



## Student Organizations

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Although students attracted to others of the same sex had developed semi-private meeting places and informal social networks at many colleges and universities since at least the early twentieth century, the first formally recognized gay student organizations were not established until the late 1960s. But the success of these early groups, along with the inspiration provided by other college-based movements and the Stonewall riots, led to the proliferation of gay liberation fronts on campuses across the country by the early 1970s.

At many colleges and universities, these organizations were male-dominated, prompting lesbians to demand greater inclusion and often to form their own groups. In the 1980s and 1990s, bisexual and transgender students likewise sought recognition, both within and separate from lesbian and gay organizations. At the same time, high school and junior high school students have begun to organize Gay-Straight Alliances, enabling even younger glbtq people to find support and better advocate for their needs.

### Early Student Groups

The first student gay rights organization, the Student Homophile League, was formally established at Columbia University by Stephen Donaldson (born Robert Martin) in 1967. Donaldson had been involved in the New York City chapter of the Mattachine Society, but when he arrived at Columbia, he could not find any other openly glbtq people and was forced by school administrators to move out of his residence hall after his roommates complained about living with a bisexual man.

Upon finally meeting other glbtq students, Donaldson suggested that they form a Mattachine-like organization for women and men on campus, what he envisioned as the first chapter of a national coalition of student gay rights groups.

With Donaldson's assistance, Student Homophile League branches were chartered at Cornell University and New York University in 1968 and at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in the spring of 1969. Two non-affiliated groups also formed in early 1969: Homosexuals Intransigent! at the City University of New York and FREE (Fight Repression of Erotic Expression) at the University of Minnesota.

These first student organizations provided support to individuals who were questioning their sexuality, passed out gay rights literature, held dances and other social events, sponsored lectures, and spoke in classes and residence halls about being gay. Through these efforts, the groups improved the campus climate for glbtq people and made it possible for many glbtq students to accept themselves and come out. Moreover, by gaining institutional recognition and establishing a place on campus for glbtq students, they laid the groundwork for the creation of glbtq groups at colleges and universities throughout the country.

### Gay Liberation Fronts

Thus, contrary to the popular perception that gay student activism began only after the Stonewall riots,

gay groups were organized and visible at several institutions prior to June 1969. However, in the aftermath of Stonewall, the number of gay student organizations proliferated. By 1971, groups existed at more than 175 colleges and universities.

Whereas the Student Homophile Leagues were initially influenced by the Mattachine Society, the post-Stonewall student organizations were often inspired by and named after the more militant Gay Liberation Front (GLF), which had been formed in New York City in the summer of 1969.

Like the first gay student groups, campus GLFs sponsored social activities, held educational programs, and provided support to individual members. But GLF activists typically sought greater visibility and were more consciously political than gay student leaders had been previously. Members were often committed to radical social change and embraced confrontational tactics, such as demonstrations and sit-ins, to challenge discriminatory campus policies.

The defiant philosophy and approach of many Gay Liberation Fronts also reflected the influence of other militant campus struggles, particularly the Black Power, feminist, anti-Vietnam war, and student free speech movements. Many GLF members were also involved in these movements and saw gay rights as part of a larger movement to transform society. For this new generation of gbltq students, their liberation was fundamentally tied to the liberation of all peoples.

### **Lesbian Feminist Groups**

But despite their expressed commitment to women's liberation, many of the gay student groups were dominated by men and often privileged male concerns, to the exclusion of the needs of lesbians and bisexual women. For example, a priority of a number of Gay Liberation Fronts was protesting campus police crackdowns against men who engaged in public sexual activity. Similarly, while GLF dances were open to everyone, women were frequently turned off by the focus on male cruising at many of these events. As a result, lesbians and bisexual women on some campuses began to hold their own dances and other social activities.

With "gay" increasingly being used to refer only to gay men in the 1970s, many lesbians sought to have the names of gay student organizations changed to include them explicitly. Others chose to form their own groups, recognizing a need to organize around their shared oppression as women and as lesbians, knowing that they would never have a strong voice in groups where men had most of the power.

These young lesbians and lesbian organizations played a significant role in the burgeoning lesbian feminist movement. For example, Rita Mae Brown, who had been one of the founders of the Student Homophile League chapter at New York University, subsequently helped establish the Furies, a lesbian collective that shaped the theory and practice of lesbian feminism, and became one of the leading lesbian writers of the twentieth century.

### **Bisexual and Transgender Groups**

Bisexual and transgender students likewise sought to be included more fully in campus gay and lesbian groups and formed their own organizations in the 1980s and 1990s. Ironically, many of the bisexual student organizations were begun by women who felt excluded from the lesbian groups that had been established earlier by women who felt marginalized in gay groups.

Transgender students often face discrimination in ways that are rarely experienced by non-trans lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals, such as having to pressure administrators to change school records to reflect their true gender, being able to have access to the appropriate bathroom, and being assigned to a residence hall in keeping with their gender.

While many lesbian, gay, and bisexual student organizations added "transgender" to their names in the 1990s, few groups actually changed their focus to incorporate trans issues, leading trans students to continue to feel isolated and invisible. This lack of inclusion has contributed to the formation of transgender support groups at institutions where trans students have felt safe enough to come out to others.

### **High School Groups**

The existence of at least one glbtq group at most colleges and universities since the 1970s has called attention to the concerns of glbtq students and helped improve the campus climate for members of the glbtq community. But, until recently, there have not been similar groups for glbtq students in high schools and junior high schools, and the hostile atmosphere for glbtq people in secondary education was largely ignored by teachers and administrators.

Glbtq high school students experience rampant harassment. A study by the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth discovered that 97 percent of high school students regularly heard anti-gay remarks from other students, and 53 percent heard such comments from school staff. Another survey found that, over the course of a month, 25 percent of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students had been threatened with a weapon at their high school and 25 percent had also skipped classes because they felt unsafe.

With high school administrators often failing to address the virulently anti-glbtc climate at most institutions, students took the initiative. In 1989, glbtq students and heterosexual allies in private Massachusetts high schools established Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) to educate other students about glbtq issues. Despite opposition from some principals and school boards, clubs quickly developed at many high schools and a handful of junior highs throughout the country. As of 2006, there are more than 3,000 GSAs nationwide, with chapters having been formed in every state but North Dakota.

### **Conclusion**

In a little more than thirty years, the number of glbtq student organizations has grown from a handful found at large universities to several thousand spread throughout the country to nearly all college campuses. Even many religiously affiliated institutions now have a glbtq student group, although often only after a long political or legal struggle.

Indeed, the formation of student groups, even at progressive universities, frequently met with homophobic resistance, including antigay violence. Often administrators and student governments withheld recognition or funding of glbtq groups, and flyers announcing their activities were routinely torn down or defaced. Legislatures in some states, such as Alabama and Colorado, passed antigay legislation aimed at student groups. Eventually these laws were overturned by federal courts, but it is important to observe that student groups were not particularly welcomed by colleges and universities and often had to struggle for recognition and acceptance.

Along with specific organizations for lesbians, bisexuals, and trans people, many colleges and universities today have groups that reflect the multiple identities and interests of glbtq students. For example, the University of California, Berkeley has 14 glbtq organizations, including groups for Latinas/os, Asians, Catholics, Jews, graduate students, science and engineering majors, and outdoor enthusiasts, along with an administrative office, a student resource center, and special interest housing.

With the student bodies of many schools becoming more diverse and with more glbtq students coming out before or during their college years, the number of glbtq organizations will continue to grow.

Similarly, the number of high school Gay-Straight Alliances will likely increase greatly in the twenty-first

century, as more attention is given to the climate for glbtq students in secondary education. With glbtq youth coming out at younger ages and seeking support from administrators and other students, GSAs will also be organized at many more junior highs. Organizing student groups at the high school and junior high school level often sparks opposition among school boards and conservative parents. In some instances, lawsuits have had to be brought in order for glbtq students and allies to be able to exercise their Constitutional right of freedom of assembly.

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### **About the Author**

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.