Transitioning to and in College: The Experiences of Trans Students

For students who attend college, especially for those who go away to college, it is a chance to discover and reinvent themselves. Away from their parent(s), the community in which they grew up, and the people with whom they went to high school, students can explore their identities, find others who share their interests and experiences, and not be as limited by peer pressure as in the narrow confines of K-12 schools. Even students who continue to live at home while attending college or who enroll at an institution in their home community still have opportunities to develop their own identities and establish new peer groups.

For trans students who attend college, their time in school can be an especially invaluable chance to examine and establish their identities. The trans students, who have long recognized but not been able to express their gender identities, because they have not had support at home and in their high schools, look to be themselves for the first time. These students often want to take immediate steps to socially or medically transition when they arrive at college, such as changing their name and gender marker on campus records or beginning hormones. Other trans students, who had less understanding of their gender identities growing up, recognize themselves as trans while in college, as they meet other students in person or online who share similar experiences of not identifying with the gender assigned to them.

But while many trans students expect to finally be able to come out as trans when they reach college, many discover that their institution denies them the ability to be themselves. Few colleges formally acknowledge and respect them as trans people, such as by providing a non-medical means to switch the M/F gender marker on campus records, or enabling them to be recognized as neither M/F. Similarly, colleges that do not provide gender-inclusive bathrooms, housing, and locker rooms signal to trans students that they should not be out and are not welcomed at the institution. The lack of administrative support for trans students creates a negative campus climate that is exacerbated by the failure of colleges to require students, staff, and faculty to attend an educational session to address discrimination against trans people, as is commonly done to counter sexual harassment.

In addition to the discrimination they may encounter from their institutions, trans student may also struggle when they enter college because of feeling isolated. If they went away to school, they are away from the friends who supported them and may have a difficult time trying
THE EXPERIENCES OF GEN Y AND Z STUDENTS

to establish a new community for themselves, as they are not sure who will be supportive of them after they disclose their trans identity. Some trans students can turn to their parent(s) for support, but many are not out to their families, and it is not uncommon for trans students to be cut off by their parent(s) emotionally and financially when they come out to them or are outed.

Trans students thus often do not have other people to whom they can turn to help them navigate campus processes that are largely unprepared to meet their needs, which can add to their stress and a feeling that they are all alone. Students who identify as genderqueer, gender fluid, agender, and other non-binary gender identities especially face difficulties, both because of the binary nature of college systems and widespread ignorance about their lives. For example, non-binary students are regularly misgendered by faculty, staff members, and other students, who assume someone’s pronouns based on their gender expression and who fail to consider the possibility of options beyond “he/him” and “she/her.”

Despite the largely negative college experience of many trans students today, there is reason to hope that the next generation of trans students will find more supportive campus climates. The trans students who are out now, and who regularly encounter harassment and microaggressions as a result, are bringing about changes in college systems and people’s attitudes that will benefit those who follow them. But these students should not be made to shoulder this burden alone and pay such a heavy price for being themselves. College staff and faculty must do all they can, as soon as they can, to create trans-supportive campuses. We hope that this binder will serve as a guide for colleges in beginning this process.

WHO ARE LGBTQIA+ STUDENTS TODAY?

Intersectionality and Multiple Identities

All people have experiences of gender, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, class, religion, ability, and age that are intersecting and complex. Inclusion efforts must pay particular attention to how intersecting identities and oppressions affect the lives of LGBTQIA+ people. Just as each heterosexual, cisgender person constitutes a unique constellation of experiences and background with differing degrees of societal privilege, so each LGBTQIA+ person must navigate society not only through the lenses of sexual orientation and gender identity, but also race, class, and other elements of identity that can combine in unexpected and complicated ways.

Experiencing Oppression

When working with LGBTQIA+ students, staff and faculty need to understand what oppression is, and how multiple oppressions may interact with LGBTQIA+ students’ experiences. It is important to think about how these intersections can impact LGBTQIA+ students’ lives, as well as ways that themes of intersectionality and multiple identities can be covered in the classroom and in campus training sessions, so that curricula are truly inclusive.

Three Types of Oppression

Individual: when one person directly discriminates against another person, usually intentionally. For example, not hiring someone because they are or seem to be LGBTQIA+, or physically attacking someone because they are gender nonconforming. Individual oppression may be overt or covert. Overt oppression can be observed and is out in the open. A person impacted by overt

Some Terminology for QTPOC
(Queer and Trans People of Color)

AGs or Aggressives: Lesbians who express themselves in a masculine manner, such as by binding their breasts. They are also called studs. The terms are more commonly used in communities of color.

Masculine of Center (MoC) People: Lesbians, queer women, and non-binary trans people who tend toward the masculine in their gender expression. The term is more commonly used in communities of color.

QTPOC and QTPOC (pronounced ‘cutie poc’): Queer people of color, and queer and trans people of color.

Same-gender Loving People: Individuals who experience same-gender attraction. The term originated within communities of color as an alternative to “lesbian” and “gay,” which they feel does not speak to their cultural heritages.

Studs: Lesbians who express themselves in a masculine manner, such as by binding their breasts. They are also called AGs or aggressives. The terms are more commonly used in communities of color.

Two Spirit People: A Native American term for individuals who blend the masculine and the feminine. It is commonly used to describe individuals who historically crossed genders. It is also often used by contemporary LGBTQIA Native American people to describe themselves.
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oppression is generally aware of the action. Covert oppression is hidden, secret, or sometimes so subtle that even a person directly affected by it is not aware that it has taken place or by whom.

Organizational: when a particular organization intentionally or unintentionally creates an environment that is unwelcoming or hostile. For example, a school requiring students to wear uniforms based on their gender assigned at birth, or a social service organization requiring state-issued identification to enter the location.

Systemic: when an established system intentionally or unintentionally creates additional barriers and burdens for marginalized groups. These hindrances cannot be tied to one specific office or policy. For example, all identity documents being tied to the sex marked on someone’s birth certificate and the often difficult process to change these documents.

For LGBTQIA+ students of color, and for LGBTQIA+ students with a variety of intersecting, non-dominant identities, experiencing multiple marginalizations can cause added stresses and challenges. Students of color, as well as white students acting in solidarity and allyship, may also find themselves devoting untold time and energy to transforming campuses and communities into environments more invested in practicing racial justice and honoring intersectional approaches.

Recommended Reading

The LGBTQIA+ Supportive Campus
Developing Effective Policies, Programs & Practices

The Political, Legal and Compliance Climate

Discrimination and Microaggressions

Discrimination

Despite the 2015 Supreme Court ruling upholding same-sex marriage and recent lower court rulings and federal interpretations that offer some protection to LGBTQ people in educational and workplace settings (most notably under Title IX and Title VII), LGBTQIA+ individuals continue to have limited rights in the United States.

There is no comprehensive federal law that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Moreover, to date, only 22 states have laws prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in employment, housing, education, credit, and public accommodations and only 19 states do so on the basis of gender identity (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016). Some counties, cities, and towns have their own nondiscrimination ordinances that include “sexual orientation” and “gender identity,” but a significant percentage of the nation’s LGBTQIA+ population has no protection. In many places, a person may be denied service in a restaurant, fired or passed over for a job for which they are well-qualified, turned down for a loan, or denied a lease on an apartment simply for being or being perceived as an LGBTQIA+ person with little legal recourse.

Trans people especially experience widespread discrimination and harassment. For example, the 2011 National Transgender Discrimination Survey (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011), a study involving 6,450 trans and gender-nonconforming people, found that because of their gender identity/expression, 47 percent of the respondents reported experiencing employment discrimination (being fired, not hired, or denied a promotion), 19 percent reported having been refused a home or apartment, 11 percent reported being evicted, and 53 percent reported being verbally harassed or disrespected in a place of public accommodation, such as at a restaurant, airport, or government agency.

Trans people also experience higher rates of sexual harassment and assault than cisgender women. The AAU Campus Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct (Association of American Universities, 2015) found that more than three-fourths of the trans and gender-nonconforming undergraduates who participated in their survey reported having been sexually harassed during their time at college. Almost 15 percent experienced “nonconsensual sexual contact” and more than 12 percent experienced “acts involving penetration by force or incapacitation.” All of these figures were higher for the trans students than for the cisgender female participants.
THE POLITICAL, LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE CLIMATE

- Train campus Title IX officer(s) to be able to provide support to LGBTQIA+ students who are survivors of sexual assault and harassment.

- Collaborate across academic and student affairs departments to create learning opportunities about microaggressions, their effects, and the ways that people who experience multiple marginalizations may be more greatly impacted.

- Encourage all campus programming and services to take intersectional approaches.
THE POLITICAL, LEGAL AND COMPLIANCE CLIMATE

Title IX and Discrimination Against Trans Students

Trans and gender-expansive students are covered under the prohibition of sex discrimination in Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. But colleges rarely address discrimination based on gender identity/expression in training sessions on Title IX or have policies and practices in place to prevent such discrimination. As a result, few colleges are in compliance with the law as it applies to trans people and risk investigation and sanction from the Department of Education, as well as lawsuits from trans students and staff.

The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) of the Department of Education has stated several times over the past few years that it expects educational institutions to protect the rights of trans people. For example, in its latest publication on the law, the 2015 Title IX Resource Guide, OCR wrote: "Title IX protects students, employees, applicants for admission and employment, and other persons from all forms of sex discrimination, including discrimination based on gender identity or failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity. All students (as well as other persons) at recipient institutions are protected by Title IX—regardless of their sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, part- or full-time status, disability, race, or national origin—in all aspects of a recipient’s educational programs and activities" (U.S. Department of Education, 2015).

To date, OCR has brought cases against several school districts for their mistreatment of trans students. In 2013, the government reached a settlement with the Arcadia, California Unified School District on behalf of a twelve-year-old trans boy. He had been required to use a restroom in the nurse’s office instead of the boy’s restroom and locker room and told that he could not be housed with cisgender boys on a field trip. The settlement mandated that the district grant the student access to the same facilities as other male students, develop trans-inclusive nondiscrimination policies, require staff to attend trans educational training sessions, and undergo monitoring and reporting ("Resolution Agreement," 2013).

In 2014, OCR entered into an agreement with another California school district, the Downey Unified School District, to address discrimination against a trans elementary school girl. The girl had complained that her school continually failed to address the verbal harassment she experienced from other students for her gender identity. Instead, the school disciplined her for wearing make-up and presenting as female. Among the provisions of the settlement in this case, the district was required to:

- Work with its consultant to ensure a school climate free of harassment by incorporating age-appropriate information on gender identity and gender-based discrimination and harassment in the curricula
- Continue to treat the student the same as other female students in all respects within the education programs and activities offered by the district, including access to sex-designated facilities for female students
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Sexual Assault, Harassment, and Intimate Partner Violence

Because the Department of Education has launched investigations of more than 120 colleges for allegedly failing to comply with Title IX in terms of not having adequate policies in place to address campus sexual assault and harassment, many institutions have begun to reform how they handle instances of reported sexual misconduct. The focus of these changes has been on assisting cisgender female students, who represent the majority of campus sexual assault survivors. But often ignored in these efforts is the fact that trans and gender-expansive students experience even higher rates of sexual violence and harassment than cis women, as shown by the AAU Campus Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct (Association of American Universities, 2015) statistics boxed on the previous page.

Given such findings, colleges need to have sexual assault and harassment policies that specifically refer to trans people, discuss the particular forms of intimate partner abuse experienced by trans people (see box), and use trans-inclusive language (such as not referring to assault survivors as “she/her”). At the same time, Title IX investigators and case managers must be well-trained on the lives of trans people and how to support trans students who are in crisis. Currently, few colleges specifically train their Title IX staff on trans issues, and colleges’ Title IX web pages and brochures rarely acknowledge that students can file a sexual harassment or assault charge based on gender identity or expression.

Forms of Coercive Control Experienced by Trans People in Intimate Relationships

- Threatening to disclose a trans person’s gender identity to others, if the person is not out.
- Demeaning their gender identity/expression, such as by telling a trans woman or trans man that they do not look female or male enough or are not a “real” woman or “real” man, respectively, or telling a non-binary individual that they do not look trans enough or look too trans.
- Telling a trans person that, if they were to leave the relationship, no one else would ever love them because of their gender identity or expression.
- Requiring a trans person to hide or express their gender identity in prescribed ways in public.
- Withholding financial and emotional support from a partner who is medically transitioning.
CAMPUS EXPERIENCES AND NEEDS

Seven Steps Toward Inclusive Physical and Mental Health Services

1. **Know Terminology and New Research.** There are many resources to help you get up to speed on the experiences of LGBTQIA+ youth and young people (see box). Even seasoned professionals will want to keep up with changing research and terminology. Students are expanding boundaries, challenging assumptions, and constructing their identities and communities in exciting new ways.

2. **Use Inclusive Language.** For instance, instead of using gender-specific words, such as “boyfriend” or “girlfriend” for a relationship, use a term like “partner or partners.” Many non-LGBTQIA+ students also appreciate the use of inclusive language because they have an LGBTQIA+ parent or sibling. When discussing sexual and reproductive body parts, remember that some trans people may have other words for these parts. Use neutral language (for example “front hole” rather than “vagina,” or “person who has a penis” rather than “male”), or ask the patient what words they use. Use the name and pronouns the student uses. Examine your forms and electronic patient records system to see if fields for chosen name and pronoun are included, and if not, add them.

3. **Avoid Assumptions.** Keep in mind that identity and behavior are separate and not always aligned. Some students may engage in sexual behavior with people of the same sex, but not identify as LGB. And some lesbian and gay students may be sexually active with people of a different sex. And some LGB students may not yet have had a same-sex relationship, even though they have a full understanding and acceptance of their sexual orientation. Do not assume that all LGBTQI+ people need screening for STIs or HIV, and do not assume that contraception is never needed. Ask questions about patients’ sexual behavior, and explain the purpose for which you are asking. For example, say, “In order to understand your sexual health needs, I need to know if you’re sexually active, and with what body parts on you and on your partner(s).” Never ask these questions of LGBTQI+ patients merely because you are curious. And do not assume or dismiss students’ mental or physical health issues as being caused by their LGBTQIA+ identity. There are many excellent professional resources that can address knowledge gaps and correct misinformation.

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**LGBTQIA+ Health Resources**

- The National LGBT Health Education Center: www.lgbthealtheducation.org
- “Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Top Health Issues for LGBT Populations Information & Resource Kit.” Rockville, MD: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2012. Available at http://1.usa.gov/5DwPRP
- U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, Healthy People 2020 LGBT Health. Available at http://1.usa.gov/1BJEaDc
Campus Experiences and Needs

- Provide a way for students to indicate the name they use (if it is not their legal name) on health and counseling center forms. Use this chosen name in all interactions with students, including when calling them in for appointments.
- Allow all students to self-identify their gender and sexual identities on health and counseling center forms.
- Remember that your health and counseling centers are already serving LGBTQIA+ students, even if they are not out to staff members. Students choose to disclose this information, or choose not to, for a variety of reasons. The most important point is that any student—LGBTQIA+ or not—deserves knowledgeable, culturally competent health care from their college's health and counseling centers.
- Have gender-inclusive restrooms (e.g., single-user, lockable restrooms that are labeled as "restroom" or "all-gender restroom") available in the health center and counseling center.

Suggested Wording on Gender and Sexual Identity for Health Forms

Gender Identity: ________________________________
Sexual Identity: ________________________________

When open-ended questions are not possible:
Gender Identity (choose all that apply):
  _ Man
  _ Trans or transgender (please specify): ___________________________
  _ Woman
  _ Another identity (please specify): ___________________________
Sexual Identity (choose all that apply):
  _ Asexual
  _ Bisexual or pansexual
  _ Gay
  _ Lesbian
  _ Queer
  _ Straight (heterosexual)
  _ Another identity (please specify): ___________________________