

Ten Strategies to Improve Trans Inclusiveness on Campus

by Brett Genny Beemyn

More and more students are coming out as transgender at colleges and universities across the U.S. But most institutions have been slow to recognize their specific needs, much less to take steps to create a more trans-supportive campus environment. As a result, transgender and other gender-diverse students often encounter hostile classmates, uneducated faculty and Student Affairs staff, insensitive campus health care providers, and school policies and practices that are based on binary gender categories (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; McKinney, 2005).

Much can be done by colleges and universities to create a more welcoming campus climate for transgender people. The following ten recommendations represent significant ways that students, staff, and faculty can make their campuses more trans-inclusive.

- **Add “gender identity or expression” to the college’s nondiscrimination policy.**

Recognizing that the inclusion of “sex” and “sexual orientation” in nondiscrimination policies does not necessarily cover transgender and other gender-diverse people, who experience discrimination based on their gender identity and/or expression, more than 40 colleges and college systems have added “gender identity or expression” to their policies in the last decade.

- **Advocate for the campus health center to provide direct insurance coverage for hormones and gender confirmation surgeries for transitioning students.**

Although more students are coming out as transsexual and seeking to transition during their college years, schools have been slow to address their health-care needs by including hormones and gender confirmation surgeries in health insurance plans.

- **Work with residence life to create transgender-inclusive housing options, including gender-neutral rooms or floors.**

Because many residence halls are designated as “single-sex” by building and/or room, transgender students often have few safe, comfortable on-campus housing options. To address this situation, colleges should offer gender-neutral housing options, in which students are assigned a roommate regardless of gender.

- **Convert existing single-occupancy men’s and women’s restrooms into gender-neutral bathrooms and include gender-neutral bathrooms in new and renovated buildings.**

Because students who are perceived as violating traditional gender boundaries are vulnerable to harassment and violence when using campus restrooms designated for “women” and “men,” a growing number of colleges are changing male/female restrooms into gender-neutral ones (typically single-stall, lockable restrooms available to people of all genders), publicizing the locations of these facilities, and making sure that new and renovated buildings include gender-neutral bathroom options.

- **Work with Student Activities, Greek Life, Athletics, and other campus departments to develop policies that ensure that transgender students can be part of gender-specific student groups, fraternities and sororities, and sports teams.**

Students should be able to participate in campus activities in keeping with how they identify and express their gender identities.

- **Work with the Registrar’s Office to establish a simple, one-stop procedure for students to change the name and/or gender on all of their campus records and documents.**

Students who do not identify as the gender assigned to them at birth should be able to have their appropriate gender reflected on college documents, including identification cards, transcripts, financial aid and employment forms, and enrollment records. Besides being a matter of fairness and respect, an accurate gender designation in college files is critical to avoid outing transgender students and to help protect them from discrimination when they apply for jobs, seek admission to graduate and professional schools, and at any other time that they must show a college document. An institution should never insist that individuals complete gender confirmation surgeries before changing their records, as many younger transgender people are deciding not to transition entirely, and even students who desire the surgeries have limited access to health care and often cannot afford the procedures, which are almost never covered by insurance.

- **Advocate for Student Affairs offices to change the gender category on their standardized forms to enable transgender students to self-identify, if they wish.**

College forms that ask students to indicate whether they are female or male, and brochures and Web sites that use “he/she” ignore the complexities of gender and signal to transgender students that they do not belong at the institution. Offering more inclusive language would not only be supportive of trans-identified people, but also help educate the campus community about gender diversity.

- **Sponsor regular transgender-specific programs and include transgender-related events during LGBT pride weeks and awareness months.**

Some student groups participate in the national transgender Day of Remembrance, an annual event that honors individuals killed because of their actual or perceived gender identity/expression. Campus organizations should not only sponsor activities that recognize the deaths of transgender people, but also hold events that speak to and celebrate their lives.

- **Include extensive transgender information and resources as part of an Ally or Safe Space/Zone program.**

Many colleges offer an Ally or Safe Space/Zone program to raise awareness and understanding of the experiences of LGBT people and to create visible allies among staff, faculty, and administrators. But many of these programs include little, if any, trans-specific content, even though transgender issues are invariably much less understood than lesbian or gay concerns. Using “LGBT” when the circumstances being described are not applicable to transgender people is an insult, not inclusion.

- **Widely publicize campus trans-inclusive policies.**

Developing transgender-supportive policies will have a limited effect if people are unaware of the changes. The most effective way to publicize the policies to students would be to create an online transgender resource guide. For staff and faculty, utilize the institutionalized methods of information sharing and communication (e.g. department head meetings, presidential memo, newsletters).

References

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Brett Genny Beemyn, Ph.D., is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, co-chair of the National Consortium of Directors of LGBT Resources in Higher Education, and a board member of the Transgender Law and Policy Institute. Brett Genny has published and spoken extensively on transgender college students and trans-inclusive campus policies and is currently conducting a national study of transgender identity development.