

Is BYU getting too liberal? Here's why some, amazingly, say it is.

While independent rankings show it's not the case, some students, alumni and orthodox members, fear the LDS Church's flagship school is losing its way on LGBTQ, race, religious and political issues.

(Isaac Hale | Special to The Tribune) The Y on Y Mountain east of Provo is lit in rainbow-flag colors to show support for the LGBTQ community on Thursday, March 4, 2021.

By Peggy Fletcher Stack | March 26, 2021, 1:07 p.m.

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Many Latter-day Saint students at Brigham Young University — and their anxious parents and alums — may have begun to wonder what is going on at their reliably conservative school.

First came the news in February 2020 that the school's Honor Code would allow [romantic behavior between members of the same sex](#) — just like straight couples — followed by gay couples celebrating, hugging and kissing in front of the Provo school's namesake statue. (Sure, that [policy was quickly reversed](#), but, for some, the powerful images and feelings of momentary joy remained.)

Next, amid the nationwide protests in the aftermath of George Floyd's killing, a [campus statue of Young was splattered with red paint](#) and tagged with the word "racist." Some students launched a petition drive to remove [slaveholder Abraham O. Smoot's name from the main administration building](#).

Last fall, Dallin H. Oaks, a former BYU president and the top-ranking church official behind Latter-day Saint prophet Russell M. Nelson, boldly [proclaimed that "Black lives](#)

matter” in a speech to students and faculty.

One year after the original Honor Code wording change, dozens of students [hiked to the mountainside Y](#) and lit it up in LGBTQ-friendly rainbow colors against the night sky.

And last month, the university released a lengthy report about [persistent racism on campus](#). It included far-reaching proposals to make the school more diverse, inclusive and welcoming.

Is the flagship university of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints suddenly becoming liberal?

Not by the numbers.

Of 55 colleges [surveyed by College Pulse](#) to produce free-speech rankings, BYU was the only one where the majority of students identified as conservative (58%). It also had the smallest percentage of liberal students overall (26%).

“Liberal students at BYU are far more likely to say they have self-censored than conservatives (85% vs. 49%),” the survey reported. “They are also less likely to say they are comfortable publicly disagreeing with their professor about a controversial topic or discussing one with their peers. Additionally, a majority of liberal students say it is difficult to have an open and honest conversation about transgender issues, abortion, immigration, feminism, race and gun control.”

That matches the experience of self-described progressive student Abigail Ryan, who is studying political science.

The South Dakotan feels uncomfortable raising “anything that might be considered contrary” the church, she says. “I can’t speak openly about my opinions, especially on gender issues.”

Even so, plenty of conservative groups have arisen to combat what they view as a rise in liberal thinking that pervades the campus.

At the center of some of the tension is the faith's 1995 [family proclamation](#), which spells out church teachings on marriage (only between a man and a woman) and gender roles (men “preside over their families,” women “nurture their children”).

That touches on many contemporary topics being widely debated on college campuses, including sexism and sexuality.

Latter-day Saint apostle D. Todd Christofferson has said several times that supporting gay marriage [is an individual choice](#).

According to BYU's policy on academic freedom, “faculty can discuss or analyze fundamental church doctrine or policy,” says school spokeswoman Carri Jenkins, but they “cannot oppose or contradict fundamental doctrine.”

Is the proclamation a “fundamental church doctrine”?

Yes, Jenkins says.

The ‘Modern Family’ generation

(File photo courtesy of Franchesca Lopez) BYU briefly removed part of its Honor Code referring to “Homosexual Behavior,” which led some students to celebrate on campus. Franchesca Lopez posted this photo on Twitter, which she called “my first gay kiss.”

The recently launched [Radical Orthodoxy](#) movement was not a reaction to BYU's growing liberalism, says Daniel Ellsworth, a business consultant in Charlottesville, Va., and a BYU alum.

But he and other organizers do see the church school as “ground zero” for what they worry about with Mormon liberals — that they have adopted such allegiance to the LGBTQ movement, for example, that it is “the lens through which they view the church,” Ellsworth says, “and not the other way around.”

There is “a wave of faculty” hired who “really do view the restored gospel as their secondary allegiance.” And that, he says, is a problem for a school trying to educate

while building faith.

Think how many recent BYU students, he says, grew up watching the popular TV show “Modern Family,” which highlights a gay couple as a “healthy, happy, normal family.” (The series also was a favorite of the most famous Latter-day Saint politician, Utah Sen. [Mitt Romney](#).)

Such students assume, based on things they’ve seen in popular culture and the experiences of people around them, Ellsworth says, that there is nothing inherently “unusual or wrong with same-sex marriage.”

They haven’t developed, he says, “a tool set for answering some of the concerns and difficulties around that [LGBTQ] issue.”

They come to BYU, where there are “quite a few faculty and students who do not believe in the principles in the proclamation on the family,” Ellsworth says. “Instead of having those views challenged and having the proclamation being articulated and explained and defended, they are having views contrary to the proclamation affirmed on campus.”

It is, he says, “a flashpoint for this larger trend of what we’re seeing in the church.”

For its part, the Radical Orthodoxy movement “is not about policing views,” Ellsworth says, but about “giving church views the best possible engagement.”

Ideally, the rainbow “would be a rallying standard for inclusiveness and love,” he says, “but it has come to represent a lot more, [including] politically hot ideas that are contrary to the gospel.”

Changing politics among millennials

(Isaac Hale | Special to The Tribune) Brigham Young University freshman Annie Richards watches others embrace as she and others sport various rainbow-colored items in support of Rainbow Day on the campus of BYU in Provo on Thursday, March 4, 2021.

Ellsworth is not wrong about young Latter-day Saints’ views on homosexuality.

According to Jana Riess' 2019 book, "[The Next Mormons: How Millennials Are Changing the LDS Church](#)," [nearly 50% of millennials support same-sex marriage](#) and are more [equally divided among Republicans and Democrats](#) than their parents.

Graduating senior Sam Crofts has definitely seen the school shift toward being "too liberal."

In his major, political science, Crofts says, "I don't know that I have had a single conservative professor, and that wasn't my expectation coming to BYU."

The Pleasant Grove resident wished there could be "a little more diversity of thought among the faculty. It is valuable for any educational experience to avoid the echo chamber."

The student body, Crofts believes, is also "trending in that direction."

He was pleased to see the school's report on race and equity but didn't like the proposal for admissions based on nonacademic factors.

"Admissions should be based on merit," Crofts says. "It should be a level playing field, like the church teaches that 'all are alike unto God.'"

Still, he sees the importance of "creating an inclusive environment."

"A lot needs to be done," he says, "so students of color feel included at BYU — just not through admissions."

Keeping faith at BYU

(George Frey | Special to The Tribune) Two students hold hands as they walk past other BYU students protesting in front of the Ernest L. Wilkinson Student Center in March 2020.

Hanna Seariac helped [write a petition](#) to administrators last summer, urging them to push faculty [to emphasize "Christ-centered education."](#)

Seariac, who also signed the Radical Orthodoxy's "Manifesto," told the student paper that it was prompted in part by the Honor Code flap.

"I had no issue with people protesting the Honor Code, but to me it turned into a protest against the church," she told [The Daily Universe](#). "People were saying that the church was wrong, the church had issues on big doctrinal things, not just minor doctrinal things, and that was allowed and even promoted in some classes."

One of BYU's missions is to build faith in Jesus Christ and the "restored gospel," she says in an interview, "and many of my classes didn't even mention religion."

Seariac is not associated with the continuing [Keeping Faith at BYU effort](#), she says, which mostly posts anonymous "testimonials" about ways in which they've seen the school "stray from its spiritual mission."

Like this one: "I had a professor who said that the only **commandments** we needed to keep were to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and [heal] the sick and that all other **commandments**...were not valuable. And that we don't necessarily have to follow them."

Recently, BYU's [college of religious education](#) beefed up its religious bona fides in hiring.

In February, BYU President Kevin Worthen reiterated that the school would give preference to religious education candidates who had taught in the faith's Church Educational System, which includes high school "seminary" classes and college "institute" courses.

"Religious education remains focused on hiring excellent teachers of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ," Jenkins says, "who are well prepared because of their experience, training and testimony."

[Michael Austin](#), a BYU alumnus and executive vice president for academic affairs at the University of Evansville, a Methodist school in Indiana, does not think this will keep students in the faith.

“A religious studies curriculum built around affirming faith often ends up dismissing honest, difficult questions,” he says, “or trying to make them seem easy.”

Policing the faculty

Among the most zealous opponents of liberalism are self-appointed warriors who use the Twitter hashtag [#DezNat](#).

They see it as their mission to call out those they deem “apostates” for not “following the prophet” enough.

Some on campus wear [#DezNat](#) badges on their backpacks as a way to signal their strict adherence to church teachings.

Many Twitter users of the hashtag have targeted the university’s LGBTQ students, relentlessly harassing some online.

Some call out professors for statements they view as unorthodox, or anti-church. Others write hostile comments in teacher evaluations or complain to school administrators about faculty tweets, retweets and Facebook posts.

The university “does not routinely monitor the social media accounts of faculty,” Jenkins says, but “if anyone provided evidence that a faculty member may have violated the academic freedom policy, we would look into it.”

One teacher, who did not want to be named for fear of further [#DezNat](#) harassment, said a student in his class was angry after being corrected for saying that LGBTQ proponents wanted “to add pedophilia to their letters.”

Finance professor [Jim Brau](#) reported getting death threats for saying during a class lecture that it would be “a blessing” to allow gay students to date at the conservative school. Brau wrote in a letter to his students last year that he was targeted over his comments, particularly by “alt-right online groups.”

Some faculty say BYU police have been seen near professors' offices and homes after they reported harassment and threats.

"If a faculty member believes they are receiving threatening messages from any source," the school spokeswoman says, "we will look at what safety measures we can put in place."

Britt Huddleston, a recent Black Latter-day Saint convert from Ohio who uses the #DezNat hashtag, is not a BYU student but was on the campus in February, when she posted images of aborted fetuses on faculty doors with the words, "Black Lives Matter — Born and Unborn."

It is against BYU's rules for "outside entities to post flyers on its campus," Jenkins says, and any flyer "from an internal group or individual would need to be authorized."

Being against abortion is her passion, she says, and she cannot understand why BYU would have clubs for a variety of social issues like race and not one about the "pro-life" cause.

As to other #DezNat users, she says, some of them "support my work (morally, not financially), but I wouldn't say it is a #DezNat effort."

'Harbinger' for whole church

(Photo by Mike Hoogterp) Benjamin Park, assistant professor of history at Sam Houston State University, and the author of "Kingdom of Nauvoo: The Rise and Fall of a Religious Empire on the American Frontier."

BYU has always been "a central hub of tension" within the Mormon tradition, says [historian and author Benjamin Park](#), also a BYU graduate, as a reflection of "much broader anxieties."

For top church leaders, the school is "the primary vehicle through which to instruct young members, the harbinger for how the entire church education system will operate,

as well as the location for faithful intellectuals to defend key doctrines,” Park says, “the closest thing to an intelligentsia within the church.”

Because of that, Latter-day Saint authorities have always “paid close attention to its faculty, and have been quick to act whenever they feel like any professors are out of line,” he says, “which has resulted in a number of crucial skirmishes over the years.”

During the past few decades, however, as more members received graduate degrees from prestigious universities just as the academic job market collapsed, he says, “BYU became the home for a growing number of professors with firm commitments to a secular academy increasingly at odds with traditional LDS beliefs.”

Park agrees with Ellsworth’s description of the entering students, noting they “are more willing to question, and even challenge, the status quo.”

The fault lines are drawn along race and gender, he says. “The result is a staggeringly divided campus.”

Some administrators and faculty — committed to retaining conservative principles and prioritizing loyalty to institutional priorities, most prominently the family proclamation — “have decried the university for losing its way,” Park says. “Simultaneously, a large number of faculty are willing to publicly question traditional policies and ideas, as well as mentor and defend students who do the same.”

Some of the progressive efforts have attained institutional support, like the [Committee on Race, Equity and Belonging](#), he says, while others remain “more tenuous, like their support of LGBTQ+ protests.”

Given the continued political and social polarization in U.S. society as a whole, Park believes BYU will remain “a quixotic nexus of these alternate, and often competing, interests.”

There will always be conflicts, he says, between academics and activists, conservatives and progressives, secularists and religionists.

But creeping liberalism, he says, is “inescapable.”



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