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RWU’s first-ever coordinator for LGBTQ programs discusses her role and vision for LGBTQ life on campus

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BRISTOL, R.I. – Coming to work at Roger Williams University felt like a homecoming for Rhode Island native Gabriella Porcaro, who in August started as the university’s first-ever coordinator for LGBTQ programs. Now that she is back, she is focused on making RWU feel like a welcoming home to LGBTQIAP+ students.

Since 2009, Porcaro has lived mostly out of state: she graduated from George Mason University with a bachelor’s degree in peace studies and conflict resolution; she earned a master’s degree in higher education and student affairs from Virginia Tech. Then, Porcaro stayed out of state for work, most recently as the student affairs case manager at the University of North Carolina Asheville.

Through all of this, Porcaro held on to a desire to return to home, and put all the skills and knowledge she’d gained during her years away in a role that could make a difference to people - especially members of the LGBTQIAP+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and plus) community.
pansexual, or questioning) community.

Now back in Rhode Island, as RWU’s coordinator for LGBTQ programs, Porcaro has the opportunity to do just that by helping the university continue its work in creating an inclusive and proactive campus environment for its LGBTQIAP+ community.

Reflecting on her role and how RWU is serving its LGBTQIAP+ community, Porcaro recently sat down for a Q&A:

**If there’s one message you want the campus community to take from the creation of your role what is it?**

With the creation of my role - and roles like the chief diversity officer – I hope folks see that our university is truly committed towards creating a more diverse and inclusive campus for all students, faculty and staff. I hope folks recognize that there’s an energy here, and that we are not going to be complacent - that we are going to do better. And that we are committed to listening to folks who have been impacted by issues of race, gender or sexuality and finding ways to educate ourselves so that we are on the bleeding edge of equity work on college campuses.

**What are the focus areas of your role?**

I see the three biggest focal points of my work as providing direct support to our students; being a trainer for faculty and staff in order to help educate them on the concerns of the queer and transgender community on campus; and as an internal consultant who looks at policies and procedures around campus to make sure they are inclusive and not harmful to students.

**Can you tell me a bit about how you provide direct student support?**

With the direct student support piece, I support students that identify as queer or transgender. I meet one-on-one with them, get to know and connect with them as a person, and also to just be an ear for them. I also work with students who are actively involved in programs at the [Intercultural Center](https://www.rwu.edu/interculturalcenter) - where I’m based - and then also the larger RWU community of student leaders on campus. I’m actively engaged and help mentor a few student clubs and organizations on campus that are geared toward issues of sexuality or gender. I also help guide other student groups to help them think more critically on how to educate the campus and other students about identity concerns students from the queer and transgender community may face. Lastly, part of my role is being present for student events and activities that matter to them, and where I can interact with them and see their day-to-day life.

**Tell me about the faculty and staff trainer aspect of your role.**

I’ll give you an example of what we have already been able to do. We relaunched the [Safe Zone Program](https://www.rwu.edu/news/news-archive/modeling-possibilities-qa-rwus-coordinator-lgbtq-programs-gabriella-porcaro) on campus, which is a three-tier training for faculty and staff that seeks to explore what gender and sexuality are. The first training helps faculty and staff understand language. There’s so many words associated with the queer communities that a lot of times folks are scared to ask questions or don’t know what a word means, so we address that head on and then that allows us to get into more practical pieces in the next trainings – where we get into what’s happening on
campus or what laws are coming down the pipeline that are directly impacting students. For professors, this might mean starting to always think about what they can do to show students they are always safe in their presence, even when they don’t know if they even have folks that are queer or transgender in their class. That’s the point of what I hope the Safe Zone trainings allow.

It’s very easy to be reactive. To have a student come to you and say, ‘I’m feeling hurt and not feeling supported.’ It’s a lot harder to look at a class of students and say, ‘I want to make sure I’m keeping all of these students safe from the start.’ My hope is to make everyone more proactive and mindful and committed to keep learning. Because if we all commit to keep learning, we are going to do better as a community.

What about your work as an internal consultant?

I think my role can be used by faculty and staff to analyze the policies and procedures that we already have and how are they coming off to the queer and transgender community. Folks have already been inviting me in to see some of their forms or documents and even materials in their lobbies or offices to seek input on what kind of messages of support and equity they send to queer and transgender folk.

How should LGBTQ students see your role and engage with you?

I want students to see me as an advocate for them on campus. I want them to know that if they come to me and talk to me about harm they experienced or ways that they are not being served, I’m going to advocate for change. The change might not be immediate or happen as quick as we all hope, but I want them to trust that I will be their voice.

I also want them to see me as a possibility model [a term made popular by transgender advocate Laverne Cox]. I want them to see that success is possible. I think a lot of times, especially queer and transgender folks, we’re told that our happiness - our success - isn’t possible in many ways. Especially when you look at a lot of the movies that come out or read a lot of the stories about what it means to be a queer or transgender person. A lot of them are really tragic. I want them to see that it’s not always going to be pretty and there’s going to be a lot of challenge, but happiness and success are possible. I hope that their interaction with me will help them see that.

How they should engage with me is however they see fit. As I said, I’m trying to find ways to be present with the larger student body as often as possible. Already students are recognizing that when my door is open they can just pop in and talk. I want that to continue.

Lastly, are there any new initiatives or projects in the pipeline for the LGBTQIAP+ community?

The Intercultural Center is opening a new space on campus called the Gender and Sexuality Center in Maple Hall. The space is going to be dedicated to promoting gender equity work and work that deconstructs heteronormativity on and off campus. I’m going to host a lot of my Safe Zone trainings there, and student organizations dedicated to advancing gender equity will host meetings there.
We hope to send the message that the space is a place where you come and commit to social justice work, particularly social justice work that is going to impact gender equity concerns and also sexuality and romantic orientation concerns.

*Students, faculty or staff interested in connecting with Gabriella Porcaro, coordinator of LGBTQ programs, can contact her at 401-254-5391 or gporcaro@rwu.edu.*