

**A QUEER PAST: THE EMERGENCE OF LGBT+ STUDENT
ORGANIZATIONS IN MIDDLE TENNESSEE**

by

Quinlan Day Odom

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Thesis Committee

Dr. Martha Norkunas

Dr. Pippa Holloway

To Mimi
You always wanted us to follow our dreams.
I love you and miss you.

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ABSTRACT

In 1979, Middle Tennessee saw the formation of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights (SCGR) at Austin Peay State University (APSU). The Student Coalition for Gay Rights became the first LGBTQ+ student organization to receive official recognition at a public institution in Tennessee. Almost ten years later, MT Lambda emerged at Middle Tennessee State University. In my thesis, I look at the history of both organizations and examine the processes they went through to enact change on their campuses. I rely on student newspapers, university documents, and legal records to better understand how these two organizations formed, the arguments used to invalidate their existence, and the ways the SCGR and MT Lambda pushed back. Both organizations were fighting for visibility within their own communities, much like LGBTQ+ student organizations across the United States.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

LGBT+ student organizations started forming in the mid-1960s in the northeastern United States, but did not begin to emerge at public universities in the South until a generation or more after Stonewall. Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), located in a state often described as the buckle of the Bible Belt, has incorrectly been considered the site of the first of LGBT+ student organization in Tennessee. A decade after Stonewall placed the Gay Liberation Movement on the national radar, students and faculty at Austin Peay State University (APSU), a small liberal-arts college in the Clarksville, Tennessee, established an LGBT+ student organization. The Student Coalition for Gay Rights (SCGR) at APSU, formally recognized in 1979, was the first LGBTQ+ student organization to receive administrative recognition from a public university in Tennessee, some nine years before the Lambda Association was established at MTSU. The SCGR was initially denied recognition by the university four times before they sued APSU and the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) for violating their first amendment rights.¹ After almost a year, the SCGR was granted a preliminary injunction by Judge Thomas A. Wiseman that granted them all of the same privileges as other officially recognized organizations on campus.

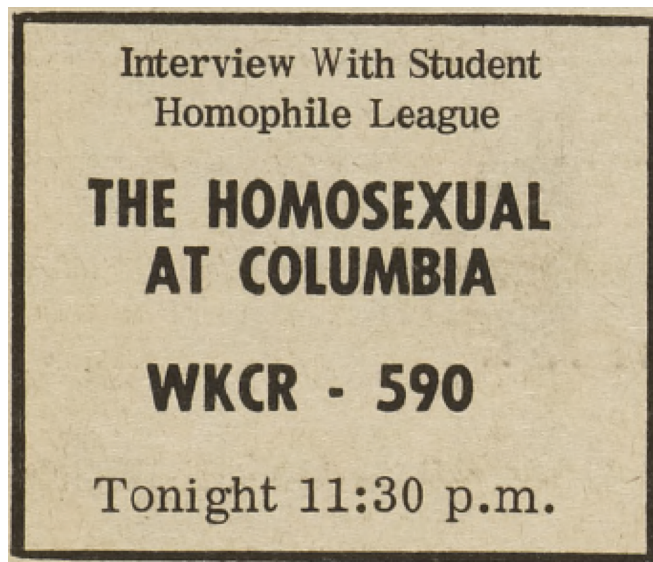
¹ In 1972, the State Board of Regents (SBR) was dissolved and replaced by the Tennessee Board of Regents. Some of the legal documents and newspaper articles related to the Student Coalition vs. APSU refer to the TBR as the SBR. “Who We Are,” The TBR Syllabus, Tennessee Board of Regents, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.tbr.edu/board/tbr-syllabus>.

The Lambda Association was founded in October of 1988 following an “expose” on homosexual life on Middle Tennessee State University’s campus. The article, published by the student newspaper *Sidelines* in September 1988, depicted a false picture of LGBT+ life at the University. Students, faculty, and community members responded to the article in editorials published by *Sidelines*. The reactions to this article prompted LGBT+ students to create the Lambda Association of MTSU to counter the false narratives disseminated by *Sidelines* and to create a safe space for queer students and their allies.

This thesis documents the early histories of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights at Austin Peay State University and the Lambda Association at Middle Tennessee State University. I examine the impetus for forming the groups, the challenges they faced socially, legally, and from the media, and the arguments they used to advocate for the rights of LGBT+ students. The SCGR and the Lambda Association were founded by students wanting to dispel myths concerning LGBT+ people. Both groups took different approaches to achieve this goal, but both faced the same types of arguments and concerns from members of the university communities.

Before either the SCGR or the Lambda Association were founded, the first queer student organization formed at Columbia University in New York City. Robert Martin, an openly bisexual student at Columbia, formed the Student Homophile League (SHL) under the pseudonym Stephen Donaldson. Martin wanted to create a safe space where

LGBT+ students felt accepted. The SHL operated underground for the majority of their first year until the University granted an official charter to the SHL on April 19, 1967.²



Radio advertisement created by the Student Homophile League at Columbia.³

Columbia's SHL was quickly followed by the foundation of sister chapters at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) and Cornell University. In the next few years other LGBT+ student groups were established at campuses across the country. Historian Warren J. Blumenfeld noted that there were 150 groups by the mid-1970s. While these organizations stemmed from the same movement, they were not all structured the same way. Some focused on political issues while others hosted social gatherings for LGBT+ students. These groups did share some similarities: most were

² Brett Beemyn, "The Silence is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (Apr. 2003), 207.

³ "The Homosexual at Columbia," Student Homophile League at Earl Hall, Columbia University, NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project, accessed March 12, 2020, <https://www.nyclgbtsites.org/site/columbia-university/>.

made up of volunteers or elected leaders who coordinated events, as well as smaller committees that planned a variety of activities, including political activism.⁴

Scholars disagree on what inspired the formation of these early LGBT+ student organizations, as well as what influenced modern LGBT+ activism. Many argue that Stonewall represented a major turning point.⁵ In June of 1969, police raided the Stonewall Inn in New York City for operating without a liquor license, which the local government would not grant. For six days, trans people and LGBT+ people of color demonstrated against the police. After the Uprising, LGBT+ activism took a militant turn and became known as the Gay Liberation Movement. Many scholars, however, linked this shift in LGBT+ activism to various complex factors. Historian Marc Stein argued that studies concerning LGBT+ activism have “expanded the concept of LGBT+ political resistance, highlighted more of the movement’s conservative and radical features, and offered new ways of conceptualizing relationships between politics and communities.”⁶ In other words, the shift in LGBT+ activism did not explicitly hinge on one moment, but was the result of cultural, regional, political, and economical influences.

⁴ Warren J. Blumenfeld, “We’re Here and We’re Fabulous: Contemporary U.S.-American LGBT Youth Activism,” *Counterpoints* 367 (2012): 75-76.

⁵ Queer activists used the LGBT+ acronym throughout the 1970s and 1980s. This acronym would expand in later years to become LGBTQIA+, incorporating more non-heteronormative identities. Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography,” *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 4 (2005), 606.

⁶ Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography,” *A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 4 (2005), 606-623.

Many have argued that centering Stonewall as the sole impetus for activism erases the work done by LGBT+ people prior to the Stonewall Uprising.⁷ In 1983, John D’Emilio published *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* and refuted the idea that LGBT+ life prior to 1969 was “marked invariably by silence, invisibility, and isolation.”⁸ He argued that after World War II, the LGBT+ community began to develop an organized approach to activism, evidenced by the creation of groups like the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis. These organizations were not prior to the late 1960s. Instead, they were part of the Homosexual Emancipation Movement of the 1950s and 1960s which employed the use of the politics of respectability to fight for civil rights. Leaders of this movement “stressed the need to tone down what they considered the more flamboyant aspects of gay and lesbian culture to avoid alienating potential supporters.”⁹ Men and women who participated in public protests that were part of the Homosexual Emancipation Movement were encouraged to follow heterosexual norms and gender stereotypes. This method of activism within the LGBT+ community dated back to the 1950s, many years before Stonewall much like D’Emilio argued. He concluded his argument by stating that the Stonewall Uprising did not set the stage for the militant movement of the 1970s, but that the post- World War II development of organized LGBT+ activism which resulted in the Homosexual Emancipation Movement paved the

⁷ Dalvin Brown, “Marsha P. Johnson: Transgender Hero of Stonewall Riots Finally Gets Her Due,” *USA Today*, March 27, 2019.

⁸ Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography,” 606.

⁹ Terence Kissack, “Freaking Fag Revolutionaries: New York’s Gay Liberation Front, 1969-1971,” *Radical History Review* 62 (1995): 107.

way for both Stonewall and the Gay Liberation Movement.¹⁰ The Gay Liberation Movement grew out of the Homosexual Emancipation Movement and turned away from the assimilationist strategies of the 1950s in favor of liberationist strategies also aimed at LGBT+ visibility.¹¹ These approaches emphasized “the goals of cultural acceptance, social transformation, understanding, and liberation.”¹²

The LGBT+ movement, as D’Emilio noted, did not begin overnight with Stonewall. D’Emilio established a transnational framework that defined the rise of gay consciousness as critical to the creation of the Gay Liberation Movement. Scholars reacted to his framework through local historical studies, many of which focused on New York.¹³ Most discourse surrounding LGBT activism centered on the northern and western regions of the United States, including most studies about LGBT+ student activism.¹⁴

Studies focused on queer youth activism, in general, reject the popular myth that Stonewall was the event that inspired the Gay Liberation Movement, much like D’Emilio. Early scholars of queer history did not focus on the specifics of LGBT+ political movements, especially in regard to student organizations, but instead mentioned

¹⁰ Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography,” 607.

¹¹ Susan Ferentinos, “Sitting In, Speaking Out: Pennsylvania’s Revolutionary Homophile Movement,” *Pennsylvania Legacies* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2016), 25.

¹² Craig A. Rimmerman, *The Lesbian and Gay Movements: Assimilation or Liberation* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 13-16.

¹³ Marc Stein, “Theoretical Politics, Local Communities: The Making of U.S. LGBT Historiography,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 11, no. 4 (2005): 606-613. These works are an example of this: Elizabeth Kennedy and Madeline Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Rutledge, 1993); Esther Newton, *Cherry Grove, Fire Island: Sixty Years in American’s First Gay and Lesbian Town* (Boston: Beacon, 1993).

¹⁴ John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

them within the broader context of local queer histories¹⁵ These types of studies offer an overview rather than a discussion of the significance of these political movements to the emergence of the Gay Liberation Movement.¹⁶ In 2003, however, Brett Beemyn published his article on the history of lesbian, gay, and bisexual student groups focusing specifically on the Student Homophile Leagues (SHL) at Columbia and Cornell Universities in the late 1960s. Beemyn traced the history of the Student Homophile League, exploring the actions taken by the groups and community responses to their university recognition.¹⁷ His study examines the origins of the SHL, the first LGBT+ student organization in the United States, asks how that organization shaped the Gay Liberation movement, and documents how they were influenced by other radical political movements of the 1960s.¹⁸

Others have also asserted that students were at the forefront of the militant turn in LGBT+ activism. Warren Blumenfeld traced the student movement from its beginnings at Columbia University to the Gay/Straight Alliance and Queer Nationalist movements of the 1990s, concluding that LGBT+ youth were integral to the emergence of the Gay

¹⁵ See Robert A. Rhoads, *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999).

¹⁶ Patrick Dilley, "20th Century Postsecondary Practices and Policies to Control Gay Students," *Review of Higher Education* 25, no. 4 (2002): 423-426; Kenneth Jost, "Gays on Campus," *CQ Researcher* 14, no. 34 (October 2004): 817-818.

¹⁷ Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups," 205-223.

¹⁸ Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 12, no. 2 (Apr., 2003): 205-223.

Liberation Movement.¹⁹ Susan Ferentinos' work on Pennsylvania's Homophile Movement is similar in that she recognizes the significance of the Student Homophile Leagues in the emergence of the Gay Liberation Movement, but differs in that she argues it was Pennsylvania's progressive LGBT+ culture that ushered in the radical LGBT+ activism of the 1970s.²⁰ These studies show that LGBT+ student organizations had a profound impact on the LGBT+ movement's adoption of more militant tactics. LGBT+ youth were influenced by the explosion of activism in the 1960s and drew on the methods of second wave feminists, members of the Black Power Movement, and anti-war protestors to inform their own strategies.²¹

Scholars focused on the history of higher education have also provided an important look into the emergence of LGBT+ student organizations and visibility at universities. Patrick Dilley, a scholar of both higher education and women and gender studies, took a different approach to studying LGBT+ students at universities. Rather than explore their connection to the broader realm of LGBT+ activism, he, specifically, looked at how campus reactions to LGBT+ people shaped the identities of gay men. According to Dilley, there were four types of responses employed by higher education institutions during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, to deal with non-heterosexual students.

¹⁹ Warren J. Blumenfeld, "'We're Here and We're Fabulous:' Contemporary U.S.-American LGBT Youth Activism," *Counterpoints, Sexualities in Education: A Reader* 367, (2012): 73-84.

²⁰ Susan Ferentinos, "Sitting In, Speaking Out: Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Homophile Movement," *Pennsylvania Legacies* 16, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 20-26.

²¹ Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups;" "'We're Here and We're Fabulous:' Contemporary U.S.-American LGBT Youth Activism;" William R. Stanley, "The Rights of Gay Student Organizations," *Journal of College and University Law* 10, no. 3 (1983): 397-418.

He defined these as reform practice, expulsion, remedial measures, and disciplinary sanctions.²² Some of these responses can be seen in the experiences of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association. Jessica Clawson, historian, drew on the work of higher education scholars to inform her studies concerning LGBT+ students. Her works focused on the emergence of LGBT+ students at the University of Florida. Clawson was interested in understanding what influenced the formation of these student organizations. She argued that the rise of student activism in the 1960s, the decision of the American Psychological Association to depathologize homosexuality, and the development of Student Affairs offices into centers focused on diversity and campus climate encourage the emergence of LGBT+ student organizations.²³

As LGBT+ student organizations began forming nationwide, more and more of them had to sue their universities for official recognition including the Student Coalition for Gay Rights. These were considered “special recognition” cases, which first began to appear in the 1960s with the growth of student activism.²⁴ In many cases, university administrators denied official recognition to LGBT+ student organizations on the basis that official recognition would be construed as university endorsement of such behavior and that LGBT+ groups could encourage students to participate in illegal acts. According

²² Patrick Dilley, “20th Century Postsecondary Practices and Policies to Control Gay Students,” *The Review of Higher Education* 25, no. 4 (Summer 2002): 411-426.

²³ Jessica Clawson, “Coming Out of the Campus Closet: The Emerging Visibility of Queer Students at the University of Florida, 1970-1982,” *Educational Studies* 50 (2014): 209-230. See also: Jessica Clawson, “Queers on Campus LGBTQ Student Visibility At Three Public Universities in Florida, 1970-1985,” (PhD diss., University of Florida, Gainesville, 2014), 9-19.

²⁴ David A. Reichard, “‘We Can’t Hide and They Are Wrong:’ The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969-1971,” *Law and History Review* 28, no. 3 (August 2010): 632-634.

to historian Warren J. Blumenfeld this happened to a number of LGBT+ groups, including: Sacramento and San Jose State Universities, Florida State University, Pennsylvania State University, University of Kansas, University of Texas.²⁵ The student government at Sacramento State University sued the college for refusing to recognize a student group called The Society for Homosexual Freedom (SHF) that formed in 1970. In *Associated Students of Sacramento State College v. Butz* the California Superior Court ruled that free speech and freedom of association applied to such student groups.²⁶ This case set a legal precedent within California that LGBT+ student groups across the country leaned on as they sought university recognition. According to historian David Reichard, the decision of the judge in the SHF case was “the first to use free speech and association grounds to extend legal protection to gay and lesbian student organizations.”²⁷ Other LGBT+ student organizations relied on this precedent to make their cases. Reichard noted that the first reported organization to do so was the Committee on Gay Education at the University of Georgia in 1972. By the 1970s, the main problem LGBT+ student organizations encountered was administrative denial of recognition.

Some legal studies done on these groups focused on the precedents they set and the effect these court rulings had on the *in locos parentis* doctrine that governed university campuses. Student activists started challenging this norm in the 1960s and won

²⁵ Warren J. Blumenfeld, “‘We’re Here and We’re Fabulous:’ Contemporary U.S.-American LGBT Youth Activism:” 76-78.

²⁶ David A. Reichard, “‘We Can’t Hide and They Are Wrong:’ The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969-1971:” 633-634.

²⁷ David A. Reichard, “‘We Can’t Hide and They Are Wrong:’ The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969-1971:” 633.

a big victory in *Healy v. James*, a case which upheld free speech rights on campus. Since, LGBT+ students were particularly affected in that their sexual identities were invalidated, the legal rejection of *in loco parentis* and establishment of free speech rights for college students had a significant impact on them.²⁸ A number of legal scholars have examined lawsuits brought forth by prospective LGBT+ student groups who had previously been denied official recognition from their university administrations.²⁹ David Reichard explained that much of this scholarship analyzed the legal impact of these cases. His case study on Sacramento College's "struggle for recognition" case, however, traced the influence of these cases on the dismantling of heteronormative campus climates.³⁰ Preceding Reichard's cultural analysis of these cases was Beth Bailey's examination of the Gay Liberation Front (GLF) that formed at Kansas University shortly after Stonewall. Her work framed "special recognition cases" within the broader discussion of campus climates toward LGBT+ student organizations.³¹

²⁸ David A. Reichard, "'We Can't Hide and They Are Wrong': The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969-1971," 633-634.

²⁹ William R. Stanley, "The Rights of Gay Student Organizations," *Journal of College and University Law* 10, no. 3 (1983): 397-418.

³⁰ David A. Reichard, "'We Can't Hide and They Are Wrong': The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento College, 1969-1971," *Law and History Review* 28, no. 3 (August 2010).

³¹ Beth Bailey, *Sex in the Heartland* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 175-90.



Photo of George Raya, LGBT+ student at Sacramento State College who sued the university for organizational recognition.³²

This thesis examines the histories of the formation of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights at Austin Peay State University and the Lambda Association at Middle Tennessee State University, in an effort to better understand the social and political climate at Tennessee universities in the 1970s and 1980s for LGBT+ students. By chronicling the formation of LGBT+ student organizations, the thesis demonstrates the challenges LGBT+ students faced at two southern universities. Both of these organizations shared similar statements of purpose. The Student Coalition for Gay Rights stated, “the primary goal of the coalition is to break down the myths and stereotypes that breed misunderstanding and unwarranted discrimination toward people with alternate lifestyles within our society.”³³ The Lambda Association relayed a similar message, “The

³² John Ferannini, “Meet the Man Who Sued Sac State For Right To Form An Official LGBT Club On Campus – And Won,” *The State Hornet*, last modified April 12, 2017, <https://statehornet.com/2017/04/meet-the-man-who-sued-sac-state-for-right-to-form-official-lgbt-club-on-campus-and-won/>.

³³ “New Student Organization,” *The All-State* 49, no. 7, November 1, 1978, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

organization will try to show society we are valuable to society...this will provide a safe place for us to meet and see we are valuable and have something to contribute.”³⁴ The SCGR and the Lambda Association sought to demythologize being LGBT+ and educate their respective communities about non-heterosexual lifestyles. The circumstances surrounding the Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association’s formation and the struggles they faced were quite different, yet responses to the group were similar. These similarities illustrate how campus attitudes towards LGBT+ students did not change much over the ten-year period between the formation of the SCGR and the Lambda Association.

In order to achieve recognition, the SCGR brought a lawsuit against Austin Peay State University. The Lambda Association did not have to fight the Middle Tennessee State University administration for recognition and instead had to face the court of public opinion. Opponents of these two groups used similar arguments to express their disapproval almost ten years apart. Both of my case study chapters provide a discussion of the arguments the groups used to achieve recognition. I outline how and why people justified their opposition to these LGBT+ student organizations. What arguments did people use for and against the SCGR and the Lambda Association? What type of language did people use when discussing the SCGR and the Lambda Association? Who were the people who publicly responded? Was it only people associated with the

³⁴ D. Brian Conley, “Proposed Organization Geared To Support MTSU Homosexuals,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 17, September 29, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, Sidelines Student Newspaper.

university or the community at large? Who was coming out in support of the group and how did they differ from those coming out against the two groups?

To answer these questions, I searched for sources that would provide me insight into the public's reaction to the SCGR and the Lambda Association. I started by searching through the student newspapers at both universities. The *All-State*, at APSU, and *MTSU Sidelines* published letters to the editor written by students and area residents who opposed and supported these groups. The newspaper articles provided me insight into the public reactions but did not offer me much information concerning university actions taken against the SCGR or the Lambda Association. Materials related to the university response to the Student Coalition for Gay Rights are housed by APSU's Archives and Special Collections.³⁵ This collection included copies of the denial letters written by university and elected officials, as well as the legal documents relating to the court case. I relied on these sources to inform my understanding of APSU's refusal to recognize the Student Coalition for Gay Rights. To better understand the Lambda Association's history, I sought out the organization's papers, which are housed at the Albert Gore Research Center at Middle Tennessee State University. The MT Lambda collection contains foundational records, copies of the reports published by the organization, and protest materials.

Chapter two focuses on the well documented effort of the SCGR to achieve official recognition, a matter that ended up in federal court and resulted in a statewide

³⁵ I was provided access to these materials by Sarah Myers, Archives and Special Collections Assistant at APSU, through Sharepoint. The documents were digitized in 2018.

university system policy change. I analyze the arguments used by the university to deny recognition to the organization as well as the responses of the SCGR to those arguments. The arguments used against the SCGR were not unique and, in fact, were used against many LGBT+ student groups during the second half of the nineteenth century. In this chapter, I provide a sequential account of the SCGR's efforts to achieve official recognition and trace the arguments used against the organization.

Chapter three follows the formation of the Lambda Association up to their non-discrimination policy initiative, noting the community backlash the organization faced along the way. I examine the arguments used against the Lambda Association by members of the MTSU community, as well as the arguments made in support. I also pay attention to the methods used by the Lambda Association during the 1990s to protest the university's refusal to incorporate sexual orientation into the non-discrimination policy.³⁶

I was introduced to the topic of LGBT+ student organizations during my year as a graduate research assistant at the Albert Gore Research Center (AGRC) at Middle Tennessee State University. When I started at the AGRC in the fall of 2018, university archivist Donna Baker was preparing an exhibit celebrating MT Lambda's fortieth anniversary. Even though I went to MTSU for my bachelor's degree, I never learned of

³⁶ As a note the Lambda Association, now known as MT Lambda, does not use the word queer when describing themselves; when specifically discussing MT Lambda I will use LGBT+, which is the acronym the group uses to describe the community they serve. When discussing the broader topic of LGBT+ history, I will use the word queer. While people have historically used this word as a slur, Queer Nationalists in the 1990s reclaimed it as a term of inclusivity, representing all gender and sexual identities. People today use this term to identify as outside the heterosexual norm. For more information see "MT Lambda," Middle Tennessee State University, last updated August 28, 2018, <https://www.mtsu.edu/mtlambda/history.php>; Warren J. Blumenfeld, "'We're Here and We're Fabulous:' Contemporary U.S.-American LGBT Youth Activism," 78-80.

any university history related to LGBTQ+ students until I began working at the AGRC. I was personally invested in the work Baker was doing to commemorate the Lambda Association. The summer before I became a research assistant at the Albert Gore Research Center, I started exploring and understanding my identity as a queer person. Learning about the Lambda Association's history and about people like Aleisha Brevard, the first openly transgender student at MTSU, helped me navigate my own understanding of who I am and where I fit on campus. By the spring semester, I knew I wanted to focus my thesis on LGBTQ+ student organizations at public universities. With the encouragement of archivist Sarah Calise, I started to dig into the history of the Lambda Association. Calise encouraged my interest in this topic and included me on different projects related to LGBTQ+ history in Middle Tennessee. In the spring, Calise assigned graduate assistant Alissa Kane and I the task of creating a website that would document queer history in the Middle Tennessee Area. While doing research for the website, I discovered that the Student Coalition for Gay Rights at Austin Peay State University was older than the Lambda Association. Prior to that discovery, Kane and I were operating under the assumption that the Lambda Association was the first organization of its kind in Tennessee because their website made that claim. I discovered that not only did the SCGR form before the Lambda Association, but they had to sue their university to get official recognition. At this point, I decided to no longer focus my thesis on just the Lambda Association but, instead, to look at the history of both organizations.

CHAPTER II

THE PURSUIT OF GAY RIGHTS: HOW THE STUDENT COALITION FOR GAY RIGHTS ACHIEVED UNIVERSITY RECOGNITION

Historians have assumed that the emergence of LGBT+ student organizations at public universities in the South are events of a more recent past, a generation or better after Stonewall. Within Tennessee, many believe that the first of these organizations in the state began at Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU) in 1988.¹ This historical memory, however, does not match up with the historical record. A decade after Stonewall placed the Gay Liberation Movement on the national radar, students and faculty at Austin Peay State University (APSU), a small liberal-arts school in the military-dominated city of Clarksville, established an LGBT+ student organization nine years *before* MTSU. In 1979, the Student Coalition for Gay Rights (SCGR) at APSU became the first LGBT+ student organization to receive administrative recognition from a public university in Tennessee. The group was initially denied four times before they sued APSU and the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) for violating their first amendment rights. After almost a year, the SCGR was granted a preliminary injunction by Judge Thomas A. Wiseman which allowed them to receive all of the same privileges as other officially recognized organizations on campus.

¹ I learned about this assumption through my interactions with current members of MT Lambda, as well as from other faculty on campus.

The SCGR was not the first LGBT+ student organization to sue their university for recognition, nor were they the last. In 1970 the Society for Homosexual Freedom at Sacramento State College became the first of these groups to file a what scholar David Reichard described as a “struggle for recognition” case.² This chapter tells the story of the Student Coalition at APSU and the impact it had on state higher education in the late 1970s and early 1980s. I focus on the well documented effort of the SCGR to achieve university recognition, a matter that ended up in federal court and resulted in a statewide university system policy change.

University Denial and the Coalition’s Resistance

About a month after the tenth anniversary of the Stonewall Uprising, the SCGR announced their formation.³ The group released a media statement that outlined their mission and purpose. The goal of the organization was to combat negative stereotypes about the LGBT+ community and to fight discrimination. In a press release, the SCGR announced they would achieve this goal through nine different methods, which included hosting educational workshops, widely disseminating information related to “alternate lifestyles,” and increasing campus consciousness about LGBT+ peoples.⁴ The group submitted their paperwork in the fall of 1978 and the Student Government Association (SGA) voted to approve their application that December by a vote of twenty-three to five.

² David A. Reichard, “We Can’t Hide and They Are Wrong”: The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969- 1971,” *Law and History Review* 28, no. 3 (August 2010): 632-633.

³ “A Step Backward: Nicks’ Decision At APSU Lacks Political Courage,” APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁴ “New Student Organization,” *The All-State* 49, no. 7, November 1, 1978, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

Before the SCGR constitution could even make it out of the SGA, though, trouble had already begun. Charles Boehms, vice president of student affairs, rejected the SGA's first attempt to approve the organization based on a technicality. He noted that the SGA was supposed to read an organization's constitution two times, at separate meetings, before they could vote. The SGA read the Student Coalition for Gay Rights' constitution twice in the same day and thus had not followed policy. The SGA had also decided to attach a "rider" to the group's constitution. This rider clarified that the SGA did not, in any way, endorse the "actions or beliefs of the organization."⁵ Prior to the SCGR, a rider had never been attached to a student group's constitution. Boehms called this action by the SGA discriminatory, even though he would be the first university official to deny the organization official recognition based on the belief that organizational recognition would imply university approval of "alternate lifestyles." In response to Boehms initial concerns, the SGA voted again on the Coalition's constitution, this time passing it without a rider attached.⁶

After the SCGR received approval from the SGA the second time, their materials were then sent to Boehms for administrative approval. On January 31st, 1979, Boehms officially denied the SCGR's student organization application. He penned a letter to the group explaining that the university could not grant the SCGR approval because he felt that doing so would endanger other students and that it would be construed as the

⁵ Kathi Bennett, "The Senate Does It Again," *The All-State* 49, no. 11, December 6, 1978, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.b v

⁶ Kathi Bennett, "The Senate Does It Again"; Proposed Findings of Fact prepared by David C. Porteus, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

university endorsing non-heterosexual identities.⁷ His rebuttal attempted to strengthen the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, which had been adopted by the university in the 1960s.⁸ This principle transferred a measure of parental authority to the university endowing them with the responsibility of guiding students morally and spiritually.⁹ Boehms referenced this paternalism in his letter of denial stating, “The educational process has to cope simultaneously with several distinct problem [sic]- the imparting of knowledge, practical and theoretical; the learning of skills and social habits; the transmission of beliefs and traditions, secular and religious, the formation of character and personality; and moral, as well as intellectual, development.”¹⁰

The SCGR responded to this reasoning with an open letter published in the student newspaper *The All-State*. Their response confronted Boehms and the doctrine of *in loco parentis*. The group rejected the notion that the university was responsible for students’ educational and moral development arguing, “The way to develop values in an institution that serves a pluralistic society is not indoctrination or the exclusion of points of view.”¹¹ Moreover, their rebuttal emphasized the fact that Austin Peay State University

⁷ Charles Boehms, “Denial,” *The All-State* 49, no. 16, February 7, 1979, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

⁸ Charles Waters, “History of APSU,” *The Governor’s Pride* 1984 vol. 35, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

⁹ With the rise of student activism in the 1960s, students began to challenge this doctrine through activism and through the court system. See also: Brian Jackson, “The Lingering Legacy of In Loco Parentis: An Historical Survey and Proposal of Reform,” *Vanderbilt Law Review* 44 (1991): 1135-1164; John C. Hogan and Mortimer D. Schwartz, “In Loco Parentis in the United States 1765-1985,” *The Journal of Legal History* 8 (1987): 260-874.

¹⁰ Charles Boehms, “Denial.”

¹¹ Student Coalition for Gay Rights, “Rebuttal,” *The All-State* 49, no. 16, February 7, 1979, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

was an independent institution with a responsibility to the campus and not the regional community.¹² The Student Coalition made it clear to Boehms that they would not give up until they received official recognition, even if that meant taking the university to court. In February of 1979, the group publicly announced that the Tennessee Gay Coalition for Human Rights volunteered to provide them with an attorney and to help fundraise.¹³ Boehms' denial was the beginning of a year-long battle.



Image of Charles N. Boehms, the first administrator to deny the SCGR recognition, from *Farewell and Hale (1979)*¹⁴

Richard Lewis, then president of the SCGR, wrote a letter to the university president appealing Boehms' decision. Two days after Lewis' appeal, the organization received another denial. Robert O. Riggs, the university president, justified this action

¹² Student Coalition for Gay Rights, "Rebuttal."

¹³ "Austin Peay's Gay Coalition To Seek Help In Its Fight," February 11, 1979,

¹⁴ *Farewell and Hale*, 1979 Austin Peay State University Yearbook, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

with much of the same reasoning as Boehms. He argued that the group “implicitly endorses homosexuality” and that “such activity is contrary to the Judeo-Christian ethic which undergirds our [APSU’s] community, our State, and our nation.”¹⁵ These points were previously refuted by the Student Coalition through various news releases and publications. Members of the group emphasized that their interest was in the dissemination of credible information and in the creation of educational programming that would demythologize the stereotypes surrounding LGBT+ peoples. Lewis, in a direct response to the university president, denounced Riggs for promoting the very misconceptions the Student Coalition wanted to breakdown.¹⁶

On February 24, 1979, Lewis found himself once again penning a letter of appeal. This letter was sent to the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR), a governing body for the state university and community college system of Tennessee which included APSU, East Tennessee State University, Memphis State University, Middle Tennessee State University, Tennessee State University, Tennessee Technological University, Chattanooga State Technical Community College, Cleveland State Community College, and Columbia State Community College.¹⁷ In response to Lewis’s letter, the chancellor of the Board, Roy Nicks, called for a fact-finding hearing where both university officials and the SCGR could defend their conflicting viewpoints.

¹⁵ Student Coalition for Gay Rights’ Brief in Support of Application for a Preliminary Injunction, prepared by Gary E. Crawford and James Blumstein, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

¹⁶ Kathi Bennett, “Local,” *The All-State* 49, no. 17, February 14, 1979, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

¹⁷ Roy S. Nicks to Richard W. Lewis, July 16, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.



Image of Robert Riggs, the second administrator to deny the SCGR recognition, from APSU's 1979 yearbook¹⁸

The campus community was not silent about these denials. APSU's student newspaper *The All-State* served as a discussion board where students and faculty debated the presence of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights. From the moment the SCGR received approval from the Student Government Association people started to react. Not surprisingly, some of these responses came from people vehemently opposed to the SCGR's formation. One such critic wrote the newspaper to state, "I'm not saying they [LGBT+ people] don't have a right to live but they certainly don't belong around children or even young adults."¹⁹ Another argued against the SCGR based on personal religious convictions, explaining, "The first chapter of Romans presents a catalog of the symptoms

¹⁸ *Farewell and Hale*, 1979.

¹⁹ Manuel S. Munoz, "Letters to the Editor: Gay Controversy Begins," *The All-State*, November 9, 1978, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

of darkness. Homosexuality is clearly listed.”²⁰ These types of arguments were repeated over the course of the SCGR’s battle to achieve recognition.

The naysayers, however, were not the only ones vocal about the Student Coalition. Many people wrote in to express their support for the organization. In one particular instance, the Women’s Action Coalition heralded the action of the SGA in approving the SCGR’s constitution in December 1978. The matter at hand, for the Women’s Action Coalition, was protection of student’s rights and, more broadly, human rights.²¹ Glenn Carter, the SCGR’s advisor, also advocated for the SCGR’s right to organize during this time. He denounced the actions of the APSU administration arguing that they were violating the rights of APSU students by denying the SCGR. Carter was a social worker and felt that it was his duty to “fight any form of discrimination, whether it be based on age, sex, race or sexual orientation.”²²



Image of Glenn Carter, SCGR advisor, from APSU’s 1985 yearbook.²³

²⁰ Bruc McJones, “Letters To The Editor: Gay Controversy Begins,” *The All-State*, November 9, 1978, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

²¹ The Women’s Action Council, “Letters To The Editor,” *The All-State* 49, no. 9, November 15, 1978, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

²² *Farewell and Hale*, 1985 Austin Peay State University Yearbook, Austin Peay State University Special Collections.

²³ *Farewell and Hale*, 1985.

Denial at the State Level

The fact-finding hearing the chancellor of the Board, Roy Nicks, called for did not take place until May, leaving the SCGR time to clarify their organization's written statement of purpose. On April 11, 1979, SCGR adopted a more detailed mission that outlined their specific goals:

As an educational and political action organization, the Coalition does not advocate or promote violation of state statutes. Our goal is not to promote homosexuality or any kind of other sexual behavior but to promote understanding and equality for all people without regard to their sexual orientation. We seek to effect [sic] our goals through compliance with the Constitution of the United States and the State of Tennessee, Tennessee statutory law and the rules and regulations of the University.²⁴

The revised policy allowed the SCGR to directly refute the claims made by Boehms and Riggs that the organization's goal was to promote homosexuality at APSU. This revised policy, however, would not prevent the organization from receiving yet another denial of recognition from the Board of Regents. Chancellor Nicks supported the decisions of both Boehms and Riggs, using the findings of fact from the Board of Regents' hearing as his justification. For two days, May 9th-10th, the Board of Regents held a hearing on the SCGR's appeal. According to the brief summary of the hearing prepared by Dr. Adkisson, hearing officer, lawyers for APSU and the SCGR called upon psychologists, medical doctors, and university officials to strengthen their respective cases. The summary Dr. Adkisson provided began with a recounting of the Student Coalition for Gay

²⁴ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by Gary E. Crawford, June 8, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

Rights' timeline followed by a breakdown of some witness testimony. His summary described testimony by a number of witnesses. First, Harvey Reese Jr., a former faculty member at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine as well as a practicing psychiatrist, testified that a small percentage of his patients were homosexuals and that, based on those experiences, "official recognition of SCGR would confer an atmosphere of legitimacy and approval by the University to the activities engaged in by these students."²⁵ Dr. Adkisson wrote that Reese believed that the group's true purpose was to persuade others to become "homosexuals" and that the atmosphere this would create would harm students who were questioning their gender identities.²⁶ Second, Dr. Embry McKee, Associate Professor of Psychiatry at Vanderbilt University Medical School and Director of the Vanderbilt Adult Psychiatric Outpatient Clinic, provided testimony in conflict with Reese's. McKee "did not think the existence of a gay rights organization on campus would create problems for people with gender identity problems."²⁷ Dr. Adkisson's summary also noted the testimony of psychiatrists Dr. Howard B. Roback, Professor of Psychiatry and Associate Professor of Psychology at Vanderbilt University, and Dr. Judd Marmor, Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Southern California Medical School.

²⁵ The Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing prepared by the Board appointed hearing officer noted that about fifteen percent of Reese's patients were "homosexuals." Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing, prepared by David F. Adkisson, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

²⁶ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

²⁷ Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing, prepared by David F. Adkisson.

The latter, formerly president of the American Psychiatric Association (APA) and the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, spoke about the APA's classification of homosexuality. Specifically, Marmor noted that homosexuality had not been considered a mental disorder by the APA since April of 1974. Dr. Marmor highlighted the fact that "psychiatrists do not all agree on many things concerning homosexuals, as will be noted from a study of the testimony of Drs. Mckee and Reese."²⁸ In addition to the testimony of these psychiatrists, Dr. Adkisson made mention of the evidence presented by Dr. William Riley, Director of Student Life at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and Mr. Glenn Carter, Faculty Advisor to the Student Coalition for Gay Rights.

Within a month of the hearing, David C. Porteous, counsel for APSU, and Gary E. Crawford, attorney for the Student Coalition for Gay Rights, submitted proposed findings of fact to the Board of Regents. These documents provided further information about the witness testimony made at the fact-finding hearing, as well as the response of both parties' legal counsel. The findings of fact prepared by Porteous expanded on the summary prepared by Dr. Adkisson by providing detailed summaries of each witness' statement, including the testimonies overlooked by Dr. Adkisson's initial summary.

Dr. Garland Blair, Chairman of APSU's Psychology Department, was called as a witness for the university, though his testimony was not mentioned in the summary. In his statements, he argued against the SCGR on the basis that "any

²⁸ Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing, prepared by David F. Adkisson.

publicity of behavior increases the probability of the occurrence of the behavior, and that recognition of the SCGR would increase the publicity of homosexuality.”²⁹ Dr. Charles N. Boehms’ was also called as a witness for Austin Peay State University and offered testimony similar to Dr. Blair’s. As the Vice President for Student Affairs at APSU, Boehms felt that the presence of a group like the Student Coalition for Gay Rights on campus would confuse students who were already questioning their sexual identities. He also argued that official university recognition would only grant the SCGR two additional privileges, “Of the various benefits Dr. Boehms testified that only two are exclusively reserved to [sic] recognized organizations – use of a campus post office box in the name of the organization and listings in the student handbook and yearbook.”³⁰ Porteous also touched on the testimony of both William Riley, Director of Student Life of the University of Missouri – Columbia, and Richard Lewis, the first president of the SCGR, before summarizing his opinions on the outcome of the fact finding hearing. Porteous summarized the evidence provided at the fact-finding hearing and assessed what that evidence meant. He found that approval of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights would construe university approval of homosexuality and that it would increase homosexual behavior on campus. He noted that “homosexual behavior is a sexual deviation, and is considered by many psychoanalysts as a mental disorder.”³¹ Approval of the group, according to

²⁹ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979.

³⁰ In this context the phrase sexual identities referred to sexual orientation. Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979.

³¹ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979.

Porteous, would increase the rate of suicide among homosexuals and would promote illegal behaviors on campus. In addition to these findings, Porteous also argued that the SCGR was not transparent with their organizational mission statement since they had changed it multiple times since their initial request for university recognition.³²

The SCGR took issue with the findings of the university and with the witnesses they called. They responded to the university's proposed findings of fact with their own statement that called into question the credibility of the defendants' witnesses. The SCGR noted that the three doctors called to testify for the university did not specialize in homosexuality. This included Dr. Boehms, who held a degree in Zoology.³³ At the hearing, the SCGR had taken great care to call witnesses who focused on issues related to LGBT+ peoples. Dr. Embry McKee, a Vanderbilt professor of Psychiatry, testified on behalf of SCGR regarding the extensive research he had done on human sexuality. In his testimony, he explained that SCGR would not have an effect on the amount of "homosexual conduct" happening on the campus. He pointed out that, "University approval or denial of recognition would not affect it one way or the other, since the reaction of society has not had any affect on it."³⁴ Dr. Howard Roback, a psychology professor at Vanderbilt who also focused his research on homosexuality, reiterated this sentiment. In the summary of the fact finding

³² Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979.

³³ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by Gary E. Crawford, June 8, 1979.

³⁴ Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing, prepared by David F. Adkisson.

hearing released by the TBR, the hearing officer noted that the testimony of Roback and McKee were “inconsistent with the fact that homosexual behavior constitutes a crime against nature in the State of Tennessee.”³⁵ This was a common argument used against the group. Boehms reiterated it in his testimony too, “What I am saying is that official recognition of an organization whose members may or may not practice something which is illegal within the state can cause an increase, in my opinion, of the student who is in question about entering into this practice.”³⁶

In their proposed findings of fact, SCGR again tackled the notion that their public presence would increase homosexuality on campus. Gary Crawford, attorney for the SCGR, wrote, “This record [of the fact finding hearing] demonstrates that issues involving recognition are needlessly confused by failure to distinguish carefully between organizational purposes and activities on the one hand and the purposes and activities of individuals on the other.”³⁷ The Coalition wanted to show the TBR that their organization should not be judged by the assumed actions of individual members, and that they were not geared toward the creation or influx of LGBT+ people. The group called witnesses like William Riley, who served as the Director of Student Life at the University of Missouri to further refute that fear. At Riley’s institution, an LGBT+ student organization formed in 1971 and received official recognition seven years later, in April

³⁵ Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing, prepared by David F. Adkisson.

³⁶ Sodomy laws are technically still in the law books in the state of Tennessee, but they were ruled unconstitutional in 1996.

³⁷ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by Gary E. Crawford, June 8, 1979.

1978.³⁸ He testified that he had “not been able to find any indication that recognition [of the LGBT+ student group] has resulted in increased or expanded homosexual conduct among students.”³⁹ In the SCGR’s proposed findings of fact, prepared by attorney for the SCGR Gary E. Crawford, they argued that there was no evidence presented that proved the group was participating in any type of illegal activity, nor were they encouraging other students to live “alternate lifestyles.” This conclusion was contrary to that of the University. David Porteous, university counsel, instead found that the witness testimony presented at the fact finding hearing proved recognition of the SCGR would construe approval of LGBT+ people by APSU administration and would increase homosexuality across campus.⁴⁰

On July 16, 1979, Chancellor Nicks of the TBR wrote to the SCGR denying their appeal based on the fact-finding hearing. He concluded that recognition of the SCGR would increase “homosexual behavior” and, thus, cause an increase in “violations of the criminal laws of the State of Tennessee.”⁴¹ Nicks also argued that the organization could not receive official recognition because they had not operated in accordance with university policies. Here, he was referring to the fact that the group altered their constitution multiple times. During

³⁸ Erin Niederberger, “The Gay Lib Controversy: Social Change versus Social Norms at the University of Missouri,” *Artifacts: A Journal of Undergraduate Writing* 14 (April 2016), <https://artifactsjournal.missouri.edu/2016/04/the-gay-lib-controversy-social-change-versus-social-norms-at-the-university-of-missouri/>.

³⁹ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979

⁴⁰ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979.

⁴¹ Roy S. Nicks to Richard W. Lewis, July 16, 1979.

the hearing, Lewis testified that SCGR adopted a new purpose with the hopes of clarifying their aims.⁴² The defendants saw this as an attempt by the SCGR to achieve university recognition and that the group was not transparent concerning their actual goals. Porteous argued that, “if recognition were granted, the stated purposes of the organization would continue to change. The SCGR has not submitted any of the revised statements of purposes to the student senate for approval as required by the University’s policy.”⁴³

This argument, however, was invalid. At APSU, *recognized* student groups were required to submit constitutional changes to the student senate for approval. Since the SCGR was not an officially recognized student organization they were not obligated to abide by those rules. In the SCGR’s purposed findings of fact their lawyer already tackled that argument, going so far as to state that, “Recognition would have the beneficial effect of providing these mechanisms for University monitoring and supervision of the organization.”⁴⁴ The University and Chancellor Nicks disagreed. They argued that the SCGR would only be deprived of a few institutional privileges that come with recognition, implying that the SCGR would be able to operate like any other officially sanctioned organization. This was, clearly, not accurate and did not work in the university’s favor. While SCGR was not allowed to schedule use of campus facilities, lease a campus post office, obtain a listing in the student handbook and yearbook, or post meeting

⁴² Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing, prepared by David F. Adkisson.

⁴³ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979.

⁴⁴ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by Gary E. Crawford, June 8, 1979.

announcements on University bulletin boards, they also were not obligated to operate in accordance with the university rules.⁴⁵

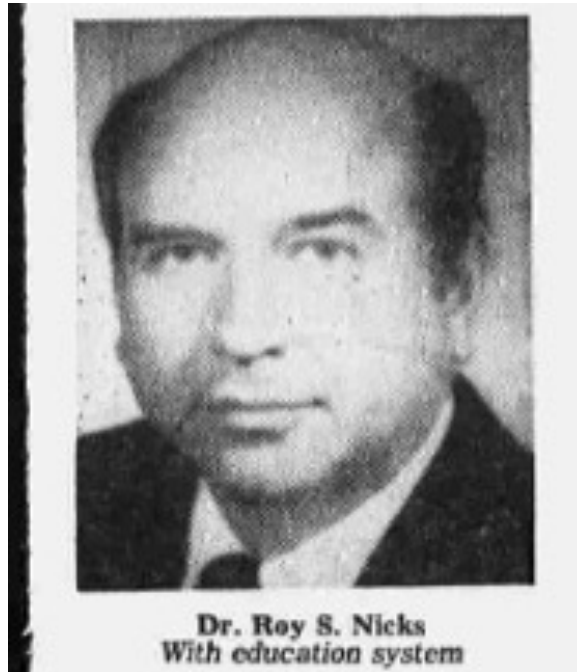


Image of Roy S. Nicks from *The Tennessean*⁴⁶

The SCGR did not accept this denial and appealed the decision to the TBR's Committee on Student Life. For the SCGR, the issue of recognition had little to do with whether or not they might promote illegal activities. Instead, the group argued that Nicks' decision violated their "constitutional right to express educational and political views."⁴⁷ On August 13 a special meeting was held by the Committee on Student life to discuss the SCGR's appeal. Both sides again presented the arguments they had made at the fact-finding hearing meeting held in

⁴⁵ Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by Gary E. Crawford, June 8, 1979.

⁴⁶ "Dr. Nicks To Head To Nashville Area C. Of C.," *The Tennessean*, November 17, 1978, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Nashville Tennessean.

⁴⁷ Alan Carmichael, "Chancellor Denies APSU Gay Group Formal Approval," *The Tennessean*, July 25, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Nashville Tennessean.

May.⁴⁸ During deliberation, members of the Committee on Student Life cited “conflicting court decisions on the issue of recognizing campus gay rights groups.”⁴⁹ David White, a member of the Committee, indicated that it was not the role of the TBR to make legal judgements but to, “look after the university system for the citizenry.”⁵⁰ Like Boehms, Riggs, and Nicks before him, White associated the SCGR with homosexual acts, conflating the aims of the organization with private, consensual actions of individual members. Chancellor Nicks reiterated this sentiment in his second letter of denial,

It is the opinion of this office that recognition of the SCGR would be likely to result in imminent violations of that statute [the state of Tennessee’s sodomy laws]...While the final illegal conduct resulting from this aspect of recognition may not be imminent, the chain of consequences which will result in increased homosexual behavior in the long-run would be imminent, and we cannot ignore the likely future results of our present actions.⁵¹

Chancellor Nicks ended his letter by informing the SCGR that, based on the advice of legal counsel, the university had no legal obligation to grant the SCGR recognition. He then told them that he contacted the state Attorney General to request a “court action for a declaration of the rights and obligations of the

⁴⁸ Saundra Ivey, “Acceptance Won’t Up Gay Action: Lawyers,” *The Tennessean*, August 9, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Nashville Tennessean.

⁴⁹ Saundra Ivey, “Gay Issue Back To Nicks,” *The Tennessean*, August 14, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Nashville Tennessean.

⁵⁰ Saundra Ivey, “Gay Issue Back To Nicks.”

⁵¹ Roy S. Nicks to Edwin Guzman, August 23, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

University in this case.”⁵² Nicks hoped to prevent a lawsuit by doing this but was unsuccessful—the SCGR filed suit four days after Nicks’ second letter of denial.⁵³

Taking the Issue to Court: the SCGR’s Legal Battle for Approval

On August 24, 1979, the SCGR filed suit against APSU and the TBR.⁵⁴ Gary Crawford and James Blumstein, attorneys for the SCGR, stated that Charles Boehms, Robert Riggs, and Chancellor Nicks had “acted maliciously in denying the Student Coalition for Gay Rights’ request for privileges granted other student groups at Austin Peay...They knew, or reasonably should have known, that their actions violated the constitutional rights of plaintiffs.”⁵⁵ The lawsuit called for personal damages from the named education officials and asked the court to declare the group’s right to recognition. In addition to filing suit, the SCGR also filed an application for a preliminary injunction from Judge Thomas A. Wiseman. An injunction would force APSU to recognize the group on a temporary basis until a ruling had been made in the case.

The fall semester was just beginning when the SCGR decided to take the issue to court. Because the organization did not have official recognition, it was not allowed to operate as a recognized student group when students returned to campus.⁵⁶ Even though A month later, Judge Wiseman granted the SCGR’s

⁵² Roy S. Nicks to Edwin Guzman, August 23, 1979.

⁵³ “Roy Nicks Asks Court to Affirm Gay Decision,” APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁵⁴ “Gay Rights Group Files Recognition Suit,” APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁵⁵ “Gays Sue for Recognition at APSU,” APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁵⁶ “Gays Sue For Recognition At APSU.”

request for a preliminary injunction, determining that the group had a constitutional right to university recognition.⁵⁷ This injunction, however, was not granted in time for the SCGR to attend the fall APSU organization day, a privilege reserved for officially recognized university organizations.⁵⁸

Wiseman was vocal about his opinions concerning the case, “Frankly, in this court’s opinion, you ought to recognize the Austin Peay chapter of the Ku Klux Klan, even though I detest the Ku Klux Klan.”⁵⁹ Stephen Doughty, the Assistant Attorney General and legal representative of the university, was blunt about the stance of his clients, stating that APSU would likely grant official recognition to a chapter of the KKK before they would the SCGR. Doughty argued that “they’re [the KKK] not illegal” and that he “didn’t know how a homosexual can engage in homosexual conduct without engaging in crime against nature.”⁶⁰ Wiseman took issue with the idea that APSU was more inclined to approve other controversial groups but would deny the SCGR their first amendment rights. The judge noted that the SCGR’s aim was not criminal in nature and, instead, was educational, a point the group had spent a year attempting to clarify. The issue at hand, in Wiseman’s opinion, was a violation of constitutional rights. Doughty did recognize this, “I agree that we’re talking about

⁵⁷ Memorandum from Judge Thomas A. Wiseman, October 12, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁵⁸ “Gay Group Misses APSU Organization Day,” APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁵⁹ Sandra Ivey, “Would APSU Recognize Klan But Not Gays?” *The Tennessean*, September 6, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Nashville Tennessean.

⁶⁰ Sandra Ivey, “Would APSU Recognize Klan But Not Gays?”

a precious right, but when states have an important policy at stake, they have been allowed to infringe of First Amendment rights.”⁶¹ This statement made it clear that APSU, the TBR, and the Attorney General’s office prioritized the state’s sodomy laws over the constitutional rights of the SCGR. To put it more plainly, the education officials were more concerned with the private sexual lives of LGBT+ students than with protecting the constitutional rights of those students. Judge Wiseman found this behavior frightening. Education officials had based the group’s denial on personal disagreements with the organization’s ideas. As Wiseman told Doughty, the defense was in trouble.⁶²

Some members of the Committee on Student Life that denied the Student Coalition for Gay Rights’ fourth appeal began to fear the repercussions of the SCGR’s lawsuit. In the suit, the Student Coalition was not only seeking recognition but they were also seeking punitive damages. Claude C. Bond, a member of the Committee on Student Life and a defendant named in the lawsuit, stated that, “It kind of disturbs me to wake up and realize that if I lose (the case), I don’t have any money to pay these people. Who’s going to bail me out?”⁶³ Chancellor Nicks tried to alleviate these woes by reminding board members that the TBR covered them with a liability insurance policy. There was, however, a \$10,000 deductible on that policy. He also stated, “You know some of your local legislators indicated to you that if we did have any problems—and I think the

⁶¹ Sandra Ivey, “Would APSU Recognize Klan But Not Gays?”

⁶² Sandra Ivey, “Would APSU Recognize Klan But Not Gays?”

⁶³ “Most UTN Staff Goes To TSU,” *The Tennessean*, September 20, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Nashville Tennessean.

chance of their winning is unlikely—they would try to bail us out with a special appropriation.”⁶⁴ Judge Wiseman shattered Nicks’ sense of confidence when he ordered Austin Peay State University to grant the Student Coalition for Gay Rights official university recognition.⁶⁵ On April 28, 1980, Wiseman released the consent order meaning the case was officially settled. The Student Coalition for Gay Rights had won their recognition.⁶⁶

Repercussions of Recognition

Judge Wiseman’s ruling was not the end of this story. Roughly two months later, the State Board of Regents announced that they were considering changing the official policy concerning student organizations. The proposed policy change would remove the process of university recognition and, instead, replace it with one of registration. This would allow the university system to absolve itself of any implication that they approved of each group’s mission. The TBR did, in fact, adopt this policy change. In 1978, when the SCGR first submitted their application for recognition, the TBR policy stated that, “No student organization may carry on any activity on the campus of an institution unless official recognition has been granted by the institution.”⁶⁷ After the SCGR won their court case, the policy was changed to state, “No student organization

⁶⁴ “Most UTN Staff Goes To TSU.”

⁶⁵ “Judge Orders APSU To Recognize Gay Group,” APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁶⁶ Rene Flaherty, “APSU And Coalition Settle Gay Right Suit,” APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁶⁷ Student Organizations Policy, Board of Regents State University and Community College System of Tennessee, September 19, 1978, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

may carry on any activity on the campus of an institution unless the organization has been officially registered by the institution.” Furthermore, a clause was added to the policy that clarified, “Registration of a student organization by an institution shall neither constitute nor be construed as approval or endorsement by the institution of the purposes or objectives of the organization.” David Porteous, APSU’s legal counsel, noted that the SCGR’s lawsuit played a significant role in the Committee’s unanimous approval of the policy change.⁶⁸ Judge Wiseman’s decision granted the SCGR recognition, but it did not protect them from the opinions and prejudices of APSU and the State Board of Regents officials.

To this day, the organization still operates at Austin Peay State University. The group has gone through a number of name changes since 1979. They are currently known as the Gender and Sexuality Alliance. The Alliance celebrated their fortieth anniversary in the spring of 2019. This celebration included a public forum on LGBT+ issues as well as a guest lecture from Glenn Carter. Carter, who served as the faculty advisor to the SCGR, was also honored by Clarksville’s mayor for his contributions to the APSU community and for his support of students.⁶⁹ The university librarian Gina Garber also celebrated the organization’s anniversary with an exhibit in the APSU library documenting the SCGR’s lawsuit.⁷⁰

⁶⁸ “Panel Approves TSU-VU Doctoral Program Plan,” *The Tennessean*, December 7, 1979, ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Nashville Tennessean.

⁶⁹ “Clarksville Mayor Honors Retired APSU Professor During GSA Anniversary,” APSU News, <http://www.apsu.edu/news/march-2019-gsa-celebration.php>.

⁷⁰ “Austin Peay’s Gender And Sexuality Alliance Celebrates 40 Years On Campus,” APSU News, <http://www.apsu.edu/news/february-2019-gsa-anniversary.php>.



The image on the left is over the APSU school mascot posing next to the Library's exhibit on the SCGR. The phot on the right is a picture of the GSA's Forum advertisement in the university library. Both photos are from the APSU library's website.⁷¹

Conclusion



Image of Richard Lewis and friend from APSU yearbook, 1979.

The Student Coalition for Gay Rights' victory over Austin Peay State University was a landmark moment for LGBT+ youth in the state of Tennessee.

⁷¹ Felix G. Woodward Library Facebook Page, Accessed May 2, 2019, <https://www.facebook.com/woodwardlibrary/>.

Forty years later the organization is still going strong, receiving encouragement and support from the university and the Clarksville community. The State of Tennessee did not see another LGBT+ student organization emerge on any other campus until 1988. The Student Coalition for Gay Rights clearly played an invaluable role in the emergence of LGBT+ student organizations in Tennessee. Moreover, it is quite possible that the visibility their struggle for recognition brought influenced the formation of other gay rights groups.

CHAPTER III

ARGUMENTS AGAINST EQUALITY: HOW THE MTSU COMMUNITY RESPONDED TO LGBT+ VISIBILITY

On September 8, 1988, Middle Tennessee State University's student newspaper, *Sidelines*, published a controversial article that depicted MTSU's LGBT+ community as sexual deviants. Student reporter Tony Stinnett specifically targeted gay men in this article, claiming that the men's restrooms in both Kirksey Old Main (KOM) and the Keathley University Center (KUC) were covered in homosexual graffiti. Stinnett asserted that gay men were leaving messages soliciting sex; that men were carving 'gloryholes' into the stall walls to spy on others; and that non-MTSU community members were 'cruising' these restrooms.¹ The article provided no hard evidence to prove Stinnett's claims, but it still had a resounding effect on the campus climate.² *Sidelines* quickly received op-eds from MTSU community members after Stinnett's article was published.

¹ Tony Stinnett, "Sexual Activity In KUC Bathrooms Prompts Changes; Others Still Used," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 11, September 8, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

² For example, in the article Stinnett mentions that "a gay magazine listed MTSU...as a place to cruise," but he does not provide the name of the publication. He notes that it is a publication out of San Francisco and that the magazine was about an inch thick. There is also controversy concerning the photos he used in the article. Faculty member Deborah Anderson claimed that Stinnett had told her class he was unsure of how much truth there was to the article; today, the MT Lambda community still asserts that the photos in the article are fake.

It was evident from those opinion pieces that the bathroom exposé was causing an increase in anti-gay sentiments at MTSU.³

Three students, Daniel Webster, Richie Smith, and John G. Weaver, took note of the public change in campus opinion and decided to found the Lambda Association, now known as MT Lambda. The organization aimed to provide a safe space for LGBT+ students and to educate their community about queer peoples. It took the group just under a month to receive official recognition from university officials.

In this chapter, I examine two events in MT Lambda's history to understand the similarities and differences between these events and those the Student Coalition for Gay Rights at Austin Peay State University encountered. I focus first on MT Lambda's founding in 1988 and then on their sexual orientation campaign that began in 1995. My purpose is to place MT Lambda's history within a larger LGBT+ narrative. In doing so I address the prejudice this organization faced and how this bigotry was not unique to MT Lambda. When the group first organized, many in the MTSU community responded by voicing their disapproval. Both faculty and students wrote to the student newspaper arguing that university recognition implied university acceptance of non-heteronormative identities, that the group itself was illegal, and that LGBT+ people were sexual deviants who would tarnish the name of MTSU. Many of these responses characterized the

³ M.A. Brown, "Bathroom Story Misunderstood," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 13, September 15, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper; Terry P. Burgess, "Paper Fosters Redneck Image," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 13, September 15, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper; Bob Petersen, "Crack Down On 'Gay Cruising,'" *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 12, September 12, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper; Macey Edward Agee, "Explicit Quotes Not Necessary," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 12, September 12, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

emergence of LGBT+ student organizations in Tennessee and, more broadly, the United States.

The Founding of the Lambda Association

The emergence of the Lambda Association can be traced back to one specific event: Tony Stinnett's bathroom article. This piece created a negative campus climate towards LGBT+ students by depicting them as sexual deviants. His article asserted that MTSU's population of gay, lesbian, and bisexual students was on the rise, evidenced by the increased sexual activity in the campus bathrooms. This increase, claimed Stinnett, was causing problems at MTSU. Stinnett's research supposedly found that gay men were carving 'gloryholes' into stall walls and were leaving messages soliciting sex. He interviewed a variety of students about the restroom situation. Some of these students claimed that many of the people 'cruising' the restrooms were not MTSU students. An unnamed source told Stinnett that a male employee of Nissan would come to the KOM at night and spend about an hour in the restroom. This source noted "I'm not stupid. Nobody takes that long to use the restroom."⁴ He even claimed to have interviewed gay men on campus who described the campus cruising culture in some detail. According to Stinnett, Jimmy stated, "We (the people who do it) use the holes because it gives a chance to watch the person in the other stall. If you look into the other stall and the person is

⁴ Tony Stinnett, "Sexual Activity In KUC Bathrooms Prompts Changes; Others Still Used."

‘beating off’ then you know that he is probably there for the same reason that you are.”⁵

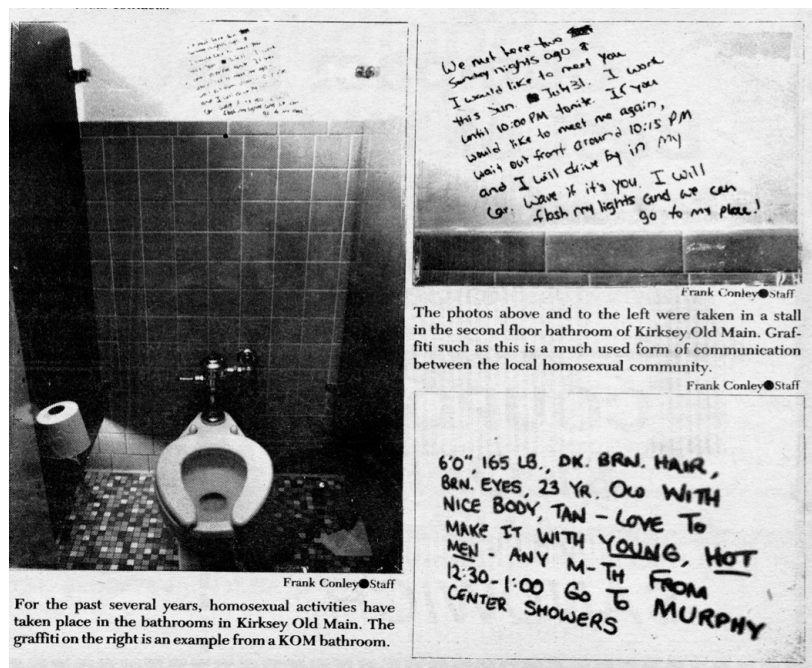
A number of the interviews he conducted were with heterosexual students who claimed to have witnessed gay men using the restrooms for sex. Interviewees claimed that those using the bathrooms as sexual meeting places had developed their own code: men would cough or tap their feet as signals to other cruisers. One person interviewed stated, “I think it is disgusting and something needs to be done about it. I think I should be able to use a restroom without some fag trying to come on to me. If they want to do their thing, they need to go home.”⁶ Another expressed a similar sentiment, “What two people do in the privacy of their own home is one thing but a public restroom is an entirely different thing.”⁷ On top of these interviews, Stinnett used explicit quotes from the KOM bathroom stall walls to illustrate the alleged behavior of those who cruised the bathrooms. One specifically charged example read, “13-21 yrs. old. If you want to watch me suck your cock and drink your piss, come to third floor men’s room now.”⁸ The article included pictures of other wall texts, all of which were of the same nature.

⁵ Tony Stinnett, “Sexual Activity In KUC Bathrooms Prompts Changes; Others Still Used.”

⁶ Tony Stinnett, “Sexual Activity In KUC Bathrooms Prompts Changes; Others Still Used.”

⁷ Tony Stinnett, “Sexual Activity In KUC Bathrooms Prompts Changes; Others Still Used.”

⁸ Tony Stinnett, “Sexual Activity In KUC Bathrooms Prompts Changes; Others Still Used.”



Images from Tony Stinnett's bathroom article, published in *MTSU Sidelines*.⁹

These opinions reflected the larger issue LGBT+ student organizations have faced concerning visibility.¹⁰ Opponents of these groups expressed concern about the “openness” of LGBT+ people, often mentioning that non-heteronormative sexual acts were okay in private but not in public places, a sentiment that Stinnett reflected throughout his expose. The credibility of his article was brought into question by faculty member Deborah Anderson. She stated that Stinnett had informed her students that his

⁹ Tony Stinnett, “Sexual Activity In KUC Bathrooms Prompts Changes; Others Still Used.”

¹⁰ Joshua C. Collins and Tiffany McElmurry, “‘Right’ and Wrong: LGBTQ and Ally Experiences at a Large, Southern U.S. University,” *Counterpoints, The Gay Agenda: Claiming Space, Identity, and Justice* 437 (2014): 189-192; David A. Reichard, “‘We Can’t Hide and They are Wrong’: The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969-1971,” *Law and History Review* 28, no. 3 (August 2010): 629-639.

article was fabricated and that he was not sure how much of it was actually true.¹¹ The newspaper stood by Stinnett's article and claimed that it was based on evidence.¹² The article, whether true or not, promoted an anti-LGBT+ environment that was strengthened by the campus' response. Campus administrators, in response to Stinnett, removed the exterior and stall doors of the KUC men's restrooms, and painted the walls a dark brown to prevent further sexual activity and to discourage graffiti.¹³

Three MTSU students decided to challenge the negative stereotype portrayed by the article and to combat the campus climate that resulted from it by forming the Lambda Association. Daniel Webster, Richie Smith, and John G. Weaver announced their intent to seek university approval for an LGBT+ student organization in an article published by *Sidelines*. On September 29, 1988 the student newspaper ran a front page article titled a "proposed organization geared to support MTSU homosexuals." In the article, Webster stated that the group's purpose was to provide support to LGBT+ students on campus, as well as to provide education on issues like AIDS.¹⁴ Essentially, the organization wanted to create a safe space for LGBT+ students on campus where they could come together and discuss the issues they encountered at MTSU.

¹¹ Deanna Kalas, "Faculty Slam *Sidelines* At Recent Senate Session," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 13, September 15, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

¹² M.A. Brown, "'Bathroom' Story Misunderstood."

¹³ Tony Stinnett, "Maintenance Begins Stall Restoration," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 13, September 15, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

¹⁴ D. Brian Conley, "Proposed Organization Geared To Support MTSU Homosexuals," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 17, September 29, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

The group did not face any backlash from university administrators in response to this announcement. Opposition to the group instead came from students and residents of the Murfreesboro area. Some students and faculty feared that official university recognition implied university support of non-heteronormative sexual identities. This fear manifested itself in three types of arguments. Opponents relied on social, moral, and legal reasons to denounce the organization. Some community members expressed a fear of association, both for themselves individually and for the university. In one such response, three students declared that MTSU was turning into “Fag U.” They wrote that prospective students had decided not to attend because the university made it seem as though being gay was okay.¹⁵ This argument was reiterated by other opponents of the Lambda Association who were concerned about the university’s perceived association with the group. These opponents felt that allowing a LGBT+ student group to organize on campus would construe an endorsement of LGBT+ lifestyles and possibly lead others to assume that they were actually part of the LGT+ community. Terry Burgess, in a letter to the editor published by *Sidelines*, claimed that MTSU would be perceived as redneck because of the reporting being done on LGBT+ students.¹⁶ Similarly, another student responded with concern about MTSU’s regional reputation.¹⁷ Newspapers in Nashville had mentioned the Lambda Association’s formation, as well as Stinnett’s bathroom

¹⁵ Keith Hopkins, Troy Cashion, Derek Vincion, “MTSU becoming ‘Fag U’ Or Not?” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 21, October 13, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

¹⁶ Terry P. Burgess, “Paper Fosters Redneck Image.”

¹⁷ RJ. Binder, “Gays Discussed Enough For Now,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 19, October 6, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

article, making MTSU's LGBT+ community visible outside of the campus community.¹⁸ People who did not want the Lambda Association to receive administrative approval feared that the visibility of this organization would lead others to think that the university, itself, was supportive of LGBT+ people.

Many also felt that the Lambda Association's presence on campus would affect society's perceptions of them personally. Doug Stults wrote a satirical article for *Sidelines* poking fun at this way of thinking. He exaggerated the extent to which people feared association with LGBT+ people saying, "In fact, there are certain people who ramble on for 10, 15, 20 minutes to the effect that if any faggot S.O.B. invades their personal space, well, that gayboy'll have a pipe slung upside his head."¹⁹ Men, in particular, seemed to have been the most concerned with being associated with LGBT+ people, which was evidenced by the continued emphasis on their own heterosexuality.²⁰

Some students expressed this fear even as they made their statements of support for the Lambda Association. Responses like these emphasized their opposition to LGBT+ identities, while also arguing for the legal right of the Lambda Association to organize on campus. Dan Clark, the editorial editor of *Sidelines*, framed his opinion as one of support

¹⁸ For an example see Chris Bell, "MTSU Gay Support Group Hopes To End 'Lot Of Misunderstanding,'" *The Tennessean*, September 27, 1988, Tennessee Electronic Library, *The Tennessean* (1972-2002).

¹⁹ Doug Stults, "Let's Go Get Them Faggots, Boys," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 18, October 3, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

²⁰ See also Richard Pearl, "Lambda Okay, Sex Laws Not," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 21, October 13, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper; Doug Stults, "Let's Go Get Them Faggots, Boys"; Dan Clark, "Letters to the Editor," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 18, October 3, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper; D. Brian Conley, "Clarifying Gay Rights: Lambda Like Any Other Campus Organization," *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 20, October 10, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

but also expressed this fear of association in his article “Let’s go get them faggots, boys.” He argued that the group had a constitutional right to receive university approval, but noted that, “Now, before all my friends and fellow Americans think I’ve gone crazy, let me state for the record that I despise homosexuality and lesbianism. As far as I’m concerned, they are sick, pitiful creatures who need professional help rather than media coverage.”²¹ This type of response appeared throughout *Sidelines* with the majority of authors emphasizing that they were in no way accepting of, nor associated with, LGBT+ people.²²

This fear even prevailed in legal arguments supporting the organization. Those who solely supported the group’s legal right to exist made sure to note that they were not accepting of LGBT+ people. One such example denounced the sodomy laws that were in place throughout the country, but not because the author supported the rights of LGBT+ people. In this letter to the editor, titled “Lambda okay, sex laws not,” the author noted, “We heterosexuals are in as much jeopardy from Big Brother as the gays.”²³ The author’s “support” for the Lambda Association stemmed from his own issues with big government and not because he saw himself as an ally, which is evidenced by his final sentence emphasizing that he was not associated with the LGBT+ community. Other legal arguments compared the Lambda Association to the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi party in order to explain the group’s constitutional right to organize. One columnist for *Sidelines*

²¹ Dan Clark, “Letters To The Editor,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 18, October 3, 1988,

²² D. Brian Conley, “Clarifying Gay Rights: Lambda Like Any Other Campus Organization,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 20, October 10, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

²³ Richard Pearl, “Lambda Okay, Sex Laws Not.”

wrote, “I am sure just about everyone opposes communism, socialism, Nazi’s, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Moral Majority. However, they all have the right to exist. They have the right to air their views— no matter how wrong they may be.”²⁴ These opinions, while attempting to advocate for the Lambda Association, drew a dangerous parallel between the organization and other highly contested political and social institutions.²⁵

Members of the campus community used the Bible to denounce the MT Lambda. One particularly heated response quoted two different scriptures. Citing Romans 1:26-27, the authors claimed that, “God let go of them [LGBT+ people] and let them do all these evil things, so that even their women turned against God’s natural plan for them and indulged in sex with each other. And the men instead of having a normal sex relationship with women, burned with lust for each other, men doing shameful things with other men and, as a result, getting paid with their souls the penalty they so richly deserved.”²⁶ This interpretation of scripture positioned LGBT+ people as sexual deviants that deserve punishment from a higher power. Hopkins, Cashion, and Vincion argued that these verses meant that “homosexuality is absolutely forbidden, for it is an enormous sin.”²⁷ Kim McLemore, another MTSU student, worried that the “new morality” in America would corrupt fundamental societal and moral beliefs.²⁸ Recognizing an LGBT+ student group

²⁴ D. Brian Conley, “Clarifying Gay Rights: Lambda Like Any Other Campus Organization.”

²⁵ See also Dan Clark, “Letters To The Editor.”

²⁶ Keith Hopkins, Troy Cashion, Derek Vincion, “MTSU Becoming ‘Fag U’ Or Not?”

²⁷ Keith Hopkins, Troy Cashion, Derek Vincion, “MTSU Becoming ‘Fag U’ Or Not?”

²⁸ Kim McLemore, “Letters To The Editor,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 18, October 3, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

on campus would promote “alternative lifestyles” according to the arguments, and thus undermine society’s widely enforced heteronormative, Christian morals.

The Lambda Association countered these fears by emphasizing that their organization was open to everyone, including LGBT+ people. In one article, Webster noted that some charter members of the group did not identify as members of the LGBT+ community.²⁹ It was important for LGBT+ student organizations to stress that they were not solely comprised of students who identified as LGBT+ and that there were, in fact, heterosexual members of the organization. Students often feared being outed during the organization approval process, a trend seen across the LGBT+ student activist experience. For example, LGBT+ members of the Student Homophile League (SHL) at Columbia University could not receive recognition until they submitted a roster of charter members, which would have meant publicly coming out for many of them. Stephen Donaldson, the group’s founder, recruited student leaders from across the campus to sign their names as charter members, thus using their heterosexual allies to protect the LGBT+ identities of closeted students.³⁰ Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, Tennessee, had a similar experience. The organization remained underground until K.C. Potter, a university administrator, signed his own name to the group’s charter.³¹

²⁹ D. Brian Conley, “Proposed Organization Geared To Support MTSU Homosexuals.”

³⁰ Brett Beemyn, “The Silence is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups,” 2017. Vanderbilt University, in Nashville, TN, also had a similar experience. The organization remained underground until K.C. Potter, a university administrator, signed his own name to the group’s charter. Matt Lieberman and Sarah Friedman, “A Safe Haven,” *Vanderbilt Hustler*, October 2015.

³¹ Matt Lieberman and Sarah Friedman, “A Safe Haven,” *Vanderbilt Hustler*, October 2015.

The Lambda Association also emphasized that LGBT+ people were valuable to society, with Webster explicitly stating, “The organization will try to show society we are valuable to society.”³² Lambda Association stated this in their purpose because of the campus climate, evidenced by the responses published in *Sidelines*. The Lambda Association was not the only group that directly responded to articles depicting the LGBT+ community as sexual deviants. Arguments concerning the fear of association, sodomy laws and constitutional rights, and religious doctrine surfaced across campuses nationwide.³³

The Lambda Association received a lot of community backlash, but university officials believed that the organization “should have no problem obtaining university recognition.”³⁴ MTSU President Sam Ingram stated that the Lambda Association needed only to meet the same requirements for recognition as any other campus organization. He noted that he in the past he had not been asked to pass judgement on the recognition of other student organizations and did not feel it “appropriate to pass judgement on them [the Lambda Association] either positive or negative.”³⁵ On October 20, 1988 the Lambda Association received university approval. MTSU officials did not decide to fight the formation of the Lambda Association even though many in the university community rejected the organization. President Ingram’s reluctance to judge the organization

³² D. Brian Conley, “Proposed Organization Geared To Support MTSU Homosexuals.”

³³ Brett Beemyn, “The Silence is Broken: A History of the First Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups:” 207-208; Kathryn Staley, “Gay Liberation Comes to Appalachian State University (1969-1979),” *Appalachian Journal* 39, no. ½ (Fall 2011/Winter 2012): 78-79.

³⁴ D. Brian Conley, “Proposed Organization Geared To Support MTSU Homosexuals.”

³⁵ D. Brian Conley, “Proposed Organization Geared To Support MTSU Homosexuals.”

followed Tennessee Board of Regents policy concerning student organizations. The policy explicitly stated that “registration of a student organization by an institution shall neither constitute nor be construed as approval or endorsement by the institution of the purposed and objects of the organization.”³⁶ During the next few years, members of the organization focused on creating educational programming to help inform the campus community about LGBT+ peoples. Direct political action was not an aim of the group until the summer of 1995 when they formed the Uniform Equality Committee (UEC) to research MTSU’s non-discrimination policy. This led to an almost seven-year battle to include sexual orientation in the university’s non-discrimination policy.

The Uniform Equality Committee

In June of 1995, members of the Lambda Association, including Michael Grantham, Devon J. Wlodyga, Martin Topping, and Richie Smith, formed the Uniform Equality Committee (UEC) to investigate the campus climate towards sexual orientation. The group began their research by meeting with various university administrators, including Robert LaLance, the Vice President of Student Affairs.³⁷ The following semester the UEC released their ninety-page report titled “Equality is Civility.” This document included the initial UEC resolution, twelve appendices, and concluded by calling on the university president to form a presidential taskforce to further investigate the benefits of adopting the sexual orientation statement into the non-discrimination

³⁶ “Policy No. 3:01:01:00, Student Organizations,” Board of Regents State University and Community College System of Tennessee, December 7, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections. The policy remains the same today.

³⁷ “Equality Is Civility, UEC,” MT Lambda Collection, Albert Gore Research Center.

policy. The report leaned on the personal testimonials of LGBT+ students and their experiences on campus to make their case. When the Uniform Equality Committee first announced they were going to put together this report, during the fall semester of 1995, they put advertisements in *Sidelines* looking for people to share their experiences.

**Attention Lesbian, Gay and
Bisexual Students,
Faculty and Staff**

The Uniform Equality Committee under Lambda Association of Middle Tennessee State University is currently compiling a report on the campus climate and concerns of lesbian, gay, bisexual students, faculty, and staff.

BE AWARE: The Uniform Equality Committee is made up of lesbian, gay and bisexual student and faculty membership from the university community who are looking to enhance the quality of campus life by addressing diversity issues for lesbians, gays, and bisexuals.

WE ARE especially interested in testimonials reflecting the experiences of lesbians, gays, and bisexuals in the classroom, workplace, residence halls, campus organizations (athletics, fraternities, sororities, etc.) and all other areas of campus life. This information will be compiled along with other UEC findings in the committee's final report.

YOUR STATEMENT should include your sexual orientation, whether you are a student, faculty or staff, and your experience or comment. Your name and mailing address is optional and all identities will remain anonymous unless permission is expressed by you to allow your name to follow your testimony. Names and addresses will not be distributed outside the work of the UEC.

PLEASE SEND COMMENTS TO:

WRITE: Lambda Association - UEC
MTSU Box 624
Murfreesboro, TN 37132

EMAIL: mtlambda@frank.mtsu.edu

CALL : (615) 780-2293

WORLD WIDE WEB: <http://www.mtsu.edu/~MTLAMBDA>

LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!

Testimonial Collection Period: Sept 11-Oct 1

Dr. Robert LaLance,

I support the idea of enhancing the nondiscrimination policy to include "sexual orientation." I understand that a *Sexual Orientation Task Force* has been formed under the Student Affairs Sub-Council and would like for you to forward this post card with my message of support to this Task Force.

sincerely, _____

student _____ faculty _____ staff _____ other _____

Advertisement and Postcard template created by the UEC to advertise their campaign to include sexual orientation in the non-discrimination policy.³⁸

The Uniform Equality Committee announced the release of this report at a press. At this event, the UEC explained that their campaign was a cooperative effort among other LGBT+ student organizations in the area for a system wide change to the Tennessee State Board of Regents' (TBR) non-discrimination policy.³⁹ The TBR had designated a special task force, the Student Affairs Sub Council, to look into the issue, eventually concluding that the inclusion of sexual orientation should be left up to individual

³⁸ Courtesy of the Albert Gore Research Center, MT Lambda collection.

³⁹ Kris Wetzel, "UEC Releases State-Wide Report: Report Analyzes Climate Towards Sexual Orientation," *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 54, March 28, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

universities.⁴⁰ The UEC did not let this decision deter them and, in October of 1996, they received support from the University Rules Committee who recommended to LaLance and President James E. Walker that sexual orientation should be included in MTSU's non-discrimination policy.⁴¹ Walker, rather than include sexual orientation, decided to create a Statement of Community Standards of Civil Behavior which expressed the university's expectation that people not discriminate against students based on their sexual orientation.⁴²

Much like reactions to the founding of the organization in 1988, faculty and students again wrote into the student newspaper *Sidelines* to denounce the UEC's campaign. These responses relied on the same rhetoric to argue against the inclusion of sexual orientation in the non-discrimination policy. Once again, the fear of LGBT+ visibility was expressed through social and moral arguments. Interestingly, though, members of the UEC like Wlodyga and Grantham, and more broadly MT Lambda, responded to these *Sidelines* articles by using the rhetoric of their opponents to support their cause.

In February of 1996, the fear of association with homosexuality was articulated by an article titled "Gays, lesbians, bisexuals should get back in the closet." MTSU student Shea Hargett claimed to have been sexually harassed in the KUC men's restroom

⁴⁰ Krist Wetzal, "Sexual Orientation Issues Up To Each School: TBR," *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 60, April 22, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁴¹ Heather Hybarger, "University Rules Committee Will Recommend Policy Change," *MTSU Sidelines* 72, no. 26, October 10, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁴² Staff Reports, "Policy Will Not Change," *MTSU Sidelines* 72, no. 38, December 5, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

by a man soliciting oral sex. Hargett was vocal in his disgust at this encounter, stating that “the semen choker in the KUC is lucky I was in a good mood that day.” He concluded his article by demanding LGBT+ students “get back in the damn closet and leave me alone!”⁴³ In 1997, an anonymous person graffitied the cement in front of Peck Hall with messages attacking Lambda’s visibility. This vandalism called for the removal of LGBT+ students, with phrases like “Lambda must go” scribbled in chalk.⁴⁴ This type of discrimination and harassment received wide publicity and helped to prove that LGBT+ students on campus faced prejudice.

Scott Link, an MTSU student and columnist for *Sidelines*, was another aggressively vocal opponent of both the UEC and LGBT+ visibility. In his opinion, there was no proof of discrimination against LGBT+ peoples on campus.⁴⁵ He argued that there was no need to explicitly define the demographic factors that should be included in the non-discrimination policy. Instead he argued that the policy should say, “We won’t discriminate based on any demographic factor.”⁴⁶ On the surface Link’s idea seemed to promote a more inclusive policy, yet, as the evidence below indicates, this approach would instead have been the erasure of much LGBT+ visibility.

⁴³ Shea Hargett, “Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals Should Get Back In The Closet,” *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 48, February 26, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁴⁴ Gregg Mayer, “Graffiti An ‘Attack’ On Lambda,” *MTSU Sidelines* 74, no. 4, September 4, 1997, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁴⁵ Scott Link, “MTSU Will Experience Day Of Infamy If Lambda, UEC Succeed With Non-Discrimination Clause,” *MTSU Sidelines* 74, no. 4, October 3, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁴⁶ Heather Hybarger, “Rules Committee Hears UEC’s Request,” *MTSU Sidelines* 72, no. 24, October 3, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

Two months after Hargett's alleged encounter, Melinda Lickiss, a history graduate student, wrote to *Sidelines* complaining about how much attention the sexual orientation campaign had received. She wanted everyone to stop publicly discussing the issue, stating "their private life is their private life."⁴⁷ This response did not explicitly denounce LGBT+ visibility, but implied issues pertaining to that community should be relegated to private spaces. The implication of Lickiss' article was also evidenced by the wording in her title, "Let's get back to normal student gripes like library." Lickiss' use of the word normal carried implications that LGBT+ issues were not, in fact, "normal" and that people who did not conform to heteronormative sexual identities were unnatural. This sentiment, which was also used in arguments against the Lambda Association's founding, appeared regularly in the form of moral opposition to the proposed policy change.

Kim Sokoya, an associate professor of management and marketing, was a vocal opponent of the UEC's proposal and relied on his personal, religious beliefs to make his case against the inclusion of sexual orientation in the university's non-discrimination policy. He argued that, due to his faith, he had a right to make moral judgements about people whose behaviors and identities he believed to be immoral. Sokoya proclaimed that, "I can define what is moral because in my paradigm I do have a measure of absolute morality."⁴⁸ He was not the only one to promote this type of thinking. An MTSU student wrote into the newspaper to denounce the immorality of homosexuality based on his own

⁴⁷Melinda Lickiss, "Let's Get Back To Normal Student Gripes Like Library."

⁴⁸Kris Wetzel, "UEC Launches State-Wide Campaign For Equality," *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 55, April 1, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

religious beliefs. He claimed, “I don’t believe anyone should be oppressed, no matter how morally degenerate their lifestyle is according to my paradigm.”⁴⁹ In the same breath, he described LGBT+ people as immoral, morally degenerate, and sick.⁵⁰ These moral arguments were contradictory in that the authors called for people to put aside their bigotries, while validating their personal prejudices based on interpretations of religious doctrines.

Another popular argument used against the UEC claimed that the inclusion of sexual orientation in the non-discrimination policy would grant special rights to LGBT+ students. Sokoya employed this argument in his rhetoric. He claimed that special rights were being given to classes of people who had had their fundamental rights denied. At a symposium on sexuality hosted by the UEC in 1996, Sokoya was quoted as saying, “Looking at the literature we can conclude that special rights are those which are guaranteed to reaffirm the fundamental rights. Those rights are not special except as they are necessary as a result of fundamental rights being denied a certain group.”⁵¹ This circular argument implied that LGBT+ students had not had any fundamental rights, which are protected by the Constitution, denied to them, thus they could not claim special rights. Other responses also brought into question the notion of “special rights.” One student implied that Lambda was not an advocate for equal rights. He noted, “I noticed

⁴⁹ Brandon Nichols, “Student Has Heard Enough About God/Apes, Gay/Straight,” *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 56, April 8, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁵⁰ Brandon Nichols, “Student Has Heard Enough About God/Apes, Gay/Straight.”

⁵¹ Mark T. Gibson, “Symposium Addresses Homosexuality And Modern Culture,” *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 55, April 1, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

that there were three pro homo/bisexual lifestyle speakers and only one pro heterosexual lifestyle speaker at the symposium [on homosexuality]...Where is that injustice, again?"⁵² Another argued that the organization was receiving special attention. In a column published by *Sidelines*, he observed that the newspaper published a lot of what he deemed unnecessary articles about Lambda. He wrote, "Strange that piece, about a [sic] existing organization going about its business, was deemed front page material, while a later article reporting about the new Campus Christian Ministries Council was not."⁵³ The authors maintained that LGBT+ people did not face real discrimination and that the true purpose of this campaign was to seek societal affirmation of non-heterosexual identities, thus undermining heteronormative societal standards.

Members and allies of Lambda, while still operating within the politics of respectability, refuted this type of argument. Michael Grantham, chair of the Uniform Equality Committee, actively challenged the fear that existed around LGBT+ visibility on campus. After Shea Hargett's sexual harassment claim, Grantham penned a letter to *Sidelines* arguing that LGBT+ people were not the problem on campus and erasing their presence would not solve sexual harassment on campus. He challenged Hargett to attend a Lambda meeting saying, "Re-evaluate your generalization and compare it to what you will find at at [sic] least one Lambda meeting. Mass Comm Room 103 is not a bathroom nor a closet. It's a classroom, and that's what we are ALL here for."⁵⁴ Grantham, on

⁵² Brandon Nichols, "Student Has Heard Enough About God/Apes, Gay/Straight."

⁵³ Scott Link, "Don't Let Link Decide Your Opinion," *MTSU Sidelines* 72, no. 40, January 13, 1997, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁵⁴ Michael Grantham, "Gays Should Not Be Generalized By Action Of One," *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 49, February 29, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

behalf of Lambda, welcomed Hargett and the campus community in an effort to prove that the members of Lambda were not sexual deviants nor immoral degenerates, but everyday people. He confronted the fear of LGBT+ visibility again in an article titled “a free society’s tolerance different from acceptance.” In the article he stated, “The fear that we must now begin ‘accepting’ homosexuality is just that: fear.”⁵⁵ He also tackled arguments based on church doctrines. The word ‘paradigm’ was used by multiple people who justified prejudice by referencing religion. Grantham chose to use the word in his rebuttal:

In my ‘paradigm,’ an ideal society inspired by God provides for the least among people and lifts them in equal presence before the splendid wonder that is the universe. It is evidence enough for me to see the stars shining equally on us all while the only contradictions to this remain buried in the words and written texts of man.⁵⁶

Here Grantham used the word ‘paradigm’ to describe his personal beliefs, much like Kim Sokoya did when asserting his claim to have a “measure of moral authority.”⁵⁷ Other advocates for Lambda and the UEC challenged the idea that the group was pursuing special rights. Bill Turner, a professor in the History Department, wrote that this argument was invalid. He concluded, “We’ve created the notion of special rights to mislabel our racial prejudices onto lesbians and gay men.”⁵⁸ In Turner’s view, LGBT+ students would not be receiving any type of “special rights” because of the policy change,

⁵⁵ Michael Grantham, “A Free Society’s Tolerance Different From Acceptance,” *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 57, April 11, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁵⁶ Michael Grantham, “A Free Society’s Tolerance Different From Acceptance.

⁵⁷ Kris Wetzel, “UEC Launches State-Wide Campaign For Equality.”

⁵⁸ Kris Wetzel, “UEC Launches State-Wide Campaign For Equality.”

but they would gain protections from the type of discrimination other minority groups had also faced.

While the MTSU community argued through print about the inclusion of sexual orientation in the university's non-discrimination policy, the UEC was campaigning for support through a series of public initiatives. The Uniform Equality Committee began their campaign seeking out support from various faculty and university departments. By February 22, 1996, the UEC received support from more than ten campus groups: Faculty Senate, Concerned Faculty and Administrative Women, Women's Studies program, Holocaust Studies program, Wesley Foundation, Panhellenic Council, Students for Environmental Action, Philosophy Department, Womyn's Political Action Group, Honor Student Association, Lambda Association, Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work, College Democrats, June Anderson Women's Center, Speech and Theater Department, History Department, English Department and American Association of University Professors.⁵⁹ It was not until October 1995 that the UEC won the support of a standing university committee, the University Rules Committee.⁶⁰ The outpouring of support from faculty across MTSU's campus did not change University President James Walker's mind. Only a few months after the University Rules Committee announced their support for the UEC's initiative to include sexual orientation in the non-discrimination policy, the President Walker announced he would not change the policy.

⁵⁹ Kris Wetzel, "UEC Proposal Receives Support From Fifth University Department," *MTSU Sidelines* 71, no. 50, March 4, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁶⁰ Heather Hybarger, "University Rules Committee Will Recommend Policy Change," *MTSU Sidelines* 72, no. 26, October 10, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

Instead, President Walker approved the addition of sexual orientation into the campus Statement of Community Standards of Civil Behavior. According to Michael Grantham, chairperson of the Uniform Equality Committee, this was a step in the right direction but, ultimately, did not provide any protections for LGBT+ students.⁶¹

By 1999, president James E. Walker of Middle Tennessee State University was still against changing the university's non-discrimination policy. Members of the UEC decided to give President Walker until April 5th of that year to adopt the sexual orientation statement into the policy. On April 6th, after President Walker disregarded the UEC's ultimatum, members of the UEC and MT Lambda decided to protest outside of the president's house. The protests began in the morning and did not end until that evening.⁶² It was not until 2001, when Dr. Sidney McPhee began his tenure as university president, that the resolution to include sexual orientation received administrative approval. In the spring of 2002, seven years after the Uniform Equality Committee began their campaign, history professor Jim Williams reintroduced the resolution to the Faculty Senate who recommended it for approval two months later.⁶³

⁶¹ Staff Reports, "Policy Will Not Change," *MTSU Sidelines* 72, no. 38, December 5, 1996, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁶² Chris Crockett, "UEC Protests Refusal To Change Non-Discrimination Policy," *MTSU Sidelines* 74, no. 50, April 8, 1999, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁶³ Amanda Maynard, "Gays Now Covered By Tolerance Policy," *MTSU Sidelines* 78, no. 32, October 9, 2002, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.



Four members of the Uniform Equality Committee protesting outside of President Walker's home, April 1999.⁶⁴

Conclusion

This visibility of LGBT+ students on MTSU's campus is directly tied to the history of activism of the Lambda Association. By directly confronting the campus climate for LGBT+ students, the group was able to create a safer environment for all students. Between 1988 and 2002, Lambda addressed social, moral, and legal arguments that were intended to create a false image of the group. Opponents of MT Lambda employed different arguments over time. When students founded the organization, some faculty and students at MTSU labeled the prospective group as sinful and sick. During the group's earlier years, members of the campus community argued that homosexual behaviors were okay in private, but not in public, implying that LGBT+ students should remain hidden. Opponents were more vocal in the late 1990s and called for LGBT+

⁶⁴ Chris Crockett, "UEC Protests Refusal To Change Non-Discrimination Policy."

students to “get back in the closet.” While this type of thinking still remained at MTSU during the UEC’s sexual orientation campaign, it took on another form. People like Kim Sokoya validated their religious arguments against the Lambda Association with their moral authority as Christians to judge those they deemed immoral.

Arguments centered on the group’s legal rights also shifted by the 1990s. Faculty and students at MTSU were no longer concerned about whether or not the group had a legal right to exist, but instead argued the group deserved special protections under the non-discrimination policy.⁶⁵ When President Walker’s administration released their Statement of Community Standards of Civil Behavior, they emphasized that the university did not feel the need to allow for protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation unless it was mandated by the federal or state government.⁶⁶

Students across the country have had to sue their campus administrations for the right to organize on campus, including the Coalition for Gay Student Rights at Austin Peay State University.⁶⁷ Other groups existed in secrecy for years before they pushed for university recognition. Vanderbilt University’s Lambda organization, forty miles north of MTSU, existed as an unofficial organization for years before they sought administrative approval.⁶⁸ To this day, LGBT+ students at universities in the Middle Tennessee area still struggle for visibility on their campuses. Bridge Builders, a group dedicated to the

⁶⁵ The Tennessee Court of Appeals ruled the state’s anti-sodomy laws were unconstitutional in 1996. The law, however, is still listed in Tennessee’s law books.

⁶⁶ Staff Reports, “Policy will not change.”

⁶⁷ William R. Stanley, “The Rights of Gay Student Organizations,” 404-405.

⁶⁸ Matt Lieberman and Sarah Friedman, “A Safe Haven, Part I: Introduction.”

intersection of faith and LGBT+ issues at Belmont University, did not receive university recognition until 2011.⁶⁹

Regardless of when or how these groups formed, they generally tend to share similar experiences with their campus climate. President James E. Walker argued that MTSU's campus climate could not be judged by nor compared to other universities because each was inherently different.⁷⁰ This statement, as evidenced by the community responses to the Lambda Association's actions, was false. The Student Homophile League had to navigate that fear at Columbia University and Cornell University, as well as MIT.⁷¹ At Sacramento State College, the Society for Homosexual Freedom (SHF) faced public outcry from the campus community while they fought for university recognition. Opponents of this group used social, moral, and legal arguments to undermine the SHF, much like those used by people who denounced the Lambda Association.⁷² Members of the MTSU campus community feared the visibility that a group like Lambda would bring to LGBT+ peoples, an experience that was widely shared by other LGBT+ student groups in the United States.

⁶⁹ Belmont University is located in Nashville, TN. The Bridge Builders group was rejected twice before receiving university approval on the third attempt. Kevin Heim, "On third try, Bridge Builders gets official status," *Belmont Vision*, February 25, 2011, <http://belmontvision.com/2011/02/on-third-try-bridge-builders-get-official-status/>.

⁷⁰ Staff Reports, "Policy Will Not Change."

⁷¹ Brett Beemyn, "The Silence Is Broken: A History of the Frist Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Student Groups:" 205-223.

⁷² David A. Reichard, "'We Can't Hide and They Are Wrong:' The Society for Homosexual Freedom and the Struggle for Recognition at Sacramento State College, 1969-1971:" 640-651.

In 2009, MT Lambda introduced a bill to the Student Government Association (SGA) to add gender identity to the non-discrimination policy in the SGA constitution.⁷³ This time the decision was left in the hands of the students in a campus wide vote on the bill. The resolution was passed in 2010, taking Lambda less than two years to succeed in their gender identity campaign.⁷⁴

In 2020, MTSU's official non-discrimination policy states, MTSU will promote equal opportunity for all persons without regard to race, color, religion, creed, ethnic or national origin, sex (including pregnancy), sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, disability, age (as applicable), status as a protected veteran, genetic information, and any other legally protected class.⁷⁵

MT Lambda now hosts social and educational events throughout the academic year that are focused on providing resources to LGBTQ+ students on campus. Amidst their non-discrimination policy initiative, the organization hosted the Southeastern Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual College Conference in 1997.⁷⁶ Less than a decade later, the group started celebrating SpringOut!, a weeklong pride celebration, on campus. Members of MT Lambda then created their own yearly LGBTQ+ conference in 2014, known as the LGBTQ+ College Conference, which takes place every spring.⁷⁷

⁷³ Brandon Thomas, "SGA Needs Gender Identity," *MTSU Sidelines* 85, no. 30, June 17, 2009, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁷⁴ Marie Kemph, "Few Students Vote In SGA Elections: Controversial Gender Identity Bill Passes Without Scandal," *MTSU Sidelines* 87, no. 15, March 18, 2010, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁷⁵ "25: Equal Opportunity, Affirmative Action, and Non-Discrimination," University Policies, Middle Tennessee State University, last modified March 12, 2018, <https://mtsu.edu/policies/governance-and-compliance/025.php>.

⁷⁶ Jamie Evans, "Gay Conference Elicits Area Reaction," *MTSU Sidelines* 72, no. 47, February 10, 1997, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁷⁷ This includes events like SpringOut! and the LGBTQ+ College Conference.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

The Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association faced different trials. Austin Peay State University (APSU) officials and the Tennessee Board of Regents (TBR) refused to recognize the SCGR. The SCGR appealed these refusals and took APSU and the TBR to court, where Judge Thomas A. Wiseman ordered the university to officially recognize the Student Coalition for Gay Rights. The Middle Tennessee State University Lambda Association did not face backlash from university administrators when they decided to organize on campus, but instead faced the opinions of students and faculty. It was not until 1995, when the Lambda Association formed the Uniform Equality Committee (UEC), that the group encountered major administrative pushback. Though these groups overcame different circumstances, they still had similar goals and experiences. Both the SCGR and the Lambda Association sought to disseminate education about LGBT+ life and, thus, dismantle stereotypes about LGBT+ people. They both faced pushback to their existence and initiatives. Opponents of these organizations used common misconceptions and stereotypes to validate their concern about LGBT+ student organizations existing on their respective campuses. Though the Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association were not directly associated with each other, similar arguments were used to validate (?) their right to visibly exist on campus.

When the Student Coalition for Gay Rights at APSU was denied official university recognition the justifications used by Dr. Charles Boehms, Vice President of

Student Affairs at APSU, were rooted in a fear of association. Dr. Boehms worried that official recognition would be seen as university approval of “alternate lifestyles.” His concerns were reiterated by other university officials, including Roy Nicks, Chancellor of the Tennessee Board of Regents. Then, almost ten years later, members of the Middle Tennessee State University community used the same arguments to publicly denounce the formation of the Lambda Association.¹ Administrators and university community members argued that the existence of these groups—the visibility of these organizations— would encourage other people to be gay. Many opponents believed that allowing LGBT+ students to exist publicly on campus would encourage others to participate in non-heteronormative behavior. This belief was held by doctors, psychiatrists, and community members. During the State Board of Regents fact finding meeting, held to rule on the official recognition of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights, APSU’s legal counsel called on two psychiatrists to validate that claim. Dr. Harvey Reese and Dr. Garland Blair both testified that recognizing an LGBT+ organization would persuade others “to try such conduct as a result of promotional activity, and that groups such as the SCGR are established for the purpose of promoting homosexuality.”² Members of the MTSU campus community later reiterated that same argument in their letters to the editor published in *Sidelines*. Dan Clark, a student at MTSU, wrote “in all

¹ Terry P. Burgess, Paper fosters redneck image,” Letters to the Editor, *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 13, September 15, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper; Dan Clark, “Letters to the Editor,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 18, October 3, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

² Summary of Fact-Finding Hearing, prepared by David F. Adkisson, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

seriousness, giving the gays the right to assemble as an organization might result in their congregating and ‘cruising’ someplace else besides the campus restrooms.”³

In addition, people argued that these organizations would consequently encourage students to participate in illegal activities. At this time, Tennessee enforced “crimes against nature” laws which prohibited same sex sexual interactions. These laws were not found to be unconstitutional within the state of Tennessee until 1996.⁴ Until then, opponents to the Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association relied on those statutes to oppress the right of those organizations to form. Administrators at APSU argued that if the visibility of an LGBT+ group on campus would increase the number of students “persuaded” to be gay, then the number of people practicing non-heterosexual sex acts would increase.⁵ This sentiment was expressed by members of the MTSU community as well. Richard Pearl, a student at MTSU, noted “President Ingram should not be put in a position of choosing whether or not to support an organization that caters to not-yet-convicted-felons.”⁶

³ Dan Clark, “Letters to the Editor,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 18, October 3, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper. See also R.J. Binder, “Gays discussed enough for now,” *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 19, October 6, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

⁴ *Campbell v. Sundquist*, 926 S.W.2d 255 (1996).

⁵ Roy S. Nicks to Richard W. Lewis, July 16, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections; Charles Boehms, “denial,” *The All-State* 49, no. 16, February 7, 1979, Austin Peay State University Special Collections; Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by Gary E. Crawford, June 8, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections; Proposed Findings of Fact, prepared by David Porteous, May 30, 1979, APSU Gay-Straight Alliance Collection, Austin Peay State University Archives and Special Collections.

⁶ Richard Pearl, “Lambda okay, sex laws not,” Letters to the Editor, *MTSU Sidelines* 63, no. 21, October 13, 1988, Jewl Scholar MTSU Repository, *Sidelines* Student Newspaper.

The Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association did not react to these claims in the same way. At APSU, the SCGR responded by appealing each rejection of official recognition they received. They rewrote their statement of purpose multiple times in order to appease the concerns of the administration. After these attempts failed, and after each of their appeals failed, they chose to sue Austin Peay State University and the State Board of Regents. The experience of the Lambda Association at MTSU is quite different. They responded to public concerns about their formation and their non-discrimination policy initiative through the student newspaper. Allies of the Lambda Association, as well as members of the organization, wrote to the student newspaper in defense of the group. When the Uniform Equality Committee pushed for the inclusion of sexual orientation language in the university non-discrimination policy, members of the UEC would use the student newspaper, *Sidelines*, to respond to oppositional letters the paper had published. The UEC also held panel discussions on campus where students could interact with the subject of LGBTQ+ people in an informed environment.

The experiences of the Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association fit into the broader experience of LGBTQ+ student organizations across the United States. As Patrick Dilley pointed out, universities during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s responded to the visibility of LGBTQ+ students in four ways. Universities opposed the emergence of these organizations using legal arguments, relying on the country's anti-sodomy laws. From the 1940s to the 1960s, many institutions would expel any student they believed to be gay or to have associated with gay people. When expulsions became less popular, universities turned to disciplinary actions, forever marking the

permanent records of any student found to associate with LGBT+ people or lifestyles. Universities across the United States employed different tactics and arguments to prevent the emerging visibility of LGBT+ students.

The Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association remain active, although they now have different names. The SCGR is known as the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA). The group celebrated their fortieth anniversary in 2020 with a series of events including a “dragstravaganza.” For this particular event, the organization rolled out a red carpet for members of the LGBT+ community to walk and invited twelve drag kings and queens to perform on campus. The GSA regularly puts on drag shows, as well as hosts informative meetings and pursues political action. In March of 2017, the GSA hosted a rally for transgender rights. At MTSU, the Lambda Association is now called MT Lambda and also remains active on campus. They also host a variety of events throughout the year such as drag shows, SpringOut!, and the LGBT+ College Conference. These are not the only two LGBT+ student organizations in the state of Tennessee. In the Nashville area alone there are LGBT+ organizations at Belmont University, Vanderbilt University, and Lipscomb University. Some are officially recognized while others are informal, but all of the organizations work to bring LGBT+ visibility to their campuses.

Vanderbilt University’s Lambda Association formed around the same time as MTSU’s Lambda Association. At Vanderbilt, the Dean of Residential and Judicial Affairs met with three students who penned a response to a controversial article about

LGBT+ students published by the student magazine *Versus* around 1987.⁷ K.C. Potter, the dean, encouraged the students to form a gay, lesbian, and bisexual support group on campus. The Lambda Association advertised in the *Vanderbilt Hustler*, looking for other people to join the organization. The founders of Vanderbilt's Lambda Association were very concerned with the privacy of possible members. Students interested in attending the informational meetings would have to respond to the Lambda Association's advertisement and then wait for one of the founders to reach out. Then, a member of the Lambda Association would pick up the interested student and take them to a secret meeting location – later revealed to Potter's house.⁸ When the organization was ready to apply for university recognition, they were required to provide a list of members. However, many of the members were not publicly out. Dean Potter "signed his own name to represent each of those students who weren't comfortable."⁹ Later on, the Lambda Association also pushed for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the university's anti-discrimination policy. The organization remains politically and socially active on campus.

⁷ Allie Gross, "A Safe Haven: The Underground Origins of Vanderbilt Lambda," *Vanderbilt Hustler*, October 7, 2015, https://issuu.com/vanderbilthustler/docs/the_vanderbilt_hustler_10-7-15/8.

⁸ Allie Gross, "A Safe Haven: The Underground Origins of Vanderbilt Lambda."

⁹ Allie Gross, "A Safe Haven: The Underground Origins of Vanderbilt Lambda."



Image of the Vanderbilt students counter protesting in 2016.¹⁰

Students at Tennessee State University (TSU), a historically black university located in Nashville, TN, formed a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in October 2003.¹¹ The mission of the organization focuses on coalition-building in order to give “the university community the knowledge & space to build a supportive environment for all students across all identities.”¹² To achieve this goal, the GSA hosts a variety of events including mixers, discussion panels, and commemorative celebrations. Most recently, the organization hosted the “Cut the Stigma HBCU Tour” on campus in January 2020. This event operated as an open forum where people could ask questions about “HIV stigma and criminalization in the Black community.”¹³ Fisk University, another HBCU located

¹⁰ Chandler Bado, “Dear Westboro Baptist Church: Love Can Drive Out Hate,” *The Tennessean*, November 1, 2016, <https://www.tennessean.com/story/opinion/contributors/2016/11/01/dear-westboro-baptist-church-love-can-drive-out-hate/93118712>.

¹¹ “GSA Achievements,” Genders & Sexualities ALLiance, TNState.edu, accessed April 8, 2020, http://www.tnstate.edu/stuorg/gsa/gsa_achievements.aspx.

¹² “Mission Statement,” Genders & Sexualities ALLiance, TNState.edu, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://www.tnstate.edu/stuorg/gsa/index.aspx>.

¹³ “Events: GSA News and Events,” Genders & Sexualities ALLiance, TNState.edu, accessed April 8, 2020, <http://www.tnstate.edu/stuorg/gsa/events.aspx>.

in Nashville, is also home to an LGBT+ student organization. OutLoud is an inclusive gender and sexuality organization that works closely with the university's Gender Studies department. In the past, the organization has hosted sexual assault awareness campaigns, panel discussions, and film screenings.¹⁴ In January 2020, OutLoud organized a panel discussion titled "Just Ask: Best Practices for Meeting Healthcare Needs of Vulnerable Populations."¹⁵



Photo of TSU faculty and students at the "Cut the Stigma" event hosted by OutLoud.¹⁶

In 2010, students at Belmont University in Nashville submitted their proposal for an organization to support LGBT+ students called Belmont Bridge Builders. The university chose not to charter the organization even though the Student Life Council recommended the group be approved. Dr. Andrew Johnston, Dean of Student Affairs, stated that "given the history of the type of campus that we are, we didn't want to create a

¹⁴ "Fisk Humanities," Picuki.com, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.picuki.com/profile/fiskhumanities>.

¹⁵ Post on Vanderbilt Program for LGBTQ Health's Facebook page, January 22, 2020, accessed April 8, 2020, <https://upload.latest.facebook.com/VUMC.LGBTQ.Health/posts/2454301054781823>.

¹⁶ TSU Gender and Sexualities, "Photo of 'Cut the Stigma' Event," *Instagram*, January 23, 2020. Accessed April 8, 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/B7rjLVKFqzX/>.

group to start a campus-wide organization around things that could be potentially divisive or difficult for the institution at this point.”¹⁷ Belmont University describes itself as a “Christian community.”¹⁸ Instead of approving the organization, university administrators decided to create a dialogue group that would discuss the issues the Belmont Bridge Builders wanted to address. Two years, and three applications, later Belmont University approved the Belmont Bridge Builders.¹⁹

At Lipscomb University in Nashville, there is no official LGBT+ student organization recognized by the campus. LGBT+ students and allies, though, are still visible and active on the campus. The University is affiliated with the Church of Christ. Recently, the university came under fire after a controversial sermon was given by a guest speaker during a campus gathering. Siran Stacy was invited by the university to speak to students about his religious experiences after the loss of his wife and four children in a drunk driving accident. The speaker, instead, discussed the sin of homosexuality and denounced LGBT+ people. In response, LGBT+ students and allies painted the campus bison statue to show their support for queer students.²⁰

¹⁷ Abby Selden, “Proposal For Student Organization Prompts Belmont Dialogue Group on LGBT Issues,” *Belmont Vision*, April 30, 2010, <http://belmontvision.com/2010/04/proposal-for-student-organization-prompts-belmont-dialogue-group-on-lgbt-issues/>.

¹⁸ “Belmont At A Glance,” Belmont University, accessed March 24, 2020, <http://www.belmont.edu/about/index.html>.

¹⁹ Erin Carson, “Bridge Builders Approved,” *Belmont Vision*, March 31, 2011, <http://belmontvision.com/2011/03/bridge-builders-approved/>.

²⁰ Lumination Staff, “Al Sturgeon Hosts Open-forum Breakout Chapel To Discuss Tuesday’s Gathering Talk,” Lumination Network: Lipscomb University’s Student News Service, February 2, 2020, <http://luminationnetwork.com/al-sturgeon-host-open-forum-breakout-chapel-discuss-tuesdays-gathering-talk/>.



Image of the Bison statue at Lipscomb, painted in response to the controversial sermon given during chapel.²¹

When I first decided to research this topic for my thesis, I called my Mom. I was excited and wanted to tell her what I would be working on for the next few months. I spent about five minutes telling her about the Student Coalition for Gay Rights' lawsuit and about the Lambda Association's response to the bathroom article published in *Sidelines*. She replied by asking me "How is that history?" Her question caught me off guard and I did not know what to say. Thinking back now, there are so many answers to that question. There's the simple one—these events happened in the past and, thus, are history. There's also so many more complex answers that are full of richer meaning. The SCGR's lawsuit against APSU *is* a significant historical event in Tennessee's history. The Lambda Association's founding and policy initiatives *are* important historical

²¹ Lumination Staff, "Controversial Gather Talk By Siran Stacy Prompts Break-Out Chapel On Thursday," Lumination Network: Lipscomb University's Student News Service, January 30, 2020, <http://luminationnetwork.com/controversial-gathering-talk-siran-stacy-prompts-break-chapel-thursday/>.

events. These organizations emerged amidst a wave of increased student activism that defined the 1960s. They fought for their constitutional rights to be seen and heard. Highlighting the histories of these LGBT+ student organizations allows me to show my neighbors and family that people like me had to fight to be seen. The Student Coalition for Gay Rights and the Lambda Association sought to educate people about who they were and to show people that being queer does not make you inhuman. The fact that a group of people needed to do that in the first place is historically significant in and of itself. University policies across the United States were aimed at keeping students closeted, to pretend as though LGBT+ students did not exist. Telling those histories helps keep these organizations visible and honors their struggle for human rights.

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