

LGBTQ Office hosts first open house

Claire Esparros
Staff Photographer

The LGBTQ Office open house provided an informal and relaxed opportunity for the Elon University community to gather and socialize Nov. 11. There was food, music and a large crowd — more than Kirstin Ringelberg ever could have hoped for.

"It was so exciting to see, well, people in general, but more specifically so many different kinds of people here," she said. "It was a really exciting turnout, and to show that support for the students is really fantastic."

Ringelberg, the inaugural coordinator of the LGBTQ Office, was in high demand throughout the afternoon. She barely had a spare moment among the many questions and conversations. She said she was beyond thrilled with the outcome, but the success of this one event made her think about what she wants to see next.

Students in SPECTRUM, the university's queer-straight alliance, distributed calendars and pamphlets of information about Transgender Week, which is Nov. 14-18. There was also a handout explaining the different letters of LGBTQ and other letters typically associated with the term.

"Even though this is a social event, we are communicating a message and giving a face-to-face opportunity to talk about what we are doing," said Kevin Newman, a senior and member of SPECTRUM.

Students were given the opportunity to write on Post-it notes and stick them on a board asking "What do you want from us?" Some notes requested more social opportunities and community-based events, while others asked for tips on ways campus can be more "inclusive."

The campus has a large population of straight allies, Ringelberg said, and she wants to ensure they feel welcome at the office's events.

Talk of the developing plans for the new LGBTQ Office was a prominent topic among those in attendance. Although the opening of the office has been postponed from spring semester to next fall, Ringelberg still has a positive attitude and said she wants the center to bridge different communities on campus.

Having a physical office is something many members of the Elon community, especially

those present at the open house, have stressed as an important part of serving a broader purpose than what one group, like SPECTRUM, can offer.

"The importance of having an actual, physical office is that people always know where to find you," Ringelberg said. "A space is an important sign of our role on campus, that this is legitimate and significant."

Some students feel there can be no harm in having an office, but others express legitimate concerns.

When first hearing about the office, sophomore Taylor Aucott, who identifies as gay, initially voiced his support, calling it a "safe haven" for people who simply want to just talk — not just about LGBTQ matters, but about anything.

He said he feels the office could provide a comfortable and welcoming environment without people feeling the need to explain themselves. As a music theater major, he has been involved in a community where there is never a shortage of support, so he understands the importance of a physical space where people feel "free to breathe."

But Aucott also fears the office may inevitably intimidate some people and less

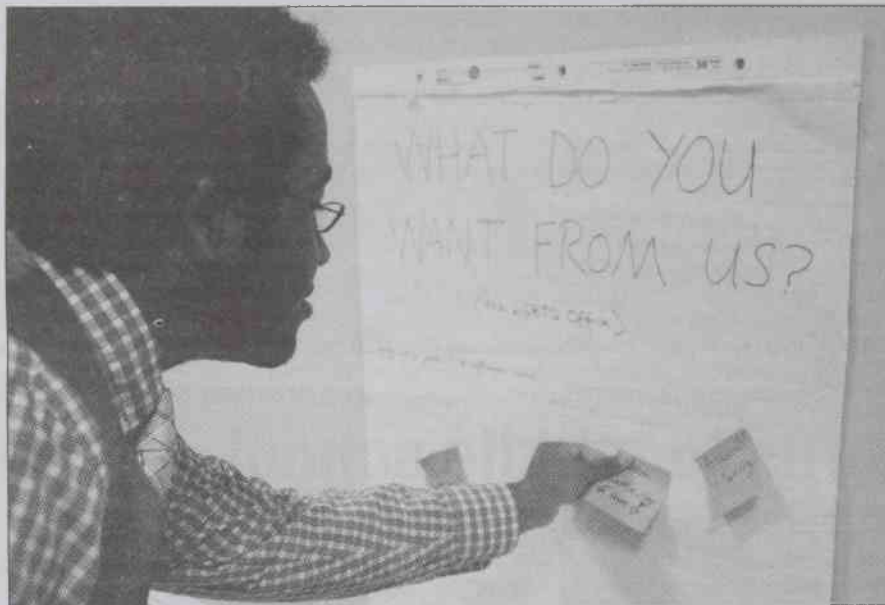
sensitive students may make assumptions that everyone who goes to the office "is gay and has problems." He worries that the place may become ridden with social stigmas, which would defeat the ultimate priority of a "safe haven."

Aucott, reflecting back on a specific SPECTRUM meeting he attended, said he doesn't want people to assume an LGBTQ office is a "gay AA," like Alcoholics Anonymous. There is a need for appropriate advertising to steer clear of such a message, he said.

But Newman said he thinks there are no concerns with having a physical office.



The Nov. 11 open house included an explanation of the letters of LGBTQIA. CLAIRE ESPARROS | Staff Photographer



Senior Raafe Purnsley posts suggestions for the LGBTQ office at the open house Nov. 11. CLAIRE ESPARROS | Staff Photographer

"Without a physical office, we don't feel like we're actually a group," he said. "We feel less inclined to communicate."

Sophomore Kevin Moore, a member of SPECTRUM, said he feels that more importance and urgency has historically been placed on other organizations, like sororities and fraternities,

so the office development has not been as prioritized by the university as it should have been. He said he sees the office as an opportunity for students to talk to someone, like Ringelberg, more privately if he or she doesn't necessarily want to be a part of an on-campus queer-straight alliance.

General studies proposal not entirely abolished

Grace Elkus
Senior Reporter

Although the proposed changes to the General Studies curriculum were voted down, discussion about the proposal and improvements to the current curriculum continue to take place.

The General Studies Review Committee has disbanded, leaving the General Studies Council and the Curriculum Committee as the two groups capable of vetting proposals for General Studies improvements, according to Jeffrey Coker, director of General Studies.

The council met Nov. 11 for the first time since the Oct. 28 vote to discuss the possibility of implementing some of the proposed changes.

Although the meeting did not conclude with a concrete idea as to where the proposal is headed, members identified parts of the proposal that are well-supported, which many faculty see as being potentially positive improvements to the General

Studies program.

"There are many people on campus that feel like there were some very good things in the proposal that need to come back," Coker said. "As far as I'm concerned, the most important thing going forward is that we have the best General Studies program that we can possibly have."

While it may be too early to know exactly what these two committees will decide, it is likely that at least one part of the proposal will get passed, Coker said. If the council or the committee puts forward any one of the seven parts of the proposal in its entirety, it will most likely be considered for a full faculty vote because of its importance and widespread interest. Despite

the possibility of controversy between faculty members, the committees aren't going to try and hide anything, Coker said.

"I think everybody on both the committees is very concerned about the common good and how other people feel across campus," he said. "We don't want a program that so angers certain groups. We want a really strong program where

"I think everybody on both the committees is very concerned about the common good and how people feel across campus."

-Jeffrey Coker
DIRECTOR OF GENERAL STUDIES

everybody really supports the common good of the university and of the students."

Larger-scale changes will most likely not be implemented until late spring, according to Coker. But smaller changes to individual courses and specific departments that have resulted from these discussions are

already in place.

"There was an enormous number of small things that have come from this," Coker said. "They're not things that show up on a check sheet. But they are really positive improvements. There are lots of ways to improve the General Studies program that don't involve changes to the curriculum itself."

Coker said because all students participate in the General Studies program, it is important to him that students feel like they have a voice in determining the future of the program. The purpose of the committees will always be to look out for the academic interest of the student body, Coker said.

"There's been some questions about whether the current program can address the mission and goals that were passed," he said. "I think that's an important question, but the better question is, what program would best serve students, and prepare them for fulfilling lives? Whatever that best is, that's what we're shooting for."

Diversity discussions ongoing

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as a population and an institution to embrace diversity into our lives rather than shy away due to personal discomforts and misunderstandings."

On Nov. 11, a meeting was held between representatives from Residence Life, Kirstin Ringelberg, director of the newly created LGBTQ Office and students from SPECTRUM.

According to Ringelberg, the meeting was positive and served as clarification on how the situation looked from different perspectives. Another meeting is scheduled for this week to discuss more collaborations between Residence Life and the LGBTQ community at Elon.

"I don't think Ms. Turner intentionally expressed a specifically homophobic attitude toward the student in question," Ringelberg said. "And I got the sense she would be more aware in the future of how such an attitude might be inferred from what did happen."

The situation served as a reminder that there are differing opinions regarding the appropriateness of an image, said Ringelberg, professor of art history.

"These posters are widely available, and we can have lots of great conversations about what they signify visually and how they signify meaning differently in different viewing contexts," she said. "Put these same posters up in a male student's room, and that context shifts our interpretation of the image. Put them in a professor's office — shift again."

But the discussions will not end there, according to Troy Martin, assistant director of academic advising, who was involved in the first meeting. An ongoing dialogue will continue between Residence Life and the LGBTQ community at the university to determine specific guidelines for making such decisions in the future.

According to Ferguson, setting a precedent for the future is an important part of the process.

"The situation calls for Residence Life to determine what they accept and do not accept as far as student expression when their rooms will be shown publicly for tours," she said. "I hope how this situation was handled is not how it is handled in the future."

Senior Ali Garced, who helped bring the situation to the attention of others at Elon, said the university should put more emphasis on combining what is learned both inside and outside of the classroom and how they complement one another.

"Not only will students be able to express themselves in front of faculty, but faculty will be able to express themselves in front of students," Garced said. "Students are not the only ones learning on college campuses. Students and faculty at Elon should be learning from each other to make themselves better."

For Ferguson, the true meaning of diversity extends beyond just a question of race.

"People need to have a better understanding of the real world diversity," she said. "I believe it is the university's job to not only prepare its students for work experience but also for personal experience through personal growth."