



Walkout for LGBTQ students at BYU is the latest part of a ‘queer revolution’

It was one of many protests at campuses nationwide to call out Title IX exemptions at religious schools.



(Palak Jayswal | The Salt Lake Tribune) Students and activists participate in a protest advocating for LGBTQ rights outside the Brigham Young University campus in Provo, Tuesday, Oct. 11, 2022.

By Palak Jayswal | Oct. 11, 2022, 4:56 p.m. | Updated: 6:03 p.m.





“We hope it’ll be really big for us, for changing religious exemptions at Title IX-exempt universities,” said Ryn Butler, vice president of [Understanding Sexuality, Gender and Allyship](#) (USGA), the longest-running queer group at BYU. “It’s such a big deal that queer people don’t have the same rights as straight people.”

The national protest, “Strike Out Queerphobia,” was aimed at spotlighting Title IX, the federal anti-discrimination laws that govern college campuses — and the exemptions to Title IX given to religiously affiliated colleges and universities, such as BYU, which is owned by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

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The Tuesday protest, which was expected to involve some 100 colleges and universities nationwide, was timed to coincide with National Coming Out Day, a celebration of LGBTQ people being able to live openly and authentically.





Around 100 students — clad in rainbow-colored clothes, holding signs and toting several types of pride flags — gathered along the south edge of the Provo campus, along 800 North between 400 and 500 East. Sebastian Stewart-Johnson, one of the organizers for the activist group [The Black Menaces](#), has been planning the event since June, said group member Kylee Shepherd, and worked with the Provo Police Department to get a permit to march on the street.



Police cars cordoned off traffic from the area, and police reminded walkout participants to stay off the sidewalks, because they are considered BYU campus property.

No counterprotesters were visible at the event, though some students walking by





ho ho, queerphobia has got to” and “two, four, six, eight stop exemptions, stop the hate.” Perhaps the loudest was “I’m queer and proud.”

As people arrived from their classes, they were handed posters and markers to make their own signs. One man brought two large boxes of “rainbow” flower bouquets to hand out to participants. The messages on the signs, written in colorful ink, included such sentiments as “God’s love is fully inclusive,” “We’re queer, we’re here and we won’t change” and “Acceptance saves lives.”

One attendee, dressed as Jesus, held a sign that read: “What happened to love one another?”

The protest began with four minutes of silence — one for each of the four years most students spend at a Title IX-exempt university, organizers said.

Many of the speakers read anonymous letters they said were from queer BYU students who were too afraid to step forward and put a face to their words. In one letter, a female student spoke of being so “scared” of being queer that she learned all the “ins and outs” of the “LDS doctrine, policies, and cultural rules concerning queerness” to figure out what she could and could not say about herself at BYU.

But despite what she’s gone through at the university, the letter writer went on, she is “quite fond” of BYU. She said she “found God at the school, in the cracks between the doctrine.. ... I see the God in BYU, but it can be so much better. I love BYU, so it must be held accountable.”





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Another speaker, identified only as J.J., said the event was the latest part of a “queer revolution” that has been percolating at BYU since 2016, and called it a mark of “progress in Provo.”

A few faculty members were seen observing the protest; two of them declined being interviewed by The Tribune. Someone who identified himself as a member of the

Nathaniel Call, a BYU senior sitting to the side of the walkout, said he finds the way BYU officials navigate and address queer students “disappointing.” He said he hopes Tuesday’s event can get school officials to “notice” and “acknowledge” the existence of queer students.

Call also noted that events like this seem to be attracting slightly larger crowds year by year.

Call said he watched the students who passed by without stopping, and wondered if those students don’t know anyone queer. The students who don’t stop, Call said, may see the protest as “a misguided venture. [Those students] should reach out and try to get to know someone and their experiences, and maybe they’ll be able to love them.”

The walkout ended with a call for protesters to go to Instagram, to sign a [petition](#) to President Joe Biden, urging he ensure equal rights for LGBTQIA+ students. As of Tuesday afternoon, the petition had garnered nearly 1,300 signatures.

Shepherd, from The Black Menaces, said the event is an extension of the group’s mission: Starting conversations on campus.

“It shows that maybe not BYU as an institution, but some of the people and faculty are trying to see differences and make a difference,” Shepherd said.



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