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Gay-Straight Alliances in High Schools

Social Predictors of Early Adoption

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This article examines the patterns of emergence of gay-straight alliances (GSAs) in public high schools in the United States. These extracurricular student groups offer safe spaces, social support, and opportunities for activism to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and straight students. Combining data on various characteristics of public schools and state anti-discrimination laws with organizational records on the formation of GSA groups, the authors consider the conditions under which these groups are likely to form, as well as the social barriers to their formation. Using logistic regression and linear regression analysis, a number of characteristics common among those schools are isolated that founded the first wave of GSAs. The location of schools, the number of students, region of the country, and support groups outside high schools are among those social forces that promoted the early adoption of GSAs in public schools.

Keywords: *gay-straight alliances; gay and lesbian; youth*

Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are extracurricular groups in high schools that support and advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students. These groups include students of any sexual orientation, including heterosexual. GSAs are student-led groups that aim to provide safe and supportive space on high school campuses for LGBTQ

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students and their straight allies (Griffin, Lee, Waugh, & Beyer, 2003). They often educate the rest of the student body about LGBTQ issues, participate in activism, and advocate for better treatment of students who are, or who are perceived to be, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (Holmes & Cahill, 2003).

Before 1990, these groups, or others like them, were virtually nonexistent. By 2003, more than 1,200 GSAs had been formed (a total of 6.6% of all public high schools in the United States). Just a few years later, at the time of this writing, that number has doubled to 3,000 GSAs in the United States (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2006). This article is concerned with the characteristics of those schools that were “early adopters,” or those in which a GSA had formed prior to 2003. By focusing on this group, we can uncover the conditions that are conducive to young people’s formation of social support groups as well as their mobilization for social change. In the historical moment of an emergent trend, there is much to be learned by parsing out the early adopters from the nonadopters. Such an exercise reveals the unique set of social conditions that fosters the growth of this new form of social support and activism. Most schools did not form GSAs, and those that did are not simply randomly distributed across high schools throughout the country. We look closely at the patterns of emergence of GSAs in public schools across the country. These patterns reveal social forces supporting or suppressing the initial formation of these groups, which are key sources of support to young LGBTQ people.

The Emergence of GSAs

GSAs started in the late 1980s in California and Massachusetts. In California, a pilot project by the Los Angeles Unified School District, called Project 10, sought to protect lesbian and gay students from bullying. Support groups among high school students became an important part of that group’s work. In Massachusetts, the work of Project 10 was influential on the development of the first student groups that coined the term *gay-straight alliance*. Between 1987 and 1989, three GSA groups emerged in the greater Boston area. The faculty advisor of one of these groups went on to develop Project 10 East, which became a networking and advocacy group that promoted the development of similar groups across the state.

In 1990, a group of Boston-area gay and lesbian educators came together to form the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teachers Network. This group brought teachers and administrators together to foster safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ students and educators. This group would go

on to become a national organization in 1995, and to change its name in 1997 to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN). To date, GLSEN is the largest group supporting GSAs through education, the provision of resources such as "How to Start a Gay-Straight Alliance" manuals, as well as a national registry of GSAs, one of the sources from which we draw our data for this article (GLSEN, 2005).

In 1998, in the San Francisco Bay Area, the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network) was established "to empower youth activists to start Gay-Straight Alliance clubs and fight homophobia and transphobia in schools" (GSA Network, 2005). Like GLSEN, the GSA Network provides leadership training to students interested in starting a GSA, fosters networking among groups in different high schools, and supports legislation that promotes safe schools for LGBTQ students.

Individual GSA groups have met with varying levels of acceptance by high school administrations and school district boards. Some schools have refused to allow these groups to form, despite the fact that, under the federal Equal Access Act, any schools that recognize extracurricular student groups must allow any group access to school facilities, regardless of that group's mission. One school district in Salt Lake City, Utah, made headlines when it chose to cancel all extracurricular clubs rather than allow the GSA of East High School to form. With the help of Lambda Legal Defense, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and the National Center for Lesbian Rights, this GSA sued the school district, which settled the case by reversing its decision (May, 2000; Wascoe, 2005). Still, even at the time of this writing, some schools are resisting the formation of GSAs.

LGBTQ Youth in High Schools

In most cases, high school is hostile territory for young lesbians and gay men, or for anyone who does not closely conform to traditional gender roles. According to a 2001 report by GLSEN, 68% of LGBTQ students feel unsafe in their schools, and there is a good reason for this: physical assault, harassment, and threats are common. More than 20% of LGBTQ students polled report being assaulted because of their sexual or gender orientation, 41% report being shoved or pushed around, and 83% report being verbally harassed. In many cases, schools are not only failing to keep students safe from antigay harassment, but their faculty, staff, and administrators contribute to the problem. Almost a quarter of all LGBTQ students surveyed reported hearing homophobic remarks from faculty or staff. More than 80%

of LGBTQ students report frequently hearing homophobic labels such as *faggot* and *dyke* in their high schools, and more than 90% report hearing the word *gay* used as a derogatory term (GLSEN, 2001).

A great deal of research indicates that LGBTQ youth are at greater risk of a host of social problems, including depression, suicide, dropping out of school, homelessness, and drug use (Rotheram-Borus, Hunter, & Rosario, 1994; Russell, 2003). In addition to the harassment LGBTQ youth report in schools, many youth experience stress, conflict with their families, personal homonegativity, and sexual risk-taking (Carragher & Rivers, 2002; D'Augelli, 2002; Remafedi, 1987). Of course, a focus on the risks of sexual minority status can hide the resilience of LGBTQ youth, for which there is substantial evidence (Russell, 2005). The emergence of GSAs can be seen as an important act of not just resilience but creativity and leadership. With GSAs, young people have been leading LGBTQ activism in new directions. GSAs are new to schools, but they also depart from traditional forms of activism and support in the lesbian and gay community. For example, the inclusion of straight students in LGBTQ groups is a novel approach to organizing (Cortese, 2006).

Traditional LGBTQ Communities and Resources

The emergence of GSAs in high schools is particularly interesting given the way that lesbian and gay subcultures have developed in the United States during the past several decades. Lesbian and gay enclaves have historically been oriented toward adults and nurtured by institutions that exclude young people, such as bars and dance clubs (Fields, 2004; Levine, 1979). The social contexts in which young people are embedded are often quite different from those of adults (Wyn & White, 2000). Youth are often shielded from information about LGBTQ lives; in many instances, college is the earliest opportunity for young people to take a course in lesbian and gay history or in the sociology of sexualities.

Although many LGBTQ activist groups and community centers try to provide outreach to youth through various programs, there are still relatively few organizations run by and for young people in the lesbian and gay community, and youth issues are rarely key priorities for LGBTQ organizations (Fields, 2004; Irvine, 2002). As a result, online communities have become pivotal centers for young LGBTQ people to meet each other and test the waters of a nonheterosexual or other-gendered identity (Addison & Comstock, 1998). The emergence of GSAs in high schools as legitimate,

official student groups recognized by school authorities marks a moment in which young people are stepping forward to claim support for lesbian and gay rights on their own terms.

Explaining Early Adoption of GSAs

Existing scholarship can offer a number of insights into the emergence of GSAs. In particular, we draw from two areas of inquiry. The first is the sociological and social-psychological study of attitudes toward lesbian and gay people. Quite a number of studies have been done to assess the social inputs to antigay attitudes at the level of individuals. Researchers have a wide array of findings, and generally agree that important social factors producing antigay attitudes include religiosity and religious fundamentalism, gender, age, education, city size, and personal acquaintance with lesbian and/or gay people (e.g., Cotten-Huston & Waite, 2000; Ellison & Musick, 1993; Herek, 1984; Herek & Glunt, 1993; Kite, 1984; Stephan & McMullin, 1982). These studies provide theoretical grounding for our current project. They would suggest that, for example, in urban areas where it is more likely that students will have some personal experience with gay culture or gay people, high schools will be less antigay than in small towns and rural areas. Similarly, regions of the country where there are lower rates of religiosity and where there is less fundamentalism will be more LGBTQ-friendly, and more politically conservative regions will be more hostile to LGBTQ students than more liberal regions. Thus, if GSAs are more likely to form in political and cultural contexts that are more LGBTQ-friendly, then we would see more groups forming in cities than in small towns, and more in the West and the Northeast than in the Midwest and the South.

The second field of study that informs our analysis is social movements theory. The attention that social movements theory has paid to the issues of movement emergence and organizational support offers excellent insight into this case. In this literature, there is broad consensus that several factors are important in supporting the emergence and growth of social movements. The first of these broad categories is resources. Scholars have established that resources including volunteers, access to meeting spaces, social networks, channels of communication between leaders and constituencies, and so forth are of critical importance in supporting social movements, especially in their nascent stage (e.g., see Edwards & McCarthy, 2004; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995).

Following this thinking, we expect to find that schools with more resources will produce more GSAs. Although we do not have access to financial

information for schools, we can make some claims about other sorts of resources. We expect to find that the number of teachers and students in a school will positively impact the emergence of GSAs. Students in particular will be a valuable resource, because in very small schools, it will be unlikely that there will be a critical mass of LGBTQ or questioning students, and LGBTQ youth will feel more isolated. Furthermore, more teachers means a greater chance of finding a supportive advisor for the GSA. Young people can also draw from resources found outside the schools they attend. Although many of these resources are more or less consistent across the country, such as access to information on LGBTQ issues on the Internet and organizational support from national organizations such as GLSEN, other resources vary by location. In a few states, private nonprofit organizations have been established by adults to support young people's efforts to develop and nurture GSAs in their schools. If such support is effective, we should see more GSAs in each of these states relative to the rest of the country.

The second category of support for social movements is political contexts (Amenta, Caren, Fetner, & Young, 2002; Gamson & Meyer, 1996; Tarrow, 1994). Political contexts can refer to a wide variety of variables that affect how open or closed to social change through activism that a particular setting will be at a given historical moment. These might include, for example, supportive political leaders and the presence or absence of legislation favoring lesbian and gay rights. In her work on LGBTQ activism in corporations, Raeburn (2004) argues that institutional contexts are just as important as political contexts in understanding social movement activity. Institutional opportunities that may be relevant to the early adoption of GSAs may include, for example, a supportive high school principal or an inclusive sex education curriculum.

A third category of support is cultural context, which likely will be related to the political context. A number of scholars have made the case that cultural factors such as emotions, rhetorical framings, and collective identities are vital to social movements of all kinds (Bernstein, 1997; Calhoun, 1994; Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2001; Jasper, 1999; Snow, Rochford, Worden, & Benford, 1986). We suspect that the overall cultural context of the United States in the 1990s, in which lesbian and gay lives are experiencing increasing visibility, is an important contributing factor to the emergence of GSAs at this point in time. However, there are also more local cultural contexts that might in part explain the variations as to which high schools are early adopters of GSAs, including especially geographic variation in attitudes toward homosexuality.

To operationalize political and cultural context variables, we compare states based on the percentage of schools that have GSAs. We examine the

relationship between the presence or absence of statewide antidiscrimination protections for lesbian and gay people and the early adoption of GSAs. We expect to see a higher percentage of schools with GSAs in states that have laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation. We see this as a cultural variable as well as political one, because the antidiscrimination legislation not only provides policy support for lesbian and gay students who are discriminated against in their school or work, but this legislation is also an important cultural message of support for lesbian and gay rights. We expect that young people who live in states with these protections will have a greater sense of entitlement to gay rights, and therefore will be more likely to start GSAs.

In sum, we make the following predictions regarding the early adoption of GSAs in high schools.

School-Level Characteristics

Hypothesis 1: Urban high schools are more likely to be early adopters of GSAs than rural and small-town high schools.

Hypothesis 2: High schools in the West and Northeast are more likely to be early adopters than high schools in the South and Midwest.

Hypothesis 3: High schools with larger student bodies are more likely to be early adopters of GSAs.

Hypothesis 4: High schools with fewer low-income students (measured by the percentage of students who are eligible for federal lunch subsidies) are more likely to be early adopters than those with more low-income students.

State-Level Characteristics

Hypothesis 5: States with laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation will have higher percentages of early-adopting schools than states that have no such statewide laws.

Hypothesis 6: States with adult-run organizations to support the formation of GSAs will have a higher percentage of early adopters than states that do not.

Data and Method

For our data analysis, we use the *Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey*, a data set of all public schools for the 2001–2002 school year, from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2001–2002). We selected from this list high schools with at least

five full-time teachers and a total student body of at least 50. This eliminates a number of after-school programs, special education programs, and superintendents' offices that are listed as separate schools, as well as many, though not all, prison schools, reform schools, and so on. We then coded each school for the presence or absence of a GSA or similar group. We retrieved information about these GSAs from several sources, each of them private, non-profit, LGBTQ organizations: GLSEN, GSA Network, Out Proud, and Project 10 East (GLSEN, 2003; GSA Network, 2003; OutProud, 2003; Project 10 East, 2003). Each of these groups keeps a registry of GSAs on the Internet. Student leaders of GSAs use an online form to announce their formation and to post their group's information on the Web. Thus, our sample is not randomly generated; however, we have no cause to believe that this sample is biased. Furthermore, this combination of sources provides the most reliable data on GSAs available.

We analyze the data from two perspectives. First, we examine various school-level characteristics, such as region, size of student body, and proportion of students receiving free- or reduced-lunch assistance. Because our dependent variable, the presence or absence of a GSA, is dichotomous, we perform a logistic regression analysis. The model is represented by the equation:

$$\log\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right) = \beta_0 + \beta_1x_1 + \beta_2x_2 + \beta_3x_3 + \beta_4x_4,$$

where

$\left(\frac{p}{1-p}\right)$ represents the odds that a GSA will be present;

x_1 is a categorical variable describing the region of the country: South, Midwest, Northeast, or West;

x_2 is a categorical variable describing the location of the school as rural, town, suburban, or urban;

x_3 is the percentage of students enrolled who are eligible for either free- or reduced-lunch subsidies;

x_4 is the number of students enrolled in a school, measured in 100s; and

x_6 is the percentage of students enrolled who are White.

Next, we use linear regression analysis at the state level to determine the impact of statewide antidiscrimination law on the occurrence of GSAs. Our dependent variable is the percentage of schools in each state with GSAs. This percentage varies across states from 0% to 30.5% for the year 2003.

Table 1
Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) by Urban/Rural Setting

| | Rural | Town | Suburban | Urban | Overall |
|-----------------------|-------|------|----------|-------|---------|
| Schools with GSAs (%) | 2.0 | 2.3 | 12.1 | 11.6 | 6.6 |

Note: $N = 17,913$; $\chi^2 = 704.474$; $p < .001$.

Findings—School-Level Analysis

Proximity to Lesbian and Gay Subcultures

Urbanites tend to have more accepting attitudes than people who live in rural areas (Merton, 1957; Wilson, 1985), and research indicates that previous contact with lesbian and gay people is a strong predictor of tolerance for sexual diversity (e.g., Herek & Glunt, 1993). This also suggests a stronger likelihood for urban high schools to be early adopters of GSAs. Our findings support this hypothesis, but also include a surprising result. Although Table 1 shows that urban and suburban schools are much more likely to be early adopters of GSAs than schools in either towns or rural areas, suburban schools are even more likely than urban schools to form GSAs. We also find a significant positive relationship between this variable and GSAs in our logistic regression in Table 3. Although we are not surprised that urban environments have a relatively high number of GSA groups in their high schools, we are struck by the prevalence of GSAs in suburban areas. These findings suggest a more complicated relationship between town size and early adoption of GSAs than we expected.

Region

Our hypothesis that we will find more GSAs in regions of the country that have traditionally been more supportive of lesbian and gay rights is also supported by both crosstab and logistic regression. Table 2 captures the relationship between region of the country and the likelihood that a high school will have a GSA. Even though there are more high schools in the South and the Midwest, there are more schools with GSAs in the West and the Northeast. Similarly, the logistic regression (see Table 3) demonstrates that if we order the regions accordingly, from South to West, for each shift in region the chances that a high school will have a GSA increase by 1.68. This finding is consistent with our expectation that a more liberal political climate will result in a greater number of early-adopter high schools.

Table 2
Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) by Region

| | South | Midwest | East | West | Overall |
|-----------------------|-------|---------|------|------|---------|
| Schools with GSAs (%) | 2.3 | 3.8 | 11.4 | 14.5 | 6.6 |

Note: $N = 17,913$; $\chi^2 = 720.345$; $p < .001$.

Table 3
Logistic Regression Analysis

| Variable | <i>B</i> | Exp(β) | <i>SE</i> | 95% Confidence Interval | |
|--------------------------------------|----------|----------------|-----------|-------------------------|-------|
| | | | | Lower | Upper |
| Region | .568 | 1.797 | .031 | 1.690 | 1.910 |
| Rural-urban | .439 | 1.551 | .038 | 1.438 | 1.672 |
| Students eligible for free lunch (%) | -2.439 | .087 | .181 | .061 | .124 |
| Size of student body | .093 | 1.098 | .004 | 1.089 | 1.106 |
| Constant | -5.785 | .003 | .143 | | |

Note: $N = 17,913$; all variables significant at the $p < .001$ level.

Resources

Our hypothesis that high schools with more resources will be more likely to have GSAs is strongly supported by the data. For example, schools with more students are more likely to be early adopters of GSAs, according to our logistic regression analysis (see Table 3). This variable is a measure of the number of students in units of 100. The data indicate that for every additional 100 students in a school, the chance of a GSA forming increases by 9%.

The financial resources of the student body also matter in the early adoption of GSAs. Considering the percentage of students in a school eligible for free and reduced lunch subsidies, we find that schools that serve poorer students are less likely to be early adopters of GSAs. Schools that serve more poor students are notoriously strapped for resources (Archer, 2000). In addition to problems in providing good educations for poorer students, extracurricular activities of all sorts suffer, and GSAs are no exception.

Table 4
Linear Regression Analysis of State Characteristics

| Variable | Unstandardized Coefficients | | Standardized Coefficients | <i>t</i> | Significance |
|--|-----------------------------|-----------|---------------------------|----------|--------------|
| | <i>B</i> | <i>SE</i> | β | | <i>p</i> |
| Statewide antidiscrimination law | 7.498 | 1.566 | .483 | 4.787 | .000 |
| Gay-straight alliance support organization | 18.385 | 3.322 | .515 | 5.524 | .000 |
| Constant | | | | -1.164 | .251 |

Note: $N = 17,913$; $R^2 = .646$.

Findings—State-Level Analysis

Antidiscrimination Laws

To analyze political contexts, we create a second data set with state-level variables. We use the percentage of high schools in each state as the dependent variable. We expect to find that relevant state policies would impact the rate of GSA formation in a state. First, we evaluate the relationship between antidiscrimination protection for lesbian and gay people at the level of the state and the presence of GSAs. We expect to find that states that have prohibited discrimination based on sexual orientation will have higher percentages of schools with GSAs. According to Table 4, this relationship is significantly positive.

GSA Support Organizations

Our state-level analysis also provides insight into the effectiveness of support from external resources. In some states, private, adult-run organizations have been established to foster the development of GSAs in high schools, as GLSEN has done at the national level. If statewide social movement organizations are successful, we will find that there are more GSAs in states where these organizations have been established. Table 4 indicates that there is in fact a strong positive relationship between the presence of an external organization and the rate of GSAs in a state. Coalitions with LGBTQ organizations are helpful to young people who want to start a GSA in their schools.

Discussion

Our findings indicate that the social contexts in which young people live have a major impact on their ability to form GSA groups. LGBTQ and supportive straight high school students who live in urban or suburban settings and in a region of the country with liberal or progressive political leanings are more likely to start a GSA than their counterparts in rural areas, small towns, or conservative regions. We also find that school resources play a role in supporting the formation of these student groups. Larger schools are more likely to have GSAs, perhaps because there is room for a wider variety of social spaces than at smaller schools. It may also be that a critical mass of LGBTQ students is difficult to come by in smaller schools, or that friendships among these students are more hampered by social pressures in smaller schools. A school's financial resources are also important to the early adoption of GSAs. An increase in enrollment of students that are eligible for lunch subsidies correlates with a lower rate of GSAs. This means that schools in wealthier neighborhoods are more likely to have these support groups than schools in poorer neighborhoods.

Given the lesbian and gay enclaves in cities and the more tolerant attitudes of urbanites, we were not surprised that urban environments have a relatively high number of GSA groups in their high schools. We were, however, struck by the prevalence of GSAs in suburban areas. This is puzzling, because suburban areas tend to be more segregated by class and race than cities (Massey & Denton, 1993). Because suburban high schools tend to have less diversity across these social categories, we would expect suburban educators to be less equipped to deal with sexual diversity in the student body than in urban settings. However, the data show quite clearly that suburban high schools are on the forefront of the emergence of GSAs, matching and even passing the rate of GSAs in urban areas.

This finding may indicate that there is some larger cultural shift affecting suburbanites to a greater degree than those who live in other settings. It is possible, but unlikely, that the increased visibility of gay and lesbian people in television and film has a greater impact on suburban populations than others. Another possibility is that the relative homogeneity of the suburbs creates a welcoming social space for LGBTQ youth, who are often "like" their straight counterparts in socially significant ways, such as race and class. Furthermore, it may be that urban settings are subject to unique barriers to GSA formation. That is, whereas some social forces in cities create a climate that supports the early adoption of GSAs, others push in the opposite direction. For example, McCready (2003) argues that the special needs of queer youth of color make it more difficult to form GSAs in urban schools.

Although further study is needed, we suspect that another source of the suburbs' place at the cutting edge of GSAs is the economic strength of these neighborhoods relative to cities, small towns, and rural areas. Suburban property tax bases create more resources per student for these high schools, which as we show, makes a significant difference in the amount of support for LGBTQ students that they can offer.

Our findings also indicate that the political and cultural contexts that contribute to the early adoption of GSAs extend beyond the high school itself. Organizations outside of high schools can support the early adoption of GSAs. Also, policies at the state level can support the efforts of LGBTQ students and allies. The presence of an antidiscrimination law protecting lesbians and gay men at the statewide level has a strong positive relationship with the percentage of high schools that host GSA organizations. These antidiscrimination policies do not provide direct protection for the formation of GSAs. Federal legislation guarantees the rights of students to form these or any other extracurricular school group. However, the presence of a statewide antidiscrimination law may support the early adoption of GSAs through two mechanisms. First, the presence of antidiscrimination law is an indicator of a political context that is relatively supportive of lesbian and gay people. As social movements theory notes, the political context is an important predictor of social movement emergence. Second, a state's political context may also affect the attitudes of its residents. Students who live in states that offer such protections may have more tolerance for sexual diversity than in other states where antigay discrimination is not prohibited. Both of these may facilitate the early adoption of GSA groups. The presence of laws banning discrimination against lesbians and gay men may send a message to young LGBTQ people that their concerns are important, and that they should stand up and be counted. This side-effect of antidiscrimination policy is not one that has captured the attention of scholars in social policy but is worthy of further study.

The upsurge in GSAs may also indicate the beginning of a generational shift in attitudes about sexuality. More young people are feeling strong enough about equality for LGBTQ people that they are forming new organizations in their high schools. We are particularly intrigued by the role of straight allies in the formation of these groups. It is possible that high school youth are refining identity politics to meet their needs or their agendas for social change, or it may be that these collaborations indicate a new approach to activism that pays little attention to identity at all (Holmes & Cahill, 2003). GSAs challenge the LGBTQ movement not only to focus on youth-specific issues but also to rethink their strategic focus and their potential support base.

As social movements theory would predict, the resources available to potential activists, as well as the political and cultural contexts in which they are situated, are important predictors of where and when a new form of activism will emerge. However, like in many fields, social movement scholars often do not give enough consideration to the unique social contexts of youth. High schools, which have significant power to organize and regulate students' lives, can be uniquely conducive to activism or can be harsh repressors. As Raeburn (2004) argues, the institutional contexts are just as important to social movements that operate within institutional boundaries as political contexts are to those that target the state. Our findings support this claim, even as they suggest new research questions on more specific aspects of the institutional context. Of particular interest in future work is the inclusion or exclusion of content about LGBTQ issues in the curriculum, such as history, social studies, or sex education, as well as the impact of students' attitudes toward homosexuality, or toward sexual diversity in general.

Although our study is limited to the patterns of the earliest moment of the emergence of GSAs, it will be interesting to see whether this phenomenon, triggered by these pioneering schools, is able to overcome some of the social barriers we have identified here. Perhaps as a critical mass of GSAs is formed, the practice of creating high school groups supporting LGBTQ youth will become easier. Given the transitory nature of high school, however, it is also possible that these groups will fold after founders and other leaders graduate. Furthermore, our study takes for granted the supportive and activist goals of these GSAs. More work needs to be done to determine whether, for example, the presence of a GSA on a high school campus reduces the number of antigay threats and comments, makes LGBTQ students feel safer, or creates a base for activism.

Inequalities in LGBTQ Supports

Overall, the high school climate is harsh for LGBTQ students, as well as gender nonconforming students, throughout the United States. Antigay attitudes are pervasive, and antigay statements and actions are common. However, the recent emergence of GSAs can be seen as a promising development, creating a safe space for support, education, and activism for LGBTQ and supportive straight youth. By tracking the early adoption patterns of GSAs, we can better understand the social forces that are conducive to growth of a new form of activism. We also identify those aspects of the social context that make LGBTQ youth and their straight allies feel more comfortable, supported, and/or empowered enough to create, name, and register a GSA group.

Our findings strongly suggest that GSAs began to emerge in just those places that are the most supportive of LGBTQ people. On one hand, this is good news for LGBTQ students: students are finding ways to create spaces in some high schools that are more supportive of LGBTQ students. On the other hand, our findings make clear that there are structural inequalities in the levels of support that LGBTQ youth can get in high school, and that the place they live has a great impact on the likelihood that they have access to, or can start, a GSA. Students in small schools, poor neighborhoods, rural areas, or the South or the Midwest were significantly less likely to have a GSA available to them during the period under review here. Because young people have little say in where their families live, these inequalities of place and of resources can be insurmountable, at least until adulthood.

Across the United States, students rely on the Equal Access Act, a federal law, for legal guarantees that they can form whatever extracurricular groups they choose. However, the wide geographical variation in antidiscrimination law, in attitudes toward homosexuality, and in the amount of resources that high schools have means that there is no guarantee for many LGBTQ students that they will find a safe and supportive space in their high schools. Similarly, the external organizations that we find are successful at encouraging the formation of GSAs are much more likely to exist in cities and in politically liberal states than elsewhere. Our findings would argue for both policy and activism that addresses these inequalities in the amount of support available to LGBTQ students by location.

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