



kort's korner

Gay Initiation Classes Provide Vital Message

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FOR THE PAST SEVEN YEARS, I've taught a course at Wayne State University for Master's level social workers, on how to help their gay clients learn to be comfortable about their orientation. This class could be in jeopardy,

if some folks here in Michigan have their way.

Fuss over a course "How To Be Gay: Male Homosexuality and Initiation," scheduled this fall at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, seems to be voiced loudest by Gary Glenn, president of the Michigan affiliate of the conservative American Family Association. Mr. Glenn wants "to stop letting homosexual activists use our tax dollars to subsidize this militant political agenda" to promote "queer studies". His agenda is to stop David M. Halperin's class because he feels taxpayers shouldn't be "forced to pay for a class whose stated purpose is to 'experiment' with the 'initiation' of young men into self-destructive homosexual lifestyle".

Is the class I teach next on his agenda to remove? I teach my master's level students in the field of social work to "initiate" gays and

lesbians into achieving healthy self-esteem and becoming positive, hard-working, responsible people. Maybe Mr. Glenn overlooked my class because its title, "Social Work and Sexual Orientation," doesn't imply that it "initiates" anybody or help anyone do so—even though I do exactly that!

What would be the public outrage if Mr. Glenn and his AFA supporters felt the same way about university courses that "initiate" women, African Americans, Jews, and other minorities into understanding of their own specific political and cultural heritage? Should tax dollars be withheld from courses that teach these individuals to achieve healthy identities?

On my first day of teaching my sexual orientation course at WSU, I reviewed the class's Gay Affirmative syllabus, along with informing the students that I was gay. An

African American woman politely raised her hand and said, "I had no idea I had enrolled in a gay studies class." She needed credits, and my class was the only one available to her, adding that her Christian beliefs did not support homosexuality and that is was a sin. But this was her last term, and if she wanted to graduate in June, she had to stay in the course.

Some of the other class members felt that because of her homonegative views, she shouldn't be allowed to stay. But she said she related to gays and lesbians because when she "came out" with her Christian beliefs on homosexuals, others discriminated against her—and she felt that same way about my class not wanting her.

I assured her that I was open to her difference of opinion. All I expected from her was that she learn the gay affirmative stance I teach, to help gays and lesbians overcome homophobia and heterosexism. In her papers and class discussions, she could show that she'd absorbed my input, and could certainly add her own disagreements along the way. I urged the class to take the same stance—which they did. Our agenda was to honor

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everyone's opinions and not enforce our own, much less make any one of us feel "bad" or "wrong."

Each week, she listened to my lectures and our guest speakers. She wrote two required papers on the "initiation" of gays and lesbians into healthy, well-adjusted, affirmative lives. Yes, her papers did include her biblical views and moral beliefs that disagreed with my teachings—particularly that gays and lesbians can become well-adjusted. I, in turn, honored her opinions and judgments, which made sense to me because of the way she was raised and what she'd been taught throughout her life.

I empathized with her difficulty. Heterosexism—believing that a heterosexual orientation is superior, romantically and sexually, to all others—is hard to overcome. We're taught this erroneous belief from early childhood, and its imprint remains unless we work hard to challenge it.

I didn't agree with her, but was able to see her outlook from her point of view. By the end of the semester, she demonstrated her full understanding of many facets of "initiating" gays and lesbians. She hadn't altered her moral or religious beliefs, and still felt that homosexuality was a sin. But she did graduate (in both senses of the word) with a wider understanding of what gay people must go through, and said the course "humanized her thinking of what gay people were like. She admitted she'd been horrified

to learn that I was gay, surprised that I seemed so happy and well-adjusted—and troubled that I'd become so comfortable with "living in sin."

I told her that she'd opened my eyes, too. What must it be like, to hold strong religious beliefs and not be able to express them freely, without others' discrimination?

Again, I have no problem with her beliefs, or anyone's, only with what people do with their personal judgments. I told her I hoped that as a social worker, she'd never provide treatment gay or lesbian because of her negative judgments. How could she assist them and help them feel good about themselves, if she herself didn't approve of them? Much as she tried to help them, she would just be committing homophobia in her conviction that they were sinners. Thankfully, she agreed!

If only those like Gary Glenn and the people in the AFA could realize the acts of homophobia they are committing! It's one thing to disagree over a class that helps students adjust to being gay, and dealing with those who are. It's quite another to try and prevent anyone, academic or not, from offering information to those who want it and need it. Shouldn't universities offer a class for people who take their righteousness and wield it as a weapon against others? To my mind, that is the biggest sin of all.