Letter from the co-chairs

We are the President’s Commission on Gender Identity & Expression and Sexual Orientation (GIESO) and are celebrating our 11th year. GIESO advocates for and advises on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, and intersex issues (LGBTQI+) that move Slippery Rock University toward a more inclusive and supportive campus climate that is free of discrimination, intolerance, and bigotry. We work toward an understanding and appreciation of differences in our diverse faculty, staff, and students. As you can see, we have had a busy 2017-2018 year.

Along with our month-long celebration in October, we also work year-round to fulfill our mission. For example, as you will read in this issue, to kick off our 11th year, we displayed banners all over campus in honor of LGBTQI+ History Month, along with a LGBTQI+ History Timeline displayed in the Smith Student Center created by some of our commission members. We also co-sponsored the “Celebration of Family Giving” where we celebrated the LGBTQI++ Scholarship reaching endowment. This was a very exciting evening as the scholarship will be able to stand on its own until the end of time, allowing us to service our students for many years to come.

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In addition, as in years past, we worked with the Pride Center to facilitate the experiential activity “Coming out Stars” where first semester students put themselves in the shoes of a member of the LGBT community to better understand the process of coming out. Also highlighted in this issue, is our time spent co-sponsoring and assisting with educational and community building programming.

We have also been busy working on helping our commission be the best it can be. GIESO has spent time throughout the semester forming subcommittees to re-evaluate the commission, its mission, and bylaws. This resulted in a commission name change to The President’s Commission on Gender Identity & Expression and Sexual Orientation to follow suit with the recently revised non-discrimination policy. GIESO also spent time, with the help of Public Relations, creating a new logo to help encompass our vibrant and powerful commission (see page 9).

Along with working to improve our own organization, we have also worked to improve the campus climate. To this end, we successfully advocated (with others) for a more inclusive non-discrimination policy for Slippery Rock University (i.e., to include gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation). We are members of the Transgender Service Task Force where we recently finalized a chosen name policy. We continue our efforts to research best practices for all-gender bathrooms and work toward the goal of having an all-gender bathroom in all buildings on campus. We also worked with the Gender Studies program to successfully advocate for information about gender inclusive language to be available for faculty to include on their syllabus. Currently, we are working to extend this effort to campus offices by providing information and signs to all campus offices informing those who enter their offices that their intent is to be inclusive and to express their willingness to use gender inclusive language.

The main event for the Spring semester was our “Night Out.” At our Night Out Celebration, we invited back two well-known alumni, Kris (Hawkins) Oliveira and Mel Seymour, who gave a powerful keynote on their time at “The Rock.” We also awarded two Breaking the Silence awards to Dr. Colleen Cooke and Graduate Student Maevon Gumble along with one Student Leadership Award to Undergraduate Erin O’Connor. Finally, our celebration ended with our Lavender Graduation where we celebrated 13 student graduates with rainbow stoles and tassels.

Many of the events and programming outlined in this letter are highlighted throughout this newsletter. Although SRU’s lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities are thriving, we know there is much work to be done. As you can see in this issue, GIESO is comprised of a dedicated group of individuals who work hard to celebrate LGBTQI+ History Month in October, but also to educate and advocate the entire year in order to improve the campus climate for the LGBTQI+ community. By reading this issue, we hope you will see our commitment to our mission. We are looking forward to continuing our efforts into the next year!

Sincerely,

Emily Keener and Amanda Nichols
Night Out Celebration

The main event for the Spring semester was our “Night Out” celebration, which is held every year in April to bring together individuals on campus to celebrate the President’s Commission on Gender Identity & Expression and Sexual Orientation accomplishments and graduating students. This year we had over 50 attendees, including 11 graduates, join us for the evening, which was our biggest turn out to date! Kevin McCarthy, our loyal MC, started the night off with a wonderful welcome which, as always, resulted in lots of laughs from the crowd. This greeting was followed by a delicious dinner provided by AVI, which was also a hit!

Every year, the commission invites a speaker to give a keynote at the event. This year, we invited back two well-known alumni, Kris (Hawkins) Oliveira and Mel Seymour, who gave a powerful keynote on their time at “The Rock.” During their keynote, they encouraged our graduates to “show up,” that it is “time to grow up,” that “balance is hard,” and the “future isn’t promised.” Needless to say, all eyes were on them the entire time, and everyone took something away from their meaningful keynote.

At the end of the evening, we were joined by Patrick Beswick and Catherine Massey who awarded the LGBTQI++ Scholarship to the first ever ally awardee, Christa Oxley. We then awarded two Breaking the Silence awards to Dr. Colleen Cooke for her persistence in ensuring a positive change in the non-discrimination policy to include gender, sex, sexual orientation, gender expression and sexual orientation as well as Graduate Student Maevon Gumble for their role in introducing gender inclusive language on campus. We then awarded Erin O’Connor our Student Leadership Award for her role as an active leader and ally for the LGBTQI++ community. Finally, our celebration ended with our Lavender Graduation where we celebrated 13 student graduates, 11 who were able attend, with rainbow stoles and tassels.
Promoting Inclusive Language

SRU’s commitment to diversity was strengthened last March when the campus passed a policy entitled Chosen First Name Policy, which addresses rights of transgender, non-binary, and other individuals on campus in regard to their chosen name. This policy also aligns with the revision of our notice of non-discrimination to include sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression. Building on these successes, GIESO worked with other groups (i.e., Gender Studies, Pride Center, and Student Success), to create statements and sample inclusive language for faculty, staff, and student to use. Below we summarize these statements, which have been distributed to faculty. We are working to get a similar message out to offices across campus.

*While language regarding gender identity and expression continues to evolve, it’s important that we strive to engage in inclusive practices for our transgender and/or nonbinary students. We cannot assume, based on a person’s appearance or gender expression, what pronouns they use or how they identify. As such, it’s important for us to remember that a student’s chosen name may be different from their legal name and/or the name that appears on their documents and other materials (e.g., payroll or class roster). To create an inclusive and respectful environment, students, faculty, and staff are encouraged to communicate and use the pronouns and names people use to refer to themselves.*

*Our support of diversity is reflected by the language we use. Using the incorrect pronoun for a trans student risks outing them in a still sometimes hostile climate; using the wrong pronoun for a gender-nonbinary student who uses they/them pronouns negates their identity. For these reasons, and to uphold the dignity of all campus community members, we hope you will communicate language about correct pronouns, names and inclusion.*

*(continued on page 5)*
We have the opportunity to lead by example, and integrating, reviewing and explaining language that fosters respect and inclusion provides a measurable way to express that.

We provide below an example of language you might use and includes at the bottom campus resources you might contact if you have questions or want further information. We appreciate your support.

Sample syllabus language:

Correct Pronouns, Names, and Inclusion: I hope to create a space where students have the opportunity to bring all aspects of their selves into the classroom in order to fully engage in this course. I support people of all gender expressions and gender identities and encourage students to use the name and set of pronouns which best reflect who they are. In this spirit, I welcome and expect all students to also use the correct name and pronouns of their classmates. I will do my best to respect and use the language you use to refer to yourself and will encourage other members of our classroom community to do the same. Please inform me if my documentation reflects a name or set of pronouns different from what you use, and if you have any questions or concerns, please contact me after class, by email, or during office hours.

Words are powerful, and the language we use has the power to affirm individuals, respect diverse communities, and uphold SRU’s non-discrimination policy. If you have questions or need additional information, please feel free to contact any one of the following for LGBTQ resources:

• Jodi Solito, Director, Women’s Center and Pride Center
• David Wilmes, Associate Provost for Student Success
• Cindy LaCom, Director, Gender Studies Program
• Emily Keener, Co-Chair, President’s Commission on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation
• Amanda Nichols, Co-Chair, President’s Commission on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation

The road to changing the SRU non-discrimination policy to include sexual orientation, gender identity and expression was long, with many people and groups advocating for the change since 2007. It started in 2007 when Colleen Cooke was chair of the APSCUF Social Justice Committee. She fought hard, along with the Diversity and Equal Opportunity Office and the Provost (Dr. Williams) to have these identities included in the policy. Although it did not happen, for various legal reasons, a Respect Statement was drafted, adopted, and displayed along with SRU’s non-inclusive policy. After seeing other PASSHE institutions including sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression in their non-discrimination policies, GIESO and Gender Studies advocated for revisiting the issue on the Transgender Services Taskforce. They were always told that the language could not be revised and that “There’s a stock notice of non-discrimination language that’s required by the department of education that’s required under federal law.” Finally, In Fall 2017, Dr. Cooke who, once again embarked on a mission to make the policy inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity and expression, was successful and SRU revised their Notice of Non-Discrimination. She told the Rocket “It’s been a long time coming.” “I interacted with the administration and there was no issue. I’m really pleased. It wasn’t nearly the battle I thought it might be and our president and his cabinet were on board from the get go so that was great.” Colleen Cooke was awarded one of GIESO’s 2017-2018 Breaking the Silence Awards for her work on this issue.

For more information: https://www.theonlinerocket.com/?p=25046
Celebration of Family Giving

This year marked a significant milestone for all of our current and future queer students. In October 2017, the LGBTQI Scholarship Fund topped over the $25,000 mark, which means it earned permanent status as an endowed scholarship. Thanks to the continued generosity of faculty, staff members, alumni, and (yes!) even students donating since 2007, we now have a guaranteed resource which will help support LGBTQI students facing financial need until the end of time.

Once endowed, the scholarship fund becomes a nest egg managed by the Slippery Rock University Foundation whose objective is to invest the fund’s money in a way that it grows at least as fast as inflation. This means that the scholarship should help our students buy the same amount of books, art supplies, notebooks, and more from the SGA Bookstore today as it will 50 years from now.

Reaching this milestone called for a party. So during RockOUT’s Pride Week in October, friends, family, and community members came out (pun intended) to the Smith Student Center for the Celebration of Family Giving event, and it was quite the gay-la, so to speak.

Students from the Department of Dance premiered a new piece – Mobius – choreographed by Attack Theatre’s Peter Kope and Michele De La Reza and set to music by cellist Zoe Keating. It was a stunning and electric performance.

The Slippery Rock University Guitar Club serenaded us while we mingled, laughed, and enjoyed a catered meal. And the money we made from event ticket sales, a cash wine bar, and a basket raffle meant we were able to put an additional $500 into the LGBTQI Scholarship Fund by the end of the evening.

Finally, our keynote speaker – Shauna Lucadamo, from the Allegheny County Department of Human Services – talked about her work with LGBTQI youth in Pittsburgh, many of whom, after coming out, face ostracism from their family, financial insecurity, and even homelessness. Shauna helped us find renewed purpose to help our LGBTQI students overcome hurdles that most other students will never have to face. While a sober reminder that our work is not done, Shauna rejoiced with us at the strides being made at Slippery Rock University.

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Timeline Honors LGBTQ+ History

In October, GIESO displayed two timelines for LGBT History Month in the Smith Student Center. The first, initially developed and presented in 2016, celebrates activism and accomplishments since World War II. New this year was a redesign of the presentation into three colorful and reader-friendly panels. Among the issues student could read about was the creation of the Mattachine Society and Daughters of Bilitis, transgender World War II veteran Christine Jorgensen, the Stonewall Inn Riot, the formation of the Log Cabin Republicans, and the landmark 2015 U.S. Supreme Court case, Obergefell v. Hodges.

Also new this year was the creation of a new panel and timeline depicting LGBT developments at SRU. Did you know that students at Slippery Rock began hosting panels on homosexuality only months before the famed Stonewall Inn Riot in 1969? Or that The Rocket formally opposed homophobia in 1988 and endorsed gay marriage in 2004? The timeline closes with SRU’s decision to designate some restrooms across campus as all-gender. GIESO plans to continue to develop this project and display it again in October 2018.

Alice Walker! “She is an activist, poet, and writer who worked to bring about racial equality, human rights, international peace, and fair treatment of the trans community.”

“Bruce Nugent was a writer and painter of the Harlem Renaissance. His short story “Smoke, Lilies, and Jade” has been regarded by many as the first publication by an African American that openly discussed homosexuality.”

“Janet Mock is an American writer, TV host, and transgender rights activist. She combines her roles as author and advocate to inspire dialogue and reach out to the LGBTQ community.”

“LGBTQ Icon James Baldwin’s work eloquently provides subversive portraits of being marginalized in America. A dedicated advocate, James spoke out frequently on civil rights and participated actively in efforts to foster equality.”

“LGBTQ Icon Bayard Rustin was the key strategist in many of King’s actions. Even with such a high-profile position within the Civil Rights movement, Rustin was openly gay, and evidence shows that he was embraced by King.”

“Though Audre Lorde passed away from cancer in the 1990s, her unabashedly personal and honest insights remain in full force. The theorist, advocate, poet, and author broke ground with her emphasis on the intersections of race, gender, class, & being LGBT.”

“A "Stonewall veteran, Miss Major continues activism on behalf of the LGBT community. Recently she was executive director of the Transgender Gender Variant Intersex Justice Project supporting trans women affected by incarceration and police violence.”
All in all, the Celebration of Family Giving was an opportunity to mark a major financial aid milestone, but it was also a starting point for the next phase of our efforts to support our LGBTQI students.

Now that the scholarship fund is endowed, we are working with the SRU Foundation to ramp up fundraising efforts, including identifying western Pennsylvania business who would want to partner with us to support our students’ education. We invite you to stay tuned and engaged with us on this journey to give help to deserving students.

The outlook for this scholarship is so bright, and we are giddy with excitement at all of the possibilities. We know that our future endeavors are only able to succeed because they will be built on an endowed, solid foundation.

A Rock Solid foundation, at that.

“Lessons Learned at SRU”

The keynote presentation at the Night Out celebration was given by Kris (Hawkins) Oliveira and Mel Seymour. They discussed the lessons they had learned in their time at SRU:

Lesson 1: When I first arrived at SRU, the first and most important stone that I picked up was a lesson: Show up.

Lesson 2: Uplift each other and allow yourself to be uplifted

Lesson 3: Time to grow up

Lesson 4: Balance is hard

Lesson 5: The future isn’t promised

In recognition of Transgender Awareness Month this past November, RockOUT, GIESO, and the Pride Center joined together to host Skylar Kergil. Skylar is a transgender activist, author, artist, and singer-songwriter who documented his transition on YouTube.

During his SRU visit, Skylar spoke about his life growing up in Massachusetts, struggling with his gender identity and sexual orientation. Songwriting and poetry became vehicles by which he explored his feelings and experiences.

In addition to speaking about his experience as a trans man, Skylar treated the audience to a performance of one of his most recent songs.

Skylar’s recent book, Before I Had the Words: On Being a Transgender Young Adult, was available for sale at the event, and Skylar was all too happy to sign the copies for folks.
New Name, New Logo!

As you may know, GIESO spent a lot of the 2017-2018 academic year working on updating the commission’s by-laws and supporting revisions to the non-discrimination policy. This caused the commission to consider a more inclusive name that would follow suit with the changes made to the non-discrimination policy. This resulted in a name change from The President’s Commission on Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation (GISO) to the President’s Commission on Gender Identity & Expression and Sexual Orientation (GIESO). Thanks to Public Relations student Tyler Sing, our new logo proudly displaying our new name stands out, just like our commission.