

A Question and Answer with Ronna Biggs, Coordinator for Programming & Leadership Development, and Chair, WWU Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Concerns Committee ( LGBTCC ) for four years, took concerns to the Executive Dining Hall Committee about Chick-Fil-A.

**Katie Chugg(KC): How did you get involved? What was the timeline of that process?**

Ronna Biggs(RB): My first connection with Chick-fil-A (CFA) occurred during late Fall quarter 2007 when student representatives with the Residence Hall Association (for which I am an advisor) began sharing information in their committee reports during our weekly meetings.

Some student representatives were serving on committees affiliated with Housing & Dining – the Meal Plan Task Force and the Housing & Dining committee. Students reported there would upcoming renovations to the Viking Union(VU) including potential new dining platforms, changes to meal plan structures, etc.

During late Fall quarter and early Winter quarter 2008 student reps continued reporting on the progress of the committees and University Dining Services(UDS) staff did presentations about possibilities for changes to the VU.

It was during these times that CFA's name was tossed to the RHA as a possibility and how did students feel about that. If there was already a decision that CFA was going to be the dining platform, that was unclear to me; it sounded like a firm decision hadn't been made yet.

A staff member approach me in winter quarter 2008 and suggest I "look at" the CFA franchise, but was not more specific. I did some initial research of the corporation and discovered they require franchises to be closed on Sundays, their mission statements reflect they are clearly a religiously-based company but on the surface there wasn't anything that raised a large red flag.

Certainly we do business with a wide-variety of organizations and companies so the religious affiliation was not of initial concern to me. I was slightly concerned about the closed on Sunday piece, less because that appeared to be in concert with a philosophical/religious belief of the company's owners but because it could place a restriction on UDS' ability to operate the store on Sundays should that student demand exist. I also figured that that issue must have been reconciled as CFA was still on the choice list.

A When I approached the staff member and shared my initial reactions, the staff member was more adamant about my looking at corporate connections to anti-gay organizations, particularly Focus on the Family (FOTF).

FOTF is one of the nation's largest anti-gay organizations that actively promotes anti-gay messages in teachings, readings, radio broadcasts, writings and web resources. They are a very well-known, multi-million industry with a global reach.

I did additional research in this new direction and quickly found a number of connections with which CFA had some kind of corporate partnership to individuals,

events and organizations that actively promoted anti-gay messages and advocated against gay equal and civil rights.

I also found an article about a Muslim man who had filed a lawsuit claiming he had been fired for religious reasons. Another article I found from Forbes magazine was an interview in 2007 with the owner who talks about who he considers to be ideal employees that seemed narrow in scope.

At this time, in early March 2008, I sent emails to two supervisors outlining my concerns and asked for feedback and assurances about them. I was assured by both individuals that my concerns would be presented to the Director of University Residences for consideration and be reviewed.

I kept checking in on how that review process was going, and was assured my concerns were being considered. By late May, I had not heard any definitive feedback about my concerns. At this point, I decided to go to the LGBTCC and forwarded the committee a summary of my concerns with a request to give me feedback if this issue seemed like it was a true concern or not. An overwhelming and swift reply from many committee members agreed this was a significant issue.

The LGBTCC met in June and discussed the matter thoroughly. Members did additional research on CFA, and I, along with a few other committee representatives, initiated a request to the Director of University Residences to meet and review the CFA contract. The Director then invited the LGBTCC to meet with the campus Executive Dining Committee (EDC) to discuss our concerns. That meeting was in late July; at the end of that meeting, the LGBTCC recommended not to bring the CFA dining platform to campus.

The EDC weighed the issues and decided to continue with the CFA contracting process, so the CFA platform was completed and opened on campus.

**KC: What were your initial concerns about Chick-Fil-A as the Coordinator, Programing and Leadership Development of Residence Life? Chair for the LGBT?**

A As the CPLD, I had specific issues that I felt were significant and important to review and discuss. I am on the University Residences Multicultural Committee, I have been asked as a part of my job to pay special attention to LGBT issues within our department and campus, I am the chair of the LGBTCC and I'm one of the few openly gay staff members in my department. I have multiple perspectives through which to consider this information, and nothing felt right about having CFA on campus.

The concerns I submitted to the two supervisors included: Chick-fil-A has engaged in corporate partnership with organizations that promote anti-gay and homophobic rhetoric; unavailability of a nondiscrimination clause on the Chick-fil-A corporate website that reflected consideration and protections for, and inclusion of, LGBT individuals; CFA had past lawsuits regarding religious discrimination filed against it.

Additionally, publicly available values statements made by the owner regarding the characteristics of ideal candidates for franchise operators appeared narrow in scope.

For example:

“The Cult of Chick-fil-A” article from Forbes (2007):

<http://www.forbes.com/leadership/forbes/2007/0723/080.html>

“Old-time Religion Guides Chick-fil-A; Bible Sets Tone for Cathy” article from BNET (1986): [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m3190/is\\_v20/ai\\_4083223](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3190/is_v20/ai_4083223)

“Muslim Sues Chick-fil-A Over On-the-Job Prayer” article from BNET (2002)  
[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m3190/is\\_44\\_36/ai\\_94131554](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3190/is_44_36/ai_94131554)

The student demand for services might be affected by Chick-fil-A’s policy requiring all franchises to be closed on Sunday. The university might have little ability to accommodate such demand. Western holds dear values around diversity and inclusion. These values appear to be compromised by contracting with a vendor and bringing a storefront to our campus that has a pattern of corporate partnership with individuals / events / organizations that promote anti-gay and homophobic rhetoric.

As Chair of the LGBTCC , my concerns remained the same and actually were expanded based on additional LGBTCC conversation and research regarding CFA’s corporate partnerships. There were a number of issues the LGBTCC presented to the EDC. Some of those issues were able to have adequate resolution; however a number of concerns remained. From a statement the committee issued to campus constituents, the concerns are summarized here:

Key issues that the LGBTCC presented where agreement and resolution have been reached to a satisfactory level, include: A request to the Chick-fil-A corporation to produce a nondiscrimination clause that would be inclusive of LGBT-identified individuals was met. The corporation clause reads, “Chick-fil-A, Inc. makes all employment decisions on a non-discriminatory basis without regard to race, sex, pregnancy, age, religion, national origin, color, disability, citizenship, military service status or any other factor or characteristic protected by applicable federal, state or local law.” [Cited from written correspondence from Chick-fil-A to University Dining Services.]

Additionally, the State of Washington ’s nondiscrimination clause does include sexual orientation, and gender identity/expression, so Chick-fil-A would be obliged to follow State law should there be a question.

The Assistant Attorney General’s office reviewed lawsuits against Chick-fil-A as well as legal aspects of the contract that Western has with Sodexo, and subsequently that Sodexo has with Chick-fil-A. Those contracts are in good standing and there does not appear to be a legal basis to prevent execution of the contract.

It was confirmed that WWU employees – students in particular – would be hired, supervised and trained by Sodexo, which has nondiscrimination policies and practices in place. It should also be noted that the LGBTCC on several occasions asserted there is not a question with Sodexo or its corporate practices; there is great confidence in Sodexo’s treatment of and care for Western’s student employees.

Sodexo representatives also noted that should any student who is hired by Sodexo request to NOT work at Chick-fil-A due to personal reasons or conflicts, those students would be supported and reassigned to work in another dining outlet.

Key issues that the LGBTCC presented where concern still remains include:

Members of the LGBTCC are concerned that the financial connection and visual representation of a Chick-fil-A franchise serves as a daily reminder to LGBT and Ally-identified students, staff, faculty and campus visitors that we are financially supporting a corporation with corporate connections to individuals / events / organizations that promote anti-gay and homophobic rhetoric. The LGBTCC believes this presence and investment undermines the values of inclusion and support of diversity on our campus, especially for LGBT-identified individuals.

Western may be viewed negatively and/or construed as not supporting socially just or socially responsible corporate / vending practices because of our affiliation with Chick-fil-A. The apparent disconnect between Western's stated values and strategic actions and its practices may lead to lack of confidence about contracting processes and decisions.

Chick-fil-A will remain closed on Sunday. While there are not particular legal regulations that require the business to be closed (e.g. federal regulations or issues of labor), Sodexo will comply with the spirit of Chick-fil-A philosophy and accommodate the corporate vendor's request to stay closed on Sundays. Students will not have a choice to have this platform open on Sunday should there be interest in that option or a request be made.

Lingering questions remain about the hiring practices of Chick-fil-A regarding the characteristics of ideal candidates for franchise operators that appear narrow in scope. While Chick-fil-A representatives provided assurances they follow appropriate and legal hiring practices, comments by other Chick-fil-A representatives (e.g. the owner) in news articles indicate ideal characteristics for operators that may reflect incongruence between policy and practice.

Western strongly articulates its values of recruiting and retaining a diverse student body and recruiting and hiring a diverse staff and faculty. Western's community has worked to put in place measures that translate this philosophy into action. Chick-fil-A's representatives have clearly articulated values and it is difficult to imagine that the corporation would not similarly have measures in place in their processes to translate their philosophies in action.

The following article from Forbes magazine online notes that the owner (Cathy) "wants married workers, believing they are more industrious and productive." Such a statement of values as to who is an ideal employee leaves a significant number of individuals (including single people of any gender or sexual orientation, unmarried heterosexual couples, and same-sex couples) on the periphery, and brings in question the Chick-fil-A recruitment, interview, and hiring processes that are in place to lead to such an outcome.

As an example, see a recent 2007 Forbes article: "Loyalty to the company isn't the only thing that matters to Cathy, who wants married workers, believing they are more industrious and productive."

<http://www.forbes.com/leadership/forbes/2007/0723/080.html>

The issue of "ideal employees" is not new; as an example of historical pattern, see a 1986 BNet article: "'We're looking at the character of a person. ... We want to see what motivates him and whether he has the ability and stamina to achieve,' said Cathy, adding that being a Christian or a believer is not a prerequisite for becoming an operator. "'We have a few Jews working for us, but I don't think an atheist would fit in well here.'"

[http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m3190/is\\_v20/ai\\_4083223/pg\\_1?tag=artBody;coll](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m3190/is_v20/ai_4083223/pg_1?tag=artBody;coll)

Chick-fil-A's presence on campus and contract with Western appear to present a conflict of institutional values and practice. Western articulates messages supporting diversity of people and thought in its values statements and its strategic actions and objectives. Financially supporting and hosting a business on our campus that, for many, may serve as a reflection of oppression does not operationalize WWU's stated intent to foster a feeling of safety and inclusion for campus members and undermines the spirit of a welcoming community that honors diversity.

**KC: What does Chick-fil-A symbolize to a regular student? A LGBT student?**

RB: Chick-fil-A has a history of corporate sponsorship with individuals, events and organizations that do not support gay rights or support that it's okay to be gay. The same corporate name and logo that we now sport on our campus is the same corporate name and logo that shows up with those anti-gay individuals, events, and organizations. We're financially supporting and hosting a business on our campus that, for many, serves as a reflection and symbol of oppression.

During the recent panel discussion that the LGBTA and a number of AS offices sponsored, I had been thinking of a way to describe what having CFA on campus feels like for particularly LGBT students – and faculty and staff – as well as Allies. I used a parallel to another controversial symbol that many people are familiar with and that's the Confederate flag.

Some people – many of whom may be white – may look at that flag and believe it represents Southern pride or Southern heritage, something to be proud of. Some people – many of whom may be black – may look at that flag and believe it represents hatred, discrimination, slavery, lynchings, killing of blacks in particular.

People are looking at the same flag, but seeing that flag is experienced in two significantly different ways. Particularly for many in the African American community, as it has been shared with me that that has tremendous negative emotional and psychological impact.

What we know is symbolism is powerful – it evokes feelings, memories, associations.

If you're a black student on this campus and there was a Confederate flag posted, chances are you're not "just seeing the flag" – you're seeing all the negative that that flag represents and symbolizes to you personally, and to your community of people.

I am white, I'm not black; I cannot ever deeply know what that experience means. What I can do in my place of privilege is listen to that impact and make decisions to avoid contributing to that impact in the future. Using that example, translate that to CFA and the LGBT community. The package of a chicken store may look a little prettier, but hate is still hate.

When a student, an LGBT student (or faculty or staff person) walks into the union and sees the Chick-fil-A storefront...I suggest that that's not what they are seeing; that's not what I see.

What they are seeing is the symbolism and the reality of who CFA is and what they support and represent. What is Chick-fil-A? This is the corporation that provides corporate sponsorship of individuals, events, organizations and programs that promote anti-gay ideologies and do not support equal rights for members of the LGBT

community. They see the connection to Focus on the Family, probably the largest anti-gay organization in the country.

They see support of philosophies like those of FOTF's James Dobson's who says "homosexuality is a symptom of a fallen humanity" (that was from the FOTF website a few months ago); or

"That the legalization of same-sex marriage would lead to "group marriage," "marriage between daddies and little girls," and "marriage between a man and his donkey." Same-sex marriage "will bring the destruction of this nation and many others." (Advocate magazine referring to a FOTF 2005 on-air broadcast)

They're hearing: "Our conviction is that birth and adoption are the purview of married heterosexual couples." (from Dobson's article in Time "Two Mommies is One Too Many")

They're noting that CFA used its corporate headquarters to host to my knowledge only one of the presidential candidates – John McCain - who has a history of publicly stating that gay folks shouldn't adopt. CFA corporate headquarters was used as a platform of support.

They're seeing CFA's corporate partnership with the Synergize! conference that has had speakers with anti-gay (and often anti-Muslim) themes.

They're remembering articles where the CFA owner has been quoted making values statements narrow in scope as to who an ideal employee is.

When those kinds of messages and associations build up, a gay person is highly unlikely to feel acknowledged, validated or valued by having Chick-fil-A here. CFA helps support those kinds of sentiments and values. A student with a gay mom or dad, or two dads or two moms is not going to have the impression that they or their family structure are validated and acknowledged because CFA has helped promote ideas to the contrary.

If you're walking into the student union and those are the messages that pop into your head every day...that's does not do a lot to support healthy identity development from a psycho-social and emotional development perspective; it doesn't lend to creating a safe or inclusive academic environment; it decreases feelings of inclusion or simply feeling you or your family are welcome or valued.

These are the harmful teachings that CFA is supporting; the ridiculous and hurtful anti-gay teachings, the advocacy against equal rights for the LGBT community, lack of support for individual and family identities. These sentiments are the kinds of messages that tip the scales for students to leave here or not attend at all. For faculty and staff to leave here...or not apply here at all.

These are the kinds of messages that younger kids hear and why the LGBT teen suicide rate hovers around 30-35 percent. These are the messages that kids are hearing and killing themselves over before they even get an opportunity to go to college. These messages are harmful and destructive no matter how old you are.

They are the kinds of messages that I believe don't reflect Western. It's the kind of impact that I don't think Western really wishes to perpetuate. As long as the franchise is on campus, those impacts remain.

**KC:Have any of the concerns raised by students or the LGBT community on campus been heard or "dealt" with?**

RB: There have been a variety of concerns raised by different individuals and community groups – issues with anti-gay connections, issues of sustainability, not buying local, etc. I think initially, the selection process probably went well in that students were serving on committees giving input. I can't speak for the students who served on those committees if they have any reaction to their levels of participation or how much influence they had or believed they had. I don't know that. I know students were involved, but they would need to respond to their level of knowledge or input. I don't know if students ever heard about the concerns I raised during spring quarter last year.

I also don't know how well-publicized the actual decision to have CFA on campus was broadcast. I sat weekly in RHA meetings, but as students reported or the UDS representatives spoke, it still seemed like these "possibilities" were out there, not a firm decision. I didn't feel like people spoke with decision until probably May. The decision may have been whittled down earlier, but the presentation of CFA as the choice wasn't strong – students kept giving more suggestions for dining platforms.

Personally, as I expressed at the panel, I did not feel adequately or accurately heard. I feel I have a great deal of credibility on the issue considering my job roles as well as personal experience. The LGBTCC has a diverse representation and is also a well-educated, highly trained group of LGBT and Ally faculty, staff and students. There are faculty teaching about diversity in higher education, teaching in the LGBT minor program, staff and students who spend their time doing diversity and social justice training, Ally training, LGBT student mentoring, educational programs, there are sociologists, psychologists and the list goes on. I also consulted students, faculty and staff who are not on the committee for opinion and time and again the conclusion has been the same. If there were to be an issue on campus, these would be the individuals to go to for expert opinion.

It has been stunning to me that after the strong recommendations from a variety of sources that hosting a CFA platform will tear at the social fabric of the campus community and have particularly negative emotional and psycho-social impacts on the LGBT community, the franchise is still here.

There were some concerns that I outlined above that were adequately resolved, but many questions still remain. New questions have emerged such as: How are concerns communicated on our campus and what are reasonable expectations for response? What is the weight of the minority voice on campus? How are the opinions and experiences of minority groups considered on campus? What happens when most or all of the decision-makers in a situation hold more power and privilege in relation to a social identity or position power? What happens when the subordinate group articulates how a particular decision negatively impacts them, but they're not in a position of power or privilege either by identity or hierarchical position to make or change such a decision?

Our campus is becoming more diverse every year, in the faculty, staff and student pools, and across multiple identities. These are new questions that I believe we as a campus need to have a dialogue around and work toward avoiding these significant disagreements and divisive outcomes.

I think it creates dissonance for people to hear one thing about inclusive values but make a decision that seems incongruent, particularly when a minority group has expressed such serious resistance.

The questions are not just for the LGBT population, but for racial/ethnic minorities and other identities such as ability, gender identity, religious/spiritual minorities, etc., etc. I don't want to feel like a token, the committee doesn't want to play a token role on campus; how do you bridge that gap in the process?

I don't think it solves the dilemma of the process to try to build a committee with a whole bunch of different social identities on it. I think the better solution is when there is a concern that may involve a minority social identity that those in power and in a place of identity privilege to seek out input from that representative group. And then to deeply hear what that group's response is.

If you are in the dominant identity, you can never truly know the experience of the subordinate identity. I believe you have to trust what a reasonable group of people representing that identity are saying is their experience or will be their experience.

There was plenty of time to make some other decisions; however, I imagine that the financial bottom line will be the most decisive factor in the remaining of the franchise on campus. The EDC representatives at the panel clearly said the decision is to have the franchise remain.

I think it's a difficult spot because had the franchise contracting process been stopped months ago, or even now, that may have been a half-million dollar costly decision. That's difficult to swallow going through that whole process and investment to have it not happen; that's a huge cost to eat especially in a time of financial crisis. No one wants to say a half-million dollars was spent in error. And in the long run, CFA may end up making money for UDS.

However, I believe that the effects of the process and that despite the strong recommendations the franchise is still here represents a cost in another fashion. There is damage to relationships, confidence in the process, confidence that the minority voice counts, damage to feelings of trust and feelings of inclusion. The cost to people and relationships is a more difficult one to heal and rectify, and no amount of profit can buy that back.