

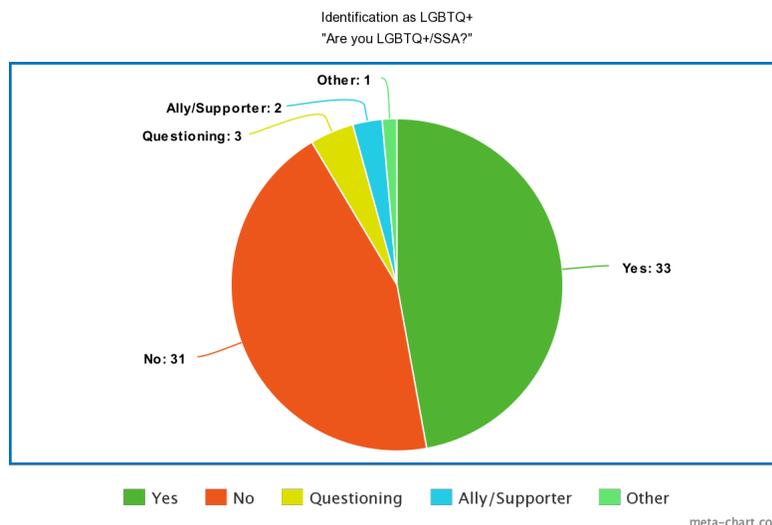
Abstract

This study is conducted to better understand conceptions of sexuality, gender, and The Closet in Christian community, specifically Gordon College. Specific stories of being in The Closet, or out of The Closet are shared, along with how people of all backgrounds understand The Closet. Responses range from people sharing hateful responses to the project, all the way to people who are LGBTQ+ sharing their stories. This essay will be a commentary on the conducted study, share the demographics of the responders, and will directly tie in quotes from students. **Please note that in the charts, 'Other' is in place where students shared hateful and inappropriate language to demean myself, and the project, or to be a troll.**

Introduction and Data

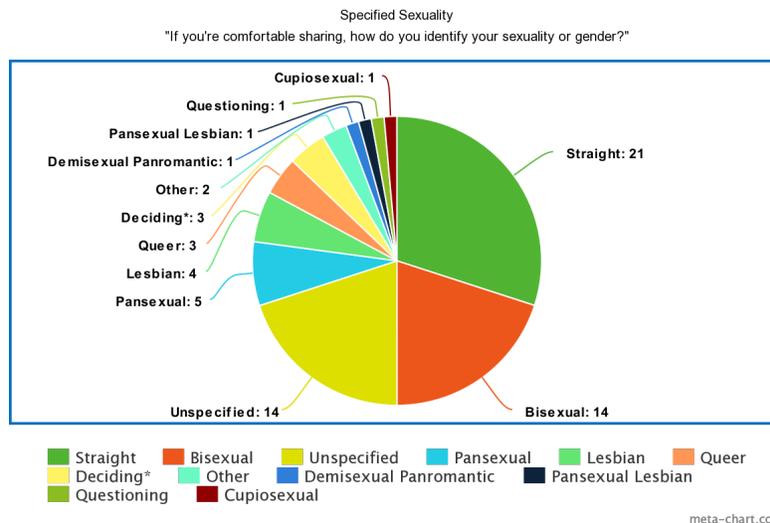
Gordon College is a nondenominational Christian College on the Northshore of Boston, Massachusetts. In 2014, the president of the college asked for religious exemption from President Obama's law against discriminating against LGBTQ+ people in the workplace, putting the school in hot water. While it has been six years, this decision still impacts many students. This study exists to hear from current students in 2020, both LGBTQ+ and Non-LGBTQ+, and to examine current opinions on sexuality, gender, and The Closet at Gordon College. An anonymous survey was sent to the Gordon College community, and 70 students responded. The importance of anonymity in the study was to allow students who were not out of The Closet a voice in the conversation. The 70 respondents all came from different backgrounds, and there is a drastic range in opinions and responses to the project.

Of the 70 students that responded, 33 (47.1%) identified as LGBTQ+, 31(44.3%) did not identify as LGBTQ+. 3 students responded as questioning, 2 responded as a 'Strong supporter' and 'ally', while one student used the opportunity to be hateful towards the project by linking the website to the Westboro Baptist Church's website.



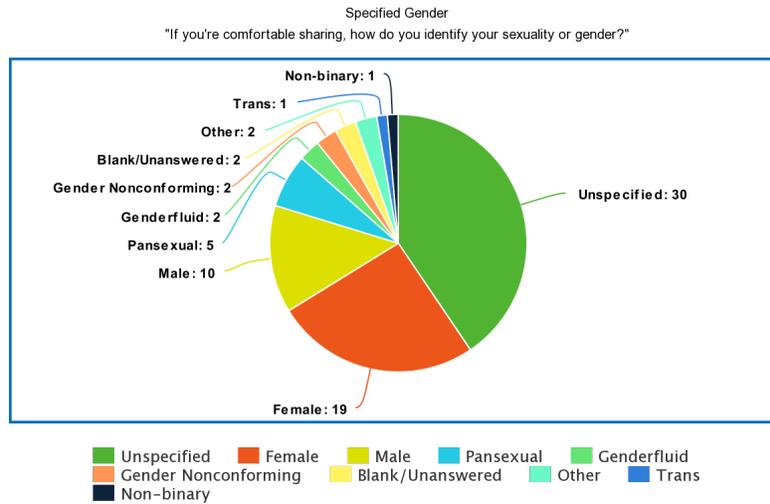
The diversity in identities allows for differing opinions and more voices to be heard from different backgrounds. Each of the people that identify themselves as LGBTQ+ in this chart have their own different identities and perspectives, while everyone that does not identify as LGBTQ+ also have their own perspectives on what The Closet means to them. For the project,

it's also important to have those minority voices of questioning, or uncertainty, as it allows for a much more diverse voice than a black and white picture. While the above chart shows questioning as one slice, in the breakdown of sexual identities, there is a breakdown between 'questioning' and deciding*.

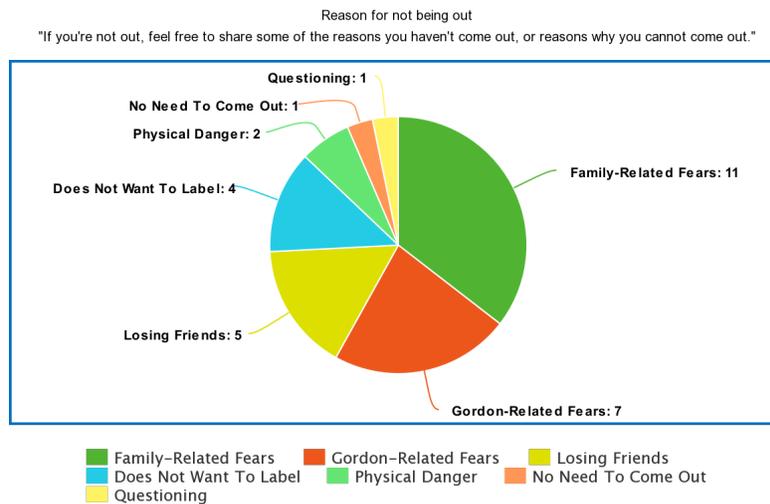


Deciding* sexuality is a category I created, as certain participant's identities didn't necessarily easily fit into the questioning category. The people who identify as questioning in the first chart identified specifically as bisexual or unspecified. The deciding* category was created to encompass those who gave a specific identity in the sexuality response section, but believed sexuality to be fluid, and weren't confident with their identity. For example, one participant identifies as bisexual, but isn't confident because they believe their sexuality is fluid: "I think i'm bisexual." One participant here that self-identified as queer did so because they are uncomfortable with all other labels. The one person in the 'Questioning' category chose to identify as such for a very specific reason, stating "I have been questioning since senior year of high school, and I just am not really sure to be honest! I guess I just like the idea of not really having a sexuality, just letting who I like be who I like!" Of the 14 respondents didn't answer the question, 12 specified their gender only, and 2 left the question entirely blank. It's worth commenting here that the 2 participants noted as others were trolling the project, and using hateful language against it. One of these participants identified their sexuality(and gender) as "Intelligent" while the other identified as "Normal / Non-perverted (not a f**)". As I noted in the Abstract, I've chosen to label hateful comments and trolls under the 'Other' category. I'm doing this because I don't want the hateful language itself in the data, but I want to represent the fact that those are some results I got from the project.

The next piece of gathered data is the participant's gender identity. Although 12 participants did not specify their sexual identity, 30 participants did not specify their gender identity. It's worth noting that although some gender identities may be assumed, the chart is purely based on responses, not assumptions. For example, a few participants identified their sexuality as Lesbian, but did not share their gender identity. It could be assumed that if one is identifying as Lesbian, they would also identify as female. However, because these participants did not directly share their gender identity, I've chosen not to express an assumption in the data, and have placed them in the Unspecified category.



The diversity in participants' sexuality and gender create a space where many different voices can be represented in the data. It also allows each participant to have a slightly different understanding of what it means to be in and out of The Closet. The participants' were asked, if they were in The Closet, to share the main reason they were. The results are diverse, and each person has a different reason for being in The Closet, even if they are in the same slice in the chart. This data shows not only that The Closet means something different to each person, but also that each person interacts with The Closet in a different way.



In the majority of the cases, people did not want to come out because of family-related fears, such as being disowned or emotionally and physically cut off. Many of the reasons were related to being specifically at Gordon College. One participant cannot come out because they fear being mistreated on their sports team and many do not want to face the stigma around being LGBTQ+ at their Christian college. In a few cases, some students felt they would be in physical danger if they were to come out, whether at school or home. There were a handful of students who wouldn't feel unsafe in coming out, but they don't feel a need to label their sexuality. In one case, an LGBTQ+ identifying person is in a heterosexual marriage, and does not feel a need to come out to anyone other than their spouse, which they have done.

The goal of these charts and this introduction is to give background to who these students are. Each student has important information, thoughts, and opinions to share, and the demographics are important to keep in mind.

Introduction to the Arguments

In this paper, I share students' conceptions of LGBTQ+ identities and The Closet, and how it relates to their experience in Christian community. Responses varied to the question, "In your own words, what is 'The Closet'?" These responses mainly fit into five categories, which are 'The Time Bounded Nature of The Closet', 'The Closet as a Refuge of Safety', 'The Closet as Contemplation', 'A Place of Shame', and 'The Closet as a ridiculous unnecessary evil'. These categories will be explored in the next section of this paper. Based on these descriptions of The Closet, I argue that The Closet, as a construction of a heteronormative and cisgendered society, can be both a place of marginalization and empowerment. This claim of The Closet being considered a place of marginalization and empowerment are both found in these five categories of responses below.

The Time Bounded Nature of The Closet

To many LGBTQ+ people, The Closet is a place they wait, or somewhere they are forced to be. However, some LGBTQ+ people talk about The Closet being a time, rather than a place. According to some participants, The Closet is not a place or an answer to the question "Where?" It is a when. Some participants only referred to The Closet as a period of time, something to be moved past, conquered. Language such as "When someone is LGBTQ+ but hasn't told...", and "The time in one's life where someone is actively not sharing..." imply that to many individuals, the idea of The Closet is not a place where they mentally are, but it's when they are. It is worth noting that the majority of people who used the language of when did not identify as LGBTQ+. There were LGBTQ+ participants that used this language as well, but it's worth noting that they were a large minority in using this language.

To these participants, The Closet is intrinsically a point on a timeline that is to be moved past. When The Closet is a point in time, coming out is directly tied to progress. Coming out of The Closet is when someone moves past a dark time. It's important to remember that the students writing these belong to Christian Communities, and it's worth noting that when they talk of a time, or a when, it's almost certainly tied to being in a Christian community. The closet being a time means it's a formative place. One student who agrees The Closet is time bound writes, "Don't push people to talk about their sexual or gender identity unless they're open to the conversation, and don't act awkward about it." It's important to never push someone out of The Closet before they're ready. This is because it's not just a place, but it's pushing them out of a time they aren't ready to leave. What can this understanding add to the current conversation regarding LGBTQ+ identities in Christian communities? If The Closet is intrinsically a moment of time, what does that mean about those who are unable to come out? If we believe coming out of The Closet to be someone leaving a time behind, what happens if a person is forced back into The Closet? How does one come out of a when? It's worth exploring these questions, to better comprehend what it means if we purely view The Closet as a point in time.

The Closet as a Refuge of Safety

To many others, however, The Closet is not necessarily described as a period of time. To many LGBTQ+ and non-LGBTQ+ people, The Closet is a place they can retreat too as a place of safety. It's something they can move in and out of depending on who they're around. For example, a participant who identifies as Gender Nonbinary believes The Closet is "A personal barrier of sorts that keeps those in the community from being open about their gender or sexuality. This can be a safety or forced aspect of their lives." Although they acknowledge that it can be a forced aspect, they believe it to be a safety that someone can use to barrier themselves from the assumed hetero/cisnormative society. An LGBTQ+ person can be out of The Closet to their friends, yet use The Closet as a tool for safety. This could be done at work to not be discriminated against or to be used at home to have support from their families.

Another example of this is with a Pansexual-identifying participants response. They believe, "The closet is a necessary survival technique that those who do not fit in the heteronormative story use[d] to exist in a world where they would otherwise experience harm or negative consequences. It can be a little sad not being able to authentically be your whole self, but The Closet is also a kind of safe space where I don't have to explain private topics in my life." The fact that they don't have to explain certain topics externally provides a feeling of safety to this participant, that they are able to exist in this heteronormative world without fear.

The Closet as contemplation

In my findings, I found the majority of the understandings regarding The Closet to be either negative, with it being dark and scary, to positive, with it being a place of safety. There are voices however, who don't see The Closet as being a positive or a negative place, but rather a healthy place where they can figure out their identity. One participant responded, saying that The Closet is "a place of contemplating your sexuality without publicly announcing it." The idea of The Closet being contemplation allows for those who are questioning their sexuality to be able to question in a safe space.

Being able to be in deep reflective thought about one's identity is crucial to these participants before one is able to come out. There must be a contemplation of one's sexual and gender identities, and there also must be a contemplation of whether or not that person should come out. The closet allows LGBTQ+ individuals to safely contemplate all these things, without having to worry about their safety.

Another participant responded saying this of The Closet: "It's when you know or suspect that you are LGBTQ+ but have yet to make it public." To this individual, The Closet is a waiting space where they wait to make their identity public, but also is a place where one can suspect their identity is not heterosexual/cisgender, and they are able to use The Closet to contemplate whether or not their suspicions are accurate.

The Closet as a Place of Shame

Some of the deepest responses are from participating students who believe The Closet to be a place of shame. Due to the heavy nature of students sharing about the shame they've felt, this section will have longer quotes from students and less paraphrasing from me, so that their voices in this deep matter can be fully expressed. One participant who identifies as lesbian,

and who is partially out of The Closet, but not entirely out due to fears of safety. This participant also is afraid of how those who haven't been told will react. This participant writes: "Being in The Closet was a place filled with a lot of shame for me. I felt like I was walking around every day with a key part of my identity hidden. It's surprising how often topics come up relating to sexuality in daily conversations and I'd be left unsure of what to say. Being in The Closet also gives you the unique experience of hearing the real opinions of many of your friends. People don't know you're gay so they're unafraid to make homophobic or discriminatory comments in front of you. It's a place where you don't feel like you fit in with the straight people, but you also don't feel like you fully belong to the LGBTQ+ community either because you aren't bearing the burden as much as some other people are. It feels like a balancing beam where falling off either side could lead to possible dangers and the feeling of not belonging." This in its essence covers many LGBTQ+ identifying students feelings of being in The Closet. It's heartbreaking to read, but the reality of it helps LGBTQ+ identifying students realize that they are not alone in their shame.

Another LGBTQ+ identifying student writes that it's like "Being stuck behind a wall of societal shame and not feeling comfortable talking about who you are because of it." The final piece of information I've chosen to share in this section comes from a non-LGBTQ+ identifying person. They write that "I'm not sure, but from what I've heard from some class discussions, there are a lot of people that support gay rights, but there is still a handful that doesn't, and inflict a lot of pain and shame on this community. I heard a terrible story from my friend about how he could not lead a LGBTQ+ Bible study at Gordon because [A Gordon Administrator] said they were not holy due to their sexual orientation. I can only imagine how much worse it would be for people being in The Closet with gender identity."

The Closet as a ridiculous unnecessary evil

The final point that was regularly brought up is that The Closet is unnecessary and/or an evil place. The participants in this category believe The Closet to be a dark, scary, unnecessary, or even ridiculous place. To them, the whole idea of The Closet either doesn't make sense or it carries such a negative connotation that it must be 'eradicated'. The first example is a student who writes "My experience being in "The Closet" seems ridiculous. The only reason I'm in "The Closet" is because everyone assumes I am straight. I don't even try to hide it, and I have never explicitly stated whether or not I am straight, but if you asked anyone who knows me, they would assume I am straight simply because I haven't said otherwise. I understand why historically, being straight is the "norm", but I don't understand why that has to [be] everyone's first assumption of people." This student has never announced their sexual identity, but it's assumed to be straight. To this student, it's ridiculous that unless otherwise stated, straight is the default sexuality.

Moving to the more unnecessary evil aspect of this section, one student writes that The Closet is "a lonely, depressing place where you have to always wear a mask to hide who you truly are." The final piece from a participant is an in depth explanation of why The Closet has been dark and dangerous. This participant writes: "The Closet is a very dark and lonely place where many in the LGBTQIA+ community must run to when they have no safe place to go. People are in The Closet for various reasons, but the main one is fear. Fear of being disowned by their family and friends, fear of being excommunicated from churches and camps, fear of

being fired on the basis of sexuality, fear of being bullied, fear of being mistreated, fear of being misunderstood, fear of being unsafe, fear of getting shot and killed, fear of getting beaten, fear of getting raped, fear of losing everything, fear of being excluded, fear of being degraded, fear of everything. The closet is where I lived for 20 years of my life. I am surprised that I survived. Sadly, homophobia and places that do not affirm queer identity pushes people into the dark closet where hopes and dreams are stripped away. Many people lose their life in The Closet. I almost lost mine there. It is not the community's fault for being forced into The Closet. It is those who continuously create a hateful and unsafe environment for people like me. The closet is where one must go when there is no other option. When there is nowhere else to go. When there is nothing left but fear.” This student shares their dark reality of being in The Closet, and the fear they felt. To all of these individuals, The Closet is a place that should not exist, and it’s dark, depressing, unnecessary, and even ridiculous.

What does this mean for a Christian Community?

What then does this data tell us about The Closet? I argued earlier that The Closet, as a construction of a heteronormative and cisgendered society, can be both a place of marginalization and empowerment. I argue this because although many people believe The Closet to be a negative, dark place that should not exist, others believe The Closet to be a refuge of safety, where one can contemplate and know themselves in the truest sense. Some LGBTQ+ people use The Closet as a point of time in their lives, and in that time they grow and become empowered in who they are until they are able to come out. From this data, it’s clear that there are many mixed opinions about The Closet and what it means in a Christian community. Not every voice from the survey was able to easily fit into any of these five categories. There were more perspectives and opinions not shared in this paper. In our heteronormative, cisgendered society, it’s clear that The Closet exists, and that The Closet would not exist if these heteronormative and cisnormative ideas broke down. I believe this data tells us that although The Closet for many is a place of marginalization, being in it empowers people to grow more than if The Closet did not exist. For better or for worse, The Closet exists, and it empowers people to be who they truly are. Either way, Christian communities should strive to be better. They should try their hardest to make their communities a safe place. Nobody should feel like they aren’t safe to come out on a campus, or Church, or home. From this data it’s clear that Christian communities need to do a better job of loving and listening well. Be open minded.

Listen to stories.

Don’t force people into The Closet, don’t force people out of The Closet.

Have honest and vulnerable conversations, these students need it.