

# COMING OUT OF THE IVORY TOWER

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CANADIAN UNIVERSITY PRESS

**B**ob Gallagher eagerly talks about the politics which dominate his personal and professional life. Articulate and engaging, the 33-year-old academic barely finishes his meal between the rush of talk on being openly gay in academia.

Gallagher teaches political theory at Trent University in Peterborough and is finishing his PhD this year at the University of Toronto. He is also an activist in Toronto, where he is working on the upcoming international gay conference, has been co-chair of the Right to Privacy Committee and was a media spokesperson for the gay community following the mass of police raids on bath houses in 1982.

Gallagher says he made a conscious decision to be open about his sexuality in 1982 when he decided to have his name splashed across the media in connection with the bath raids. Although he was out to his colleagues at the U of T prior to 1982, this new visibility would leave no doubt in anyone's minds.

"That was a choice to come out both personally and politically," he says, peering from behind rimless, wireframe glasses. "It was conscious choice."

"I had already thought of being open and its possible effect on my career," he says. Gallagher had been active organising gays on campus and regularly contributed to *The Body Politic*, a Toronto-based gay liberation newsmagazine, but the decision to become a media spokesperson would mean no turning back.

"I knew this would mean that I could never be in the closet again."

As a sessional lecturer at Trent, Gallagher has no job security and his gayness could be a factor in the future postings. He says he acted "pre-1982" when he arrived at Trent and has no idea if administrators knew he was gay when they hired him. "Who knows if they knew."

He says he tells the students in his classes and his colleagues at his college that he is gay. "As it comes up, it's told to them (students). Then the rumour spreads. My sense is the word is relatively out."

Being open to his students is important to Gallagher for several reasons. "For students who are gay and have problems relating to it, I've been a resource person for that. That's been fulfilling for me."

He says students have come out to him every year he has taught, and he often helps students writing papers on gay issues. Teaching politics has also been useful, he says, because he can come out in the context of talking about gay politics.

Gallagher says being openly gay is also good for the straight students and colleagues. "As an openly gay academic, I'm helping to break down some of those stereotypes and prejudices."

One of those stereotypes is that of gay men as sexual aggressors who prey on unsuspecting young men. As a professor who is close to his students and often acts as a counsellor to them, Gallagher must be careful this is not misconstrued as a sexual come on.

A gay professor who sleeps with his students takes a much greater risk than a heterosexual professor who does the same, Gallagher says.

"You have to be careful because it would mean your job," says Gallagher, running his hand along his hair to the pony-tail neatly tucked under his sweater. "But heterosexuals caught sleeping with students would be told that was not acceptable and told not to do it again."

He says there are proportionally fewer gay and lesbian professors sleeping with students than their straight counterparts.

"Almost universally, they (gay and lesbian professors) won't sleep with students," he says.

When Gallagher talks about his experience as a gay academic, he is quick to point out that the experience of lesbians in academia is different from his. Lesbian oppression differs because of the added factor that they are women.

**"As an openly gay academic, I'm helping to break down some of those stereotypes and prejudices."**

"To be female in a university means you have a hassle on your hands, whether you are a lesbian or not," says Gallagher. "There is no doubt about that."

Susan Brown knows what Gallagher is talking about. A junior professor at a mid-sized Canadian university, Brown knows what it's like to be labelled a trouble-maker in her department for just being a woman and a feminist.

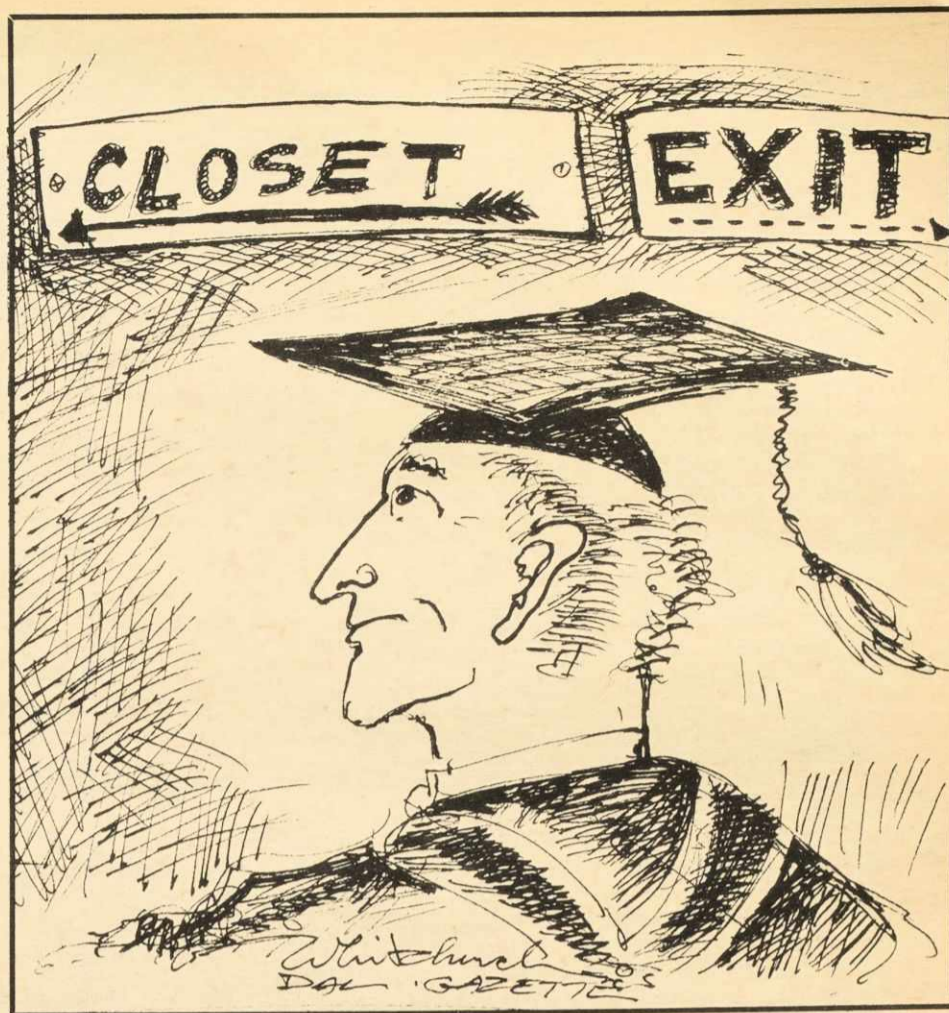
"The problems I have are three-fold—problems shared by all women, feminists and lesbians in academia," says Brown. "For each one of those problems, you're one step further from being accepted in your department."

Brown says a woman who is aggressive as an academic and does not play up to male academics' egos often has the label "lesbian" thrown at her as an insult. She says she has enough trouble being taken credibly as an academic without having her colleagues know about her sexuality. For this reason, and also because she fears for her job, she must remain closeted.

"I don't play the sorts of games expected of women profs. I don't pander to the male professors' egos, in fact I probably do more deflating than inflating of egos. I'm outspoken and I don't hide my knowledge and skills."

"These are part of the problems women and especially feminists face in academia. Women are not expected or encouraged to be competent. You get your reward from the students, not the department, for being competent."

She says once a woman academic is labelled a "man hater", it is only one step further to being a lesbian, whether she really is or not.



"It is tempting sometimes if I'm being perceived that way to be blatant (about being a lesbian)," she says. "At least I'd have some freedom, or a different kind of constraint."

Brown says she has been in an academic setting before where she was open about her sexuality. "There was strength in numbers," she says. "I wasn't the only one."

"When you are the only one, you don't even consider having a coming out party."

At her current job, Brown says she is scared those with power will find out she is a lesbian, which could threaten her job security and future employment opportunities, and colour how her work is perceived.

"If they have a problem with lesbianism, they may use that to pan your work," she says. "Knowing your orientation puts a lavender glow on all your work. They don't see the quality of your work, only that you're a dyke."

The idea of coming out to her students appeals to her because she feels this would break down the stereotypes they have about lesbians.

"I feel confident about my teaching ability, I do a good job and I really care about my students. It's tempting in that sense to be out to my students because it shows them that I'm, a lesbian who is decent human being, competent, and normal."

**"When you're the only one (lesbian) you don't even consider having a coming out party."**

Like Gallagher, Brown has a good relationship with her students and often has some come out to her or seek advice. She says she must be careful not to be perceived as being involved with a student.

"It would be extremely risky for me to socialize with a student, while it's perfectly alright, and even encouraged, for male professors to go out with their students," she says.

This has forced Brown to keep her personal life completely separate from her professional life. "The people I would normally have as a support group I can't associate with because of problems of professional decorum."

Brown says the oppression of lesbians at universities is just an example of what lesbians everywhere face. "There are problems in being a lesbian in academia, but they aren't any different from being a lesbian in any established institutions. I don't expect I'm going to have the welcome mat rolled out for me."

Both Bob Gallagher and Susan Brown are non-tenured professors whose livelihoods depend on having employment contracts with universities renewed. While neither have the security of tenured professorship, Gallagher is taking a risk by being openly gay.

Jerri Wine may be a tenured professor, but she still does not feel completely safe from discrimination based on her sexual orientation.

Wine is an applied psychology professor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education in Toronto, a post she has held for 10 years. "In the last two, I have had the courage to come out to most of my classes," she says.

Despite the concerns, she eventually did receive tenure as an applied psychology professor in feminist studies.

Wine says she comes out to all her feminist classes, often more than halfway through the course, after she has laid lots of groundwork. "My students have been uniformly supportive," she says.

The support from her colleagues is not there, though, because lesbian and gay professors do not enjoy the collegiality others do. She says as long as they don't see her as a shit disturber, she will be fine.

"If I became political, though, that would be a different case," she says. "As long as you're a well-behaved and quiet lesbian, you're alright."

The conservative Kinsey estimate is one out of every ten people is gay, and the figure is probably higher. The handful of openly gay professors in Canadian universities is not in keeping with these statistics, and chances are those gay academics are there but are closeted for fear of losing their jobs or not having their work taken seriously.

It is only through increased visibility that negative stereotypes about gays and lesbians will be broken down and people will be open about their sexuality.

Says Wine: "What made me decide to be more open to my classes was knowing that in every class there is at least one lesbian student."

Come out, come out, wherever you are.