

Community college board to revisit gender identity issue

By Richard Schultz

An LGBT employee group is working to reintroduce a measure that would insert the phrase “gender identity” in the Maricopa Community College District’s nondiscrimination policy.

Dale Heuser, president of Equality Maricopa, said he expects to present the issue at the Aug. 23 meeting of the district’s governing board. A vote on the change could come during the board’s Sept. 27 meeting.

Heuser noted that more than 390 U.S. colleges and universities have nondiscrimination policies that include gender identity, including Arizona State University and the University of Arizona.

Equality Maricopa attempted a similar effort in 2008, which gained support from the Chancellor’s Executive Committee. When that proposal was considered, the governing board heard from supporters including a transsexual student, a member of the college counseling faculty and even a college president.

But the 2008 proposal never got a vote of the governing board after it was opposed by Family Watch International, a Gilbert-based nonprofit conservative advocacy organization and others.

Lori Girshick, a professor of sociology at Chandler-Gilbert Community College who was president of Equality Maricopa in 2008, said that the timing is better to revisit the issue.

She said membership of the governing board has changed and more members support the proposal. “Even if an individual is uncomfortable or unsure about transgender people, that person can still protect them from discrimination and harassment,” she said.

Girshick said that there is inconsistent treatment on the colleges’ 10 campuses toward transgender individuals. “There remains a huge level of ignorance among district employees about who transgender people are or what their issues are,” she said.

With what he’s learned from the 2008 effort, Heuser is seeking support from LGBT organizations. An on-line petition has been created for those who want to voice their support.

Heuser, a faculty member in the Health and Exercise Department at Paradise Valley Community College, also is making a video with stories about students and faculty members that will be played for the governing board.

Robt Pela, communications coordinator for the Phoenix chapter of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, applauded the effort. “Equality Maricopa is working — like GLESN — to make it safe for all students,” he said. “Students don’t want to be bullied. If they’ve have been bullied before, then college feels like high school again.”

Girshick and Rory Gilbert, senior manager of diversity and engagement for the community colleges, have written a “Frequently Asked Questions” guide that takes on opponents who suggest that gender identity disorder is a mental illness. “The World Professional Association for Transgender Health unequivocally views treatment for this condition as medically necessary,” they wrote.

Equality Maricopa is a group of Maricopa Community Colleges LGBT employees and allies dedicated to a safe, inclusive and supportive environment.

Equality Maricopa’s online petition supporting the proposal is at www.ipetitions.com/petition/maricopagenderidentityequality/.

The governing board also can be contacted by visiting www.maricopa.edu/gvbd/. **-E**

2008 debate exposed divided views on gender identity proposal

A variety of views were expressed when the Maricopa Community Colleges Governing Board considering adding gender identity protections its nondiscrimination policy in October 2008. The proposal never went to a vote.

Here’s a sampling of that previous debate gleaned from public records:

■ **Maria Hesse**, then president of Chandler-Gilbert Community College: “It is my sincere hope that we commit ourselves to having a policy that asks for no confusion about our commitment to non-discrimination based upon gender identity. We need to be explicit, not just to avoid lawsuits, but to encourage a culture that is welcoming, inclusive, and respectful for everyone in this room and every member of our families.”

■ **Erica Keppler**, a transsexual woman who was attending Scottsdale Community College: “For me personally, this change would allow me to move through and between the campuses knowing that I am protected. I don’t have to hide. I don’t have to fear that if I am harassed, attacked, academically thwarted, etc., that I will have no recourse and I can trust that the system will be on my side.”

■ **Loman Clark**, a member of the counseling faculty at Phoenix College: “This process ... is a teachable moment and people are learning of what we are made by our willingness to engage together on this journey. If Maricopa believes in diversity and inclusivity, any time it comes into our consciousness that employees or students suffer because

of a gap in our awareness or critical thinking skills ... we should be looking at how to safeguard the ability of all to be engaged in our educational community.”

■ **Jerry Walker**, former governing board member: “Imposing rules to try to make dysfunctional behavior ‘normal’ is just ridiculous and will waste the educational resources of community colleges.”

■ **Andy Biggs**, a Republican state representative: “This policy would encourage more transgenders to apply and express themselves.” he said. “Many would see this as a radical change [that] would have a negative impact on enrollment and believe this would be harmful.” **-E**