

2012

The College Experiences of Transgender Students: Creating a Welcoming Environment on Campus

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THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS:
CREATING A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT ON CAMPUS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

By

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B.A., Wittenberg University, 2009

2012
Wright State University

WRIGHT STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES

June, 2012

I HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THE THESIS PREPARED UNDER
MY SUPERVISION BY Roxanna Jessica-Dyan Patton ENTITLED The
College Experiences of Transgender Students: Creating a Welcoming
Environment on Campus BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL
FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
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ABSTRACT

Patton, Roxanna. M.A., Department of Leadership Studies in Education and Organizations, Wright State University, 2012. *The College Experiences of Transgender Students: Creating a Welcoming Environment on Campus*.

The number of transgender students on college campuses has been increasing throughout the United States (Schneider,2010). Transgender students face unique concerns in nearly every aspect of campus life. The purpose of this research was to examine the college experiences of transgender students and recommend best practices for making college campuses more welcoming for transgender students. This phenomenological study was conducted using open ended interview questions to collect qualitative data from three transgender students at a large four year public institution in the Midwest. Respondents identified unwelcoming messages in the following areas of campus life: student activities, health services, and through the dichotomization of gender on university forms. Nine recommendations for best practices in creating a welcoming campus environment for transgender students are included in the discussion section of this thesis.

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ACKNOWLEDEMENTS

As I move on to the next chapter of my life, it is important to acknowledge the people who made this chapter so successful.

First and foremost I would like to thank Dr. Suzanne Franco. Without whose guidance and support I do not believe that I would have been able to complete this research. Her unwavering support over the last two years inspired me, motivated me, and ultimately helped me to create something to be truly proud of. I have learned so much from her that I will carry with me throughout my career. Thank you Dr. Franco.

I would like to thank my committee members whose input and critique helped to shape this research.

I also wish to recognize Dr. Rick Danals, Dr. Joanne Risacher, and Kathy Morris for their support and professional guidance. These are my professional models and I hope to live up to their example.

A special thank you to all of my participants who opened up and shared their stories with me, without them this research would not have been possible or impactful. Your stories will change lives.

Thank you to my friends Lynsey Ayers, Mary Johnson, Caitlin Baker, and Betsy Glass who supported me and encouraged me when my spirits were low and pushed me to succeed and follow my dreams. You are truly the best.

I would also like to express my gratitude to Dr. Bob Davis, who made me believe in myself as an educator. As a first generation student there were many moments where I doubted my own ability, but you never did. You challenged the way I viewed the world and the way that I viewed myself and I am eternally grateful! Thank you!

Finally, I wish to thank Brian Lintala. My senior year of high school you wrote in my yearbook, "It's not going to be easy, just keep going". You were right then, as always. Those words have followed me throughout the last decade and have been a driving force in my success. Without the educational foundation you provided me, I know that I would not be here today. Thank you.

DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my amazing parents David and Carol Patton and my surrogate mother Mama Karen Johnson.

Papa Bear, your love and support drive me every single day of my life. You wanted what was best for me above all else and while you may no longer be here to rejoice with us, we did it! Your Baby Girl made it through college like you always hoped and thanks to the stubbornness that I got from you, I now finished my second degree. I love you!

Mom, how many people are so lucky as to have a mother and a best friend in the same person? Thank you for supporting me and loving me even when you disagreed with me. Thank you for teaching me what it means to be a good person and how important it is to stand up for what is right. Without you, I don't know who I would be.

You both taught me love and compassion. I hope to one day hold a candle to the glowing love that you two have contributed to this world.

Mama Johnson, I am blessed each day to say that I have two mothers. We may not be related in any way, but you have been just as much a parent to me over the last few years as any relative. Your love and support have kept my life on track in times when I felt I had no place to turn. You mean the world to me! Thank you so much for everything!

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

The number of transgender students on college campuses has been increasing throughout the United States (Schneider, 2010). Transgender students face unique concerns regarding registration, residence life, health services, athletics, Greek life, and interactions with untrained or ill-informed faculty and staff. Many times students registering for classes are forced to identify their sex only as male or female and do not have the opportunity to self-identify gender. The registration process is not inclusive to transgender students who do not fit into the gender binary. Transgender students also may have no way of having their chosen name or their self-identified gender reflected on their college identification cards or class rosters. In residence halls separation of students based on sex without consideration of gender leaves many transgender students without comfortable living accommodations. Health centers may also be ill-prepared or untrained to deal with the specific health concerns of this growing population. Campus activities such as athletic teams and Greek organizations historically separate men and women based on sex and not gender, a practice which can be unwelcoming for transgender students.

In addition to campus policies that often marginalize transgender students, many transgender students face opposition from ill-informed faculty and staff who lack knowledge of transgender terminology and proper pronoun usage. Transgender students frequently encounter staff that have little to no knowledge about the difference between gender identity issues and sexual orientation issues. Even the best intentioned, ill-

informed faculty and staff can have a detrimental effect on transgender students' experiences. For example, many Lesbian, Gay, Bi-sexual, Transgender, Queer, Questioning, and Ally (LGBTQA) programs and centers merge transgender issues (gender identity) with those of the LGB (sexual orientation identities) community. The merger can be unaccommodating and even offensive to transgender students who may identify with others in the LGBTQA community but ultimately whose identity development is one of gender not sexual orientation. These practices make college experiences unwelcoming to transgender students.

This study provides valuable insight into the current campus experiences of transgender students and offers resourceful information for making campuses more welcoming to the transgender population. Throughout this study, gender neutral pronouns will be used to replace gender specific pronouns: *ze* will be used in place of he or she, *hir* will be used in place of him or her, and *hirs* will be used in place of his or hers.

Statement of the Problem

As the number of transgender college students increases across the country, colleges and universities struggle to provide adequate transgender services, accommodations and training for faculty and staff. Transgender students have unique concerns regarding to residence life, health services, registration, and student activities. This study describes the college experiences of transgender students and makes recommendations in regard to making the campus environment more welcoming for transgender students.

Definition of Terms

Cross-dresser. A transgender person who dresses in clothing that is not typically associated with hir sex assigned at birth. Cross-dressers typically have no intent on living full-time as the gender not associated with hir sex assigned at birth (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Female-to-Male (FTM). A transgender person who was assigned a female sex assigned at birth but currently identifies as male, also known as a Transgender Man (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Gender Identity. One's understanding of self as being man, woman, or other gender (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Gender Expression. How one presents their gender identity to other people. Gender expression can be presented in clothing, hairstyle, facial hair, behavior, voice, and body characteristics (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Gender Non-conforming. A transgender person whose gender expression does not match that of the expression typically associated with their sex assigned at birth (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Genderqueer. A transgender person who identifies as neither man nor woman but rather a third gender (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Hir. A gender neutral pronoun that takes the place of *him* or *her* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d.).

Hirs. A gender neutral pronoun that takes the place of *his* or *hers* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d.).

Male-to-Female (MTF). A transgender person who was assigned a male sex at birth but currently identifies as woman, also known as Transgender Woman (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Passing. When a transgender person is typically seen by others as their self-identified gender (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Sex Reassignment Surgery. A surgery to alter one's body to match their gender identity. Surgeries can include but are not limited to breast augmentation or removal, altering of the genitals, and facial reconstruction. The terms "sex-change" surgery is not considered appropriate (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Transgender. An umbrella term that refers to any person whose gender identity or expression that is not generally associated with their sex assigned at birth. This term can include those who identify as genderqueer, gender non-conforming, transsexual, cross-dresser, or androgynous (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Transition. The time period in which a transgender person is beginning to live as their gender identity. During this time a person may change their name, clothing, have surgery, take hormones, and change legal documents to reflect their gender identity (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Transsexual. A transgender person who identifies as a gender opposite of that associated with their sex assigned at birth. While some transsexual persons may wish to alter their body through hormone therapy or sex reassignment surgery, this is not always the case (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Ze. A gender neutral pronoun that takes the place of *he* or *she* (Massachusetts Institute of Technology, n.d.).

Research Question

What are the college experiences of transgender students on campus? Additional guiding questions are as follows:

What has your experience as a transgender person been like on campus?

Tell me about a typical day on campus.

Tell me about a typical social event on campus.

Questions may also be found in Appendix A.

Assumptions

There are four assumptions related to this study. First, participants will be honest in their self-identification as transgender students. Second, transgender students receive unwelcoming messages, whether intentional or unintentional, on college campuses. Third, a student is identified as transgender as soon as ze begins transitioning genders from that associated with his sex assigned at birth; and fourth, participants will be honest in their responses to research questions.

Scope

This study focuses on the experiences of three transgender students at a four-year public institution in the Midwest. The results cannot be generalized to the experiences of transgender students at other institutions.

Significance of Study

Transgender students are a growing minority population at institutions of higher education throughout the country; studies as recent as 2005 document that transgender student are being underserved and often discriminated against by current policies and practices in higher education (Beemyn, 2005). This study provides valuable insight into

the current campus experience for transgender students and offers resourceful information for making campuses more welcoming to the transgender population.

Overview

Chapter II of this study summarizes the literature and research reports relevant to the thesis topic. Chapter III contains the methodology. In Chapter IV, the results of this study are presented; recommendations for creating a more welcoming campus environment for transgender students are summarized in Chapter V.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Transgender students are more prevalent on college campuses than ever before (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; McKinney, 2005). With the growing transgender college population comes a unique set of issues about which college faculty, staff, and administrators must be educated. The issues facing transgender students affect every area of student life and each department on campus. For example, transgender students face adversity in registration and completion of required forms, residence life, health services, and even in student activities. The literature review addresses each of these issues with greater detail.

Dichotomy of Gender

One of the primary problems facing transgender students upon entering colleges and universities is the dichotomization of gender as male or female based on a person's sex assigned at birth (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, et. al., 2005; Schnetzler & Conant, 2009). Transgender students report that not having more than the two options of male and female for declaring gender is perceived as a very unwelcoming message (Beemyn, 2003). College enrollment forms require sex assigned at birth along with birth name which may be gender specific to that associated with one's sex assigned at birth. The provided name and sex appears on a student's identification card. A transgender student's preferred name and gender may not match hir identification card, causing confusion. For example, campus safety officers may inadvertently cause the transgender student to out themselves. When issues call for the response of campus safety officers,

the responding office generally requires identification from all students involved. Additionally, identification cards are frequently required to be presented to a safety officer or fellow student upon entering a campus event. The encounter may lead to transgender students being inadvertently outed.

In addition, not having the preferred identity information on official forms can be problematic for professors when assessing attendance or using the class roster to address students during class; both situations cause the transgender student to feel violated and exposed. (Beemyn,2005). The lack of correct gender identity and gender appropriate name on official documents also can be detrimental to transgender students upon leaving college and pursuing careers by increasing the risk of accidental outings (Beemyn, 2005). Unnecessary outings expose transgender students to prejudice and often dangerous situations.

Residence life is another aspect of campus life affected by dichotomizing gender. Many campus residence halls separate students by sex assigned at birth either by floor or by building. The separation leaves transgender students with few on campus living situations that are comfortable and safe (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, Curtis et. al., 2005). When transgender students are placed with a roommate based on their sex assigned at birth rather than gender identity, there is a great deal of anxiety for the transgender students before arriving on campus. Students of opposing genders, even if they share the same sex assigned at birth, may feel uncomfortable changing clothes, sleeping, and performing hygiene rituals in front of each other. The discomfort causes many transgender students to seek living accommodations off campus (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, et. al., 2005). Some transgender students seek single rooms, if single rooms are

available and if the student has the funds (Klein, 2004). If a transgender student is fortunate enough to live in a single room or be assigned a roommate of the same gender identity, numerous other unwelcoming problems exist within the residence halls.

In addition to problems created in the residence hall room assignments, there are also other problems within the residence life. Many college residence halls lack gender neutral restroom and shower facilities. Gender specific restrooms leave transgender students who live on campus with few options for safe places to go for their sanitary needs.

The unavailability of gender neutral restroom facilities is not only a problem for transgender students in residence halls but also for transgender students throughout campus. Facing gender specific restrooms is the largest source of anxiety facing transgender students across campus (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, et. al., 2005). Beemyn stated that “Trans women are especially subjected to verbal and physical assault and face being questioned or even arrested by the police” in gender specific restrooms (2005, p. 81). Because restrooms are often secluded they offer an ideal isolated breeding ground for conflict for the transgender student. When a transgender student chooses to use the restroom congruent with their gender identity, they are vulnerable and exposed to other people who may not be accepting of their gender identity.

Health Care Services

Another source of added stress for transgender students on campus involves medical services. Transgender students must work with psychologists and therapists throughout their transition (Beemyn, 2005). Many campus therapists and counselors have not been trained to meet the special needs of transgender students. Receiving proper

psychiatric care is vital for transgender students; Grossman & D'Augelli (2012) documented that 26 per cent of transgender youth aged 15 to 21 will make an attempt on their own life (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2010). In order to receive the care that they require, many transgender students are forced to seek counseling off campus and at their own expense (Beemyn, 2005).

Similar to inadequately trained therapists and counselors, many campus health care providers are not trained in the special care needed for transgender students (Beemyn et. al., 2005; Lombardi, 2001). For students undergoing medical transitioning procedures, there are special gynecological exams and other medical exams required to cover their unique health concerns. If a medical provider has not specifically studied the needs of the transgender population, ze may not be able to provide the correct type of care. Transgender students need hormones during their transitioning process; accessing the hormones may be a financial burden since many colleges' insurance plans do not cover the hormones required for medical transition (Beemyn, 2005; McKinney, 2005). Currently there are only 26 colleges and universities in the nation that include hormone therapy for transgender students in their student insurance policies (Beemyn, 2012).

In addition to inadequate training, there are other stumbling blocks in regard to medical care for transgender students. Health care facility sign-in forms, like most official documents, dichotomize sex and offer no option for self-reporting gender identity; as a result doctors may be ill-informed as to the sex related care that a transgender student may need. Additionally, many student health care facilities have treatment areas designated and decorated for women students. Students with a different gender identity than sex assigned at birth may require special gynecological

examinations; transgender students may not feel comfortable in a women's only space and so may choose not to enter these spaces or disclose their gender identity (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2005). Without providing a safe space for students to identify their gender, transgender students may receive improper care.

Student Activities

While many practices on campus can leave transgender students feeling ostracized and isolated, Bilodeau (2005) posited that few practices have as powerful an effect as those associated with student activities. Bilodeau (2005) reported that numerous transgender students identified the benefit of having some type of campus LGBTQA organization or center. The author explained the key roles that support centers play in transgender identity development: a sense of community and belonging that they cannot find on the campus at large. Centers may also provide a safe space to gather, educational resources, access to LGBTQA friendly health providers, and human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and sexually transmitted infection (STI) testing. Unfortunately, some colleges simply cannot afford to support or staff a support center; many do not offer any student organizations for transgender students.

For students who have access to an LGBTQA organization on campus, another problem may arise concerning LGBQ groups adding the 'T' in their title for transgender students but only for name's sake (McKinney, 2005). Some LGBQ organizations do not welcome transgender students. McKinney (2005) documented that transgender students desire campus visibility and programming for their needs, and that most campuses are still lacking in one or both areas. Providing inclusive spaces such as LGBTQ Centers and transgender-focused events on campus send a welcoming message to transgender

students. Housing the centers and events in places that are easy to locate increases the visibility and adds to the welcoming message.

LGBTQA groups are not the only student activities that may be unable to serve transgender students adequately. Many campus athletic policies do not have clear specifications for transgender students. Transgender students may not be able to participate on athletic teams that match their identity due to a college's policy or league policies.

Another area of student activities that often leaves transgender students without options is Greek life. Sex is a primary qualifying factor for most traditional fraternities and sororities. This researcher identified only 15 Greek organizations specifically dedicated for students identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (Rainbow Greek Network, n.d). Transgender students living on campuses lacking a Greek organization that accepts transgender students are forced to refrain from being a part of Greek life or to not disclose their sex assigned at birth.

Summary

Beemyn wrote

transpeople shouldn't have to lie, lead double lives, and deny their gender simply to make others comfortable, avoid possible discrimination, and prevent being verbally or physically attacked (2003, p.41).

It is for this reason that this study aims to understand better the needs of the transgender community and to help build a more welcoming campus climate for transgender students. Because state and federal policy makers are emphasizing retention of college students it is key for institutions to review services and policies that include the growing population

of transgender college students on campus (“Investing in Education”, 2012). Not doing so will limit opportunities for transgender successes at post-secondary institutions.

III. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

Transgender students' challenges in higher education are becoming more evident on campus as more transgender students are out and attending colleges and universities (Beemyn, 2005). Transgender students have unique concerns in regard to residence life, health services, registration, and student activities. This study seeks to better understand the college experiences of transgender students and identify standards and policies that will create a more welcoming environment for the transgender community on campus.

Population

This study took place at a four-year public institution in the Midwest. The research institution has a population of approximately 20,000 students with 79.1 per cent enrolled as undergraduates, 16.8 per cent enrolled as graduate students, and 4.1 per cent enrolled as professional/doctoral students. The average student age is 24.6. The student body is 18.3 per cent non-white minority students.

The sample for this study is three transgender students. For the purpose of this study, transgender is defined as any person whose gender identity or expression is not generally associated with his sex assigned at birth. Transgender includes those who identify as genderqueer, gender non-conforming, gender fluid, transsexual, cross-dresser, or androgynous (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Research Design

To attain participants, this researcher emailed (Appendix B) members of the research institution's LGBTQA organization and faculty and staff listServ describing the study and asking for interested transgender students to volunteer, self-identify and participate. This researcher reviewed the list and categorized responses according to sex assigned at birth, age, time since transition began, and respondent's discipline of study. There were three respondents; all were accepted for the study.

Data Collection

Data was collected through the following open ended questions in one-on-one interviews in the spring of 2012: What has your experience as a transgender person been like on campus?; Tell me about a typical day on campus; Tell me about a typical social event on campus. Questions are also available in Appendix A.

Each interview was recorded and transcribed verbatim. The participants were offered the opportunity to select their own pseudonym for the purpose of this study. A student's pseudonym was marked on the transcription to protect the student's identity. After transcription the interview tapes were destroyed.

To enhance the credibility of this research, this researcher employed member checking which Creswell (2007) described as giving participants the opportunity to review both their part in the research and the completed research. Upon completion of the transcription process, participants received a copy of their interview transcription for review. Their comments were incorporated into the data; no data was deleted. Also, to assure that this researcher's conclusions are accurate, the completed study documentation was distributed to participants. The participants' comments are included.

Prior to the one-on-one interviews, participating students were required to complete a consent form (Appendix C) to document their informed consent and desire to participate in the study.

Data Analysis and Coding Procedures

To ensure that this research is transferrable, this researcher utilized member checking as well as peer review. For peer review, this researcher's coded transcriptions were reviewed by colleagues to check for errors and missed information. To increase dependability within this research process, this researcher engaged in mapping an audit trail (Creswell, 2007). Mapping an audit trail created a detailed guide to the process of this research including transcriptions, journals, and coded topics. The audio recordings are not included in the audit trail as they were destroyed after the completion of research per the consent form. The efforts enhance the confirmability of the results.

An advocacy paradigm was used for this study. Creswell (2007) defines an advocacy paradigm as a worldview that strives for an action plan to battle types of oppression facing marginalized groups. Equitable access for students in higher education is a social justice issue. The advocacy paradigm was used to identify inequities for transgender students and to suggest methods to make campuses more welcoming to transgender students.

IV. RESULTS

This study seeks to better understand the experiences of transgender college students in order to recommend best practices in creating a welcoming environment on campus. Using one-on-one interviews, participants were asked to answer the following questions:

What has your experience as a transgender person been like on campus?

Tell me about a typical day on campus.

Tell me about a typical social event on campus.

This chapter is organized by the categories and topics used to present the literature review. First the results in relation to the dichotomization of gender will be described; then results in relation to medical services, and finally results in relation to student activities.

Three participants were selected for this study. Jenny is a 60 year old Male-to-Female transgender person. Ze is majoring in English and began hir transition nearly 5 years ago. Emily is 20 years old and is also a Male-to-Female transgender person. Ze is currently in the process of transitioning and is currently only living part time as a female. Ze began hir transition 1.5 years ago. Ze is majoring in accounting. Oliver, is a 30 year old Female-to-Male transgender person, who began hir transition 3 years ago. Ze is a graduate student pursuing a Master of Humanities.

Dichotomy of Gender

Preferred vs. birth name

Each of the participants opted out of living on campus; as a result there is no data related to transgender students' issues with residence life.

Jenny had completed hir transition legally by having hir gender marker legally changed before attending the university; therefore, ze was able to use hir preferred gender and name on all university forms. Oliver and Emily began their transitions while at the research institution; rather than their preferred name and gender, their birth name and sex assigned at birth were included on university forms. Oliver expressed frustration in relation to hir birth name being on university forms. Because hir name was on the university roster, ze anticipated some confusion with hir professors. Ze decided it was best to be proactive and send professors emails essentially outing hirself in hopes that the professors would use hir preferred name. Oliver noted that most professors were supportive and made an effort to use the correct name and pronouns. Some professors struggled. Oliver reported that ze had one professor who referred to most students using pronouns, but only referred to hir by hir preferred name. Ze felt uncomfortable about being singled out in this manner; ze spoke to the professor who agreed to use pronouns if ze preferred. The professor felt that using a name instead of pronouns might be more “pacifying [Professor’s word]” to the entire class. It was unclear what the professor meant by ‘pacifying’.

Emily also experienced some issues with seemingly well intentioned professors regarding hir preferred name. Ze experienced one professor who deliberately did not call on hir during class when ze raised hir hand. Emily felt that the lack of acknowledging hir in class was due to the professors' comfort level in using hir preferred gender pronouns and name. Emily also had a professor who was willing to use hir preferred name and

pronouns but asked inappropriate questions regarding hir gender identity. The professor asked hir, “So, how do you have sex?”. Ze said that she calmly explained to the professor that ze had sex in the same way that anyone else would, but internally her reactions was, “are you seriously asking this?”.

Oliver also experienced some hostility from a professor after being forced to out himself. The professor refused to use hir preferred name and pronouns; ze deliberately outed Oliver to the class. Ze decided to speak to the professor after class and the professor in Oliver’s words “flipped out” and proceeded to tell hir that ze would need to undergo a legal name change before ze would be willing to use hir preferred name. After explaining to the chair of the department the professor’s requirement for a legal name change, Oliver was transferred to a different section of the class with a different professor. However, there were future required classes that were only taught by this professor. Oliver contacted the professor before the beginning of the required class; the professor asked Oliver to come in for a meeting which became volatile:

I go in and he berated me for an hour and a half in his office. He basically had blocked the door so I couldn’t even get out and he just kept screaming at me, saying that I would never be a man and uh, never be accepted. He would never accept me. Just, it was ridiculous.

Ze communicated the professor’s opinions to the chair of the department and arrangements were made for Oliver to take the class as an independent study. However, a great deal of damage had already been done:

after this situation with the, you know the professor who refused to use preferred name and pronouns with me I...I got really funny stares and a lot of times I felt

uncomfortable and I was terrified for probably about a month that I was going to be assaulted or worse and it was because he made such a big deal out of it.

Restroom facilities

Each of the participants may currently use the on campus restrooms which match their gender identity. All participants described difficulties associated with using the gender preferred restrooms both on campus and off. Both Jenny and Oliver have had their names and sex officially changed through their home state. The university was not involved in the process of allowing them to use the restroom associated with their gender identity.

Even though Emily has an official letter from hir psychiatrist that diagnoses gender identity issues, ze is closer to the beginning stages of hir transition process and has not had any name or gender information altered legally. Since ze has not undergone legal transition in hir state, ze had to go through the university administration to gain access to the women's restroom. Ze experienced some resistance from university administrators as ze is not currently "living full time" in hir gender identity. Emily's gender expression caused some confusion among administrators, because the institution currently does not have any policies in place for students in the process of transitioning. Emily was first given permission to use both the women's restrooms and locker rooms on campus by the Office of Affirmative Action. However, after some fellow students complained about a "man" being in the women's facilities, a panel of university staff was created to discuss the accommodations. The panel decided that Emily could use the women's restrooms only when ze was dressed in "female expression" and that ze would not be permitted to use the women's locker room at all. Instead, ze was given the key to a

single room, gender neutral/family/disability restroom that is down the hall from the fitness and pool facilities. The confusion caused by the lack of policy was very frustrating and disappointing for Emily and ultimately resulted in her not using the university pool.

Ze said of the experience:

I was kind of ticked off at that, I was like really, you couldn't have figured that out ahead of time. You couldn't have figured that out? Like honestly? Like where was the lack of communication, so? But now I'm like, stuck in, for swimming purposes, I have to go around this, roundabout way, if I want to wear a women's swimsuit. So, I was like, 'yeah, I don't think I'll be swimming that much.

The university's accommodations left Emily feeling singled out and unsatisfied: "I wish, it just wasn't, like, 'oh let's single this person out because, she hasn't transitioned all of the way yet and still has a penis so we can't let her in there'".

Additionally, Emily found the new policy to be confusing, as one's gender expression can be defined very differently depending on each person's understanding of male and female expression:

... it was like, kind of like, well which restroom do I use or whatever, because they were like, 'male expression, male restroom and what not, female, female.' So I was just like, 'So if I dress like a woman, does that mean I can go in? and then, but if I'm not according to the persons definition of exp...female expression does that mean I have to go into the men's? So it's kind of like a back and forth of which one do I use.

Due to the lack of clarity of the policy, Emily decided that it would be best for her to bend the rules and always use the women's restroom regardless of how she is dressed.

Emily and Oliver both expressed feelings of anxiety concerning using the restroom of their gender identity. Emily, who has only recently gained university permission to use the restroom designated for women, said that ze had to “test the waters”, “Just kind of sneaking in at odd hours, just so that there’s nobody in there”. Oliver spoke about the first time ze used the restroom on campus designated for male students. Ze used the support of the Women’s Center, and told a Women’s Center staff member “if I’m not back in like 10-15 minutes, you know, come look for me or something.”

The anxieties stem from both personal experience and experiences of other transgender persons known by the participants. In fact, all three participants noted that they had been confronted or questioned about their gender identity in a restroom setting. Each shared “horror stories” that they have heard from others in the campus transgender community. Emily said that ze knew someone who was “beaten up” while using a restroom on campus. Oliver also explained that ze knew many people who had had negative experiences worse than his own.

Oliver, was assaulted in a restroom on campus by a classmate who had met hir prior to hir transitioning:

“Um, it was somebody who had been to class with me before I had s, like started coming out. And he, didn’t believe I was a guy. He actually groped me and then he punched me and kicked me and knocked my head into the toilet, I almost pa...passed out. And then somebody who was apparently in there with him, I had, didn’t see the other guy, like screamed that somebody was coming and then they headed out.”

Oliver was visibly tense as ze relived the moment. Ze explained that in hir opinion the assault was not handled properly by university officials. Oliver reported the incident to university officials through a bias incident response team and campus police. Ze was assured that the restroom was to be patrolled. However, Oliver never saw the restroom being patrolled and ze did not know if the student who assaulted hir ever faced official action for the attack.

Health Care Services

Psychiatric services

Jenny had no experiences with campus medical services; however, Oliver and Emily had utilized campus health services throughout their transition. Oliver felt that hir overall experience with campus health services was positive even though it was not ideal. Oliver found that the campus psychiatrist was very supportive but less than an expert on the needs of a transitioning transgender student. During the process of trying to gain hir official letter of diagnosis that would allow hir to pursue medical and legal transition, the campus psychiatrist openly admitted that ze was not very knowledgeable in the area of transgender mental health:

the doctor there that I had went through, amazing, knew-I mean didn't know a whole bunch about, like I guess the fine details that need go in the letter but the doctor she was very much about looking it up and like she even gave me a proof of it, like "okay, you've probably seen examples does this look right" and I was like "yeah" and then like the therapist I have is amazing about stuff. She's very supportive.

Emily also utilized campus health services in attaining her diagnoses letter and described an overall positive experience. Emily also spoke about how being able to see an on campus psychiatrist made hir transition process smoother and more convenient. Both Oliver and Emily continue to utilize an on campus counselor.

Medical services

Oliver's experience with campus health services was not as positive regarding accessing hormone therapy. Due to hir hormone injection shots not being covered by the university's student insurance plan, Oliver had to go off campus for the weekly hormone therapy needed to transition medically. Ze had this to say about the process:

Yeah, like they, they could do my injections technically but because of like, the standards of care, um, thing, the doctor that's actually at student health services here has to sign off on it and he's never worked with transgender patients before so he's not comfortable because especially if you're getting testosterone your blood pressure can go up and he doesn't want to take the chance that my blood pressure would go up too high and then I could have a heart attack or stroke under his care when he's not my actual like, primary physician. So he doesn't want to take that risk...

Student Activities

LGBTQ organizations and services

None of the study participants have attempted to be involved in Greek activities.

All three participants are involved with the campus LGBTQ student organization.

Emily who is not currently out on campus has pocketed areas in which ze feels comfortable being open about hir gender identity. The places in which ze feels the most

comfortable being out about hir gender identity are the Women's Center, LGBTQ Center, and the LGBTQ student organization's office. Oliver participates in a panel program to educate students and groups about the experiences of LGBTQ college students. The panel program initiative began as part of the LGBTQ Student Organization. Oliver speaks to classes and groups about hir experiences as a transgender person and answers questions from the attendees. Participation in the panel program sometimes leaves Oliver feeling tokenized as one of the only transgender persons who participates in the program; however, ze feels that the service is very beneficial to the campus community and ze plans to continue to participate. Jenny has also been active in the student LGBTQ organization. Ze even hosts a "Transgender 101" session for the organization, answering questions from students out of "pure flat out curiosity". In addition to their utilization of the student group, each of the interviewees stated that the presence of an LGBTQ student organization and center played a major role in their college selection process.

Athletics

Oliver and Jenny did not share any experiences regarding to athletics.

Unlike the positive experiences in LGBTQ student organizations, a student activity related to a women's intramural soccer team was a negative experience for Emily. Emily was excited at the prospect of becoming involved with the women's intramural soccer team. After ze had gained permission from the campus athletics department to be a member of the designated women's team, hir teammates expressed negative responses to her participation. After a few practices, ze was asked by her teammates to leave the team. When asked for a reason, Emily was simply told that ze was not a good enough soccer player. The statement regarding hir skill level was confusing because the

intramural team does not determine membership based on ability. Other members were not expected to be experts at the game. Ze described the experience as a “big crush” for hir at the time.

Summary

Students’ overall views of the university regarding welcoming and unwelcoming experiences on campus were mixed. All participants expressed frustration over issues related to the restroom facilities and over being forced to out themselves on university forms. Medical services were beneficial in many ways through being supportive, but medical staff lacked resources and knowledge regarding transgender issues. Student activities offered opportunities for personal growth and community through the student LGBTQ organization, but other areas of student activities were not always as welcoming.

V. DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

As more transgender students arrive on college campuses than in the past, colleges are not prepared to provide adequate services specific to the needs of the transgender student (Beemyn, 2005). Transgender students have unique experiences and require specific services in residence life, health services, registration, and student activities. This study sought to better understand the college experiences of transgender students and to develop recommendations for making the college campus more welcoming for transgender students. The students in this study experienced struggles similar to those described in the review of literature regarding transgender students on college campuses. Recommendations regarding how to make college campuses more welcoming to transgender students follow.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this research is the size of the sample. Because transgender students make up a small percentage of the college student population and because of the personal nature of this research a large sample size was not possible.

Recommendations

Policy recommendations

Higher education institutions should provide gender neutral restroom and locker room options. Gender specific restrooms are one of the greatest sources of anxiety

for transgender students on campus (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, et. al., 2005). The anxiety is not unfounded since gender specific restrooms are a hotbed for hostility towards transgender persons (Beemyn, 2005). This study described the anxiety the participants experienced regarding gendered restrooms. Oliver, Jenny, and Emily expressed anxiety and frustration in dealing with restrooms, particularly during the transition process. Additionally, one of the three participants was assaulted in a gender specific restroom.

Higher education institutions should have policies in place requiring that all newly constructed buildings include gender neutral restrooms. As gender specific restrooms are a source of anxiety and often dangerous spaces for transgender students, it is important to develop plans for inclusive restroom spaces on campus (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, et. al., 2005). Because financing the construction of gender neutral restrooms is not always possible, it is recommended that there be a policy that all new buildings on campus include gender neutral restrooms.

Higher education institutions should have policies in place for transitioning transgender students to utilize gender specific restrooms. For the safety of transgender students, policies should be in place before an issue arises (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, et. al., 2005). This research documented the frustration that transgender students experience when there is not a clearly defined policy for restroom and locker room use. Because a policy was not in place, Emily experienced unnecessary turmoil and confusion by staff members who were unsure of how to deal with hir unique concerns.

Higher education institutions should include space on official forms for students to self-identify gender and preferred name. The literature consistently corroborated that not having the option for transgender students to self-identify gender and name on university forms is a major issue with a domino effect into many areas of campus life (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn 2005; Beemyn, et. al., 2005; Schnetzler & Conant 2009). Transgender students interpret not having the opportunity to self-identify to mean that the transgender student is not welcome on campus (Beemyn, 2003). The issue effects students' access to facilities and causes transgender students to be outed inadvertently by a variety of university officials (Beemyn, 2005).

Two of the three transgender students who participated in this study experienced negative consequences related to having their sex assigned at birth and birth gendered name on official university forms. As a result the students were outed to their classmates both accidentally and deliberately. Oliver experienced verbal harassment and stated that outing students in the classroom inadvertently or deliberately is "putting that student's life at risk."

Higher education institutions should have policies in place for transitioning transgender students to change name and gender markers. The literature described the dangers of having transgender students' birth name and sex assigned at birth on official documents and class rosters forms (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn 2005; Beemyn, et. al., 2005; Schnetzler & Conant 2009). Both Oliver and Emily transitioned after entering campus and have had very different experiences transitioning in regard to official documents. While current state laws and policies vary and may make transitioning very difficult and lengthy, higher education institutions should provide reasonable policies for name and

gender identity changes in order to create a safe place to learn throughout transitioning (National Center for Transgender Equality, n.d.).

Higher education institutions should provide visible inclusive spaces for transgender students. The literature established that LGBTQ students benefit by having access to LGBTQ inclusive spaces like LGBTQ student centers and LGBTQ student organizations. Housing centers and events in locations which are easy to locate increases visibility and sends a welcoming message to transgender students. Campus LGBTQ centers provide a safe space for students and provide opportunities to educate the campus community and advocate for LGBTQ student needs (Bilodeau, 2005). LGBTQ student organizations provide community and connection for LGBTQ students.

The students in this study were involved with the university LGBTQ student organization, the campus LGBTQ Center, and the Women's Center and utilized these resources for support throughout their transition process. Each student cited that the existence of these resources on campus was a primary reason for enrolling in the research institution.

Higher education institutions should provide opportunities for health services staff to receive training regarding transgender student health. The literature posited that health services professionals are often not trained to deal with the specific health needs of transgender students (Beemyn, 2005; Lombardi, 2001). Psychiatrists and therapists may not be familiar with what should be included in a letter of gender identity disorder diagnosis that is necessary before students undergo a legal transition process. Doctors may not be aware of the specialized exams that transgender students need in order to stay healthy (Beemyn, 2005; Lombardi, 2001).

The students in this research echoed the literature findings. They encountered supportive medical professions who unfortunately lacked the training necessary to provide proper care. Both of the students who had utilized campus counseling to receive the letters necessary for transition expressed that their counselor was unaware of what information was required for the letter. These students were tokenized educators for their counselors. Additionally, one student was forced to go off campus to receive his hormone shots because the doctor on campus did not feel comfortable with knowledge of the treatment.

Higher education institution should advocate for all hormone therapy to be included in student health insurance plans. Beemyn (2005) documented that when students cannot receive the hormone treatments needed for the transitioning process, they go off campus to find the resources. In addition to the inconvenience, the hormones can be costly without insurance coverage. For students who utilize student health insurance plans, not including hormone treatments in the health insurance plans can be a heavy emotional and financial burden.

The one student involved in this research who was undergoing hormone therapy was forced to access hormones off campus and sometimes receive hormone shots from friends rather than trained medical professionals. These experiences put the student's health at risk.

Higher education institutions should provide education to faculty and staff on transgender student issues. Beemyn (2005) established that transgender students frequently encounter staff and faculty that are ill-informed or uneducated about the issues facing transgender students. A poorly educated staff also leads to insensitivity in

accommodating transgender students. The lack of adequate education causes professors to out students and to behave in a hostile manner towards transgender students.

All of the transgender students involved in this study were forced to educate and be their own advocate to faculty and staff. The students were often the only voices their professors heard concerning transgender issues. As tokenized transgender students they were asked inappropriate questions. The faculty and staff's lack of basic knowledge regarding transgender student issues also caused the students to be outed in their classes both accidentally and deliberately. One student also faced verbal abuse from a professor when ze was held against hir will and berated for hir gender identity.

Recommendations for future research.

Future research should focus on transgender college students experiences in areas of student life not covered in this research: residence life and Greek life.

Summary

The purpose of this research was to explore the college experiences of transgender students in order to inform best practices in creating a welcoming campus environment for transgender students. The phenomenological study focused on the experiences of three transgender students at a large public institution in the Midwest. Application of the recommendations will help student affairs professionals to create more welcoming and safe environments for transgender students.

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doi:10.1300/J035v22n01•06

Appendix A

Guiding Questions

What has your experience as a transgender person been like on campus?

Tell me about a typical day on campus.

Tell me about a typical social event on campus.

Appendix B

Email Invitation for Participation

Dear Students,

My name is Roxie Patton and I am a WSU Graduate Student in Student Affairs in Higher Education working under the direction of Suzanne Franco Ph.D.. I am currently seeking participants for my thesis research regarding the college experiences of transgender students. For this research transgender is defined as any person whose gender identity or expression is not generally associated with their birth sex. This can include those who identify as genderqueer, gender non-conforming, transsexual, cross-dresser, or androgynous.

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the experiences of transgender students on college campuses. This will be used to aid student affairs professionals in accommodating the needs of transgender students on campus. Each participant will sign and receive a copy of a consent form. Students will then take part in a one on one interview with me, that is expected to take approximately 60 minutes. The provided information will help raise awareness of the needs of transgender students and may help to create programs and accommodations for transgender college students.

There are no known risks to participating in this study, however there may be some psychological discomfort due to the personal nature of the topic. Any information about participants obtained from this study will be kept strictly confidential and participants may select their own pseudonym so they will not be identified in any report or publication.

If you or someone you know would be interested in participating in my research please respond to this email with your name and contact information. I will contact you to further discuss your potential participation in this study.

If you have any questions regarding this study or to make sure that you qualify feel free to contact me via email at patton.67@wright.edu.

Thank you,

Roxie Patton



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Appendix C

Consent Form

This signed consent is to certify my willingness to participate in the research, THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCES OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS study, conducted by Roxie Patton, a Wright State University graduate student under the direction of her faculty advisor, Suzanne Franco, Ed. D.

PURPOSE OF STUDY:

The purpose of this research study is to better understand the experiences of transgender students on college campuses. This study will be used to aid student affairs professionals in accommodating the needs of transgender students on campus.

PROCEDURE(S):

Each participant will take part in a one on one interview with the researcher that is expected to take 60 minutes. These interviews will be audio recorded. I am free to choose whether or not I wish to discuss a particular question or topic.

BENEFITS AND RISKS:

There are no direct benefits to me for participating in this study. There may be some psychological risk due to the personal nature of the questions/topics.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any information about me obtained from this study will be kept strictly confidential and I will not be identified in any report or publication. After the study is completed all audio recordings will be destroyed.

WHOM TO CONTACT:

If I have questions about this research study, I can contact the researcher, Roxie Patton at patton.67@wright.edu or Dr. Suzanne Franco at suzanne.franco@wright.edu. If I have general questions about giving consent or my rights as a research participant in this research study, I can call the Wright State University Institutional Review Board at 937-775-4462.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I am free to refuse to participate in this study or to withdraw at any time. My decision to participate or to not participate will not adversely affect my relationship with this institution or



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cause a loss of benefits to which I might otherwise be entitled.

My signature below means that I have freely agreed to participate in this study.

Signature of Participant

Date

Printed Name of Participant