

LBGT Issues

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From a graduate student in Engineering:

"Can I be bisexual and a faculty member? I know of only 3 gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered faculty in the science and engineering departments, and only recently came to know them. I wonder whether the academic environment does not hire "out" LBGT faculty. I don't wish to have a job where I must be silent about other aspects of my life. Although academia is often a liberal environment, the lack of "out" LBGT faculty seems to suggest that there is a problem with being LBGT and faculty. Some companies I have been exposed to through Alumni activities have a more visible and supportive work environment than what I see at MIT."

This fall I joined the Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay and Transgendered (LBGT) Issues Group Steering Committee as the faculty representative. The mission of the group is to create a more inclusive and welcoming campus community for lesbian, bisexual, gay, transgender and questioning and friendly individuals with a primary focus on students. The goals of the group are to:

- ensure appropriate resources are readily available
- foster campus-wide dialogue
- enable opportunities to celebrate our community and
- encourage participation and collaboration.

Past accomplishments of the LBGT Issues Group, working with other student LBGT groups, include:

- You are Welcome Here campaign, with over 500 signs hung by faculty and staff to demonstrate their commitment to supporting MIT's LBGT community
- Events for Coming Out Week in October—this year these included the Rainbow Reception and "Being LBGT and at MIT: A Collection of Photographs" in Lobby 10
- Lavender Guide: a resource for LBGT students describing support groups, hotlines, community groups, health issues, e-mail lists, MIT policies etc.

Faculty participation in LBGT initiatives and student life has been weak. As part of an effort to bring LBGT faculty together and to increase LBGT faculty-student interactions, the LBGT Issues Group is organizing a series of social events (lunch or wine and cheese reception) for LBGT faculty. The first of these was held last spring, with 8 faculty attending, mainly from HASS. There are very few out LBGT faculty in the other 4 Schools: my own informal inquiries have so far identified only three, other than myself. I am the only out faculty member in the School of Engineering that I know of. Students are concerned about the lack of role models. The lack of out LBGT faculty

sends a message to students that it is not acceptable to be out on the faculty. This is especially discouraging for graduate students considering academic positions.

How can LBGT faculty be more visible?

- add a "You are Welcome Here" card on your door
- if you are partnered, add a picture of your partner around your office
- attend the Rainbow Reception or the Tute Gay Ice Cream Friday (TGIF) at 4pm on Feb 6, 2004 in the Rainbow Lounge (50-306)
- add your name to the LBGT Issues Group and/or one of the student groups to be aware of events on campus
- let the LBGT@MIT staff in the Rainbow Lounge know that you can be referenced as an "out" faculty member if a student is looking for a specific contact for something related to your field
- offer to attend one of the LBGT student meetings to talk about being LBGT and a faculty member at MIT
- add a personal webpage linked to your lab's webpage, with LBGT related links (e.g. web.mit.edu/lbgt/)

Straight faculty can be supportive by attending LBGT events and being vocal in support of LBGT issues.

Another related issue is the isolation of the LBGT faculty. The LBGT Issues group will be organizing another social event for LBGT faculty in the spring term. If you are interested in joining us for the social, or in supporting and participating in LBGT events, please contact Rick Gresh (who organizes the LBGT Issues Group) at rgresh@mit.edu. Rick also maintains the lbgt-faculty@mit.edu mailing list for discussion and communication among LBGT faculty at MIT. The membership of the list is confidential and only members can post to the list.

As an institution, MIT has been supportive of the LBGT community. The non-discrimination policy includes sexual orientation. MIT has provided domestic partner benefits since 1993. The Institute provides financial support for LBGT events and space for the Rainbow Lounge, a meeting place for the LBGT community. On a personal level, I have found my colleagues to be supportive. In coming out, one of my fears was that my students would find this difficult to accept; this has never been an issue with any of them.

In spite of this laudable institutional support, there are issues that concern me. Over the last few years, there have been a number of large research projects with major involvement of faculty in the School of Engineering (e.g. Singapore-MIT Alliance, DuPont-MIT Alliance, Cambridge MIT Institute, Institute for Soldier Nanotechnology, sponsored by the US Army). In engineering, these large group projects are becoming increasingly important in obtaining research funding. Last spring and summer I was asked to consider participating in the renewed Singapore-MIT Alliance and in the Technology and Development Program's educational collaboration with the Malaysia University of Science and Technology. Both countries have particularly oppressive policies towards gays. In Singapore, the maximum penalty for homosexual conduct is life in prison. LBGT email lists are illegal. The government does not allow the formation

of LGBT groups. In Malaysia, the maximum penalty for homosexual conduct is 20 years in prison and whipping.

I have decided that I cannot participate in these programs. I've discussed this issue with several colleagues, and some feel that this is my choice. However, other faculty are not put in the position of making a choice to participate in programs with a sponsor that imprisons people like them.

This issue raises a broader policy question: are there any limitations on institutions, organizations or countries that MIT will do business with? As a hypothetical instance, if a foreign company had a policy against hiring Blacks, would MIT enter into an agreement with that company? MIT does have a policy regarding use of outside facilities (12.5.4 in Policies and Procedures), which states:

Official Institute business is occasionally conducted in private clubs outside the Institute. Some private clubs have discriminatory membership policies or practices. Consistency with the Institute's long-established policy of nondiscrimination requires that no member of the MIT community be placed in the position of having to participate in an official MIT function at a place where he or she would not be welcome as a member. In keeping with this policy, it is inappropriate for official MIT business or social functions to be conducted at Institute expense in clubs having discriminatory membership policies.

Is it MIT's policy that it is not appropriate to have MIT functions at clubs that discriminate but that it is appropriate to have collaborations with countries that do?

MIT's policy on ROTC has been developed to alleviate issues associated with discrimination by the US military against homosexuals. It has been described as one of "tight embrace" (Professor Michael Piore "Gays and ROTC" MIT Faculty Newsletter September 2003). The philosophy is one of ensuring that any homophobia within ROTC does not spill over into MIT, but rather, that MIT's open and tolerant academic culture permeates ROTC. While ideally I would like to see the US military's policy on homosexuality change, I agree with Professor Piore that MIT's ROTC policy is "a practical accommodation to the Congressional threat to cut off all military funding to universities which severed connections to ROTC."

Would it be possible to approach MIT's interactions with countries or institutions with oppressive policies towards any group in a similar manner with the goal of engaging the country or institution to move towards a more tolerant society? One action that MIT could take would be to insist on a discussion of our own non-discrimination clause as part of the negotiations of future contracts and to require the country or institution to accept all students, staff and faculty at MIT as participants in the project. Clearly, this is not a simple problem and further thought would have to be given as to how MIT might pursue this.