2010 – 2011 Annual Report

Prepared by
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The Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services: An Overview

Most sexual minority and gender variant youth know the daily distress caused by marginalization that entrenches fear, mistrust, helplessness, and a sense of being alone. These youth often experience schooling and legal, medical, and government services as fragmentary and insufficient to address the stressors, risks, and trauma associated with living with adversity induced by heterosexism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. At the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS), which is housed in the Faculty of Education, University of Alberta, we employ a uniquely holistic model that brings to bear all of the strengths of research, teaching, advocacy, policy-making and community outreach to develop programs to protect and meet the needs of sexual and gender minority (SMGV) youth. Institute researchers draw on the disciplines of education, medicine, law, psychology and social work to design programs to assist youth directly, and to build knowledge and understanding for our teachers, health providers, community agencies, and government and institutional policy-makers. Through research and practice, iSMSS is having a profound impact on the lives and futures of these vulnerable youth. iSMSS is helping hundreds of these youth to overcome challenges and thrive through our year-round Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker program and Camp FYrefly, our summer leadership camp held in Alberta and Saskatchewan annually for SMGV youth. When a youth needs mentoring, counseling, medical, legal or police assistance, housing, or help to mediate schooling or work, we are there to help and connect them with the supports they need. Institute expertise is nationally recognized through our work with such stakeholders as the Canadian Teachers’ Federation, the Public Health Agency of Canada, and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. This networking allows us to impact research, policy, and practice focused on meeting the needs of vulnerable sexual and gender minority youth so they can grow into resilience.

iSMSS research, funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the Public Health Agency of Canada, highlights the fact that, with mentors, resources, and supports, certain sexual and gender minority youth survive and thrive despite daily stressors, risks and barriers they encounter in their schools, families, and communities. These youth are “growing into resilience.” By helping them to develop a “resilient mindset,” SMGV youth can become self-respecting and self-confident individuals who actively participate in creating change for themselves and others. Although much still needs to be learned about helping sexual and gender minority youth in this process, current iSMSS research clearly demonstrates that those who set realistic goals and engage in problem solving with people who are supportive and collaborative become self-reliant and happy, even in cases of complete family and societal rejection. In recognition of the cutting-edge nature of the research I conduct at iSMSS, I participate in the following national initiatives:

- Appointment (invited) to the Canadian Teachers’ Federation Panel of Academic Experts (Fall 2010 for three years)
• Expert Advisor (invited) to the Chief Public Health Officer’s Reports Unit on the State of Public Health in Canada, Public Health Agency of Canada (for the 2011 and 2012 annual reports)
• Member of the National Working Group on Sexual Health, Public Health Agency of Canada (invited appointment, Fall 2010 – present)

Further details regarding iSMSS operations are contained in the iSMSS Policy Guide. It is our core document and details the Institute’s principles, policies, and procedures. It provides a framework to guide responsive and responsible behavior whereby Institute constituents exercise an ethic of care and use good judgment when interacting with youth and one another. The iSMSS Policy Guide provides procedural protocols and reinforces the importance of ethical conduct in daily interactions with youth and other constituencies.

2010-2011 iSMSS Team

Dr. André P. Grace – iSMSS Director
Dr. Kristopher Wells – iSMSS Researcher and Programmer
Beverly Clarke – Administrative Secretary
Barb Maheu – Educational Coordinator
Scott Mair – Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker
Cory Dawson – Camp fYrefly Coordinator
Alexis Hillyard – iSMSS Graduate Research Assistant and Program Assistant
Fiona Purton – iSMSS Arts-informed Programming Assistant
Lionel Kinkartz – Safe Spaces Initiative Coordinator
Lauren Groves – Undergraduate Research Assistant and Program Assistant
Jeremiah Bolstad – Roger S. Smith Undergraduate Student Research Award Recipient

The Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker Program

Since December 2008, iSMSS has operated the Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker (YIOW) program as its key year-round project to meet the needs of SMGV youth in the University and the greater Edmonton community. We have achieved the following primary program objectives:

• We have developed and we deliver on an ongoing basis a multi-faceted sexual minority and gender variant youth intervention and outreach program;
• We have provided support for Youth Understanding Youth as a primary intervention and prevention site for at-risk SMGV youth in the greater Edmonton area; and
• We have created and implemented a mentorship project for sexual and gender minority youth with Big Brothers and Big Sisters Society of Edmonton.
We created a Community Advisory Board with members from Alberta Child and Youth Services and an array of government and community-based youth serving agencies who serve as advisors for the program. This program is a unique “first of its kind” position in Edmonton that allows sexual minority and gender variant 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.

Key achievements of the Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker Program:

1. Drop-in groups: We conducted more than 45 sessions of Youth Understanding Youth. These sessions involved more than 90 hours of programming for over 450 youth participants.
2. Information referrals: There were over 1000 contacts (phone, email, Facebook, text messages) requesting LGBTQ information and referrals to community services. As of June 30, 2011, 5100 contacts have been made to the Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker.
3. We ran 2 key community events via the YIOW program: the 2011 Queer Prom and the Youth drop-in tent at the 2011 PRIDE Edmonton festival. 450 youth attended the prom and 85 youth visited the youth drop-in tent.
4. In terms of community educational outreach, more than 30 presentations were provided, involving over 500 attendees. These presentations mainly involved educating service providers to work with sexual and gender minority youth.
5. There were 133 face-to-face meetings with 96 youth, 86 of whom required referrals including counseling for suicide ideation/mental health supports.
6. Volunteerism is central to the YIOW program. This year 175 community volunteers were involved in different aspects of program delivery. In addition, we had one practicum graduate student, and 8 youth-agency volunteers served as members of the community advisory committee.
7. Youth Understanding Youth (YUY): This year we moved the youth group to the First Baptist Church in downtown Edmonton. A marked increase in attendance resulted. A number of new facilitators were recruited and trained to support the group.
8. Q2Q (Queer to Queer) Mentorship Program: The program recruits and matches mentors with vulnerable sexual and gender minority youth from the community. We work with Big Brothers and Big Sisters of Edmonton to deliver this program, which is attracting an increasing number of youth seeking support.
9. GSA Roundtable meetings: These monthly meetings provided opportunities for sexual and gender minority youth in Edmonton public schools to have a space for socialization and social learning to address safety and accommodation concerns.
10. We participated in strategic committee work with Region 6, Alberta Child and Youth Services to help increase the visibility of SMGV youth in care and provide services for them.
Camp fYrefly

The Institute for Sexual Minorities and Services currently operates a national summer youth leadership program called Camp fYrefly (www.fYrefly.ualberta.ca), which is now in its 8th year. The camp, which I co-founded with Dr. Kristopher Wells in 2004, is a university-community educational outreach project that focuses on the needs of sexual minority and gender variant youth who variously identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, two-spirited, queer, and allied. The fYrefly acronym stands for: fostering, Youth, resiliency, energy, fun, leadership, yeah! Camp fYrefly has evolved into a 4-day volunteer-based, residential style summer leadership retreat for these youth who engage in research-informed activities that 1) promote individual development and socialization, 2) help youth grow into resilience and, as they are able, develop leadership skills such that these youth can become change agents in their communities. Over 500 youth have attended Camp fYrefly since its inception. Annual camps are held at sites in Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Camp fYrefly’s philosophy and programming emphasize a by-youth-for-youth approach where older youth and adult facilitators mentor and help to support younger youth. The camp 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. In sum, Camp fYrefly’s pedagogy focuses on four key areas: leadership, individual development, socialization, and growing into resilience. Five themes comprise the framework that guides the development and delivery of the Camp fYrefly program:

1) Creating a socially just and inclusive community;
2) Building resilience and youth leadership capacity;
3) Empowering youth to address bullying, harassment, and hate incidents and crimes by knowing their rights;
4) Learning through art, music, writing, performing arts, and games; and
5) Self and social development.

All of our camp programming is guided by input from youth and facilitated by trained educators and youth workers in collaboration with a team of artists, dramatists, educators, 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.
During the 2010-2011 academic year, I worked with iSMSS staff to co-organize Camp fYrefly VIII in Alberta and Camp fYrefly III in Saskatchewan. I personally attended the AB and SK camps as a mentor and facilitator. These 4-day summer youth-leadership camps were held July 27-31, 2011 in Edmonton and August 18-21, 2011 in Saskatoon. Collectively, the camps provided nearly 100 youth participants with opportunities for peer mentoring, arts-based and other social learning, and leadership training in a safe and supportive teaching-learning environment. Other Camp fYrefly activities include:

1. Hosted the annual wine tasting and silent auction gala in March 2011 in aid of the camp. Over 150 people attended the fundraiser that included a silent auction, which raised over $45,000.
2. Pride Week activities: iSMSS and youth we served marched in the annual Pride Parade. This year donors provided a giant inflatable fYrefly, which can be seen in the cover picture of this report. We also collaborated with Edmonton Public Schools to share a joint resource and information tent in Churchill Square.
3. Mayor’s Pride Brunch in Support of Camp fYrefly: The event was completely sold out with 300 people in attendance, including Dr. Fern Snart, Dean of Education, and Dr. Randy Wimmer, the incoming Associate Dean of Undergraduate Teacher Education. Mayor Stephen Mandel hosted the brunch and various dignitaries including Minister Thomas Lukaszkuk, MLA Laurie Blakeman, and City of Edmonton Councillors Don Iveson, Karen Liebovici, Amarjeet Sohi, and Ben Henderson were in attendance. Edmonton Public School Board Chair Dave Colburn, Vice-Chair Sarah Hoffman, and Trustee Michael Janz also attended. Members of the Edmonton Police Service, key camp supporters, were also among guests.
4. Nearly 100 youth applied to attend Camp fYrefly Alberta 2011, including 40 who applied to be youth leaders. This is nearly double the number we are currently able to host as campers.
5. Spencer Harrison was summer 2011 artist in residence at both Camp fYrefly Alberta in Edmonton and Camp fYrefly Saskatchewan in Saskatoon. Spencer’s contribution was unique and significant, conveying his passion and commitment to helping sexual and gender minority youth make their lives better now. When he was not conducting workshops, Spencer could be found engaging campers in animated conversations. He was always ready to encourage campers and provoke their deeper critical thinking through thoughtful questioning. The workshops Spencer led were tied together through the common theme of authentic engagement. He raised key questions underlying this theme: What do you want your legacy to be? What stories do you want to leave behind? Through various artistic activities combined with small and large group discussions, Spencer led campers through a journey where participants were encouraged to be self-reflective and authentically engaged as they shared their stories with those around them. Spencer’s workshops facilitated the strengthening of friendships and a sense of belonging among camp participants. He modeled what he was teaching through the keen interest he showed in others and the
genuine appreciation he demonstrated for the individual stories and experiences shared. Spencer’s parting words were ones of hope as he challenged everyone to be true to self and to be courageous on personal life journeys. Spencer encouraged one and all to take a bow and loudly say, “Ta Dah!”

**Educational Outreach**

Educational outreach involves four categories: workshops and presentations, Camp fyrefly training and complementary training manual development, strategic planning for the Safe Spaces Initiative, and resource development.

1. Workshops and Presentations: A total of 26 workshops were delivered to groups that included classes in Elementary Education, Secondary Education, and Educational Policy Studies Policy Studies; graduate students; school administrators; high school students and teachers; parents; and university student groups. The total number of participants in workshops was 1744. The majority of workshops focused on educating pre-service undergraduate students about sexual and gender minority issues and concerns. Workshops were customized to be consistent with course outcomes in various subjects.

2. Camp fyrefly training: Throughout the year, a training manual was re-developed for use with youth leaders and adult volunteers. The manual provided polices, information, and practices for reference and orientation. The new manual also contains organizational structures, roles and responsibilities, and inspirational quotations. This year training sessions incorporated feedback (such as the inclusion of case studies and scenarios) provided by the volunteers from the previous year.

3. Safe Spaces Initiative: A cross-campus retreat was organized and held on January 22, 2011. We gathered information to develop a Safe Spaces strategic plan based on input from the variety of participants that attended from the university community. These participants included youth volunteers from campus groups and various individuals representing student services, departments, and faculties campus-wide. Several actions are underway to operationalize the Initiative. To date, actions that have been taken include:

   a. Participation in the University of Alberta Week of Welcome;
   b. Working with the Office of the Architect to ensure that all buildings have easily accessible single-use washroom facilities for transgender students;
   c. Providing orientation sessions for Faculty Liaisons who will be “point people” in their own faculties to help implement goals in the SSI Strategic Plan;
d. Developing a resource list to aid Faculty Liaisons and other in directing sexual and gender minority students to appropriate services;

e. Developing a survey to gather data to gauge campus climate and to help shape future actions;

f. Developing promotional materials (SSI brochures, stickers, bookmarks etc.); and
g. Developing directories of campus contacts.

4. Safe and Caring Schools for Gender Minority Students: A Guide for Teachers: Barb Maheu, in collaboration with Mason Jenkins and Alexis Hillyard, developed a booklet to address ways for teachers to improve understanding and enhance accommodation of gender minority students. This booklet will become one in the series of Diversity booklets published by the Alberta Teachers’ Association and The Society for Safe and Caring Schools and Communities.

Safe Spaces Initiative: Timeline of Events

Here I will expand on aspects of the strategic plan for the Safe Spaces Initiative introduced above. Dr. Carl Amrhein, the Provost, and Dr. Frank Robinson, Dean of Students have endorsed the Safe Spaces Initiative, which grew and developed significantly during the 2010-2011 academic year.

• In September 2010, the iSMSS Safe Spaces Initiative coordinator and volunteers attended orientation, sharing a table with Siderite – group for sexual and gender minority students living in U of A residences – at the student services fair.

• During the Fall 2010 semester, a group of student volunteers were gathered to provide input on the mission of the Safe Spaces Initiative and the key areas to consider.

• In October, the iSMSS Safe Spaces Initiative coordinator and volunteers presented at iSMSS’s InsideOUT Speaker Series to discuss and hear others’ views about the campus climate for LGBTQ individuals.

• In November, those Safe Spaces Initiative staff and volunteers attended the Joint Services Open House, raising awareness of iSMSS and the developing Safe Spaces Initiative among staff and faculty.

• In January 2011, iSMSS sponsored and organized a retreat, which was open to all students and staff members of the University of Alberta. This retreat served as a think tank and brainstorming session to discuss the current state of the U of A’s climate for LGBTQ individuals. Participants discussed what goals would be appropriate, what actions they wanted taken, and identified who would support these actions. At this time, contact was made with the Office of the Architect, who is assisting in mapping out gender-neutral washrooms around campus.
• In February, a follow-up to the retreat was held. A condensed version of the action plan was made available, and various points were clarified, discussed and prioritized.
• Since May onwards, the Safe Spaces Initiative coordinator and volunteers have been working on creating a visual identity and establishing various forms of communication. Visuals are currently being developed. A Facebook page, twitter page, web page, and listserv have all been created to aid in the dissemination of information about the Safe Spaces Initiative.
• The Safe Spaces Initiative has been increasing awareness around campus through a series of presentations. Presentations have been given to the Health and Wellness Team as well as to Infolink and the Centre for Student Development.
• A staff network has been established to identify a staff member in each faculty as a safe resource person for LGBTQ students. To this point, 11 faculties have identified a staff member for this purpose.
• A campus climate survey has been completed. It will be distributed to students in the Fall 2011 semester to build knowledge and understanding of students’ views on the LGBTQ campus climate and what needs are manifest across campus.

iSMSS Knowledge Dissemination

1. Contribution to Congress 2011: The Institute organized and hosted a pre-conference: Queer Issues in Education and Culture III. The full-day pre-conference at CSSE/Congress 2011 involved faculty and graduate students from Canadian and US universities. The Institute produced and edited Proceedings for the pre-conference.

2. Establishing a Special Interest Group: Members of the Canadian Association for the Study of Women in Education who attended the AGM at Congress 2011 voted unanimously to establish a Queer Studies in Education and Culture (QSEC) SIG within the Association. iSMSS sponsored the resolution. I wrote a Constitution for the new SIG, which will be a formal part of CSSE at Congress 2012.

3. Work with the Public Health Agency of Canada: PHAC contracted iSMSS to research and produce a report entitled Sexual Minority and Gender Variant Youth and Linkages between their Mental Health and Sexual Health. This will be available to the public through PHAC resources.

4. Inside OUT Speakers’ Series: The Institute also plays a vital role in campus knowledge mobilization through ventures such as our InsideOUT Speakers’ Series. We host monthly seminars during the academic year that focus on sexual and gender minority research in education and culture. These seminars are designed as an interdisciplinary engagement for academics, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students. Undergraduates and members of the larger community are also invited to attend.
Funders for the Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services

I would like to acknowledge and publicly thank the following funders that enable us to run our year-round programs to make life better for sexual minority and gender variant youth.

- Alberta Children and Youth Services, Government of Alberta who have provided funding for the Camp fYrefly Coordinator position through the Community Incentive Fund.
- The City of Edmonton - Family and Community Support Services (FCSS), Edmonton Community Foundation, and the United Way Capital Region whose collective funding enables the Sexual and Gender Minority Youth Intervention and Outreach Worker Program.
- Other key funders include the TELUS Community Foundation, ATB Financial, Edmonton Public Teachers' Charitable Trust Fund, and the Stollery Charity Foundation.
- Other sources of funding include Camp fYrefly’s Annual Gala Wine Tasting and Silent Auction, the Mayor’s Pride Brunch in Support of Camp fYrefly, and hundreds of individual and community donations, which support Camp fYrefly’s operations and outreach work.
- We would also like to thank the Office of the Dean of Students for providing operating funds and the Faculty of Education for providing operating space and support.

Our Websites

For further information, please visit our websites:

Institute for Sexual Minority Studies and Services (iSMSS)
www.ismss.ualberta.ca

Camp fYrefly
www.fyrefly.ualberta.ca