Interview with Erin Echols

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INTERVIEW WITH ERIN ECHOLS

Cal Poly Pride Center Director

Erin Echols is the first full-time Director of the Pride Center at Cal Poly, a position she has held since Fall 2006.

Moebius: Tell me about the Pride Center and its mission.

EE: The Pride Center is one of the three cultural centers at Cal Poly under the auspices of Student Life and Leadership. The other two are the Women's Center and the Multicultural Center. We're not a club like the Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual United (GLBU), whose purpose is primarily social. We provide a safe space for students to hang out, socialize, or just come in and work on the computer, but we also organize programs and events, and sponsor guest speakers. There is a Pride Center Yahoo group, and through that we inform LGBT students and Allies of events. We also provide Ally Training: interactive, educational workshops on LGBT issues and for faculty, staff, and students. [An Ally is someone who does not identify as LGBT but who has gone through Ally training and made a public commitment to support LGBT concerns.] We have a library of books and videos for students to borrow. We also have a speaker's bureau of students who have been trained to speak on LGBT issues and experiences to classes here at Poly as well as off-campus. The Pride Center has a few student assistants, volunteers, and a student advisory board. I represent the Pride Center and the LGBT point of view on university committees, including the University Diversity Enrichment Council.

Moebius: What did you do before taking your current job as Director, and what led you to Cal Poly?

EE: I was Assistant Director of Campus Activities at Colby Sawyer College, a small liberal-arts college in New Hampshire. I advised several student groups, and I found that I really liked working with the gay/straight alliance there; I found it really rewarding. I grew up in New York, and also lived in North Carolina and Connecticut, but my father is actually a Cal Poly alumnus, and I liked the idea of moving to California—someplace liberal, forward-thinking—but I saw that this idea of California wasn't entirely true of this campus, on LGBT issues. I saw that this position was really needed and by opening it, Cal Poly was taking a step forward, and that I could do some important work here.
Moebius: That leads to my next question. Conventional wisdom says that Cal Poly is not very diverse, and in particular, not a very welcoming place for LGBT people. There have been some incidents in recent years—the egging of a booth during Pride Week, the painting over of the rainbow “P,” the gay marriage art installation comparing same-sex unions to bestiality. What's your assessment of campus climate on LGBT issues?

EE: It's been very positive for me. I've had many individual conversations with students, faculty, and staff, and they're very encouraging and supportive. When I first arrived here last fall, many people told me how excited they were to have a full-time director for the Pride Center. So far, no negative things have happened. The only thing I have noticed, though, is that in comparison to the smaller school where I used to work, things here move more slowly. I think that's just the case with a large public university, though, and not particular to Cal Poly. I do, though, get a sense that many people here have conservative, or even homophobic views on LGBT issues, but they keep quiet about them.

Moebius: That's interesting—I was just reading Dan Savage's book The Commitment (about gay marriage), in which he says that homophobia is harder to spot these days, because, it's less and less acceptable to voice those opinions. The result is that people may hate you but with a smile on their face.

EE: That may be. Just this week there was an article in the Mustang Daily on the Pride Center, and my students were excited because it was the most-read online article. In the same issue, though, there was an opinion piece on liberal bias at Cal Poly. The author said that the fact that the Multicultural, Women's, and Pride Center are housed in the Vu was evidence of liberal bias. Students wrote in with different opinions on this. It's interesting that Cal Poly's support of diversity could be thought “liberal” or that our existence would be “controversial.”

Moebius: Or that a conservative would imply that conservatism equals white and straight. I'm not sure the Republican Party would put that in its platform!

EE: What's ironic too is that we're bringing in a speaker from the Log Cabin Republicans [a national organization of gay Republicans]. But to get back to campus climate—although my experiences have been positive, the bottom line is that a lot of LGBT students here perceive that it's not a comfortable campus, and so they're not out. It's difficult to provide services to students who aren't out, and don't feel comfortable being out on campus. We're looking into starting a faculty mentoring program as one way to address this problem.

Moebius: What other programs and activities are being planned?

EE: We've received some funding through Instructionally Related Activities, and we're starting a film series (we have to pay for the rights to show films). We plan to show LGBT films that students may have heard of but not seen, and perhaps also include lesser-
known films that do well at Sundance, for example, but don’t then get wide distribution. We’ve started a Facebook group — students really like this. [Facebook is an online social networking service for college students.] We’ve also expanded Ally training. It used to be 45 minutes to an hour, but now it’s a two-hour presentation with time for interactive discussion, and presented by students trained in the speaker’s bureau. We’re also developing advanced Ally training, to follow up on the initial workshop. We’ve had really good attendance for Ally training. We will also be having more conversations about career preparation — how to present yourself, on a resume and in person, as an out lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender person. Cal Poly students are very career-oriented, so it’s a really good practical issue to address. We’re also going to have more discussions about religion and homosexuality. We’ve been working with members of the Coalition of Welcoming Congregations. Hopefully, students can understand that being gay and having faith don’t have to be separate.

Moebius: There’s been some discussion in the past about moving the Pride Center from its current location. Some feel that it’s kind of hidden, and that its being in a portable building sends the wrong message. What are your thoughts on that?

EE: I’m not really against the location. If we were in a more visible location — the union, for example — some students might feel intimidated to come by, especially questioning or newly out students who really need our support. Our current space is kind of small, though, making it difficult to have larger meetings.

Moebius: Have you encountered any controversies so far at Cal Poly, or if not, how would you deal with them if they came up?

EE: I’ve learned that in student services its best to avoid anything too controversial. Our goal is to provide support for students, and we don’t want to create a situation where they’d feel uncomfortable or intimidated. As I said, many of our students are questioning or newly out.

Moebius: It seems like this is always a concern — should an LGBT group be more activist or social, or some combination of the two.

EE: Yes, the GLBU was once more activist than it is now, but now it’s more social, and change in that group is to be expected, as its membership changes. But I think the Pride Center should be constant in its mission of support and education.