

Trans on Campus: Measuring and Improving the Climate for Transgender Students

Brett Genny Beemyn

From *On Campus with Women*, 34 (Spring 2005): <http://www.aacu.org/ocww>

As an undergraduate student, Lisa was open about being transgender.¹ She spoke about her gender identity on panels, sought to make campus groups more trans-inclusive, and challenged gender expectations by often wearing dresses and make-up, but otherwise appearing as her male birth gender. In her crossing of traditional gender boundaries, Lisa encountered both individual and institutional discrimination. It was not uncommon for her to be verbally harassed as she walked across campus, and residence life staff would only house her with male students, leading to uncomfortable and potentially dangerous situations.

Lisa's experiences are typical. More and more students are coming out as transgender at colleges and universities across the U.S, only to be confronted with often hostile classmates, insensitive and uneducated faculty and staff, and institutional systems that recognize only male and female gender categories. While some institutions have begun to change policies and practices to accommodate the needs of transgender students, most colleges and universities have yet to consider or take steps to create a more trans-inclusive campus climate (Beemyn, 2005).

In some cases, the lack of support services for transgender students seems to result from a failure to recognize that transgender students exist on campuses and have specific needs, while in other cases, it appears that colleges and universities do not know how to respond to their needs effectively. This article will address both of these concerns. After reviewing research on the experiences of transgender college students, the article will consider ways in which campuses

can create a more welcoming and inclusive environment for transgender students in terms of both policy and practice.

Research on Transgender Students

Although there have been few studies of transgender college students, the literature indicates that they often encounter institutional and personal discrimination on many campuses. For example, a study (Rankin and Beemyn, in progress) involving 50 transgender-identified students from 14 colleges and universities found that 44 percent of the respondents had experienced harassment. Derogatory remarks were the most common form of harassment, reported by 86% of the individuals who experienced harassment. Other types of harassment included pressure to be silent (52%), verbal threats (48%), graffiti (43%), physical threats (24%), denial of services (23%), and physical assaults (19%). In contrast, less than one-third of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual respondents to the study (Rankin, 2003) had been harassed, and less than two percent had experienced physical violence.

The hostile campus climate for transgender students was reflected in many of the students' attitudes and behaviors. In Rankin and Beemyn's study (in progress), 40 percent of the transgender students stated that they feared for their physical safety on campus because of being transgender, and 30 percent indicated that they concealed their gender identity to avoid harassment and discrimination. Nearly three-fourths of both the transgender study respondents (Rankin & Beemyn, in progress) and the LGBT study respondents (Rankin, 2003) felt that harassment against transgender people was likely or very likely on their campuses.

Along with fears and concerns about harassment, many transgender students report experiencing institutional discrimination. In a survey of 75 self-identified transgender

undergraduate and graduate students from 61 different colleges and universities, McKinney (in press) found that the respondents did not feel that their institutions adequately address the needs of transgender students. For example, few of the students indicated that their schools provide any transgender-related programming, and none of the students considered faculty and staff, in general, to be transgender-supportive. Asked “Are faculty and staff educated about transgender issues?,” the students all had negative responses, including:

“There are frequent transphobic and clueless remarks in class by profs.”

“Many professors do not have up to date information. . . Homosexuality and transgender are taught in social problems as a strain on society and deviant acts.”

“Even LGB staff/faculty are largely ignorant—not overtly bigoted, their ignorance takes its toll. Trans issues are still seen as add-ons/expendable as opposed to being an integral part of so-called LGBT affairs on campus. The campus LGBT center staff lack even a basic understanding of the realities facing trans folk on this campus.”

“I have tried to educate some of the staff and faculty. I have spent a lot of energy wanting to be heard. That energy would have been better spent on my coursework.”

“Hahahahaha, are you kidding?”

Many of the students were especially troubled by the lack of transgender education among campus counseling and health-care center staffs. Only four of the 75 students surveyed reported that campus counselors were helpful, knowledgeable, and supportive in regard to transgender issues (McKinney, in press). Responses to the question, “What type of counseling, if any, is available on your campus?,” included:

“As a trans person, I would NEVER seek counseling here as I don’t want to be diagnosed with some gender identity disorder.”

“No good counseling is available. I was referred to a mental institution for expressing such feelings.”

“I went to the university health services. They had no counselors with experience dealing with trans folk. Nor were they able to refer me to any experienced counselors anywhere in my state. . . . Having access to effective counseling resources would have made a substantial difference in my experience.”

“Not at all. I went to two different counselors since I’ve been here and it was always ME that had to educate them about who I was on the gender spectrum.”

The transgender students surveyed expressed similar concerns about campus health center staff. McKinney (in press) found that the graduate student respondents, who apparently

had a greater need for transgender-related health services than the undergraduate students, were particularly dissatisfied with the medical care available at their colleges and universities. As the recognized standards (Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association, 2001) for providing care to individuals who are transitioning from one gender to another require counseling and medical evaluations, the lack of trained campus health-care professionals represents a major obstacle for many transgender students.

The Diverse Identities and Needs of Transgender Students

A number of articles (Beemyn, in press; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, in progress; Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, & Smith, in press; Sanlo, in progress) have offered recommendations for how colleges and universities can become more trans-inclusive, and often provide examples of institutions that have implemented these changes. Among the areas of campus life discussed in these works are housing, counseling and health care, bathrooms, locker rooms, documents and records, standardized forms, and training and programming.

College administrators and student affairs staff need to develop transgender-specific policies and practices in each of these areas. But they also must be able to work with transgender students on an individual basis, recognizing that these students have diverse identities, experiences, and needs. For example, because many transsexual women who are in the process of transitioning are initially not able to “pass” as female, they face different issues than transsexual men, who begin to be seen as male soon after starting hormone therapy. Similarly, a man who identifies and performs onstage as a drag queen will likely have different

concerns than a heterosexual man who crossdresses secretly, without even his female partner(s) knowing.

Although MTFs (male-to-female transsexuals) and drag queens have historically been the most visible transgender people within both transgender communities and the larger society, these groups are today only a small segment of individuals whose identities, appearances, and/or behaviors blur or cross traditional gender lines. Since Christine Jorgensen made international headlines in the early 1950s for having a “sex change,” the dominant model of transgender identity development has been personified by individuals who recognize themselves as a gender different from their birth gender at a young age, struggle to understand these feelings, and after years of shame and denial, begin to accept themselves (Meyerowitz, 2002). Typically, in mid-life, they take hormones and have gender reassignment surgeries to align their outward appearance with their inner sense of self.

But over the last decade, there has been a fundamental shift in how many transgender people, especially many younger trans people, conceive and express their gender identities. Trans youth today, who have access to information on the internet, see a growing number of transgender images in popular culture, and benefit from the political and social gains made by previous generations of transgender activists, are much less likely than transgender people who grew up in the 1960s to mid 1990s to feel that they are the “only one.” As a result, trans youth in the 2000s may acknowledge and embrace their transgender identities more quickly and not experience a prolonged sense of confusion or guilt.

With many transgender people coming out at younger and younger ages, more students are openly identifying as transgender in or even before college and expecting their campuses to provide transgender-specific services and activities and to have transgender-supportive faculty

and staff. But as McKinney (in press) found, many institutions offer little or no transgender programming. The lack of campus transgender events means that faculty and staff, whom the participants in McKinney's study perceived as being largely ignorant about transgender issues, have few formal opportunities to become more knowledgeable. College administrators and student affairs staff can thus make an important difference by regularly offering educational sessions about transgender issues and including transgender speakers and performers as part of general campus programming.

Along with often coming out earlier, transgender people today who want to transition may seek to do so in their teens or early twenties, rather than making this decision later in life. Increasingly then, transgender students will need the assistance of campus counseling and health-care centers for therapy, hormones, and gender reassignment surgeries. But, as McKinney (in press) demonstrates, many counseling and health-service personnel are no more knowledgeable about transgender concerns than other staff and faculty. Moreover, most college health insurance plans do not cover treatments related to transsexuality, based on the misguided belief that such procedures are elective rather than necessary for an individual's well-being (Beemyn, 2005). Thus if campus counseling and health-care centers are to meet the needs of the growing number of students who openly identify as transgender, they must require their staffs to attend trainings on the experiences of transgender people and provide access to and coverage of transitioning services.

Many transgender youth today, however, do not feel that they need to transition entirely or at all in order to be "real" men or "real" women. Challenging the assumption that one's genitalia is the defining aspect of one's gender, they may take hormones, but not have any surgeries, or they may have a breast augmentation or reduction procedure, but not genital

surgeries. Trans men, especially, often forgo “bottom” surgeries, because many are able to be seen as male only from taking hormones, and because of the tremendous cost of phalloplasty and what they see as less than adequate surgical results (Cromwell, 1999).

Other trans youth refuse to present or characterize themselves as either male or female. Often referring to themselves as genderqueer, they seek to blur gender boundaries, such as by having an androgynous appearance or by wearing both “male” and “female” clothing. Whereas the term “transgender” was often shorthand for “transsexual” for much of the 1990s, the “transgender” umbrella is recognized today as covering a myriad of gender-crossing and genderqueer identities (Diamond, 2004; Nestle, Howell, & Wilchins, 2002; O’Keefe & Fox, 2003). Some of the more common words that trans youth use to describe themselves include transboi, boydyke, third gendered, bi-gendered, multi-gendered, andro, androgyne, and gender bender. Drag king identities are also more visible and accepted among trans youth today (Volcano & Halberstam, 1999), so that campus drag shows, once the sole domain of drag queens, are increasingly presenting a range of gender expressions.

The growing diversity of transgender communities means that college administrators and student affairs staff will increasingly encounter students who do not fit the traditional model of transsexual identity development and who have different concerns than earlier generations of transgender people. Addressing the needs of students who do not identify as either male or female will require a fundamental re-organization of colleges and universities, which typically operate on the basis of binary gender categories in everything from bathrooms and locker rooms to housing to institutional forms and documents. More and more campuses are offering gender-neutral bathrooms, locker rooms, and housing options, and are changing forms and documents to enable transgender students to self-identify (Beemyn, 2005). But most colleges and universities

continue to acknowledge only two “sexes,” which, whether intended or not, signals to genderqueer and other transgender students that they are not welcomed and included on campuses.

Because of individual and institutional discrimination, many transgender students have an overall negative college experience. Administrators and student affairs staff can make an important difference in the lives of these students, but to do so, they will need to reconsider many of their assumptions about gender and the structure of higher education. Improving the campus climate for transgender students requires nothing less than changing the campus.

References

- Beemyn, Brett. In press. Making campuses more inclusive of transgender students. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*.
- Beemyn, Brett. 2005. Ways that colleges and universities meet the needs of transgender students. Transgender Law and Policy Institute, <http://www.transgenderlaw.org/college/index.htm>.
- Beemyn, Brett. 2003. Serving the needs of transgender college students. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education* 1: 33-50.
- Beemyn, Brett, Billy Curtis, Masen Davis, and Nancy Jean Tubbs. In progress. Transgender issues on college campuses. In book name, edited by Ronni Sanlo.
- Beemyn, Brett, Andrea Domingue, Jessica Pettitt, and Todd Smith. In press. Suggested steps to make campuses more trans-inclusive. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*.
- Cromwell, Jason. 1999. *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, bodies, genders, and sexualities*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Diamond, Morty, ed. 2004. *From the inside out: Radical gender transformation, FTM and beyond*. San Francisco: Manic D Press.

Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association. 2001. The HBIGDA standards of care for gender identity disorders. HBIGDA, <http://www.hbigda.org/soc.cfm>.

McKinney, Jeff. In press. On the margins: A study of the experiences of transgender college students. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*.

Meyerowitz, Joanne. 2002. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nestle, Joan, Riki Wilchins, and Clare Howell, eds. 2002. *Genderqueer: Voices from beyond the sexual binary*. Los Angeles: Alyson.

O'Keefe, Tracie, and Katrina Fox. Eds. 2003. *Finding the real me: True tales of sex and gender diversity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Rankin, Sue R. 2003. *Campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people: A national perspective*. New York: National Gay and Lesbian Task Force Policy Institute.

Rankin, Sue R., and Brett Beemyn. In progress. Perceptions of campus climate for transgender people.

Sanlo, Ronni, ed. In progress. *Transactions: Transgender Issues in Student Affairs*.

Volcano, Del LaGrace, and Judith Jack Halberstam. 1999. *The Drag King Book*. London:
Serpent's Tail.

¹ The term "transgender" encompasses a wide range of identities, appearances, and/or behaviors that blur or cross gender lines. The transgender umbrella includes, but is not limited to, transsexuals, who identify as a gender different from their biological gender; crossdressers (previously known as transvestites), who wear clothes considered appropriate for another gender but not one's own; drag kings and drag queens, who crossdress within a performance context; and genderqueers, who do not identify as either male or female and who often seek to blur gender lines.