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Transgender Issues on College Campuses

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Anecdotal evidence suggests that more and more students are coming out as transgender on campuses across the country. The term “transgender” encompasses a wide range of identities, appearances, and/or behaviors that blur or cross gender lines. Within this transgender umbrella are: transsexuals, who live some or all of the time in a gender different from their biological gender; crossdressers (formerly transvestites), who wear clothes typically associated with the “opposite” gender; drag kings and drag queens, who crossdress within a performance context; and genderqueers, who identify outside of a binary gender system (Lombardi & Davis, under review).

This chapter discusses the experiences of transgender students and how student affairs professionals can most effectively address their needs in areas of campus life where transgender students have unique concerns: programming, housing, bathrooms and locker rooms, counseling and health care, and records and documents. Although a growing number of colleges and universities are beginning to consider the needs of transgender students, most institutions still offer little or no support to this segment of the campus community (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005). If student affairs professionals are committed to working with all students and helping foster their personal development and academic success, then they cannot ignore transgender students. As this chapter demonstrates, transgender students regularly encounter institutional discrimination in higher education, which makes it particularly important that

student affairs professionals understand their experiences and the obstacles they confront at most colleges and universities.

Who Are Transgender Students?

Transgender students may be of any age, ethnicity, race, class, or sexual orientation. Some enter higher education open about being transgender, while others “come out” during college or graduate school. Still others may never use the term “transgender,” but will strongly identify themselves as a man, woman, transsexual, or another (or no) gender. Some students may choose to transition; that is, to live as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth. Transitioning is a complex, individual process that often includes changing one’s name, appearance, and body (Lombardi & Davis, under review).

Identity development is a dynamic process for many transgender college students (Bilodeau, 2005). For example, Sky entered college as a lesbian. During her sophomore year, she realized she felt like neither a woman nor a man and began identifying as genderqueer. Over time, Sky identified as an effeminate gay man, but found it difficult to find male partners as a gender-different student. During Sky’s senior year, he initiated hormone treatment and lived as a man.

Many transgender students experience isolation and rejection from family and friends (Pusch, 2005). Curt, an 18-year-old heterosexual male, had been placed into foster care after being rejected by his family when he came out as a female-to-male transsexual two years earlier. Now in his first year of college, Curt is legally changing his name and gender. He is frustrated that professors keep calling him by his female name even though he presents as male and has asked to be called Curt. He feels isolated and is considering leaving school.

Transgender students confront a number of challenges within campus environments, including a lack of access to health care and difficulties with sex-segregated facilities (Beemyn, 2003; Nakamura, 1998). Maria, a Latina student, was assigned male at birth. Although Maria would prefer that no one know that she is a transsexual woman, she must negotiate with student health to ensure access to hormones and other services. Maria works extra hours so she can afford genital surgery some day.

Other students live genderqueer lives by refusing to limit themselves to any single gender. Ron, a 19-year-old African American male, proudly wears a dress around campus, weathering chronic harassment from other students. Chris, a graduate student, wants to be gender-free and prefers gender-neutral pronouns.

These composite portraits represent but a fraction of the diverse identities of and challenges faced by transgender students. Transgender students offer unique contributions to the campus community. With the assistance of student service professionals, who can help them navigate campus resources and sex-segregated facilities, transgender students can fully realize their potentials.

Addressing Specific Transgender Concerns

Programming

College events and activities play a significant role in a student's sense of belonging and connection with the greater campus community. The quality and quantity of campus involvement also has a positive effect on a student's learning and development (Astin, 1984). Institutions should thus develop programs that are welcoming to transgender students, including

programs that focus specifically on transgender issues. A campus with a variety of events and activities that are inclusive of transgender experiences and needs can also provide non-transgender students with a more valuable college experience.

Educational Programs

In order for transgender students to feel welcomed and included in campus life and activities, programming must reflect their experiences and allow for their full participation. Similar to other underrepresented communities on campus, transgender students may feel invisible or marginalized if there is little or no effort made to acknowledge their presence, much less meet their needs. Yet most campuses offer few opportunities for students to learn about transgender issues and experiences (Beemyn, 2003; Sausa, 2002).

Creating and widely advertising transgender-focused educational programs can increase campus awareness of the unique challenges faced by transgender students. Colleges and universities can also develop a transgender ally program or speakers bureau, create a transgender FAQ bulletin board packet for residence halls, invite leading transgender speakers to campus, schedule a separate awareness week for transgender issues, include transgender-related information throughout the institution's website, and offer regular training sessions for staff and students on transgender issues.

Support Services

Support for transgender students is typically combined with support for gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students. But many GLB student organizations and academic programs, even ones that include or have added "transgender" to their names in recent years, rarely address

gender identity issues and often provide limited support to transgender students, especially to transgender students who self-identify as heterosexual (Beemyn, 2003). As a result, transgender students are forming their own groups at some colleges and universities, particularly where there are a large number of openly transgender students and a more supportive campus climate. In the absence of a transgender student organization, a campus GLBT office or counseling center can work with students to create a transgender support group (Beemyn, 2003; Lees, 1998).

Inclusive Policies

Campus non-discrimination policies include “sex” and sometimes “sexual orientation,” but neither category necessarily covers transgender people, who face discrimination based on their gender identity and expression, rather than their biological gender or sexual identity (Beemyn, 2003). To protect the rights of transgender people, more than 20 colleges and college systems have added “gender identity or expression” to their non-discrimination policies. A number of institutions are also changing policies and practices that exclude or marginalize transgender students by conceptualizing gender as male and female, such as college forms that allow students to identify only as “male” or “female” (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005).

Campus Housing

Housing policies and practices that assume that students are male or female fail to serve transgender students, especially those who are in the process of transitioning from one gender to another or who do not identify as either dominant gender. Thus if college administrators are to continue to meet the changing needs of students, they must develop procedures that recognize

diverse gender identities and expressions. This professional obligation is also a legal requirement at institutions where state or municipal laws and/or college policies ban discrimination against people because of their gender identity or expression.

Given the diversity of individual student needs and the immense diversity of housing facilities and programs, the housing needs of transgender students must be addressed on a case-by-case basis. However, a formal written policy can guide institutional practice and provide a foundation for ensuring the fair, safe, and legal treatment of transgender students.

Several colleges and universities have adopted such housing policies. The University of Minnesota, Twin Cities developed a policy that respects the gender identity a student establishes with the University and strives to provide accommodations when possible (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005). The Ohio State University created a similar policy that also states that no student “whom they know to be transgendered [will] have to find a comfortable, welcoming housing assignment on their own” (Ohio State University, 2005). The University of California, Riverside’s policy emphasizes the principle of “reasonable accommodations” when the University is notified in a timely manner (University of California, Riverside, 2005).

In order to identify and assist transgender students, some colleges and universities are changing the “sex” designation on their housing intake forms (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005). Asking if someone is “male” or “female” not only fails to recognize the full complexity of gender identity, but also provides insufficient information for roommate assignments. More appropriate alternatives to binary boxes are a simple fill-in-the blank, “Your gender is: _____,” or the multiple choices of “Male,” “Female,” “Self-Identify: _____.” Housing forms also often ask students to indicate any special needs. Some campuses include

“transgender” or “gender different” among these concerns (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005).

Regardless of how transgender students notify the institution of their gender identities, residence life staff should follow-up with the students who want to live on campus to understand their specific needs better. In such instances, the personal information shared by the students should be kept confidential, and only information required to establish the need for a particular accommodation should be requested. Some transgender students prefer not to reveal the status of their physical body, which may not be congruent with their gender identity or expression. Colleges and universities should thus allow students to demonstrate the need for a particular housing option by providing a letter from a medical professional.

Residence life staff who demonstrate their sensitivity to and understanding of transgender experiences create a welcoming environment for students to explore their housing needs and options more honestly and effectively. However, many colleges and universities have yet to identify the campus housing options that would provide the safest and most comfortable living arrangements for transgender students.

Implementing trans-supportive policies requires student affairs staff to assess different housing options in relation to transgender student needs. Many campus residence halls were built at a time when hallways, floors, or buildings were divided by gender and offered only communal men’s and women’s restrooms and shower rooms. By inventorying the kinds of facilities available and how students are housed in these facilities, residence life staff can successfully address the needs of transgender students on a case-by-case basis (Curtis & Tubbs, under review).

When assessing housing facilities, the first consideration is whether rooms are co-ed or same-sex by suite, hallway, floor, or building. A transgender student's ability to "pass" may be more difficult in a same-sex living environment, where residents are expected to conform to a particular set of gender expressions.

Residence life staff should document the existence and location of rooms which have their own bathrooms and showers. As discussed later in this chapter, many transgender students prefer private restrooms and shower facilities for safety reasons. In residence halls that do not have a bathroom in each room, residence life staff should note whether the buildings have any gender-neutral restrooms and whether any of the shower facilities have lockable stalls, rather than just shower curtains. They should also examine cost differences between residence halls to determine whether transgender students are forced to incur a greater financial burden in order to live in a safer environment.

Another important consideration is which buildings or floors include theme housing, and whether transgender students would likely gain acceptance and feel a part of these communities. Even an LGBT and Allies theme hall may not be a comfortable environment for transgender students if they identify as heterosexual or are not open about their gender identity.

A campus housing assessment should also examine the demographics of the residents of each building. Returning students who have already lived on campus may be more accepting of gender difference, and thus a largely upper-class-student residence hall might be a safer location for transgender students.

Recognizing that existing facilities are often unable to meet the needs of students with diverse gender identities, some colleges and universities are beginning to offer a gender-neutral housing option, either to all students or just to upper-class students. In gender-neutral housing,

room assignments are made without regard to the individuals' biological gender, so residents may request a roommate of any gender. Among the institutions that provide this opportunity are Sarah Lawrence College, the University of California, Riverside, the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Southern Maine, and Wesleyan University (Curtis & Tubbs, under review; Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005).

Because transgender students have unique concerns that are often poorly understood by housing staff, regular training workshops for professionals and paraprofessionals in residence life are essential for meeting the needs of transgender students. In addition to providing basic information about transgender people, these sessions should address how to make room assignments for transgender students, how to assist a student who comes out as transgender during the academic year, how to create trans-inclusive hall programs, and how to create a safe, confidential space so that transgender students feel comfortable approaching staff with questions and concerns.

To inform current and prospective students about how the campus addresses the housing needs of transgender people, colleges and universities should include such information, along with the contact information of a housing staff person who can respond to transgender-related questions and concerns, on residence life web sites and brochures and in any material targeted to LGBT communities. Housing staff should also seek to reach prospective students through sharing the information with Student Affairs colleagues, particularly the staffs in admissions, orientation, and student activities. Returning students might be reached through outreach to campus groups and/or offices that provide support to LGBT students.

Student affairs professionals should recognize transgender students' needs, just as they would try to understand and address the concerns of members of other underrepresented

communities. By acknowledging and accommodating the specific housing needs of transgender students and fostering a residential environment where all forms of diversity are celebrated and appreciated, residence life staff can help transgender students benefit both academically and socially from living on campus.

Bathrooms and Locker Rooms

Whether through crossdressing, transitioning from one gender to another, or blending traditionally female and male elements, transgender students violate society's expectation that someone is either female or male, which makes them vulnerable to harassment and violence. Some of the most dangerous places on many campuses for transgender students are restrooms and locker rooms designated for "women" and "men." Anecdotal and research evidence suggest that transgender people often face verbal and physical assault and risk being questioned or even arrested by the police when they use gender-specific facilities (Coalition for Queer Action, 2004; San Francisco Human Rights Commission, 2001).

Given these dangers, it is not surprising that bathrooms and locker rooms are a major source of anxiety for many transgender students. Some travel far out of their way to use restrooms that are safer and more private or avoid using campus bathrooms altogether, to the detriment of their comfort and health (Coalition for Queer Action, 2004). It is easier for transgender people to avoid using locker rooms, where having to undress and shower in front of others may "out" them as transgender. But transgender students are thus prevented from being able to participate in athletic programs and physical education courses and from having complete access to campus recreational facilities.

To aid transgender people in being able to use bathrooms without fear or concern, students, staff, and faculty at some colleges are advocating for the creation of gender-neutral restrooms (single-stall, lockable unisex restrooms) in existing and newly constructed buildings. For example, the student association at San Diego State University passed a resolution in 2003 calling for the implementation of safe restrooms across campus for transgender students. As a first step, the group approved funds to change door signs and install door locks to convert a set of women's and men's bathrooms in the student union into gender-neutral facilities. The locations of all gender-neutral restrooms are also listed in the university's general catalog. At the University of Chicago and at Beloit College (Wisconsin), students successfully lobbied their institutions to create gender-neutral bathrooms in the most frequented campus buildings (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005).

To make locker rooms safe for transgender students, colleges and universities can create individual showers with curtains or private changing rooms. Although these changes require more extensive renovations than converting men's and women's restrooms into gender-neutral bathrooms, institutions should have facilities that are accessible to all members of the campus community. Moreover, private changing rooms benefit not only transgender people, but also families with children (such as mothers bringing sons or fathers bringing daughters to a facility) and people with disabilities who require the assistance of an attendant of a different gender.

Counseling and Health Care

As transgender students become increasingly visible on college campuses, counseling and health-care services are struggling to address the unique needs of this population (Beemyn, 2003; Carter, 2000). For example, a 2002 survey of University of Michigan student affairs

professionals, including counselors and health-care providers, found that over half of the respondents reported challenges in addressing the concerns of transgender students (Gender Identity Working Group, 2003). A related survey of more than 400 University of Michigan students (Matney, 2003) found that transgender students there face multiple barriers, including perceptions that campus health-care and counseling professionals are unable to provide support to transgender students or adequately address their needs.

Other colleges and universities likewise lack supportive health-care services for transgender students. In a national qualitative study of 75 transgender undergraduate and graduate students, McKinney (2005) found that only four of the respondents indicated positive interactions with campus counselors. Many of the graduate students in the study also reported that campus health center staff failed to provide adequate services for transgender students.

Counseling

Culturally appropriate counseling can provide a safe, non-judgmental place for students to explore their developing identities and address college-related challenges (Gould, 2004). While sharing many of the same developmental concerns as their peers, transgender students may also face culturally-specific issues related to their gender identity development, including coming out to themselves and to family and friends; negotiating gendered environments (e.g., residence halls and restrooms); deciding whether or not to physically transition to the “opposite” sex; negotiating intimate relationships outside of traditional male and female identities; accessing transgender-supportive health-care services; adjusting to a new social identity; and surviving discrimination and harassment (Ettner & Brown, 1999; Gould, 2004; Israel & Tarver, 1997). Counselors working with students who are seeking to transition should refer to the Standards of

Care developed by the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (2001) for recommended treatment guidelines.

The scant research that has been published on transgender students finds that they are subject to higher rates of marginalization, discrimination, and harassment than non-transgender students (Rankin, 2003). The social and economic stresses that many transgender students experience as a result of family rejection, harassment, violence, and isolation can, in turn, lead to adjustment disorders, depression, posttraumatic stress, anxiety, depression, substance abuse, suicide ideation, and self-harm (Dean, et al). These mental health issues may affect the academic success of transgender students, making access to supportive counseling even more important for this population. Although counseling may be encouraged for transgender people, especially for those who plan to undergo gender reassignment processes, transgenderism should not be considered a mental illness (Dean, et al.). A diagnosis of a gender-related mental disorder should be limited to individuals with evidence of distress or impairment of functioning beyond that which is caused by social stigma or prejudice (American Psychological Association, 1994).

Health Care

All students need and deserve culturally competent primary health care to maintain healthy, productive lives. Although research on campus-based health services for transgender people is sparse, studies of general health-care access for this population find that professionals typically lack accurate information about transgender people, severely limiting their ability to provide quality care (Dean, et al). For example, a survey of transgender men in Los Angeles (FTM Alliance of Los Angeles, 2004) found that slightly more than half of the respondents had been denied medical services because of their transgender status. When they did receive care,

more than two-thirds were dissatisfied with the provider's knowledge of transgender issues. A Washington, D.C. transgender needs assessment (Xavier, 2000) reported that nearly one-third of the 263 transgender people who were surveyed believed that the transphobia of health-care providers and a fear that caregivers would disclose their transgender status were barriers to medical care. In one of the few college-based studies, McKinney (2005) found that transgender graduate students were more concerned than their undergraduate peers about health issues. The graduate student participants did not feel that campus health-care systems met their needs—they often had to educate the providers about transgender health issues—and their limited health insurance coverage made it difficult for them to seek off-campus health care.

In order to provide more competent and supportive health care, campus health center staff should educate themselves on transgender health issues and the specific needs of transgender people. For example, health-care providers should recognize that the external appearance of a transgender student may differ significantly from the person's internal anatomy. Thus a transsexual man may need a pap smear if he has not had a hysterectomy, and a transsexual woman may need a prostate exam (Feldman & Bockting, 2003). In addition to informed and sensitive primary health care, transgender students need access to gender-specific services, including safe, affordable hormones and gender-related surgeries. If campus health insurance plans exclude transition-related services, student health personnel should advocate for expanded coverage and help students find alternate, off-campus care. The absence of appropriate health care may negatively impact the retention, academic success, and physical and mental well-being of transgender students (DeBerard, Spielmans, & Julka, 2004; Lombardi & Davis, under review).

Campuses across the country are beginning to improve the quality of health services for transgender students (McKinney, 2005). For example, the University of Michigan and the

University of Minnesota have transgender-specific health-care and counseling programs, and the University of California, Berkeley has developed a Transgender Student Health web site to create a welcoming climate and increase health access for transgender students (University of California, Berkeley Health Services, 2004; University of Michigan Health System Comprehensive Gender Services Program, 2004; University of Minnesota Transgender Health Services, 2004). Some colleges and universities are also implementing mandatory transgender education training sessions for health center staff, revising intake forms to be inclusive of transgender students, and developing policies and procedures to help ensure that transgender students receive appropriate and supportive health services (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005).

Institutions that are unable to meet the health-care needs of transgender students should develop a resource guide and referral system for transgender-friendly counselors and health providers off-campus. In the absence of local resources, students may be referred to relevant national organizations, publications, and web sites, such as Trans-Health (www.trans-health.com) and TransGenderCare (www.transgendercare.com).

College Records and Documents

Transsexual students who decide to transition from one gender to another typically seek to change their gender and often their names on official records and documents. Students who self-identify as genderqueer may also change their given names to match their gender identity. The process for making these changes varies from state to state and institution to institution. At some colleges and universities, the process is difficult or there is not a means to make such changes.

Being able to alter their records and documents, though, is personally and legally important for many transgender students. Not only does having the appropriate name and gender reflect and validate their identities, but it may also prevent transgender students from being placed into uncomfortable and dangerous situations where they would have to explain why they use a name different from their birth name and why their appearance does not match a photo or gender designation on an identification card. Moreover, updated records and documents ensure that transgender students will not be forced to disclose their gender identities and thus be subject to discrimination when they apply for jobs, seek admission to graduate and professional schools, or at any other time when they must show a college document.

Colleges can address this issue by establishing a simple procedure for transgender students to change the name and/or gender designation on all of their campus records, including ID cards, listings in electronic and print directories, and files in admissions, financial aid, the registrar's office, and the health center. For example, at The Ohio State University, transgender students who legally change their names can complete a form with the registrar to change the name as well as the gender designation on their main college record. At the University of Maryland, transgender students can change the name and gender listed on their records by obtaining a letter of support from a mental health professional. Through these processes, students at both institutions effectively change the information on all of their campus records. No one outside of the registrar's offices knows that students' records have been changed. At the University of Vermont, transgender students who are not in a position to change their names legally can still request an ID card with a name other than their birth name (Transgender Law and Policy Institute, 2005).

An institution should never insist that individuals have genital surgeries before changing their records. More and more transsexual students are identifying and living as a gender different from their birth gender without pursuing or completing gender reassignment, and even people who desire surgeries often cannot afford the procedures or are limited by pre-existing medical conditions. Moreover, some transmen feel that the results of genitoplasty (genital reconstruction) are less than adequate. Given these factors, it is inappropriate and unethical for institutions to pressure students to have surgery before aligning their records with their identities.

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