

NEWS

Finding 'Common Ground' at WSU, campus unites in support of LGBTQ+ students



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WORCESTER — A Pride flag was raised at the new "Common Ground" public space located just outside of the student center on the Worcester State University campus in an effort by the university to show that LGBTQ+ students are not only welcome at the school, but that they belong there.

Hundreds of spectators gathered around the new space for a ceremony that included raising the Pride flag on the new unity flagpole, to hear from university leaders and to also listen to classmates perform original pieces they wrote in their LGBTQ+ narratives course.

"All of our students are, in this time, critically important to us and we know that our student body is becoming more diverse in so many different ways," said university President Barry M. Maloney. "The LGBTQ+ students are just another group that we needed to make sure we reminded the community and remind ourselves how we can support them."

When asked if the event was in response to the recent backlash Bishop Robert J. McManus faced after he demanded the Nativity School remove their pride and Black Lives Matter flags, Maloney said no.

"We've been working on these issues during my entire time here...This in no way shape or form, has any connection," Maloney said. "We would remind the community that we are a supportive community. When people wonder about the attitudes here, now we're telling a different story. We're a little more open about it."

In addition to the pride flag, which will be raised year-round, a second rotating flag will wave just beneath it.

Currently, a "Hate Has No Home Here" flag was raised just beneath a pride flag but it will eventually rotate to another flag sponsored by a campus student group, said a university press release.

Student survey found feelings of exclusion from campus

Maloney said that the university had been taking steps to create a more inclusive campus for LGBTQ+ students after a survey found that students from the community felt excluded from the campus.

"It broke my heart when I learned that some people felt that they didn't have a place here," said Stacey Luster, general counsel and assistant to the president for employment. "You can

look at me and see that I'm Black but you can't look at people and see that they represent LGBTQ communities and so people don't know if they're really represented here."

Luster said that the flag is to show students that they are represented in the community and on the campus and that they belong.

Plan to create more inclusive campus

Maria Isabel Gariepy, chief diversity and equity officer at the university, said that the flag-raising was also an extension of the five-point plan the school developed to create a more inclusive campus environment.

"There's been a number of things we've done," Gariepy said. "We have a space in the student center for an LGBTQ+ Resource Center. We inaugurated that right before the pandemic."

She said the pandemic hindered the impact of the new resource center but since students are back and have more of a presence on campus again, the flag was an opportunity to "keep showing the community here that we care."

Just before the flags were raised, a group of students in Riley McGuire's LGBTQ+ narrative course read and performed some of their original pieces for the crowd.

"They did an excellent job today, sharing their stories and their perspective," McGuire said. "Incredibly proud, couldn't be any happier. Just a really, really talented, brave group of students."

An important symbol

McGuire, who is an assistant professor of English at the university, said that the flag being raised was important for both him and his students.

"I think both myself and the students feel really supported and welcomed by the larger community here, as we can see from the turnout," McGuire said. "I think that's a really important symbol for all LGBTQ+ community members."

Anthony Drapos, a junior at the university and one of several performers from McGuire's class, read his piece titled "If not now, when?"

"It's about how there's a lot of damage that, I feel, has been created before us," Drapos said. "It's my plea for us to save the future for our youth of LGBTQ+ generation."

Drapos said that he was proud that the university decided to raise the flag and make an effort to create a more inclusive campus environment for LGBTQ+ students.

He said he also understands if some LGBTQ+ students have reservations about choosing where to attend college because they aren't sure if they would be accepted.

"I had the same worries in high school. High school was a very difficult time for me," Drapos said. "I couldn't be more happy with the decision that I made. I believe that I go to a school that is very inclusive, very diverse and it's right in the heart of Worcester, which is a very diverse city. It's progressing from what it used to be."