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Kaitlin A. Gabriele-Black and Abbie E. Goldberg

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“I’ve Heard There’s Some Sort of Underground Group”: LGBTQ Activism on Evangelical Christian Campuses

Kaitlin A. Gabriele-Black
Salve Regina University

Abbie E. Goldberg
Clark University

Historically, most Evangelical Christians have condemned LGBTQ people, citing Biblical passages establishing heteronormative sex and gender roles. As a result, Evangelical Christian colleges and universities can be difficult places for sexual and/or gender minorities, who face hostility, harassment, and even expulsion. Yet some LGBTQ students may engage in strategic activism, even on religious campuses, as a means of survival and resistance. Drawing from queer and intersectional theoretical frameworks, with an emphasis on the period of emerging adulthood in particular, this qualitative study explored the experiences of 23 LGBTQ young adults ages 18–29 ($M = 23.48$, $SD = 3.32$) who attended an Evangelical Christian college, examining their reasons for the types of activism they were engaged in and why, the risks of engagement in activism, and why some students chose not to be activists. Findings indicate that in spite of the risks of being out and visible on campus, students were engaged in numerous forms of activism. Students who were not engaged saw engagement as too risky or did not know about the existence of other queer students. Professionals working with LGBTQ young adults in an Evangelical Christian environment should support them in resisting marginalization and finding community with other LGBTQ young adults and connect them to opportunities to enact social change.

Keywords: college, Evangelical, LGBTQ, activism, Christian

Christianity in the United States has long had an influential role in shaping the beliefs, values, and policy preferences of its followers (Gallagher, 2003; Sweeney, 2005). In the U.S., Christians are the largest religious group, with over 70% of Americans identifying with some branch of Christianity (Pew Research Center, 2015). About 25% of these Christians are Evangelicals, who tend to be committed to Biblical teachings, believe in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, have a personal conversion experience, and commit to converting others to the Christian faith (McGrath, 1997). Because of their commitment to following Biblical teachings, the majority of Evangelical Christians have condemned lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) people¹ (Pew Research Center, 2015), citing Biblical passages establishing heteronormative sex and gender roles (Anderson, 2015). Denominationally, condemnation of homosexuality and same-sex marriage has come from prominent groups such as the Assemblies of God denomination, the National Baptist Convention, and the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC; Masci & Lipka, 2015), with bisexuality typically being ignored or condemned as well (Bernhardt-House, 2010; Gallagher, 2003). Evangelical

Christians have also largely opposed transgender (trans)² rights, referencing their interpretations of the Bible as the reason for the opposition. For example, the SBC (2014) published a statement stating that God created “two distinct and complementary sexes, male and female,” (para. 2) with “distinctions in masculine and feminine roles, as ordained by God” (SBC, 2014, para. 3). Separating gender identity from biological sex “poses the harmful effect of engendering an understanding of sexuality and personhood that is fluid,” running counter to Biblical teaching (SBC, 2014). As the largest Evangelical denomination (Pew Research Center, 2015), the SBC sets the tone for Evangelical resistance to trans persons and identities.

As a result of Evangelical beliefs about Biblical teachings, Evangelical Christian colleges can be difficult places to be LGBTQ, and students often face hostility, harassment, and risk of suspension or expulsion for being queer and/or being involved with LGBTQ-related organizations (Wheeler, 2016; Wolff, Himes, Soares, & Miller Kwon, 2016). For instance, Welch College in Gallatin, TN suspended a trans student in August, 2019 for “sexual perversion” after the college learned that the student had gotten top surgery (Nixon, 2019, para. 42), thereby conflating sexuality and gender and also undermining the student’s right to privacy. LGBTQ

 Kaitlin A. Gabriele-Black, Department of Psychology, Salve Regina University; Abbie E. Goldberg, Department of Psychology, Clark University.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Kaitlin A. Gabriele-Black, Department of Psychology, Salve Regina University, 100 Ochre Point Avenue, Newport, RI 02840. E-mail: kaitlin.gabrieleblack@salve.edu

¹ In this paper, “queer” is used interchangeably with LGBTQ. “Queer” is an inclusive term that captures a variety of aspects of identities, including sexuality and gender, that do not conform to dominant expectations (LGBTQIA Resource Center, 2018).

² A person who is transgender (or the more inclusive “trans”) has a gender identification (i.e., internal sense of gender) that differs from the sex assigned to them at birth (GLAAD, n.d.).

students on conservative Christian (e.g., Evangelical) college campuses may face harassment and discrimination by other students, faculty, and administration (Craig, Austin, Rashidi, & Adams, 2017; Pappano, 2018; Woodford, Levy, & Walls, 2013). It may seem easier, then, for students to avoid being “out” and visible (Craig et al., 2017)—although such silence has consequences as it results in students hiding fundamental aspects of their identity and limits their ability to benefit from the support of others who share those identities, as well as to engage in collective resistance to campus or community victimization and marginalization (Toomey & Russell, 2013).

The college years are often marked by increased engagement in activism, including activism related to individuals’ marginalized identities and on behalf of related (e.g., LGBTQ) communities. For LGBTQ students—including those at religious institutions of higher education—activism can be a powerful source of support and identity development (Craig et al., 2017). Thus, the current study explores the experiences of LGBTQ students who have attended Evangelical Christian colleges to examine the types of activist work they engage in and why, the risks of engaging in activism, and for some, why they choose not to be involved in activist work.

Theoretical Framework

The current investigation is guided by queer and intersectional frameworks. Queer theory represents a critical analysis of, and emphasizes the deconstruction of and resistance to, binaries of gender and sexual orientation—the presumed “naturalness” of which is grounded in heteronormativity, or the fundamental privileging of gender conformity, heterosexuality, and nuclear families (Butler, 2004; Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005; Torkelson, 2012). For Evangelical Christians, Biblical teachings about sexuality and gender are firmly grounded in heteronormativity, whereby, for example, any gender identity that is beyond the male/female binary is regarded as a threat or disruption to not only the structure of society but also God-designed morality. Young people, particularly those in an Evangelical Christian context, encounter messages that privilege heteronormativity from an early age: they are expected to be sexually attracted to a different sex and to conform to gender expectations for men and women, which includes marrying and having children (Pollitt, Mernitz, Russell, Curran, & Toomey, 2019). Evangelical Christian contexts, including colleges and universities, enforce this heteronormative view of sexuality and gender through policies and social pressures (Anderson, 2015), and queer students occupy a marginalized space within these broader contexts. Yet LGBTQ emerging adults within the Evangelical Christian context are at a life stage that is marked by questioning and exploration of identity (Arnett & Jensen, 2002) and, thus, may be in a position to reconsider and resist heteronormative messages about sexuality and gender (Pollitt et al., 2019; Torkelson, 2012)—possibly connecting with others to create community, explore personal identities, and work to create change (e.g., “queering” evangelism).

Intersectionality frameworks emphasize that individuals have multiple identities (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, and age) that intersect in unique and complex ways and impact how they view and how they are viewed by society (Cole, 2009). Young (or emerging) adulthood is a time of profound identity

development (Arnett, 2000) and, thus, a time when these multiple identities and their interactions may be rapidly shifting and changing. Emerging adulthood (ages 18–29) is a period of increasing independence, allowing for self-exploration, figuring out one’s identities in a variety of realms (e.g., political, relational, sexual), and articulating personal beliefs (Arnett, 2000), such as those surrounding sexuality and gender. Young adulthood is also a critical period for religious and spiritual development, including wrestling with and questioning one’s faith (Hall, Edwards, & Wang, 2016) as it intersects with developing sexual and gender identities (Cole, 2009). Because the spiritual development of students on Evangelical Christian campuses is explicitly emphasized (i.e., in coursework, mandatory chapel attendance), LGBTQ students may be continually reminded that their identities do not comply with basic tenets of the Evangelical Christian “moral code,” possibly prompting feelings of internal tension, isolation, or shame (Kulick, Wernick, Woodford, & Renn, 2017; Pappano, 2018). Acknowledging these intersecting identities amid broader systems of power and inequality (Cole, 2009) can inform our understanding of how queer young adults on Evangelical Christian campuses experience their sexual identities and engage in activism and advocacy surrounding these identities and the tensions they experience in doing so, amid heteronormative and cisnormative contexts.

Particularly relevant to this study is the fact that emerging adulthood is also a time when individuals initiate or increase civic engagement and activism, directing their energies toward areas they believe they may see genuine progress in (Pryor, Hurtado, DeAngelo, Blake, & Tran, 2010; Renn, 2007). Some queer Christians, for instance, choose to engage in social justice activity around LGBTQ issues in the Christian community (Craig et al., 2017; McQueeney, 2009; Smith, 2017). Young adults attending college often join special interest groups or clubs (e.g., gay-straight alliances, or GSAs), which carry opportunities for civic engagement as well as social support and community, even if such involvement comes with risks (e.g., harassment, academic discipline, or expulsion; Craig et al., 2017; Toomey & Russell, 2013; Wheeler, 2016). Students may create or seek out communities of other LGBTQ people, acts of resistance that may help them to avoid feelings of loneliness and low self-worth (Craig et al., 2017). Little work has addressed how faith informs the campus activism of LGBTQ emerging adults or how activism is perceived as influencing, serving, or otherwise intersecting with one’s faith (but see Craig et al., 2017). Of interest is how these students—whose experiences and perspectives are shaped by their particular set of intersecting identities along the axes of gender, sexuality, age, and religion—advocate for LGBTQ inclusion and possibly “queer” what it means to be LGBTQ within an Evangelical Christian context.

Evangelical Christian College Administration and Policies

As noted, LGBTQ students who attend religious colleges face institutional disapproval and even hostility toward their identities. Many Evangelical Christian university administrators, for example, have been outspoken in their stance on sexuality and gender. Indeed, the late Jerry Falwell, founder of Liberty University, the largest Evangelical Christian university in the U.S., has said, “Gay

folks would just as soon kill you as look at you,” and “AIDS is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals, it is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals” (Johnson & Eskridge, 2007, para. 10). Pat Robertson, a former Southern Baptist minister who espouses conservative Christian ideals and serves as chancellor of Evangelical Regent University, has denounced homosexuality, blaming gay people in part for the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (Goodstein, 2001). More recently, in 2017, the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood authored the Nashville Statement, which emphasized a heterosexual definition of marriage and opposed LGBTQ identities. Among the 20,000 + backers of this statement were Evangelical Christian university presidents, administrators, and faculty (Council on Biblical Manhood & Womanhood, 2017). Thus, opposition toward those with LGBTQ identities at Evangelical Christian universities often stems directly from administration (Joyce, 2014; Pappano, 2018).

Beyond university administrators, university policies also communicate and contribute to an inhospitable climate for LGBTQ students. Many Evangelical Christian colleges, for example, hold exemptions to Title IX, which allows them to discriminate against students on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity while still receiving federal funds (Campus Pride, 2018; Gjeltén, 2018; O’Brien, 2017). Wolff and Himes (2010) surveyed student codes of conduct at Christian colleges that were predominantly, but not exclusively, Evangelical and found that there were consequences for those who engaged in LGB “behavior” (e.g., holding hands, kissing), including academic probation, mandatory counseling, limitations of privileges, and the threat of expulsion. Because of these policies (which are not applied in the same ways to heterosexual, cisgender students), there is significant pressure on queer students to remain closeted about their sexual and gender identities rather than risk the academic and social consequences of being out on campus—yet some do choose to be out (Craig et al., 2017).

Why Attend an Evangelical Christian College or University?

Despite explicitly heteronormative administration and university policies, LGBTQ students continue to enroll in Evangelical Christian institutions for a variety of reasons. These include that they are not out at the time that they enroll, they experience pressure from family to do so, or they perceive benefits to receiving a Christian education (Pappano, 2018) and having an opportunity to deepen their faith (Arnett, 2000). Little work has explored the experiences of queer students at Evangelical Christian schools specifically, and the work that does exist focuses on sexual minority students (Craig et al., 2017; Wolff & Himes, 2010; Wolff et al., 2016), largely ignoring the experiences of trans and gender-nonconforming students.

In a study of identity and well-being among 213 sexual minority students who attended nonaffirming religious institutions, Wolff et al. (2016) found that students generally struggled with coming to terms with their sexuality. They also reported high levels of bullying and/or harassment and high levels of depressive symptoms. However, students who were engaged in a GSA had more positive views of their sexual identity and more congruence between their religious beliefs and their sexual identities (i.e., less tension or conflict) than students who were not involved in a GSA

(Wolff et al., 2016). Yet the reasons why queer students on Evangelical Christian campuses become involved in GSAs or in other social justice work, and how such work informs or intersects with their religious/spiritual beliefs, remains unexplored.

LGBTQ Activism on College and University Campuses

As noted, college students may engage in activism as an outgrowth of the identity exploration that is common in emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000; DeAngelo, Schuster, & Stebleton, 2016). LGBTQ students in particular may become involved in activist work on their college campuses for a variety of reasons. Several studies suggest that personally experiencing discrimination or harassment can push students to engage in activist work (Callaghan, 2016; Swank, Woodford, & Lim, 2013). Perceiving the university administration as unresponsive to one’s needs and demands as sexual minorities may also spur activism (Waldner, 2001). College students are also more likely to become involved in activist work when they have friends who are already involved or are asked to join by others they know (Swank et al., 2013; Wilkinson & Sagarin, 2010). Students who are more out about their sexual orientation/gender identity are more likely to be engaged in activism (Gortmaker & Brown, 2006; Renn, 2007; Waldner, 2001). Finally, some research suggests that trans students are more inclined to volunteer or be civically engaged than other students (Goldberg, Smith, & Beemyn, 2019; Jones et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017), following historical patterns of civic engagement within the transgender community around legal and social reforms (Stryker, 2015). Indeed, in a recent study of trans and nonbinary students’ activist work (Goldberg, Kivalanka, & Black, 2019), these students cited personal values and a need for change in the systems, supports, and infrastructures as reasons for their engagement. Finally, trans students in particular tend to place importance on forming kinship networks as a strategy for success in college (Nicolazzo, 2016b), such as through clubs and organizations and connections with others who identify as trans (Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017).

Forms of LGBTQ Activism

For LGBTQ students, activism can take a variety of forms, including creating LGBTQ groups that function as social supports around issues of identity (Russell & Fish, 2016), organizing and attending LGBTQ events (e.g., talks), advocating for policy changes, and educating others in order to reduce harassment and discrimination (Jones et al., 2016). Activism may also take the form of “underground” groups in defiance of and to subvert administration (Craig et al., 2017; Killelea McEntarfer, 2011). Involvement in activism connects LGBTQ young adults to others who are working on similar issues (Singh, Hays, & Watson, 2011). It may enhance young adults’ sense of self-worth (Singh et al., 2011) and ease feelings of isolation and thoughts of self-harm (Jones et al., 2016). In addition to reaping social benefits, students who engage in campus activism related to sexuality and gender may create change (e.g., gender-inclusive restrooms, formation of GSAs) and cultural change (e.g., challenging heteronormative attitudes; Elliott, 2016; Killelea McEntarfer, 2011). Participation in LGBTQ-related social justice activities is also associated with greater school belongingness (Toomey & Russell, 2013), which

has been linked to positive academic outcomes (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).

Risks of LGBTQ Activism

Yet there are also risks associated with activism (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011), particularly on religious campuses, where sexual and gender minorities are often stigmatized and excluded because of religious beliefs (Craig et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016). Consequently, becoming involved in activism is not always easy for some students, particularly those at religiously affiliated universities, where such groups may not exist (Kane, 2013) or are banned (Wolff et al., 2016), rendering it difficult to connect with other LGBTQ students. Activism may invite harassment from students (Wolff et al., 2016), discrimination by administration and faculty (Watson, Varjas, Meyers, & Graybill, 2010), loss of support from family who hold conservative beliefs about sexuality and gender (Etengoff & Daiute, 2015), and expulsion (Grasgreen, 2013). Thus, LGBTQ students at Evangelical Christian colleges face a constellation of potential risks and benefits when considering or engaging in activism. The Evangelical Christian context and the tendency toward civic engagement in young adulthood may create tension for LGBTQ emerging adults in particular—tension that may ultimately facilitate important identity exploration and growth.

The Current Study

The present study fills an important gap in understanding how queer emerging adults, who may be in the process of (re)defining their faith (Arnett & Jensen, 2002) based on their emergent sexual/gender minority identity, advocate (or choose not to advocate) for LGBTQ rights and the ways in which they “queer” what it means to be LGBTQ on an Evangelical Christian campus. This exploratory qualitative study therefore focuses on a sample of 23 LGBTQ current and former students who attended Evangelical Christian colleges to explore the challenges, benefits, and drawbacks of involvement in LGBTQ activism, specifically within the Evangelical Christian college context. We address the following research questions:

1. What types of activism work do LGBTQ emerging adults on Evangelical Christian college campuses engage in, and why?
2. What are the perceived risks of being an LGBTQ activist on an Evangelical Christian college campus?
3. Why do some individuals choose not to become involved in activism? What barriers do they perceive to involvement?

Method

Participants

This study was part of a larger study on the experiences of 29 LGBTQ emerging adults from Evangelical Christian backgrounds. A subset of this larger study ($N = 23$) had attended or were attending an Evangelical Christian college or university. Thus, 23

young adults ages 18–29 ($M = 23.48$, $SD = 3.32$) participated in the present study, representing the full range of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2000). Twenty (87.0%) were White, one (4.3%) Black, one (4.3%) Latino/a/x, and one (4.3%) Biracial (Asian American/White).

When asked to label their sexual and gender identities, many participants chose more than one label to describe themselves (e.g., lesbian + queer + asexual), underscoring the complexities of sexual and gender fluidity as one’s identity develops in young adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Katz-Wise, 2015). Contemporary emerging adults especially may own different identities at different times and may experience their sexuality and gender in multiple, fluid, and nuanced ways (Johns, Zimmerman, & Bauermeister, 2013; Morgan, 2013; Torkelson, 2012). Indeed, regarding sexual orientation, terminology was far from fixed, with seven participants (30.4%) using multiple labels to describe themselves. In this sample, seven participants (30.4%) identified as gay, seven (30.4%) identified as queer, six (26.1%) identified as bisexual, five (21.7%) identified as asexual, five (21.7%) identified as lesbian, two (8.7%) identified as pansexual, and one (4.3%) identified as demisexual. On average, participants had identified in these ways for 48.7 months ($SD = 36.37$, range 10.0–163.0 months). Participants started privately exploring their sexual orientation around age 14.5 ($SD = 4.94$, range 5.0–23.0 years old).

As with sexual orientation, terminology around gender identification was varied. Fifteen participants (65.2%) identified as cisgender, six (26.1%) identified as trans, four (17.4%) identified as nonbinary, one (4.3%) identified as gender nonconforming, and one (4.3%) identified as feminine-of-center (see Table 1). Three participants (13.0%) used multiple labels to describe their gender identification. Participants started privately exploring their gender identity around age 17.29 ($SD = 6.05$, range 11.0–26.0 years old).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from across the U.S. using the social media platform Facebook. The project description was posted to

Table 1
Participant Demographic Information

Demographic	$N = 23$
Age (years)	$M = 23.48$ ($SD = 3.32$)
Sexual orientation	
Gay	7 (30.4%)
Queer	7 (30.4%)
Bisexual	6 (26.1%)
Asexual	5 (21.7%)
Lesbian	5 (21.7%)
Pansexual	2 (8.7%)
Demisexual	1 (4.3%)
Gender identification	
Cisgender	15 (65.2%)
Trans	6 (26.1%)
Nonbinary	4 (17.4%)
Gender nonconforming	1 (4.3%)
Feminine-of-center	1 (4.3%)
Race/ethnicity	
White	20 (87.0%)
Black	1 (4.3%)
Latino	1 (4.3%)
Asian American/White	1 (4.3%)

the first author's personal Facebook page, where it was shared by connections to the first author, including to secret student-organized Facebook groups connected to Evangelical Christian colleges—groups of which the first author was not a member. Using Google and Facebook Messenger, the first author also sent the project description to LGBTQ student groups that were visible to those with Facebook accounts. Interested individuals contacted the first author via e-mail and were asked (a) to sign an interview consent form, (b) to schedule an interview date, and (c) to fill out the demographic survey (all participants were given a unique ID before completing the survey). The consent form, distributed via Qualtrics, explained the details, benefits, and risks of participation and the first author's contact information. In addition, they were reminded throughout the course of their involvement that their participation was voluntary and that they could terminate their participation and/or refuse to answer any question at any time throughout the process. Participants were entered into a raffle for one of six \$50 Amazon gift cards. The study was approved by Clark University's institutional review board.

The semistructured interviews, conducted by the first author, took approximately 1 hr and were audio-recorded. The interview questions were informed by intersectional and queer theoretical frameworks (Cole, 2009; Oswald, Kivalanka, Blume, & Berkowitz, 2009), the existing literature, and the research questions. Questions included (a) Were/are you involved in any activist work around LGBTQ issues? LGBTQ issues and the church? Tell me about that. (b) What do you believe now about God, the Bible, and church? What do you not believe? What do you understand about Evangelicalism that you didn't growing up? Did you struggle at all with particular Bible passages? How do you think about those passages now? How often do you think about God, your religious/spiritual beliefs, and so forth? (c) Who or what was helpful to you as an LGBTQ person in an Evangelical environment? In what ways were they supportive? In what ways were they not supportive? Were there times you needed certain things from certain people, and you didn't feel like you got that type of support (e.g., you needed someone to listen, you needed health/medical advice)? Tell me about that. The interviews were transcribed verbatim with the help of a trained undergraduate assistant.

Data Analysis

The study utilized thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Braun & Clarke, 2006) to examine the interviews, a qualitative method that provides interpretation of participants' meanings (Crowe, Inder, & Porter, 2015). It is a flexible way to analyze data given that it can be applied across a range of theoretical approaches (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing for application of an integrative theoretical lens (i.e., developmental and queer theories) to the data. Further, thematic analysis was particularly appropriate given the exploratory nature of this project: it offers "thick description(s)" of data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 37), which often generates new insights into the nature of a particular phenomenon and can highlight similarities and differences across a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Thematic analysis was employed as follows. We began by immersing ourselves in the data in order to become familiar with the depth and breadth of the interview content. This initial stage required us to repeatedly read the interviews in an active way,

looking for patterns, disagreement, and notable or important themes guided by the lenses of queer and intersectionality theories. For instance, we noted that many participants who possessed multiple minority identities (e.g., trans and gay) talked about how challenging it was to connect with other LGBTQ students on campus, even when there was a campus group, simply because the pool of students with the same identities was nonexistent. We organized the raw data from the interviews that spoke to these challenges in a separate coding document, systematically working through all the interviews. In this stage, we coded for as many themes as possible. After initial coding, we had a robust coding document with codes from across the data set. We refocused our analysis, sorting codes into potential themes, looking for overarching narratives running through the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). These themes were expanded, removed, collapsed, refined, and precisely defined until the codes became focused and the coding scheme was clear (Charmaz, 2006). When new codes emerged, previously coded interviews were recoded to ensure that the new codes could be equally applied across the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Intercoder agreement was calculated between two coders at two time points to verify the coding scheme, which increases validity (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013; Ravitch & Carl, 2015). At Time 1, intercoder agreement was 72%, indicating moderate agreement (number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements). Disagreements between coders were discussed, and coding definitions were clarified. At Time 2, intercoder agreement was 81%, which is acceptable (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Our approach to this study is shaped by our own personal and professional identities and experiences. The two authors are both White cisgender women but differ in their vantage points regarding the project focus. The first author, who conducted all the interviews with participants, grew up immersed in Evangelical Christian culture through family, church, and primary school. Like all the study participants, she attended an Evangelical Christian college, which likely facilitated stronger rapport during the interviews and shaped how participants responded to interview questions. The second author has no connection to Evangelical Christian culture but has been doing research within the LGBTQ community for two decades. Together, we brought a different set of perspectives, experiences, and personal and professional lenses to the study conceptualization and analysis, which facilitated a deeper and more nuanced understanding of participants' voices and perspectives. At the same time, our analysis was circumscribed by our identities and perspectives such that our attention and interpretation to certain themes, for example, reflects not only the theoretical lenses that we employed but also our own subjective lenses through which we see the world.

Results

In the first section, we discuss the types of activism work (i.e., support and actions on behalf of the LGBTQ community) that participants described immersing themselves in and their reasons for engagement. Then, we explore the risks of activism on Evangelical Christian campuses. Finally, we discuss why some participants were not involved in activism. We present participants' self-described sexual orientation and gender identity labels along-

side their quotes in order to provide relevant context for their individual experiences and perceptions.

Types of Activism

Starting LGBTQ groups. Six participants (26.1%) started their own LGBTQ groups to provide a space for fellow LGBTQ students. Because of university policies, these groups were not formally recognized by the administration and did not receive university support (e.g., funding, space). The purpose of these groups was typically twofold: to create safe spaces for LGBTQ students on campus and to gain support around having an LGBTQ identity.

Wanting a space. Two participants (9.0%) spoke specifically of simply wanting a space for LGBTQ people to exist and support each other as their reason for starting groups. These groups were not university-sanctioned and were therefore underground (see Craig et al., 2017). These students found that simply being together with others who faced similar challenges provided support and validation of their experience of being LGBTQ on a hostile campus.

“Just to be in a room of people where we all knew this is who we are, and this is what we experience, and like, we’re okay, was really really helpful,” said Dani (age 24, bisexual, nonbinary/trans). Dani appreciated attending these informal meetings without worrying about being judged, with people who “faced the same restrictions and could feel that very specific situation.” For queer students like Dani, then, the risks of getting caught were outweighed by the sense of community and shared experience that group connections offered.

Gaining support. Starting LGBTQ groups was also a way of creating support around having an LGBTQ identity ($n = 4$; 17.4%) and, for some, gaining clarity regarding (and possibly working through tensions surrounding) their LGBTQ identities and their faith, including the ways in which their own personal beliefs about gender and sexuality aligned or mismatched with their faith. Brandon (age 29, bisexual, cisgender man), who didn’t know that “bisexuality was a thing” until college and used to think it was “sinful and just something to ignore” ended up coming out publicly on campus as bisexual. He explained his shift in thinking, sharing, “I know God’s okay with [being gay] now . . . I know that God is about love, and that he wouldn’t be judgmental about who you’re loving in that way,” after grappling with the history and cultural context of the Bible and his beliefs around its inerrancy. Brandon pushed for a support group on campus while he was a student, talking with faculty who “came out of the woodwork” to support him after he publicly came out, writing letters to the college newspaper and meeting with administration while connecting with other queer students. He continued to advocate for an LGBTQ student support group as an alumnus. Brandon’s activist work was thus informed by his religious beliefs, which had shifted and evolved alongside and in intersection with his bisexual identity.

Teaching others. Six people (26.1%) spoke about their efforts to teach other LGBTQ young adults about how one could be LGBTQ and, in some instances, how one could be Christian. In contrast to starting LGBTQ groups specifically for queer students, this type of activism was for the broader community. Participants’

reasons for teaching others included wanting to connect others to resources and push for structural change.

Connecting others to resources. Two participants (9%), who had already done substantial identity work on their own, were involved in activism in order to connect others to helpful resources. Notably, both participants had been teachers in their churches growing up and served as leaders in their youth groups, which helped them to develop the skills they ultimately used to teach others about LGBTQ issues and resources. Amber (age 25, queer, cisgender woman), who was “heavily involved” in organizing youth retreats and giving talks to other teens in her youth group and had explored her own identity through Tumblr, started a Tumblr blog with information about having healthy relationships, regardless of sexual orientation and/or gender identities. “I’m really passionate about like, really good sex education,” she said, after explaining that her own sex education was lacking because of its abstinence-only model. The teaching skills Amber developed as a teen likely helped her teach her peers about healthy relationships and shifted the focus of activism beyond just the queer student community.

Other participants ($n = 4$, 17%) shared resources they had found helpful about being queer and being a person of faith—efforts that were directed both at heterosexual and LGBTQ students. Alex (age 21, pansexual, trans man) described how he shared his experiences with heterosexual peers who didn’t believe that being queer and being Christian were compatible identities—which seemed to have some impact: “Changing their perspective, or at least widening their views . . . I feel like, since talking to them, they definitely understand, or understand now, that it’s okay to be LGBT and a Christian.” Whereas Alex drew on his own experience as a resource, others connected their LGBTQ peers to specific websites and social media platforms that had been personally helpful to them in their journey of identity exploration. For example, Christina (age 24, gay/lesbian, cisgender woman) worked as a counselor at a camp and shared that several questioning young people from the camp had messaged her via Facebook because she was gay, asking for advice. “I do a lot of like, leading people to better resources,” said Christina, who had used Facebook in her own identity exploration process. Armed with personal knowledge about LGBTQ issues and faith, these participants were prepared to help others come to a similar place of understanding (Foster, Bowland, & Vosler, 2015).

In a personal project meant to be shared with LGBTQ people, one participant (Bianca, age 20, Black, lesbian/queer/demisexual, cisgender woman) started her own YouTube channel to address being LGBTQ and Christian in light of her own experience. Bianca felt strongly that her story could help others come to the same conclusion that she did about the compatibility between faith and being queer. “It’s just about the fact that being a Christian and being a part of the LGBTQ+ —insert other letters—it’s not contradictory things, you know? You can be both and be okay.” Feeling constrained by the hostile environment toward LGBTQ students at her university, Bianca saw YouTube as a way to be an LGBTQ advocate and share her intersecting identities as Black, Christian, and lesbian without being highly visible on campus (e.g., Craig et al., 2017). Thus, Bianca enacted a creative means of speaking out and resisting heteronormative oppressions, ultimately sidestepping the academic institution by using a platform that is viewable by anyone with an Internet connection to promote her

understanding of sexuality, gender, and faith (e.g., Oswald et al., 2005) and to support other LGBTQ students.

Pushing for structural change. The second way ($n = 6$, 26.1%) that participants taught others was through pushing for structural changes in their communities. This type of activism was directed primarily at non-LGBTQ people and typically involved spreading awareness of LGBTQ people and issues (e.g., calling for protections for LGBTQ students against harassment, compatibility between an LGBTQ identity and faith). “I’ve joined in some protests, some marches,” said Will (age 21, bisexual/asexual, cisgender man), who was involved in activist work on and off campus. Organizing and attending events served as a means of publicly declaring their identities and beliefs to non-LGBTQ people and sometimes Christians. These participants saw themselves as pioneers, willing to risk social censure to resist, transform, and ultimately “queer” the broader, often oppressive, Christian environments (Foster et al., 2015).

In a particularly distinctive way of engaging in activism, four participants (17.4%) used school papers and projects to advocate for recognition of LGBTQ students and sometimes examine the compatibility of sexuality, gender, and faith, engaging directly with faculty in these endeavors. This type of activism was uniquely subversive in that it theoretically forced professors to confront the topic of gender and sexuality. Jaimie (age 29, queer, nonbinary) spoke of their time in graduate school, where they “did a huge project around intersectionality, the intersection of Christianity and its effect on specifically lesbians. And out of that came an [interest in being involved in] a more active way in the community, with church-going gay people.” Through their paper, Jaimie was able to communicate with the faculty member, articulating what they believed about gender, sexuality, and faith and sharing empirically based support for their arguments. Amber (age 25, queer, cisgender woman) shared her frustrations around faith and sexuality with faculty via a major project:

I was an English major . . . In my capstone class, we had to write a paper about how our faith has informed our study in English and vice versa. And I wrote a really scathing paper . . . And I was just like, “I’m really sick of people telling me things I can’t be, and be a Christian. Like, you know, I can’t be bisexual. I can’t be a Democrat. I can’t be pro-choice. I can’t be all this stuff. I’m so sick of it!”

The professor called Amber to her office to have a conversation about the paper and told Amber that “you can’t let other people define your faith.” While Amber had mixed feelings about the conversation, the process of writing this paper and engaging in this dialogue marked the beginning of her more visible leadership in campus activist work (Renn, 2007). Amber went on to start her Tumblr blog focused on sex education, aimed at students on her campus.

Risks of Activism

Being involved with activist work was not without some risk for students given their status as queer students on Christian college campuses. Four participants (17.4%) explained that by engaging in activism, they were aware of the possibility of being reprimanded or sanctioned by the administration for breaking the rules—that is, for starting a group for LGBTQ people. Brandon (age 29, bisexual,

cisgender man) explained that he “might get kicked off, or worse, because of this.”

Two participants (9.0%) were aware that they were at risk of harassment by other students for forming groups. “Would we be ridiculed by other students? Would we have nasty comments or looks? Yes, absolutely. A lot of them. As a whole, the students here are very unwelcoming,” said Anna (age 21, lesbian, cisgender woman) of her Evangelical Christian college campus. One of Anna’s friends came out “rather publicly” in a class presentation on diversity in education, and she “got a death threat in her mailbox.” While the administration “tends to be at least cooperative—they’re not mean, and they’re not persecuting us . . . it can feel like, very, like kind of, persecuting. That comes from the students more than anything else, really.” In spite of the real risks of getting into trouble with administration or of being harassed by other students, participants felt deeply about their beliefs and were willing to risk a great deal to help others in similar situations. For example, Morgan (age 29, queer, cisgender woman) emphasized her commitment to forming a group for other LGBTQ students on campus in part to provide support but also to ensure that others on her campus were aware that “the world is a huge place, and there’s people who believe so many different things . . . I think that’s really important for people in more conservative situations to know.”

Lack of Involvement in Activist Work

Almost half of the participants ($n = 10$, 43.5%) were not actively involved in activist work. Most described wanting to be engaged but, for a variety of reasons, felt like they couldn’t be, at least not at the current time. Reasons for lack of engagement included lack of connection with other queer students on campus and fear of reprisal.

Lack of connection or availability. For some ($n = 5$, 21.7%), LGBTQ-related groups didn’t exist on their campuses, or they weren’t able to find or connect with them. “I’ve heard there’s some sort of underground group of gays, like, wandering around somewhere. Which I’m like, ‘Yeah sign me up for that!’ But I haven’t found them yet,” said Jesse (age 21, queer, nonbinary). Noel (age 23, asexual, nonbinary) was on an Evangelical Christian campus that didn’t even have an underground group until the end of their college career: “The LGBTQ community only really started to materialize my senior year of college, at which point I was living off campus. So I did not get involved with them.” Those who experienced lack of connection or availability often possessed multiple minority identities, which likely made finding community even more challenging. Emmett (age 18, gay, trans man), for instance, struggled to find others on campus who shared or understood his unique constellation of identities. “Sometimes you really just need someone to listen to your experience. You don’t want to see their brain process of them trying to figure it out, because that makes you feel even more isolated than before,” he explained. For queer and trans students of color, whose voices are not well-represented in this sample, it can be even more difficult to find connection with others, experiencing isolation in largely White queer spaces (Nicolazzo, 2016a; Singh et al., 2011).

Fear of reprisal. Five participants (21.7%) described fear of reprisal as a reason for their lack of activist engagement. They were concerned that they would be the target of bullying or

harassment because of their involvement in the LGBTQ community, and the bullying and harassment outweighed any benefits to activism. Olivia (age 21, bisexual, cisgender woman) explained, "It's hard to find anybody who is brave enough to do anything on campus. Because we have had people say really awful things before, and it's much more of a safety issue than it is at other schools." It was not necessarily safe for participants in this group to publicly be LGBTQ. "I want to keep a low profile," said Laura (age 19, gay, cisgender woman). For a few students, there was also the possibility of their parents finding out about the activist work and cutting off financial support, a risk some participants were not ready to take. Thus, being an advocate or activist meant being out, and these students were fearful of the consequences of bringing visibility to their sexual and/or gender minority identities amid potentially punitive familial, religious, and community contexts.

Discussion

This study provides insight into the underexamined experiences of LGBTQ emerging adults on Evangelical Christian college campuses. At a time of development of increased exploration of multiple intersecting identities (Cole, 2009) and of civic engagement (Arnett, 2000), it is essential that those working with queer college students (and prospective college students) in and around conservative environments (e.g., guidance counselors, administration, faculty, mental health counselors) understand the needs of this population and work to support these students. Our first research question concerned the types of activism in which students were engaged, given that they were on campuses where LGBTQ activism (and even an LGBTQ presence) was generally unwelcome (Craig et al., 2017; Jones et al., 2016), as well as their reasons for engagement. Students described how the institutions they were at were inhospitable to them as gender and sexual minorities, which led many of them to start underground support groups for queer identified students, mirroring the experiences of students at religious colleges more broadly (Craig et al., 2017; Killelea McEntarfer, 2011). These unsanctioned groups served as a safe place to learn more about different queer identities and the intersection of these identities with faith (Arnett, 2000; Hall et al., 2016) while providing validation of their identities and social support (Russell & Fish, 2016). Notably, this type of activism was largely for individuals' own personal benefit and often led to increased outness and visibility on campus, mirroring patterns of engagement found in other work with queer student activists (e.g., Renn, 2007).

Some students spoke of their work in educating the wider campus about LGBTQ identities, including through sharing their personal journeys of exploring sexuality, gender, and faith through in-person interactions and social media (e.g., Tumblr, YouTube, Facebook). Still other students worked to create structural changes at the institutional level, directing their efforts primarily toward non-LGBTQ people and working to gain equal rights on campus with heterosexual cisgender students, which has been explored previously (e.g., Jones et al., 2016). From one-on-one activist work with faculty through papers and projects to organizing events aimed at the larger campus community, students shared their identities and pushed for institutional changes. Such involvement has been linked to greater social well-being in emerging adulthood (Jensen & Arnett, 2012; Zambianchi, 2016) in part because such

work can provide young adults with a sense of meaning and purpose and also because it can strengthen feelings of community belonging (Rostosky, Black, Riggle, & Rosenkrantz, 2015). While rendering them more visible and vulnerable, their efforts may have, over time, helped lead to meaningful institutional and cultural change. Indeed, some work by Wolff, Himes, Kwon, and Bollinger (2012) suggests that even exposure to gay students can challenge Evangelical Christian college students' beliefs about gay people, increasing their acceptance of the gay community and helping them to see gay rights as a broader human rights issue.

Notably, several students in this study had been leaders in their churches while growing up (e.g., worship team leaders, youth group leaders) and found activism to be a natural extension of the skills they had developed as teenagers (e.g., organizing LGBTQ student groups, teaching classmates about healthy relationships). This engagement can be viewed as a "queering" of the evangelism they were taught to engage in as adolescents: rather than evangelizing others through communicating the message of the Gospel, these queer emerging adults "evangelized" to their campuses, sharing with others their identities and beliefs around LGBTQ+ issues and faith (Oswald et al., 2005). Such work can be liberating for students as they embrace their sexual and/or gender minority status, taking on the label of "gay Christian" and resisting those who see the label as impossible (Gardner, 2017). Indeed, tension between the Evangelical Christian context and tendency toward civic engagement may ultimately facilitate important identity exploration and growth in these students.

Our second research question focused on the drawbacks associated with engaging in activism on Evangelical Christian college campuses. Students were well-aware of the risks they took given institutional commitments to upholding heteronormative values. These risks included punishment by administration (e.g., loss of privileges, dismissal from the university) and harassment by other students who held to heteronormative, "Biblical" teachings around sexuality and gender. Hostile religious campuses have been connected to poorer mental health (Craig et al., 2017), an outcome that some participants alluded to within their interviews. Furthermore, a few students were concerned about losing support from their parents if they were actively involved in LGBTQ initiatives on campus—a legitimate concern for LGBTQ students from conservative families (Roe, 2017). These drawbacks may be partially mitigated through support by LGBTQ-friendly faculty and staff, who can provide advice and serve as a liaison between the students and administration (Broadhurst, Martin, Hoffshire, & Takewell, 2018).

Our third research question focused on the experiences of students who chose not to engage in activism—almost half of the sample. Their reasons for not engaging varied and point to the uphill battles students on religious campuses face when deciding if and how to engage in activism (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018). Most students in this group would have engaged in activism if the right opportunity had come up or planned to do so in the future when they were in a better position to help others. For instance, a few students were concerned that they would lose parental financial support if they engaged in activism while in college but expressed interest in LGBTQ activism when they were financially independent. Others would engage in activism if they were able to connect with other queer students yet felt isolated. For such students, who may have fewer resources and who may have

marginalized identities that make them especially vulnerable (e.g., trans, gender nonconforming; Cole, 2009; Oswald et al., 2009; Torkelson, 2012), becoming involved in organizations outside their university may relieve some of the isolation they experience and would help them avoid reprisal from their campus community.

Finally, participation in LGBTQ-related activism tends to translate to other social justice-oriented contexts (e.g., working for racial equality, peace activism; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). The literature on student engagement indicates that involvement with identity-related groups (e.g., groups for students of color, LGBTQ students groups) is good for students (Hope, Velez, Offidani-Bertrand, Keels, & Durkee, 2018; Klar & Kasser, 2009; Linder, 2019; Renn, 2007). For instance, political activism in college can be a protective factor against depression and stress for some students of color (Hope et al., 2018). Similarly, participating in LGBTQ-specific activism in leadership roles can help counter the negative messages and microaggressions leveled against queer students (Kulick et al., 2017), in turn promoting better mental health. Organizing and creating meaningful change is also an important part of identity development for queer students (Renn, 2007). These are all important reasons for university administration to support student engagement.

Implications

Our findings have practical implications for those working with LGBTQ students, particularly students attending or planning to attend Evangelical Christian colleges and universities. Evangelical Christian colleges may vary in the degree of flexibility and agency given to faculty, staff, and administration around the support of LGBTQ students. We next offer some suggestions for potential strategies to facilitate progress, while recognizing that many of our suggestions may not yet be possible on some Evangelical Christian campuses.

High school guidance counselors working with religious students who are queer or questioning should communicate the unique challenges these students may face if they choose to attend a religious college. Guidance counselors should encourage them to make informed decisions about their educational experience through researching their colleges of interest and their support for LGBTQ students. Guidance counselors may also be able to connect their high school students with LGBTQ college students and alumni from that institution who can support the incoming student.

Higher education professionals have a responsibility to provide safe spaces for students and to promote their well-being, regardless of religious beliefs. It is imperative that students be allowed to meet freely given the connections between such support and increased mental health (see Wolff et al., 2016). Higher education professionals must also work to protect LGBTQ students from harassment by peers, faculty, and administration. Implementing regular workshops that train faculty and administration and inviting guest speakers who specialize in gender, sexuality, and faith can add gravity to the importance of this topic and demonstrate to queer students that they are valued members of the community. Finally, administration should be quick to respond to issues of harassment and bullying directed at LGBTQ students.

Counseling centers and other campus spaces where LGBTQ students may seek support should be ready to connect these students with others on campus (and in some instances, off campus)

who identify as queer. Health services providers, who have the potential to be key supporters for LGBTQ students, must be knowledgeable about and competent in working with this population (Goldberg et al., 2018). Counselors and health service providers can act as advocates for these students to administration, focusing on pushing for services that support student well-being and mental health.

Advisors working with LGBTQ student groups on campus can provide a critical perspective and help students negotiate the tensions between their visions for their schools and the realities of being in an institution that holds to heteronormativity (Elliott, 2016). Strong support from faculty and administration can help queer students thrive on campus, potentially increasing student retention (Goldberg, Kuvallanka, et al., 2019). Finally, recruiting faculty and administration who identify as queer and Christian would also benefit students by sending the message that such identities are valued and welcomed. Such employees can provide LGBTQ students with support in navigating issues related to sexuality, gender, and faith.

Finally, affirming administration, staff, and faculty can direct students to off-campus and online communities, which have become sources of kinship for many LGBTQ people (Nicolazzo et al., 2017), particularly those who are trans and nonbinary (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Local LGBTQ networks can be a source of support (Puckett, Matsuno, Dyar, Mustanski, & Newcomb, 2019). Online, finding advice, reading about the stories of other queer students, and watching videos of others navigating similar situations can be a major source of support, affirmation, and connection at a time when the student may feel isolated and misunderstood, particularly for trans and gender-nonconforming students (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Such networks can help participants explore gender identities and expressions, provide a safe haven against discrimination and harassment, and facilitate activist work against forms of oppression. A few participants spoke of connecting to LGBTQ alumni online, whereby they can obtain institution-specific advice and support. Additionally, for students of color whose particular constellation of identities may make it difficult to find belonging and support in person, online communities may be good spaces to facilitate connection and support. Qualitative work by Singh (2013) suggests that social media can be a particularly affirming space for transgender youth of color to connect with others like them and see transgender-positive and racial/ethnic-affirming role models. LGBTQ students of color at Evangelical Christian colleges and universities may find online spaces to be particularly helpful.

Limitations

Our sample was limited in several important ways. First, participants who elected to be in this study may have had different experiences on campus than those who chose not to participate. For example, those who participated may have more negative experiences at their universities than those who had largely positive experiences. Fear of harassment or interference with administration may have kept some people from participating in order to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Yet the experiences of those who may not be “out” are likely different in key ways from those who are open about their sexual and/or gender identities (Renn, 2007).

Second, the timing of the study may also be connected to increased interest in LGBTQ-related activism among participants. Interviews were conducted from December 2016 through February 2017, right

after the 2016 presidential election. Several participants directly referred to the election during their interview and expressed passion for protecting the rights of LGBTQ people given the U.S. administration's increased intolerance of that community (Cahill & Makadon, 2017; Tan, Baig, & Chin, 2017). It's possible that these participants saw engagement in the current study as one way to advocate for LGBTQ people. Participants in this study may have been unusually motivated to share their stories.

Third, while we report race/ethnicity, students were almost exclusively White; thus, our ability to explore intersecting minority identities was limited. Black and Latino students at Christian colleges are underrepresented and face additional challenges and disparities (Kulick et al., 2017; McMurtrie, 2016). While Evangelical Christian colleges are becoming more racially diverse, many Evangelical Christian schools are connected with denominations that have historically espoused racial segregation, and these campuses may seem particularly unwelcoming to students (Cross & Slater, 2004; Rose & Firmin, 2016). For those who identify as LGBTQ and as racial minorities, it may be easier, and safer, to not call attention to themselves (Duran, 2018; Hope et al., 2018). Future work with more diverse samples should explore the intersections of race, sexuality, and gender in more complex and nuanced ways.

Conclusions

The findings from this exploratory study across multiple universities indicate that Evangelical Christian colleges can do much more to provide support for their LGBTQ students. There are likely thousands of LGBTQ students enrolled in the hundreds of Evangelical Christian colleges and universities in the U.S. More work is needed on the unique challenges facing this population to better understand the implications of anti-LGBTQ university policies and religious beliefs on the lived experiences of students. Future work should also explore how other identities, such as race, intersect with religious and gender identities and sexual orientation. The experiences of nonbinary students on Evangelical Christian college campuses should also be examined as they may be under particular scrutiny for not complying with Evangelical Christian standards for gender. Research in these areas will support the well-being of queer students who, despite often-oppressive environments on Evangelical Christian campuses, have the potential to creatively engage in work to promote visibility and equality, living out their interpretation of the Biblical mandate to evangelize.

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