

LGBTQ students now have an organization at UTM

BY JOHANNA KRISTOLAITS

UTM now has an official group for homosexual and transgender students. Over 15 students attended the first meeting of **OUT at UTM** on Wednesday, September 26, and many more have expressed interest in the group.

"When I got here, I was upset that there was nothing really representing the gay community," said Skye Plowman, a first-year Humanities student and now the Chair of OUT at UTM. "Every school has some kind of group like that for students, except here. So I'm really excited that we have one now."

"We've tried to start similar groups in the past," said Pardeep Nagra, UTM's Diversity Officer. "The student support just wasn't there before; only a few people would come out." So far it seems that this year is going to be different.

"We simply provided an opportunity and it took root among those that attended this year's initial meeting," said Mark Overton, Dean of Student Affairs. "There was interest from students, faculty, staff and alumni, so I think the potential is amazing."

"Already people are jumping up and asking 'When's the next meeting?'" said Joseph Deogracious, one of the organizers for the Sexual Education Centre (SEC). "It may be because we've advertised better this year, especially with the first years."

OUT at UTM is an organization for LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) students, staff, faculty, and alumni, as well as their friends and supporters, commonly referred to as allies.

"It's a platform for LGBTQ people and their friends to come out and support each other, and celebrate diversity," said Nagra.

"A group like this is important to show that the gay community isn't invisible," said Plowman. "You don't have to hide it and keep quiet; you can be open about it."

"At the first meeting, we didn't share what orientation we were," said Deogracious. "That's not the point because everyone is welcome."

Now that OUT at UTM has had its first meeting, the possibilities for its future seem endless.

"It will become a student-run organization with staff **OUT at UTM** and its events."

Other initiatives and events will happen throughout the year," said Nagra. "Some of the things that have been brought up are information campaigns, movie nights, and the positive space campaign."

"The group still has to grow into what it will be," said Chris Damdar, a third-year UTM student who volunteers with SEC. "Right now we want it to be a social/support group, but it may move into

our direction."

"We definitely want the support of the UTM community," added Deogracious.

That support is already underway. Student Affairs and the Diversity Office have helped the group get started and pledge to be avenues of support. "The primary goal of UTM's student services is to encourage and support students' academic success," said Overton.

"Creating a welcoming and supportive environment helps students engage in our community and that tends to foster better academic performance too."

photo/Melissa Donnelly

"I'm looking forward to working with the group and being a resource," said Nagra. "I want to make sure they have stable footing."

Many students are glad that a group of this kind has finally emerged onto UTM's community radar. Its importance is underlined by this year's student interest.

"I don't want to say we're 'here', because we've been here for a while," said Deogracious. "But we weren't visible before. Other queer people weren't seen to turn

to and talk to."

"We've now got people and enthusiasm and a good mix of skills," said Damdar.

"It must have been hard for students before this year," said Nagra.

"For people who have freshly come out of the closet, it can be an alienating time," said Plowman. "People may need somewhere to turn, and OUT can be that place."

Although the group is just starting out, plans for events and student communication are already taking shape. The first OUT event/initiative is to have a display for National Coming Out this Friday. A list-serve is already set up to alert students to meetings and other events. Postering will also be a means of communication.

"Aside from posters and e-mail, word of mouth is the best communication tool," said Deogracious. "If someone hears about the group and is interested in joining, just come to the meetings and events."

Funding up to this point has been provided by the Diversity Office.

"The activities that the group chooses in the future will determine where we might seek additional funds," said Overton. "There's lots of interesting possibilities here, downtown and in the community."

Overall, OUT at UTM will add another dimension to the diverse landscape of this campus. Like other clubs, this one provides a place and an opportunity for students to learn more about themselves.

"Being at university is all about coming to terms with who you are, and sexuality is just one part of that," said Plowman. "In the end, you define your sexuality. Your sexuality doesn't define you."



Stop by the S.E.C. office for more information about **OUT at UTM** and its events.