

# “Creating a Gender-Inclusive Campus”

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Although some trans-spectrum<sup>1</sup> students today have a generally positive campus experience, many others attend colleges and universities that continue to force them to run a gender gauntlet daily. They wake in their residence hall to a roommate not of their choice, as they cannot be housed in keeping with their gender identity, or they are in a single room, having paid more to avoid such a situation. Unless they have a shower in their rooms, they are forced to use a group facility that does not reflect their gender identity, making them vulnerable to being “outed” and subsequently harassed. If they decide to work out at a campus recreational center, they are similarly relegated to the “wrong” locker room. When they go to classes, they may be called by a name that they no longer use and by pronouns that do not fit how they see themselves. They almost certainly will find no mention of gender-nonconforming people in their courses, as the curriculum, except for women’s and gender studies, typically treats gender as a binary. If they need to use a bathroom between classes, they must decide which gender-specific option is less likely to lead to harassment and violence, find a gender-inclusive bathroom, which may be far away, or simply refuse to go until they can “pee in peace.” Assuming that they persist until graduation (and many do not), they will be awarded a diploma that lists their given

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<sup>1</sup> We use “trans-spectrum” and “trans” to refer to the wide range of individuals whose gender identity and/or expression is sometimes or always different from the gender assigned to them at birth.

name, which may not be the name they go by, so that they endure a final act of disrespect before leaving college.

This hypothetical day in the life of a trans-spectrum college student is far too often their reality. In this article, we will examine recent research on the experiences of trans-spectrum students, and using the findings of these studies, suggest ways for colleges and universities to become more trans-inclusive, focusing on two often overlooked areas: the classroom and athletics. While the number of students openly identifying and expressing themselves as gender nonconforming has grown rapidly over the last decade, their presence on campuses is still commonly ignored; they are rarely included in college research or supported by administrative policies.

### **Research on Trans-Spectrum College Students**

The dearth of studies on the identity development of trans-spectrum people, particularly trans-spectrum youth, led us to undertake the research that became *The Lives of Transgender People* (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Working with trans college students, we had observed that they often understood their identities and came to identify as trans in ways that were quite unlike previous generations of trans people, and the study confirmed our perceptions. Based on data collected from nearly 3,500 surveys and more than 400 interviews with trans-masculine, trans-feminine, and gender-nonconforming individuals in the United States, the study found pronounced differences in how people experienced being trans by age, which resulted largely from the rise of the Internet and the greater visibility of trans people in the media and pop culture over the past decade.

The participants indicated that they first recognized feeling “different” from others because of how they perceived their gender at 4-5 years old, on average, or from their earliest memories. But while the older respondents found little or no support, and many of the trans women were punished if their gender difference was revealed or discovered, the respondents in their teens and early twenties grew up being able to turn to the Internet and found support online if they did not receive it from their families and friends. Because of greater exposure to trans people through the media, more parents today are willing to embrace their trans children, including male-assigned kids who identify as female, so that young trans people less often have to hide or deny who they are. Many were out in high or middle school, and some even in elementary school, whereas many of the participants who grew up from the 1940s through 1980s repressed their gender identities until later in life, when they could no longer ignore their “true selves” or when the Internet became available to them and they recognized that they were “not the only one” who felt like they did.

Another generational difference was in how the participants identified. Many of the older MTF respondents first thought of themselves as cross-dressers because it initially seemed to make sense; only later did they recognize that they did not want to stop presenting as female. Similarly, many of the older FTM respondents who were attracted to women first thought of themselves as butch lesbians, because it too seemed to fit, before they realized that they were indeed men. With access to greater resources, the younger trans-masculine and trans-feminine respondents did not experience this sense of misidentification at all or for very long.

The participants who were in their teens and twenties also more readily recognized that there was not one way to be trans. While the older respondents felt limited to identifying themselves as cross-dressers or transsexuals, depending on their desire for gender-affirming

surgeries, the younger individuals envisioned and created a wide range of gender possibilities. One of the most striking findings of our research was that the survey respondents provided more than a hundred different descriptions of their gender identity, ranging from the general (“I am me”) to the very specific (“FTM TG stone butch drag king”). Most of the younger people identified outside of a gender binary; they see themselves as both male and female, as neither male nor female but as a completely different gender, or as somewhere in between. Some also went by gender-inclusive pronouns, most commonly using “ze” or “sie” and “hir” or “they” and “them” as singular pronouns to refer to themselves.

Having accepted and sometimes having lived as their gender identity from childhood or their early teens, the younger individuals in our study entered college looking for, but typically not finding, support and resources. Other research, which focuses specifically on campus climate, describes how trans students frequently experience an unreceptive or even hostile college environment. The largest of these studies, the *2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People* (Rankin et al., 2010), involved more than 5,100 students, staff, and faculty, including almost 700 trans-spectrum individuals. Among the trans respondents, 417 (60%) identified as gender nonconforming, 174 (25%) as transmasculine, and 104 (15%) as transfeminine.

The *2010 State of Higher Education* study found that discrimination and a fear of discrimination were commonplace among the trans-identified participants. Among the three trans-spectrum groups, 31-39% reported experiencing harassment on campus, with 65% of the transmasculine students and 55% of the transfeminine students stating that they did not disclose their gender identity because of a fear of negative consequences. An even greater number of the trans-spectrum students of color sought to hide their gender identity to avoid intimidation or because they feared for their physical safety. Thus most of the respondents had either

experienced harassment or remained closeted in the hope of avoiding harassment, which shows that students who are out on most colleges today will be discriminated against at some point. Because they found the climate on their campuses so antagonistic, more than a third of the trans-spectrum participants seriously considered leaving their schools, with some having already transferred to other institutions. But, at the same time, more than half indicated that they felt comfortable or very comfortable with the overall campus climate at their colleges and universities, demonstrating that some schools are much more trans-supportive than others.

Another recent study (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012) confirmed that many trans students are faced with a hostile campus climate, which can adversely affect their educational experience. Comparing 91 trans-identified and intersex-identified students with matched samples of cisgender (non-transgender) LGB-identified and cisgender heterosexual-identified students, the researchers found that the trans students “reported more frequent encounters with harassment and discrimination as well as a significantly lower sense of belonging within the campus community” (p. 732), even though the trans students were no less engaged in educational activities, such as participating in internships, working with faculty members, and volunteering for community service. The trans students also had significantly lower scores than their cisgender LGB and heterosexual peers on measures of gains in complex cognitive skills and capacity for socially responsible leadership, which may reflect the difficulties of developing a positive sense of self in an often negative environment.

The work of Brent Bilodeau (2009) demonstrates the extent to which colleges and universities can be hostile places for trans-spectrum students. Bilodeau considered the experiences of trans students at two large, Midwestern public universities that have implemented some trans-supportive policies and practices and found that genderism still permeated every

aspect of campus life: the academic classroom, campus employment and career planning, student organizations and communities, and campus facilities. The students interviewed for the study who identified or expressed their gender outside of a binary had an especially difficult time finding campus support, as the institutions remained firmly entrenched in a gender system that assumes that students are either male or female. It is noteworthy that these were schools that had made progress in recognizing and addressing the needs of trans people; colleges and universities that have done little or nothing to support trans-spectrum students create an even more toxic environment.

### **Trans-Supportive College Policies**

Colleges and universities can be supportive of trans students by implementing the policies and practices that have been suggested by educators and advocates in the field (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, et al., 2005; Beemyn, Domingue, et al., 2005; Bilodeau, 2009). These changes include adding “gender identity and/or expression” to the institution’s nondiscrimination policies; creating gender-inclusive bathrooms, locker rooms, and housing options; enabling trans students to use a non-given first name and a non-assigned gender on campus records and documents; covering hormones and surgeries for transitioning students as part of student health insurance; requiring all Student Affairs professionals, Public Safety officers, and other staff who work daily with students to attend a trans-focused training session; and regularly sponsoring trans speakers, performers, and other programs that include the perspectives of trans people. Campus Pride, a national support and advocacy group for LGBT college students, tracks and maintains lists of the colleges and universities that have enacted many of these trans-inclusive policies and suggests best, trans-supportive practices. The organization also produces the

LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index, which measures the supportiveness of colleges and universities by examining institutional resources and policies (see the resource list at the end of the article for Web links).

According to Campus Pride's Trans Policy Clearinghouse (2013), more than 150 colleges and universities offer a gender-inclusive housing option (housing in which students can have a roommate of any gender) and more than 70 enable trans students to use a first name other than their legal first name on campus records and documents, such as identification cards, course rosters, and directory listings. But fewer colleges and universities have done much work to address two large parts of campus life: the academic classroom and athletics. In both areas, trans-spectrum students face a rigid gender binary and regularly experience discrimination that interferes with their ability to participate fully.

### **Creating a Trans-Inclusive Classroom**

Fostering a trans-inclusive classroom involves both establishing an environment in which trans-spectrum students are supported and welcomed and educating cisgender students about the experiences of trans-spectrum people. To begin to make trans students feel included from the first day of classes, instructors should not presume the gender of their students or that they go by their given name, especially if the institution does not allow students to use a first name other than their legal one on course rosters and other campus records. Instead, teachers should ask the students to introduce themselves and provide the first name and pronouns by which they want to be known. This exercise would mean that some trans-spectrum students would be faced with having to decide whether to come out and may not feel comfortable doing so, especially to a faculty member who is going to grade them or to a room full of their peers. But the option is

important for the trans students who are open about their gender identity and who want to be acknowledged as how they see themselves.

For the classroom to be a truly trans-inclusive environment, the curriculum must also be changed so that trans-spectrum people are specifically represented, as well as not erased by the assumption of a gender binary. A number of studies have shown the benefits of “teaching trans” to both trans-spectrum and cisgender students. Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar (2013) discuss how making gender diversity a recurring theme in an urban, public elementary school classroom over the course of a year affected the third- and fourth-grade students. The teacher, who was one of the study’s authors, used four lesson plans of increasing complexity to familiarize students with the concepts of gender nonconformity and transgender. Contrary to critics who say that young children are not ready for such topics, the researchers found that the students were receptive and engaged. From their experiences, the students better recognized restrictive gender norms, developed a broader understanding of gender identity and expression, and were able to apply the knowledge they learned to situations not directly about gender.

The Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar study is the only published research to date on the implementation and assessment of a trans-inclusive elementary school curriculum. Several more studies have been conducted at the college level, but research remains very limited here as well. Case and Stewart (2013) examine the impact of introducing three different trans educational interventions (a letter from a transsexual teen to his parents, a list of facts about transsexuality, and a clip from a documentary about transsexual college students) to a group of 132 students at an urban state university in Texas. The results of the study indicated that all of the interventions significantly lowered the participants’ negative attitudes and stereotypical beliefs about transsexuality, but no significant difference was found between the respondents’ pretest and



posttest mean scores for predictions of discriminatory behaviors. The students had become more supportive, but this change had yet to be incorporated into how they might treat trans people. The participants, who were recruited from different social sciences courses, were almost all female and their average age was 31 years old; research involving a younger, more gender diverse sample may have led to different results, because youth are generally more likely to support trans rights, while men are generally less likely to do so.

In another study, Rye, Elmslie, and Chalmers (2007) found that having a MTF guest speaker talk about her experiences to students in upper-level human sexuality courses at a Canadian college resulted in the participants expressing more positive attitudes toward transsexual people. For many of the students, this class program was the first time that they had “met” an out trans individual, and, according to the authors, “the effect was remarkable.” Written feedback indicated that the students developed a greater understanding of transsexuality as a result of the speaker talking about herself and about trans-spectrum people in general, and for some students, the experience changed their conception of diversity and inclusion. While a more involved or sustained intervention similar to Ryan, Patraw, and Bednar’s research may have had an even greater effect, these two college-level studies demonstrate that even a small step to educate cisgender students about trans-spectrum people can make a big difference.

At the same time, what Drabinski (2011) refers to as the “special guest” model is limiting, as it continues to treat trans-spectrum people and their experiences as peripheral. A class is devoted to a trans speaker or panel; otherwise, their perspectives fail to inform the curriculum. Framing transgender studies as a set of practices rather than simply as an identity, Drabinski offers an approach that enables the insights that can be gained from an examination of the lives of trans people to remain foregrounded in the women’s and gender studies classroom.

But if trans-spectrum experiences are considered only within women's and gender studies, then academia will continue to operate from a gender binary and be biased against trans people. To create more comprehensive and lasting curricular change, all disciplines must engage in "gender-complex education"— education that recognizes the existence and experiences of trans-spectrum and gender-nonconforming people (Rands, 2009). As Rands (2013) offers, even a field like mathematics, which has traditionally not addressed issues of social justice, can seamlessly incorporate gender diversity. Ze presents a series of exercises for middle-school students using statistics related to anti-trans discrimination from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network's National School Climate Survey (Kosciw et al., 2010). The students then design and carry out an action plan based on what they have discovered about the value of peer intervention in anti-trans bias incidents. From these lessons, the middle-school students further develop critical mathematical and statistical skills, as well as learn how to apply these skills in practical ways to address an issue that is relevant to their lives. A similar approach, with more complex exercises, could be used in high school and college math classes.

### **Creating a Trans-Inclusive Athletic Program**

Until recently, the inclusion and support of trans-spectrum students in athletics had been a largely unexplored topic. In part, the lack of discussion was a matter of priorities: trans students and their supporters initially focused on advocating for the more immediate needs of having safe places to live and go to the bathroom on campuses and being able to receive appropriate care at college counseling and health centers. Typically, only after these issues have been addressed at their institutions have trans students considered the inclusiveness of campus recreational facilities and sports teams.

Another reason that athletic programs have received little attention is the paucity to date of out trans-spectrum student athletes. For example, the Student-Athlete Climate Study (Rankin et al., 2011), which involved nearly 8,500 college student athletes from 164 NCAA-member institutions, had only seven trans-identified respondents. An earlier study (Rankin et al., 2008) that sampled more than 1,300 athletes from six institutions included no trans-identified students.

In the last few years, though, the issue of trans participation in athletics has received greater consideration and much more visibility as a result of several trans-spectrum student athletes having come out. Most well-known is Kye Allums, a starting guard for the George Washington University women's basketball team, who became the first openly trans Division I athlete in 2010. He was able to remain on the team after he began to identify as male because, in compliance with NCAA guidelines (Griffin & Carroll, 2011), he did not begin to take hormones until after ending his college playing career. Other out FTM college athletes have included Keelin Godsey, an All-American women's track and field athlete at Bates College in 2005, and Taylor Edelmann, the captain of the men's volleyball team at SUNY Purchase in 2013. Like Allums, Godsey was able to compete on a women's team because he had not begun to transition, while Edelmann started taking testosterone and switched from the women's to the men's team (DeFrancesco, 2013; Torre & Epstein, 2012).

Even fewer MTF college athletes have come out, and their ability to play sports in keeping with their gender identity has been much more controversial, despite research showing that any possible physical advantage disappears after taking hormones. The NCAA allows MTF athletes to compete on women's teams if they have been on hormone therapy for at least a year (Griffin & Carroll, 2011). Nevertheless, there has yet to be an NCAA-level female athlete who is openly transgender. Currently, the only out trans woman participating on a women's sports

team is Gabrielle Ludwig, a basketball player at Mission College, a community college in Santa Clara, California (Prisbell, 2012).

The NCAA's policies for transgender athletes are more inclusive and realistic than the International Olympic Committee's policies, which require MTF competitors to have at least two years of hormone therapy and all transgender people to undergo gender-affirming surgery and to change documents to be legally recognized as their gender identity. But the NCAA needlessly excludes transgender women who have not taken hormones for more than a year from participating on women's teams, assuming that male-bodied athletes automatically have a physical advantage over female-bodied athletes. The most trans-inclusive athletic policy would enable students to participate on the team that is consistent with their gender identity, irrespective of whether they are taking hormones or have changed the gender listed on their legal records (Buzuvis, 2012).

There is also a movement underway to include trans athletes in K-12 programs. As of 2013, two states have enacted formal policies that allow elementary and secondary school students to join teams based on their gender identity (Massachusetts and California) and one state does so just at the high-school level (Washington). A recent legal settlement ("Resolution Agreement," 2013) between the U.S. Departments of Education and Justice and the Arcadia Unified School District of California, which affirms that anti-transgender discrimination is covered under Title IX, may lead other school districts and colleges to enact trans-supportive athletic policies to avoid possible lawsuits.

While colleges and universities are bound by the rules of the NCAA and the governing bodies of club sports, a growing number of campus athletic programs are developing policies that ensure that trans-spectrum athletes are accommodated as best as possible within these

expectations. In addition, institutions are creating trans-inclusive policies for their intramural and recreational sports teams, which enable trans students to compete based on their gender identity. Among the campuses with such policies are Bates College, Emory University, Miami University (Ohio), and the University of Vermont (Campus Pride Trans Policy Clearinghouse, 2013).

### **Conclusion**

Trans-spectrum people are not new to our campuses, but institutional policies, attitudes, procedures, and facilities often keep them isolated and invisible (Rowell, 2009). With more and more trans-spectrum people coming out to themselves and others during childhood and adolescence, many colleges and universities are witnessing a steadily growing number of openly trans students. These students are expecting to be recognized and to have their needs met by their institutions. However, campuses have been largely unprepared to meet these needs and so now are scrambling to provide support services and to create more inclusive policies and practices.

The vast majority of college students, faculty, student affairs educators, and administrators have a tremendous amount to learn about gender diversity. For this majority and for trans-spectrum students and educators, opportunities are all but untapped to leverage this diversity to enhance learning, as well as to support and celebrate these individuals. At the same time, every day that students and educators remain ignorant about this population is another day that trans-spectrum students face overt or unintentional harassment and discrimination that may result in their departure from the institution.

Colleges and universities can be supportive of trans-spectrum students by implementing

the trans-inclusive policies and practices that have been suggested within this article and through the resources on best practices provided. However, the changes needed cannot end there. Having a process whereby students can change the male/female designation on their college records, for example, is of little value to gender-nonconforming students who fit into neither box. Gender-segregated co-curricular activities (e.g., fraternities, sororities, and athletic teams) and “women’s” health and support services likewise ignore and exclude the growing number of genderqueer and androgynous students. Only after a complete transformation of institutional cultures will colleges and universities become truly welcoming to trans-spectrum students.

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## **Resources**

Campus Pride Trans Policy Clearinghouse: <http://www.campuspride.org/tpc>

Johnson, E., & Subasic, A. (2011). *Promising practices for inclusion of gender identity/gender expression in higher education*:

<http://www.umass.edu/stonewall/uploads/listWidget/25137/promising-practices.pdf>

LGBT-Friendly Campus Climate Index: <http://www.campusprideindex.org>

Trans Checklist for Colleges and Universities:

<http://www.campuspride.org/tools/transgender-checklist-for-colleges-universities>