

Diversity issues continue to challenge universities

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By Communications Staff
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A new video providing a compelling examination of how discrimination and exclusion persist in Canada's post secondary education system and the toll that takes on students, faculty and staff premieres Monday, October 27 at The University of Western Ontario.

Voices of Diversity: Creating a culture of safety, respect and belonging on campus tells of how discrimination and isolation, as well as emotional and physical intimidation impacts the lives of faculty, staff and students as told through the voices and stories of women, aboriginals, international students, members of members of the GLBT community (gay men, lesbians, bisexual and transgendered people), people of diverse ethnic, religious and racial backgrounds, and people with disabilities or who are differently abled.

Produced by acclaimed London, Ontario filmmaker Kem Murch, the video was commissioned by the University of Western Ontario's Caucus on Women's Issues with financial support from the university.

Voices of Diversity was produced in response to the 2007 April Fools' issue of Western's student-owned newspaper The Gazette that caused campus protests and anger among many groups that labeled the issue sexist and homophobic.

"We've made progress at Western and on many other university campuses," says Bonnie MacLachlan, Chair of the Video Steering Committee and a senior member of the Caucus on Women's Issues that oversaw production of the video. "But the student Gazette spoof issue in 2007 and a subsequent town hall meeting where people shared their stories, was a stark reminder that there is still a great deal of work to be done."

MacLachlan adds that Western has seen a dramatic shift in its population in the last 10 or 15 years, and this means rubbing shoulders with people with very different traditions and ways of looking at things. "This has, in some cases, produced tension, anger and misunderstandings that affect the way we learn, work and feel about our campus."

More than two years of research and hundreds of interviews went into making the video and spokespersons for the movie say that while most of the video's content originates on the campus at Western, the reports of discrimination, intolerance and lack of safety could be repeated on most university campuses and indeed in Canadian society.

"Western is courageous," says MacLachlan of Western's decision to provide funding for the project. "The first step leading to greater change is to name the issue, and that is what this video does. Western is acknowledging it wants to continue the process of change."

In recent years Western has introduced a number of new initiatives aimed at creating a culture of safety and respect on campus.

Jane Toswell, President of the Western Caucus on Women's Issues and Associate Professor in

Western's Department of English, says there is an obligation for universities to be proactive in ensuring Canadian campuses are welcoming and inclusive. "It's not good enough to say this kind of discrimination is systemic in our communities. Universities have an obligation to lead, and indeed to show others the path to take to create an equitable community."

Western President Paul Davenport says it's not enough to promote tolerance. "We want to create a culture where all students, faculty and staff feel respected, safe and valued for who they are and the contributions they make to the success of Western and the greater community," he says.

"The stories in this video clearly demonstrate we have work to do, and our goal should be no less than to make ours an inclusive and caring environment for all students, faculty and staff who come here," says Davenport.

While Western is not unique in its efforts to be more inclusive, the President congratulated the Caucus on Women's Issues members for their commitment to diversity saying, "This is an area where Western must show leadership."

The video is intended to encourage discussions, both on and off Canadian post secondary campuses, on the issue of inclusion. To assist with that dialogue, a facilitator's guide will be released shortly.

Voices of Diversity will premier today at 4 p.m. in Conron Hall, Room 224 in University College at The University of Western Ontario

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