

Closet, Community or Bubble?  
Queer Life at Whitman College from 1975 to 2011

by

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*Certificate of Approval*

This is to certify that the accompanying thesis by Rhiann “Ree” Robson has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with Honors in History.

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## **Abstract**

College campuses have always been a space for exploration, whether that was with one's future, one's beliefs or one's sexuality, and for forming one's own identity. Especially at smaller residential colleges, the campus becomes a place to develop close communities. Despite this, college campuses, and institutions of higher education as a whole, have had little presence in LGBTQ+ historical research. Since the 1960s, LGBTQ+ student organizations have made strides forward, bringing acceptance and inclusivity to their own communities. In this thesis, I take a look at Whitman College as an example, using oral history interviews conducted with alumni, staff and faculty. At a small, and small-town, school like Whitman, it took longer to reach the point at which students were willing to be out and open about sexuality and gender issues. In particular, the community at Whitman has dealt with relative isolation, heteronormativity, resistance to change and a tightly knit community that limited this development. However, queer students and faculty of the early nineties made an impact on campus and set the stage for a consolidated LGBTQ+ community at Whitman, which has adapted to its circumstances and become more inclusive over time.

## Introduction

The year 1989 seemed like any other year at Whitman College. New students arrived on campus and began to settle in, staff and faculty prepared for the academic year while seniors worried about senior exams and the future ahead of them. All in all, a typical scene. Yet, just four years later, as the class of 1993 were graduating, a substantial shift in campus culture had commenced. In 1989, the queer population of Whitman was almost completely closeted and had little presence on campus or impact on campus politics. In 1993, LGBTQ+ activism was at the heart of two very visible student organizations and had become a regular feature on the campus calendar. In the time in-between, a handful of students and employees had taken it upon themselves, as activists and allies, to compel Whitman to develop a more progressive, inclusive and accepting environment for queer community members.<sup>1</sup> Together, they agitated to make LGBTQ+ issues a priority across campus through education and understanding. Thanks to their efforts, the Whitman of 1993 was a very different space for queer students than the Whitman of 1989 and would only continue to change in the decades afterward.

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<sup>1</sup> A note on terminology: Throughout this piece, I will use various terms to refer to the queer community at Whitman and nationally. I personally use both queer and LGBTQ+ as an umbrella terms for gender and sexual minorities. I prefer queer when referring to communities and people, as I feel it is more inclusive, but will use LGBTQ+ to refer to political movements/organizations. However, to emulate the inclusivity and naming conventions of queer spaces historically, I will also occasionally use terms such as “gay” and “gay and lesbian” etc. when appropriate.

To refer to gender minorities, I prefer the term trans and mean it to encompass all non-cisgender experiences. Since I have only found evidence and narratives of trans experiences at Whitman from 2000 on, unless explicitly stated otherwise, descriptions of LGBTQ+ life at Whitman before then reference only the experiences of sexual minorities; however more inclusive language will still be used.

In this thesis, I will explore the college campus as a site of LGBTQ+/queer community development and activism, investigating how this specific environment creates its own challenges and benefits for queer people. This historical research will be based mainly on primary sources, particularly oral history interviews conducted with alumni, staff and faculty of Whitman College.<sup>2</sup> Whitman College is the focus of this paper. However, I also discuss Vassar College and Colorado College, only as points of comparison to the community at Whitman. Vassar College and Colorado College were chosen because they have their own oral history projects that provided a wealth of sources and because they are similarly sized residential liberal arts colleges.<sup>3</sup> As a small liberal arts college in southeastern Washington state, and my undergraduate college, Whitman provided an interesting locale for analysis both personally and academically. Whitman, despite its 21<sup>st</sup> century reputation in the region for being liberal and welcoming to queer students, only developed LGBTQ+ activism and community in the 1990s, several decades after other similar American colleges and universities had already done so. As a member of the queer community on campus, I was curious about this apparent lag in Whitman's inclusivity and how the college had gained its current reputation after such a recent

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<sup>2</sup> The oral histories analyzed in this thesis are a part of the Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, a project I began in the summer of 2019. These interviews as well as the Whitman College LGBTQ+ Collection in the Whitman College and Northwest Archives have been invaluable for this research. See Appendix A for more details on the creation of the Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project and the progress of the project so far.

<sup>3</sup> For the oral history projects, see: Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project, founded by Andrew Wallace, 2011 – 2013, DigitalCC, Charles L. Tutt Library, <https://digitalccbета.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:5979>; Vassar College LGBTQ Oral History Project, 2012 – 2016, Digital Collections, Vassar College Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.vassar.edu/islandora/object/vassar%3Algbtq>.

Other institutions of higher education with LGBTQ oral history collections are Oregon State University (OSU), Princeton University, Oberlin College and Smith College. Others, like Reed College and Rutgers University, have more general institutional oral history collections that occasionally include interviews with LGBTQ community members. Although I debated about using the collection from OSU, I chose to use the two college LGBTQ oral history collections in communities that had the most similarities to Whitman.

transformation. Thus, this thesis weaves together a narrative of queer life, culture and activism at Whitman College, in an attempt to articulate the unique impact that the college setting can have on queer communities.

In the field of queer history as it stands, colleges have not been a place of study as most histories of LGBTQ+ communities, cultures and organizations have concentrated on cities and urban queer neighborhoods. While this is understandable, as those spaces have been important to the national community, it has also created a singular historical narrative. This narrative has overlooked other spaces and their distinct cultures and has privileged the experiences of sexual minorities over the stories of trans people. All too commonly, sources that purport to talk about LGBTQ+ history as a whole will only mention trans issues and narratives in passing. While both of these trends have been bucked by historical works that shift the spotlight toward other communities,<sup>4</sup> a topic that has not yet been explored in any depth has been the role of higher education. Colleges and universities have been a place for youth to explore their own emerging sexualities and have relationships while out of the parental household. Intimate queer relationships have long been part of this exploration.<sup>5</sup> For example, Vassar College's all-female populace in the early 1900s encouraged the development of close relationships between women, many of which blurred lines between romantic and platonic.<sup>6</sup> Thus, queer relationships have always existed in college spaces. New possibilities for privacy and close quarters with other youth afforded the needed time

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<sup>4</sup> For some examples of books that deviated from this narrative, see: John Howard, ed., *Carryin' on in the Lesbian and Gay South* (New York: New York University Press, 1997); Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed a History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> John C. Spurlock, *Youth and Sexuality in the Twentieth-Century United States* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 3, 8, 30-31, 56.

<sup>6</sup> Anne MacKay, ed., *Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian and Gay Experiences, 1930-1990*, 1st rev. pbk. ed (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), xii, 4-5, 8.

and space to recognize one's sexuality. Now, in the modern era of politicized identities, campuses have also become locations for LGBTQ+ activism, another means for youth to refine their understanding of self.<sup>7</sup> Like urban 'gayborhoods' and queer bars, colleges have been a place for youth to learn about and develop queer identities.

Yet, despite the role that college has played for some queer youth, there has been little historical analysis done of queer life in college spaces. College's inaccessibility for many young people made it a less obvious source; nevertheless, factors have arisen that may turn the college campus into a more appealing avenue for historical research. One factor is that, despite the rising costs of a college education, it has become more expected in American culture as an important societal marker of the transition from youth to adulthood. Also, the college archive has become a potentially invaluable source as LGBTQ+ student organizations preserve their records. For example, the Whitman College and Northwest Archives received a major donation of documents from Whitman's LGBTQ+ student organizations in the late 2000s. That collection was able to jumpstart my own research. With more sources becoming available, as LGBTQ+ student organizations have become more common, these records will become interesting sources of comparison and analysis with other community organizations. Therefore, I believe that college spaces will become of interest to more researchers in the coming years.

Queer history is a field that is still developing and changing. It has only been recognized as a field of study since the 1970s and has been dealing with problems such as limited material sources, the silencing power of the closet, and homophobia in academic spaces since the beginning. As every decade brings major changes for the status of queer

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<sup>7</sup> Patrick Dilley, *Queer Man on Campus: A History of Non-Heterosexual College Men, 1945 to 2000* (New York: RoutledgeFalmer, 2012), 11-12, 84-5, 102-3, 180.

people in American society, so does the role and interests of queer history shift. Yet, as the field has developed and gained more legitimacy, it has become possible to tell a wider variety of stories. That is where this work comes in. However, before we dive into Whitman College, first we need to understand two parallel historical events of queer America: the development of a national LGBTQ+ activism movement and the creation of queer social and political spaces in higher education.

## **A History of LGBTQ+ Communities in the US**

In order to situate Whitman College into a conversation around LGBTQ+ rights and acceptance, first we have to understand the national LGBTQ+ community as a whole. Through the entire history of the United States, queer lifestyles and identities have been criminalized, punished or used as justifications for discrimination. And yet by the mid-1900s, LGBTQ+ communities began to fight negative perceptions and legalized discrimination, culminating in at least three distinct waves of activism: the homophile movement, gay/queer liberation, and gay rights. Over time, queer identities have become more politicized and more well-known as these movements compelled discussions.

Through most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, homophobia was institutionalized in the state. Sodomy, defined loosely to cover all supposedly deviant sexual behaviors, had been progressively criminalized in states across the country. Many states had also banned cross-dressing or deviant gender expression.<sup>8</sup> As Michael Bronski suggested, the criminalization of sodomy paved the way for the construction of a new class of people: the homosexual.

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<sup>8</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008), <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?GLTC:2033373>, 32.

The homosexual was inherently sinful and typically considered mentally instable and in need of either medical readjustment or institutionalization;<sup>9</sup> ultimately not fit to be an American citizen. ‘Vice’ crimes were often enforced to target queer communities, mostly through police raids on gay bars from the 1940s and on.<sup>10</sup> Thus, throughout the United States, by the middle of the twentieth century, homosexuality was defined as criminal, illegal and immoral.

These definitions of homosexuality fueled the further entrenchment of homosexuality as a legal category within the federal government. As Margot Canaday argued in her book, *The Straight State*, homophobia was embedded into the institutions and procedures of the national government through the exclusion of “homosexuals” from full citizenship.<sup>11</sup> Queer people were targeted through policies like the ones that barred the immigration of confirmed or suspected homosexuals or the ban on homosexuality in the military in the forties. These definitions often relied on psychological definitions of homosexuality that emphasized it is “moral turpitude.”<sup>12</sup> The American state has been built on the exclusion of queer people. In *Coming Out Under Fire*, Allan Bérubé also looked at American military policy during World War II. Bérubé explained how, despite the surveillance and violence that anti-homosexuality policies perpetrated, queer relationships and culture flourished in the military. For many, it was their first time to meet others like them, in a gender segregated community in which same-sex encounters could be sneakily sought out. Networks and relationships were built that created a sense of identity and

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<sup>9</sup> Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, ReVisioning American History (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 91, 96. This argument stemmed from a similar argument in Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, Vintage Books ed (New York: Vintage Books, 1990).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 125-6, 158-9, 169.

<sup>11</sup> Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America*, 2009, <https://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.23943/9781400830428>, 4, 8-9, 11.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 174, 187, 216, 219.

fellowship that lasted beyond the war, as many sought out queer communities after leaving the military.<sup>13</sup> Homophobia has been baked into the American government. Yet, even as queer people were forced to hide, homophobic policies helped generate a political and social gay identity.

Despite the intensifying of explicit discrimination and criminalization, the existence of the homosexual identity offered a term to gather around and a goal to achieve. In response to the persecution of homosexuals, the organizations of the homophile movement in the 1950s and early 1960s were mostly focused on crafting an image of normality and respectability as well as supporting each other in times of need. They spent a lot of time just trying to decriminalize and de-medicalize queer identities as well as defending their right to freedom of speech. However, they never really broke into the political mainstream.<sup>14</sup> These movements had emerged in large part due to the new knowledge of homosexuality spread by the World War II draft policies and the subsequent migration of queer people to urban centers in search of community.

While the homophile movement was publicizing itself as the voice of respectable gay folks, trans people still had to formulate a sense of a communal identity. Similarly to the homophile movement, the trans movement initially developed its terminology out of psychological and academic understandings of gender identities. Universities like University of California in San Francisco conducted studies on sexuality and gender minorities throughout the forties and fifties. Through these studies, many transsexual

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<sup>13</sup> Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), 4, 12, 103, 189, 244.

<sup>14</sup> John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58, 63, 72, 81, 110-1, 123-5; Michael Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, ReVisioning American History (Boston: Beacon Press, 2011), 184-5.

people found support and medical aid that they needed to attempt both medical and social transition.<sup>15</sup> Thanks to the novelty of these surgeries, some trans folks earned celebrity status for publicizing their transition, most famously Christine Jorgenson, who came out in 1952. Through her story, many trans folks learned that others like them existed.<sup>16</sup> While many trans folks were involved in gay communities at this point, trans identities were not commonly known and understood.

As America moved out of the 1960s, activism around social issues based on identity had become a major part of the political landscape, providing an opportunity for the emergence of a national gay political movement. Moving outside of the structures and rhetoric of the homophile movement, more aggressive and radical action became the new style for protecting queer communities. Throughout the fifties and sixties, queer urban communities continued to face police violence and raids, especially in poor and nonwhite areas. To fight back, queer and trans folks rioted. Although the most famous of these riots was Stonewall, others, like the Compton's Cafeteria Riot in San Francisco, also played important roles and were often led by trans people of color.<sup>17</sup> This new norm inspired the gay liberation movement.<sup>18</sup> Gay liberation turned to coming out as a means to make a statement and challenge oppressive institutions, rejecting heteronormative respectability. This emphasis on coming out aided the development of unified national political movement.<sup>19</sup> Many people were energized and ready to be public in the fight for change,

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<sup>15</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 39, 41-44, 44-5. For a longer discussion of the history of medical transition and transsexuality, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed a History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004).

<sup>16</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 47-9.

<sup>17</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 60-63, 64-5.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 70, 72, 82, 86; Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 208-9, 211-2.

<sup>19</sup> Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 208-9, 217-9; D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*, 232-5; John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America*, Third edition (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2012), 319-221, 324.

at least within gay and lesbian communities.

The AIDS crisis provided an all-encompassing target for that energy. The AIDS crisis and the social movement that arose out of that tragedy afforded some of the biggest steps toward universalizing and humanizing LGBTQ+ issues for a broader liberal community. While the AIDS crisis was dismissed by some as solely a “gay disease,”<sup>20</sup> its impact was not isolated, and AIDS activists found many allies outside of LGBTQ+ communities. The more widespread impact of AIDS, and media depictions of the devastation of the crisis, helped bring more attention and sympathy to both LGBTQ+ and AIDS activism.<sup>21</sup> The AIDS crisis also caused a massive shift in the goals of LGBTQ+ activism. As Bronski argued, while gay liberation had rejected the power of the state and other heterosexual institutions, AIDS activists demanded the attention of the state as they saw it as a necessary component to accessing the resources needed to address the disease in a substantive way. Thus, the state was reframed as a potential ally. One that did have a history of failing to be supportive, but a potential source for political change none-the-less.

By the 1990s, LGBTQ+ issues had completed their movement from side-stage to the national arena and had forced their way into mainstream liberal agendas. Instead of just demanding decriminalization, more and more LGBTQ+ organizations and activists began to look for acceptance and political legitimacy granted by the state in the form of rights.<sup>22</sup> Rights-based politics were more easily digestible for a mainstream and moderate liberal polity.<sup>23</sup> LGBTQ+ activism frequently concentrated on protecting of the rights of LGBTQ+

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<sup>20</sup> D’Emilio and Freedman, *Intimate Matters*, 354-7, 350-60.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 350-60; Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 229, 231-2.

<sup>22</sup> Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 240.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 240-2, 232. Some organizations like Queer Nation continued to focus on liberation-style politics and demand more radical change.

individuals. Although AIDS activism was still a part of the movement, legislation like “Don’t Ask Don’t Tell” and hate crime bills became the new major issues. At the same time, trans people demanded a better position in the national movement, and the term trans or transgender was added to more LGBTQ activist organizations’ names and mission statements. However, this apparent inclusion did not necessarily translate to policy, as the removal of gender identity protections from the Employment Non-Discrimination Act proved.<sup>24</sup> By the 2000s, the LGBTQ+ movement had started to commit to being a true coalition of gender and sexual identity minorities and had moved more towards politics focused on rights and acceptance.

The development of gay and LGBTQ+ activism on college campuses followed a similar trajectory. However, the differences between campuses reveals how, despite mirroring the national LGBTQ+ movement, the impact of gay activism in any one community depended on the culture and shape of that community.

## **National LGBTQ+ Activism and the College Campus**

Over two decades before any queer students at Whitman demanded a public student organization, students at a few universities in New York had already started agitating for recognition of and support for gay and lesbian student groups. Two years before Stonewall, Columbia University in New York chartered the first university-based gay student group, the Student Homophile League (SHL). The next year, homophile leagues formed at both

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<sup>24</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 137, 151.

New York University and the smaller Cornell University.<sup>25</sup> In “The Silence is Broken,” Genny Beemyn explored the development of LGBTQ+ activism at Cornell. Beemyn showed how the publicity from the creation of the homophile league at Columbia motivated students at Cornell to start a similar group. Starting with a small, mostly male membership who didn’t want to be out, Cornell’s SHL increased its early membership by allowing straight allies to join; but then faced internal conflict when, after Stonewall, some members wanted the group to be an exclusively gay social space and others wanted to focus on activism. The SHL worked with other student activist organizations on campus, including the Afro-American Society and Cornell’s Students for a Democratic Society. These connections motivated the SHL to become more confrontational. They transitioned the group into a Gay Liberation Front. The GLF went on to hold protests against a local bar that discriminated against gay people, marking an important moment in the trajectory of the group from a closeted, conflicted student group to an activist organization that was part of a growing youth gay liberation movement of the early 1970s.<sup>26</sup> The student group’s emergence paralleled that of the national LGBTQ+ movement. The group at Cornell would not have developed or changed so quickly without the influence of LGBTQ+ political organizing on the East Coast and in New York.

At other colleges and universities across America, the 1970s were a period of emerging activism and social connection for queer youth. For some students, forming an official student group was easy, such as University of California in Los Angeles’ 1969 gay

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<sup>25</sup> Ronni L. Sanlo, ed., *Working with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender College Students: A Handbook for Faculty and Administrators*, The Greenwood Educators’ Reference Collection (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 1998), 321; G. B. 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 (2003), 205–206.

<sup>26</sup> Beemyn, “The Silence Is Broken,” 207-8, 211-2, 213-5, 216-8, 221-2.

student group. At UCLA, queer life was surprising not very focused on activism. Instead, a major element of queer life at UCLA in the 1970s was the *Gayzette* newsletter, founded in 1974. The *Gayzette* provided a means for community members to find connection with each other. It included opinion pieces on gay issues and news as well as humor, gossip columns and creative works. The *Gayzette* was a space for freedom and expression. It was also mainly run by white gay men, and thus was representative of a lack of racial diversity especially common in early gay organizing. Similarly, UCLA's Gay Student Union (GSU) and its Lesbian Sisterhood remained separate and disconnected throughout the 1970s as gender also tended to cause divisions within early gay political development.<sup>27</sup> The UCLA's GSU and the *Gayzette* were emblematic of early LGBTQ+ college student organizing, being mostly focused on developing ties with other gay people on campus, to the neglect of more universalized or intersectional activism.

However, not all gay and lesbian student groups were disinterested in aggressive activism. In Minneapolis, Fight Repression of Erotic Expression (FREE) started as a community group also founded in 1969 right before the national gay liberation movement took form. FREE started as two young people's Free University course called the "Homosexual Revolution"; as the course was ending, one of the remaining students registered it as a club with the University of Minnesota. FREE was began to operate on campus. Within FREE, much like at Cornell, arguments arose between those who wanted to use the space for social events and those who were pushing for an activist agenda. The activists won out. Some members went off on their own personal campaigns, like Michael

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<sup>27</sup> David A. Reichard, "Behind the Scenes at the *Gayzette*: The Gay Student Union and Queer World Making at UCLA in the 1970s," *Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (April 2016): 98–114, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohv075>, 101-3, 99, 105, 107-9, 110, 111, 104.

McConnell and Jack Baker who applied for a marriage license as a same sex couple as a protest. However, FREE's primary activism was about procuring anti-discrimination measures on local levels after a member lost his job because he was gay. In 1971, the continuing differences in political goals and strategies destabilized the group for good.<sup>28</sup> Unlike UCLA's GSU, FREE, having developed off campus, had goals focused on educating and improving a wider community. However, conflicts over choosing priorities ended up killing FREE.

For other university gay student groups, homophobia in the community provided a direct challenge and limitation to queer student organizing. New York's Rutgers University's gay student organization, despite similarities to other groups discussed so far, dealt with levels of homophobia that directly influenced the character of the organization. The 1969 Rutgers University Homophile League was founded mostly by men and was mainly focused on community building and providing education on gay issues, holding panels about gay identities and even a yearly conference from 1970 – 1975.<sup>29</sup> Like FREE, the League also attempted to address homophobia in the community. For the Rutgers League, homophobia was retaliatory, arising in response to their community awareness events. In particular, the yearly Gay Jeans Day was consistently met with displays of violent homophobic threats from the fraternity DKE. In 1976, after changing their name to the Gay Alliance, the group began to protest more forcefully against homophobia on campus. Conflicts with the frats, sometimes resulting in physical altercations, continued up

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<sup>28</sup> Bruce Johansen, "Out of Silence: FREE, Minnesota's First Gay Rights Organization," *Minnesota History* 66, no. 5 (2019), 186, 189, 190-1, 193-5, 196, 198.

<sup>29</sup> David Nichols and Morris J. Kafka-Holzschlag, "The Rutgers University Lesbian/Gay Alliance 1969-1989, The First Twenty Years," *The Journal of the Rutgers University Libraries* 51, no. 2 (1989), <https://doi.org/10.14713/jrul.v51i2.1689>, 56, 58, 61, 66. This piece is more of a timeline than anything else as it was a twentieth anniversary retrospective produced by founding members of the group. However, it does show the changing nature of the group and so was included in this historiography.

into the 1980s. Although visible homophobia eventually declined, the Gay Alliance voiced its concerns and demands for a better campus environment to the administration in 1987 and helped usher in some positive change.<sup>30</sup> Unlike the Cornell's GSU or FREE, the Rutgers Gay Alliance seemingly lacked a lot of internal strife, presumably because the problem of campus homophobia provided a clear goal. The group, after facing a decade of homophobia, ultimately ended up concentrating on the protection and safety of LGBTQ+ students by becoming a vehicle for student protests about campus culture.

There are a few characteristics that the four examples given so far (Cornell's SHL/GLF, UCLA's GSU, FREE and Rutgers' Gay Alliance) have in common. These early gay student groups had similar issues with diversity, tending to be led by gay men, lack racial diversity and not yet include issues of gender identity. Most faced a transition from an internally focused social or educational group to an externally focused political group that tried to build community and influence local attitudes. Some of these transitions are easily demarcated by a name change; others just occurred as the goals of the group shifted over time. The breadth of their political interests was heavily dependent on their situations. FREE was a community organization with non-student members that saw issues to be addressed in the city as a whole, while the Rutgers Gay Alliance had trouble just making sure that their group could exist on campus without violent retaliation against them. Thus, although shifts in national activist movements clearly had an impact, these organizations were more concerned about their own communities.

On other campuses, the process of forming an official gay student group was a more fraught task. Getting one recognized by campus administrations became an important act

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<sup>30</sup> Nichols and Kafka-Holzschlag, "The Rutgers University Lesbian/Gay Alliance," 66, 68-9, 70-1, 80-1, 90-1.

of visibility and a challenge to heteronormative and homophobic institutions. In the early seventies, the illegality of homosexual acts was often used as a justification to deny recognition or administrative approval. Student groups resorted to lawsuits in response. David Reichard explored the history of one of these cases in ““We Can’t Hide and They are Wrong,”” which discussed the Sacramento College Society for Homosexual Freedom (SHF) and their three year lawsuit. In this legal history, the struggle for recognition became a symbol of legitimacy, one that generated visibility and a public political identity for these gay students. The SHF, which was mostly male, had some support on campus. Despite this, the college administration argued that they would be promoting illegal acts if they officially supported the student group. In retaliation, the SHF hired an alumnus as an attorney to sponsor their legal case and, backed by the ACLU, won their lawsuit against the administration using arguments centered on freedom of expression. In 1971, the group was officially recognized by the college. This California legal case helped set a precedent that other LGBTQ+ student groups could then draw on when suing for discrimination.<sup>31</sup> The Sacramento College example revealed how establishing gay student groups could be difficult when there was no precedent to defend their rights to exist.

These victories in the legal arena helped ease the way for students who otherwise would have faced resistance from the administration because of the conservative influences on their institutions. At the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, legal precedent was the main reason that a gay group gained recognition. In the 1970s, the Center on Human Sexuality Issues was established on this UNC campus. The Center soon ended up

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<sup>31</sup> D. 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 (2010), 632-3, 637-8, 641-4, 647-8, 657-8, 652, 656, 660-1, 663, 670, 672.

hiring a counselor specializing in gay issues to meet student need and in 1974, this counselor founded the Carolina Gay Association (CGA) as a consciousness raising group, mostly recruiting other white gay men. Although the university administration was not happy about CGA's existence, previous court rulings established precedent that protected the right of gay student groups to exist, so the group was reluctantly allowed. Throughout the seventies, excepting a few students and their radical newsletter, the group was mostly focused on social networking and most members were not really activists. Only in the 1980s did the group become more politicized.<sup>32</sup> In this example, even discussion-based student groups faced opposition from conservative university administrations, and it was often only the risk of losing a lawsuit that prevented retaliation or removal from campus.

Even after this precedent was set, the political environment of some institutions and their locales encouraged unwillingness from campus administration to support LGBTQ+ student groups. For queer students in conservative regions, homophobia in the area worked alongside homophobia on campus to limit their political development. For example, at the University of Florida, reactionary homophobia caused difficulties for the university's Gay Liberation Front. This GLF, founded in 1974, prioritized becoming an official student group through administrative recognition. However, the university initially refused to approve the group, pushing it off-campus. The GLF spent much of the 1975-6 academic year trying to reverse that decision and made some progress. Then, in 1977, Dade County in Florida passed a nondiscrimination ordinance that included protections based on sexual orientation, and the homophobic "Save Our Children" campaign, led by Anita Bryant,

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<sup>32</sup> T. Evan Faulkenbury, and Aaron Hayworth, "The Carolina Gay Association, Oral History, and Coming Out at the University of North Carolina," *Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (April 29, 2016), 120-121, 122, 124-5, 128, 123, 133.

arose in reaction. The campaign encouraged anti-gay sentiment across Florida. At UF, queer students dealt with an increase in vocalized homophobia as homophobic community members lashed out at LGBTQ+ activism or events with violent threats. Despite having gained official recognition and minimal office space on campus before the popularity of the Bryant campaign, the GLF was temporarily forced off campus again in 1982 by the administration.<sup>33</sup> When anti-LGBTQ+ political movements flourished, homophobic and unsupportive university administrations were justified in their actions and encouraged to reject their queer student populations, despite precedent that should have protected students.

In other cases, some university administrations attempted to dodge the issue entirely in order to retain connections with homophobic alumni and local communities. For queer students at Appalachian State University in North Carolina, the mid-1970s provided an opportunity to make themselves known. A gay support group emerged out of the gay social networks that had existed already. This group became the Appalachian Gay Awareness Association (AGAA) in 1979, which focused on networking and providing resources to the community. AGAA's path to official recognition was complicated. Although the administration initially planned to block their proposal, thereby avoiding the issue entirely, they eventually allowed the proposal to go through to the Student Senate, mostly due to the administration's hesitancy over the potential legal struggle that could result. While the Student Senate initially approved AGAA's status as an official student group, homophobic students immediately proposed and passed a referendum that reversed

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<sup>33</sup> Jessica Clawson, "Coming Out of the Campus Closet: The Emerging Visibility of Queer Students at the University of Florida, 1970–1982," *Educational Studies* 50, no. 3 (May 4, 2014): 209–30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131946.2014.907162>, 210-1, 215-6, 219, 220-1, 223, 225-7.

that decision. However, the Senate's approval had already been sent to the university's Chancellor's office and the retiring Chancellor decided to sign it. This came as a surprise, as the Chancellor had been repeatedly insisting on his disinterest in allowing a gay student group to exist, both publicly and in communications with homophobic alumni. Why he chose to approve the group is uncertain.<sup>34</sup> Whatever his motivations, his communications with alumni and statements to the community on the issue revealed how university administration might prioritize relationships with alumni donors and the local city over supporting students. Appalachian State almost did not have a gay student group, due to the administration's unwillingness to even consider the proposal.

Conservative and homophobic attitudes in local communities and in the institutions of higher education themselves limited the development of queer student groups, and the styles and focus of their activism. For these groups, winning official recognition by the university administration often became a goal in and of itself as a means to legitimize their existence, protect themselves and to make a statement. Thus, this process was given a certain weight. However, conservative administrations were willing to block groups from gaining an official status as a student group; such as at Colorado College, where the seventies Gay Liberation Front was an off-campus group due to the administration's refusal to accept it.<sup>35</sup> Fear of losing a lawsuit was sometimes the only way that gay students got around this blockade. However, even official recognition, once given, was not a certain guarantee of their right to exist, as the experiences of the students at University of Florida could attest. A rise in anti-LGBTQ+ politics and attitudes could be enough to threaten the

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<sup>34</sup> Kathryn Staley, "Gay Liberation Comes to Appalachian State University (1969-1979)," *Appalachian Journal* 39, no. 1/2 (2011), 74-7, 80-1, 82-4, 85.

<sup>35</sup> "The Catalyst [1971 v. 3 No. 1 Sept. 1 - 1972 v. 3 No. 22 May 26]," *The Catalyst*, 1971-2, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:9871>, pp. 88, 188, 209.

presence of queer student groups.

All of the examples given so far have focused on 1969 and the 1970s as the major period of queer university student group development; however, institutions with ties to conservative traditions, in particular religious institutions, have prevented the development of out LGBTQ+ communities up into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Heather McEntarfer discussed the creation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) at three religiously affiliated colleges in the late 2000s and early 2010s. All three GSAs faced significant resistance from their college's administrations. They had limitations placed on their activities, like being forced to work with college priests or having their advertising abilities restricted. When the GSAs wanted to get around these constraints, they either had to drum up support within the community to pressure the administration to change the rules or use subversive tactics like keeping events and meetings secret. McEntarfer explored how these GSAs have created positive change on their campuses once they managed to get past administrations and actually get work done.<sup>36</sup> At all of these religiously affiliated liberal arts colleges, the administration has continued to stand in the way of queer student's political and social development, even after LGBTQ+ political movements have become mainstream. Only by capitulating to the administration's restrictions or by gaining support from a broader coalition of the community have these groups been able to take shape and be more active on their respective campuses. Although not a truly historical piece, McEntarfer's article showed how the process of getting LGBTQ+ student groups founded has remained similar over time and can be greatly impacted by the traditions, locale and attitudes of the institution.

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<sup>36</sup> Heather Killelea McEntarfer, "'Not Going Away': Approaches Used by Students, Faculty, and Staff Members to Create Gay-Straight Alliances at Three Religiously Affiliated Universities," *Journal of LGBT Youth* 8, no. 4 (January 28, 2011), <https://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.whitman.edu/doi/full/10.1080/19361653.2011.607623>, 313-4, 315, 317-20, 323, 327.

The more religious, conservative or unchanging an institution is, the harder it has been for queer students to make change and build community.

In all of these articles, LGBTQ+ student groups presented a distinct perspective on both the impact of national activist movements on smaller communities and on the ways that space, region and culture have shaped the development of queer communities and organizations. Each college or university campus provided its own complex locale for a queer community. The relationship between the campus and the surrounding area has played an interesting and important role. The college's relationships with the locals, with alumni, with faculty, and with students, and students' relationships with each other, all form a complicated network that queer students have to navigate, while at the same time coming to terms with their own identity and political positions.

### **Late to the Game: Whitman's LGBTQ+ Community**

In 1989, after decades of queer identities remaining mostly unacknowledged on campus, queer life at Whitman improved suddenly as a small and confidential student group found new leaders who were willing to be out and engage in regular activism. This change did not happen concurrently with Stonewall or with the rise of the gay liberation movement, but only after even the AIDS crisis had already made its impact on national LGBTQ+ politics. When Whitman's LGBTQ+ student group, the Gay and Lesbian Association, applied for recognition and funding from the student government, the amount given was small,<sup>37</sup> but the group was not prevented from forming, nor did any immediate

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<sup>37</sup> Kelley Wilt and Alexis Cofield, "ASWC Budget Request Form 1991-1992," 1991, WCA118: "Whitman College LGBTQ+ Collection," Series 2: "Bob Tobin Papers, 1989-2008," Box 1, Folder 9: "ASWC: Budget and Funding," Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Mike Rogoway, "ASWC Tightens Its

backlash result. On the surface, the circumstances at Whitman look very unlike any of the cases discussed so far. Whitman College, a residential liberal arts college much smaller than most institutions discussed in this introduction, had a very different journey. This thesis aims to explain why that is the case and where Whitman fits into this pattern of LGBTQ+ community development.

As I've mentioned before, college has been an important environment for youth development, a space for people to take the time to understand themselves and form communities and relationships. This interconnectedness and the inter-relationality of small residential colleges can have negative impacts on the development of queer spaces, however. It can take longer for these communities to reach the point where students are willing to be out and open because the pressure to conform is more personal. It also can take longer to change community norms because the size of the community means that it is often up to individuals on their own to drive progress. At Whitman College in particular, the relative isolation of the college, the pressure to fit into social norms, a close-knit student body and a more conservative locale have all limited the development of a queer-identified student population. The combination of increasing societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities, the shift to rights-centric politics and the arrival of openly queer community leaders on campus broke through these social barriers. But it only began in the 1980s. Even after the dam had been broken, the Whitman's culture affected the focus of campus LGBTQ+ activism and the shape of the queer community itself.

The first part of this thesis will focus on Whitman as an institution and the delayed emergence of LGBTQ+ activism and community on campus. In the first chapter. I will

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Belt for New Budget: GLA, WISH and LEAD Suffer Most," *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 11, 1991, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

discuss Whitman's history, its long-standing problems with diversity and set-up the community as it was by the 1970s when this story begins. Important to this conversation is Whitman's geography, as the rural location of the college has shaped the structure of the institution and the way the institution is perceived. At this point, I will also introduce Vassar College and Colorado College, which will be brought up occasionally as comparisons. I will then explore the experiences of queer students at Whitman in the 1970s and 1980s in the second chapter. This chapter will explain that finding queer identity on campus was difficult, if not impossible for some students. Queer social networks that did exist were small and primarily social, with political identity only becoming relevant in the mid-to-late eighties. In the last chapter of this section, I will describe how growing societal acceptance of LGBTQ+ activism and the leadership of new community members gave voice to a burgeoning queer community and spawned Whitman's first LGBTQ+ organization, and how this moment shaped LGBTQ+ activism on campus. During a short period in the early nineties, Whitman's queer students developed an active political identity and organization that started its own traditions on campus.

In this second part of this thesis, I will explore the progression and shifts in the queer community at Whitman, both in terms of activism and in terms of how the community defined itself. One chapter will focus on the LGBTQ+ activism that happened on campus throughout the 1990s and 2000s. I argue that the activism at Whitman was highly impacted by the turn towards gay rights politics in the 1990s, a political position that was encouraged by Whitman's culture. The last chapter of this thesis will explore how transgender students and issues were treated at Whitman. I make sure to bring in the experiences of trans and gender nonconforming students in their own words, and to analyze

the twin problems of trans inclusion and gender/trans-focused community activism. Throughout this section as whole, I also comment the discrimination that queer students faced on campus and the responses of the community. In addition to contributing to a growing body of work about the role of higher education in queer history, after tracing the development of queer community, activism and identity at Whitman, I will have shown what queer life at this institution has looked like over time. I hope to explain how our college became the space that we know it as today.

## **Chapter 1: Normality and Isolation in the Walla Walla Valley**

What defines a college campus as a space of historical study? No two institutions are exactly alike. Some universities are larger, both in terms of physical space and population. Some colleges have a broad range of majors and some have a very specific focus. Geography and physical space are important too; rural or urban? What area of the country? Is the campus all tucked up into a few buildings, a walkable couple of blocks or spread out across half of an urban downtown? It can be hard to define the college as a place of study; the term itself is pretty ambiguous and open. However, that does not mean that these locations are less important because of that difficulty. While the particulars can be hard to pin down, institutions of higher education share overarching similarities.

The defining features of the college campus, especially the undergrad campus, are: the construction of the community around the academic year, the focus on education, the ways that social networks form and the fact that for most schools, the student body is a young population in the throes of developing their own self-identity. In-between and around classes and homework, students join clubs, meet new people and make connections. It can be both a time of crisis and a time of exploration; people need to figure out their future paths and develop their sense of who they are, which often includes sexuality and gender identities. Colleges have a cyclical lifestyle; as new students come in, old students leave. Each group brings their own perspectives and goals to the environment. Old plans and ideas get dropped when the ones driving them leave. That means employees of the college are the only ones with the longevity to really notice change in the institution. These

factors absolutely shape the way that both students, staff and faculty interact with the community and with the space itself.

Another important element of college life has always been privilege. For a long time, higher education has been something only within the reach of those with money or influence.<sup>1</sup> Thus, in America, only a small number of young adults went to college in each generation. However, the spread of institutions of higher education and the expansion of the American middle class has made college, especially public universities, much more available to the average person. In particular, in the post-World War two period, it became much more common for higher education to be considered necessary for a career.<sup>2</sup> However, college has still been most easily accessed by people in higher wealth classes, especially with costs rising over the past few decades.

Besides college's expenses, the institutions were almost always founded with white men in mind as both students and teachers. Many colleges, especially elite institutions, were developed to accommodate racism and slavery, or were built and maintained thanks to the oppression of others. People of color were rarely included as actual students.<sup>3</sup> For women in America, college was not much of an option up until the late 1800s. Oberlin College was the first American college to accept female students in 1837 and the inclusion of female students progressed slowly after that. Even after women were allowed in, men were still preferred and women discouraged from pursuing long academic careers or

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<sup>1</sup> Annika Neklason, "Elite-College Admissions Were Built to Protect Privilege," *The Atlantic*, March 18, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2019/03/history-privilege-elite-college-admissions/585088/>.

<sup>2</sup> Patricia Albjerg Graham, "Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education," *Signs* 3, no. 4 (1978): 759–73.

<sup>3</sup> Leslie M. Harris, "The Long, Ugly History of Racism at American Universities," *The New Republic*, March 26, 2015, <https://newrepublic.com/article/121382/forgotten-racist-past-american-universities>.

professions.<sup>4</sup> Historically black and historically women's colleges in America were created in response to the unwillingness of other institutions to accept and teach diverse student bodies. Thus, race, gender and class/wealth status were all ways in which certain students were privileged, and all molded the cultures, norms, and mechanisms of colleges as institutions.

Beyond the clear exclusion of women and people of color, college campuses also have a history of supporting heteronormativity and oppressive gender roles across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Authors Marilyn Preston and Garrett Hoffman described this phenomenon by classifying colleges as “traditionally heterogendered institutions.” The term heterogender was used to describe the overlap between heteronormativity, which assumes heterosexual desires and lifestyles as the default, and traditional gender roles, which try to enforce certain behaviors and activities upon people based on arbitrary biological characteristics.<sup>5</sup> Historically, colleges and universities have enforced both heteronormativity and gender roles. For example, common practices included policies that policed female students and their appearance or that preferenced married students, the prominence of fraternities and sororities (which often hold matchmaking events that promote heterosexuality), and the segregation of male and female students in student housing. While some of these practices have faded, such as dress codes, and the rhetoric of most institutions has become more accepting, these changes have not necessarily undercut institutional heteronormativity. Building off of analytic works that discussed “traditionally white institutions,” Preston and

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<sup>4</sup> Patricia Albjerg Graham, “Expansion and Exclusion: A History of Women in American Higher Education,” *Signs* 3, no. 4 (1978): 759–73.

<sup>5</sup> Marilyn J. Preston and Garrett Drew Hoffman, “Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions: Discourses Surrounding LGBTQ College Students,” *Journal of LGBT Youth* 12, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 64–86, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2014.935550>.

Hoffman argued that the kind of diversity promoted by most colleges and universities has typically been used less to support minority students but instead to further the education of privileged students. Since diversity was not considered inherent to the institution's community, the "normal" was still defined as the straight, cis, white or male person. Since 'diverse' students were not the "normal" and thus only considered to be a portion of the student body, the resources and programs put in place to support these students were then limited. For LGBTQ+ students, assumptions were made that they were "vulnerable," and in need of programs to protect them, which only served to normalize any discrimination or discomfort students faced.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, this presumption placed the burden of change on the students themselves, as they were the ones meant to educate others about their identities and issues.<sup>7</sup> In these ways, even as practices that explicitly enforce heterosexuality disappear, institutions can still presume a certain kind of heteronormativity and present queer students as different from the rest of the campus community.

## **A Critical Introduction to Whitman College**

All of these descriptions of the college campus as a place of study have described Whitman College to an extraordinary degree. As a small elite residential liberal arts college, Whitman has not attracted a particularly diverse population of students since becoming a degree granting institution in 1882. Located in a small rural city in Eastern Washington, Whitman has a reputation for having a rigorous academic program with small

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Linder et al., "'A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student': Student Activism as Labor," *The Review of Higher Education* 42, no. 5 (May 24, 2019): 37–62, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0044>; Preston and Hoffman, "Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions."

class sizes and a very busy student population. Currently, the college has a student body of just over 1,500 (and was smaller historically). As a private institution, Whitman's total tuition for the 2019-2020 academic year was over \$57,000. Whitman's status as a private school has meant that it has always been fairly exclusionary just because of the expenses. Historically the Greek system has been very popular here.<sup>8</sup> Whitman draws in students mainly from the West Coast, and the student population is consistently majority white by a significant percentage, at over 60% in 2020.<sup>9</sup> In 2001, even after efforts to recruit more broadly, white students still made up about 88% of the population.<sup>10</sup> It is historically white, both in student body and in faculty membership, and with a historically male leadership.<sup>11</sup> As for Whitman's relationship to LGBTQ+ students, LGBTQ+ issues were rarely ever brought up on campus until the early 1990s. Whitman was a place of isolation, where queer students may have fit in because of their race or class, but were on their own in areas of sexuality. Whitman today is a more diverse and more accepting place than it has been historically, but these privileges have long been part of the college's institution and culture.

Beyond population statistics, Whitman College has a problematic racist history tied to its founding relationship with American missionary movements and the oppression of Native American tribes in the Pacific Northwest. The college was named after Marcus Whitman, an early missionary who had a contentious relationship with the Cayuse, whose

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<sup>8</sup> G. Thomas Edwards, *Tradition in a Turbulent Age: Whitman College 1925-1975* (Walla Walla, Wash.: Whitman College, 2001), 384.

<sup>9</sup> Based on the statistics of the 2019-2020 first year class, one of the most diverse student years at Whitman. For the 2019-2020 stats, see: "Class Profile," Whitman College, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.whitman.edu/admission-and-aid/learn-more-about-whitman/class-profile>.

<sup>10</sup> The 88% percentage take the total percentage of reported minority students and subtracts that from 100%. "Whitman College Factbook: Academic Year 2010-2011" (Whitman College, 2011), [https://www.whitman.edu/documents/Offices/Institutional%20Research/2010-11\\_Factbook1.pdf](https://www.whitman.edu/documents/Offices/Institutional%20Research/2010-11_Factbook1.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> See any of the pictures of faculty membership or Whitman presidents from Edwards, *Tradition in a Turbulent Age*.

land his mission was on. From a 21<sup>st</sup> century perspective, the Whitmans helped support settler-colonialism in the region by aiding westward-bound white settlers. The Cayuse meanwhile encountered the spreading of disease and encroaching settlement on their lands. They realized that the settlers were a source of harm to their people. Marcus claimed to be a doctor, yet their people died while settlers survived. Cayuse members gathering food were accused of theft, and settlers poisoned crops to harm them. In 1847, Cayuse men attacked the Whitman mission, killing Marcus and his wife Narcissa in retaliation for the deaths of Cayuse members.<sup>12</sup> The attack on the mission sparked war. Five Cayuse men were unjustly tried and executed as “justice” for the deaths of the Whitmans. White settlers, with support from the US government, forced the Walla Walla valley tribes to sign a peace treaty. The 1855 treaty removed the tribes from their historic lands and constrained them to a much smaller reservation.<sup>13</sup> The story of the Whitmans was tied to racial violence and oppression.

Despite this brutal history and the devastating consequences to the Cayuse and other Walla Walla valley tribes, Whitman College was built on a legacy that celebrated the Whitmans and their supposed accomplishments. At times when the college needed to promote itself, Whitman administration frequently turned to the story of Marcus Whitman. White historians and college presidents alike glorified the Whitmans as authentic, proud “pioneers” who “saved Oregon” and paved the way west.<sup>14</sup> The college’s self-identity drew

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<sup>12</sup> Indigenous Peoples’ Education and Culture Club, Jacqueline Rees-Mikula, and Lachlan Johnson, “A Decolonial History of Whitman College,” ed. Grace Fritzsche, 2016, 8, 11-12 (digital copy of document saved by author); Jacqueline Rees-Mikula, “The Disenchanted Missionary : Unraveling the Colonial Fantasies of Whitman College” (Whitman Politics Thesis, May 10, 2016), <https://arminda.whitman.edu/theses/291>, 11-13.

<sup>13</sup> Indigenous Peoples’ Education and Culture Club, Jacqueline Rees-Mikula, and Lachlan Johnson, “A Decolonial History of Whitman College,” 13-15.

<sup>14</sup> Delaney Hardin Hanon, “The Whitman Legend: The Intertwining of History and Memorial in the Narrative of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman” (Whitman History Thesis, May 10, 2017),

on this narrative, such as with the naming of the student newspaper the *Pioneer* or the sports teams the Whitman Missionaries. This narrative was questioned starting in the 1990s, but it was not until the mid-2010s that the names of the newspaper and the sports teams were changed.<sup>15</sup> The legacy of the Whitmans has not been forgotten the physical spaces of the college either, which still condone this colonialist past through monuments to the Whitmans and the 1855 treaty.<sup>16</sup> As a historically white institution, Whitman has repeatedly failed to substantially address its legacy and the subsequent privileging of white identity and white history on campus.<sup>17</sup> In many aspects, Whitman has been an institution that serves the privileged and the “normal.”

While there have been some attempts to more quickly and radically change Whitman, the college has generally frustrated these efforts, with progress towards diversity and inclusion only moving slowly. Massive protesting has been rare at Whitman in general. In the 1960s and 1970s, Whitman students were most interested in defending and expanding their own freedoms, and issues like racial equality, the Vietnam War and social justice were less pressing for most students.<sup>18</sup> This was true even when it came to problems facing students on campus. Whitman’s Black Student Union’s demands and problems were frequently ignored or only met with some support during the 1970s. This only continued

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<https://arminda.whitman.edu/theses/344>, 46, 68-9; Indigenous Peoples’ Education and Culture Club, Jacqueline Rees-Mikula, and Lachlan Johnson, “A Decolonial History of Whitman College,” 15-16.

<sup>15</sup> Delaney Hardin Hanon, “The Whitman Legend : The Intertwining of History and Memorial in the Narrative of Marcus and Narcissa Whitman,” 134, 140, 144-6, 159; Indigenous Peoples’ Education and Culture Club, Jacqueline Rees-Mikula, and Lachlan Johnson, “A Decolonial History of Whitman College,” 15-16, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Indigenous Peoples’ Education and Culture Club, Jacqueline Rees-Mikula, and Lachlan Johnson, “A Decolonial History of Whitman College,” 19-20; Jacqueline Rees-Mikula, “The Disenchanted Missionary: Unraveling the Colonial Fantasies of Whitman College,” 20-2.

<sup>17</sup> Christopher Lee Cahoon, “Whiteness at Whitman : A Discursive Study | Arminda” (Whitman Rhetoric Studies Thesis, December 9, 2016), <https://arminda.whitman.edu/theses/314>, 24, 30, 34.

<sup>18</sup> G. Thomas Edwards, *Student Activism at Pomona, Willamette, and Whitman: 1965 - 1971*, Whitman College Historical Publications Series 1 (Walla Walla, WA: Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 2008), 15-17.

when the group reformed later.<sup>19</sup> Without a significant population of students of color, social justice issues were easily dismissed on campus. Whitman was a fairly stagnant place, seemingly filled with comfortable students who had little interest in bucking the status quo.

Part of the problem for Whitman was the locale. Walla Walla is an hour out from the closest large metro area<sup>20</sup> and several hours from major cities like Seattle or Portland. Walla Walla, despite having three institutions of higher education, is not a college town. Between the agricultural industries, the regional hospital, and the state penitentiary, there are other major economic and political influences on the town. It is also a fairly conservative area. With all that, someone looking for a diverse and active community would likely feel out of place in Walla Walla and also at Whitman. The location can discourage minority students of all types from moving out here, unless they have lived in a similar area or community before. Although Whitman has been known as a more liberal place in the Walla Walla region, it has only provided limited support to marginalized students and cannot change the issues of the community around it.

## **Being Queer in Washington State**

In terms of locale, both Washington State and Walla Walla have had their own complicated relationships to their LGBTQ+ populations. Like the rest of the United States, Washington State has only become a safer place for LGBTQ+ people in more recent years.

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<sup>19</sup> Edwards, *Student Activism at Pomona, Willamette, and Whitman: 1965 – 1971*, 35-8; Denice N. Kelley, *The Ethnic Minority Student Experience and Diversity at Whitman College*. (Walla Walla, WA: Whitman College, 2003), 42-3, 52, 54.

<sup>20</sup> The Tri-Cities region that includes Pasco, Richland and Kennewick did not exist before the World War II era Manhattan Project and thus is a historically recent area of population growth and density.

As discussed in the introduction, homosexual activity has historically been banned throughout the United States. Washington State was no exception. Although initial settlement patterns meant that women in the population were limited and certain kinds of homosexual relationships became part of the West Coast culture,<sup>21</sup> when people realized in 1893 that Washington had no sodomy laws, they were enacted. The definition of sodomy was pretty vague, covering most non-reproductive sexual acts, but was used to target sex between men. In the early 1900s, as elsewhere, the law was updated to include sterilization as a potential ‘solution’ to the crime.<sup>22</sup> Walla Walla had a unique relationship to the sodomy laws, as location of the state penitentiary where convicted sodomists would be sent.<sup>23</sup> Yet attitudes in the early 1900s were not as strict and unyielding as they would be in the Cold War era. In 1912, there was a scandal in Walla Walla when a local news editor was accused of seducing teenage boys. The town reacted with distaste, and the news editor was sent to the penitentiary. Once he served his sentence, he was allowed back into town without much obvious trouble as he was apparently still seen as a useful community member.<sup>24</sup> Walla Walla, although it was a place where gay sex could occur, was also the place where gay men might end up in jail for the crime of desiring other men.

By the 1970s, Washington State was growing more accepting of homosexuality and gay rights, at least in liberal areas. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Seattle was the home

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<sup>21</sup> Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 32, 67, 96, 136, 157.

<sup>22</sup> “The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States - Washington,” Gay and Lesbian Archives of the Pacific Northwest, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://www.glapn.org/sodomylaws/sensibilities/washington.htm>; Peter Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs: Constructing and Controlling Homosexuality in the Pacific Northwest*, First edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 206, 212, 214.

<sup>23</sup> Gary Atkins, *Gay Seattle : Stories of Exile and Belonging*, 2013th ed. (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 16, 219.

<sup>24</sup> Boag, *Same-Sex Affairs*, 179-183.

to various kinds of gay activist organizations, from a homophile league called the Dorian Society in 1967 to a Gay Liberation Front in 1970. Seattle passed a city-wide nondiscrimination act to protect the employment of LGBTQ+ people in 1973 and then a housing nondiscrimination act in 1977. In 1977 and 1978, a backlash against these laws arose within the city but an attempt to repeal the acts failed.<sup>25</sup> Washington's sodomy law was taken off the books in 1975.<sup>26</sup> In 1986, Seattle passed another nondiscrimination act focused on gender identity.<sup>27</sup> Although not state-wide, knowledge of queer identity and acceptance of non-normativity sexuality was improving, especially in the Seattle area.

Unsurprising to LGBTQ+ activists, in the 1990s the Pacific Northwest faced a new movement from the religious right to silence LGBTQ+ activism and education. A bill had been introduced to the Washington State Senate that criminalized hate crimes against minorities and included protections for sexual orientation. However, the bill was blocked by conservative state senators and the sexual orientation clause was dropped.<sup>28</sup> In 1993, the religious group, Oregon Citizens Alliance (OCA), gained influence in Washington State politics. The OCA had repealed a measure that banned employment discrimination for sexual minorities in the Oregon State government before endorsing new measures that would institutionalize homophobia in state governments. Washington Citizens for Fairness aka Hands Off Washington (HOW) formed in response as an LGBTQ+ rights group. HOW succeeded in preventing the passage of discriminatory legislation, thanks to its surprising

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<sup>25</sup> "LGBTQ Activism in Seattle History Project - Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project," accessed October 3, 2019, [https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq\\_intro.htm](https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq_intro.htm); Gay Seattle prob

<sup>26</sup> "The History of Sodomy Laws in the United States - Washington," GLAPN.

<sup>27</sup> "LGBTQ Activism in Seattle History Project - Seattle Civil Rights and Labor History Project," accessed October 3, 2019, [https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq\\_intro.htm](https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/lgbtq_intro.htm).

<sup>28</sup> Gary Atkins, *Gay Seattle: Stories of Exile and Belonging*, 2013, 357.

popularity across the state.<sup>29</sup> Although HOW failed to get more inclusive nondiscrimination laws passed in the state, it represented growing interest and support for LGBTQ+ rights across the state, and the LGBTQ+ movements shift toward defending against homophobia while demanding the same rights as other citizens.

Washington was a state with a changing relationship to LGBTQ+ issues from the 1970s onward. Whitman, located in the far eastern side of the state, was a good distance away from the LGBTQ+ organizing going on in Seattle. Furthermore, historically, Walla Walla had a complicated relationship to queer sexualities. Within a more conservative area, Whitman was already resistant to rapid change, as diversity groups focused on racial equality have discovered. Whitman not a place built with the interests of queer students in mind, but as Whitman headed into the 1990s, opportunities arose to challenge the heteronormativity of the institution.

## **Introducing Vassar College and Colorado College**

Before I continue with Whitman's story, in order to think about how Whitman compares to other institutions of higher education, I will pause throughout this thesis to look at two other schools, Vassar College and Colorado College. To set-up those comparisons, we first need to know how these two colleges developed their own LGBTQ+ communities and activism. They are both liberal arts colleges, like Whitman, with fairly small student bodies, like Whitman. However, they are in very different places. Vassar

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<sup>29</sup> Alex Cofield, "Cofield Interview - July 29<sup>th</sup>, 2019," transcript of an oral history done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019, <https://arminda.whitman.edu/object/arminda62277>, 16.

College is an elite East Coast college founded in 1861 to offer a college education to women. In 1969, Vassar went co-educational, opening its doors to male students. In terms of diversity, for the first-year class of 2019, 71% of students were white. With a student population of about 2,500 undergraduates currently and a 2019-2020 tuition of approximately \$57,000,<sup>30</sup> this college has a lot of similarities to Whitman. However, its location about two hours out from New York City, and close to many other East Coast schools, provides ample opportunities for students to make connections outside of campus.

The other college we will be looking at is Colorado College. Founded in 1874, Colorado College is another private liberal arts institution with a current student population of about 2,000. Colorado College is located in Colorado Springs, a city of about 300,000 thousand, much larger than Walla Walla's current 30,000. A coeducational institution from the beginning, like Whitman, Colorado College has become another well-ranked liberal arts college, with a tuition on the same tier as Whitman and Vassar. Colorado College's student body is mostly white, at about 65% for the 2019 first year class.<sup>31</sup> Like Whitman, in the early 2000s, this percentage was higher, with about 85% of the student body being white in 2004.<sup>32</sup> Although Colorado College is located in a more historically conservative and rural area than Vassar is, it is still closer to urban areas than Whitman, as it is less than

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<sup>30</sup> All info above found on Vassar's website. "About," Vassar College, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.vassar.edu/about/>; "Class Profile - Admissions," Vassar College, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.vassar.edu/admissions/class-profile/>; "History - Vassar Info," Vassar College, accessed February 12, 2020, <http://info.vassar.edu/about/vassar/history.html>.

<sup>31</sup> All above info can be found on the college's website: "Diversity: Student Demographics • Institutional Planning and Effectiveness," Colorado College, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/offices/ipe/diversity-student-demographics.html>; "Our History," Colorado College, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/basics/welcome/history/index.html>; "Overview," Colorado College, accessed February 12, 2020, <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/basics/welcome/overview/index.html>.

<sup>32</sup> "Progress and Priorities," Colorado College, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.coloradocollege.edu/basics/welcome/diversity/progress-priorities.html>.

2 hours from Denver, Colorado. With these three colleges, we can see three schools with similar academic goals, similar student bodies and costs but different histories and geographic locations. These differences are mirrored and expanded in the ways that LGBTQ+ communities developed on the three campuses. To illustrate, I will give a short summary of LGBTQ+ life over the past few decades at Vassar College and Colorado College, before delving deeper into the story at Whitman.

At Vassar College, its history of being a women-only institution shaped the perception and acceptance of queer students and communities on campus. While romantic relationships between women were not exactly accepted, the lack of men on campus for much of its past allowed women to explore intimate relationships with other women, often in the form of “romantic friendships.” However, as ideas about the “homosexual” coalesced around the turn of the century, the college began to worry that the school was gaining a reputation as many alumni were not married after graduating. Students were encouraged to live more “normal” lives.<sup>33</sup> By the 1950s and the Cold War lavender scare, homophobic attitudes and language became more common.<sup>34</sup> Then, a lot changed in the 1970s. Thanks to the prominence of national liberationist movements and Vassar’s coeducational turn, new gay organizations developed and students and alumni became open more about their sexualities.<sup>35</sup> Like the other schools from the upper East Coast, for example Cornell University, discussed in the introduction, the 1970s were a period of massive change and student movements at Vassar.

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<sup>33</sup> Anne MacKay, ed., *Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian and Gay Experiences, 1930-1990*, 1st rev. pbk. ed (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1993), xii, 5-9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 17-19.

For Vassar students in the 1970s and 1980s, connection to a gay or queer identity was becoming more common, but one result was growing homophobia within the Vassar community. A Vassar Gay Liberation Front formed in 1972. Although it was mainly a social group,<sup>36</sup> it at least provided space for community members to talk with other queer students. A lesbian-only group was created on campus, first in 1976 and revamped in 1989, that provided support for young queer women on campus.<sup>37</sup> These groups continued through the 1970s, occasionally hosting events and generally making themselves known on campus. Due to this active presence, Vassar began to develop a reputation as a “gay school,” which the administration was not happy about. Eager to downplay the queer community at Vassar, the administration was insistent that Vassar was not gay<sup>38</sup> to the point of apparently actively rejecting applications from openly gay students, which some students felt led to the recruitment of a new class of more homophobic students in the late seventies.<sup>39</sup> How homophobic the campus was at this time seemed to depend on who remembered it. In 1982 – 83, there was a group promoting homophobic and racist violence on campus for a short time, but even students who were around then still seemed to consider Vassar safe overall.<sup>40</sup> For example, Colin O’Connell, who liked to wear drag around campus, found Vassar a safe space to do so even in the early 1980s, thanks to the active Gay People’s Alliance.<sup>41</sup> Most LGBTQ+ employees were apparently pretty closeted, with

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<sup>36</sup> “Gay Lib Plans Activities,” *Vassar Miscellany News*, April 14, 1972, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries.

<sup>37</sup> MacKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 135-6, 143.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Coshnear, “Moll Tells SGA Admission Office Will Be Honest,” *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 21, 1975, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries.

<sup>39</sup> Anne Hall, “College Board Scores Decline As Admissions Policies Stabilize,” *Vassar Miscellany News*, September 20, 1974, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries; MacKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 113-4.

<sup>40</sup> Peggy Hayes, “Gay Student Beaten on Skinner Path,” *Vassar Miscellany News*, October 29, 1982, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries; MacKay, *Wolf Girls*, 135.

<sup>41</sup> MacKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 129-130.

only a couple of out faculty.<sup>42</sup> So while some students, staff and faculty dealt with a homophobic community, others felt comfortable at Vassar.

Going into the nineties, the queer community at Vassar had continued to make a name for themselves and carved out spaces for queer life on campus for a growing number of students to explore their identity. By 1984, sexual orientation had been added to Vassar nondiscrimination policy.<sup>43</sup> Gay People's Alliance and its popular student dances made an impression on campus, even throughout arguments over the how queer friendly the dances were.<sup>44</sup> By the early 2000s, Vassar was seen as a "bubble," a queer safe space.<sup>45</sup> More and more students were coming to Vassar because of its reputation and the feeling that they could explore their identities there. In the mid-2000s, Vassar planned to add gender identity to its nondiscrimination policy and was beginning debates about policies like gender neutral housing that would provide safer spaces for transgender students.<sup>46</sup> From a

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<sup>42</sup> Karen Robertson, "Robertson, Karen - Oral History, July 18, 2013 (Transcript)," transcript from interview done with Naimah Petigny, LGBTQ Oral History Project, July 18, 2013, Vassar College Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.vassar.edu/islandora/object/vassar:46587>, pp. 5-6; Paul Russell, "Russell, Paul -- Interview Transcript," transcript from interview done with Jay Louik, LGBTQ Oral History Project, April 16, 2013, Vassar College Digital Library, <https://digitallibrary.vassar.edu/islandora/object/vassar%3A32466>, pp. 5-6.

<sup>43</sup> "GAY RIGHTS ON CAMPUS: The 1984 - 85 Addition to the Vassar Catalogue," *Womanspeak*, May 1, 1984, Vassar College Digital Library.

<sup>44</sup> For the debate: Members of BiGALA, "BiGALA Angry at Homo-Hop Harassment Incidents," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 1, 1991, sec. Opinions, Vassar College Digital Library; Alexandre Nhanascale, "Column Showed Ignorance," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 30, 1990, Vassar College Digital Library; Daisy M. Moore, "Homo Hop Was Not Degrading," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 30, 1990, sec. Letters, Vassar College Digital Library; Brett Cohen, "No Offense: The Homo Hop," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 16, 1990, Vassar College Digital Library; Brett Cohen, "NO OFFENSE: Watching a Breakdown in Community," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 30, 1990, Vassar College Digital Library; Geoffrey Hills, "Striptease Was Logical," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 30, 1990, Vassar College Digital Library.

<sup>45</sup> "Are Vassar Students Living in a Liberal Fantasy Land?," *Vassar Miscellany News*, January 31, 2003, Vassar College Digital Library; Kiana Moore, "LGBTQ Oral History Project - Kiana Moore," transcript of an oral history interview done by Logan Keane, July 16, 2013, Vassar College LGBTQ Oral History Project, Vassar College Libraries, <https://digitallibrary.vassar.edu/islandora/object/vassar%3A46599>.

<sup>46</sup> Hayley Tsukayama, "College Plans to Add to Anti-Discrimination Policies," *Vassar Miscellany News*, February 24, 2006, Vassar College Digital Library, [Vassar Miscellany News, January 31, 2008, Vassar College Digital Library,](https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=miscellany20060224-01.2.4&srpos=4039&e=-----en-20--4021-byDA-txt-txIN-lgb%2a+OR+%28gay+OR+lesbian%29-----; Morgan Warners, )

conflicted community in the 1980s where some faced homophobia and others felt comfortable, the college's community got more accepting and inclusive over the course of the nineties and early 2000s.

At Colorado College, after the long 20<sup>th</sup> century history of closets and silencing, the 1970s were a period of emerging tension between students and administration. Before that, as two male graduates from the late 1960s commented, Colorado College (CC) was still very closeted and not someplace that one openly talked about non-heterosexual sexualities. However, between the campus and the city, there were a lot of opportunities for cruising, or casual hookups.<sup>47</sup> Then Stonewall and the gay liberation movement were the inspirations that began to change CC's culture. With these developments, some students at Colorado College wanted to make their own Gay Liberation Front (GLF). As mentioned, the administration was not supportive, as they feared that alumni would withdraw support from the college if the group was allowed.<sup>48</sup> Thus, the GLF existed on campus without an official charter for several years.

However, after several faculty members came out, tensions relaxed and there was more support for queer students. At smaller colleges, as we will see with Whitman, the actions of a few individuals can greatly impact the community. There were no out faculty at Colorado College before 1985, which hadn't helped the GLF. However, that year, Professor Bruce Loeffler and another professor decided to come out at the same time.

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<https://newspaperarchives.vassar.edu/?a=d&d=miscellany20080131-01.2.14&srpos=4121&e=-----en-20--4121-byDA-txt-txIN-lgb%2a+OR+%28gay+OR+lesbian%29----->.

<sup>47</sup> Frank Mosher, *Mosher, Frank* (Colorado Springs, 2011), Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:30616>; Heinz Geppert, *Geppert, Heinz by Garoutte, Justin* (Colorado Springs, 2012), Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:30622>.

<sup>48</sup> Frank Mosher, *Mosher, Frank*; "The Catalyst [1971 v. 3 No. 1 Sept. 1 - 1972 v. 3 No. 22 May 26]," *The Catalyst*, 1971-2, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:9871>, pp. 88, 188, 209.

Together, they founded a gay support group through the counseling center that they called Out and About. Out and About was a pretty secretive and confidential group that was not widely advertised but provided a space for queer students nonetheless.<sup>49</sup> However, the campus in general was still homophobic, as 1991 graduate Karl Jeffries called the culture on campus a “constant barrage of negative messages.”<sup>50</sup> Even as students and faculty attempted to carve out a space on CC’s campus, the campus was not safe for everyone.

In the nineties, as at Whitman, LGBTQ+ activism became more prominent at Colorado College. More and more LGBTQ+ centered events were put on by the Bisexual Gay and Lesbian Alliance (BGALA), especially as state and local politics made it necessary. In 1992, an amendment to the state constitution was passed in Colorado that increased the state-wide debate about gay rights. Many queer students and faculty got involved in the years long campaign to repeal it.<sup>51</sup> This amendment banned all protections for gay rights but was declared constitutional in 1996,<sup>52</sup> after a long fight. This activism caused tension between the more conservative Colorado Springs and the college community.<sup>53</sup> By this point, the administration, and campus as a whole, was more receptive to LGBTQ+ issues, making space for more radical student groups like one called EQUAL to form.<sup>54</sup> By the early 2000s, Colorado College had become someplace where students

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<sup>49</sup> *Jeffries, Karl* by Wallace, Andrew (Colorado Springs, 2011), Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:6053>.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.; Bruce Loeffler, “LGBT Oral Histories\_Loeffler, Bruce,” October 5, 2011, Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:30589>, 2, 4-5.

<sup>51</sup> Loeffler, “LGBT Oral Histories\_Loeffler, Bruce,” 5; “The Catalyst [1992 v. 32 No. 1 Sept. 11 - 1992 v. 32 No. 10 Dec. 11],” *The Catalyst*, 1992, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:10019>, pp. 287, 290.

<sup>52</sup> “Romer v. Evans,” LII / Legal Information Institute, accessed May 18, 2020, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/supremecourt/text/517/620>.

<sup>53</sup> Ginger Morgan, *Morgan, Ginger* by Wallace, Andrew (Colorado Springs, 2012), Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:30608>.

<sup>54</sup> Mike Edmonds, *Edmonds, Mike* by Minsky, Anna (Colorado Springs, 2011), Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:30602>.

generally felt safe and like they had the chance to explore their sexuality and activist ideals, despite a rocky start for the gay students of the seventies and eighties.

These narratives of Vassar College and Colorado College provide their own comparisons and counterpoints to one another. Location played an important role in both communities to how quickly and to what extent LGBTQ+ communities and activism were accepted. Both had queer organizations starting in the 1970s and faced administrative resistance, although CC's was a more explicit rejection and denial. While homophobia was a problem for both communities but Colorado College had to deal with homophobia in Colorado Springs and homophobic political movements in the state through the nineties, while Vassar's problems were more internal and concluded in large part by the end of the eighties. Vassar had more intimate history of queer relationships on campus, whereas CC's common pre-1970s queer relationships seemed to be casual hookups. Vassar developed a reputation for having a safe and welcoming community pretty quickly and developed multiple queer student organizations starting in the eighties. By the mid-2000s, both colleges had active queer communities and activist organizations that were pretty stable.

Now that we have been introduced to Vassar College and Colorado College, let's look at LGBTQ+ life at Whitman. At the same time that Vassar's gay students were developing a community on campus, and Colorado College's Gay Liberation Front was trying to convince the administration to allow it on campus, Whitman was still in the closet.

## **Chapter 2: A “Delicate Little Dance of Subtleties”**

“I do think that was a difficult feature of being a small town college professor, was just trying to figure out how to create community when there were so few out people,” said Professor Robert Tobin, one of a handful of openly gay professors at Whitman in the late eighties and early nineties.<sup>1</sup> As Tobin’s comment stated, building a queer community isn’t easy. It’s not a community that one is born into or that has an obvious physical location. Queer communities are created. They have also commonly been hidden for their own protection. Communities were made as people found each other and choose to let them in on the secret. Whitman was no different. Before there was a public LGBTQ+ community, gay communities were confidential and disconnected. The key to finding others was social networking and subtle questioning.

### **Difficulties of Creating Queer Communities**

Queer communities more easily developed in spaces where there was some level of privacy and significant potential interaction with people of the same gender. For example, while the American military in the 1940s and 1950s was one place in which one might not expect queer social networks to form, Allan Bérubé proved that assumption false. As described in the introduction, the military’s attempts to define, identify and remove homosexuals actually often help recruits realize that there were others like them. Thus,

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Tobin, “Tobin Interview - August 16, 2019,” transcript of an oral history done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019, <https://arminda.whitman.edu/object/arminda62277>, 7.

for young people in the military, there was a whole new community to explore their sexuality within.<sup>2</sup> Attempts to criminalize and ban homosexuality, as in the case described here, only encouraged queer people to hide, sometimes in plain sight, or find new social spaces. In these ways, the emergence of homosexuality as both a personal and a political identity boosted the creation of gay communities. Homosexuality was an exclusionary category, but also a definable and identifiable one. For everyone, knowledge that they weren't alone was extremely important. It was in this context that urban neighborhoods became key to the growth of gay community spaces.

As mentioned before, privacy was important and urban life provided it in spades. City life allowed people to get away from family and nosy neighbors and gain unprecedented levels of independence. In this environment, gay organizations and meeting spaces were able to develop and thrive. Thus, cities like San Francisco, LA and New York all became places where gay folks could get lost in the crowd. Beyond homophile and gay liberation organizations,<sup>3</sup> they also created gay bars and bathhouses, which became places for anonymous interactions with other queer people. They allowed people to find partners and build connections without giving up their place in heterosexual society.<sup>4</sup> When new folks came looking, bars and bathhouses were reliable social spots that were more easily found than secret meeting places like someone's basement. Knowledge about gay bars could quickly spread. Yet while the privacy provided by urban spaces has been undoubtedly important to LGBTQ+ community development, urban spaces should not be considered the only or necessarily the most important queer spaces.

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<sup>2</sup> Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, 99-100, 22, 29, 36-8, 118.

<sup>3</sup> John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 58, 101, 190-1.

<sup>4</sup> Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 170-2, 217-9.

Outside of the city, queer relationships and identities were not often discussed, nor were there many chances for queer culture to become popular enough to become common knowledge. Gay folks in suburban or rural areas did not have the same level of privacy to protect themselves and often turned to hiding or denying their identity and relationships instead. The goal was to escape notice, or failing that, escape reprisal. At the same time, not discussing the evidence and existence of queer people was common practice in many parts of the country. Most people preferred not to even address others' deviance from the norm. As Lynn Greenough, 1986 Whitman alumnae, commented about Walla Walla:

*There were plenty of gay couples... but it was just under the radar, it was just people living their lives. So, that's kinda how it worked. There wasn't an activism thing, there wasn't an injustice thing, there was just people living their lives. Two guys living together, we all knew, and they all knew, but nobody made a big deal about it. Unless they were, you know, unless somebody hassled them or something like that.<sup>5</sup>*

Queer people outside of the city were just “under the radar,” sometimes as an open secret and sometimes not. It was something that a lot of people might know or suspect but not discuss (in polite company at least). Many rural LGBTQ+ people, just like their fellows living in cities, preferred to avoid hate by hiding their sexuality or staying out of the public eye. But, since most folks want companionship, identifying and connecting with other gay people was still a priority and a problem.

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<sup>5</sup> Lynn Greenough, “Greenough Interview - July 20, 2019,” transcript of an oral history done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019, <https://arminda.whitman.edu/object/arminda62282>, 20.

## One Inevitable Solution to Loneliness

Although easier to find in urban spaces, cruising has been a way for gay people, particularly men, to find sex and companionship. Cruising is when people, typically gay men, wander a public area looking for a casual, typically anonymous sexual partner for a hook-up. The flirting involved in cruising has been designed to be ambiguous, meant to signal interest to other gay men without tipping off straight people. Thus, it could be interpreted as normal, friendly interactions. For an example, Professor Robert Tobin, a former German professor at Whitman, recalled that in his first month in Walla Walla in 1989, he was approached by a man at the public pool. At first, since Tobin had just moved to Walla Walla from an urban East Coast area, he wasn't sure if it was a cruising situation or if the guy was just acting like that "cause he's like friendly, like All-American?"<sup>6</sup> However, it turned out the guy was also from out of town. Speaking to the way that this kind of flirting typically worked, Tobin said, "there was a whole kind of language of the eyes,"<sup>7</sup> that was very subtle and had to be learned to be recognized. Therefore, participants were protected by a certain level of deniability should someone get called out for flirting with someone of the same sex. However, despite cruising's important role in sexual encounters, it rarely led to the development of relationships. Cruising was temporary companionship, not one that solidified long term bonds.

Despite that, cruising and casual hook-ups played a role in gay life, mostly gay male life, at Whitman during the 1980s. Although Professor Tobin only commented on the

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Tobin, "Tobin Interview – July 17, 2019," transcript of an oral history done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019, <https://arminda.whitman.edu/object/arminda62283>, 4.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

one meeting that he had with someone from out of town, cruising was known to the Whitman community. Lynn Greenough remembered that her group of friends used to all gossip about who was rumored to cruise the public parks in Walla Walla. In particular, she remembered that professors were often rumored to have been seen cruising.<sup>8</sup> Although it was difficult to find much explicit reference to cruising between students or on campus, there was some evidence that cruising occurred in the public bathrooms at Whitman during this time. In one 1987 'jack' or comedy issue of the Whitman College student newspaper, the *Pioneer*, a short article was printed called "Is It True?" that referred to gay sex in the campus bathrooms. Although the article's tone was joking, the "joke" was existence of gay sex. Saying the author's "concern" was not with people's sexualities but the "corresponding activity in [their] restrooms," this potential gay sex was described as something that "stimulate[d] your [the reader's] phobias." Gay Whitman students were stereotyped and insulted, described as "cowering but friendly," desperate for sexual contact, and "tormented" "fudge packers." The article took on an false air of concern for the "social problems" of gay men, while also calling them derogatory names and depicting them as potential threats to other male students.<sup>9</sup> Although the article was not exactly serious, its existence suggested that cruising encounters were common enough to bother someone on the newspaper staff. Professor Tim Jeske, a former Politics professor at Whitman, responded to the sexism and homophobia in this particular *Pioneer* issue in a letter to the editor in a later issue. He commented specifically on "Is It True?," pointing out its hypocritical tone and offensive stereotyping. Jeske asked students to consider why

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<sup>8</sup> Greenough, "Greenough Interview," 12.

<sup>9</sup> Fudge packer is a derogatory term for gay men used in this article. "Is It True?," *Whitman College Pioneer*, December 10, 1987, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

cruising happens, suggesting that homophobia and the lack of queer spaces at Whitman encouraged people to search out casual hook-ups over other kinds of relationships.<sup>10</sup> Although cruising does not seem to have been that common, at least on Whitman's campus, it was not alien and played a role in queer life for some students.

Cruising was apparently a common practice at other colleges and was only further increased by more urban settings. Colorado College in the 1960s and 1970s was apparently a prime example. Apparently Colorado Springs had an overall "live and let live" attitude then and people's sexuality was not commented on.<sup>11</sup> The downtown had an active gay presence, including bathhouses, and there were cruising spots across town that the police generally left alone.<sup>12</sup> However, there was little to no gay life at Colorado College in the sixties; all the cruising happened off campus. It was only in the seventies and later that some gay student groups and events started on campus.<sup>13</sup> Frank Mosher, a 1969 graduate and long-time library staff member, noted that when the AIDS crisis began, the need to be more careful and the fear of the disease caused the shutdown of local bathhouses and an end to old styles of cruising.<sup>14</sup> So, cruising did not typically happen on campus at Colorado College, but was a large part of the gay community in Colorado Springs until the AIDS crisis forced the community to change. Cruising as a practice helped generate a sense of a larger shared community even if it often failed to create more long-lasting social bonds. The biggest differences between Colorado College and Whitman was the time period and the locations. Colorado College had a urban center with more opportunities for cruising,

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<sup>10</sup> Tim Jeske, "'Jack' Issue Response," *Whitman College Pioneer*, February 4, 1988, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>11</sup> Frank Mosher, *Mosher, Frank*, Audio, Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Heinz Geppert, *Geppert, Heinz by Garoutte, Justin.*, Audio, Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project.

<sup>14</sup> Frank Mosher, *Mosher, Frank*, Audio, Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project.

but its hook-up culture ended in about the same period that we know that cruising existed in Walla Walla.

## **Living Life in the Closet: The Seventies and Eighties**

More commonly up through the 1980s, most LGBTQ+ Whitman students didn't even know that gay relationships or queer community would be something that they were looking for. In a newsletter printed by the 1990s organization Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni Association (WGALA), many alumni from the seventies and eighties shared stories of their time at Whitman. Several of the stories commented on how the alum had not even realized that they could be gay while at Whitman, either in denial or just unaware of the possibility.<sup>15</sup> For many of them, this was due to the environment that they grew up in. For example, former astronomy professor, Kate Bracher never even heard about gay or lesbian identities while growing up. Even once she learned about lesbianism, she didn't realize that those terms were relevant to her until many years after coming to teach at Whitman in 1967.<sup>16</sup> Others were explicitly in denial, convincing themselves that their interest in people of the same sex was platonic only.<sup>17</sup> The overwhelming heteronormativity of both American society and Whitman in the seventies and eighties made it hard for people to be out, even to themselves.

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<sup>15</sup> "Written Comments," *Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (January 1993): 1–2

<sup>16</sup> Kate Bracher, "Kate Interview - January 11, 2020," oral history interview conducted by Ree Robson in 2020, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives. Interview not published in collection at time of this thesis's publication but was being processed to be uploaded.

<sup>17</sup> For examples, see: Anonymous, "My Experiences at Whitman as a Lesbian Were Nonexistent," *Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (June 1991): 1–2; David Barnes, "Platonic All the Way," *Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni Newsletter* 1, no. 2 (June 1991): 2.

For many alumni from this period, discovering their sexuality was typically a slow development, one that only came to fruition near the end of their college careers. For example, one 1992 alumnus commented that he “never was a gay student at Whitman” because of the long process he had to go through to come out to himself and others while in undergrad.<sup>18</sup> Many short comments posted in the WGALA newsletter showed that even those who came out to at least a few people on campus tended not to do so until senior year or around graduation. In the meantime, most felt isolated and were nervous to come out at all, thanks to having little space to talk about gay and lesbian issues comfortably on campus.<sup>19</sup> For many, there were few opportunities to be gay at Whitman, it just wasn’t something that could be easily explored.

For the ones who were aware of their sexuality for a significant portion of their undergrad years, most gay students found queer life at Whitman to be essentially nonexistent. Connecting with other LGBTQ+ students was often just luck or happenstance. For example, Lynn Greenough found that of the people she had been drawn to in her first year, many of them ended up coming out to friends over her time at Whitman. It was not intentional; they just all happened to find each other. Once a few of them had come out and realized it was safe to do so, the rest of the friend group just revealed itself to be very queer.<sup>20</sup> In another such instance, two alumni were paired together as roommates their first year, and quickly suspected that the other might be gay. They spent a long time not asking

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<sup>18</sup> Jed Schwendiman, “Schwendiman Interview - June 21, 2019,” transcript of an oral history done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019 <https://arminda.whitman.edu/object/arminda62279>, 8. Interview only available to Whitman community members.

<sup>19</sup> “Written Comments,” *Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (January 1993): 1–2; “Statistical Highlights From The Second Survey,” *Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni Newsletter* 3, no. 1 (January 1993): 3–4.

<sup>20</sup> Greenough, “Greenough Interview,” 4-5.

each other outright, before one roommate happened to walk in on the other while his partner was visiting. They stayed good friends and supported each other during their time as students.<sup>21</sup> Other queer people found each other when close relationships verged on, or stepped over, the line between friendship and romance. For one former student, after having a fellow Resident Assistant come out to her, a chance encounter in the laundry room almost shifted the direction of their relationship. However, the risk to their jobs was too much and they continued to ignore the tension between them.<sup>22</sup> Some community members also attracted LGBTQ+ students, intentional or not. Professor Kate Bracher, although not being out or considering herself a lesbian role model, ended up befriending a significant number of gay students. She often didn't know that they were queer until they had known her for a little while.<sup>23</sup> Likely, her more androgynous style attracted LGBTQ+ students in the STEM fields. Openly gay professors like Robert Tobin and Tim Jeske were other obvious allies for young queer people looking for support. Thus, it was not impossible to find other queer people at Whitman; however, it often did require an established relationship as most were not open about their sexuality to strangers.

Close friendships were often a lead-in to realizations about one's sexuality and formed the basis of many queer social networks, limited as they may have been. At Vassar, intimate relationships between women had often led to hidden lesbian romances over the entire history of the college, a trend that continued up into the seventies and eighties. While some students remained scared to take things much farther than friendships and wishful

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<sup>21</sup> Vincent Theel, "A Love Letter for Jose," *Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni* 1, no. 2 (June 1991): 3.

<sup>22</sup> AEC, "...The Isle of Lesbos or the Lyman Laundry?," *Whitman College Gay and Lesbian Alumni Newsletter* 1, no. 1 (1991): 2.

<sup>23</sup> Bracher, "Bracher Interview."

thinking,<sup>24</sup> others developed full-blown romances.<sup>25</sup> However, Vassar in the eighties also had its own gay student groups that provided potential support networks for these students coming to realizations about their sexualities.<sup>26</sup> Thus, unlike Whitman, these relationships weren't all there was. However, just because there may have been a student group around did not mean that students found it or needed it. At Colorado College, 1996 graduates Ashley Hillmer and Paula Mathias got together in college after a long and very close friendship. Despite the active LGBTQ+ organization on the campus at the time, they could not recall even knowing about it. They were in their "own little world."<sup>27</sup> Even in more recent times, close relationships have been an important element of LGBTQ+ community. However, when not accompanied by larger social organizing, these social networks can be isolated or cut off from a larger queer community.

While LGBTQ+ community and space was minimal on Whitman's campus, occasionally Walla Walla and other local cities offered LGBTQ+ events that students could take advantage of. Off-campus social gatherings hosted by locals provided potential escapes. These spaces were not permanent, as that would have been more difficult to achieve without drawing attention from homophobic elements of the community. Instead, the Walla Walla queer community consisted of people's social networks, private events, pop-up bars and dances, and, in the nineties, gatherings hosted by LGBTQ+ organizations in the area. Lynn Greenough formed her own gay social group that expanded beyond Whitman's campus thanks to one of her friends being from Walla Walla and knowing

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<sup>24</sup> MacKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 108-9, 133

<sup>25</sup> MacKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 115-7, 127,

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 134, 144-5.

<sup>27</sup> Ashley Hillmer and Paula Mathias, *Hillmer, Ashley and Mathias, Paula by Sheade, Nina*, Colorado College LGBT Oral History Project (Colorado Springs, 2018), DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:30853>.

people who went to Walla Walla College.<sup>28</sup> These “townies” then became part of her friend group. They rarely did “gay specific things” as much as they had “just sort of a camaraderie in the context of what everybody else was doing.”<sup>29</sup> Sometimes though, there were dances. Greenough remembered that there was a pop-up bar that took over a community center in Pasco, about an hour away from Walla Walla. Greenough reminisced about how people would take the opportunity to express themselves in nonconforming ways, as “the queeniest queens and the butchest dykes.” However, the pop-up only happened occasionally.<sup>30</sup> Similarly, Alex Cofield, a 1993 graduate of Whitman, mentioned that there were “monthly gay and lesbian dances” that happened in towns nearby during the early nineties. They were “how you met other people, who were not at Whitman.”<sup>31</sup> In the end, these dances only lasted as long as the LGBTQ+ organizations in the Tri-Cities and Walla Walla area survived. Social events put on by people in the town could be means for Whitman students to find connections outside of the campus, but only when students knew that they were happening.

For those who did manage to find other LGBTQ+ folks at Whitman, options for romance were typically limited, both in that dating pools were small and that relationships were not publicized. According to the stories shared by most alumni up to the 1990s, if they ever met other LGBTQ+ students, it was only a few people. As Eric Tooley, a 1990 graduate, explained, despite his efforts to find others—including doing stuff like putting

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<sup>28</sup> Walla Walla College is now known as Walla Walla University.

<sup>29</sup> Greenough, “Greenough Interview,” 19.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>31</sup> Cofield, “Cofield Interview,” 16. These monthly dances were probably the ones put on by Humanities In Togetherness and Alternative Lifestyles League, which Professor Tobin learned about and shared information about with students. These Walla Walla valley/Tri-Cities groups developed to provide LGBT support networks and resources to the region but disappeared in the mid-nineties. These groups were also mentioned in Tobin, “Tobin Interview - July 17, 2019,” Transcript, 4.

fliers for Whitman's gay support group in people's mailboxes—he only met a handful of queer students, mostly women.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, Lynn Greenough's friend group included a lot of gay men, but not many other women.<sup>33</sup> For both of them, there were not many romantic opportunities amongst their LGBTQ+ friends. Greenough did have a short-lived relationship with another woman she was friends with. Although she said that the relationship was more casual, Greenough did bring flowers to her sorority dorm at the end of the year, which she was very nervous about as it was rather “out there.” This was the closest thing she had to a serious relationship in college.<sup>34</sup> Even during less serious relationships, romantic expression was curtailed by fears of being too open and obvious about the relationship. For Tooley, his fliers did end up attracting the notice of a closeted student who became a close friend that Tooley shared his love-life woes with. That friend was very supportive and encouraged Tooley not to give up on love. Eventually the two started dating. The relationship ended after his boyfriend graduated, but Tooley remembered it fondly as his first real relationship.<sup>35</sup> Although both Greenough and Tooley had at least one relationship in college, their dating options were very limited, even despite both of them being relatively open about their sexualities. The overall small population of Whitman combined with the likelihood for LGBTQ+ students to be closeted during the eighties made it difficult to have actual relationships while in college.

As these examples have all shown, until the 1990s, and even beyond, for most students at Whitman, finding a queer community required a lot of emotional and mental

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<sup>32</sup> Eric Tooley and Ree Robson, “Notes from an Informational Interview with Eric Tooley,” interview by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, July 2nd, 2019. Private notes created and held by Robson. Permission granted by Tooley to use notes as a source for this thesis.

<sup>33</sup> Greenough, “Greenough Interview,” 8-9. Although most names have been removed for privacy's sake, almost all of the people that she mentioned were men.

<sup>34</sup> Greenough, “Greenough Interview,” 15-16.

<sup>35</sup> Tooley and Robson, “Notes from an Informational Interview.”

labor through the long process of befriending trustworthy people. Tooley spent a long time sticking fliers in mailboxes hoping to get replies, and dealing with hate occasionally in response.<sup>36</sup> For those who weren't willing to be out, the process was less public, but no less nerve wracking. Rumors could help, as they provided potential information on who was safe to talk to.<sup>37</sup> Discussing his first few years at Whitman, Professor Tobin, who was already out when he accepted the job, noted how exhausting the task of building a safe social network could be:

*Meeting people was a matter of kind of, getting a sense. Like if you thought they might be queer, and then hopefully if you get it right, you know, if you were accurate in your speculation, that person would then introduce you to others. And I do think that happened relatively quickly, but that was the way to meet people, through this very delicate little dance of subtleties... You would meet one or two and they would come out to you, maybe find out from somebody else. It was all very word of mouth. It was actually quite, now that I think about it, boy, a lot of emotional energy trying to figure that all out.<sup>38</sup>*

Getting confirmation about other people's sexuality and deciding if they were trustworthy enough was a scary and exhausting project. Not everyone was lucky enough to just happen to befriend the other queer students on campus right off the bat—although many queer youths were drawn to each other nonetheless. Thus, many queer students were left feeling isolated or with only a few friends that they were willing to be out to. However, the presence of a vocal gay student group began to change that. With a centralized organization

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> In her interview, Lynn Greenough discussed how she and her friends would constantly debate who was queer or not, especially professors. See Greenough, "Greenough Interview," 11-12.

<sup>38</sup> Tobin, "Tobin Interview - July 17, 2019," Transcript, 3-4. Quote also used in the chapter title.

that supported students' desire for confidentiality and privacy, more queer students were able to find each other and the support that they needed, whether or not they got involved in the group itself.

## **Standing on the Precipice of Change**

When former Whitman counselor Sharon Kaufman-Osborn arrived on campus in 1982, she was surprised at the lack of queer community at Whitman. After an undergrad experience at Oberlin College, she was used to having LGBTQ+ groups and spaces be a part of campus life; Sharon and her husband had had many friends in the queer communities at Oberlin.<sup>39</sup> After taking a job in counseling, she joined previous counselor, Sharon Brown, and Deborah Winter, former Psychology Professor, in spear-heading LGBTQ+ programming in the student support services at Whitman. Winter and Brown had, throughout the 1970s, hosted sporadic gay discussion groups. They had also sponsored a few other events, like bringing gay students from other universities' LGBTQ+ student organizations to talk to Whitman students.<sup>40</sup> Kaufman-Osborn continued this support for LGBTQ+ students by helping to form a new gay student support group in the mid-eighties.<sup>41</sup> The main students involved were Lynn Greenough and her friends, who used it as an extension of their existing social gatherings. Kaufman-Osborn and a music professor

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<sup>39</sup> Sharon Kaufman-Osborn and Ree Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview with Sharon Kaufman-Osborn," interview by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, June 10th, 2019. Private notes created and held by Robson. Permission granted by Kaufman-Osborn to use notes as a source for this thesis.

<sup>40</sup> Kaufman-Osborn and Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview."; Sharon Kaufman-Osborn, "History of the GLA," n.d., WCA118, Series 3: Sharon Kaufman-Osborn Papers, Box 2, Folder 1: "History of GLA at Whitman," Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>41</sup> "Gay Support Group," *Whitman College Pioneer*, December 6, 1894, sec. Ads, , Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 7.

named Jose Rambaldi split hosting duties for this small group throughout the mid-eighties. Both provided friendship and support to the students involved.<sup>42</sup> However, as Greenough's friends left Whitman, the group faded and disappeared.

When Politics professor Tim Jeske started at Whitman in 1987, the openly gay professor found himself at a campus that did not generally publicly talk about LGBTQ+ issues. Professor Jeske used his position as a professor to challenge the Whitman community. After growing up in Eastern Washington, he was used to the culture of Whitman's locale and felt comfortable he could navigate the community as an openly gay professor.<sup>43</sup> As mentioned previously, he began to point out homophobia on campus—critiquing cruel jokes about cruising published in the *Pioneer*, for example. At this point, Professor Rambaldi was beginning to step down from his position as part of the informal support network for gay and lesbian students, due to the progression of his AIDS preventing him from being as active. Jeske was a potential successor. The gay student group, reformed and now mostly propelled by Eric Tooley's efforts, remained mainly a social support group. Under Professor Jeske, it mostly was just a safe space for people to talk about their lives.<sup>44</sup> Meanwhile, Jeske continued to push Whitman to improve. In one instance, he gave a lecture on the lack of sexual maturity at Whitman, using the examples of the problems of homophobia and sexual assault on campus as proof.<sup>45</sup> Jeske worked to try to make Whitman a more comfortable place for queer students during his career here.

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<sup>42</sup> Greenough, "Greenough Interview," 8-9.

<sup>43</sup> Tim Jeske and Ree Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview with Tim Jeske," interview by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, June 18th, 2019. Private notes created and held by Robson. Permission granted by Jeske to use notes as a source for this thesis.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Gina Pusateri, "Whitties Found Immature," *Whitman College Pioneer*, February 9, 1989, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

In the fall of 1989, Professor Robert Tobin arrived on campus to find that there was already some pressure on Whitman from a small group of students, staff and faculty who were demanding changes in campus attitudes. Despite his slight concern about moving to a more rural area, he hoped that being an openly gay professor talking about LGBTQ+ issues would be “a real contribution [he could] make to a place that otherwise wouldn't have that.”<sup>46</sup> He found that to be the case. Not long after arriving at Whitman, Tobin actually met with Professor Rambaldi, who told him that he was thankful to have him there to have another person helping gay and lesbian students.<sup>47</sup> Thanks to Sharon Kaufman-Osborn’s work in the Counseling Center creating a space where students could look for support when they needed it and Professor Jeske’s presence on campus, there was a base in place to build off of when expanding the old gay student organization and creating a new one.

As the 1989-90 academic year started, Whitman was on the precipice of change. After decades of queer communities remaining underground and isolated, students were beginning to strain against that kind of life. At the same time, two out professors and their allies were beginning to argue for the rights of queer students and demanding that campus culture become more accepting and safer for everyone. Building a lasting movement on a college campus can be difficult since the cyclical nature of student life has often meant that opportunities pass each other by. However, the network had been building since 1982, ready for someone with more interest in activism to take advantage of it. This untapped potential was lying in wait when the fall semester of 1989 started in earnest, and a new group of first years stepped onto campus.

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<sup>46</sup> Tobin, “Tobin Interview - July 17, 2019,” Transcript, 8-9.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 5.

### Chapter 3: Cracking Open the Closet Door

Just one student's four years can bring a lifetime of changes to a small college campus. For Whitman, the years from 1989 to 1992 created an entirely new campus life for queer students. In 1989, queer life at Whitman had remained mostly underground and undisclosed like it had been for decades, and queer students tended not to openly engage politically with LGBTQ+ issues. By the beginning of the 1992-1993 academic year, Whitman had two different LGBTQ+ issue focused student groups, openly held queer student events, and had a growing number of out and politically active queer community members. By the time that students were arriving to campus in 1994, Coalition Against Homophobia, the LGBTQ+ students and allies group on campus, was so popular and had made such an impact on campus that many assumed it had been around for longer than two years.<sup>1</sup>

This swift shift in campus culture was precipitated by a few factors: the increased willingness of a few students and Whitman employees to be out and allied with LGBTQ+ issues, the now established support network for queer students and activists, acceptance within the administration of these developments, and the movement of LGBTQ+ issues into mainstream liberal political dialogues. Although each of these factors were important, together they combined to create a small but hardy community of LGBTQ+ students, staff and faculty, and supportive allies. Connections between queer folks on campus were not

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<sup>1</sup> Chris Wolf commented on this phenomenon in Chris Wolf, "Wolf Interview - July 24, 2019," transcript of an oral history done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019, <https://arminda.whitman.edu/object/arminda62281>, 5-6.

new but thanks to these changes, openness about sexuality and LGBTQ+ issues was possible in ways that were unthought of before.

Due to Whitman's locale and overall community culture, the political conversations on campus have tended toward the moderate, with not many willing to upset the status quo. Despite a sizable liberal leaning in the beliefs of the student population, Whitman tended to follow national liberal political discussions at a slower pace.<sup>2</sup> Thus, an important element for the emergence of public and political queer identities and activism on campus was the gradual shifting of LGBTQ+ issues onto the liberal political agenda. During the 1980s, LGBTQ+ issues were rarely even brought up on campus, but at the same time, LGBTQ+ issues were becoming a national debate, thanks to the prominence of AIDS activism. Once LGBTQ+ issues had made it into major political dialogues, it was easier for them to find a foothold at Whitman too.

As LGBTQ+ issues gained prominence in political conversations, it also became more acceptable for individuals to be out about their identities. More students at Whitman were coming into college having come of age in a time where gay identities and the AIDS crisis had been major topics, unlike those who grew up never even knowing what being gay meant. Although this shift was not always positive,<sup>3</sup> this new situation meant that more students knew that there were others like them and a community out there for them. They were not willing to accept isolation and exclusion.

When queer students knew that they were not alone, they were more likely to reach out and look for queer community at Whitman. As Lynn Greenough's experiences showed,

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<sup>2</sup> See Chapter 4 for a longer discussion of the political environment at Whitman College.

<sup>3</sup> Coming of age during the AIDS crisis caused many queer youth, especially gay men, to fear for their future. Both Jed Schwendiman and Robert Tobin mention the impact of AIDS on their experiences and worries as gay youth in their interviews.

in the mid-1980s, queer students mostly found each other through happenstance. In finding each other, they formed small communities, ones that fluctuated with the cyclical losses and gains inherent in a college environment. But Greenough's friend group had support from faculty and staff and there found a kind of stability. The semi-closeted, confidential support group that Greenough, her friends, Sharon Kaufman-Osborn, Professor Jose Rambaldi and Professor Tim Jeske had developed provided the basis for an expanded support network that emerged at the beginning of the next decade. The continued efforts of students looking for community kept this network alive and grew it into a more official and public organization.

### **Beginnings of the Gay and Lesbian Association**

In 1986, by the time that Lynn Greenough and her friends were either in their last year or had left Whitman already, their gay support group had disappeared, leaving at least one new student high and dry. Eric Tooley, 1990 graduate, arrived that year. Hoping to find the support group he had vaguely heard about before arriving, he instead discovered that its members had scattered to the winds. Left to his own devices, he started his own group, the Gay and Lesbian Association, with the support of the Counseling Center, hoping to find friends and potential partners. As mentioned, Tooley began sending out letters to student mailboxes to try to get the word out. Although he met some new people and found one boyfriend, Tooley felt like the group never really took off. He only ever had a few members.<sup>4</sup> Like Greenough before him, Tooley ended up mostly finding a queer

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<sup>4</sup> Tooley and Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview."

community through the friends that he made, rather than through a student organization. However, the group did not go away, even though its strict confidentiality made planning meetings and finding new members difficult.

In 1989, two people arrived on campus who would have a big impact on the direction of LGBTQ+ activism and community development at Whitman. First, as discussed, former German Professor Robert Tobin accepted a job at Whitman despite his misgivings and found opportunities to sponsor change. At the beginning of that fall semester, 1994 graduate Alex Cofield entered campus as part of the new first year class. When Alex Cofield got to Whitman, unlike Tooley, she was able to find a LGBTQ+ student group, even if she had to ask around to figure out that the Gay and Lesbian Association was hosted by the Counseling Center. But when she went and found no other queer women involved in the group, she almost left Whitman.<sup>5</sup> It was her conviction that the education was worth it that convinced her to stay, and, like Tobin, she found opportunities for leadership during her time at Whitman that she had never before considered.<sup>6</sup> While Tobin's and Cofield's desires for community were nothing new, when their opportunities were limited, their impulse was not just to find who they could, but to force the entire Whitman community to tolerate their differences.

The work that Professor Tim Jeske, Professor Jose Rambaldi, Sharon Kaufman-Osborn and Eric Tooley all put in to build queer community and presence on campus set the stage for Professor Tobin's arrival to make the impact that it did. Tobin remembered that when he was hired, his academic history made a pretty clear statement about his sexuality. Therefore, he was not surprised that he was greeted by the community as a new

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<sup>5</sup> Cofield, "Cofield Interview," 3-4.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

gay mentor, approached by students, other faculty and Sharon Kaufman-Osborn alike.<sup>7</sup> From the get-go, Tobin had a well-developed social network to draw from. After quickly finding his allies, he used these resources to start trying to make an impact at Whitman. After having recognized his own gay self-identity in the midst of the AIDS crisis, he had lofty ideals about the potential of activism. Tobin saw a job at a place like Whitman as an opportunity to educate others and to combat homophobia and bigotry.<sup>8</sup> When he arrived at Whitman, Tobin found friends, in particular from students who were chomping at the bit to not feel so alone and out-of-place at Whitman.

### **Private vs Public, Statement vs Declaration**

The nineties were a period of changing notions of queer political identities that were mirrored in the ways that queer students presented themselves on campus. By the fall semester of 1989, Tooley was one of the few students with an openly gay identity on campus since he and Sharon Kaufman-Osborn tended to lead the charge on gay activism at Whitman. He joined panels on LGBTQ+ issues, letting people ask him questions about his experiences and making himself into a bit of a public figure on campus.<sup>9</sup> It was at one of these panels that Alex Cofield made her own debut into LGBTQ+ activism. Despairing the lack of a lesbian perspective on the panel, Cofield made the spur of the moment decision to join to answer questions herself:

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<sup>7</sup> Tobin, "Tobin Interview - July 17, 2019," 5.

<sup>8</sup> Tobin, "Tobin Interview - July 17, 2019," 8-9.

<sup>9</sup> Tooley and Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview."

*“So, people were asking questions, people on the panel were telling stories. Sharon [Kaufman-Osborn] did her best, as she could, to answer questions about women, about lesbians, as best that she could. As this went on, I'm thinking, 'Oh my god, these people, they're not gonna hear all the right stuff!' So, I stood up, walked upfront, sat down... and said, 'Hi, my name's Alex and I'm a lesbian.'”<sup>10</sup>*

Although this seemed like a simple enough statement, it had a huge impact. First, it outed Cofield to the entire campus, as rumor quickly spreads in a small community.<sup>11</sup> It also bucked the trend of students only carefully and slowly sharing their queer identities with the community, marking a moment in which it had not only become possible, but acceptable, to make such a bold public declaration.

Coming out, or the process of staking a public claim to a queer identity, has always been an important element of LGBTQ+ life and activism. For the homophile movement, being out meant proving that gay people could be respectable, productive people. For gay liberation, it was about rejecting heterosexuality and challenging the heteronormative system. For college students, it had been a way to achieve visibility and legitimize queer student groups in the gay liberation era. In the gay rights movement, coming out has been a claim to respect, inclusion, and acceptance in the community, and a means of demanding change. But coming out will be never be easy. The process has always been very personal, and the fear of judgement or rejection has limited people’s willingness to come out. For many at Whitman, it had been a risk not worth taking beyond a small circle of friends.

While many were not willing to be identified as queer and so published anonymously, Whitman’s student newspaper had been a place where students could share

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<sup>10</sup> Cofield, “Cofield Interview,” 6.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 7.

their personal stories to challenge campus attitudes and assumptions about LGBTQ+ people. For example, in 1975, anonymous interviews were placed in the *Pioneer* that explicitly opposed certain attitudes about gay people that could be seen on campus. The article wanted to humanize “homosexual” or queer people, dismissing the idea that they were strangers or weirdos and emphasizing that they were just fellow students.<sup>12</sup> Again in 1981, another article was published in which a student anonymously shared their experiences and their fears in order to challenge the Whitman community to be more inclusive and see LGBTQ+ students as human and normal.<sup>13</sup> Lynn Greenough and a friend published a similar article in 1984, but their article was much angrier, calling out stereotypes and the harmful impact that they have on gay youth, while demanding respect and better treatment.<sup>14</sup> All of these interviews and articles were anonymous, as students wanted to make these arguments without risking themselves or having to directly deal with backlash. However, all followed similar themes, as students asked for acceptance and recognition of their inclusion in the community as a gay person.

When Cofield came out as a lesbian to the Whitman campus, she made a declaration. Not just, “I am a lesbian,” but also that Whitman needed to change, and it needed more voices to come together to demand that change. Although Cofield did not intend to, she made herself into a leader, a reliable spokesperson and educator. Her public declaration gave her little room to hide and she decided to accept that.<sup>15</sup> With Tooley

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<sup>12</sup> “Why Can’t We All Live In The Same House?,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 2, 1975, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>13</sup> Kristy Nekinson and Dale Roberts, “The Closet Ajar: An Investigation of Gay Lifestyles and Values at Whitman and in Society,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 30, 1981, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>14</sup> “Sing if You’re Glad to Be Gay,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 26th, 1984, 8, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>15</sup> Cofield, “Cofield Interview,” 7.

graduating that year, there was a vacancy that could be filled. Cofield had made herself impossible to overlook. She frequently wrote her own articles for the student newspaper about LGBTQ+ issues, about protests and events happening on campus. When Cofield shared her own coming out story in the *Pioneer* later on, it was under her own name.<sup>16</sup> Unlike Greenough a few years earlier, coming out was not implied by action or dress, but stated with words in front of an audience. The culture where everyone knew but “nobody talked about it”<sup>17</sup> was kicked to the curb. Cofield became someone whose voice was frequently heard.

In doing so, Cofield became an inspiration and a buffer for other queer students on campus. By putting herself in the position of spokesperson, she opened up room for other students to be out without them needing to face the same level of scrutiny. As she said, “It wasn’t until I was out... already started the conversation, that that other people then were able to feel comfortable that they didn’t have to be that spokesperson.”<sup>18</sup> With both a gay student group to deflect hate and fight ignorance and a student leader on campus able to take the majority of the questions, other students were able to just be themselves.

## **A New Decade and a New Gay Presence on Campus**

With at least one student willing to take on a leadership position and a clear, if small, support network underneath them, there was more driving force than ever to make LGBTQ+ issues a concern at Whitman. Cofield, Tooley and Tobin all took on roles as

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<sup>16</sup> Mike Rogoway, “The Homosexual ‘Whitman Experience,’” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 25, 1991, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>17</sup> Greenough, “Greenough Interview,” 11.

<sup>18</sup> Cofield, “Cofield Interview,” 7.

community educators, willing to reveal personal information in order to fight ignorance.<sup>19</sup> They took the Gay and Lesbian Association (GLA) from a backroom support group and made it into a vehicle for activism on campus. They started an event called Lesbigan week, a week of panels, lectures, dances and other events meant to educate the community and provide outlets for frustration at the heteronormativity of campus life.<sup>20</sup> These events got enough attention to draw the attention of Whitman's gay alumni.

From early on, alumni offered financial backing and support, while announcing their approval of these developments to the college administration. Alumni very quickly responded to the publicity of events like Lesbigan week. For example, in 1990, 1975 graduate Larry Johnson sent a letter to the Dean of Students in order to get in touch with Cofield, Tobin and the GLA to offer a donation to the group.<sup>21</sup> This donation and others like it made it possible for the GLA to remain separate and outside of Whitman's student government, allowing the group more confidentiality and flexibility. These events on campus inspired LGBTQ+ alumni to create their own organization. In 1991, the Whitman Gay and Lesbian Alumni Association (WGALA) was founded and began to send out newsletters<sup>22</sup> in order to keep queer alumni informed about happenings at Whitman, as well as build their own social networks. Throughout the nineties, this group was kept up to date

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<sup>19</sup> For example: "Calendar for the Week Of...", *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 19, 1990, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>20</sup> "LesBiGay Awareness Week Schedule," *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 12, 1990, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; "LesBiGay Schedules," 1991-3, WCA118: "Whitman College LGBTQ+ Collection," Series 2: "Bob Tobin Papers, 1989-2008," Box 1, Folder 1: "CAH Planning," Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>21</sup> Larry Johnson, "Larry Johnson," 1990, WCA118: "Whitman College LGBTQ+ Collection," Series 2: "Bob Tobin Papers, 1989-2008," Box 1, Folder 11: "Gay Alumni," Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>22</sup> Whitman Gay and Lesbian Alumni Association, "Welcome to the Voice of the Gay and Lesbian Whitman Community," 1991, vol. 1, ed. 1, WCA118: "Whitman College LGBTQ+ Collection," Series 1: "General Files," Box 1, Folder 4: "Whitman Gay and Lesbian Alumni Journal," Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

about issues and debates at Whitman, in a way that provided a lot of aid to the Whitman community. WGALA participated in events like future Lesbigan weeks<sup>23</sup> and generally provided a clear ally to the students on campus. For a comparison, Colorado College also had an LGBTQ+ alumni association but it only developed after alumni saw the college's student organization at Pride events.<sup>24</sup> Alumni could be powerful allies that would help encourage college administrations to accept and support queer students, but were not often aware of student movements on campus immediately. The close relationship that Whitman alumni maintained with the college made it easier for the GLA to become independent. These connections between student and alumni groups in the nineties were an important element of the group's early successes due to alumni's financial and emotional support of the GLA.

After the GLA emerged as a potential player in campus politics, it was quickly allowed and accepted, to an extent. At the same time, its founders attempted to find the best ways to reach all students and make the biggest impact. In 1990, the administration decided to update Whitman's nondiscrimination policy to include sexual orientation,<sup>25</sup> likely due to the emergence of the student group, Professor Tobin's comments to the administration, and potentially even the attention from alumni. As discussed in the intro, the right for LGBTQ+ student organizations to exist and hold meetings had already been established through legal precedent throughout the 1970s, so it was not a surprise that there was no institutional challenge to the group's creation. However, while this addition was

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<sup>23</sup> Stuart Watson, "To the Coalition Against Homophobia," approx. 1992, WCA118, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11: "Gay Alumni," WCNA.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Loeffler, "LGBT Oral Histories Loeffler, Bruce," 3.

<sup>25</sup> David Maxwell, "Enclosed Statement," 1990, WCA118, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 23: "1990 Whitman Non-discrimination Policy," WCNA.

supportive, it also did not come along with substantial changes in college policy. Thus, there was still work to be done to make campus a safe place for queer students, which is where Coalition Against Homophobia, Whitman's second LGBTQ+ student group, came in. Tobin and Kaufman-Osborn had decided to split the GLA in two groups. By doing this, the GLA could remain confidential and exclusive to gay students, while another group, Coalition, could take the lead on activism and include allies to get more done.<sup>26</sup> Coalition quickly took over the work of LGBTQ+ programming and LGBTQ+ activism on campus, fighting to make Whitman achieve its stated goals of inclusion and nondiscrimination.

In these ways, by 1992, LGBTQ+ student and faculty leaders had come forward to promote the right of LGBTQ+ students to be heard at Whitman, and Whitman had responded by institutionalizing that right, at least on a broad level. However, at the end of the 1991-2 academic year, an incident occurred. It reminded the queer community that the institution could still fail them and still harm them, but also showed them that they come could together and protest these failures. The incident also revealed who the allies of Whitman's growing LGBTQ+ community were and where to find them when they were needed. Even as debate raged over whether this incident was really a problem or not, it unified and mobilized a developing community. They came together, as newly formed as they were, to demand better of the institution.

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<sup>26</sup> Kaufman-Osborn and Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview."; Tobin, "Tobin Interview – July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019," 7.

## **A Moment to Take a Stand: The Hayner Incident**

This incident began in 1992 when Whitman nominated a Washington State Senator named Jeanette Hayner for an honorary degree from the college. At first, the majority of the faculty accepted this nomination. However, soon after the initial vote, some faculty members questioned the decision, gesturing to Hayner's voting record to ask whether she deserved the degree. Professor Tobin published a long editorial in the *Whitman College Pioneer*. He argued that Senator Hayner's supposed support of educational policy, the main stated reason for her nomination, was not reflected by her career. Tobin also pointed out that Hayner's son was a Trustee of the college at the time, and a member of the nomination committee,<sup>27</sup> which suggested potential nepotism. Furthermore, arguments turned towards ethics. Hayner had a bad track record on gay rights and other social issues. Primarily, Tobin discussed how she repeatedly prevented the passage of a bill condemning hate crimes and was only convinced to let it pass once protections for sexual orientation were taken off. Thanks to her poor record, Professor Tobin and Coalition Against Homophobia were ready to protest her nomination for the degree, and Tobin asked other faculty and allies to do the same.<sup>28</sup> This article launched a debate that circulated across campus, with LGBTQ+ allies and activists pushing to get Hayner's nomination denied.

After these initial protests, Senator Hayner's nomination was widely questioned and discussed by the Whitman faculty and student body. The issue got a spotlight in the

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<sup>27</sup> Robert Tobin, "A Question for the Record... Senator's Legislative Tolerance Tally Falls Short," *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 16, 1992, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Tobin, "Tobin Interview - July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019," 12-13; Tobin, "A Question for the Record."

April 16<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Pioneer*, which helped promote it as a campus-wide issue.<sup>29</sup> As the opinions and editorials section of the April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1992 issue of the *Pioneer* could attest,<sup>30</sup> community members were highly divided as to whether Hayner's homophobic and racist voting record was a true and legitimate criticism of her work or a deciding factor against her nomination. A decent chunk of the staff and faculty, including Tobin, Jeske, the Kaufman-Osborns, and some of the closeted faculty all came together to protest the nomination, signing a memo to the entire faculty that criticized the decision.<sup>31</sup> Students followed up with their own opinions and arguments.<sup>32</sup> There were a lot of arguments going back and forth, especially from the out faculty and allies on campus, that led to a lot of controversy and conflict with the administration. What started as a smaller protest motion headed by an openly gay professor sparked a debate that lasted through the end of the academic year.

Despite the open controversy about her nomination, Hayner did end up receiving the honorary degree, leading to further protests. Although the administration was apparently worried about more aggressive action, CAH decided to keep it simple. During graduation, those who were against Hayner's acceptance of the degree stood up and turned their back, refusing to engage with this portion of the ceremony. The goal was to be disruptive without violence or greater controversy.<sup>33</sup> Professor Tim Jeske commented that he was surprised

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<sup>29</sup> Dan Enriquez, "Honorary Degree Sparks Controversy," *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 16, 1992, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; See also Tobin's article (mentioned above) in the same issue.

<sup>30</sup> See this issue of the *Pioneer* (<https://arminda.whitman.edu/object/arminda59070#page/1/mode/2up>), the folder "Jeanette Hayner," in WCA118, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 14, WCNA and the folder "Protest" in HTM\_WCMss364: "Jeanette Hayner Collection", Box 1, Series 1, Whitman College and Northwest Archives for more articles/memos etc. discussing the controversy around the honorary degree.

<sup>31</sup> Tobin, "A Question for the Record."

<sup>32</sup> For example: Eric R. Tognetti, "Hayner's Dismal Legislative Record Should Not Be Honored," *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 23, 1992, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>33</sup> Tobin, "Tobin Interview - July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019," 12-13.

by the number of seniors willing to participate in the protest.<sup>34</sup> This moment was the culmination of weeks' worth of arguments that shaped the first semester of Coalition's existence. Tobin called it an "important marker of the politicization of the movement,"<sup>35</sup> as it represented the willingness of the community to openly oppose decisions made by the institution and demand support of social issues like gay rights. However, it was not without consequences. After participating in this protest, Tim Jeske was not brought back in his position at Whitman and was rejected when he applied again later. He believed that this refusal to rehire him was likely a response to his role in the protests against Senator Hayner's honorary degree.<sup>36</sup> Although this was not necessarily a successful protest, it was an impactful one.

This incident was an example of the new LGBTQ+ activism happening on campus, and the controversy it sparked energized the new student organization. Bolstered by this debate and having found their support network, Coalition Against Homophobia emerged onto campus ready to push Whitman into the modern era. Within the span of three years, Whitman went from having no public student groups dedicated to LGBTQ+ identities or activism, a handful of mostly closeted gay faculty and only a few out students to a having two different LGBTQ+ student organizations, out gay faculty members and allies who were willing to take a stand on queer issues and a small number of out and proud student leaders. The Hayner incident gave Coalition Against Homophobia a reason to exist, proof that they were a necessity on campus. It showed them who would and wouldn't support them

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<sup>34</sup> Jeske and Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview." Students who wanted to the protest the degree were encouraged by the GLA/Coalition to stay through graduation and join the protest, see "Do you disagree with Whitman nominating Hayner?" 1992, in HTM\_WCMss364, Box 1, Series 1, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>35</sup> Tobin, "Tobin Interview - July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019," 13.

<sup>36</sup> Jeske and Robson, "Notes from an Informational Interview."

publicly, who to count on. When the 1992-3 academic year began, Coalition knew who their allies were and what they could get away with, and they were ready to turn their frustrations into fuel for the coming year of activism.

## **Chapter 4: “All the Opportunities That I Created”**

When students stood up at the 1992 graduation ceremony and turned their backs on State Senator Jeanette Hayner, they made a statement that could not be ignored by the community. Through their protest, they set the standard and style of LGBTQ+ activism at Whitman in the year following. The budding student organization Coalition Against Homophobia had shown that their presence on campus was both necessary and supported by a significant portion of Whitman’s population. They also proved that they were ready to do as their name suggested. And they did. Coalition Against Homophobia reflected the political landscape at Whitman. They had limited long-term goals and a tendency to be reactive and focused on education over making demands on the administration. As their identity as student activists emerged, Coalition members focused their efforts on ending homophobia and bringing acceptance, a mission statement that generally avoided calling for structural changes.

Coalition was a prime example of the kind of student activism that could and did develop and flourish at Whitman. Throughout the nineties, Coalition was just one of a growing number of identity-based student organizations. All of these organizations were primarily focused on achieving acceptance for their particular minority groups and making space for their communities to exist on campus. Across the country, multiculturalist, what we would now probably call intersectional, activism was becoming more popular. Whitman had long been disconnected from the national culture of student activism but caught up just in time to join in this new student movement.

## American Colleges and the Culture of Student Activism

The widespread protests that were evident on college and university campuses nation-wide in the 1960s transformed the nature and function of student activism. Activism began to be defined by broad sweeping goals that pushed for massive cultural progress,<sup>1</sup> propelled by a population that felt a responsibility to improve their world in ways that mattered to them. As Gerard DeGroot argued, this attitude was passed down to the next generation of students, encouraging the attitude that political action and involvement was a necessity to be an active citizen and good student. It became a legacy and a part of the culture of college life.<sup>2</sup> Although not every student felt the need to continue that legacy, the effects were still profound. For those who did see a need for societal transformation, the actions of the sixties became the template for protest and resistance against the problems that they saw in the world. Thus, the sixties and seventies saw a period of increased political involvement on college campuses.

However, this culture was less widespread than it has been remembered as being. For many students across the country, while national politics were a concern, the biggest worries were the ones closest to home. Most social justice or identity-oriented student organizations focused on improving life for marginalized students on their own campuses over national issues. For example, the civil rights movement inspired black students to demand more representation for themselves in higher education, whether that meant by the recruitment of more students of color to their school or the development of African

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<sup>1</sup> Philip G. Altbach, *Student Politics in America: A Historical Analysis*, Foundations of Higher Education (New Brunswick, NJ, USA: Transaction Publishers, 1997), 229.

<sup>2</sup> Gerard J. DeGroot, ed., *Student Protest: The Sixties and After* (London: Longman, 1998), 4-5.

American or Ethnic Studies programs.<sup>3</sup> Helping other students feel comfortable, secure and represented at their shared institution was a priority because it impacted daily life. Also, some campuses were just more politically active than others. The sixties wave of student activism did not reach all campuses in the same ways. Location mattered. During the 1969-70 academic year, only about 43% of college and university campuses reported increased activism or the development of new student movements. Most that did were large universities, not smaller institutions.<sup>4</sup> Bigger universities had more students, more diversity in their student bodies, more faculty and staff to support those students and a tendency to have a stronger history of student activism.<sup>5</sup> While these institutions made the biggest splash, with their student protests often taking up major headlines, many other schools around the country continued to operate pretty normally, with activism only affecting part, if any, of their usual functioning.

Compared to the expressive protesting of the sixties, student activism seemed to just vanish in the late seventies and eighties. The 1970s have been described as a period of “drowsy discontent” and political disillusionment,<sup>6</sup> or potentially even a moment of conservative resurgence.<sup>7</sup> Although there were a few major issues during the decade, many of the movements that made the 1960s so memorable had lost steam. By the 1980s and the rise of Ronald Reagan, conservatism had limited political conversations and upended many social movements. However, these issues had not been forgotten, but had been festering while communities faced continued oppression and violence. These social

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<sup>3</sup> Mark Edelman Boren, *Student Resistance: A History of the Unruly Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 122-3.

<sup>4</sup> DeGroot, *Student Protest*, 29-30; Robert A. Rhoads, *Freedom's Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity* (Baltimore, Md: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 35

<sup>5</sup> DeGroot, *Student Protest*, 31, 34; Rhoads, *Freedom's Web*, 51, 52.

<sup>6</sup> Rhoads, *Freedom's Web*, 54-55.

<sup>7</sup> Boren, *Student Resistance*, 189.

movements, in particular those dealing with race, women's issues and gay and lesbian issues, made repeated attempts to penetrate the public discourse throughout the eighties. Their eventual breakthrough allowed for the "rebirth" of student activism in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

The nineties were a time of both apolitical protest and the development of multiculturalist and intersectionality movements that hoped to merge the goals of various social movements together. After the high energy of the 1960s, activism in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century looked unremarkable in comparison. One author, Mark Boren, saw this decade as apathetic and apolitical, with any protesting that occurred mostly focused on students' freedoms, like the ability to drink, that had little connection to any broader social movement. He saw the nineties as a sign that student activism in the United States had declined over time.<sup>9</sup> Other authors begged to differ. Robert Rhoads pointed out how students from the 1990s were more likely to be dissatisfied with the status quo and participate in political demonstrations.<sup>10</sup> This dissatisfaction led to the development of both an "activist identity" and of multicultural movements that desired broad social change to meet the needs of many different identity groups. Rhoads saw the nineties as time in which identity-based politics were developing and American activist movements were again focused on national institutional and social change.<sup>11</sup> Activism was both a resistance to discrimination<sup>12</sup> and a movement toward set of larger ideals. Neither of these authors were exactly wrong; they both landed on some element of the truth. Activism in the nineties did look much different than the activism of the sixties. Massive protests were much more

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<sup>8</sup> Boren, *Student Resistance*, 227; Rhoads, *Freedom's Web*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> Boren, *Student Resistance*, 227-8, 248.

<sup>10</sup> Rhoads, *Freedom's Web*, 11-12.

<sup>11</sup> Rhoads, *Freedom's Web*, 241-2, 7, 228-9, 233.

<sup>12</sup> Rhoads, *Freedom's Web*, 223.

unlikely, and many activist organizations had begun to ask for reform, rather than demanding radical institutional change. Yet, the blending of multiple identity-based issues into a multiculturalist or intersectional movement created a much more overarching and comprehensive ideal of societal change than had been seen in student activism before.

At a small, isolated, private school like Whitman College, student activism has been limited and made a limited impact on the campus. Here, student life has rarely been disturbed by activism and protesting. The Hayner incident was a bit of an outlier for the attention that it drew and the number of people who got involved in some way or another. Other political conversations at Whitman were much more constrained. Whitman, despite a reputation for liberal political leanings and a very active student body, has not ever been a center of activism. The shifts in the national culture of student activism could barely be seen at Whitman until the nineties when multiculturalism offered new opportunities for students to become politically active on campus.

## **The Whitman Student Activist**

Looking at the history of student activism and protest at Whitman College, the size, shape and character of the community limited the possibilities for student action. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, Whitman has not historically had a particularly diverse student body, as most students were white, straight and wealthy enough to pay for a private college. Furthermore, located in an area located far from the urban centers that drew in the most politically active youth, Whitman was not well positioned to be easily impacted by political movements. Another element of Whitman that limited student

activism was the small residential college practice of *in loco parentis*.<sup>13</sup> As Whitman historian and former history professor G. Thomas Edwards described, this practice became the main issue that students of small colleges confronted in the sixties because of its direct impact and control over their lives. In waves of student protests, students demanded to stop being treated like children and have more independence from college administrations, challenging the very nature of their institutions. Whitman was one example. *In loco parentis* was the most personal and thus the most important social issue for the general student body at the time.<sup>14</sup> Although other issues were present in campus politics, they did not generate the same level of interest from the broader student body. Whitman was a quiet campus.

Throughout the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, national political movements struggled to find a good foothold on Whitman's campus. Anti-war protests were common across the country in the sixties and seventies yet minimal at Whitman. In 1968, after failing to generate many signatures for an anti-war petition, some Whitman students held a sit-in against military recruitment, which the administration called the police on.<sup>15</sup> While civil rights debates spurred conversations and arguments throughout America, issues of race were dealt with on an individual basis at Whitman. In the 1970s, when the national fraternity Sigma Chi refused to allow a student of color to join the chapter at Whitman, the Whitman chapter disbanded—for a few years before coming back as soon as the rules

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<sup>13</sup> *In loco parentis*, meaning “in place of the parent,” was common practice at smaller residential colleges before the 1960s. Under this policy, the college took on the role of a moral teacher and a parent to its students. In actual practice, these policies meant restricting the freedoms and individualities of the students. Often this included curfews, dress codes, gender segregation in housing, mandatory social events and other policies meant to model good behavior for students. See G. Thomas Edwards, *Student Activism at Pomona, Willamette, and Whitman: 1965 - 1971*, Whitman College Historical Publications Series 1 (Walla Walla, WA: Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 2008), 15-17.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 17, 20.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-2, 30.

changed.<sup>16</sup> Also in the seventies, after the arrival of a couple black students on campus, the newly-created Black Student Union made demands for more representation in academics and the student body, basically for more black voices on campuses overall. Most of these demands were ignored, and the group was generally met with fear and questions rather than unconditional support.<sup>17</sup> Community groups that challenged norms that did not impact most students found themselves ignored because most people only worried about their own problems.

The failure of civil rights and social justice activism to find a place on campus has illustrated how discrimination and bias have functioned at Whitman. While Whitman has not been a stranger to discrimination, marginalization and social hierarchies, these problems tended to be more subtle, with obvious aggression a deviation from the norm. Overt discrimination was not common at Whitman. However, passivity, disinterest and a culture of normativity and resistance to change have long been problems. As a small college, the longevity of many staff and faculty members and the small-town feel of the campus have encouraged a certain level of stagnation, as those who are not happy with the community are not likely to stay at or even come to Whitman. Those who failed to follow community norms were made to feel uncomfortable and like they did not belong. For example, 2004 graduate Tristen Shay remembered hearing one professor make a homophobic comment, dismissing homosexuality as something weird and unnatural. Although this comment wasn't targeted at Shay himself, it still revealed this professor's

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 33-4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 36; Denice N. Kelley, *The Ethnic Minority Student Experience and Diversity at Whitman College*, 43, 46-7, 58.

discriminatory attitudes.<sup>18</sup> These kinds of comments were common enough to hear throughout the years. Sometimes they escalated into threats. In 1990, Professor Robert Tobin got a suspicious phone call inquiring about the Gay and Lesbian Association. When he refused to give the caller private information, the caller sent another message, calling him slurs and threatening him and other queer people on campus.<sup>19</sup> Another time, a gay student from the early 1990s had his room trashed and vandalized with slurs after coming out to his residence hall section.<sup>20</sup> While incidents on campus rarely lead to physical attacks on queer people, they certainly could create an unwelcoming environment. Exacerbating the problem was community members' refusal to accept that discrimination was an actual problem. In 1993, not long after the incidents just referenced, a dialogue emerged on campus that Whitman was safe and friendly for queer students because there were student groups and LGBTQ+ events. 1994 graduate Alex Cofield quickly responded that this was not true for everyone, reminding people about these kinds of homophobic acts, and pointing out how much work LGBTQ+ students and allies had put in to make Whitman even somewhat safe.<sup>21</sup> Privileged Whitman students found it hard to believe that discrimination occurred on campus when they didn't personally see or experience it. That attitude had made it harder for marginalized students have their needs respected by the campus as a whole. Even as the campus became more accepting, deeply entrenched bigoted attitudes have not gone away. As Shay said:

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<sup>18</sup> Tristen Shay, "Shay Interview - November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2019," transcript of an oral history done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019, 19.

<sup>19</sup> Richard S. Clayton, "WW's Gays, Lesbians Call for Understanding," *Walla Walla Union-Bulletin*, March 4, 1993 found in WCA118, Box 1, Series 2: "Bob Tobin Papers," Folder 17: "LGBT in Walla Walla," Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Tobin, "Tobin Interview – July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019," 8.

<sup>20</sup> Clayton, "WW's Gay, Lesbians."

<sup>21</sup> Alex Cofield, "Is Whitman 'gay/Lesbian Friendly' or Homophobic?," *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 28, 1993, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

*There's still those incredible assholes that are entrenched in their bigotry, like there always will be, unfortunately. Seems to just be this little group of people that just wants to resist civility at all costs... I imagine they're probably even a little bit more vocal.*<sup>22</sup>

All these factors combined have made it hard for progress to be made and to implement effective change, as they tend to delay any campus reaction to issues of discrimination and mistreatment.

Furthermore, as discussed, living in Walla Walla could reinforce some experiences of bigotry and discomfort. For LGBTQ+ students, the smaller size and conservative inclination of Walla Walla was another worry and another restriction on being a queer activist at Whitman. Many Whitman community members actively avoided being out to people outside of campus, fearing people's reactions. For example, even after going to Whitman and living in Walla Walla for over a decade, former staff member Jed Schwendiman didn't feel comfortable being out in town. He remembered joining marches with the local PFLAG group during the 2000s and having "people on the street, giving me stink-eye and booing" a few times.<sup>23</sup> Chris Wolf, a 1998 graduate, stated that, "But Walla Walla overall is a pretty conservative, religious small town and I don't think I would have paraded through the streets saying, 'I'm bisexual!'"<sup>24</sup> Similarly, Cofield commented that, "[it was] not like you'd walk around [Walla Walla] with a t-shirt that says, 'Hi, my name's Alex, I'm a lesbian,' you know? That just wasn't done then."<sup>25</sup> These uncertainties about Walla Walla urged Whitman students concentrate their activism on campus where they had

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<sup>22</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 36.

<sup>23</sup> Schwendiman, "Schwendiman Interview," 16.

<sup>24</sup> Wolf, "Wolf Interview," 20.

<sup>25</sup> Cofield, "Cofield Interview," 17.

more influence. Yet, these fears about the town also served to isolate LGBTQ+ students on campus and added to overall worries about safety.

Altogether, these experiences of discrimination and hate delayed the development of a culture of student activism at Whitman. Either students felt comfortable in their position at Whitman and therefore ignored or underplayed problems in the community, or they wanted to improve the lives of minority students like themselves but were seen as exaggerating or incorrect in their accusations. Furthermore, while most queer students might have only dealt with undirected homophobia and bigoted language, and most threats did not follow through, that did not guarantee safety. Tristen Shay remembered that there were stories about one student from the nineties who got beat up for being visibly gay in Walla Walla.<sup>26</sup> During the early 2000s, students were chosen as targets of blackmail and violence because they were closeted and would not report it. As Shay said, “I know people who were badly banged up, pretty badly hurt, that never pressed charges against anybody, never filed anything, because they never wanted anyone to know that they were gay.”<sup>27</sup> Being different, being other, was already enough of a risk. Not everyone was willing to also challenge these norms publicly as activists and potentially endanger themselves more.

Yet, despite these fears, as Whitman moved into the 1990s, more minority students began to ask for their own place on campus and participated in multicultural and identity-based activism, for all that they continued to deal with problems of institutional and communal stagnation. Starting in the eighties, a bunch of diverse student groups were formed. The Multi-Ethnic Student Organization (MESO) was one of the first and had goals

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<sup>26</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 30.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-5.

to create more diversity on campus.<sup>28</sup> A few years later, in about 1992, the group AHANA<sup>2</sup> (aka Asian, Hispanic, African and Native American, plus Jewish and Gay/Lesbian) was created as the new multi-ethnic group that covered all minority groups on campus. AHANA<sup>2</sup>'s focus was on raising awareness of Whitman's whiteness and heteronormativity and did lot of community education.<sup>29</sup> Each identity covered by AHANA<sup>2</sup> had its own individual student group. The Black Student Union (BSU) had been reestablished out of the previous student organization, but the Gay and Lesbian Association, the Asian Student Association, Shalom (the Jewish student group), and Indo-Mestizo (the Hispanic student group) were all new groups that quickly became part of the social scene at Whitman. From the mid-1980s into the early 1990s, we can see the shift toward coalition building between various identity groups, the emergence of individual identity organizations for different minorities and the development of multiculturalism as a movement on campus.

Within the institution itself, Whitman's attempts to prove supportive of minority students and multiculturalism led to the development of a staff position and eventually a new office department focused on multicultural student affairs. After the original Whitman BSU made demands for a more diverse and representative campus in the seventies, Whitman had created a multicultural advisor position,<sup>30</sup> a staff member who found that all the problems of all minority students at Whitman were piled onto their shoulders. By the early nineties, this position had developed into an office for minority student issues. The Office of Multicultural Affairs, now known as the Intercultural Center, had more resources

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<sup>28</sup> Denice N. Kelley, *The Ethnic Minority Student Experience and Diversity at Whitman College*, 66; Michael C. Lindbloom, "Students Campaign for Cultural Diversity," *Whitman College Pioneer*, November 7, 1985, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>29</sup> Office of Multicultural Affairs, "AHANA2 Wins Prestigious Award," *Whitman College Pioneer*, February 3, 1994, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>30</sup> Denice N. Kelley, *The Ethnic Minority Student Experience and Diversity at Whitman College*, 49, 63.

and capability to support students, but still has had to deal with the problems of many student organizations of varying needs. Instead of these duties being spread out across the administration, a few staff members take on the sole burden of managing diversity and inclusion and responding to discrimination. While Whitman was willing to provide spaces for diverse and marginalized students, the status quo tended to remain in place.<sup>31</sup> Diverse students, who don't fit into the definition of a normal or average Whitman student,<sup>32</sup> were thus separated out into a separate section of the administration, their differences highlighted.<sup>33</sup> Even as Whitman made more space for diversity (the 'other') on campus, a sense of what and who the normal should be was maintained.

This separation, and the prevailing attitude that dismissed discrimination as exaggerated, created a situation in which minority students were expected to explain their oppression and educate their fellow students and the college alike. Garrett Hoffman and Tania Mitchell argued that most modern colleges have developed a culture in which diversity is praised but not prioritized and burdens are unfairly distributed. They explained how students make demands on the institution but have rarely seen significant payout in the form of structural change. Instead, students, already struggling with their own marginalization, have been placed in charge of educating others and fixing problems in the institution. Messages about "diversity" then end up mainly being lip service. By encouraging "everyone" to work towards diversity and acceptance, most institutions of

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<sup>31</sup> As Kelley commented, diversity might have been "achieved" but deeper institutional support is still often missing. Kelley, *The Ethnic Minority Student Experience and Diversity at Whitman College*, 80, 89, 148. This is a common problem in higher education, see: Preston and Hoffman, "Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions."

<sup>32</sup> Lilia May Cohen, "Understanding 'Fit' at Whitman College : The Role of Race and Class in Crafting Whitman's Student Body" (Whitman College Politics Department, May 9, 2018), Whitman College and Northwest Archive, <https://arminda.whitman.edu/theses/388>, 15, 23, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Preston and Hoffman, "Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions."

higher education thus deny their own role in fostering change.<sup>34</sup> Students who have pushed themselves to do this work often receive little more than a pat on the back from the administration. Beyond that, allies in faculty and staff typically also have had to take on extra responsibilities to help students. For example, at Whitman, Professor Tobin helped support LGBTQ+ students, putting in a lot of extra hours to help manage two different groups and lead lectures, panels and film showings. While the administration might have paid lip service to LGBTQ+ issues by adding sexual orientation to the nondiscrimination policy,<sup>35</sup> that was about all that the administration did. Thus, students had to take up the charge, putting even more responsibilities on the shoulders of the few out students.

Since staying in the closet was still a norm at Whitman up into the late 2000s, a small number of queer students became leaders in the community because of their willingness to be open about their experiences. We saw that happen to Alex Cofield; she came out to make sure that Whitman students were educated properly and in return she was instated as a leader, despite her inexperience.<sup>36</sup> This continued up into the 2000s, as Tristen Shay can attest. By arriving at Whitman out and visibly queer, they attracted a lot of attention and a lot of people looking for their advice and help.<sup>37</sup> For these students, being confident and open about their identity amongst a community that otherwise mainly consisted of closeted, semi-closeted or questioning students meant becoming a leader and a counsel for others almost immediately.

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<sup>34</sup> Garrett D. Hoffman and Tania D. Mitchell, "Making Diversity 'Everyone's Business': A Discourse Analysis of Institutional Responses to Student Activism for Equity and Inclusion.," *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (2016): 277–89, <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000037>.

<sup>35</sup> David Maxwell, "Enclosed Statement," 1990, WCA118, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 23: "1990 Whitman Non-discrimination Policy," WCNA.

<sup>36</sup> Cofield, "Cofield Interview," 7.

<sup>37</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 6.

Even in a small community, becoming a leader for the LGBTQ+ community was a lot of responsibility, and research has proven that taking on that kind of burden can be difficult as it can lead to problems of burnout and exhaustion. Taking on activism and leadership roles added another task to already busy student schedules,<sup>38</sup> especially at a college like that Whitman that has tended to encourage over-involvement. As was noted in this section to already be a problem at Whitman, research has shown that students engaging in identity-based activism commonly deal with targeted hate because of their attempts to build a better campus environment.<sup>39</sup> This discrimination and violence added to the stress of daily lives. It can cause students to face burnout, mental health issues, and fatigue. Often, students have been forced to suddenly reduce their duties to cope, or even take breaks from school.<sup>40</sup> Some students happily accepted this additional work and fared well with the challenge, like Alex Cofield. Cofield appreciated the work that she did as a student because it boosted her confidence and shaped her life, saying, “So, at the time it was hard, but I look back now... all the opportunities that I created as well as the opportunities given to me by the college—it was definitely the right decision.”<sup>41</sup> Others acknowledge that the burden was overwhelming or difficult. Shay commented that while they were happy to just not be alone in ‘doing the work’ at the time, now they would consider the system to be exploitative and can understand why others were uncomfortable with the expectations of student activism.<sup>42</sup> The division of labor created by the attitudes around diversity and

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<sup>38</sup> Linder et al., “‘A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student’: Student Activism as Labor.”; Annemarie Vaccaro PhD and Jasmine A. Mena PhD, “It’s Not Burnout, It’s More: Queer College Activists of Color and Mental Health,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 15, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 339–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2011.600656>.

<sup>39</sup> Linder et al., “‘A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student’: Student Activism as Labor.”

<sup>40</sup> Vaccaro and Mena, “It’s Not Burnout, It’s More.”

<sup>41</sup> Cofield, “Cofield Interview,” 4. Quote also used in the chapter title.

<sup>42</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 16.

discrimination at Whitman was unfairly skewed towards marginalized students themselves, a problem that impacted the successfulness and the style of LGBTQ+ activism on campus.

## **Coalition Against Homophobia, For Acceptance**

The two LGBTQ+ student groups that emerged from this campus culture were then not a surprise; neither was their styles and purposes. The dichotomy between wanting safe social spaces free from bigotry, and the need to address discriminatory attitudes shaped the very structure of LGBTQ+ activism at Whitman. Arguments over whether community groups should prioritize social interaction or activism have always been present in LGBTQ+ spaces; as mentioned in the introduction, they were a problem for early gay student groups in the seventies. This question has always impacted the direction of student organizing. At Whitman, this divide was just emphasized by a physical separation between these two styles in the form of the division between the Gay and Lesbian Association<sup>43</sup> and Coalition Against Homophobia.

The Gay and Lesbian Association represented students' desire to remain protected and have a space to be themselves without judgement or harassment, and so only supported activism from the background for two decades. As mentioned in the last chapter, thanks to the publicity garnered early in the decade, the GLA had its own funding source in the form of alumni donations.<sup>44</sup> Free from dealing with the rules and structure of the student government, GLA was able to maintain strict levels of confidentiality when providing safe

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<sup>43</sup> By the mid-1990s, the Gay and Lesbian Association had added Bisexual to the name, becoming the Gay Lesbian and Bisexual Association (GLBA). Later, by 2001, it would be known as GLBTQ.

<sup>44</sup> Larry Johnson, "Larry Johnson," 1990, WCA118, Series 2, Box 1, Folder 11, WCNA; Schwendiman, "Schwendiman Interview," 14.

spaces for queer students to meet. While this secrecy definitely made some students feel more comfortable; for others it only generated disinterest. Tristen Shay only went to a few meetings of the group before finding the confidentiality-fixation unpleasant, like being shoved back into the closet.<sup>45</sup> Most who were actively involved in it appreciated the casual and more social nature of the Gay Lesbian Bisexual Association. For Chris Wolf, a 1998 graduate, being one of the leaders of GLBA was about finding time to hang out with other queer students. It wasn't a "serious commitment" but rather a space to feel comfortable and secure. She loved the supportive community that GLBA offered.<sup>46</sup> From 1991 to 2001, the members of GLBA were pretty happy to use their group more as a support space and a social club than anything else. In 2001, GLBTQ's staff advisor Jed Schwendiman created an internship for the group to provide a more stable leadership for the students involved,<sup>47</sup> which laid the foundations for a shift in GLBTQ's position on campus later on. However, until the 2010s, GLBTQ remained a social space.

Coalition, on the other hand, was immediately concerned with activism that generally focused on visibility and fighting ignorance and hate, with education as its main goal. It did not take long for the GLBA to fade into the background as Coalition took over from the spring semester of 1992 on. Coalition itself was a vehicle of queer representation on a closeted campus. Many of the early events put on by both the GLA (before Coalition existed) and Coalition involved queer community members talking about their lives and experiences to answer questions and challenge stereotypes. LesBiGay week, the educational event that had been the GLA's staple, was expanded to become longer Pride

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<sup>45</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 7.

<sup>46</sup> Wolf interview, 6-7, 22.

<sup>47</sup> Schwendiman, "Schwendiman Interview," 11-12.

or Awareness months under Coalition. During these months, Coalition would plan lectures, panels, film showings, presentations and speakers, even dances; anything that they thought could be used to educate the Whitman community, make temporary queer spaces on campus or ask other students to commit to supporting LGBTQ issues.<sup>48</sup> Occasionally these educational events went beyond Whitman, occurring at Walla Walla University.<sup>49</sup> One of Coalition's major events was the dance DragFest, which was meant to be both a fun event for queer students and to encourage straight students to play with gender. With all these projects, Coalition members dedicated a majority of their time to fighting ignorance by attempting to educate the community, generally by sharing their own personal life experiences as a means to convince others.

Coalition Against Homophobia also fought homophobia more directly, holding protests over national issues or pointing out discrimination happening at Whitman. Throughout the 1990s, while Coalition rarely held demonstrations, they did hold protests and sit-ins against the presence of military recruiters on campus after "Don't Ask, Don't Tell." The protests were mostly against the policy itself and the discrimination against gay American citizens that it represented.<sup>50</sup> When incidents of homophobic violence were brought to national attention, like after the murder of Matthew Shepard, Coalition joined

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<sup>48</sup> "Coalition Against Homophobia Gears up for LesBiGay Week," *Whitman College Pioneer*, February 27, 1992, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; "Lesbigay Week Schedule 1994," *Whitman College Pioneer*, February 24, 1994, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; "Over the Rainbow," 1996, WCA118: "Whitman College LGBTQ+ Collection," Series 1: "General Files," Oversized Folder, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; "Out and About," 1997, WCA118: "Whitman College LGBTQ+ Collection," Series 1: "General Files," Oversized Folder, WCNA.

<sup>49</sup> Schwendiman, "Schwendiman Interview," 25; Wolf, "Wolf Interview," 7.

<sup>50</sup> Becky Schneer, "Students Want Equality," *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 7, 1993, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Danny Goodisman, "Students Protest Marines," *Whitman College Pioneer*, February 29, 1996, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

in vigils and protests in honor of victims of hate crimes.<sup>51</sup> Most commonly, Coalition members repeatedly spoke out against ignorant or hateful actions and comments on Whitman's campus. This tendency led to several long threads of letters in the *Pioneer* when accusations of homophobia led to campus-wide debates.<sup>52</sup> Other times, an author posted something in the newspaper that excused homophobia and would be quickly reprimanded by Coalition members.<sup>53</sup> The biggest example was one of the *Pioneer*'s joke or parody issues from the end of the 1994-5 academic year. The front-page article reads "F\*\*\*\*ts should be killed, says Coalition" (*censoring added*). While this article was meant to be a joke parodying the goals and messaging of Coalition Against Homophobia, it also intentionally condoned violence against LGBTQ+ people and insulted Coalition and its work. Posted right at the end of the semester,<sup>54</sup> there wasn't time for Coalition to reply by the end of the year, but the faculty response letter sent out soon after<sup>55</sup> proved that Coalition and its allies didn't let this pass without criticism.

Throughout its early organizing and activism, Coalition Against Homophobia faced some limitations because of Whitman's location. Whitman was fairly isolated from

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<sup>51</sup> Lenora Yerkes, "Gay Pride Month Kicks off with March," *Whitman College Pioneer*, September 30, 1999, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Genevieve Gagne-Hawes, "Vigil Remembers Victims of Hate Crimes," *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 14, 1999, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>52</sup> For example, Derek Jentzch's criticism of the Greek system and its homophobia received a lot of criticism from people at Whitman, both due to its content and its tone. See the September 24<sup>th</sup>, 1992 and March 4<sup>th</sup>, 1993 editions of the *Pioneer* for just some examples of the controversy Jentzch stirred.

<sup>53</sup> For example, in 1994, an article calling homosexuality a "sign of perversion" (Brian J. Bozlee, "Homosexuality a Sign of Perversion," *Whitman College Pioneer*, March 10<sup>th</sup>, 1994, Arminda, WCNA) led to a debate spanning several issues on the validity of this description and whether people should be allowed to publish articles like this. See the March 31<sup>st</sup>, April 7<sup>th</sup> and April 13<sup>th</sup> issues for responses.

<sup>54</sup> "Faggots should be killed, says Coalition," *Whitman College Pioneer*, May 4<sup>th</sup>, 1995, Arminda, WCNA.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, page 13 of the digitized version of this issue. The letter, sent out by faculty and staff, argued that free speech and the possibility and necessity of learning from the mistakes made was important, but that the cruel language used in the paper should not have been included. In the next issues of the *Pioneer*, the staff, which was partially new hires, agreed with this letter and claimed they would try to do better from now on. ("Our perspective," *Whitman College Pioneer*, September 14<sup>th</sup>, 1995, Arminda, WCNA.)

LGBTQ+ organizations, especially other college student groups, as the closest colleges to Whitman tended to be religious and so did not have official LGBTQ+ groups. Other colleges were hours away. Networking with local LGBTQ organizations was also difficult, as there were only a few of them. Professor Tobin helped connect Whitman students with two Walla Walla valley organizations called the Alternate Lifestyles League and Humanities in Togetherness Crowd, but these organizations were short lived and mostly centered on social events.<sup>56</sup> For a short time, as mentioned in Chapter 1, LGBTQ+ activism across Washington State was focused on preventing the passage of homophobic policies promoted by the Oregon Citizen's Alliance. This movement was led by the state-wide organization Hands Off Washington, which had a chapter in Walla Walla that Alex Cofield helped create.<sup>57</sup> However, none of these groups had even existed before Whitman's own LGBTQ+ organizations, and were gone before the end of the decade.

At the same time, LGBTQ+ activists faced occasional homophobia from within the larger Walla Walla Community for trying to do their work. For example, in 1993, Whitman's diversity group AHANA<sup>2</sup> was invited to a conference about diversity being held at the local community college. That is, it was, until the conference leaders found out that Cofield was in the group and was planning to speak about LGBTQ issues. They asked AHANA<sup>2</sup> to dismiss Cofield or leave the conference. In response, AHANA<sup>2</sup> protested the event.<sup>58</sup> LGBTQ+ activism was not often accepted in the wider community. Throughout the second half of the nineties, Whitman students also had to deal with protesters from the Baptist church in Touchet, Washington, a small town a short drive away, who did not

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<sup>56</sup> Tobin, "Tobin Interview – July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019," 4.

<sup>57</sup> Cofield, "Cofield Interview," 16-7.

<sup>58</sup> Alex Cofield, "Freedom of Assembly at Its Finest," *Whitman College Pioneer*, September 16, 1993, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Cofield, "Cofield Interview," 10-11.

approve of Whitman's liberalist tendencies and espoused racist, sexist and homophobic beliefs. These protesters were known to harass students while on campus.<sup>59</sup> Coalition attempted to argue with the Baptists, as well producing their own counter-protests to drown them out or combat their arguments, but had problems finding a good way to stop them.<sup>60</sup> Homophobes around the Walla Walla valley were not happy about the platform that Whitman's Coalition Against Homophobia gave to LGBTQ+ issues and these incidents only contributed to the discomfort that queer students felt in Walla Walla.

As an activism organization, Coalition Against Homophobia was more focused on building a welcoming community than it was on demanding and enforcing structural and institutional reforms. While its goals called for broad social change, it was in the direction of acceptance and inclusion into the current system, not systematic restructuring. In this way, Coalition reflected the development of LGBTQ+ activism in America, as the national movement was also turning to arguments that centered gay rights and the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people into traditional institutions like marriage and the military.<sup>61</sup> Unlike national political organizations, the community focus of Coalition meant that it was more focused on direct community education and local homophobia. This narrow attention gave Coalition the chance to respond immediately and aggressively to problems in the community but did not typically result in calls for transformation of the campus beyond social and cultural aspects. While this decision was understandable, it left a critical gap in

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<sup>59</sup> Kate Moscato, "Touchet Baptists Bring Chance to Examine Hate," *Whitman College Pioneer*, November 13, 1997, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>60</sup> Adam Graham-Squire, "Tactics of Confrontation," *Whitman College Pioneer*, November 6, 1997, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>61</sup> Bronski described this shift as the development of an argument that LGBTQ+ people are "just like you." Bronski, *A Queer History of the United States*, 240-2.

the community's inclusivity, especially when it came to trans students, as I'll explain in chapter 5.

## **Comparisons: Party Culture, Inclusion and Debates**

How does Whitman's Coalition Against Homophobia compare to the activist groups at Vassar College and Colorado College? For all three, queer activism grew to include more identities and issues over the course of the nineties into the early 2000s. Vassar's Gay People Alliance became the Bisexual Gay and Lesbian Alliance and then Queer Coalition. Colorado College's group Out And About was renamed the Gay and Lesbian Alliance, then the Bisexual Gay and Lesbian Alliance, before remaining the Queer Student Union/Association throughout much of the 2000s. Whitman's LGBTQ+ student group went from the Gay and Lesbian Alliance (GLA) to the GLBA to GLBTQ. Thus, at all three schools, the shift toward identity politics and the growing acceptance and understanding of a broader number of queer identities affected the student groups at these college campuses.

All three schools also tended to lean into the party culture side of LGBTQ+ communities. Although a portion of this is likely due to the culture on American college campuses as a whole, queer dances seemed to be popular events, despite continuous controversies over their existence. Although the debates over DragFest at Whitman emerged more in the mid-2000s as students questioned the purpose and impact of the dance on campus, DragFest received criticism for taking over so much of the college party

scene,<sup>62</sup> and for catering too much to the straight gaze.<sup>63</sup> Colorado College had their own drag ball starting in 1999, that also drew a significant amount of campus attention and was becoming a campus tradition.<sup>64</sup> At Vassar, the Gay Peoples Alliance's Homo Hop was an extremely popular campus dance that regularly ended with students needing to go to the emergency room.<sup>65</sup> The Homo Hop was marked by its own debates about how much the dances catered to straight interests, its potential reinforcement stereotypes about queer people and the treatment of queer students by visitors at these dances.<sup>66</sup> Thus, dances were clearly a common element of LGBTQ+ programming on college spaces, but were frequently at the center of arguments about their own relevance and necessity.

Vassar and Colorado College both had their own internal divisions, like the two distinct student groups at Whitman. At Colorado College, a group of students broke off from the Queer Student Association (QSA) to form EQUAL, a more radical, anti-assimilationist queer student activist group. EQUAL quickly garnered a negative reputation at Colorado for being considered too pushy, apparently over aggressive and stricter than many found necessary. While some sympathized with EQUAL's motivations and frustrations, others were insistent that EQUAL was doing something wrong. However,

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<sup>62</sup> Bonnie Yocum, "Protect Visitors from DragFest's False Impressions," *Whitman College Pioneer*, February 26, 1998, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>63</sup> Keola Whittaker, Gabe McGuire, and Todd Borden, "Awareness Groups Are Counter-Productive," *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 21, 1999, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

<sup>64</sup> "The Catalyst [2001 v. 45 no. 1 Sept. 14 - 2002 v. 45 no. 22 May 10]," *The Catalyst*, 2001-2, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:10029>, 285.

<sup>65</sup> Ben Silverbrush, "QCVC Questions Future of HomoHop," *Vassar Miscellany News*, March 26, 1999, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Digital Library.

<sup>66</sup> Members of BiGALA, "BiGALA Angry at Homo-Hop Harassment Incidents," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 1, 1991, sec. Opinions, Vassar College Digital Library; Brett Cohen, "No Offense: The Homo Hop," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 16, 1990, Vassar College Digital Library; Devin Lindow and Leticia Villarreal, "Queer Space Violated by Disrespect of Heterosexuals," *Vassar Miscellany News*, December 1, 1995, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries; Nathan Gray, "Value of Homo Hop Is Overestimated by Gay Community," *Vassar Miscellany News*, December 4, 1994, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries.

there also seemed to be an element of personal conflict between the QSA and EQUAL; thanks the small campus, many problems could potentially be boiled down to personal arguments about political goals and action.<sup>67</sup> Despite the controversy, or perhaps due to the potential personal motivations behind EQUAL's existence, the group did not last long. Still, the division in this community reflected the division between LGBTQ+ student groups at Whitman, where one was more activist, and one was more social.

At Vassar, the uninterrupted longevity of the LGBTQ+ community meant that the college provided more resources to them, and that divisions in the community were common but not inherently disruptive. In the mid-1980s, gay and lesbian students had created separate spaces; this was partially due to politics of the time. The women's movement on campus found the gay male community to be too apathetic and not knowledgeable enough on women's issues,<sup>68</sup> but the AIDS crisis and the rise of more unified LGBTQ activism changed the dynamics within the community and helped bring LGBTQ+ student groups together again. Throughout the 1990s, while Whitman and Colorado's LGBTQ+ students were still struggling to just find their place on campus, Vassar institutionalized resources for gay, lesbian and bisexual students, creating a new student center.<sup>69</sup> In 1996, Vassar's Bisexual Gay and Lesbian Alliance added a sub-group, a Gay-Straight Alliance, in order to get more allies involved with LGBTQ+ activism.<sup>70</sup> Apparently, Vassar's queer community was so well-established that they hadn't needed to

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<sup>67</sup> "The Catalyst [1998 v. 43 no. 1 Sept. 11 - 1999 v. 43 no. 21 May 7]," *The Catalyst*, 1998-9, DigitalCC, <https://digitalccbета.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:10024>, 386, 396, 412, 429.

<sup>68</sup> Bill Maurer, "The Phallic Critique and the Conservo-Fag," *Womanspeak*, March 1998, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries.

<sup>69</sup> "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Center to Open," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 16, 1990, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries.

<sup>70</sup> Jennifer Higginbotham, "Students Form Gay-Straight Alliance," *Vassar Miscellany News*, November 3, 1995, Vassar Newspaper Archives, Vassar College Libraries.

include allies in their groups to strengthen their activism up to that point. Vassar's reputation as a gay friendly school and its location attracted more students who were willing and able to be out and be leaders in the community, thus meaning that the college had a greater investment and acceptance of LGBTQ+ students and issues.

As mentioned, both Vassar College and Colorado College had a longer history of LGBTQ+ activism than Whitman, starting with the gay liberation movement. Thus, discussion around gay and lesbian issues had been occurring for far longer. Vassar's head start meant that the college had shifted toward providing more resources to LGBTQ+ students sooner and it had a greater reputation as a queer school. Colorado College's history offered the opportunity for a breakaway radical student organization like EQUAL, but, like Walla Walla, Colorado Springs did not provide a very supportive environment for LGBTQ+ activism. Still, by the end of the nineties, in many ways these communities looked similar. Their student organizations went through the same journey to being more inclusive, shared similar kinds of major events and also had similar debates about styles of LGBTQ+ activism. Vassar was the most different but the regional similarities between Colorado College and Whitman played a hand in shaping their communities differently.

## **Chapter 5: “I Felt Very Different, All The Time”**

For visitors to Whitman College from 1992 to 2013, sticking around after dark on Visitor’s Day meant witnessing an unusual scene. The college campus, usually filled with casually dressed students trudging off to classes, would have instead been chock-full of a crowd of students dressed in costume, with male students tottering around on borrowed heels and female students holding up glued-on mustaches. They’d all be heading towards the sound of a party, the biggest dance of the year. It was time for DragFest, and Whitman was ready for a night of fun, partying and playing with the gender binary. Or at least, that was the idea. From the turn of the century on, DragFest played a huge role in Whitman’s LGBTQ communities and became a major token of queer and trans acceptance on campus. Despite this annual and very visible performance of gender nonconformity, trans inclusion in the community was a slow process.

By the 2000s, Whitman had generally caught up with the national LGBTQ+ movement, in terms of the styles of activism and the general environment for queer students. Although discrimination was still a problem, more queer students felt comfortable on campus. However, having reached a certain level of inclusivity, Whitman stagnated, as student efforts to build a culture of acceptance confronted institutional and social norms. Those few community members concerned with issues facing trans students found themselves running into a wall that has still not yet come all the way down.

## The Problem of the ‘T’ in LGBTQ

Issues relating to non-normative gender identity and expression have always been even more complicated than those of sexuality difference. For a long time, these two things, deviant gender expression and sexuality, were assumed to go together and these misconceptions have not yet left the public consciousness. “Cross dressing” and other forms of nonconforming gender presentation have been criminalized and tied to notions of perversion and homosexuality for centuries.<sup>1</sup> It has only been since the 1950s in America that transgender<sup>2</sup> identities became defined as a distinct category from sexuality. Research into gender deviance, and the first few cases of modern gender confirmation surgeries (aka “sex changes”), helped introduce these ideas to the public, especially the famous transition of Christine Jorgenson.<sup>3</sup> With publicity came the first few community groups created by and for people of divergent gender identities, following in the footsteps of gay and lesbian community and political development.<sup>4</sup> During the fifties and sixties, trans people were especially harmed by police violence in raids targeting queer communities. Thus, riots like the Compton’s Cafeteria Riot or Stonewall were often led by trans women.<sup>5</sup> The strict repression of deviant gender expression in the United States made it difficult for trans people to find each other, but they have long been a part of queer communities and played important roles in the formation of LGBTQ+ activism.

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<sup>1</sup> Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley, CA: Seal Press : Distributed by Publishers Group West, 2008), <http://www.aspresolver.com/aspresolver.asp?GLTC:2033373>, 32, 37.

<sup>2</sup> Or transsexual, as was the dominant terminology then.

<sup>3</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 44-5, 47-8.

<sup>4</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 53-5.

<sup>5</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History*, 63-9, 70, 72, 86.

Despite this, trans issues and identities were quickly excluded from the movement and from liberal politics generally. For example, in the seventies, radical lesbian feminism, which relied on strict biological definitions of gender, regularly espoused transphobic rhetoric. Claiming to be fighting against the patriarchy and male violence, radical feminist spaces excluded trans people.<sup>6</sup> This exclusion fed right into other trends that pushed more and more virulent anti-trans rhetoric and hatred. Trans people formed their own community groups and support networks in response to the discrimination found all around them.<sup>7</sup> These groups made it possible to survive. The new-found visibility of trans people helped build a distinct community but it also led to backlash against gender nonconforming identities.

This split in the community continued into the 1990s and beyond, although the divide has been somewhat reduced over time. By 1995, gay rights organizations had begun to add the ‘T’, at least in name, to their goals and missions.<sup>8</sup> Yet, at the same time, trans issues were almost never prioritized. When gay rights organizations, like the Human Rights Campaign, promoted a bill that promised to protect the LGBTQ+ community, the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA), the decision was made to drop gender identity from the protections in order to make the bill more “acceptable.” When it came to nondiscrimination policies as a political strategy in general, most only focused on sexuality-based discrimination. Protections for trans-people have been only been added later, if at all.<sup>9</sup> Mainstream LGBTQ+ political goals most often center on sexual minorities,

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<sup>6</sup> Stryker, *Transgender History.*, 99-100.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 151; Jami K. Taylor and Daniel C. Lewis, “The Advocacy Coalition Framework and Transgender Inclusion,” in *Transgender Rights and Politics: Groups, Issue Framing, and Policy Adoption*, ed. Jami K. Taylor and Donald P. Haider-Markel (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 109, 115, 121.

like love is love and the gay marriage movement.<sup>10</sup> While trans issues were slowly being incorporated into the LGBTQ+ rights agenda, they have not been prioritized when the time came to follow through. Adding the ‘T’ was more lip service than actual policy.

## **Challenging the Cisgendered Institution**

As discussed in the introduction, conversations about the legality and acceptability of gay and lesbian student groups have been in development since the 1970s, with these groups becoming more common in recent decades. However, even as institutions grew more supportive of queer students, the needs of trans students remained a blind spot. While many (non-religious) colleges were likely to have some kind of support structure in place for gay, lesbian and bisexual youth by 2000, these spaces and services were often not designed with trans students in mind. By this point, a healthy dialogue about the needs of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth in higher education had been established, but there was no similar dialogue about trans youth. This was the field that some researchers and activists stepped into. In 2005, B. Bilodeau published an article called “Beyond the Gender Binary,” in which the author used the experiences of transgender students at one institution to put forward a theory of gender identity development. This theory specifically mirrored theories on sexual identity development that had already been in circulation.<sup>11</sup> Bilodeau’s article was one of the early attempts to create for trans youth what sexuality theorists had done for gay and lesbian youth. In another 2005 article, Jeffrey McKinney shared findings from a

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<sup>10</sup> Taylor and Lewis, “The Advocacy Coalition Framework and Transgender Inclusion,” 108-110, 118-19.

<sup>11</sup> Brent Bilodeau, “Beyond the Gender Binary: A Case Study of Two Transgender Students at a Midwestern Research University,” *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education* 3, no. 1 (December 29, 2005): 29–44, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01\\_05](https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01_05).

survey of trans college students. He found that many trans college students felt insecure and unsupported because most colleges did not have any nondiscrimination policies that protected trans students or any resources designated to help them.<sup>12</sup> At more conservative or religious schools, as we saw in the introduction with Heather McEntarfer's analysis of Gay/Straight Alliances, institutional attitudes could make it difficult to force any consideration for trans students' needs.<sup>13</sup> Thus, while questions of how to support gay and lesbian students have been brewing for decades, the same questions have only begun to emerge in the last 15 or so years for trans students. The conversation has come nowhere near settled, and new interjections, like Z. Nicolazzo's 2015 book *Trans\* in College*, have continued to try to redefine the conversation and propel it forward.

At the same time as this dialogue was beginning, trans students faced campuses that did not know what to do with them. Since the early 2000s, the number of openly trans students, and students transitioning while in college, has vastly increased. As trans identities became more known to the wider public, more and more people discovered their gender identity at younger ages. However, in the 2000s, the likelihood that another college student had met openly transgender people before was minimal. Thus, trans students faced alienation, constant questions and interrogation, and rude and discouraging comments about their lives and presentation.<sup>14</sup> These comments and attitudes together created hostile climates that only reinforced feelings of isolation. Beyond being forced to deal with

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<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey S. McKinney, "On the Margins: A Study of the Experiences of Transgender College Students," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education* 3, no. 1 (December 29, 2005): 63–76, [https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01\\_07](https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01_07).

<sup>13</sup> Kim A. Case et al., "Transgender Inclusion in University Nondiscrimination Statements: Challenging Gender-Conforming Privilege through Student Activism," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 1 (2012): 145–61, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2011.01741.x>.

<sup>14</sup> Rob S. Pusch, "Objects of Curiosity: Transgender College Students' Perceptions of the Reactions of Others," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education* 3, no. 1 (2005), 50, 52-3; McKinney, "On the Margins," 66-7

ignorant and bigoted students, trans students have also had to wrestle with institutional discrimination. College administrations either did not know what to do with trans students or expected them to conform to gender normative college policies. Counseling centers did not respect trans identities and often dismissed mental health problems or medical needs. Even at institutions with LGBT+ programs or centers, most trans students could not find trans mentors to guide them.<sup>15</sup> In the 2000s, trans students were still trying to carve out space on the college campus for themselves, all while facing discrimination or dismissal by the community.

Like other institutions, the question of trans students was still a new one at Whitman in the 2000s. In the early 2000s, there were very few gender nonconforming people at Whitman, as Tristen Shay found, and no one was explicitly out as trans.<sup>16</sup> In 2001, Whitman did update its nondiscrimination policy to include gender identity. However, this change was not exactly unanimous and only occurred thanks to the work of one student. Brianne Testa had recently come out of a summer research project where she interviewed trans people and, after hearing about the oppression that they faced, she petitioned Whitman's Board of Trustees to consider adding gender identity to the policy. Although some people were supportive, the idea got pushback from those who did not want to support gender nonconformity. Still, the addition was passed, in the end.<sup>17</sup> However, much like the 1990 addition, this seemed to be all the administration was willing to do, and other college policies were left untouched. The only other major development was the creation of the

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<sup>15</sup> John P. Dugan, Michelle L. Kusel, and Dawn M. Simounet, "Transgender College Students: An Exploratory Study of Perceptions, Engagement, and Educational Outcomes," *Journal of College Student Development* 53, no. 5 (September 24, 2012): 719–36, <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2012.0067>.

<sup>16</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 6, 15-6.

<sup>17</sup> Jeff Ives, "Whitman Expands Non-Discrimination Policy to Include Gender Identity," *Whitman College Pioneer*, March 1, 2001, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

Gender Studies major in the mid-2000s, which provided more potential opportunities for gender and sexuality focused courses. However, Tristen Shay's perception was that the creation of that major was the effort of queer students (including Shay), Professor Tobin, and a coalition of others.<sup>18</sup> It was not something pioneered by the administration. The fact that Whitman even had a protection for gender identity in its nondiscrimination policy was progressive for the time though. Most other colleges did not.<sup>19</sup> Thus, Whitman looked surprisingly inclusive,<sup>20</sup> despite only having had its first LGBTQ+ student group a decade before. Still, having the policies in place did not mean that they were followed, for all that they made Whitman look better.

During this decade, the LGBTQ student groups at Whitman made their own, if limited, steps toward inclusion and support of trans students. As mentioned before, it was common practice starting in the late nineties to add the 'T' to the names of LGBTQ+ organizations, as Whitman's own GLBTQ did. Although Coalition did not change their name, both LGBTQ+ student groups had similar priorities. Coalition continued to be the main group planning LGBTQ+ programming and public events on campus during the 2000s; however, GLBTQ took on its own expanded role in this time as well. After Jed Schwendiman founded the internship position for the group, GLBTQ interns ran meetings, planned social events and acted as another representative for LGBTQ students and issues on campus. Although the groups were technically separate and had different funding, they

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<sup>18</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 27-30.

<sup>19</sup> John Baez, Jennifer Howd, and Rachel Pepper, *The Gay and Lesbian Guide to College Life: A Comprehensive Resource for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students and Their Allies*, 2008 ed (New York: Random House, 2007), 236-239.

<sup>20</sup> In *The Advocate: College Guide for LGBT Students*, Whitman received a score of 16/20, making it one of the more highly ranked colleges in the guide, in large part due to its nondiscrimination policy. Shane L. Windmeyer, "Whitman College," in *The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students*, 1st ed (New York: Alyson Books, 2006), 316.

supported each other. By the end of the decade, the stable leadership provided by the internship had increased the role of GLBTQ in campus activism, and the group eventually took over LGBTQ+ campus programming in the early 2010s. For example, the stability of GLBTQ meant that the group, led by its advisors, was able to put on an annual lecture series dedicated to Matthew Shepard and other victims of homophobic violence starting in 2005 after they received a donation. In 2009, as part of this lecture series, trans activist Dean Spade talked on campus to share his analysis of the systemic oppression that trans people face.<sup>21</sup> Thus, the explicit inclusion of trans students in GLBTQ, and the influence of GLBTQ leadership,<sup>22</sup> was important in giving trans students a space and platform on campus, especially going to the 2010s and beyond.

Until then, Coalition Against Homophobia continued to be the main vehicle of LGBTQ+ activism on campus, championing for LGBTQ+ students. More effort was put into the big community events, like the Pride Month lectures and activities and DragFest. Starting in the early 2000s, trans identities were more consistently a part of Coalition's curriculum for Whitman. For example, Coalition brought Leslie Feinberg, author of *Stone Butch Blues*, to campus to talk about trans issues.<sup>23</sup> Kate Bornstein, another famous trans activist, was brought back to campus, having performed at Whitman in 1997, again in 2006

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<sup>21</sup> Eric Nickeson-Mendheim, "Matthew Shepard Lecturer Talks Transgender Rights," *Whitman Wire*, October 1, 2009, <https://whitmanwire.com/news/2009/10/01/dean-spade-delivers-breakthrough-lecture/>.

<sup>22</sup> Especially in the late 2000s, GLBTQ's leadership was either trans or very supportive of trans issues. In 2009, Professor Susanne Beechey came to campus and later became the main advisor for GLBTQ. Professor Beechey has been very supportive of trans issues. Bex MacFife, 2011 graduate, was a gender nonconforming student who was a GLBTQ intern. A co-intern of MacFife's was also trans. See: Bex MacFife, "MacFife Interview – Nov. 21<sup>st</sup>, 2019," transcript of an oral history interview done with Ree Robson in 2019, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, Whitman College, Walla Walla, 2019, 7, 9.

<sup>23</sup> Evan Carman, "Feinberg Encourages Open Sexuality, Identity," *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 9, 2003, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Shay, "Shay Interview," 9.

to do another one of her short pieces.<sup>24</sup> However, beyond events like these, Coalition's other major contribution was DragFest, which attempted to encourage students to question the gender binary and have fun with gender expression. DragFest was controversial, which was mentioned last chapter and we will explore in more depth momentarily. While Coalition pushed for the acceptance of all LGBTQ+ identities at Whitman, its broad focus meant that, like national LGBTQ+ organizations, the problems of trans students often fell to the wayside.

At the start of the decade, Whitman had supposedly made a declaration of support for trans students with the addition to the nondiscrimination policy. A decade before that, in 1990, the same statement of support for gay and lesbian students was immediately met with demands for acceptance and increased student activism. In 2001, the new statement was just one part of an agenda of LGBTQ+ inclusion and did not amplify student activism. Since queer students often had to do the work of fighting for LGBTQ+ issues, the small trans and gender nonconforming population was not enough to push these issues to the forefront and no one else would force the conversation. While the 2001 addition marked a moment of shifting tides, it also became a promise left neglected and unfulfilled.

## **Imagining the GenderQueer at Whitman**

With that in mind, let us take a look at the portrayal of nonnormative gender expression and identity at Whitman: to understand the culture that trans students were

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<sup>24</sup> Malia Renner, "Gender Outlaw Author Presents Play Tonight," *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 2, 1997, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Michaela Murdock, "Bornstein Presents to Students, Faculty," *Whitman College Pioneer*, March 9, 2006, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

living in and how the failure to keep that promise of improving the community impacted students' experiences. There were two Whitman traditions that I want to investigate, Coalition Against Homophobia's DragFest and the student-directed *Rocky Horror Picture Show* production (which was not associated with either Coalition or GLBTQ). With minimal trans activism happening on campus, these annual events were the most regular (and most popular) occasions that promoted or introduced gender nonconformity to campus. Both events diverged from Whitman's typical student experience to encourage gender and sexuality play or exploration, but both also appealed to straight audiences and obscured the work and experiences of trans students.

Many a Whitman students' first introduction to queer culture or identities was the *Rocky Horror Picture Show*. First shown in 1979, the show became a regular feature of Whitman's campus activities calendar after 1984. Billed as "perversion for diversion," the advertising for the 1979 show used language of coming "out of [the] closet"<sup>25</sup> to draw attention. In 1984, the show returned to Whitman, complete with a new set of rules. Apparently, the administration was worried about the show getting too rowdy.<sup>26</sup> Despite the administration's concerns, the show became a tradition, as *Rocky Horror* was continued on a semi-annual basis ever since. For most of a decade, *Rocky Horror* was the one of few even queer-adjacent events at Whitman, and the only one that featured a gender nonconforming character.

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<sup>25</sup> "Calendar," *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 26<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 10; Dan Salnz, "Yearbook Surmounts Problems: Davis Promises 'Quality Book,'" *Whitman College Pioneer*, Jan 25<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 4. This version of *Rocky Horror* was put on to raise money for the yearbook but became a Whitman Events Board funded event sometime later.

<sup>26</sup> Dave Peters, "The Horror Returns to Walla Walla," *Whitman College Pioneer*, Feb 16<sup>th</sup>, 1984, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 1.

*Rocky Horror* has a contentious place in queer culture, as a film that has played an important role in offering queer visibility for decades, but with representation that reinforced stereotypes of queer people now seen as particularly offensive. For some people, *Rocky Horror* provided a needed community space where nonnormative sexualities were celebrated. Thus, it has had a place of honor in American queer cultural legacy.<sup>27</sup> However, *Rocky Horror*'s story, especially the character of Dr. Frank-N-Furter, drew from stereotypes of queer people that many now see as difficult to excuse. The sex-obsessed doctor and his dubiously consensual actions in the film reinforced the idea that queer people, especially trans feminine people and bisexuals, were predatory sluts.<sup>28</sup> Never mind whether this was intentional, this depiction shaped people's perceptions of queerness. Considering use of the word "perversion" in the 1979 ad, and the phrase "senseless orgy" in a 1989 ad for the Whitman *Rocky Horror* showings,<sup>29</sup> the way that *Rocky Horror* was presented at Whitman did not challenge these problematic aspects of the film.<sup>30</sup>

On the other hand, DragFest was an event that, while meant to be a good time, was also supposed to be educational and encourage open minds. It was supposed to help create an accepting and welcoming environment at Whitman through a fun, less serious event.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> "Is The Rocky Horror Picture Show Good for the Gays?," *Slate*, <https://slate.com/human-interest/2014/10/is-the-rocky-horror-picture-show-good-for-the-gays.html>; "Why The Rocky Horror Picture Show Still Matters 40 Years Later," *Vulture*, <https://www.vulture.com/2015/10/why-the-rocky-horror-picture-show-still-matters.html>.

<sup>28</sup> "Do We Need to Time Warp Again?" *Bitch Media*, <https://www.bitchmedia.org/article/do-we-need-time-warp-again/queer-identity-and-problems-rocky-horror-picture-show>; "Let's NOT Do The Time Warp Again, Rocky Fans," *The Mary Sue*, <https://www.themarysue.com/lets-not-do-the-time-warp/>.

<sup>29</sup> "Features," Whitman College *Pioneer*, (Nov 11<sup>th</sup>, 1989), page 101.

<sup>30</sup> In the 2018 version of the show at Whitman, the cast decided to update some of the language used in the show and to frame the show as a 'celebration of queer bodies' since there were a lot of queer students in the cast. This version was the only one I've found that tried to update the show. See: Emma Chung, "Rocky Horror: A Celebration of Queer Bodies," *Whitman Wire*, November 12, 2018, <https://whitmanwire.com/arts/2018/11/12/rocky-horror-a-celebration-of-queer-bodies/>.

<sup>31</sup> Jon Angell, "Come out at the Spanish House," *Whitman College Pioneer*, Nov 11<sup>th</sup>, 1993, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 10.

Yet, despite good intentions, DragFest quickly became an event that was advertised and seen as ‘sexy’ and ‘fun.’ By 1996, DragFest was trying to “sex up” Whitman, rather than teach much. Although Coalition Against Homophobia’s goals were still to decrease hate,<sup>32</sup> sexiness had been given a high priority, twisting the original event’s playfulness in a new direction. By this point, DragFest was one of the biggest parties on campus. Attention given to DragFest in the student newspaper in the later nineties was increasingly less about the meaning of the event and more about the fun party. In 1999, the *Pioneer* ran a DragFest follow-up article that was mostly about what people wore and the party’s costume contest (which a “queen” with fake perma-erection won). Based on this article’s descriptions, only men were actually participating in the gender bending, since “guys went as badly dressed girls and girls went as badly dressed whores.”<sup>33</sup> As that quote showed, DragFest’s environment tended to prioritize the ability of straight men to play with gender. Two articles in the *Pioneer* in the 2000s emphasized the experiences of male students choosing to dress up as women for the dance. In 2003, one article was about the author’s “night as a sexy woman” and how he was surprised at how difficult it was to become a “woman.” Another article in 2009 dedicated half the page to an interview with a “drag queen.”<sup>34</sup> The focus on the experience of these “drag queens” placed their perspectives at the same level of importance as the Coalition leaders who only got quoted a few times per article. DragFest’s development into a sexualized party scene limited the good that it could bring by discouraging deep personal reflection on gender roles and expression in favor of jokes,

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<sup>32</sup> Dawn Mac Donald, “DragFest to sex up Whitman,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 11<sup>th</sup>, 1996, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 8.

<sup>33</sup> “What You Missed,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 15<sup>th</sup>, 1999, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 12.

<sup>34</sup> Adam Hardike, “My night as a sexy woman (once again),” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 24<sup>th</sup>, 2003, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives; Mike Sado, “This year’s fest: a gender bender,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives.

sex, and partying. Much like the problems with Rocky Horror, DragFest, especially costumes like the 1999 contest winner's, taught Whitman students that queerness was sexy, potentially perverted, and just for fun. DragFest's "gender bending"<sup>35</sup> was temporary. Most did not take challenge that DragFest tried to present seriously enough to learn the intended lesson.

Between *Rocky Horror* and DragFest, by the end of the 1990s, some of Whitman's most popular traditions sexualized queer and gender nonconforming bodies with only minimal criticism of these attitudes. In 1998, Rocky Horror was described as a "rite of passage" that Whitman students needed to attend,<sup>36</sup> having solidified its place in Whitman culture. Meanwhile, DragFest faced some backlash to its continuing popularity. An article was published in the *Pioneer* that complained about the fact that the dance gave visitors a "false impression" that made Whitman seem like a "drag haven," and misrepresented the community.<sup>37</sup> This article launched a volley of replies that emphasized DragFest's role in campus LGBTQ activism, asked what a "wrong impression" was, and pointed out how many other popular events could impact people's perceptions of Whitman.<sup>38</sup> Although this debate raised interesting conversations around what DragFest meant to Whitman, no one challenged the way that the event encouraged sexualized depictions of drag.

In the new decade, Coalition Against Homophobia confronted internal debate about the importance and usefulness of DragFest. DragFest in 2000 was focused on presenting

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<sup>35</sup> Sado, "This year's fest: a gender bender.;" Min Pease, "U.S.E. rocks gender-bending parties at 'naughty cal' dance," *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 28<sup>th</sup>, 2005, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 8.

<sup>36</sup> "Halloween Weekend 7 Days..." *Whitman College Pioneer*, Oct. 29<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 11.

<sup>37</sup> Bonnie Yocum, "Protect visitors from DragFest's false impressions," *Whitman College Pioneer*, Feb 26<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 6.

<sup>38</sup> See *Whitman College Pioneer*, March 5<sup>th</sup>, 1998, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 2, 6.

“real” drag to the community by bringing “real” drag queens to perform before the dance, and Coalition leaders talked about wanting to encourage more “drag kings” to dress up.<sup>39</sup> In 2001, Coalition dropped DragFest to put on a Queer Prom, which had a much lower turnout.<sup>40</sup> Coalition leadership had begun to question the perspective that DragFest was essentially good so long as it was fun, and started hoping that DragFest (or a similar event) could be a vehicle for change. It was not a coincidence that 2000 was also the year that Tristen Shay got to campus and joined Coalition. Both Elana Stone '06 and Tristen Shay '04, who were Coalition leaders as students, commented on how—although they had doubts about DragFest—because it was a fun tradition with a lot of momentum, they felt at the time that they had to keep supporting it. It had too much value to get rid of completely. However, they both encouraged the addition of more educational activities on the topics of drag and queer culture before the dance.<sup>41</sup> DragFest was retrenched over the course of the 2000s as a Whitman tradition. Yet, growing awareness and the arrival of openly gender nonconforming and trans students in Coalition leadership shifted the way that DragFest was viewed by LGBTQ+ activists on campus.

Despite the debate, for some queer students, DragFest had provided a consistent queer space on campus, one reason why the event was hard to cancel. However, the environment that that the dance provided was more welcoming for cisgender students. In the mid-1990s, Chris Wolf had a good time at making herself into a convincing drag king

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<sup>39</sup> Bob Peachey, “Of cabbages and queens: DragFest thrills students,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2000, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 1-2.

<sup>40</sup> Jeff Ives, “No More ‘DragFest,’” *Whitman College Pioneer*, Feb 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2001, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 6.

<sup>41</sup> Elana Stone, “Stone Interview – Nov. 15<sup>th</sup>, 2019,” transcript of an oral history interview done in 2019 by Ree Robson, Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 11-12; Shay, “Shay Interview,” 9, 12.

for DragFest and called the dance “a good time for everybody.”<sup>42</sup> Tristen Shay talked about how dances like DragFest were often an excuse for their cis queer friends to be more fabulous and wild than they would normally be. Shay often helped them prepare by doing things like dying people’s hair bright colors.<sup>43</sup> For a student population that tended to be closeted, having one night where everyone was dressed up gave queer students the chance to explore without standing out. 2011 graduate Bex MacFife noted that though DragFest didn’t really feel like a queer space, she still had fun as it was “playful” and a good party.<sup>44</sup> Although DragFest was meant as an event where all students could have fun with gender expression, this was easier for some students than others.

This prioritization of cis experiences at DragFest led to more commentary on whether DragFest was a worthwhile event in 2007. Some claimed that getting into other people’s shoes for a night was important, while others argued that DragFest was just appropriation that failed to generate more in-depth contemplation of gender issues.<sup>45</sup> As Tristen Shay commented, the movement of drag from queer spaces to straight spaces can end up presenting drag as more of a “freakshow” or “spectacle” for the audience. It can also promote ideas that it is “easy” to be a woman or be trans,<sup>46</sup> a problem embodied by the articles about DragFest’s “queens.” These debates over DragFest explain why, when Coalition Against Homophobia disappeared in 2014, so did DragFest. GLBTQ brought back some elements of the event, but intentionally left out the dance.<sup>47</sup> Controversy over

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<sup>42</sup> Wolf, “Wolf Interview,” 12-13.

<sup>43</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 9.

<sup>44</sup> MacFife, “MacFife Interview,” 10.

<sup>45</sup> “Pro/Con: Is DragFest good for Whitman?” *Whitman College Pioneer*, May 10<sup>th</sup>, 2007, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, 20.

<sup>46</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 12, 37.

<sup>47</sup> Christy Carley, “Dragfest Returns with Renewed Vigor,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, October 3, 2014, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, <https://whitmanwire.com/news/2014/10/03/dragfest-returns-with-renewed-vigor/>.

the point of DragFest led to the most popular part of the event being cut.

*Rocky Horror* and DragFest were two Whitman traditions that embodied the way that gender nonconformity was explored and presented on campus. DragFest, because of its connection to LGBTQ+ activism, was the center of regular debates about the necessity and appropriateness of a drag-centered dance at a straight school. On the other hand, *Rocky Horror*'s position as an independent, entertainment event, meant that very little of this debate touched it, despite the show's problematic connotations. However, both events ended up catering to a straight audience and only partially, if at all, addressing the unrealistic and stereotypical depictions of queer identities that they promoted. Fun won out over acceptability in these cases. Normativity reigns in small communities like Whitman and even breaks from that normativity often reproduced uncomfortable stereotypes or fetishized gender divergence instead of accepting it.

## **Unkept Promises and Inclusion vs Care**

In the 2000s at Whitman, most queer students were still closeted, and many dealt with homophobia. Trans students faced similar problems of their own. Even those who were openly gender nonconforming were still figuring out their own gender identity.<sup>48</sup> Students faced potential homophobia from multiple directions: parents who might be confused or reject them, other students being ignorant or cruel, and professors being dismissive.<sup>49</sup> Those who were closeted seemed to take the brunt of the most cruel or violent

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<sup>48</sup> Tristen Shay, Elana Stone and Bex MacFife all were gender nonconforming during their time at Whitman but were not openly out as the gender identity that they are now—although they did occasionally use gender neutral language for themselves while students.

<sup>49</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 9-10, 18-19.

homophobia and transphobia. As discussed in the last chapter, Tristen Shay, as well as Elana Stone, noticed that they tended not to be pursued by homophobes, while closeted friends did. Both attributed their relative safety to their confidence and being too obvious of a target.<sup>50</sup> However, Stone could recall being harassed in town occasionally, so they still faced their own difficulties.<sup>51</sup> At the same time that their gender nonconformity made them too well-known to be attacked, standing out could make them feel out of place at Whitman. As mentioned before, Tristen Shay vividly remembered attracting attention because of their rainbow mohawk and overall look.<sup>52</sup> Elana Stone commented that Whitman felt “predominantly heteronormative” and that as a gender nonconforming person, “the climate was such that... the overarching feelings at Whitman were that it felt—I felt very different, all the time. And so, that was very exhausting.”<sup>53</sup> On a different, but similar note, Bex MacFife mentioned that when she was looking at colleges, she was actually drawn to Whitman because she would stand out. She felt like at Whitman, she could potentially do more good by being openly weird than she would at other places. This attitude was in part what led her start expressing herself in more gender nonconforming ways.<sup>54</sup> While many queer students continued to feel out of place or faced homophobia at Whitman, trans students’ experiences of isolation from the Whitman community were amplified when they stood out as gender nonconforming. With only a handful of trans students going to Whitman at one time until the 2010s, being trans on campus was a stressful and alienating experience.

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<sup>50</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 18-19; Stone, “Stone Interview,” 14-15.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 6.

<sup>53</sup> Stone, “Stone Interview,” 14-15. Quote also used in chapter title.

<sup>54</sup> MacFife, “MacFife Interview,” 12-13.

Alternatively, Kiana Moore, one of the first people to transition at Vassar College, felt overwhelmingly positive about her life as a student. Moore came to Vassar in 1998 and started transitioning while a student. Although she experienced some sexual harassment as a student, she felt as though it was handled well by the administration, and she doesn't otherwise remember facing backlash or transphobia. In fact, she felt as though in her time at Vassar, she had been safe to explore her identity. So safe that she had found it difficult to move to life outside of the "Vassar bubble" because it was harder to avoid discrimination while being out as trans in other places.<sup>55</sup> Contrastingly to the experiences of students at Whitman, Moore felt very supported and protected in her time at Vassar. Although I took Moore's interview with a little bit of a grain of salt, I believe this recollection reflected the differences in the progress that Whitman and Vassar had made. Vassar, in its interconnected location and with a longer history of LGBTQ student communities and support—including other gender nonconforming students who had made themselves known on campus in the early 1970s<sup>56</sup>—had had more time to foster a tolerant and accepting community. Whitman, with only about a decade of experiences with just gay and lesbian issues by the time Shay arrived on campus, had not had anywhere close to the same amount of time to develop a culture that would feel supportive and safe.

Instead, while trans and gender nonconforming students had to deal with the questions and scrutiny that came with being visibly queer, Whitman did little to provide support for them. For example, when Stone was an Resident Assistant in the mid-2000s,

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<sup>55</sup> Kiana Moore, "LGBTQ Oral History Project -Kiana Moore," transcript of an oral history interview done by Logan Keane, July 16, 2013, Vassar College LGBTQ Oral History Project, Vassar College Libraries, <https://digitallibrary.vassar.edu/islandora/object/vassar%3A46599>.

<sup>56</sup> Like the student who liked to wear drag around campus, mentioned before. MacKay, *Wolf Girls at Vassar*, 105-7.

feeling uncomfortable with the lack of gender neutral bathrooms in the residence halls, they mapped out the bathrooms on campus and offered suggestions to Residence Life about what bathrooms could be made gender neutral. Their proposal was dismissed.<sup>57</sup> Although Whitman supported trans students in theory, many were left on their own, and trans issues were only addressed by the administration when staff made it a priority. As discussed a little bit in chapter 4, the work was left to trans students themselves. DragFest was a prime example how of trans students found themselves putting in the work to justify and produce events to create anything near trans inclusive spaces on campus. As Stone and Shay described, being a trans student in Coalition meant defending DragFest even when they may or may not have wanted to continue the tradition and diverting a lot of energy to dances and parties rather than other projects.

Furthermore, in their roles as campus LGBTQ+ spokespersons, trans students could feel overwhelming pressure. Shay remembered feeling like they were responsible for representing the entire trans community, a burden that had followed them throughout their teenage and young adult years. As Shay put it, when you're one of few out people, you shape people's understanding of queer identities and that puts a lot of pressure on you to not screw it up for someone else.<sup>58</sup> While Shay was accustomed to this burden, they remembered that there were other queer students in the community who hadn't understood why they needed to be the ones to "do the work." Shay empathized with those students who hadn't wanted to take on the burden of educating others and fighting homophobia.<sup>59</sup> Speaking about students pushing themselves to "do the work" though, Stone felt like as the

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<sup>57</sup> Stone, "Stone Interview," 9-10, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 16-17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

only openly LGBTQ Resident Assistant at Whitman during their student years, they pushed themselves to work “extra hard” to be a role model and make “safe and welcoming” spaces for queer students.<sup>60</sup> While it may be partially self-imposed, the emotional labor of being an out trans student was not properly supported by the institution and made student life more tiring and stressful for trans students.

In 2010, two Whitman College staff members, Jed Schwendiman and then Dean of Students Chuck Cleveland, declared their, and the administration’s, commitment to making Whitman more trans friendly and trans inclusive.<sup>61</sup> This pledge came nearly a decade after gender identity was added to Whitman’s nondiscrimination policy. At the same time, GLBTQ had begun to take a more prominent place in campus LGBTQ activism and had trans leadership under students like Bex MacFife. Out faculty like Professor Susanne Beechey and Professor Melissa Wilcox were supporting trans issues on campus. For example, Wilcox and GLBTQ intern Liam Mina started another conversation about gender neutral bathrooms in 2009.<sup>62</sup> Perhaps it was this shift in campus politics that inspired a declaration from allies in the administration about making this policy an actual reality.

Either way, the 2010s began a period of actual progress on trans issues at Whitman. While changes were not universal, and still slow to take hold, they have happened. This thesis does not have the time or the sources to explore this new chapter in Whitman’s history, but one example was that in 2013, the Associated Students of Whitman College (ASWC), Whitman’s student government, passed a resolution to commit to more gender

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<sup>60</sup> Stone, “Stone Interview,” 14.

<sup>61</sup> Karah Kemmerly, “Working to Make Whitman Trans-Inclusive,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, December 2, 2010, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, <https://whitmanwire.com/news/2010/12/02/working-to-make-whitman-trans-inclusive/>.

<sup>62</sup> Chelsea Bissell, “Gender-Neutral Bathrooms?,” *Whitman College Pioneer*, April 2, 2009, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, <https://whitmanwire.com/feature/2009/04/02/gender-neutral-bathrooms/>.

neutral housing for first years.<sup>63</sup> It took the college twelve years and a resolution from ASWC to change housing policies to be more inclusive of trans students. That was only a first step. Whitman as an institution was beginning to change and to make space on campus for trans students to exist as they were, rather than as they could be fitted in. Yet, Whitman's very early development of a trans inclusive nondiscrimination policy has made the institution's slow progress a disappointment and a sign of Whitman's failure to live up to promises made and fulfill the hopes of minority students.

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<sup>63</sup> Emily Lin-Jones, "ASWC Passes Gender-Neutral Housing Resolution," *Whitman Wire*, February 27, 2013, Arminda, Whitman College and Northwest Archives, <https://whitmanwire.com/news/2013/02/27/aswc-passes-gender-neutral-housing-resolution/>.

## Conclusion: The Small-Town College, Looking Forward

From 1989 to 2011, Whitman College developed two different LGBTQ+ student groups and a network of queer students and faculty (for the first time not all closeted) as well as updated its nondiscrimination policy to protect LGBTQ+ students. After being slow to catch up with the progress made at other similar nonreligious liberal arts colleges, the nineties at Whitman were an explosive time for LGBTQ+ issues on campus. Decades of the closet had pushed Whitman's queer students to a breaking point. They wanted a better campus for themselves. After skipping over gay liberation and the AIDS crisis, LGBTQ+ politics at Whitman emerged during the gay rights shift and followed the general trajectory of the national LGBTQ+ rights movement from then on. Once caught up with these milestones of LGBTQ+ inclusion, Whitman College was surprisingly at the front of the pack when it came to administrative policies that included LGBTQ+ students.<sup>1</sup> Whitman's culture has been slower to change but the seeds were sowed by the early 2000s.

All of this would have been surprising to a Whitman student from the eighties. Then, over a decade since Stonewall, it was still inconceivable for most to even come out, never mind openly talk about LGBTQ+ issues on campus.<sup>2</sup> Yet, by the end of that decade, several factors came together to provide an opportunity to push for a more inclusive and more open Whitman. The first of the burgeoning changes started with the expansion of a queer social network that grew beyond close personal networks, thanks to the efforts of the people of the Counseling Center like Sharon Kaufman-Osborn, a handful of queer students,

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<sup>1</sup> See Whitman's score of 16/20 in: Shane L. Windmeyer, "Whitman College," in *The Advocate College Guide for LGBT Students*, 1st ed (New York: Alyson Books, 2006), 314–16.

<sup>2</sup> Greenough, "Greenough Interview," 11

and queer faculty members and allies. This network could be relied upon; all members played their parts to support each other. Out of this network emerged the original Whitman Gay and Lesbian Association. As coming out became a political statement amongst LGBTQ+ activists, the combination of this political situation and the developing LGBTQ+ community at Whitman paved the way for students like Alex Cofield, Eric Tooley, and others to come out. Those students and their friends led the charge and demanded better from Whitman. No one individual could do anything completely on their own but in a small community, even just a couple people speaking out can create waves. By creating or taking over space on campus to talk about LGBTQ+ issues, identities and culture, these students encouraged others to take a stand and built a legacy in student organizations that could continue to fight to improve Whitman's community. Even as Coalition Against Homophobia and GLBTQ became staples of Whitman student life, visible queer student leaders helped guide and shape campus culture and activism.

Although other similar colleges, like Vassar College or Colorado College, had had LGBTQ+ movements since the 1970s, Whitman had lagged behind. One reason for the delay was the size of the community and the lack of diversity on campus. For all that the small size of the community helped individuals make powerful statements on campus, it was also a problem. Coming out would shape the community's opinions of someone. It also could not be easily kept secret beyond a small group of friends. As Alex Cofield discovered, coming out meant being known as "the lesbian" on campus.<sup>3</sup> Anonymity was hard. Being out meant being marked as different. A historically white and privileged college, the typical Whitman student has generally fit a very specific image and those who

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<sup>3</sup> Cofield, "Cofield Interview," 6-7.

do not fit that image stand out and often feel pressured to assimilate or hide their differences.<sup>4</sup> As discussed in chapter 4, sometimes being different was enough for a student to be targeted by violent homophobia. Not only has this culture limited political dialogues on campus throughout recent decades, it also added another layer of potential rejection and risk to personal safety to the fears around coming out.

Walla Walla, too, was another small community, with its own history of conservatism. Although some students came from similar areas, and thus understood the culture and felt comfortable here,<sup>5</sup> students from more urban areas often worried about their reception in town. For example, Chris Wolf, who grew up in Bellingham, commented that “I don't think I would have paraded through the streets saying, ‘I'm bisexual!’”<sup>6</sup> Due to the attitudes of the Walla Walla community, people in town were less likely to have had much exposure to or education about LGBTQ+ identities and issues.<sup>7</sup> Beyond the different levels of understanding, Walla Walla was remote. Students were cut off from urban centers and large queer communities, adding to feelings of isolation. Student perception of Walla Walla impacted their thoughts about Whitman and how safe it was to be out in college.<sup>8</sup>

The uncertainty and fear around being out hid the size and scope of the LGBTQ+ community on campus and prevented the formation of a cohesive community. Tristen Shay described Whitman in 2000 by saying, “I think a lot of people felt isolated because... they

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<sup>4</sup> Kelley, *The Ethnic Minority Student Experience and Diversity at Whitman College*, 152-3, 156.

<sup>5</sup> As Tristen Shay did, coming from an even more rural area. Shay, “Shay Interview,” 1-3.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf, “Wolf Interview,” 20.

<sup>7</sup> As noted by the Whitman community members who participated in panels on the topic at Walla Walla University. For example, Bex MacFife noted that the gap in experience and knowledge was obvious. See MacFife, “MacFife Interview,” 16.

<sup>8</sup> This thesis has necessarily had a biased perspective on Walla Walla, because the sources and interviews that I drew on tended to have a certain viewpoint, coming from Whitman students. Although I was curious about LGBTQ+ history in Walla Walla, and the local perspective about the LGBTQ+ activism and community on campus, there was neither time nor sources available to pursue that line of interest. It would be another important point of view on queer history here in the Walla Walla valley though.

were not out, and they did not know large communities of folks. Yet I knew so many people; yet so many people did not want me to connect them to each other or were not comfortable being out in public.”<sup>9</sup> The more that people did not come out, the more people felt alone. However, they weren’t alone, just cut off from each other. The breaking of these self-contained closets, through the creation of the Gay and Lesbian Association or of Coalition or through the exploratory spaces that events like DragFest provided, were what allowed the community to come together. As more of these individualized closets disappeared, Whitman felt like a safer and happier place for queer students.<sup>10</sup>

Another important element to the shifting landscape at Whitman was the national political situation and its interactions with Whitman culture. By the nineties, LGBTQ+ issues were firmly bedded into American political discourse. Furthermore, as the national LGBTQ+ movement turned toward arguments centered on acceptance, inclusion, and rights, rather than queer liberation, these ideas were more easily accepted into mainstream liberal views. Whitman College, especially in the past couple decades, has generally had a liberal tilt. It was never, however, particularly radical. New dialogues about bringing acceptance by ending homophobia and providing rights and legal protections could more easily blend with Whitman’s style of liberal politics. Instead of entirely restructuring campus culture, this rights and inclusion focus allowed for the multiculturalist movement that encouraged the creation of separate groups for minority students. Whitman added protections to its nondiscrimination policy, proving its allegiance to these ideals of

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<sup>9</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 6.

<sup>10</sup> At least this was true in the interviews used throughout this thesis. However, as mentioned repeatedly in Shay’s interview, other students had vastly different experiences of Whitman, and might have seen the community differently. Perhaps at a later point more of those perspectives will be represented in the LGBTQ oral history collection.

inclusion, while failing to follow up on deeper policy change until encouraged or forced to do so by LGBTQ+ students, faculty, and staff. The appeal of this form of LGBTQ+ activism explained how it was so easily, quickly and completely introduced on campus and became the norm for Coalition and GLBTQ.

Some have called Whitman's culture of political dialogue "Whitman Nice," pointing out the community's overall unwillingness to challenge communal norms or confront inflammatory political questions. As Bex MacFife said, she got tired in her senior year of "how much people agreed politically and how little people talked back, how nice people were, how it was getting in the way of actually doing things."<sup>11</sup> Beyond a lack of political debates or radical activism, MacFife's comment also exposed how the inclusion of minority groups has worked at Whitman. The "nice" attitude meant that once discrimination against a group was deemed unacceptable, overt bigotry would gradually drop off. However, passivity, apathy and more subtle forms of discrimination can limit the reality of this apparent acceptance and equality. As Tristen Shay said,

*You can't do that [use slurs] and have your social capital be still recognized and valued. You're quickly going to turn into somebody that people are going to see as social liability, right? So, I think in a place like Whitman, though, obviously homophobia still exists... all the "isms" exist, they're just going to exhibit themselves more cleverly, right? .... I think that more often than not people are truly changed for the better, as cheesy as it sounds, for getting to know people in such a small environment. People who never had to be nice to other people but all the sudden they have to because there's only ... so many of you.<sup>12</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> MacFife, "MacFife Interview," 9.

<sup>12</sup> Shay, "Shay Interview," 16-17, 41-42.

At Whitman, discrimination has typically been hidden or couched in layers of denial that make it hard to call out. Although the close-knit community has potentially forced people to learn better, as Shay hoped, it also just encouraged others to hide their bigoted beliefs more thoroughly. At Whitman today, marginalized students and community members still have had to point out and personally respond to instances of racism and discrimination, often to replies that they were exaggerating the problem.<sup>13</sup> This dismissiveness has arisen from the belief that because Whitman is so nice, liberal and inclusive, these community members must be seeing hate when there is none. This rhetoric of communal acceptance created a problem, one where bigotry is hidden to get around social norms without being recognized and thus allowed to plague Whitman students. By limiting active discrimination and adding legal protections, Whitman became a more inclusive space, while not uprooting institutional issues or the problematic elements of campus culture. Still, this attitude is not solely a fault of Whitman College, but a larger issue of many liberal spaces that can just be seen more clearly in a smaller community like this one.

Another issue stemming from this attitude toward diversity is that it makes challenging discrimination and encouraging actual equity and inclusion the problem of the marginalized communities alone. At colleges and universities, it has often been marginalized students who demanded inclusion and equality in the institution in the first

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<sup>13</sup> For example, see the conversations about the conversation (or lack of it) around a manifesta, a set of demands, published by women faculty of color at Whitman: Dalia Biswas et al, “We Need to Thrive: A Manifesta,” *Whitman Wire*, <https://whitmanwire.com/opinion/2019/04/25/we-need-to-thrive-a-manifesta/>; Danielle Hirano, “Remember the Manifesta? Reparations Are Due,” *Whitman Wire*, <https://whitmanwire.com/opinion/2019/05/16/remember-the-manifesta-reparations-are-due/>.

Also, see the student response vs the administration response to a couple hate crime incidents occurring in spring 2020: Grace Jackson, “Hate Crime Incident Sparks Outrage,” *Whitman Wire*, <https://whitmanwire.com/news/2020/02/27/hate-crime-incident-sparks-outrage/>.

place.<sup>14</sup> While “diversity, equity, and inclusion”<sup>15</sup> might then get included in the college’s messaging and rhetoric, there was typically little resulting shift in the culture or actions of the institution. Diversity became something to gain, students to admit, rather than a never-ending project.<sup>16</sup> While Whitman has made some changes, the college’s rhetoric has often exemplified this problem, making diversity into a statement rather than a challenge to shape the college around. The pressure has been put on the marginalized students themselves to point out issues, recruit other minority students and develop new policies.<sup>17</sup> At Whitman, as shown throughout this thesis, it has consistently been the job of queer students (and occasionally queer staff, faculty and allies) to force actual policy changes. Tristen Shay commented on the culture of activism at Whitman, saying that many queer students felt like they were being forced to do “the work” of activism.<sup>18</sup> Students may have felt the need to do this kind of labor because no one else would, like Elana Stone did.<sup>19</sup> Whether intentional or not, out students have often felt pressured to be activists as well as students, workers, RAs, athletes and whatever else they may be. That can cause a lot of problems for students. This additional burden to already busy student lives has been shown to cause increased stress, burnout, mental health issues and fatigue, even leading people to drop out.<sup>20</sup> Essentially, becoming a student activist for social issues could potentially impact

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<sup>14</sup> Garrett D. Hoffman and Tania D. Mitchell, “Making Diversity ‘Everyone’s Business’: A Discourse Analysis of Institutional Responses to Student Activism for Equity and Inclusion.,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (2016): 277–89, <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000037>.

<sup>15</sup> “Diversity, Equity and Inclusion,” Whitman College, accessed April 17, 2020, <https://www.whitman.edu/campus-life/diversity>.

<sup>16</sup> Chris Linder et al., “‘A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student’: Student Activism as Labor,” *The Review of Higher Education* 42, no. 5 (May 24, 2019): 37–62, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0044>; Hoffman and Mitchell, “Making Diversity ‘Everyone’s Business.’”; Preston and Hoffman, “Traditionally Heterogendered Institutions.”

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Shay, “Shay Interview,” 16.

<sup>19</sup> Stone, “Stone Interview,” 14.

<sup>20</sup> Linder et al., “‘A Student Should Have the Privilege of Just Being a Student’: Student Activism as Labor.”; Annemarie Vaccaro PhD and Jasmine A. Mena PhD, “It’s Not Burnout, It’s More: Queer College

someone's ability to be a student at all.

Whitman was and is not perfect. It has been marked by issues with diversity that have and continue to shape the campus and its culture. Whitman's LGBTQ+ community, as a result and as a part of this culture, has developed its own issues with inclusion, equality, and the overworking of student leaders. Whitman has become known as a "bubble" because of the tightly knit community and the separation of the campus from Walla Walla. While the "bubble" itself, and the apparently welcoming community it houses, has often been what draws students to the college, the "bubble" has created an environment that generates a unique set of problems for this campus and for the students who want to make Whitman a better place.

## **Finding Inspiration and Legacy**

After saying all of that, what makes the story of the LGBTQ+ community here at Whitman important? Taking the story at face value, it looks very different from the narrative of LGBTQ+ community development, both nationally and at institutions of higher education, laid out in the introduction to this thesis. However, it was this difference that made Whitman so interesting to write and to think about. The delays, lags, and alternate paths that shaped Whitman into what it has become were important. They revealed how every community is different and how each community must take its own journey to developing a community that is inclusive and supportive of LGBTQ+ people. They revealed how progress is not linear and not continuous. The college campus is a microcosm

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Activists of Color and Mental Health," *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health* 15, no. 4 (October 1, 2011): 339–67, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2011.600656>.

of everyday life; its cyclical nature only emphasizes the problems that we must solve when reforming our society on a grander scale. The story at Whitman just forces us to take a deeper look at how these issues manifest in places that are not centers of activism and progress.

This thesis has been a history that looked beyond the urban queer, the gay bar and national activism. It has not covered every story, every perspective of life at Whitman, because materials are limited and not everyone is willing to share their experiences. Yet, even in this small cross-section of the narrative, we can find a story about how people can make themselves a home no matter the situation. In our current society, where marginalized and queer lives are still being debated on both local and national stages, I believe these local histories will be important. As we look to create a future in which everyone is included and safe, we will need to think about how queer communities have carved out space to exist wherever they are, even amongst difficult or complicated circumstances. Every community has had its own internal struggle with queer lives, identities and issues.

As it stands, college campuses have long been spaces for youth to negotiate sexuality, gender expression and their futures. With more young people going to college now, and more that know or are discovering their own queerness, the landscape of college LGBTQ+ communities will be radically changed. Knowledge of the history of their institutions and the communities and support that has existed there in the past can be an inspiration, or it can be evidence with which to challenge their community to do better and be better.

## **Whitman As We Know It**

I began this thesis talking about the years from 1989 to 1993 at Whitman College and the massive amount of change achieved by the community in those four years. From the arrival of Cofield and Tobin to the emergence of the Gay and Lesbian Association and Coalition Against Homophobia to the protest against Senator Hayner's honorary degree, those years yanked Whitman from the depths of the closet and forced it to confront to queer issues (to a point). These four years set the stage for Whitman over the past three decades and shaped the community that current queer students have come to know. To see how drastic those changes were, let's examine another four years at Whitman: my own four years here.

In my first year here, in 2016, there was no Coalition Against Homophobia, which hadn't existed since 2014. There was only GLBTQ, which had a handful of members and a couple harried student interns. Those interns were trying to decide if we should be maintaining classic LGBTQ+ events and programming at Whitman or starting anew. That year, we changed GLBTQ's name to PRISM, trying to get away from the alphabet acronym that always seems to leave someone out. We managed to host a few events but not DragTastica, GLBTQ's version of DragFest that cut out the dance and focused mainly on the drag show. In my second year, Kyle Martz, a staff member at Whitman, stopped being PRISM's advisor because Whitman (finally) hired a staff member whose job was to support LGBTQ+ students. The LGBTQ+ Resource Coordinator took charge of the club but, as only a part time staff member, only could do so much. PRISM's membership was still small and big events like DragTastica continued just not happening, more due to an inability to actually plan it than any big decisions to end these events. In my junior year, I

became the only intern for the LGBTQ+ Program. I struggled to fit club meetings, program planning and projects meant to improve LGBTQ+ student life on campus in the five hours a week I was paid for. I ended up mainly focusing on meetings and projects like improving Whitman student's access to gender-neutral housing and thus dropping much of the typical event planning. PRISM's membership, now mostly first years, grew even smaller. In my last year here at Whitman, the new part-time LGBTQ+ Resource Coordinator was still trying to figure out how to actually get stuff done in the hours allotted and PRISM's membership has stayed very small. Honestly, it will be a real question to see if PRISM continues to survive much longer.

Looking at Whitman now, as compared to three decades ago, it is hard to believe that they are the same place. The introduction of a dedicated staff member focused on LGBTQ+ student issues has mildly bolstered a few small projects, like discussions on gender neutral bathrooms and housing, that were lagging before, but has caused no rapid change in LGBTQ+ life on campus. This is extremely unlike Whitman in the early nineties, when even just what professors like Tobin, Jeske and others could do in their free time made a massive difference for queer students. The velocity and impact of LGBTQ+ organizing on campus has stagnated. Whitman is now seen as, and generally experienced as, a fairly welcoming and accepting place for queer students. The "Whitman bubble" is someplace that people want to be. While not perfect, it has allowed queer students to build their own communities and connections outside of established groups. Student organizations may have become redundant. With more and more young people aware and easily accepting of their own queerness, LGBTQ+ communities, especially in higher education, will have to evolve. Whitman is no different. Maybe PRISM will disappear.

Maybe something else will replace it. No matter what, students will build their own communities. After all, until there is no longer hate, prejudice or discriminatory normalities, we will all still be queer.

## Appendix A – The Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project

The project started in 2019 when I got the idea to create an oral history project about LGBTQ+ history after going to the 2019 Creating Change Conference hosted by the National LGBTQ Taskforce. At that conference, there was a presentation from folks at Princeton University and Vassar College who had founded similar oral history projects for their campuses. After consulting with several professors from the Whitman History Department, I visited the Whitman College and Northwest Archives to pitch the idea. I applied for a summer internship grant from the Whitman History Department and awarded the grant, providing me with financial support to begin the project.

The idea for creating an oral history project specifically came about both because of the direct inspiration but also because of the usefulness of oral history as a source for queer history. Thanks to the closet and homophobia, finding significant physical materials for queer historical work is often difficult. Queer narratives have been lost to time due to the death of people who could have told their stories. In the 1970s, as oral history began to be viewed a legitimate means of historical research, queer oral history collections emerged and became a potential solution to the problem of a lack of sources.<sup>1</sup> Besides providing entirely new sources, oral history can also be used to fill in gaps in historical research, as the interviews can provide the backstory behind scattered or incomplete physical

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<sup>1</sup> Elise, Chenier, "Privacy Anxieties," *Radical History Review*, no. 122 (May 2015), <https://doi.org/10.1215/01636545-2849576>, 131-2 and Kevin Murphy, Jennifer L. Pierce, and Jason Ruiz, "What Makes Queer Oral History Different," *The Oral History Review* 43, no. 1 (April 1, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohw022>, 4-6.

materials.<sup>2</sup> Oral history has also been useful for queer history because of the style of the interviews. Interviews themselves revolve around a personal story/narrative, something which resonates with the self-discovery and personal realizations that tend to make up queer experiences. Interviews are a great method for sharing these very personal journeys and for talking about one's experiences with the self and with community.<sup>3</sup> For all these reasons, oral history was chosen as the method of research into LGBTQ+ history at Whitman.

After receiving the grant and settling plans for the internship itself, in summer 2019, I began research. Background research was conducted by sorting through the archives' Whitman College LGBTQ Collection, a scattering of files from former staff and faculty who had been involved in past and present LGBTQ+ student groups on campus. From these materials, I created a timeline of LGBTQ+ history at Whitman College, trying to determine how the LGBTQ+ student groups on campus developed. I continued background research by contacting former staff, faculty and Whitman alumni to chat about their experiences at Whitman in more informal conversations. These all helped build up my general understanding of the situation at Whitman in the eighties and nineties and gave me the chance to work on more detailed interview questions in the meantime. During this process, I also began building up a now extensive contact network for the project.

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<sup>2</sup> See D. A. Reichard, "Animating Ephemera through Oral History: Interpreting Visual Traces of California Gay College Student Organizing from the 1970s," *Oral History Review* 39, no. 1 (January 1, 2012): 37–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ohr/ohs042> for an example on how oral history interviews can be used to flesh out the narrative told by scattered archival sources.

<sup>3</sup> Murphy et al., "What Makes Queer Oral History Different," 11; Chenier, "Privacy Anxieties," 135; Katherine Fobear, "Do You Understand? Unsettling Interpretative Authority in Feminist Oral History," *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*, 10 (2016), <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1100&context=jfs>, 64-5, 67-8.

Initially, thanks to my own interest in the LGBTQ+ student groups as a former LGBTQ+ Program intern, as well as due to the materials and contacts available at this point, the project focused mainly on these student organizations. Specifically, early interviews mainly discussed the now-inactive Coalition Against Homophobia and the current LGBTQ+ group PRISM's predecessor, GLBTQ. The initial six interviews (with Schwendiman, Cofield, Greenough, Wolf and two with Tobin) covered the progression from a closeted campus to a campus with two distinct and busy LGBTQ+ student organizations over the period from the 1980s to the 2000s.

In the fall semester, I expanded the project to cover LGBTQ+ experiences at Whitman more generally. After completing those first six interviews, I felt that the project's inclusivity had been undermined and restricted by the initial goals of the project. I wanted to make sure a wide variety of LGBTQ+ identities were present in the archives. In particular, since the narratives of trans people have often been sidelined or excluded from LGBTQ+ historical projects, I dedicated the fall semester to recording the stories of trans and gender nonconforming alumni. I continued the project through an independent study, working with the Gender Studies department. Three new interviews (with MacFife, Stone and Shay) were conducted. Although these interviews continued to discuss the LGBTQ+ student groups Coalition and GLBTQ, I made sure to ask about the experiences of the narrators as trans and gender nonconforming youth at Whitman from 2000 on.

In the spring semester of 2020, the Whitman LGBTQ+ Oral History Project received the David Nord Award for LGBTQ+ research. As part of the project, I planned to host an on-campus exhibit, as well as complete a digital exhibit to have a unified online location for the project materials. Since I was finishing up senior year, I also planned to

hire several students as interviewers in hopes of finding someone interested in continuing the project after my graduation. Due to issues caused by COVID-19, many of the initial plans for the semester had to be discarded. In the end, new interviewers, Clara and Anika, worked on expanding on the boundaries of the time period covered by the project. Clara interviewed two alumni from the 2010s while Anika interviewed an alumna from the seventies. Since these interviews were only completed later in the semester and not processed fully until after the semester was over, only the first nine interviews are analyzed in this thesis. Also, the on-campus exhibit was cancelled and so, the digital exhibit was expanded to be a more in-depth look at LGBTQ+ history at Whitman and to share the work done by all students involved.<sup>4</sup> While the plans for the project in the future have not been finalized at this point, I hope that it continues to serve as inspiration for others to think about and create the historical projects that they want to see.

Although I was not sure at first that I would do this thesis, after completing the bulk of my research over the summer, I decided to go through with writing it. I wanted to be able to actually analyze these conversations that I spent months having and think them about in conjunction with my own thoughts about the campus that has been my home for four years. I hope that this thesis stands as a testament to the power of oral history, the importance of LGBTQ+ history from every community, and the work that I did throughout my senior year.

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<sup>4</sup> Whitman College LGBTQ Oral History Project Digital Exhibit, 2020, created by Ree Robson, [https://www.whitmanarchives.org/omeka\\_s/s/LGBTQhistory/page/main](https://www.whitmanarchives.org/omeka_s/s/LGBTQhistory/page/main).

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