

# LGBTQ Students

## & CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

by Sheila Wagner

Christian colleges and universities have been grappling with the issue of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning) students in order to be fair and respectful to their students, while holding to the strict values of their religious faith and principles.





  
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## Acceptance as a Secular Value

The current climate in secular private universities is acceptance of everyone, no matter their race, gender, nationality, culture and sexual orientation. Especially since June of 2015, when the law was passed to make same-sex marriages legal in the United States, gay students are feeling it's safer to come out now.

Some Christian colleges and universities are working diligently to find a way to welcome and affirm these students; other places are definitely not ready to even start the conversation; then there are a few institutions who struggle with the concept in their everyday dealings with the gay community at their school.

## Sexuality and Gender Awareness at Calvin College

Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, affiliated with the Christian Reformed Church, was recognized on a 2015 list of the most gay-friendly campuses in America by an online news organization, Newsmax.

They have an extensive policy covering this issue and have a club with a faculty advisor to talk about all the problems and situations that

present themselves on a Christian campus. The group is called SAGA (Sexuality and Gender Awareness). The website states that "SAGA seeks to educate the campus about the unique issues faced by LGBT+ students."

The college's position on homosexuality and same-sex marriage is articulated this way: "We believe that homosexual orientation is not a sin, and we strive to love our gay, lesbian, and bisexual students as ourselves as God expects of us. We also affirm that physical sexual intimacy has its proper place in the context of heterosexual marriage." They believe that sexual behavior is chosen, but sexual orientation is not. The student conduct code applies to all students, regardless of sexual orientation.

## Affirming LGBTQ Students at Campbell University

Campbell University in Buies Creek, North Carolina, is a Baptist university that also made the list of the best gay-friendly Christian campuses. This institution has made great strides in welcoming and affirming LGBTQ students.

While they have a similar code of conduct for students, homosexual activity is not specifically

mentioned. It states that students should abstain from any sexual relations outside the bonds of marriage.

Reverend Faithe Beam, Dean for Spiritual Life and Campus Minister, is a strong believer that every student at Campbell University deserves to find acceptance, meaning, and a strong sense of who they are.

Beam adds, "We have a recognized club on campus called Common Ground which is committed to providing a safe space as well as education and awareness, persons who are Safe Zone trained, and we offer opportunities for courageous conversations at a regular event called Our Place at the Table."

J. Rich Leonard, the Dean of Campbell University Law School, said that in the fall of 2014, Campbell University amended its EEO plan as protected classes in every way, in terms of admission, hiring and any other employment bracket. That was driven by former president Dr. Jerry Wallace.

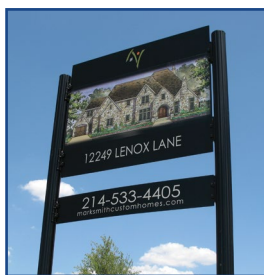
Leonard recalls hearing about a flurry among some of the faculty and some of the donors, but President Wallace was firm that he thought this was the appropriate thing to do,



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and the dissent essentially died. The current president, Dr. J. Bradley Creek, inherited a situation that had already been resolved.

Dean Leonard added, “We are still a very serious faith-based school, but we are a community that realizes that faith can take you to different places on this issue.”

Leonard added that the mission of the law school is as follows: “Because we recognize the immeasurable dignity and worth of every person evolved from the creation of our image of God, we seek to preserve a congenial academic environment where everyone is treated with kindness, civility and respect, and students from all faiths and traditions are welcome.”

There is an organization in the law school called Lambda Law which seeks to provide a meaningful forum for debate and discussion of LGBTQ issues on the law school campus in order to promote a greater diversity of ideas which is essential to the process of a legal education. In addition, Lambda Law provides a positive support network for LGBTQ students and their allies.



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## Gay Student Called to Baptist Ministry

Mississippi College, in Clinton, Mississippi, is a conservative Baptist college that made an opposite sort of list in a 2016 issue of *Huffington Post*. However, the Mississippi College newspaper *The Collegian* printed an article in the November 2017 issue written by a recent graduate, Benjamin Smith, who is currently in seminary at Wake Forest University. His article "What Seminary Has Taught Me" outlines his plans to graduate in 2020 and become a Baptist minister.

In this article, Smith tells his story of realizing in his freshman year that he was gay. When he was called to the ministry, since he had never known any gay clergy, Smith imagined he had sealed his fate and would be permanently forced to hide his sexual orientation and identity.

## Loving Ourselves in God's Image

Smith began to find friends who he could trust with the truth, and by his senior year in college, he felt free enough to come out totally, even in the setting of this conservative Baptist

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college. He states, "It's one thing to believe that we are made this way but an entirely different thing to embody it. So...what does it mean to love ourselves in God's image?"

Benjamin says that there are many LGBTQ Christians at Wake Forest training to become ministers like he is. He ends his article this way: "It is nothing like the future I wanted—but I wouldn't in a million years ask for a different one."

Different Christian colleges and universities have widely divergent views on this topic, and that is not going to change overnight. If people keep the lines of communication open as well as their minds, perhaps we can keep moving forward to the place of understanding, love, and acceptance.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Sheila Wagner has spent the last several years working as a professional editor and recently became the staff writer for *Private University Products and News*. Wagner can be reached at [sheila@pupnmag.com](mailto:sheila@pupnmag.com).

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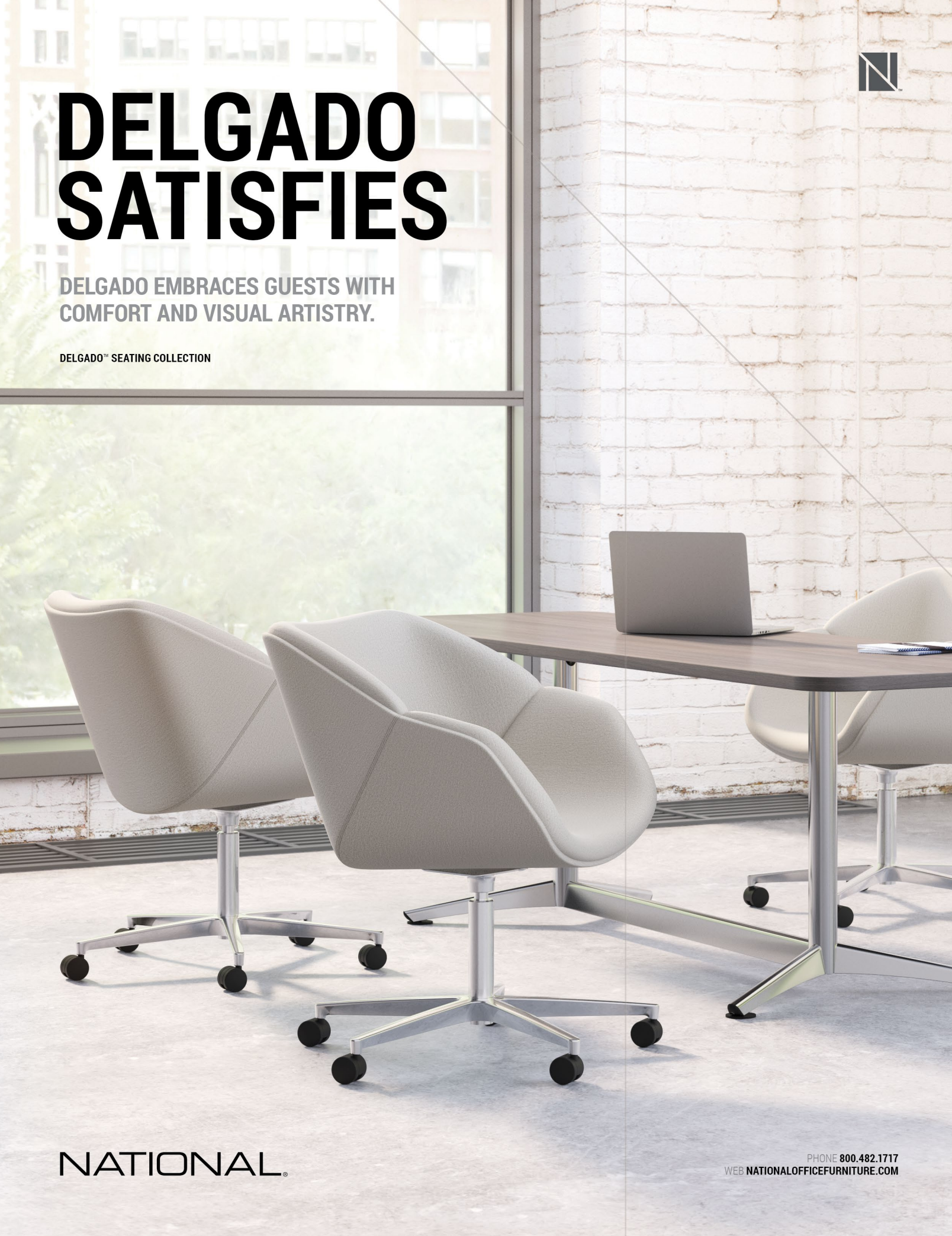
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