



COLLEGE OF ARTS & SCIENCES WOMEN'S & GENDER STUDIES

TO: Interim Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Keith Moreland
FROM: Women's and Gender Studies Program Faculty
RE: Open Letter Regarding Faculty Concerns About Recent Changes in CGS and Harm to Our Student-Centered Values and Mission at UM-Flint
DATE: January 17, 2020

We write to you in response to the termination of Heather Johnson, Director of the Center for Gender and Sexuality (CGS). In this letter, we describe our outrage regarding this termination and explain the ways it undermines the integrity of our work and academic mission. To better explain the latter, we also provide some history and current context regarding the deep connections between the Women's and Gender Studies (WGS) Program and the Center. We conclude this letter with requests for follow-up. Finally, at the end of our letter you will find addendums for your information.

1. Faculty response to termination

We write to you as faculty who are outraged by the termination of CGS Director Heather Johnson. We are deeply concerned that a valued and admired colleague, Director Johnson, is harmed by this action. We are particularly concerned by what appears to be the complete lack of protection for individuals to do the job they are tasked with. In this case, it seems Director Johnson has been targeted for fulfilling a key responsibility of her position, which is to identify areas of institutional weakness or need, assure the use of expertise in best practices, and to advocate for change in order to promote the retention and success of LGBTQIA identified people, women, and all individuals on campus. We are also concerned by the apparent utter lack of a meaningful framework for recourse in place for said individuals to help build or simply seek a safe and supportive work environment.

Director Johnson's forced departure means that a significant amalgam of institutional expertise, commitment, and labor (completed or underway), has quite suddenly been erased, dramatically marginalized, or put on indefinite hold. This is the second time in less than five years that our institution has failed to retain a highly qualified and admired Director for this Center or its predecessor (the Women's Educational Center or WEC). We write to you as faculty whose scholarly expertise and contributions (the latter reflecting a complex array of teaching, research, and service activities) have been central to the formation and transformation of the Center, and its staffing, board membership, programming, vibrancy, and impact on our campus. Our work entailed and entails multiple iterations and constellations of faculty collaborators who consistently identify areas of need, and intentionally and collaboratively craft solutions and design infrastructures that construct bridges across units; create synergies and efficiencies in order to provide otherwise unaffordable services, project opportunities, and programming (including academic programming, see below); and build community, enhance morale, and improve our campus climate. The termination of Director Johnson not only harms her directly, it also devalues and dismantles the work of faculty.

As faculty, we are quite literally on the frontlines of work with our students, often the most consistent (over time) presence on campus, and are deeply committed to not only student retention and success, but also to student overall well-being. The sudden disappearance of Director Johnson from our campus

occurred in the last full week of the fall 2019 semester, a time that is often quite challenging and anxiety producing in the lives of students, and at a time when, coincidentally, the long-serving CGS Program Coordinator, Kristen Campbell, was preparing to leave her position. Given the lack of prior communication with faculty and the HR directives that indicated she was either “out of office” or “on leave,” without further explanation, we were unable to help our students understand what was happening or why (and we continue to be placed in this untenable position). That we were without a director with expertise in trauma centered approaches and the complex lives of LGBTQIA individuals at the time of the tragic and violent death of one our students, Kevin Bacon, further fuels our concern about unmet student need and rash action on the part of campus leaders. Actions like this sudden termination are the antithesis of a student-centered approach, and therefore, undermine our university mission. The lack of transparency and communication regarding this and related events that are clearly described in addendums undermines the values, ethos, and very mission (thus promise) the collective work our campus community is meant to achieve. Thus, taking all of these strands together, our institution is also harmed by this action.

2. Historical Connections between WGS and the WEC *cum* CGS and Current Context:

History

The Women’s and Gender Studies faculty were those who – through their interactions with students, conversations with each other about the state or conditions of our university, and analyses rooted in disciplinary expertise and knowledge of university-based best practices – identified the need for what became the Women’s Educational Center (WEC) and developed a proposal that led to its creation. The WEC was founded by Chancellor Mestas in 2000 based on this thorough proposal and the advocacy of Women's and Gender Studies Faculty on our campus. The WEC was envisioned as a campus wide resource, one focusing on students, while also serving faculty, staff, and community. From its inception, the WEC was meant to be something of a hybrid; it was designed to be a place of somewhat typical student affairs oriented service provision and programming, while also a space for ongoing intellectual work of different kinds. It was a space in which students, staff, and faculty could come together to analyze their experiences and the institutional or social conditions giving rise to them, in safe place that fostered research and other forms of collaboration and that would also uplift projects for social change.

From its inception, and in order to add human resources in the form of time, labor, and expertise to a department incredibly short of staff, and to support the work of the Director who was/is always in a structurally challenging situation (as noted above, one of simultaneously supporting and critiquing our institution), the WEC and later the CGS was/is supported by an Advisory Board. Its size and composition has varied, but the Board always included/s a strong faculty presence and regardless of changing size and composition, always included/s WGS faculty. Board chairs were/are faculty members, and all board chairs have been faculty who also teach WGS courses, with only one exception.

This strong faculty role was instituted and maintained to the present so that faculty could use their institutional location (and relative privilege) in order to:

- advance the work of the Director in and through faculty spaces (e.g., governance, curriculum), projects, and initiatives
- bring faculty academic expertise and deep knowledge of students, rooted in our work in the classroom and beyond, to the Director in order to help set annual goals for Center operations and provide formative feedback to the Director

- said feedback entails contributing a board-based evaluation letter to be included in the Director's annual evaluation process; and while the Center was housed in Academic Affairs, also included an annual meeting with the Provost to discuss the Center and progress of the Director

In addition to WGS and other faculty support for and participation in the WEC *cum* CGS, WGS faculty have been appointed to every Director Search Committee; and all successful searches have been chaired by WGS faculty. For most of its history, the WEC was "housed" within Academic Affairs, which helped signal the ways the work of the WEC included supporting faculty in their teaching, scholarship, and service. It also framed the significant guiding approach to serving students, and thus the expected ethos of the director, that would include supporting extensions of student academic work or their intellectual lives in Center space and programming, and that would support student academic and intellectual growth. Finally and perhaps most importantly from the point of view of the WGS program, our collaboration with, support of, and commitment to the WEC *cum* CGS is written into our Academic Program Guidelines. Thus, our work in support of the Center and as Center collaborators forms part of our core identity and practice as an academic unit.

Simultaneously, the Center was expected to directly collaborate with various departments within Student Affairs, and its "home" in Academic Affairs did present some challenges. When an outgoing Director, who had contracted a new position within Student Affairs, proposed to the Board that the Center move to Student Affairs, we – with great reservation – agreed with the understanding that the Advisory Board would remain in place and continue to serve as resource, contribute to evaluation and planning, and maintain active participation by WGS faculty and faculty across the university. The transition to Student Affairs did witness areas of growth and new-found visibility for the WEC and later CGS. Nevertheless, as indicated above, we have not retained either of the directors serving these Centers since the move, nor has faculty work on the Advisory Board or search committees met with the kind of dialogue and consultation that was the norm when the Center was in Academic Affairs.

Current Context

While there are many important examples of the ways faculty scholarship (teaching and research) as well as service intersect with the leadership of past directors, focusing on the last 18 months with Heather Johnson as Director and the building of the new Center, the CGS, it is worth noting the following:

- WGS faculty worked with Chancellor Borrego, Vice Chancellor Avery, Provost Knerr, and with the last WEC Advisory Board to share much of the history just articulated, advocate for another new director in the wake of the departure of Director Rushika Patel, and to develop a draft of new Director position that would include transforming the WEC into the CGS.
- Associate Professors Laube and Alvey as well as then Associate Professor Moyo were named to both search committees needed for this hire, and Alvey chaired the second, successful search.
- Alvey, as search advisory committee chair and in her capacity as Director of WGS (that is to say, fulfilling part of her WGS Director service) worked for a solid year with Heather Johnson, meeting frequently in person, via email, and through phone conversations, to help with the process of building the new Center for Gender and Sexuality, recruit students to peer education and certificate programs, and offer introductions to and relationship-building support with faculty. She assisted in the process of recruiting five faculty participants for a panel at the first (and what was hoped to become annual) CGS conference on campus (a panel that was

extraordinary and showcased innovative research methodologies used by the panelists), as well as in securing six faculty to serve on CGS scholarship committees.

- Associate Professor Britt became one of the Co-Chairs of the new CGS Board along with Professor Moyo, who has recently left our institution

This important and meaningful work is just a minute part of the picture of our deep collaborations with Director Johnson. Even more impactful are the ways that Director Johnson supported the instruction of a number of faculty on campus by giving guest lectures; indeed she delivered many full class lectures last year (more than 25), and she and her peer educators were in high demand this year as well. The WGS Program, noting her expertise and wishing to synergistically build on our collaborations in support of students, designed a new course, which was circulated and approved in Fall 2019 (WGS 115 Introduction to Sexualities). We hoped to offer this course now, in winter 2020, and following all normal protocols, conducted a search. Heather Johnson was hands down the most outstanding candidate and we attempted to secure her, but we were met with the circumstances of December, which made it impossible for us to schedule her and led to a course cancellation. Our hope was that this teaching opportunity would further fortify the relationships between WGS and the Center, offer students a course that they have been asking WGS faculty to teach for years, and utilize the expertise of someone already embedded on our campus.

Further, many students have been caught up in Director Johnson's absence. Faculty have not been allowed to be as honest as we would like, harming the trust we have built with students. We are worried that, given only an "out of office" message, follow up with any advocacy she was doing for students with the Office of Financial Aid, advising, or other entities on campus is falling through the cracks and leaving students' issues unresolved. We are once again reluctant to send our students to the Center or advise other faculty to do so.

3. Conclusion and Follow-up

In conclusion, the events of recent weeks have alarmed and angered us, rekindling a climate of distrust and anxiety we had hoped was behind us. The situation has required that we spend time in numerous discussions and meetings, which is time away from other tasks and our collective productivity. Such circumstances make it difficult for us to trust the university, or imagine giving our time in service to projects that may be dismantled without consultation or regard for the value of the time, labor, and expertise they entailed. This is emotionally draining.

In these conditions, it becomes impossible for us to do our best work. We literally do not have time to do it. Again, we find ourselves emotionally exhausted, which seriously affects students (in our classes, advising, co-curricular work, and general support). Circumstances like these also keep faculty from progressing professionally, as our expenditures of time, intellectual, and emotional labor are swept aside and invalidated. We must literally make a choice between our own professional advancement and the well-being of our colleagues and students and the future of this institution. Worse, circumstances like this make us ask: Why should we try to recruit colleagues and students if we fear that they will be harmed or that the institution is not committed to our collective well-being and success? What will change? Why would we encourage people to come here and be committed if this is the context they will encounter?

Our best work rests on relationships built overtime, and requires confidence that we can expect our institution to consistently recognize and support our efforts. There are many shining examples of this including those found in our collaborations with Heather Johnson. When these are taken away from us, we are lesser. For these reasons we respectfully ask that you :

1. Please explain why Heather Johnson is terminated and the basis of this action. Additionally, how is this being communicated so that needed follow-up on outstanding student and other work issues not be delayed.
2. Bring this letter and the wider faculty concerns it represents to the Cabinet and Council of Deans
3. Schedule a meeting to follow-up on these concerns
4. Begin a process of identifying ways to reconfigure the reporting and organizational structure of the CGS, including consideration of a more significant role of academic affairs in the operations of the Center

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Alvey, Director, Women's and Gender Studies
Daniel Birchok
Erica Britt
Sasha Drummond-Lewis
Patricia Emenyonu
Emily Feuerherm
Heather Laube
Vickie Larsen
Adam Lutzker
Charles Thomas
Shelley Spivack
Christine Waters
Benedicte Veillet

cc: Shelby Newport, Associate Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Studies
Stephen Turner, Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Programs

Addenda are attached to the email containing this letter, and include:

Addendum 1 Open Letter to the Chancellor in Response to DEI Initiative (Letter to Chancellor from the Women's Commission)
Addendum 2 CGS FSAB Letter (Letter to VC Giordano from the CGS Faculty and Staff Advisory Board)
Addendum 3 Dir WEC LGBT UM Flint (Job Description for CGS Director)
Addendum 4 Letter of Nomination of Heather Johnson for the Distinguished Diversity Leaders Award