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The Queer Student Affairs Career of Stephen Lenton, 1970-1980

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The Queer Student Affairs Career of Stephen Lenton, 1970-1980

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This article primarily uses document-based historical methods to reconstruct Stephen Lenton's LGBTQ advocacy while a student affairs professional at Virginia Commonwealth University from 1970 to 1980. Lenton enjoyed significant career success in his first several years at VCU, establishing popular and successful programs and a strong rapport with students. In 1974, Lenton agreed to advise VCU's first LGBTQ student organization, even as its members sued the institution for refusing to register their group. After the students won the lawsuit, Lenton became a visible and noted advocate for LGBTQ people and became an openly gay man on campus. Yet as Lenton's visibility increased, his career prospects at VCU diminished. VCU leaders rescinded a promotion, refused to incorporate LGBTQ advocacy into his job description, canceled his popular program, removed him from supervising other student affairs professionals, moved him to a worse office, and lowered his salary increases. These hostilities led Lenton to resign from VCU and leave the student affairs profession. Lenton continued to press VCU to eliminate homophobia as a private citizen, contributing to improved campus climates for LGBTQ people. The years that frame this study represent the beginning of a gradual shift within the student affairs profession from oppressing LGBTQ people to supporting their development, yet this history remains largely untold. Indeed, this article may be the first history centered on a student affairs professional who publicly advocated for LGBTQ rights and openly identified as gay.

As he prepared to leave his position as assistant dean of student services at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in 1980 following 10 years of service, Stephen Lenton (1980d) published an op-ed in the campus newspaper. As an administrator, Lenton had combated racism, sexism, and ableism. Lenton admitted that he had not always been successful in his advocacy and had often been imperfect as a person. "But, I've tried and VCU has paid me well," he wrote, "until my last advocacy choice" (p. 4). This advocacy

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had been to combat homophobia and support LGBTQ¹ students and employees. Lenton—who became, over time, an openly gay man at work when such an identity was incredibly rare—had called out faculty members who used homophobic slurs in class. He had counseled LGBTQ students who had “been physically and emotionally attacked in dorms” (Lenton, 1980d, p. 4). He knew of students and faculty “forced out of” VCU for being perceived as gay but who were actually straight, and he knew many others whose mental health suffered from the stress of being anything but heterosexual at VCU. Lenton had also advised the Gay Alliance of Students (GAS), VCU’s first LGBTQ student organization, even while it sued his supervisors to gain the rights regularly afforded to other groups (Hevel & Cain, *in press*).

Lenton (1980d) warned fellow student affairs professionals about the risks of LGBTQ advocacy. “The student development worker who wants to assist our society [to] overcome homophobia, discrimination, and the consequences of these forces on students’ development,” he noted, “needs to realize that even the most simple program may be received as controversial” (p. 4). Since Lenton had publicly advocated for LGBTQ rights, VCU leaders had canceled a popular program he had created, decreased his staff from six professionals to one part-time secretary, stopped appointing him to important committees, lowered his salary increases, and rescinded a promotion. “My sphere of influence, responsibility and input seems destined to shrink to something smaller than a gnat’s eye,” he wrote (p. 4).

Stephen Lenton had a queer career in student affairs. It was *queer* in the original sense of the word—a deviation from the typical and normal—as Lenton had a strange and unique path to being appointed assistant dean of student life at VCU in 1970. After a difficult childhood, Lenton left college to join the Peace Corps and later interviewed for the VCU position while out on bail following a Vietnam War protest. Lenton’s career was also *queer* in its pejorative meaning—a disparaging and offensive label for deviations from heterosexuality—as Lenton experienced discrimination for his sexual orientation. At VCU, Lenton endured homophobic comments, resistance to incorporating LGBTQ advocacy into his job responsibilities, and rescinded promotions due to his sexual orientation. Finally, Lenton’s student affairs career was also *queer* in its contemporary, empowering usage of the word, one that seeks to disrupt “broader societal oppressions that influences and were influenced by existing gender and sexuality norms” (Beck, 2019, p. 1357). By the end of his time at VCU, Lenton was recognized as an openly gay man and effective LGBTQ advocate who educated others about LGBTQ people and worked to end homophobia.

This article focuses on Stephen Lenton’s LGBTQ advocacy while a student affairs administrator at VCU from 1970 to 1980. It primarily uses document-based historical methods to analyze, interpret, and reconstruct Lenton’s career (e.g., Howell & Prevenir, 2001; McCulloch, 2004), drawing extensively on materials in the Stephen Micheal Lenton Papers at the Virginia Historical Society’s Virginia Museum of History and Culture. This collection consists of over 3,000 items originally belonging to Lenton that were deposited after his death in 2001. In highlighting Lenton’s

¹ In this article, we use LGBTQ, an acronym of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer, to describe a larger umbrella of people with sexual and gender minoritized identities. It is important to note that this acronym was not in use in the years of this study. While Lenton identified as bisexual for part of his life and was knowledgeable about people who today might identify as trans or gender nonconforming, most of the LGBTQ advocacy in these years, including Lenton’s, centered on and used the terms *gay*, *gay men*, and *lesbians*.

contributions and challenges, this article may be the first history centered on a student affairs professional who publicly advocated for LGBTQ rights and openly identified as gay.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Today, student affairs may be seen as a generally safe career path for LGBTQ people and a profession that emphasizes creating safe campus climates for LGBTQ people. However, little is known about earlier generations of LGBTQ student affairs professionals, and previous scholars have highlighted how some student affairs professionals oppressed LGBTQ students. Reconstructing Stephen Lenton's experiences at VCU adds an important line of inquiry into the historiography of student affairs and LGBTQ people, or what might be called student affairs' queer past. The existing historical scholarship that informs this queer past can be divided into two distinct threads. First, historians who studied deans of women—the first widespread student affairs position that was established in the late 19th and early 20th centuries—have noted that many of these women remained unmarried and sometimes lived with other women. This was true for deans of women at both predominantly White (Bashaw, 1999; Klink, 2014) and historically Black institutions (Miller & Pruitt-Logan, 2012). While the sexual nature of these relationships remains unknown, they were certainly loving and often lasted for decades. By the 1920s, cohabitating women drew more social scrutiny. Deans of women became vulnerable to speculation that they were lesbians (Nidiffer, 2000). Even those deans of women who did not have a companionate relationship with another woman transgressed the sexual norms of their era in which it was expected that White women would marry and not work outside the home.

The second thread of this scholarship highlights how student affairs professionals oppressed LGBTQ people across much of the 20th century. From at least the 1920s through the 1960s, student affairs professionals regularly expelled students they suspected of being LGBTQ (Dilley, 2002a, 2002b; Nash & Silverman, 2015; Sartorius, 2014; Wright, 2006). Some student affairs professionals created sting operations to entrap LGBTQ students (Dilley, 2002a). When students attempted to transfer, attend graduate school, or request recommendations for employers, student affairs professionals shared charges of homosexuality with institutions and employers on transcripts and reference letters (Dilley, 2002a, 2002b; Sartorius, 2014). Such draconian measures prevented graduations and forestalled promising careers, resulting in some students dying by suicide (Dilley, 2002b; Wright, 2006). Beginning in the late 1960s, student affairs professionals often resisted efforts of LGBTQ students to form campus organizations (Beemyn, 2003; Cain & Hevel, 2021; Hevel & Thompson, 2022). By the 1970s, many student affairs professionals had moved away from expelling real or perceived LGBTQ students to mandating counseling, but such "treatment" often had the end goal of changing their sexual orientation (Bailey, 1999; Dilley, 2002b).

As perhaps the first history centered on an openly LGBTQ student affairs professional, this article provides insights into how Stephen Lenton developed into an LGBTQ advocate and became increasingly "out" on campus. Moreover, it shows tactics used to advance LGBTQ rights, while highlighting successes and setbacks. With a career in student affairs that spanned the 1970s, Lenton's experiences represent a transition from an era when faculty and staff were fired for being or being perceived as LGBTQ (Weiler, 2007; Werth, 2001; Wright, 2006) to an era when many colleges and universities added sexual orientation to their nondiscrimination

policies (Dilley, 2019). These years also encapsulate the first full decade of the existence of LGBTQ college student organizations (Beemyn, 2003), when the first staff were hired to work directly with LGBTQ students (Dilley, 2019), and when scholars produced the first developmental theories about LGBTQ people (Evans et al., 1998). By the 1990s, student affairs professionals would learn these theories to promote identity development among LGBTQ students. Indeed, a major change within student affairs in the late 20th century was a proactive, inclusive approach to working with LGBTQ students (Hevel & Wells Dolan, *in press*). A history of Lenton's student affairs career reveals the challenges facing those who helped lay the foundation for that change.

PREPARING FOR VCU

Born on August 18, 1941, in Los Angeles, California, Lenton (2000) was his parents' second of three children to survive childbirth. He grew up poor in a largely Latinx, rural community outside Whittier, California. His mother had alcohol use disorder, had been arrested several times for neglect, and had a tenuous grasp on reality. His father was a long-haul truck driver who moved livestock across the West. When he was home, he and his son had what Lenton later termed "a very problematic—well, definitely complex relationship" (p. 5). Lenton was hurt that his father considered him lazy and a liar, telling him that he needed to go to college since he would never work hard enough to earn "an honest wage" (p. 6). Lenton's (2000) first sexual experiences were as a teenager with men in the U.S. Air Force who his older brother brought home for weekend visits while in the service.

Although Lenton's (2000) childhood had challenges, there were aspects that prepared him for his future. His parents taught him loyalty, the importance of working hard, and a commitment to activism. Moreover, growing up in a diverse community exposed discrimination in schooling and society that would influence his later commitments. Lenton, who was White, recalled that "early on I was very, very aware of ethnic differences and discrimination" (p. 4). He felt aligned with outsiders and those who experienced discrimination.

School proved to be an outlet for Lenton (2000), and he came to see it as his way to leave home. In 1959, at age 17, he enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley. He struggled academically at first, but loved the environment, speakers, and activity. He became deeply involved in the U.S. Civil Rights Movement. He was a leader in the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and helped raise thousands of dollars to support the legal defenses of several Freedom Riders. Eventually, the stress of his activism and disenchantment with in-fighting in the movement contributed to his decision to leave Berkeley without a degree and join the Peace Corps in 1962 (Lenton, 2000).

Lenton (2000) spent 6 years as a member of the Peace Corps in the Philippines, first as a volunteer, then as a paid administrator. When he returned to the United States, he worked for a year as a training coordinator for the Peace Corps in Washington, DC. Finding neither the position nor his part-time studies at George Washington University satisfying, Lenton returned to Berkeley in fall 1969 to finish his degree. There, he became more sexually involved with men and began to identify as bisexual. It was, he recalled, "an intellectual conviction" (p. 58). That same year, he witnessed his first LGBTQ pride demonstration, but becoming involved in the LGBTQ community did not occur to him.

Lenton's plan to become a teacher changed when a former Peace Corps colleague, Richard Wilson, provided a different opportunity. Wilson had become vice president of student affairs at VCU in 1969. Shortly after Lenton's graduation from Berkeley the following summer, Wilson offered him a position as an assistant dean of student life—while Lenton was out on bail following a Vietnam War protest. Lenton (2000) recalled,

He wanted to really shake things up at the University but didn't really know what he wanted to do. They didn't have any money to really hire anybody. . . . So I was perfect. I was cheap. I had a BA, and I worked my buns off. (p. 34)

When Lenton arrived at VCU, he had previous sexual experiences with men, was in a relationship with a woman, and was perceived as heterosexual by those on campus (Ender, personal communication).

STUDENT AFFAIRS WORK AT VCU

Lenton made many contributions to student affairs at VCU, even as he earned a master's degree in counseling in 1973 and a doctorate 3 years later from the Union Graduate School in Cincinnati. In his first year at VCU, he oversaw "University Week," which included leadership training sessions and seminars examining the purposes of an urban university (e.g., "Student Aides Needed," 1970). In 1971, he worked with Dean of Student Life Alfred Matthews to initiate a program to help first-year students adjust to college by focusing on self-identity and career development ("Freshman Adjustment May be Easier Now," 1971). The following year, he helped design and implement the Summer Orientation Advising and Registration (SOAR) program, VCU's first new student orientation program (Lenton, 2000). He was also involved in a laborious, but ultimately unsuccessful, endeavor to create a representative student government (Bendle, 1974).

The program with which Lenton would become most associated was the Awareness Series. Developed by Lenton and several colleagues in the early 1970s, the series was a collaboration between multiple student affairs offices and the School of Education (Griffin, 1974). It consisted of for-credit courses, noncredit courses, and workshops. "Education of Self," often shortened to "Ed of Self," was the foundational course in which new students explored "their own identities and relationships in society" (Griffin, 1974, p. 11). In addition to Ed of Self, there were advanced classes in interpersonal relations, small group facilitation, and cross-cultural communication.

The Awareness Series was immediately popular and Lenton, himself, was highly regarded by many of the students. One recently recollected, "Stephen was bright, sensitive, I just loved him" (Cirelli, personal communication), while another noted his charisma, humor, and "great laugh" (Kriegel, personal communication). By the end of the 1973–1974 academic year, Lenton estimated that nearly 20% of VCU students had participated in some aspect of the Awareness Series, a remarkable participation rate for an urban university. In July 1974, the *Richmond News Leader* profiled the Awareness Series and Lenton. Noting that Lenton's approach to student development work was informed by his "experiences in the encounter and sensitivity movements, as a teacher in the Peace Corps and as a student at the University of California at Berkeley," the reporter signaled to readers its liberal foundation (Griffin, 1974, p. 11). In 1976,

the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) recognized the program as the most innovative in the region. The success of the Awareness Series and Lenton's liberal approach to education, not to mention his own emerging gay identity, would directly connect to his LGBTQ advocacy.

INITIAL LGBTQ ADVOCACY AT VCU

Much of Lenton's LGBTQ advocacy originated from the Awareness Series. Lenton's first mention of such advocacy in his archive occurred in an October 1973 memo he sent to his VCU supervisors and colleagues. Lenton (1973a) noted that he had recently read a book that focused on the author's "homosexuality and reactions to his public self-disclosure of his sexual identity" (p. 1). Lenton described the book as "a study in courage and authenticity" (p. 1). In this same memo, Lenton noted accepting an invitation to join a committee—the first of its kind at VCU—to explore "program ideas for gay students" (p. 4). The next month Lenton (1973b) reported reading *Society and the Healthy Homosexual*, "a radical book which makes good common sense," to prepare for "On Being a Man," a workshop in the Awareness Series (p. 1).

The Awareness Series also helped start two important LGBTQ organizations. In spring 1974, the Awareness Series planned a human sexuality week that included a visit by Rita Mae Brown, who had recently published what would become the classic coming-of-age lesbian novel *Rubyfruit Jungle* (Saucer, 1974). At the end of the speech, Dottie Cirelli, a psychology graduate student who had spearheaded Brown's invitation, passed around a sign-up sheet for those interested in starting an LGBTQ organization (Cirelli, personal communication). Within a few months, two overlapping groups had evolved, Gay Awareness in Perspective (GAP), a group for the larger Richmond community, and what became the Gay Alliance of Students (GAS), an organization for VCU students. Lenton was involved in both, helping to lead the former and encouraging the latter. A founder of GAS remembered that when they wanted to become a registered university group, Lenton told them, "If you get this together, I'll agree to sponsor it" (McNeill, 2016, para. 18).

By centering identity and self-awareness, the Awareness Series provided students opportunities to consider their sexual orientation and for Lenton to suggest that some consider joining GAS. Such was the case with Walter Foery in the mid-1970s. Recalling his Ed of Self course taught by Lenton, Foery (personal communication) said, "Through that, I became more and more political about being gay." Due to Foery's disclosures about being gay in Ed of Self, Lenton told him about GAS. Foery soon became an active GAS member.

Lenton faced significant challenges as GAS's advisor. When the students attempted to register as an official university organization in fall 1974, the Office of Student Life abandoned its normal procedure (Hevel & Cain, *in press*). Rather than approving the organization—as the staff had for the previous 144 groups that had requested registration—they forwarded the application to Vice President Wilson, who had recruited Lenton to VCU. He, in turn, presented it to VCU's governing board. Fearing backlash and funding cuts, the board refused to register GAS. With backing from the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Virginia, GAS filed a lawsuit in federal court claiming that the board's decision violated its members' constitutional rights. Lenton (2000) later recounted, "Gay students were denied access to meeting on campus. And I said 'you can't do that. This is a public institution.' . . . I was the advisor to the students who sued the university and my

own boss” (p. 42). In a split opinion, the judge ruled that VCU needed to provide GAS with some benefits of registration, including access to facilities and the ability to advertise on campus, but did not have to register the group or fund it (Hevel & Cain, *in press*).

After the ruling, Foery, by then a leader of GAS, and Lenton issued a press release that criticized the decision (Foery & Lenton, 1975). And GAS soon appealed. In October 1976, the Fourth Circuit Court of Appeals sided decisively in GAS’s favor. In so doing, the court not only required VCU to officially register GAS, but became the first federal appellate court to rule in favor of an LGBTQ college student organization and against a public university (Hevel & Cain, *in press*).

As cowriting the press release suggests, Lenton proved a vital resource for GAS members as they navigated the lawsuit. Foery (personal communication) described Lenton as “my mentor in many, many ways.” Brenda Kriegel, another GAS leader, recalled, “He was the most compassionate and supportive person [and] teacher that I have ever met. As a dean of student life and a veteran of the Peace Corps, he was all about promoting fairness, justice and human rights” (McNeill, 2016, para. 72). In fact, as the case approached oral arguments in 1976, Lenton and Kriegel represented GAS as guests on a radio show broadcasting from the College of William and Mary (“Gay Debate,” 1976).

Lenton’s deep involvement with GAS was clear in a report to his supervisors in February 1976, shortly before the appeal’s oral arguments. He provided a detailed update on GAS, reporting that GAS had decided to hold a fundraising dance to ameliorate what he termed “our debt” (Lenton, 1976b, p. 1). The challenges were real, but they also proved invigorating in ways. Lenton later noted, “I thought, ‘Oh I am so bad!’ But it was a wonderful time, because I had never really invested in gay stuff before” (Lenton, 2000, p. 42).

Lenton’s investment in GAS coincided with his own developing identity as an openly gay man. By 1975, he referred to himself as “a gay man” on VCU letterhead to colleagues (Lenton, 1975a, p. 1). Lenton began identifying as gay rather than bisexual after a relationship with a recent VCU alumnus. “It was through sex with him,” Lenton (2000) recalled, “that I realized I was capable of bisexual behavior, but I was really a gay man” (p. 59). Lenton’s growing political activism with GAS coincided with his influential roles in GAP. After GAS’s legal victory and as a more openly gay man, Lenton increased his already impressive record of LGBTQ advocacy.

A RECOGNIZED LGBTQ EXPERT AND ADVOCATE

With GAS registered, Lenton expanded his role in supporting LGBTQ people at VCU and in the community. He continued to advise GAS as it moved from an organization fighting for registration to one that served the needs of its constituents. Lenton listed advising GAS as a job duty to his supervisors, and he wished to be evaluated on it (Lenton, 1978b, 1979e). GAS meetings often occurred in the basement of a building that housed student affairs offices, a location that Lenton likely arranged. Lenton facilitated GAS workshops on the “Gay/Lesbian Experience” in the late 1970s (e.g., *Gay/Lesbian Experience*, ’77, 1977). In February 1979, he planned a 2-day retreat for GAS entitled “Building Community.” For one activity, participants created skits about events that affirmed LGBTQ community and those that inhibited LGBTQ community (Gay Alliance of Students, 1979).

Lenton also expanded his efforts to serve LGBTQ people at VCU beyond GAS. He ensured that the orientation program introduced resources for LGBTQ students and that the counseling center was attentive to their concerns (Lenton, 1979e). In 1976, he advertised a small group for people who wanted to confidentially “discuss being gay or possibly gay” at the VCU Counseling Center in GAP’s newsletter (“Got a Closeted Friend?”, 1976). After meeting pioneering gay historian Jonathan Katz at the Gay Academic Union Conference in fall 1976, Lenton (1977b) organized a 15-member group at VCU that read Katz’s book. He also used his position on campus to make VCU resources available to the larger LGBTQ community. In April 1980, he hosted a 4-hour weekend meeting on campus for the Virginia Coalition for Lesbian and Gay Rights, for which he served as cochair (Lenton, 1980c).

Promoting policies to support LGBTQ students in the late 1970s, Lenton surveyed their experiences in VCU residence halls (Lenton, 1978f). The survey revealed that most respondents remained closeted while living on campus and were “exposed to daily homophobic conversations and behaviors” (Lenton, 1978f, p. 1). While the students enjoyed the opportunity to build relationships with fellow students and, discretely, fellow LGBTQ people, they reported feeling isolated, worrying about sexual assaults, and, if out, being expected to “gladly accept all sexual advances” on their floor (p. 1). They were frustrated by an “unwritten expectation” that conflicts between an LGBTQ and straight roommate were solved by the LGBTQ roommate moving out (p. 2). The students recommended more staff training about LGBTQ people and that homophobic students be disqualified from serving as a resident advisor (RA).

These survey results helped justify Lenton’s urgency in pressing VCU leaders to improve the experiences of LGBTQ people. In 1977, he wrote individual letters to 16 members of the VCU presidential search committee to insist the finalists attest that sexual orientation would not affect employment at VCU and that they would support the American Association of University Professors’ (AAUP) nondiscrimination policy, which had recently added “sexual or affectional preference” (e.g., Lenton, 1977e). Two years later, he wrote to the dean of nursing after learning that the American Nurses Association had adopted a nondiscrimination policy that included “sexual and affectional preference.” Noting his role in career counseling, Lenton asked if he could “honestly advise our students that their applications to nursing school . . . will not be negatively prejudiced by membership in the Gay Alliance [of] Students” (Lenton, 1979a, p. 1). Despite receiving a response that sexual orientation was not raised in the admission process (Andrako, 1979), Lenton (1979c) arranged a meeting to discuss his “questions and concerns” (p. 1).

Lenton also brandished his pen to support LGBTQ issues in the community. In February 1977, he pressed a police colonel to conduct “an exhaustive investigation” into a recent murder of an LGBTQ person that would lead to “an early arrest and just conviction.” The murder had “seriously hurt the sense of safety gay people in Richmond have,” Lenton wrote, “which is often precarious at best” (Lenton, 1977c, p. 1). Several months later, he chastised his congressman for supporting an amendment that barred low-income individuals from receiving federally funded legal aid to file lawsuits related to LGBTQ rights (Satterfield, 1977).

Much of Lenton’s LGBTQ advocacy was more public than his letter-writing efforts. Lenton regularly spoke to classes about LGBTQ issues. Overcoming initial misgivings, Lenton spoke about homosexuality in an abnormal psychology class in 1977. He and a GAS member were “informative” and “helped to erase stereotypes,” claimed the professor (Bishop, 1977, p. 1). For

several years, Lenton coordinated a panel about homosexuality for first-year medical students at VCU (Peed, 1978). Lenton was invited to speak to a sociology class about homosexuality at a nearby community college in 1979 (Hugo, 1979).

Lenton also became a noted speaker beyond the classroom. In 1977, he delivered a training program for staff at Virginia state mental hospitals regarding myths about homosexuality (Segal, 1977). The next year, he presented to Planned Parenthood and the Virginia Human Sexuality Conference (Lenton, 1978g). He spoke to a regional office of the Virginia Department of Corrections in 1979; the feedback was “overwhelmingly positive” (Edwards, 1979, p. 1). Lenton also presented at the annual conferences of the Virginia Council on Social Welfare in 1979 and 1980, first on “Gays and Parents” and then on “Issues in Gay Counseling” (Mabe, 1978; Virginia Council on Social Welfare, 1980). Occasionally, his presentations to community groups overlapped with his campus presentations. In 1979, Lenton presented “Alternative Lifestyles” to the Nurse Practitioner Professional Practice Group in Richmond and later to the students in VCU’s family nurse practitioner program (McCord, 1979). He was invited back to present to the nursing students the next year (DesCamp, 1980).

Lenton’s popularity as a speaker on LGBTQ issues garnered press attention and helped Virginians. In 1979, the *Richmond News Leader* covered Lenton’s presentation at the Virginia Council on Social Welfare conference. Despite prevailing and pervasive discrimination, Lenton saw room for hope. “A panel like this could not be offered a few years ago,” he said, because anyone who attended would have been considered gay (Levi, 1979, p. 3). Lenton soon received a note from a reader who praised his enlightened advocacy in contrast to “Neanderthals” such as singer and antigay activist Anita Bryant, writing, “It is so important that people in positions of authority and prestige should speak out [on] this issue” (Futch, 1979, p. 1).

Perhaps most significantly, Lenton regularly presented to LGBTQ organizations and about LGBTQ issues at student affairs conferences. Lenton (1979e) delivered two workshops—one about coming out and one about gay student organizations—at the fourth Annual Southeastern Regional Lesbian and Gay Conference in North Carolina in 1979. That same year, he presented the coming out workshop and a session about managing stress through running at the third Annual Tidewater/Lesbian/Gay Conference in Norfolk (Lenton, 1979e).

Lenton started presenting about LGBTQ issues at student affairs conferences in 1976. That year, he led a workshop entitled “The Gay/Lesbian Student” at the conference of the Virginia Association of Student Personnel Administrators. One of its organizers praised the workshop and noted that many participants “commented that it was one of the most helpful and professionally stimulating experiences they have had in quite some time” (Sadler, 1976, p. 1). At the conference of Southern College Personnel Association (SCPA) in 1977, Lenton copresented with VCU colleague, Kenneth Ender, on “Student Development and the Gay/Lesbian Student” to approximately 60 people. He recorded in his diary, “All the feedback was positive and people stopped me over and over to give appreciation” (Lenton, 1977a). Building on his residence life survey, Lenton presented at the Southeastern Association of Housing Officers conference in 1979. The following year, he proposed to present “Training Your Staff to Deal with Homosexuality in Residence Halls” with colleagues from VCU and the University of Tennessee (Kollar et al., 1980). The presentation would discuss identities that today are considered to be trans and gender nonconforming.

As part of his advocacy and education efforts, Lenton pressed student affairs organizations to combat homophobia. The morning after his successful SCPA presentation in 1977, the

organization unanimously passed an antidiscrimination resolution that Lenton had written to include “sexual or affectional preferences.” Lenton was overwhelmed with emotions, “part joy, part pain,” noting that “I never could have done this without my gay friends at home and my straight friends here . . . Kenny [Ender] especially” (Lenton, 1977a). This would not be the last time Ender helped Lenton make lasting contributions related to LGBTQ people in higher education.

Lenton increased his reach and reputation by writing about LGBTQ issues. Lenton’s earliest writings appeared in the GAP newsletter. For example, Lenton (1975b) wrote an article about coming out in 1975. He later adapted it to be included in Sam Julty’s (1979) *Men’s Bodies, Men’s Selves*. Lenton’s professional writings culminated with two chapters in the 1980 book *Student Development Practices: Strategies for Making a Difference*, edited by Fred B. Newton and Ender. One chapter, coauthored with a colleague, detailed the Ed of Self course. The second, a sole-authored chapter, was titled “A Student Development Response to the Gay Issue.” As Lenton wrapped up edits to this chapter, he wrote the editors that he was “deeply touched by your willingness to include the historically unincludeable. Yours is a strategy that will make a difference possible for many many people” (Lenton, 1979d, p. 1).

Reflecting the lack of knowledge about LGBTQ issues in student affairs at the time, Lenton (1980b) started the chapter with definitions. Lenton (1980b) went on to identify four roles for student affairs professionals to help improve experiences of LGBTQ students. He first highlighted the need for more information and awareness to overcome stereotypes. The second intervention was providing opportunities for meaningful peer interactions among LGBTQ students, including through organizations such as GAS. He then turned to the importance of counseling services for LGBTQ students. Finally, he addressed the important, but professionally risky, work of advocacy for LGBTQ students.

As this last point suggested, Lenton paid a professional price for his LGBTQ advocacy. As he well knew by the time of the chapter’s publication, “programming in the area of gayness may threaten professional advancement and, by association, create a backlash against all innovative programs” (Lenton, 1980b, p. 283). As such, student affairs officials needed “to consider personal risks as well as issues of conscience” when committing to advocacy (p. 284). Lenton insisted that “the advocacy role cannot be left to gay professionals and students” alone (p. 283). Indeed, Lenton closely associated his growing reputation as an openly gay man and an LGBTQ advocate with the demise of his student affairs career at VCU.

LEAVING VCU AND STUDENT AFFAIRS

Initially, Lenton’s involvement with the GAS lawsuit appeared to have little impact on his career. In May 1977, Lenton learned that Vice President Wilson planned a reorganization that would promote Lenton into a new position. “My prime is damn exciting,” Lenton (1977a) wrote in his diary, “I’m overwhelmed by the constant good fortune in my life.” But the good fortune was no longer constant. Four days later, Lenton heard that the board might not approve the promotion, leading him to record, “I’m tired and the thought of a fight is fatiguing” (Lenton, 1977a). Within a few weeks, both the reorganization and Lenton’s promotion had been canceled, with an official justification that any reorganization should wait until VCU hired a new president. Lenton later recalled that Wilson confidentially admitted that the acting

president had nightmares about losing state funding for putting a gay man in charge of the counseling center. On learning about the lost promotion, Lenton (1977a) recorded, “I’m being limited, not because I am gay, but because I’ve said out loud that I’m gay.”

Lenton’s public profile as an LGBTQ advocate and openly gay administrator apparently made his career advancement at VCU untenable. The campus paper regularly interviewed Lenton about LGBTQ topics (e.g., Davis, 1979), and Lenton (1978d) recounted the GAS lawsuit for the campus newspaper at James Madison University. Perhaps more troubling to VCU leaders was Lenton’s frequent appearances in Richmond’s newspapers, including being interviewed for articles about married men who engaged in gay sex (Booker, 1978) and the struggles of LGBTQ student organizations across Virginia public colleges and universities (Waldron, 1979). All these newspaper articles included Lenton’s affiliation with VCU, and Lenton realized the danger. As an article in the campus paper about LGBTQ rights for which he had been interviewed was published, Lenton (1977a) wrote in his diary, “More trouble to come no doubt. Will I starve?”

Amid this publicity in the years after the rescinded promotion, Lenton became frustrated by his supervisors as his role became uncertain (Lenton, 1978c; Matthews, 1978). When Vice President Wilson successfully reorganized the Division of Student Affairs in August 1978, the new structure was similar to what Lenton had previously envisioned (Griffin, 1974). However, he would not lead any unit. Instead, he was an assistant dean of student services who reported to Phyllis Mable. The new reporting line did not improve Lenton’s experiences with his supervisors (Lenton, 1978e; Mable, 1978). The juxtaposition of his difficulties at VCU and his increased demand in the community led Lenton (1979e) to note, “On campus I feel the ground perpetually giving way under and around me and off-campus I receive truly superb reviews” (p. 15).

As he continued to experience discrimination at VCU. Lenton (1976a) wrote to the director of placement services that he “didn’t like his faggot joke at the staff meeting” in 1976. After the rescinded promotion, Lenton learned that a colleague received a \$1,500 raise for earning a doctorate while he received only \$600, and he was moved to “a worse office” in an “inadequate facility” (Lenton, 1977a). One of the reasons Lenton offered an LGBTQ workshop through GAS was that he was not allowed to explicitly add the topic to the Awareness Series. After learning that he couldn’t, Lenton recorded, “It is the continued rejection that gets me, the daily discrimination” (Lenton, 1978a). Lenton developed LGBTQ material for the RA manual, but soon the manual was no longer used (Lenton, 1979e). Similarly, a section about LGBTQ issues included in an orientation publication was “inexplicitly deleted” the following year (Lenton, 1979e, p. 7). Lenton was also unsuccessful in having his work with LGBTQ students included as a formal part of his job description. Lenton (1979e) wrote Mable, “I have never been given the okay to work with gays on office time, and this creates a fugitive atmosphere which causes unnecessary stress and confusion” (p. 8).

Indeed, by that time, the stress and confusion proved too much for Lenton. Interactions at a staff retreat in January 1979 led Lenton (1979g) to conclude “that the leadership in Student Affairs would be professionally grateful for my resignation” (p. 1). Lenton also believed that his “presence on the staff was a threat to” programs that he had helped create and highly valued (p. 1). Leaving the institution, he concluded, was a way to save his many contributions to VCU, especially the Awareness Series. Lenton told Mable that he intended to resign from VCU in 1980 (Mable, 1979a).

Lenton's resignation did little to assuage his challenges on campus, as he conflicted with Mable over his work and communications (Lenton, 1979a, 1979b; Mable, 1979b, 1979c). This conflict culminated in a battle over Lenton's salary. On June 6, 1979, he received his final contract from VCU (Wilson, 1979a). The raise amount incensed Lenton. He wrote to Mable that his "pay increase was discriminatory and punitive. For my first seven years here I was given the highest percentage annual salary, or one of the highest. Now, without feedback I seem clearly in the lower third" (Lenton, 1979e, p. 1). Lenton went on to provide 14 pages of his contributions over the past year and several critiques of Mable's leadership. One week later, Lenton received a new contract with a \$1,000 increase (Wilson, 1979b).

The higher salary did not indicate that VCU leaders desired his continued employment. Lenton's job search was hampered by an economic recession, and he asked Mable to let him to stay at VCU until he had "found suitable employment" (Lenton, 1979g, p. 1). She responded that plans had already been made for his departure. "I am truly sorry that the job market is so poor," Mable (1979d) wrote, "however, your employment will end June 30, 1980" (p. 1).

As his time at VCU wrapped up, Lenton worried about who would fill his role in advising GAS and supporting LGBTQ students. "I need to direct serious attention to developing strategies for involving staff, gay and non-gay, in the concerns of gay students," Lenton told Mable, noting that "I am not nor have I ever been the only gay person in Student Affairs, yet I am the only 'out' person" (Lenton, 1979e, p. 6). He worked with GAS leaders to prepare for a future without him, estimating that he spent 3 hours a week advising the group (Lenton, 1979f). In summer 1979, the group wrote a constitution and changed its name to Lambda League, which was "less high profile" (Lenton, 1979e, p. 6). The group and Lenton also looked for a new advisor. However, the climate at VCU made it difficult, as Lenton told the campus newspaper, because it brought "personal and professional risk" (Davis, 1979, p. 11). Lenton lamented to Mable, "On campus job discrimination and the exodus of gay faculty have caused an increase in fear and distrust" among LGBTQ people at VCU, which also decreased Lambda League membership and made "fewer students available for leadership roles" (Lenton, 1979e, p. 6).

Just as there were fewer students in Lambda League, there was, increasingly, less work for Lenton to do. By 1978, he was no longer appointed to important committees or asked to participate in interviews of job applicants. In fact, Lenton (1979e) came to believe that his "endorsement" was a "kiss of death" for the candidate (p. 11). Responsibilities for orientation were transferred to another student affairs professional without Lenton's (1979e) knowledge. He learned of the change only when he contacted other offices about preparing for orientation and realized they had already been working with his colleague. Student affairs leaders also dismantled the Awareness Series, meaning that Lenton's resignation did not save the premier program he had created. At the end of his time at VCU, he led no office, supervised no staff, and controlled no budget—a stark contrast to his early years at VCU. Lenton (1979e) told Mable,

One could look at my last two years at VCU in terms of promotions, salary increases, access to resources, incentives for professional development, status of committee appointments, authority and clarity of job description and surmise that the advocate role for gays is lethal. (p. 6)

Lenton's last few months at VCU were mostly miserable. "I hate my work situation," he recorded in his diary on March 6, 1980. Lenton (1980a) also dealt with the response to his op-

ed in the campus newspaper that detailed his mistreatment by VCU leaders for his LGBTQ advocacy in late April and early May 1980. To seemingly add insult to injury, VCU began to renovate Lenton's office in his last months on the job. Lenton (1980a) found "grit and disarray in every direction" and acknowledged that the "remodeling ... doesn't include me." In what may have been his last act as a VCU employee, Lenton (1980e) wrote on a piece of university letterhead, "June 1980—I leave—glad and hurting" (p. 1).

LENTON'S POST-VCU EFFORTS AND LEGACY

Lenton's departure from VCU was more abrupt than he had hoped and left him somewhat adrift. He did not find or accept a salaried position before his employment with VCU ended. Although he explored student affairs positions at other campuses, he instead started a private counseling practice, a financially risky endeavor that earned him far less money than his VCU position, at least initially. In the years that followed, Lenton became more deeply involved with the LGBTQ community in Richmond and a key advocate for people with AIDS.

Lenton remained an advocate for LGBTQ people at VCU after his employment ended. On learning that the VCU counseling center was seeking accreditation from the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1982, Lenton sent a letter to its director on behalf of a "collection of students, faculty and alumni" and copied APA leaders (p. 1). Noting that accreditation required providing effective professional counseling to diverse groups, the letter questioned the counseling center's services for LGBTQ students. Eventually, Lenton (1983b) met with a counseling center representative whom he found understood "the needs and concerns of lesbians and gay men" (p. 1). In 1983, Lenton responded to a request to donate to VCU. He would be happy to contribute and encourage his friends to as well, but he first needed to know that VCU had "stopped discriminating against" LGBTQ people (Lenton, 1983a, p. 1). "What service is it to be first in biostatistics," Lenton asked, referring to an academic strength of VCU, "and last in human rights?" (p. 1).

Lenton did a great deal to establish LGBTQ advocacy at VCU. His work also advanced LGBTQ advocacy at other colleges and universities, especially in Virginia, and in the field of student affairs. Lenton used interpersonal techniques (e.g., letter writing, conversations), public speaking, and publishing to advance LGBTQ rights. Lenton's use of these same tactics in off-campus organizations and settings highlighted that student affairs professionals could be effective educators about LGBTQ issues in the larger community. His popularity as a speaker at student affairs conferences, his ability to write for student affairs publications, and the willingness of his colleagues to pass nondiscrimination policies in professional organizations all help to illustrate the eagerness of many student affairs professionals to learn about and work toward ending discrimination against LGBTQ people by the late 1970s. Especially off campus, his VCU affiliation provided an immeasurable amount of credibility to his controversial, though worthwhile, efforts. At the same time, his visible association with VCU created problems for him and his supervisors, as prominent community and political leaders resisted and resented progress in the LGBTQ rights movement. Lenton's success as an LGBTQ advocate played a major role in ending his student affairs career.

A history of Stephen Lenton's student affairs career provides historical perspective for contemporary higher education leaders, faculty, and students who work to promote social

justice and progressive organizational change. Lenton's strategies may inform, and his successes may motivate, their work. However, like Lenton, they may experience loneliness, stress, and career setbacks due to their advocacy. And while it may seem that higher education has come a long way in its treatment of LGBTQ people since the 1970s, there remain pressing concerns. Many trans students report harassment on campus, leave college due to the campus climate, and experience financial insecurity (Goldberg, 2018). Given the politicized nature of supporting trans people, many student affairs professionals advancing this advocacy may share all too many similarities with Lenton. The forestalling of Lenton's career also reminds us of the limited number of visible LGBTQ leaders in higher education. There were neither enough people nor enough interest to establish a professional organization of LGBTQ college and university presidents until 2010 (Senese, 2021). Contemporary challenges to the full inclusion of LGBTQ people on campus and in the community illustrate that the pioneering advocacy of Lenton remains unfinished.

CONCLUSION

Eleven years after he left VCU, Lenton was interviewed for an article in the *Richmond News Leader* about the improving condition for LGBTQ people in higher education. Lenton argued that college provided LGBTQ students with a unique opportunity to explore their identities as they separated from their parents and high school friends. Lenton noted that while tolerance toward gay people was increasing, it remained low. Fortunately, college administrators were "taking a more active role in preventing physical and verbal abuse and discrimination of homosexuals these days," and university nondiscrimination policies were beginning to include sexual orientation (Guernsey, 1991, p. 24). In the same article, a junior at the University of Richmond who had joined the campus LGBTQ organization noted that it was much better to be gay in college than in high school. "It's really uncool to be homophobic on campus," the student said, "Maybe being gay isn't totally accepted, but it is tolerated" (p. 24). Unbeknownst to this student, Stephen Lenton had played an important role in helping to make college better than high school and the 1990s better than the 1970s for LGBTQ students in Richmond—and beyond.

In myriad ways, Lenton was an instrumental force in combating homophobia, increasing tolerance, and promoting social change. After contributing to VCU, advocating for its LGBTQ students, and moving on to both a career and commitment to working with and for LGBTQ people, Lenton died of complications from AIDS in 2001. As his former VCU colleague Ender (personal communication) recently recalled, "I think a lot of the issues we have today particularly across racial lines, across gender lines, across sexuality lines, if the country had a big dose of what Stephen Lenton was serving up back in the 70s, we'd be in different place."

Even at a low point in his life, Lenton managed to be hopeful. In his op-ed that appeared as his VCU career was ending, Lenton (1980d) acknowledged that he had "seen great progress in an unfinished movement" for LGBTQ rights (p. 4). While he warned others in student affairs of the consequences for working on behalf of LGBTQ students, he also noted that in the recent past some student affairs administrators had faced similar attacks for advocating for racial equality. In fact, some of Lenton's colleagues had been "courageously supportive" of his LGBTQ advocacy. Lenton hoped that "many gay faculty and administrators will emerge

once I leave” (p. 4). At VCU and across the nation, the extent to which subsequent LGBTQ people were able to work openly in student affairs and subsequent generations of student affairs professionals were successful LGBTQ advocates remains an important and untold history.

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