Overview

The Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS) is housed in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta. It provides a foundation and a “hub” for scholarly work in sexual minority studies, giving primacy to research and teaching in this area. Furthermore, and uniquely in Canada, the Institute places this studies function in a dynamic relationship with a vital service function so it can holistically assist and meet the needs of sexual minority undergraduate and graduate students across professional Faculties and sexual minorities living in the larger community. This reciprocity fosters innovative intellectual work and sustained outreach.

The Faculty of Education is a logical home for iSMSS since the Institute accentuates the importance of a research-based approach to educating professionals in teaching and other caring professions at the preparatory and continuing stages of their careers. As well, given the very significant interest in sexual-minority studies across many disciplines and areas of study within the University of Alberta and beyond, the broad interdisciplinary character of the Institute enhances possibilities for groundbreaking contextual and collaborative research as well as wide-ranging educational endeavors and service provision. Since Canadian universities engaged in sexual-minority work tend to separate the teaching and research functions from the service function, the Institute stands as a unique Canadian university model, placing sexual-minority (LGBTQTQ or lesbian, gay, bisexual, two spirit, trans-identified, and queer) inclusive studies and services in a dynamic relationship within a university setting.

The Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services stands as a tangible indicator of the University’s commitment to sexual-minority inclusion and the advancement of our individual and civil rights in Canada and beyond. As it fulfills its functions, iSMSS brings the intellectual sphere of ideas (its studies function) and the organic sphere of action (its service function) into dynamic equilibrium.

iSMSS’s Studies Function

Currently, the Institute’s studies function has a strong focus on sexual-minority educational and cultural research projects that include Dr. André P. Grace’s endeavors as well as the thesis and doctoral research of several graduate students. Dr. Grace, a SSHRC standard research grant holder, currently employs both graduate and undergraduate research assistants. During 2008-2009, this group of researchers included an undergraduate student recipient of a Roger S. Smith Undergraduate Research Award.

Dr. Grace’s current research, funded by the Social Sciences and
Humanities Research Council of Canada, is entitled *Using sexual-minority youth resilience research to inform queer critical theory building and educational policymaking*. The following is a synopsis of this three-year research program: Stories of at-risk sexual-minority youth are increasingly being transgressed by stories of resilient sexual-minority youth who survive and thrive amid the risks and barriers they face daily. In the case of resilient sexual-minority youth, interdisciplinary literature indicates that resilience needs to be researched as an asset-creating process that enables the individual to transgress the adversity induced by heterosexism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia; to deal with consequential mental and emotional trauma; to grow into self-respect and self-confidence; to set realistic goals and engage in problem solving as part of surviving, thriving, and acting in the world; and to build supportive, collaborative relationships. In conducting this research on resilience, my research assistants and I engage in queer critical ethnographic research on sexual-minority youth within a larger contextualized, reflexive study that builds an emergent queer critical theory to frame the research, locates the researcher as the researched in queer critical research, and uses queer critical theorizing and resilience research to guide educational policymaking and implementation focused on meeting the needs of sexual-minority children and youth. To conduct this research, we use multiple methods to produce knowledge and understanding as ethical and political co-constructions. This includes a dialogic style of interviewing in both open-ended focus group and individual contexts, coupled with autoethnography to explore researcher investments.

As part of its studies function, iSMSS offers a series of research-informed workshops on sexual-minority issues in education and culture for undergraduate and graduate students in the Faculty of Education as well as in other University of Alberta Faculties. The Institute keeps an inventory of current undergraduate and graduate courses with LGBTTQ content offered across the University campus. The Institute also hosts the InsideOUT Speakers Series, which involves monthly presentations by local, national, and international scholars from across disciplines. This series is part of the Institute’s efforts to link the University’s community of scholars with national and international networks of scholars, programs, centers, and institutes that focus on sex, sexual, and gender issues in culture, society, law, government, education, and the arts, humanities, and social sciences. To enhance these opportunities for networking, iSMSS also hosted the inaugural *Queer Issues in Education and Culture* preconference as part of the 2009 annual conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education, Carleton University, Ottawa. More than 40 faculty and graduate students attended.

**iSMSS’s Service Function**

In fulfilling its service function, iSMSS provides outreach to
undergraduate and graduate students, faculty, and staff in the University community, and it has created an extensive LGBTTQ resource base. This outreach includes mentoring several students in the Community Service-Learning Program in the Faculty of Arts. iSMSS is available to support the work of currently existing LGBTTQ undergraduate and other campus groups. It liaises with the Office of the Dean of Students to help ensure that the LGBTTQ undergraduate and graduate students have access to University of Alberta services, facilities, resources, and opportunities that all students should be able to enjoy. iSMSS is working to ensure that the learning environments of the University are free from harassment and discrimination against LGBTTQ undergraduate and graduate students in keeping with University policy and Section 15 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

Our two major service projects emphasizing university and community outreach are overviewed below.

Camp fYrefly, now moving into its 7th year, was founded in 2004 as a university-community educational project by Dr. André P. Grace and Mr. Kristopher Wells. The camp is informed by our teaching and research experiences working with sexual-minority youth.

Camp fYrefly is a 4-day volunteer-based, residential style summer leadership retreat for these youth. It focuses on building and nurturing their leadership potential and personal resiliency in an effort to help them become agents for positive social change in their schools, families, and communities. To our knowledge, Camp fYrefly is the largest youth leadership camp of its kind in Canada and the only one in the world affiliated with a major research university, which ensures for research-informed programming, sound pedagogical principles, and strong fiscal management.

Camp fYrefly’s philosophy and programming emphasize a by-youth-for-youth approach in which older youth, with the guidance of adult facilitators, mentor and help to support younger youth. In the spirit of advancing youth leadership, youth contribute to the development and delivery of our wide-ranging camp leadership-and-learning program. All of our camp programming, which is facilitated by trained educators and youth workers, is collaborative with a team of artists, dramatists, and community and youth leaders. The camp, guided by an arts-based educational philosophy, is jam-packed with dance, drama, music, writing, visual art, empowerment and reflection exercises, anti-oppression work, personal growth opportunities, healthy socialization, and in-depth learning activities about specific youth topics and social issues. Collectively, this educational and cultural work is intended to help empower camp participants to envision a healthy and happy future free from fear, abuse, and discrimination. Youth leave with a resiliency network of friends, trusted adults, community resources, and leadership
strategies to help them survive and thrive.

Camp fYrefly Alberta 2009 took place July 23-26. For those four days, we collectively worked to create a world that lives out the fYrefly acronym, which, as the youth tell us, stands for:

Fostering, Youth, resiliency, energy, fun, leadership, yeah!

The camp hosted 54 youth, 16 adult volunteers, and featured more than 20 workshops. At the centre of the Camp fYrefly experience was the Artist-In-Residence Program, which featured a partnership with printmaker Anthea Black and the Society of Northern Alberta Print-Artists.

In addition to running a successful Camp fYrefly VI in Alberta, equally successful inaugural camps were held in British Columbia and Saskatchewan. All three 4-day summer youth-leadership camps were held in July and August, 2009. We planned the camps over the course of the 2008-2009 academic year to provide youth participants with opportunities for peer mentoring and leadership training in safe and supportive community learning environments. All 2009 camps received media attention from an array of newspapers and television networks in all three provinces. This year we put the focus on interviews with youth participants and parents/guardians as media highlighted Camp fYrefly's unique arts-based educational approach and youth leadership building activities. In total, 140 youth attended the three camps.

For more Camp fYrefly details or to view media coverage of the three camps, please visit our camp website www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca.
In fulfilling its service function, the Institute utilizes its research knowledge and expertise to address the needs and concerns of sexual-minority youth in the university and the larger community throughout the year. In this regard, iSMSS complements Camp fYrefly by operating a Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker (YIOW) program. The YIOW program began in December 2008 with funding support from the Edmonton Community Foundation, the United Way, and the City of Edmonton. The primary objectives of this program are: (1) To develop a year-round sexual-minority youth intervention and outreach program and an annual youth needs assessment; (2) to provide support for Edmonton’s Youth Understanding Youth (YUY) group as a primary intervention and prevention site for at-risk sexual minority youth in the city area; and (3) to create a sexual-minority youth mentorship project with the Big Brothers and Big Sisters Society of Edmonton.

To ensure the proper oversight and expertise necessary for the Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker, iSMSS formed a Community Advisory Committee, which has youth-serving agency representatives from government and other sectors who meet every 6 weeks. The committee is responsible for providing advice and guidance to the Institute in relation to the objectives, goals, delivery, and evaluation of this outreach program.

The YIOW program is a unique first-of-its-kind venture that allows sexual-minority youth who are at increased risk for suicide, suicide ideation, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, poor mental health outcomes, increased victimization, and social isolation to have a centralized access point for advocacy and support where none previously existed. The Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker addresses youth needs and concerns as they grapple with matters related to their sexual orientations and/or gender identities, variations, and expressions. Youth that have accessed the position have reported feeling relieved that they now have an advocate whom they can call on to help them with their specialized needs and concerns. The position has also prompted considerable discussion about the fair and equitable treatment of sexual-minority youth among youth-serving agencies in Edmonton. These agencies now have an advocate they can call to provide evidence-informed information, intervention strategies, and consultation around sexual orientation and gender identity issues for youth on their caseloads.

The YIOW has also successfully reached out to Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) groups in schools in the Edmonton area to provide community resources to group leaders and attendees both at the junior and senior high levels. These connections help make youth aware of YUY, the YIOW advocate, and other resources available for them in the local community. During 2008-2009, the Youth Intervention and Outreach
Worker, in partnership with the Alberta Teachers’ Association, hosted monthly GSA Roundtable meetings to help support the development, coordination, and sustainability of GSAs as a primary source of school-based resiliency development for sexual-minority youth in the Edmonton region.

One notable success of the 2008-2009 programming year was the Queer Prom: Paint the Town Red event, which was held at the Citadel Theatre. Since this social/recreational programming does not meet the conventional funding eligibility requirements of our funders, outside funding was solicited and provided by HIV Edmonton and a number of private sponsors and anonymous donors. The Queer Prom was identified by local youth as an important social/recreational space. With the dedicated support of the Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker, over 230 youth participated in the spring 2009 Queer Prom. Community speakers included Mr. Keray Henke, the Deputy Minister of Alberta Education; Ms. Rachael Notley, MLA (NDP); Mr. John Mould from the Office of the Child and Youth Advocate; and Mr. Murray Billet, Edmonton Police Commissioner. In order to circulate information about the event, a website (www.queerprom.ca) and postcard were designed by local youth and circulated to community partners and youth-serving agencies. Youth-serving agencies were also invited to set up information booths at the event to create an opportunity for youth to access these community supports directly while attending the prom. This highly successful event helped to communicate the presence of the YIOW program, and associated community supports, to a wide and varied audience of youth and youth-serving agencies.

In addition to the Queer Prom, iSMSS, through its YIOW program, helped coordinate the Queer Youth Curators Mentorship Program in conjunction with the Art Gallery of Alberta and Exposure: Edmonton’s Queer Arts and Culture Festival. Four youth were offered positions in the program this year.

In a continuing effort to build awareness of the YIOW program, we have joined the “Bridging the Gaps” community initiative, linking the YIOW program to a connected database with other youth-serving agencies. The purpose of this partnership is to allow youth to make multiple community connections in a one-stop centralized location rather than having to access one agency at a time. The database will allow other agencies (i.e. Alberta Health Services) to refer youth to see the YIOW on scheduled appointment times to access assistance. As part of this communications work, iSMSS continues to enhance our online outreach, maintaining the Institute and YUY websites, Facebook pages, and listservs, which have a combined membership of over 400 individuals. For more information, please visit www.iSMSS.ualberta.ca.
Contact Information

Dr. André Grace
Director, Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services
Faculty of Education, University of Alberta
7 - 104 Education North
Edmonton, AB, T6G 2G5

Office: 5-111 Education North
Phone: 780-492-0767
Fax: 780-492-2024
E-mail: andre.grace@ualberta.ca