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Rochester Institute of Technology: Keeping LGBTQ+ Students Connected



We all had to find ways to adjust during the COVID-19 pandemic and RIT's Chris Hinesley didn't miss a beat. He is the Assistant Director for Campus Life-The Q Center which is a safe space and resource center for LGBTQ+ students, faculty and staff.

When the pandemic forced the campus to close this past spring, Hinesley opened an avenue to keep students in the LGBTQ+ community connected. He created a virtual hangout and support space because he was concerned about their mental health. Hinesley says early data out of the University of Maryland Prevention Center, combined with individual student experiences were alarming.

“LGBTQ+ students reported increased rates of having to go back into the closet as a result of moving back in with parents, increased rates of hate speech and racial slurs, and of course, the isolation of being queer or trans was exacerbated by the lockdown. There were also new challenges tied to online learning, such as mismatches between name-in-use and name now visible on the screen or “in the system”, and added difficulty in building relationships with faculty or other students, which usually help during gender transition and the coming out process. It seemed obvious we would be facing a mental health tsunami.”

The new virtual weekly sessions replaced the formal, structured in-person support groups at the Q Center, co-led with RIT mental health counselors. Feedback from students was positive and the virtual sessions opened new possibilities to serve students who had never had access to Q Center sessions before.

Hinesley says the largest number of attendees came from RIT's Dubai campus. He says for many, the online meetings were their very first opportunities to openly express their identities.

“Before we thought about “zoom bombers”, we posted our program link to social media and our students in Dubai saw it. They joined the support space even though it was late at night for them. It was just amazing to work with them and learn about the reasons that coming out is really not an option for them. It really taught us a lot about serving students who may never be on the main RIT campus but whom we can still support. This is something that we plan to carry forward after the pandemic is over.”

The RIT Q Center-“Creating Safe Spaces, Building Allies, Educating the RIT Community.”

**To learn more about the RIT Q Center,
visit: rit.edu/studentaffairs/qcenter/**