

# One of the oldest LGBTQ refuges in America is on the verge of being erased.

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As a queer teen from a small Midwestern town, I never expected to find a place where I saw myself in the majority. Growing up, I heard people make fun of gays so often that when I came out in middle school, I felt lucky that the bullying I faced was minimal. But the isolation was exhausting.

In 2017, when I arrived at Mills College, a small liberal arts institution for women in Oakland, I finally felt I belonged. With an LGBTQ student population of nearly 60%, I found a community of peers that wasn't just LGBTQ friendly, but was actually majority LGBTQ. I was surrounded by others who shared my story — and by those who didn't, who had faced violence and a loss of family support because of who they were. As much as the existence of Mills empowered me, it also served as a reminder that homophobia and transphobia were alive and well.

We are now losing this precious space. In March, Mills College President Elizabeth Hillman announced that the college would no longer be accepting incoming freshmen and would stop conferring degrees after 2023 citing, “declining enrollment coupled with years of operating losses and the unexpected challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.”

But the need for Mills and other spaces that empower and protect LGBTQ communities remains. In 2019, the Trevor Project conducted the largest survey ever on the mental health of LGBTQ youth and found that 39% of respondents had seriously considered attempting suicide within the past 12 months. For transgender and nonbinary youth, the percentage jumped to more than half.

Having community matters. It lifts you up and builds you up.

For decades, Mills has been that place. With queerness as the norm on campus, students identify their pronouns on dorm doors and in every class ice-breaker. The presence of the Trans and Gender Non-Conforming Club is a given at the club fair each semester — as was its newest tradition of a student-run drag show until the pandemic shut it down. Internally, Mills has no problem celebrating itself.

As President Hillman said at my orientation, Mills is a place where we pride ourselves on who we let in, not who we shut out. We are proud of our 76% acceptance rate — that 64% of our

students are people of color, that we welcome parenting students, students who are the first in their families to go to college and students above the traditional college age. She told us that everyone deserves a Mills education, and that we celebrate our trans and genderqueer students — and after becoming the first single-sex college in the country to adopt an admissions policy that explicitly welcomes them in 2014, paving the way for other academic institutions like ours.

And yet, it seems that queerness is something Mills' administration never really appreciated.

Mills has one of the largest, if not the largest, percentage of LGBTQ students of any higher education institution in the country, but it's not easy to gather that from the website. Tucked in with other important diversity facts in a Points of Pride fact box, the school makes no attempt to truly highlight the unique place Mills is for LGBTQ communities. Compare the way Smith College, another all-women's private college in Massachusetts, speaks to and about its LGBTQ community and the difference couldn't be more stark: One school's administration showcases its queerness. The other does not.

Last week, a letter from 15 members of the classes of 1970 and 1971 surfaced online in which they cited Mills' high LGBTQ numbers as a "marketing problem" — and possibly the reason for its demise. "A majority LGBTQ educational niche, while welcoming to some, may be off-putting to other applicants," they wrote. After garnering outrage online from the student and alumnae communities, not one of the college's leadership has publicly denounced the letter — including President Hillman, herself a member of the LGBTQ community.

The reality is Mills doesn't broadcast its majority LGBTQ numbers. Perhaps if it had, the college might not be in the situation it is today.

The LGBTQ community has a global annual spending power of \$3.9 trillion, according to LGBT Capital. For years, U.S. colleges have viewed LGBTQ recruitment as a growth market, largely due to the fact that the median age for young adults to come out is 20 — and having a safe space to do so in is critical.

Last month, in an effort to save the college, the Mills board of trustees voted to merge with Northeastern University and the combination is expected to take effect in July of next year. In the press release, President Hillman spoke of the merger as a "commitment to ensuring that all students, regardless of backgrounds, have access to a range of academic opportunities." But in merging with a university where being LGBTQ isn't a dominant norm, how much is a commitment to students "regardless of their backgrounds" just the opposite — a dissolution of a historical and radically inclusive academic community that has served as a safe haven for thousands of LGBTQ people for decades?

Alumnae from as early as the late 1950s have told me they remember being taught by openly lesbian administrators and professors. Even then, when the country was over half a century away from equal treatment under the law, Mills was a place where being openly gay was not only possible, but accepted.

This is the legacy we are losing.

*Lila Goehring is a founding member of the Save Mills College Coalition.*