

"Searching" students find support on Common Ground

By Jessica Ronky
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It's not easy being gay, but it's especially difficult at the University of Richmond, a traditionally conservative school.

Three years ago the Lambda Coalition was founded by senior Matthew Beams as a social support group for homosexual students and their supporters. Since then, the group has grown from four to 13 members and has become increasingly visible on campus. But visibility can have its drawbacks.

Homosexual students or students who are unsure about their sexuality may be intimidated by the Lambda Coalition's visibility and the group's political activeness, said John DaRos, Richmond College area coordinator and the Lambda Coalition's adviser.

As a result, the Lambda Coalition has historically hurt for members. It's taboo to be associated with the gay or lesbian issue on this campus and even more so to be a member of the Lambda Coalition, DaRos

said.

It is estimated that 10 percent of the population is homosexual. On this campus that means there should be about 350 homosexuals. Less than one-tenth of this group belongs to the Lambda Coalition.

Is this because the University of Richmond is different, that there aren't as many gays here? Highly unlikely — it seems that other factors are at work at the University.

An independent survey of 30,000 college students across the country asked the participants to rate other campuses in their state in regard to which were most and least accepting of homosexual students. In Virginia, the University of Richmond was named the most homophobic campus in the state and William and Mary the most accepting of homosexuals.

This attitude may scare people away from the Lambda Coalition and make them uncomfortable about revealing their true sexuality.

"The Lambda Coalition is putting the cart before the horse," DaRos said. "The group

expects people to get involved with the issue but everyone knows the time and place of the meeting and the group is politically active."

In an attempt to reach students who avoid the Lambda Coalition for this reason, a new group has formed on campus. Common Ground is a support group for gay, lesbian, bisexual or "searching" students.

Membership in Common Ground is completely confidential. The time and place of the meetings are only known by the members of the group. DaRos hopes that this strict confidentiality will encourage more students to join the group.

However, Common Ground is not just an ultra-secret version of the Lambda Coalition. There are many differences between the two groups.

Membership to Common Ground is strictly limited to gay, lesbian, bisexual and searching students whereas the Lambda Coalition is open to anyone who supports the issue of gay rights. Currently, about half of the

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Lambda Coalition's members are supporters.

The Lambda Coalition is also more of a social group. Common Ground will serve solely as a support group where students will talk about their homosexuality or their unsure feelings.

DaRos calls Common Ground "a place where everybody can walk through the door and know everybody else is in the same boat or at least in a similar boat."

The atmosphere at Common Ground meetings will be much different from that at the Lambda Coalition. There will be no agenda, no activities and no plans, DaRos said. There will just be talk. Talk about what it is like to be a homosexual student at the University of Richmond. Talk about how you know if you are gay. Talk about what it is like to come out to friends and family.

Common Ground is designed to be a group where the gay, lesbian or bisexual student can feel totally comfortable, DaRos said. The group is designed to get people set up and comfortable with the issue of homosexuality, he said.

So far DaRos is pleased with the amount of interest that has been expressed in the group. Informational flyers were sent to all University students to announce the start of Common Ground. Students who are interested in the group must first call DaRos or Laurie Neff, Westhampton College assistant dean of students, for information.

Anyone who expresses interest in joining Common Ground must go through a

screening process, DaRos said. This consists of a personal meeting with DaRos to make sure the student is sincere.

"We want to make sure nobody with malicious intent is coming," he said. "Unfortunately we have to deal with that on this campus."

There has never been a problem with detractors at Lambda Coalition meetings, but it is still important to take precautions, DaRos said.

Gay students may belong to both the Lambda Coalition and Common Ground. DaRos said some students may even join the Lambda Coalition after they have become more comfortable with the issue of homosexuality through their experience with Common Ground.

One heterosexual member of the Lambda Coalition is not put off by the fact that he cannot attend Common Ground meetings because he is not gay. He believes Common Ground will allow people to get in touch with their sexuality in a comfortable setting.

DaRos wants Common Ground to be a family group where people feel comfortable to talk openly about their experiences. He said the meetings will be held off campus because "I thought people would feel safer getting out of here [campus]."

Beams thinks there is a definite need on campus for a group like Common Ground. "Some people are intimidated by the Lambda Coalition," he said. "It's good to have a group that doesn't do any activism, that is strictly a support group."