

THE EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS OF TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

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The experiences and needs of college students who identify on the transgender spectrum (androgynous, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, transfeminine, transmaculine, transgender, etc.) have begun to be explored in recent years, but this work has largely been limited to four-year colleges and universities. Virtually no research has considered the lives of transgender students at community colleges. Yet transgender and gender nonconforming students may be more likely to attend two-year institutions because of gender-identity-based prejudice and discrimination in education and employment. After describing the problems often faced by transgender community college students and the ways in which their campuses largely fail to meet their needs, the article offers suggestions for making community colleges more transgender inclusive and supportive.

In the last decade, a growing number of transgender-spectrum (androgynous, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, transfeminine, transmaculine, transgender, etc.) students have come out in community colleges and turned to their schools for support. Too often, though, community colleges have been ill-prepared to address the needs of transgender-identified students or, worse, have institutionalized policies and practices that discriminate against them. Given the absence of studies that specifically examine the lives of transgender students at

community colleges, this article relies on anecdotal evidence to understand their experiences, and offers suggestions for making two-year institutions more transgender inclusive and supportive.

THE EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

Students who come out or who are recognized as transgender or gender nonconforming often encounter discrimination at and from community colleges. Consider the following examples:

- In 2011, officials at Southwest Texas Junior College denied the request of a MTF (male-to-female) student to live in the women's dormitory and told her that, because she is transgender, she had to use one restroom on the campus (Degollado, 2011)
- A FTM (female-to-male) student at Northern Essex Community College in Haverhill, Massachusetts, in 2007 was prevented from obtaining a locker in the men's locker room, despite his male gender identity and expression, because college leaders considered him female ("Transgender Student Fights for Rights," 2007)
- Administrators at Lane Community College in Eugene, Oregon, segregated a transsexual woman from other female students in her physical education class by forcing her to shower in a converted custodial closet in 2001 (Evelyn, 2001)
- Also in 2001, the administration at Estrella Mountain Community College in Avondale, Arizona, demanded proof that a MTF student and adjunct instructor had had genital surgery before allowing her to use the women's restrooms on campus, and when she complained, the college terminated her employment. She brought a lawsuit on the basis of gender

discrimination, but the 9th U.S. District Court ultimately dismissed her case in 2009 (Buchanan, 2002; *Kastl v. Maricopa County Community College District*, 2009).

While these are individual incidents, they are telling, and in the absence of much research on the experiences of transgender community college students, they provide important insights into the discrimination that these students likely encounter on most campuses.

Until recently, there had not been any studies that sought to involve a significant number of transgender community college students. Either research on transgender college students did not include community colleges, or research on community college students did not consciously include transgender or even non-transgender lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. As a result, a 2005 article could reiterate an earlier claim and conclude that “it is not overstating the case to say that we know virtually nothing about LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] students on community college campuses” (Ivory, 2005, p. 62). The only study published to date to tell us something about transgender community college students is Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer’s *2010 State of Higher Education for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender People* (2010), which had 34 transgender-spectrum (transmasculine spectrum, transfeminine spectrum, and gender nonconforming) community college students among the 164 LGBT community college students and the 3,247 LGBT college students overall who participated.

Rankin, et al. (2010) found that many transgender-spectrum community college students, like the larger sample of LGBT college students, had negative experiences on their campuses. For example, 13 (38%) participants indicated that they had personally experienced exclusionary, intimidating, or offensive behavior within the past year, and 19 (47%) feared for their physical

safety at times because of their gender identity, with six (35%) having feared for their safety three or more times. Because of such experiences, almost 30 percent (10 students) stated that they seriously considered leaving their colleges, and one respondent revealed that ze (a gender-neutral pronoun used to replace “he/she”) was transferring to another college at the end of the semester because of the hostile environment.

For many of the trans-spectrum community college students in the study by Rankin, et al. (2010), their college administrations contributed to the negative climate. One participant wrote that ze has “had hell on wheels being a gender variant student in the [community college] system, [as] there are no protections here and issues are dealt with quite poorly.” Another student told this story: “Financial aid has this data sheet that you have to fill out to receive funding. It asks for gender. I put my gender and was called in because it didn’t match the sex that social security had on record.”

Certainly not all transgender community college students encounter so much hostility. A few students in the Rankin, et al. (2010) study described having positive campus experiences, and several openly transgender students have become leaders at their community colleges in the last few years. For example, a Female-to-Male (FTM) student was voted Homecoming king at Pasadena (California) City College in 2007 (Schwyzer, 2007), and a genderqueer transgender male student was elected Student Senate President at Holyoke (Massachusetts) Community College (HCC) in 2009 (A. Pangborn, personal communication, April 13, 2011). Note, though, that both of these acts of support came principally from other students and not from the colleges’ administrations. In fact, in 2009, officials at HCC quietly removed “gender identity/expression” from the school’s nondiscrimination policy, because the lawyer for the state’s community

colleges indicated that only the Massachusetts Board of Higher Education could authorize such a change. An additional statement covering gender identity and expression was subsequently enacted through the work of the administration and, in particular, through a transgender committee on campus, but only after local media attention was drawn to the issue (Eramo, 2010a, 2010b).

THE LACK OF RESOURCES FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS AT COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Given how few community colleges have any transgender-supportive policies and practices, it is to Holyoke Community College's credit that it established a committee that seeks to improve campus life for transgender students and (re)implemented a transgender-inclusive nondiscrimination policy. Of the more than 400 colleges and universities known to have "gender identity and expression" in their nondiscrimination policies, only 22 are community colleges, and most are part of the University of Hawai'i and the City University of New York, which amended their nondiscrimination policies system-wide (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2011b).

Even fewer community colleges have implemented other policies in support of transgender students. For example, while dozens of colleges and universities enable students to use a preferred name on course rosters, online directory listings, and other records so that they are not outed as transgender if the gender expected by their legal name does not match their appearance, almost none of these institutions are community colleges (LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index, 2011; Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2011a). Similarly, a growing

number of institutions enable transitioning students to change the gender designation on their records without requiring them to change the gender on their birth certificates or driver's licenses first, but again, few are community colleges (LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index, 2011; Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2011a). Having this policy is important because states often require evidence of gender confirmation surgeries before changing legal documents, and several states will not reissue documents, such as birth certificates, at all. Moreover, many transsexual individuals transition without undergoing surgeries, because they cannot afford to do so, are not satisfied with the aesthetic results, or just do not see the need (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). It is thus discriminatory to insist that individuals change specific documents or undertake costly medical procedures before making a simple bureaucratic revision.

Contributing to and reflective of the lack of transgender-supportive policies at community colleges is the absence of staff members whose formal job responsibilities include providing support to transgender students, much less administrators who direct campus LGBT centers. Out of the 1,167 community colleges in the United States (American Association of Community Colleges, 2011), only one, the Community College of Denver, has a professionally staffed LGBT center, and its director position is split with the University of Colorado at Denver and Metropolitan State College (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2010). In contrast, 170 LGBT centers with at least a half-time director position have been established at four-year U.S. institutions (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2011).

Colleges and universities with an LGBT center are much more likely to make progress on creating a campus that is inclusive of and welcoming to transgender students. A study (Beemyn,

2011) of 81 schools that have in place some transgender-supportive policies found that the institutions that had enacted the most policies also had LGBT centers whose directors had advocated for these changes, which included gender-inclusive residence hall rooms, bathrooms, and recreation center locker rooms; school insurance coverage for hormones and surgeries for transitioning students; and an accessible process for students to change their name and gender on campus records. Of the 12 “trans-friendliest” schools, 11 had professionally staffed LGBT centers.

ADDITIONAL CHALLENGES CONFRONTING TRANSGENDER COMMUNITY COLLEGE STUDENTS

The lack of LGBT centers and staff members whose jobs include advocating for the needs of transgender students is just one aspect of the challenges that these students face at community colleges. Most community colleges have only a small number of student affairs offices and staff in general, giving transgender students few places to turn for support. The likelihood that most staff members will have no knowledge about their experiences makes finding support even more difficult.

Particularly significant for many transitioning and partly transitioning students is the limited availability of health and counseling services, much less transgender-informed services, at many community colleges, which means that transsexual students have to leave campus even to receive the therapy necessary to be prescribed hormones. For example, when asked, “Do you think your campus is responsive and sensitive to the health and mental health issues of people

who are LGBTQQ?,” almost all of the transgender-spectrum participants in Rankin, et al.’s study (2010) commented that their schools provide very little in the way of resources and support. Even the respondents who indicated that their community colleges have health and counseling center staffs who try to be responsive stated that these efforts are largely superficial. One of the students wrote: “There are trans-inclusive posters on the walls of the health center but I never found anyone there to be particularly knowledgeable or inclusive when working with me. I always felt like I had to educate the counselors that I worked with there.” Similarly, another student stated: “The health center seems to have some pretty nice folks, who are pretty laid back around LGBT issues. Though I’m still not disclosing my trans status to them so I’m obviously not convinced they’re totally on the mark!”

Like the student in this last quote, some transgender students at both two- and four-year schools are not out, or are out to only a select group, because of concerns over how this information will be received. Transgender students at community colleges, though, may be even more reluctant to disclose their gender identities because of the nature of these institutions. As many community colleges are commuter campuses or have limited on-campus housing, many students continue to live with their families, which may lead them to be more reluctant to come out. At the same time, being commuters means that these students are on campus for a limited amount of time and have less of an opportunity than their counterparts at residential colleges to connect with other transgender students and to take advantage of any transgender-supportive campus resources (Ivory, 2005).

Yet the transgender students who attend college may be more likely to enroll at a two- than a four-year institution because of gender-identity-based economic and educational

oppression. According to a recently released study conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011), transgender people face widespread job discrimination. Survey respondents reported being unemployed at twice the rate of the general population, and 90 percent indicated that they had experienced harassment, mistreatment, or discrimination on the job or sought to present as gender normative in order to avoid potential hostility. Employment discrimination contributed to an extreme level of poverty among the participants, who were nearly four times more likely than the general population to have a household income of less than \$10,000 per year. Given these economic circumstances, transgender people who want to attend college and who cannot turn to their families for financial support often struggle to be able pay for it and may be more likely to enroll at a relatively more affordable community college.

Discrimination against transgender people in educational institutions has also served to limit their ability to attend college, particularly four-year institutions. The Grant, Mottet, and Tanis study (2011) found that the participants who expressed a transgender or gender nonconforming identity while in primary or secondary schools experienced shocking rates of harassment (78%), physical assault (35%), and sexual violence (12%). The harassment was so severe that it led almost one-sixth (15%) to leave a primary or secondary institution or a college; another six percent reported being expelled because of their gender identity/expression. Among the transgender people who managed to get through high school, some may understandably be reluctant, given these types of negative experiences, to continue on much farther, especially to commit to another four years at a college or university.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES TO BE MORE TRANSGENDER INCLUSIVE

There is much that community colleges can and should do to address their often hostile campus climates for transgender students. Among the most important steps are the following.

Language and Processes

- Add the phrase “gender identity or expression” to the college’s nondiscrimination policy.
- Enable students to have a preferred name, instead of their legal name, on college records and documents (ID cards, class and grade rosters, Internet directory listings, etc.) upon request.
- Enable transitioning students to change the gender on campus records upon request or with only a letter of support from a therapist or medical professional (i.e., without requiring proof that students have modified their bodies or first changed their birth certificates or driver’s licenses).
- Revise campus forms to enable transgender students to self-identify, if they choose. Rather than “sex (choose one): male or female,” ask “gender (mark all that apply): male, female, transgender, or self-identify _____.”

Facility Access

- Adopt a policy that enables transgender students to use the campus restrooms that are in keeping with their gender identity/expression.

- Create at least one gender-inclusive restroom in each campus building by changing the signage on single-stall and/or multi-stall men's and women's restrooms.
- Require all newly constructed buildings to include at least one single-stall, gender-inclusive restroom.
- Create private changing facilities and single-person showers in recreation centers.
- If campus housing is available, have an inclusive policy that enables transgender students to be housed in keeping with their gender identity/expression and offer a gender-inclusive housing option, in which students who request it are assigned a roommate without regard to gender.

Education and Support

- Have a staff person whose job responsibilities include providing support to transgender students and educating the campus on transgender experiences.
- Require all faculty and staff to attend a training session on the lives of transgender people.
- Sponsor transgender speakers, performers, and other programs on an ongoing basis.

FUTURE NEEDS

As a first step, community colleges should appoint a staff person whose position formally involves improving the campus environment for transgender students. This individual would then have the time and ability to work on implementing many of the other recommendations. As stated above, the four-year colleges and universities that have enacted the greatest number of

transgender-supportive policies had someone whose job entailed seeing that these changes were made.

These recommendations apply to both two- and four-year institutions of higher education. A more detailed consideration of the unique needs of transgender students in community colleges awaits the findings of future studies that will specifically address their experiences. Such research is a critical step in creating more transgender inclusive and welcoming campus climates at community colleges.

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