

From: (b)(6)
Sent: Fri, 11 Jun 2021 19:06:14 +0000 (UTC)
To: T9PublicHearing
Subject: Please uphold student protections under Title IX at Religious institutions of higher learning

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Dear Secretary Cardona and all others to whom it may concern,
I am writing to add my voice to the many voices asking for the Department of Education to uphold and/or reinstate Title IX protections for sexual and gender minority (lgbtqia+) students at private religious institutions of higher education that also access Department of Education and other public funding through student loans and grants in aid and other public funding programs overseen by the Department of Education.
I was born on the campus of Bob Jones University and spent my entire childhood and adolescence as a student in BJU's lower schools (K-12). Like many young people growing up within and adjacent to Bob Jones University and its affiliated institutions (churches, "feeder" Christian schools and homeschooling networks, Christian summer camps, etc.), I was brought up in an insular environment that limited my options when it came to college choices. My parents made it very clear from my earliest memories that I would be attending Bob Jones University after I graduated from Bob Jones Academy at 17 years of age. While I began to be aware of my sexual orientation around the age of 8, BJU was not a safe place to discuss that growing awareness of my attraction to other boys and men, not even with my peers. In those days, from the time I was in the 7th grade, the daily chapel attendance requirement meant that I heard regular rantings against "homosexuals" including repeated calls for the US government to enforce a "swift and speedy" capital punishment on lgbtqia people involving "stoning, as the Bible commands," often involving sexually explicit language inappropriate for audiences so young. While I understand that this is less common at BJU today, it was fairly common there as recently as a decade ago when a number of us who are lgbtqia alumni of Bob Jones University formed a support organization called BJUnity in response to a gay student's attempted suicide on campus. I left BJU when I was 18 years old due to a medical condition that required my taking a pause from academic study, and I found my way, eventually over several years, to a music conservatory in New York City. That was a long and difficult journey which led me out of a very insular subculture, undertaken at great personal cost in terms of my friendships, a journey that should not be so difficult for any young person who finds themselves similarly situated.

Over the last decade a community of lgbtqia+ alumni from Christian colleges and universities has emerged both in virtual spaces online and in gatherings across the country. Many of them have told their stories publicly. BJUnity has chronicled many such stories from within the BJU community at bjunity.org/who-we-are/ LGBTQIA students from Bob Jones University and many other Christian colleges and universities regularly face administrative harassment if they are *under suspicion* for being lgbtqia+, and students who make statements in support of lgbtqia rights and identities often face punishments that include late night surprise inquisitions by student life staff (deans of men and women), disciplinary probation, and threats of expulsion (now conveniently called "suspension" to meet certain guidelines required by accreditors, but for all intents and purposes it is expulsion). In several cases I am personally familiar with, BJU "outed" an lgbtqia person to their families and pastors without that student's consent, often resulting in the loss of that person's entire social network, sudden homelessness, and food insecurity at an already deeply traumatic moment in their life: expulsion from school. For many decades, leadership at Bob Jones University have publicly demonized lgbtqia alumni, going so far in one case of a particularly accomplished and noteworthy academic, the late Dr. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott, to call her "a demon" on official university letterhead in a response to a pastor inquiring about her status as an alumnus of the school. Some people have had their college transcripts withheld by the school, and up until their recent accreditation by SACSOC, BJU's ongoing policy of retaliatory and punitive measures against lgbtqia alumni meant further academic advancement in the larger world of academia often involved starting all over again at an accredited public college or university.
While I firmly support the right of any private institution of higher learning to adhere to its denominational and other doctrinal commitments in teaching its religious viewpoints (even ones with which I profoundly disagree, such as the

view in conservative evangelical circles that being lgbtqia+ is sinful), as a taxpayer, as a gay Christian citizen, and as someone who has listened to and supported numerous young people who have faced discrimination, harassment and abuse by administrators and student life staff at Bob Jones University, I firmly and unequivocally stand against the public funding of colleges and universities that violate students' basic rights (as affirmed in the recent "Bostock" decision and by long-standing Department of Education guidance) under Title IX to be free of such discrimination, harassment and abuse.

I note that many Roman Catholic colleges and universities have managed to maintain strict adherence to Roman Catholic social teaching in their ethics and theology classes while also offering their lgbtqia students a safe and non-discriminatory student life in accordance with longstanding Title IX guidance from the Department of Education and their accreditors. Roman Catholic social teaching on lgbtqia identities is not particularly divergent from the views held by conservative evangelicals today, but many Roman Catholic Colleges seem to offer a much safer student life environment than most evangelical colleges and universities offer.

When it comes to Bob Jones University, their track record with respect to the victims and survivors of sexual assault alone puts them in very poor standing by Title IX standards, as evidenced by the university-commissioned GRACE Report found at

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b0a335c45776ee022efd309/t/5bb72a12a4222faf0f8bd4da/1538730518938/BoB%2BJones%2BU%2BFinal%2BReport.pdf>

Particularly for lgbtqia+ students who come from extremely conservative religious environments, being at college is a time when exploration and self-awareness come to the forefront of the student's emotional life as they individuate from their previous home environment, have new experiences, and form lasting relationships. Students who do not fit the norms -- and there have historically been many such students at Bob Jones University -- of gender identity and gender expression or of sexual orientation can experience depression and suicidality at rates much higher than the background population *even at public colleges*, so it is important that all students who study on Dept of Education guaranteed loans, Pell Grants, and other public funding programs be allowed and supported in an effort to flourish psychologically and socially on the college campus as provided for and protected by that college's Student Life department.

I implore the Department of Education to withdraw or otherwise circumscribe such "religious exemptions" when they interfere to every student's right to attend a college or university of their choice without fear of reprisal because of their sex or gender, as construed in the Bostock ruling to include sexual orientation and gender identity. If Christian colleges and universities wish to pursue discriminatory policies in their student life and student discipline (at Bob Jones University, student life IS student discipline, there is no separation between the two), then they should be free to do so without public funding. Christian colleges and universities have grown increasingly reliant on public funding in order to continue operating at a time when student enrollment at many such institutions is declining. If they are going to continue operating using public funds, they should be held to the same standards under the law as public colleges and universities and as many other religious institutions who manage to follow Title IX while also maintaining their religious identity.

Respectfully,

Jeffrey Hoffman

founding executive director, BJUnity (outgoing)

composer

conductor

Episcopalian

professional organist and music director

Links in the message (1)

