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New LGBTQ+ organization for STEM majors offers community, professional development

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Tuesday March 14, 2023

JoAnna “Gigi” Walker transferred to UD last fall, unsure if there would be a place for her. When she saw a flier with a rainbow on it marketing a new group for LGBTQ+ STEM majors, she followed the rainbow to a pot of gold: a community.

"I didn't really think that I would be able to express myself in that way at all, especially being in a male-dominated field," said Walker, a sophomore studying mechanical engineering. "And when I saw the posters in Kettering Labs and the Science Center, and I saw the rainbow, it brought me a little bit of happiness to know that I'm not the only one here."

Now Walker is the president of the new group, UD oSTEM, a chapter of the national organization oSTEM (Out in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics).

Started in December by Allison Shaw '22 with the support of the School of Engineering's diversity office, about a dozen students gather bi-monthly for social events, mentorship, and professional and technical development.

"When I think about going into the workforce, I'm not necessarily thinking about anything to do with my identity, but it's important to have it there and it's important to not have to hide it or feel uncomfortable sharing your life with the people around you," said Walker.

Jacob Cress '05, assistant professor of mechanical engineering technology in UD's Engineering Management, Systems, and Technology Department and UD oSTEM faculty advisor, knows the value of an empathetic support system. He sees the group as another avenue for students coming to terms with their identity to know they have a place to belong, and a community that can relate and help each other navigate life and work while also being true to themselves.

"This kind of mentorship and support is something I wish I would have had as a student," Cress said. "I wasn't quite in my phase in life when I was ready to come out in undergrad. I knew, but I wasn't ready to come out. It took many, many more years before that actually happened. But I would like to think if I had seen a club like that on campus, it would have saved me a lot of angst and trepidation in my own coming out journey."

Cress also is involved with the faculty-staff LGBTQ+ affinity group, QDayton; the faculty advisor for the UD chapter of the national honor society for engineering technologies, Tau Alpha Pi; and offers professional mentoring, so being the advisor for UD oSTEM, "felt like a perfect fit."

"I teach, but I'm preparing the next generation of engineers," Cress said. "That does not only involve technical knowledge, it also involves how you navigate the workplace. The political nature, logistics and technical competence is a portion of that, but there's a lot of other stuff that comes along with being successful in your professional life. So if we can connect students with alumni and folks in the community that they can identify with, maybe they can learn from them."

The national organization has a conference, which the group plans on attending in October 2023, giving them additional opportunities for networking and mentorship. Ultimately, though, the students can know they have a home at UD.

"UD oSTEM highlights that a Catholic university doesn't have to be at odds with this," Cress said. "The two can coexist."

[Current students interested in joining UD oSTEM, click here.](#)