

## **Pioneering UW Oshkosh values statement a signal, symbol of support for LGBTQ community**

by Mandy Potts - Tuesday, April 29, 2014

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/33268/pioneering-uw-oshkosh-values-statement-a-signal-symbol-of-support-for-lgbtq-community/>

When Jerry Thomas was looking for a place to teach, the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh stood out.

Now in his third year as an assistant political science professor at UW Oshkosh, Thomas sums up his reasons for picking the state's third-largest public higher education institution pretty well: "UW Oshkosh values inclusive excellence."

With that idea at the forefront, Thomas—also involved with the LGBTQ Education and Advocacy Council on campus—has been working hard with a group of dedicated faculty, staff and students on the council to make sure that idea of inclusiveness is understood and heard loud and proud throughout campus and beyond.

Drafted late last spring by the council, and now adopted by all four campus governing groups, UW Oshkosh is leading the way with its newly published, adopted and recognized values statement, which acknowledges students of diverse sexual orientation and gender identities. The values statement is formally titled: Educational Values of Students of Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities.

The UW Oshkosh LGBTQ Council's charge is to "provide visionary leadership, education and advocacy necessary to cultivate an equitable, inclusive and supportive climate for UW Oshkosh community members of all sexual identities." The generation and adoption of UW Oshkosh's values statement aligns with that charge.

"LGBTQ citizens are a unique minority group in many ways—especially because sexual orientation and gender identity is not always visible," Thomas said.

LGBTQ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer; the acronym has been in use since the 1990s and is commonly used. As outlined by the values statement, "diverse sexual orientations and gender identities" is intended to be an inclusive statement that embraces myriad orientations and identities understanding that many individuals prefer no labels at all.

"Having this sort of statement being publically visible makes LGBTQ citizens not invisible on our campus—it makes them and the issues visible," Thomas said.

Beyond the arguments of equality and inclusivity, the values statement is important to Thomas because he's openly gay; he's married to his partner and in part chose to be a part of UW Oshkosh because the institution offers domestic partner benefits, he said.

“It mattered to me, that’s why I am here,” he said. “This is one of the most positive, affirming environments I’ve ever lived in; I might even say that about Oshkosh as a whole.”

Caitlin Hopper, a senior studying human services leadership who is the Oshkosh Student Association student liaison to the LGBTQ Council, said she’s proud of all UW Oshkosh offers in the way of LGBTQ-focused resources. She also feels optimism around the idea of the UW Oshkosh values statement, which outlines nine specific values.

“I think right now in American society, we’re going through a cultural change. This values statement is a small step, but it’s also a really big step,” Hopper said. “It’s about valuing students.”

The values statement goes beyond students, though, said Sally Masters, co-chair of the LGBTQ Council, who was instrumental in working with Thomas to make the published statement a reality.

“The Educational Values of Students of Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities is an important project because of the inclusive portrait it paints, not only for current students, but also for faculty and staff and for prospective students, faculty and staff as well,” Masters said. “When I was researching UW Oshkosh as a prospective employee who happens to be gay, if I would have found this statement on the campus website, it would have been one more piece of supporting evidence of a welcoming environment. I know other faculty, staff and students research university climate in the same way. The values statement serves as a welcome mat of sorts to all those considering UW Oshkosh as their educational or occupational home.”

Thomas’ best guess is that about 5-10 percent of people on campus identify in one of the LGBTQ categories, which would equate to several hundred students on the UW Oshkosh campus.

“The statement is really about inclusive excellence. This is about saying this University values everybody,” Thomas said.

In doing the research to put the UW Oshkosh values statement together, Thomas and his colleagues on the LGBTQ Council found it hard to find other institutions creating similar statements or documents.

“UW Oshkosh is leading the way for LGBTQ advocacy among Wisconsin universities and universities around the country, I think,” he said. “Values statements such as these are not adopted by universities or if they are, they are not well publicized.”

At UW Oshkosh, the values statement is not where being inclusive of all populations ends, however. A number of campus resources are available to students, faculty and staff such as the LGBTQ Resource Center, Rainbow Alliance for HOPE, the Inclusive Excellence Council, U-Matter and more. Training opportunities and additional support services are offered throughout campus.

“UWO has taken many steps in the right direction to make sure we’re inclusive and everyone feels welcome,” said Joseph King, a sophomore theatre major involved with the Queer Peer Mentor Program; King is also deeply involved with the Rainbow Alliance for HOPE Drag Show. “I think the values statement helps our university because it will make us stand out a little as one who wants to make changes and one who really wants to make everyone in the student population feel at home and be

welcomed on campus without fear or concerns.”

King said it’s easy to be involved?in groups that focus on everything from LGBTQ-focused topics to multicultural-focused diversity groups? on the UW Oshkosh campus no matter who you are or what your background is.

“UW Oshkosh is a very forward-thinking institution,” Thomas said. “We already have some really good things in place; this values statement is about inclusive excellence, it’s about saying ‘This University values everybody.’ It’s about putting our money where our mouth is with inclusive excellence. It’s about saying, ‘We mean everybody!’”

Learn more:

- [Educational Values of Students of Diverse Sexual Orientations and Gender Identities document](#)
- [UW Oshkosh LGBTQ Education and Advocacy](#)

Read more:

- [UW Oshkosh making strides with LGBTQ community on campus and beyond](#)