The Importance of Being Acknowledged
A Response to the NWP Mission Statement

BY NICK D’ALESSANDRO, MELANIE HAMMER, AND ED OSTERMAN

Friday, November 21, Denver
We begin the day at the National Writing Project Annual Meeting. A chance to greet old friends. An opportunity to share stories and professional information. Along with the upbeat news of more sites, an expanding network, and increased federal funding, Executive Director Richard Sterling shares the NWP mission statement on an overhead. The statement contains an anti-discrimination policy in which the NWP endorses diversities of “race, gender, class, ethnicity, and language.” It seems like a great list, except that it stops before the end. Where is the support that includes sexual orientation?

Some of us shift uncomfortably in our seats. We look down the aisle at our colleagues from our own site and from other sites. We’ve known and worked with many of the people in this room for years. We’ve attended meetings and conferences together. We’ve collaborated on workshops and articles. We’ve dined and celebrated together. And, of course, we have all built, supported, and been nurtured by this organization. We like the people in this room. We respect them. We have all been committed to better writing and better teaching.

But as we listen to the mission statement read aloud, we feel awkward and uncomfortable. Uncomfortable for the first time in 20 years of writing project gatherings. And we wonder, as our eyes scan the rows of occupied seats, do others notice an omission? Does anyone else in this room feel something is askew? Is this really the NWP’s mission statement, one that disappears gay and lesbian members?

Whatever individual members may be thinking, we don’t have time to discuss it. We’re off to a workshop that two of us are presenting at the main NCTE meeting. It’s called “Queer Teaching and Learning: Telling Our Stories.” In that room, people begin to talk. We hear everyday experiences about “faggot” being used as a casual word, about anti-gay sentiments expressed lightly by colleagues we might have assumed would know better, about the daily lives of students and teachers who hide a part of themselves as a matter of course. One New York City middle school teacher talked about how fearful he was of coming out; this in a city that is probably considered by the rest of the country to be gay-friendly and where his job is explicitly protected by the New York City Board of Education regulations.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 9
At a subsequent NCTE workshop, billed as “For Straight Teachers: Dispelling Myths about Gays and Lesbians,” the tone of the room is somewhat more positive. A young man who graduated from an alternative high school talks about how he was able to be out in his school, despite the problems that arose from his public acknowledgment of his identity. It’s also somewhat more desperate: teachers from around the country want to talk about their teaching, telling not only their own stories, but their students’ and colleagues’ and friends’. In that room are teachers who want to include discussions of gays and lesbians in their classrooms, but are afraid, or want guidance or, at least, the chance to share expertise. Teachers make suggestions to each other, toss out ideas that worked for them, but leave the session asking for more opportunities to talk and share.

What is one to make of these three experiences? On the one hand, there are the gay and lesbian students and teachers, many of whom live in fear and silence whether their community is a small rural town in Wyoming, a suburb of Birmingham, or a large diverse urban area like Philadelphia or Los Angeles. Like teachers and students everywhere, they want to teach and learn in a safe and nurturing environment that respects them. They are joined by a larger group of teachers and students who want to find ways to bring these voices into their classrooms, to expand the possibilities for literature and to make room at the table.

One thing we were struck by at the sessions we attended was the spontaneous exchange of information. Teachers volunteering solutions and suggestions to questions other teachers raised. This is the model we know: teachers teaching teachers, the writing project’s model. In that room, straight and gay teachers asked about materials to read, approaches to writing, ways to structure the tasks of reading and writing in their classrooms so that all students could recognize themselves and have their voices heard. The teachers in those rooms were asking for what the NWP has always provided: a place for teachers to work together, to talk about classroom issues, to exchange information and resources, to build a network of support.

After the convention, some of us shared our anger and distress with other teacher-consultants at our local sites, many of whom, both homosexual and heterosexual, were stunned that the national organization had taken this stance. By letter and email, we expressed our concerns to Richard Sterling. Richard listened and suggested a meeting.

To publicly ignore the passion, talent, and hard work that gay and lesbian directors, consultants, and teachers have brought to the writing project as well as to the teaching profession is to deny the personal and professional identities of multitudes. At a time when homophobia continues to be tolerated in our nation’s classrooms and anti-gay violence still rages across the country, does the NWP really want to be silent and invisible?

Friday, February 25, New York City

At this meeting, teacher-consultants and directors from New York City Writing Project and the Long Island Writing Project meet with Richard and NWP Co-Director Judy Buchanan, from the NWP East Coast office. Following a discussion, we begin working on the idea of extending the discussion within our network. Richard reminds us that the NWP is not a top-down organization; changes with the national network have traditionally emerged from the expressed concerns and collective hard work of teacher-consultants throughout the country. We agree to publicly acknowledge our concerns about the mission statement and what that statement represents: a limited vision of diversity. As a place to begin, we would like to issue a call to other sites for their ideas and input.

One of our assumptions is that, as usual, some of this important work is already going on in various sites. An initial course of action, then, is to share our experiences. We would like to promote the work going on and build on it, beginning with these shared experiences. What kinds of support and outreach are various sites giving to their gay and lesbian members and students? How are sites exploring gay and lesbian concerns along with other issues of equity and equality? What approaches have sites found effective in helping teachers deal with these issues in their classrooms, inservice seminars, and summer institutes? Have site newsletters published stories, articles, or lists of resources for their membership?

This year at the NWP annual meeting in Milwaukee, there will be time and space for a serious discussion of these issues. The national leadership would like input from local sites as to how this conversation might be structured. What issues should be addressed and how might the national network move forward? Please send responses to Judy Buchanan (jbuchanan@philadelphia.org) about both the work you may already be doing in your local site and your ideas for the session at the annual meeting.

To publicly ignore the passion, talent, and hard work that gay and lesbian directors, consultants, and teachers have brought to the writing project as well as to the teaching profession is to deny the personal and professional identities of multitudes. Other national professional organizations such as NCTE, the AFT, and the NEA have passed resolutions explicitly supporting the rights of their gay and lesbian members.

At a time when homophobia continues to be tolerated in our nation’s classrooms and anti-gay violence still rages across the country, does the NWP really want to be silent and invisible? The writers of this article, long-time NWP members, think not.

We believe NWP members are ready for an expansive and informed dialogue, and that our national network will demonstrate, as it has in the past, its capacity for growth and inclusion.