-neutral restroom recommendations to the appointed Facilities Management Liaison. An assessment of restrooms of the St. Paul campus was completed, and recommendations for that campus were drafted. A "Restroom Assessment Tips Sheet" was developed to orient service-learning students and other volunteers who are assisting with the campus-wide assessment. An educational handout regarding the importance of gender-neutral restrooms was created and used at several events.

**B. The Health Care Workgroup** helped to secure Queer Student Cultural Center representation on the Student Health Advisory Committee (SHAC). They made a presentation on inclusion of gender services in undergraduate insurance plans to SHAC, and developed a legal argument to support inclusion of gender services.

**C. The Education & Training Workgroup** experienced another productive year of presenting *(Trans)Gender 101* trainings and tailored gender dialogues to students, staff, and faculty across University of Minnesota campuses in the Twin Cities and in Duluth and Crookston. Our *(Trans)Gender 101* training was implemented into the training curriculum of the Minnesota GLBTA Campus Alliance, which delivers trainings on college campuses and at businesses across the state. Transgender Commission members also presented a day-long series of trainings and consultations with Winona State University students, staff and faculty to provide education during a faculty member's public gender transition. Trainers at Winona State raised funds for the Commission in this process. In an effort to bring together a variety of people doing similar educational work, the Transgender Commission organized the first Trans Education Summit, during which training methods, models and resources were shared, and the need for a continuation of such meetings in the future was elucidated.

**D. The Programming Workgroup** started out the 2008-09 year as a major sponsor/organizer of a week of Twin Cities-wide events featuring world-renown author, artist, scholar, performer and gender outlaw *Kate Bornstein*. Kate provided a moving performance at the 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Transgender Commission Open House in the St. Paul Student Center Northstar Ballroom. Workgroup members led a series of *Genderheads* Dialogues, including discussions of Kate Bornstein's *My Gender Workbook* and the documentary films *Boy I Am* and *STILL BLACK: a portrait of black trans men*. The Transgender Commission also organized or sponsored Trans Day of Remembrance events and an Intersex Workshop with Dr. April Herndon, former Education Director for the Intersex Society of North America.

## **V. Trans Advocacy Team**

The Trans Advocacy Team, a volunteer-based task force of advocates trained to respond to gender-related issues/instances at the University of Minnesota, was conceived and launched over the last year. Since the formation of the Transgender Commission, the need for an organized group of dedicated trans advocates has become startlingly clear in light of the increasingly frequent requests the Commission receives from campus community members to help navigate discriminatory classroom, office, departmental, and other interpersonal situations. During the next year, the Trans Advocacy Team will educate itself around advocacy principles and strategies in order to provide support, training, referrals, intervention, and/or resources in order to proactively create safer, affirming spaces at the University of Minnesota for people of all genders.

Advocates will be trained in the basics of crisis consultation and management, peer counseling skills, and issues of privacy and confidentiality, all within an inclusive framework for understanding the spectrum of gender identity and gender expression. The Transgender Commission hopes to build allies and expand its network of resources through collaborations with organizations such as the University of Minnesota Aurora Center, OutFront Minnesota's

Anti-Violence Program, and the Sexual Violence Center in Minneapolis. Ultimately, the Commission hopes to build a network of people who can respond to instances of campus gender discrimination and transphobia by strategically utilizing advocacy teams representing a diversity of identities, experiences, skills, and positions within the University to de-escalate, educate, empower and resolve tense and/or painful situations in a healthy, holistic manner.

## **VI. Transgender Commission Consultation**

Over the last year, the Transgender Commission has been asked to provide consultation, education and resources not only to departments within the University of Minnesota, but also to several other universities and organizations seeking information about how to navigate (trans)gender-based situations, policy changes, and transitioning employees and students -- including but not limited to the University of Wisconsin-River Falls, Winona State University, Augsburg College, and St. Olaf College. In cases such as UWRF and Augsburg College, these smaller campuses have used the Transgender Commission's model to create rapid change within their relatively less dense university bureaucracies and systems, resulting in, for example, new gender-neutral accessible restrooms in their student unions and resident halls. In some cases, the Transgender Commission has met with faculty and staff groups for circle discussions and transition tool sharing sessions, and/or has accompanied our consultation with public gender education seminars on these campuses and earned funds for the Commission in return.

## **VII. Goals for 2009-10 Academic Year**

Our goals for the 2009-2010 academic year include the following:

1. Integrate knowledge and experiences from the Conversations Project into the agenda and the power structure of the Transgender Commission to expand the circle of individuals and communities who direct the work of the Commission -- and to inform the scope and breadth of the Commission's work itself.
2. Re-conceptualize the access points for new leaders to engage in the work of the Transgender Commission by moving away from a "workgroup" structure into a mobile team process that emphasizes dialogue, concrete actions and specific tactics -- especially where our work intersects with work being done by other social justice organizations.
3. Educate, train and mobilize the Trans Advocacy Team.
4. Develop and implement concrete goals with accountability measures for the Facilities Team to move forward the creation of high-traffic gender-neutral restrooms (sign and lock changes) in conjunction with Facilities Management.
5. Develop a gender dialogue series that utilizes a learning circle format to allow participants to have in-depth, ongoing discussions about gender identity, systems of gender and power, and the intersections of gender and other aspects of identity.