

Article

# Have Christian Colleges and Universities Become More Inclusive of LGBTQ Students Since *Obergefell v. Hodges*?

Jonathan S. Coley 

Department of Sociology, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078, USA; jonathan.s.coley@okstate.edu

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**Abstract:** Due to rapid changes in societal attitudes toward LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people, as well as the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 decision *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalizing same-sex marriage nationwide, Christian colleges and universities are experiencing more pressure to become inclusive of LGBTQ students. This article draws on U.S. Department of Education data on all four-year, not-for-profit Christian colleges and universities, as well as an original longitudinal dataset of LGBTQ student groups across Christian colleges and universities, to describe the landscape of LGBTQ student inclusion on Christian campuses before and after *Obergefell v. Hodges*. In 2013, two years before the U.S. Supreme Court legalized same-sex marriage, just under half (45%) of Christian colleges and universities had LGBTQ student groups. However, the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell* decision has evidently had little effect on holdouts: in 2019, the percentage of Christian colleges and universities that were home to LGBTQ student groups was only slightly higher (47%). Logistic regression analyses reveal that Christian colleges and universities that have recently become home to LGBTQ student groups were already predisposed to having LGBTQ groups in the first place, given that they are associated with social justice-minded denominations, have large student bodies, and have higher percentages of women students. The article's findings hold implications for ongoing research on the status of LGBTQ people within Christian institutions.

**Keywords:** sociology of religion; Christian colleges and universities; higher education; LGBTQ students; LGBTQ activism; religious freedom; Christianity; *Obergefell v. Hodges*

## 1. Introduction

The U.S. Supreme Court's landmark 2015 decision *Obergefell v. Hodges*, which led to the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage, was the embodiment of many LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer) people's greatest hopes and many conservative religious people's greatest fears. For years, LGBTQ activists in the United States had pressured courts and legislatures to grant same-sex couples the right to marry. Although some LGBTQ people argued that a focus on marriage equality distracted from other important goals, such as the need for employment nondiscrimination laws, marriage equality activists countered that the legalization of same-sex marriage would lead to greater acceptance of LGBTQ people in all corners of society (see discussions in [Bernstein and Taylor 2013](#); [Bernstein 2015](#)). For their part, many conservative Christians warned that the legalization of same-sex marriage would lead to a major assault on their religious freedoms ([Coker 2018](#); [Gass 2015](#); [NPR 2015](#); [Pickering 2017](#); [Russo 2016a, 2016b](#)). Specifically, some conservative religious actors predicted that, once same-sex marriage became legal, religious leaders who condemned same-sex marriages would nevertheless be forced to marry same-sex couples (e.g., [Gass 2015](#)). Relatedly, some conservative observers speculated that religious institutions such as Christian colleges and universities would soon be forced to accept LGBTQ people ([Pickering 2017](#); [Russo 2016a, 2016b](#)). As a result, conservative

religious activists have been promoting religious freedom legislation that would ensure that religious leaders and institutions continue to have the ability to discriminate against LGBTQ people on the basis of their religious beliefs (Bentele et al. 2014; Kazyak et al. 2018; LGBTMap 2020). This includes proposed legislation that would enshrine Christian colleges and universities' ability to discriminate against LGBTQ students into federal law (NPR 2015).

This article focuses on the case of LGBTQ student inclusion at Christian colleges and universities to consider whether changes in same-sex marriage laws have indeed led Christian institutions to become more inclusive of LGBTQ people.<sup>1</sup> Specifically, I consider whether a significant number of Christian colleges and universities have become home to LGBTQ student groups since the U.S. Supreme Court issued its *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision. Christian colleges and universities have long varied in their approaches to LGBTQ student inclusion. In an earlier study based on 2013 data, I found that 45% of Christian colleges and universities were home to LGBTQ student groups and 55% of Christian colleges and universities had adopted nondiscrimination policies inclusive of sexual orientation (Coley 2017). Conversely, as of 2013, 31% of Christian colleges and universities had adopted student handbook bans on so-called "homosexual acts" or "homosexual behavior" (Coley 2018b). Have Christian colleges and universities become more inclusive of LGBTQ students over the past several years, and if so, does that have anything to do with recent changes in marriage laws?

The question of whether more Christian colleges and universities are becoming home to LGBTQ student groups is important not only in light of recent debates over LGBTQ rights and religious freedom, but also because research shows that LGBTQ student groups have brought about major personal, cultural, and policy changes on Christian college and university campuses. On a personal level, students in college are often just beginning to "come out" to friends or trusted authority figures, and they are attempting to grapple with perceived contradictions in their religious, sexual, and gender identities (Haltom and Ratcliff 2020; Wedow et al. 2017). Studies have found that LGBTQ groups help students better understand the connections between their own religious and sexual or gender identities (Coley 2020; Wedow et al. 2017) and inspire many students to begin difficult conversations about their sexual or gender identities with family members and friends (Coley 2018a). In terms of their experiences on campuses, LGBTQ students often face bullying, harassment, and rejection on non-affirming campuses (Craig et al. 2017; Hughes 2019), sometimes leading students to develop mental health problems (Wolff et al. 2016). Research shows that LGBTQ groups have led to improvements in campus cultures (Hughes 2020). Finally, on a school policy level, LGBTQ student groups sometimes convince Christian college and university administrators that LGBTQ student inclusion is in line with their institutions' missions, leading them to adopt nondiscrimination policies inclusive of sexual orientation and/or gender identity (Coley 2018a; Hughes 2020; McEntarfer 2011). Thus, the results of this article's inquiry can inform our understanding of why some students have the opportunity to experience the personal and institutional benefits of LGBTQ groups, whereas others do not.

In the article that follows, to understand whether and why Christian colleges and universities are becoming more inclusive of LGBTQ students, I analyze my original, comprehensive database of LGBTQ student groups that were present at Christian colleges and universities in 2013 and 2019. I first show that 47% of Christian colleges and universities were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019, representing only a slight increase over the percentage of Christian colleges and universities that had LGBTQ student groups in 2013. Next, through logistic regression analysis, I analyze the conditions associated with the presence of LGBTQ student groups at Christian colleges and universities in 2019. I show that Christian colleges and universities that had LGBTQ student groups in 2019 were associated with social justice-minded religious traditions, had larger student bodies, were located in Democratic-leaning states, and were located outside the South. This analysis represents a replication

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<sup>1</sup> By Christian colleges and universities, I refer both to colleges and universities that are formally associated with Christian denominations and colleges and universities that are officially nondenominational yet still identify as Christian.

of my earlier study of LGBTQ student groups that were present at Christian colleges and universities in 2013 (Coley 2017). Finally, through additional logistic regression analyses, I show that the schools that have only *recently* become home to LGBTQ student groups are those schools that were generally predisposed to having LGBTQ student groups in the first place: specifically, these are schools that are associated with social justice-minded religious traditions, schools with large student bodies, and schools with higher shares of women students. Recent changes in marriage laws thus seem to have little to do with the small recent inroads that LGBTQ students have made at Christian colleges and universities, contrary both to the hopes of many LGBTQ activists and the fears of many conservative Christian activists. I elaborate on these findings later in the article, but first I theorize the potential impact of changes in same-sex marriage laws on Christian colleges and universities and discuss other possible explanations for Christian colleges and universities' inclusivity of LGBTQ students. I conclude by discussing implications for ongoing research on LGBTQ issues within Christian institutions, as well as larger societal debates over religious freedom in an era of increasing inclusion for LGBTQ people.

## 2. Theorizing the Potential Impact of *Obergefell v. Hodges* on Christian Colleges and Universities

Many conservative Christians in the United States have objected to the legalization of same-sex marriage, not only because of their beliefs that marriage should be limited to partnerships between one man and one woman, but also because of their fears that Christian institutions, such as Christian colleges and universities, could soon be forced to accept LGBTQ people (Berg 2010; Pickering 2017; Russo 2016a, 2016b). For example, prior to the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 ruling, Berg (2010) wrote about some conservative Christians' worries that, should same-sex marriage be legalized, "a religious college that provides married-student housing might violate state law if it refused to house same-sex married couples" (p. 206). Writing after *Obergefell v. Hodges* was decided, Russo (2016b) wrote that the Supreme Court's decision "likely sent chills up the spines of leaders in faith-based educational institutions" (p. 263), because Christian colleges and universities' tax-exempt status might now be at stake. Pickering (2017) went so far as to write that it is "uncertain if [most Christian universities] can survive" due to the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision (p. 2). Finally, a U.S. Senator from Utah, Mike Lee, voiced fears that Christian colleges and universities would soon no longer be able to decide "how to operate, which faculty to hire, which students to admit"; specifically, he voiced concerns that the government could soon impose a "particularly nasty form of discrimination" on Christian colleges and universities and no longer allow them to operate on the basis of their "religious belief that sexual relations are to be reserved for marriage ... between a man and ... a woman" (NPR 2015).

As noted, many LGBTQ activists have similarly hoped that the legalization of same-sex marriage would lead to greater acceptance of LGBTQ people in society more generally, because the legalization of same-sex marriage reflects a fundamental change in how the general public views LGBTQ people (Hart-Brinson 2018). However, because the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision only directly dealt with the issue of same-sex marriage, why exactly might we expect the decision to have ramifications for Christian colleges and universities' acceptance of LGBTQ people? One reason is that the legalization of same-sex marriage may be leading to greater public acceptance of LGBTQ people, which in turn increases public pressure on Christian colleges and universities to be accepting of LGBTQ people.<sup>2</sup> In his survey of 34 presidents of conservative Christian colleges and universities, Pickering (2017) reported that conservative Christian colleges and universities in Democratic-leaning states such as California were experiencing increased public pressure to accept LGBTQ students, although Christian colleges and universities in the South were not reporting such pressure. More specifically, college and university presidents reported pressure from "[l]iberal voices within the Church, accrediting

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<sup>2</sup> For background on scholarly debates about the relationship between public opinion and Supreme Court rulings, see Adams-Cohen (2020).

agencies, LGBT advocacy groups, and changing student values” (p. 2). Past research has certainly documented instances of LGBTQ activism leading to the official approval of LGBTQ student groups and nondiscrimination policies inclusive of sexual orientation or gender identity at Christian colleges and universities (e.g., [Coley 2018a](#)). However, research has produced mixed evidence about whether the general public has actually become more supportive of LGBTQ rights following the U.S. Supreme Court’s decision ([Adams-Cohen 2020](#); [Kaufman and Compton 2020](#); [Kazyak and Stange 2018](#)); at minimum, researchers such as [Adams-Cohen \(2020\)](#) and [Kaufman and Compton \(2020\)](#) have shown that a substantial minority of the U.S. public still favors allowing religious institutions and even private actors to discriminate against LGBTQ people.

Although it is at least possible that there has been increased public pressure on Christian colleges and universities to become more accepting of LGBTQ students following *Obergefell v. Hodges*, there is no evidence that, as some scholars have feared ([Pickering 2017](#)), Christian colleges and universities are being legally forced to accept or accommodate LGBTQ students following the nationwide legalization of same-sex marriage. Indeed, it still remains true that Christian colleges and universities are under no legal obligation to treat LGBTQ people the same as heterosexual people. In 1980, for example, students at Georgetown University (a Catholic university) sued the institution for refusing to recognize an LGBTQ student group, yet a court ruled against the students, stating that religious institutions have the ability to discriminate against students on the basis of sexual orientation ([Miceli 2005](#), p. 19). Furthermore, beginning in 2013, the U.S. government began issuing nondiscrimination waivers that formally granted schools the ability to discriminate against students on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, even if their states had passed laws banning such discrimination ([Anderson 2015](#)). Finally, following the election of Donald Trump, Christian schools are no longer required to even apply for formal authorization to discriminate against transgender students—specifically, the Trump administration has made it clear that it will not investigate colleges and universities that do not provide accommodations to transgender students ([Fain 2017](#)).

In short, although it is possible that the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision has increased public pressure on Christian colleges and universities to become inclusive toward LGBTQ students, the law still protects the ability of Christian colleges and universities to discriminate against LGBTQ students should they choose to do so. Thus, we should expect recent changes in same-sex marriage laws to have either a weak impact or no impact on Christian colleges and universities’ approaches to LGBTQ inclusion.

### 3. Other Potential Influences on LGBTQ Student Groups at Christian Colleges and Universities

Beyond assessing the potential influence of recent changes to same-sex marriage laws, in the article that follows, I also consider whether (a) institutional characteristics, (b) student body characteristics, and (c) sociopolitical contextual characteristics might explain the presence of LGBTQ student groups at U.S. colleges and universities.

#### 3.1. Institutional Characteristics

Past studies on LGBTQ student groups at U.S. colleges and universities find that public schools and secular schools are more likely to be home to LGBTQ student groups than private schools and religious schools (e.g., [Fine 2012](#); [Kane 2013](#)). U.S. Christian colleges and universities, though, are all private and religious—what other institutional factor(s) might explain variation in these Christian colleges and universities’ approval of LGBTQ student groups? Studies of LGBTQ groups at Christian colleges and universities in particular highlight the role of schools’ religious affiliations ([Coley 2017](#); [2018b](#)). Some Christian colleges and universities are associated with *communalist* Christian religious traditions that have developed bodies of teachings on social justice and have tended to promote human rights for all members of society. Thus, even if these religious traditions consider same-sex relationships to be sinful, they may still support the right of students to form LGBTQ groups in the interest of treating all students equally. These religious traditions include not only religious denominations that ordain LGBTQ ministers and authorize same-sex marriages (e.g., the Disciples of Christ, the Episcopal

Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, and the United Church of Christ), but also religious denominations that condemn same-sex relationships as sinful (e.g., the Roman Catholic Church, the United Methodist Church, and most Black Protestant denominations). In contrast, other Christian colleges and universities are associated with *individualist* Christian religious traditions that tend to emphasize matters of personal piety and morality rather than social justice. These religious traditions not only condemn same-sex relationships as sinful but may also seek to enforce their moral standards on all people. Thus, Christian colleges and universities associated with these religious traditions (which include White Evangelical Protestant denominations such as the Assemblies of God, Churches of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, and Southern Baptist Convention, along with most nondenominational churches) would likely deny students the ability to form LGBTQ student groups. I thus attempt to replicate previous findings that Christian colleges and universities associated with *communalist* religious traditions are more likely to be home to LGBTQ student groups (Coley 2017).

### 3.2. Student Body Characteristics

Next, previous literature finds that certain student body characteristics are associated with the presence of LGBTQ student groups. For example, studies find that schools with a large number of students are more likely to be home to LGBTQ student groups, since these schools likely contain a higher number of LGBTQ students and straight, cisgender allies who might be willing to form or join an LGBTQ group (Coley 2017; Fine 2012). Additionally, studies often assess whether schools with a higher percentage of women students are more likely to have LGBTQ student groups, since even straight, cisgender women are generally more likely to identify as supporters of the LGBTQ community and are more likely to join LGBTQ student groups than straight, cisgender men (Miceli 2005; Worthen 2012). I thus assess whether Christian colleges and universities with a larger number of students and a higher percentage of women are indeed more likely to have LGBTQ student groups.

### 3.3. Sociopolitical Context

Finally, past studies often assess whether the sociopolitical characteristics of the area in which schools are located are associated with the presence of LGBTQ student groups. First, studies often find that, as a state's support for Democratic Presidential candidates increases, the likelihood of a state's Christian colleges and universities having LGBTQ student groups or student centers also increases (Coley 2017; Fine 2012). In the recent 2016 Presidential election, for example, supporters of the Democratic Presidential candidate Hillary Clinton were much more supportive of LGBTQ rights such as same-sex marriage and nondiscrimination laws than supporters of the Republican Presidential candidate Donald Trump (Kaufman and Compton 2020). It is possible that many LGBTQ students may seek to attend colleges and universities in these more liberal states or at least feel emboldened to form or join LGBTQ groups at schools in these more liberal states. Next, schools located in states outside the South may be more likely to be home to LGBTQ student groups (Fetner and Kush 2008; Fine 2012); Southern states tend to be more conservative than non-Southern states and had mostly maintained bans on same-sex marriage up until the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling (Georgetown Law Library 2020). Students may sense that the South is less hospitable to LGBTQ people and either avoid attending schools in the South or avoid forming LGBTQ groups if they end up attending schools in the South. Finally, schools in rural areas may be less likely to have LGBTQ student groups (Fetner and Kush 2008); again, sensing that rural areas are less hospitable to LGBTQ people than more urban areas, LGBTQ students may avoid attending rural schools completely, leading to fewer LGBTQ student groups at Christian colleges and universities in rural areas. In light of these studies, I thus also examine whether Christian colleges and universities in states that cast a higher percent of votes for Clinton, in states located outside the South, and in schools located outside the rural areas might be more likely to have LGBTQ student groups.

#### 4. Data and Methods

To assess whether more Christian colleges and universities have become home to LGBTQ student groups in light of recent changes to same-sex marriage laws, I draw on my original, longitudinal database of LGBTQ student groups that were present at U.S. Christian colleges and universities in 2013 (prior to *Obergefell v. Hodges*) and 2019 (after *Obergefell v. Hodges*). I began constructing this database by generating a list of Christian colleges and universities from the U.S. Department of Education's Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System ([nces.ed.gov/ipeds](https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds)) but then removed any Christian colleges and universities that offered only graduate degrees or that were online-only (since these schools do not tend to emphasize student organizational life). I include all schools that identify as Christian in my database and thus include both schools that are formally associated with Christian denominations and schools that are officially nondenominational. Although 682 Christian colleges and universities existed in the summer of 2013 (Coley 2017), 17 schools shut down between 2013 and 2019, such that only 665 four-year, not-for-profit Christian colleges and universities existed by the fall of 2019.

##### 4.1. Dependent Variables

To construct dependent variables indicating the presence of LGBTQ student groups at Christian colleges and universities, I draw on my earlier dataset of LGBTQ student groups that were present at Christian colleges and universities in 2013 (see Coley 2017) and then followed a similar procedure to identify LGBTQ student groups that were present at Christian colleges and universities in 2019. Specifically, along with a research assistant, I first visited the website of each Christian college or university and located their student organization webpages or databases. I searched for relevant LGBTQ student groups using terms such as "LGBTQ", "gay", "lesbian", "queer", "sexual orientation", "GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance]", "Equality", "Spectrum", "Prism", and "Alliance". Second, if I was not able to identify an LGBTQ student group using that method, I conducted secondary searches on Google containing the name of each Christian college and university plus the keyword "LGBTQ". I then examined search results and looked for any evidence that an officially recognized LGBTQ student group was present and active at a Christian college or university. When I encountered information showing that a school was home to an LGBTQ group, I recorded a "1"; otherwise, I recorded a "0".

In addition to using these data to construct variables indicating whether Christian colleges and universities were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2013 and 2019, I also used these data to construct a dependent variable that indicates whether a school was home to an LGBTQ group in 2019 yet was *not* home to an LGBTQ group in 2013. Through close attention to this small subset of schools ( $n = 58$ ), I am better able to assess why some schools have become more inclusive of LGBTQ students over the past few years.

##### 4.2. Independent Variables

One of my primary interests is whether recent changes in same-sex marriage laws have led to an increase in LGBTQ student groups at U.S. colleges and universities. Although basic descriptive statistics on the prevalence of LGBTQ student groups in 2013 versus 2019 provide important evidence bearing on this question, to further assess this possibility, I constructed an independent variable indicating whether or not the state in which a school was located had legalized same-sex marriage at any time after I had first collected data on LGBTQ student groups in the summer of 2013. I also constructed an independent variable indicating whether a state had held out on legalizing same-sex marriage until the U.S. Supreme Court issued its *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision in the summer of 2015. I relied on a public timeline of same-sex marriage legalization in the United States to construct these variables (Georgetown Law Library 2020). Inclusion of these variables allows me to assess whether states that had only legalized same-sex marriage after 2013 had become home to more LGBTQ student groups by 2019.

I also constructed three other sets of variables to assess the potential influences of schools' institutional characteristics, student body characteristics, and sociopolitical contextual characteristics on LGBTQ student group presence. First, I constructed a variable indicating whether a school was associated with a religious tradition with a *communalist* theological orientation, i.e., a religious tradition with an historic body of social justice teachings. Following [Fuist et al.'s \(2012\)](#) and [Coley's \(2018b\)](#) coding schemes, communalist religious traditions include the Roman Catholic Church, mainline Protestant denominations (such as the Disciples of Christ, Episcopal Church, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Presbyterian Church USA, the United Church of Christ, and the United Methodist Church), the historic peace churches in Protestantism (such as the Church of the Brethren, Friends, and the Mennonite Church USA), and Black Protestant denominations (e.g., the African Methodist Episcopal Church and National Baptist Convention). Next, to assess the role of student body characteristics, I constructed variables that indicate the total number of students at a school and the percentage of women students at a school, using data from [Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System \(IPEDS\) \(2018\)](#). Finally, to assess the role of sociopolitical context, I constructed a variable indicating a state's percent vote for Hillary Clinton in the 2016 Presidential election (using data from [USElectionAtlas.org](#)), a variable indicating whether a state is located outside the South (following the U.S. Census Bureau's regional classifications), and a variable indicating whether a school is located in a rural area (using [Integrated Postsecondary Educational Data System \(IPEDS\) \(2018\)](#) data). Descriptive variables (including means, standard deviations, and ranges) are reported in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics.

Variable	Description	Mean	SD	Min	Max
2019 LGBTQ Student Group	Presence of at least one officially recognized LGBTQ student group in 2019	0.47	0.50	0	1
2013 LGBTQ Student Group	Presence of at least one officially recognized LGBTQ student group in 2013 (among schools still existing in 2019)	0.44	0.50	0	1
Recent LGBTQ Student Group	Presence of at least one officially recognized LGBTQ student group in 2019 but not 2013	0.09	0.49	0	1
Communalist Religious Tradition	Association with a religious tradition with a historic body of social justice teachings (Roman Catholic Church, Mainline Protestant denominations, historic peace denominations, and Black Protestant denominations)	0.61	0.49	0	1
Number of Students	Number of students at a college or university	2629.79	4565.94	16	75,044
% Women Students	Percent of women students at a college or university	57.72	12.29	2	100
% Clinton Vote	Percent vote for Hillary Clinton during the 2016 Presidential Election for the state in which a school is located	44.99	8.82	26.18	62.22
Non-South	Presence of a school outside the South	0.61	0.49	0	1
Non-Rural	Presence of a school outside a rural area	0.70	0.46	0	1
State Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage after 2013	State legalized same-sex marriage after first wave of data collection (i.e., after summer 2013)	0.77	0.42	0	1
State Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage due to <i>Obergefell v. Hodges</i>	State legalized same-sex marriage only due to the U.S. Supreme Court's <i>Obergefell v. Hodges</i> decision in 2015	0.37	0.48	0	1

Note:  $N = 665$ . SD = standard deviation. Descriptive statistics for the "Number of Students" variable is in pre-logarithmic form.

### 4.3. Analytic Strategy

I begin by presenting basic descriptive findings on the prevalence of LGBTQ student groups at Christian colleges and universities in 2013 versus 2019. I then provide regression analyses showing the characteristics of (a) schools that were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019 and (b) schools that were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019 yet not in 2013. I provide results from binary logistic regressions given the dichotomous dependent variable, and I employ cluster-robust standard errors to account for any clustering by a school's associated religious tradition.

## 5. Results

### 5.1. Descriptive Findings

How prevalent were LGBTQ groups at Christian colleges and universities in 2019 as compared to 2013? Whereas LGBTQ groups could be found at 45% ( $n = 307$ ) of the 682 Christian colleges and universities that were operating in 2013 (Coley 2017), my new data show that LGBTQ groups were present at 47% ( $n = 315$ ) of the 665 Christian colleges and universities operating in 2019. This represents a slight increase from 2013.

Is it possible that most Christian colleges and universities that shut down since 2013 had previously been home to LGBTQ student groups, and thus these basic descriptive findings understate more significant inroads that LGBTQ students have made at Christian colleges and universities since 2013? I find some support for this idea. Specifically, after removing Christian colleges and universities that have shut down between 2013 and 2019 from the initial 2013 database, I find that only 44% ( $n = 295$ ) of the 665 Christian colleges and universities that are still operating today were home to LGBTQ groups in 2013. Thus, among the Christian colleges and universities operating in the United States today, 20 more are home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019 as compared to 2013, providing more evidence that LGBTQ students have made slight inroads into Christian colleges and universities since the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision.

Statistics on student organizations are also subject to volatility, because students are continually graduating from and/or leaving their colleges and universities every semester, sometimes causing student organizations to shut down if there are no remaining students who are interested in running them. Through additional analyses, I found that 6% ( $n = 38$ ) of Christian colleges and universities that were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2013 were no longer home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019, whereas 9% ( $n = 58$ ) of Christian colleges and universities that were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019 were not home to LGBTQ student groups in 2013. Thus, when considering whether a school was home to an LGBTQ student group in 2013 or 2019, I find that at least 53% ( $n = 353$ ) of Christian colleges and universities were home to LGBTQ student groups at some point over the time period of 2013 through 2019. In other words, the majority of U.S. Christian colleges and universities at least seem *willing* to approve LGBTQ student groups.

### 5.2. Findings from Binary Logistic Regression Analyses

To better understand the characteristics of Christian colleges and universities that have LGBTQ student groups, I provide results from binary logistic regression analyses. Model 1 of Table 2 reports characteristics of schools that were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019. Four variables are statistically significant. First, Christian colleges and universities that are associated with *communalist* religious traditions (i.e., religious traditions with historic bodies of social justice teachings) exhibit greater odds of being home to an LGBTQ student group than schools associated with *individualist* religious traditions (i.e., religious traditions that emphasize personal piety or morality). This finding is highly significant in a substantive sense as well: when the other variables in Model 1 are held at their mean, Figure 1 shows that the predicted probability of a school having an LGBTQ group is approximately 0.70 if a school is associated with a communalist religious tradition, compared to just over 0.10 if a school is associated with an individualist religious tradition. Next, student body size is

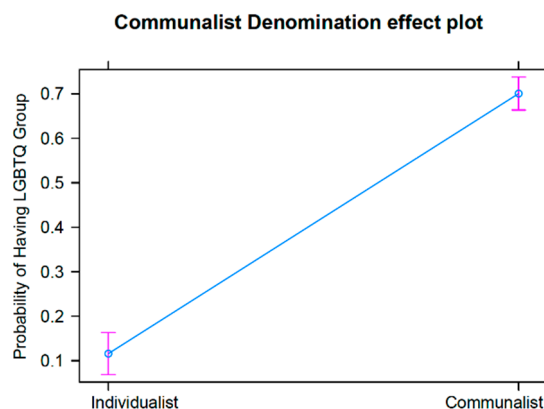


positively associated with LGBTQ student group presence, such that larger schools are more likely to be home to LGBTQ student groups. Third, a state’s percent vote for Clinton in the 2016 Presidential election is positively associated with LGBTQ student group presence, suggesting that schools in “blue states” are more likely to be home to LGBTQ student groups. Finally, schools outside the South are more likely to have LGBTQ student groups. Overall, these findings are similar to results from my earlier analyses of 2013 data (Coley 2017), although two variables that were significant in that study (percentage of women students and location in a nonrural area) are not significant in this model.

**Table 2.** Logistic regression analyses of LGBTQ groups at Christian colleges and universities.

	Group in 2019		Group in 2019 but Not 2013			
	Model 1		Model 2	Model 3		
	<i>b</i>		<i>b</i>	<i>b</i>		
	se		se	se		
<u>Institutional Characteristics</u>						
School Affiliation with Communalist Religious Tradition	3.527	***	0.856	*	0.844	*
	0.352		0.381		0.386	
<u>Student Body Characteristics</u>						
Number of Students (log)	0.802	***	0.307	*	0.312	*
	0.148		0.135		0.132	
% Women Students	−0.001		0.024	**	0.024	**
	0.009		0.008		0.008	
<u>Sociopolitical Characteristics</u>						
% State Vote for Clinton	0.022	**	0.009		−0.001	
	0.008		0.016		0.019	
Non-South	0.472	**	−0.034		−0.170	
	0.181		0.249		0.261	
Non-Rural	−0.010		−0.612		−0.605	
	0.187		0.335		0.344	
State Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage After 2013			0.158			
			0.298			
State Legalization of Same-Sex Marriage Only Due to <i>Obergefell v. Hodges</i> decision in 2015					−0.344	
					0.374	
<u>Constant</u>	−9.745	***	−6.796	***	−6.061	
	1.073		1.436		1.645	
Chi-Square	374.59	***	21.19	**	21.99	**
Nagelkerke	0.575		0.070		0.073	

Note: N = 665; unstandardized coefficients with standard errors clustered by religious affiliation; \* *p* < 0.05; \*\* *p* < 0.01; \*\*\* *p* < 0.001 (two-tailed tests).



**Figure 1.** Predicted probability of a Christian college or university having an LGBTQ student group, by affiliation with a communalist vs. individualist religious tradition.

My main interest is understanding whether recent changes in same-sex marriage laws have facilitated students' efforts to form LGBTQ groups at Christian colleges and universities. In Models 2 and 3 of Table 2, I thus assess characteristics of Christian colleges and universities that were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2019 but *not* in 2013. For Model 2, I include a variable indicating whether a state had legalized same-sex marriage any time after 2013 (whether because of a state or federal court ruling or because of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision). This variable is statistically insignificant, suggesting that students are not more likely to form new LGBTQ student groups simply because same-sex marriage is now legal in their states. For Model 3, I add a variable indicating whether states had refused to recognize same-sex marriages until 2015 and have now only done so because of the U.S. Supreme Court's 2015 *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision. This variable is also statistically insignificant, providing more evidence against the idea that students are better able (or more willing) to form LGBTQ student groups following *Obergefell*. Rather, both Models 2 and 3 suggest that LGBTQ student groups have made recent inroads at (a) schools associated with communalist religious traditions, (b) schools with a higher number of students, and (c) schools with a higher percentage of women students. Because the variable for the percentage of women at a school was not statistically significant in Model 1 (which showed characteristics of all schools that had groups of LGBTQ student groups in 2019), the significance of this variable in Models 2 and 3 may suggest that women students play a significant role in supporting or forming LGBTQ groups at schools that previously lacked them.

## 6. Discussion and Conclusions

Have Christian colleges and universities become more inclusive of LGBTQ students since the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision? The results presented in this article suggest that students have made slight inroads at Christian colleges and universities since 2013—specifically, 47% of the 665 Christian colleges and universities that existed in 2019 are now home to LGBTQ student groups, as compared to 45% of the 682 Christian colleges and universities that were home to LGBTQ student groups in 2013 (Coley 2017). However, results from logistic regression analyses suggest that these inroads do not have much to do with court rulings such as *Obergefell v. Hodges*. Rather, schools that have only recently become home to LGBTQ student groups are schools that were already predisposed to having LGBTQ student groups based on their institutional profile, specifically, their associations with communalist religious traditions, their large student bodies, and their larger shares of women students.

The results hold implications for the ongoing debate over the impact of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision. Scholars (Berg 2010; Russo 2016a, 2016b; Pickering 2017) and politicians (NPR 2015) alike have voiced worries that the Supreme Court's decision could force more Christian colleges and universities to become inclusive of LGBTQ students. Some scholars, for example, speculated that Christian colleges and universities that are not inclusive of LGBTQ students could come under significant pressure from the general public, LGBTQ activists, and their own students (Pickering 2017); scholars have also raised fears that these schools could lose their tax-exempt status or otherwise be legally penalized for not being welcoming toward LGBTQ students (Berg 2010; Russo 2016a, 2016b). However, the evidence presented in this article suggests that there has been little change in Christian colleges and universities' approach to LGBTQ students, or at least the question of whether students can form LGBTQ groups, since the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision. Other reports indicate that conservative Christian colleges and universities that are associated with the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCUs) have nearly all maintained their strong stance against same-sex marriage since 2015, with most of these schools continuing to formally discriminate against LGBTQ students (Jaschik 2015).

However, just as the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision has not led to some of the changes feared by conservative religious activists, neither has it been the panacea for all inequalities or injustices faced by LGBTQ people. Because most Christian colleges and universities are still not home to LGBTQ student

groups, the study suggests that any further inroads may need to come through more work outside the legal realm, such as activism at these schools or within these schools' associated denominations.

Beyond informing public debates over the impact of *Obergefell v. Hodges*, this study holds practical implications for LGBTQ students attending Christian colleges and universities. LGBTQ student groups have played significant roles on Christian college and university campuses, leading LGBTQ students to better understand their own religious and sexual identities (Coley 2020; Wedow et al. 2017) and leading to changes in campus policies regarding LGBTQ students or programming on LGBTQ issues (Hughes 2020; McEntarfer 2011). Why do some students have the potential to benefit from these LGBTQ student groups whereas others do not? This study suggests that students are able to access LGBTQ groups when their Christian colleges and universities are associated with communalist religious traditions (such as the Roman Catholic Church and mainline Protestant denominations), have a large number of students, are located in "blue states", and are located outside the South.

This study is not without limitations. Most notably, the study only examines one indicator of LGBTQ inclusion at Christian colleges and universities—the presence of LGBTQ student groups. Future studies might examine whether more Christian colleges and universities are now adopting nondiscrimination policies inclusive of sexual orientation and gender identity, or whether some Christian colleges and universities are now dropping student handbook bans on so-called "homosexual acts" or "homosexual behavior". Future studies might also examine the extent to which Christian colleges and universities provide benefits to the same-sex spouses of their faculty and staff, or whether Christian colleges and universities allow married same-sex couples to live together in on-campus housing. Such studies could provide more evidence for or against the notion that Christian colleges and universities have become more inclusive of LGBTQ students since *Obergefell v. Hodges*.

Finally, although this study describes the current landscape of LGBTQ student groups at Christian colleges and universities, the study makes no attempt to predict the future. It is possible that future political leaders or U.S. Supreme Court justices could adopt different stances on the right of Christian schools to discriminate against LGBTQ people on the basis of their religious beliefs. It is also possible that future Supreme Court justices could reverse the *Obergefell v. Hodges* decision or otherwise adopt less favorable stances toward the rights of LGBTQ people. Currently, however, the U.S. Supreme Court's *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling has not led to a substantial increase in the number of Christian colleges and universities that are home to LGBTQ student groups.

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