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Making Campuses More Inclusive of Transgender Students

Brett Genny Beemyn

ABSTRACT. This article examines a number of areas of campus life where transgender students experience discrimination because of gender-exclusive policies and practices: health care, residence halls, bathrooms, locker rooms, records and documents, public inclusion, and programming, training, and support. The specific obstacles faced by transgender students in a given area are discussed, followed by examples of how different colleges and universities are addressing these issues. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

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More and more students today are coming out as transgender—as transsexuals, cross-dressers, genderqueers, gender benders, androgy-

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nous, and a host of other gender-variant identities. But U.S. colleges and universities have been slow to acknowledge the presence of trans people on their campuses, much less to recognize and respond to their needs and concerns (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). Consequently, as documented in this issue, transgender students typically feel isolated and marginalized, rather than welcomed and included, at most institutions.

Colleges and universities that seek to be supportive of transgender students must consider how they are often physically and socially structured in ways that enforce a binary gender system. This article examines a number of areas of campus life where transgender students experience discrimination because of gender-exclusive policies and practices: health care, residence halls, bathrooms, locker rooms, records and documents, public inclusion, and programming, training, and support. I include a brief discussion of the specific obstacles faced by transgender students in a given area, followed by examples of how different colleges and universities are addressing these issues. The follow-up article, "Suggested Steps to Make Campuses More Trans-Inclusive," provides further recommendations and serves as a practical guide for institutional leaders wanting to adopt policies and practices that better meet the needs of transgender students.

HEALTH CARE

Most colleges and universities fail to meet the basic health-care needs of transgender students. The common standards of care for transsexual adults require that they receive an initial psychological evaluation, frequently followed by a period of therapy, before they are prescribed hormones. Since campus counseling staff typically lack training on transgender issues, they cannot provide adequate support or assistance to them or to other gender-variant students in need of counseling. As a result, many transgender students are forced to see a non-campus therapist, often at their expense.

Campus health center staff are likewise often not sensitive to or knowledgeable about the medical needs of transgender students. Intake forms rarely provide an option for people to define their "sex" beyond male and female, and most practitioners diagnose and treat patients based on the assumption that their gender presentation matches the gender assigned to them at birth. Even transgender students who encounter respectful and informed health center staff often cannot receive proper

medical treatment, as most college insurance plans specifically exclude coverage for gender reassignment surgeries and related conditions, including hormone replacement therapy.

As a first step in providing better services to transgender students, the health and counseling centers at Cornell University, New York University, the Ohio State University, the University of California-Riverside, and a number of other colleges and universities require or strongly encourage their staffs to attend a training session on trans issues presented by campus LGBT offices. At schools without specific staff responsible for LGBT services, these training sessions could be conducted by a campus or local transgender speaker. Health-care providers and counselors also should receive administrative support and be recognized for educating themselves further about transgender issues.

Some campus health centers are beginning to implement structural and procedural changes to create a more welcoming environment for transgender students. New York University, for example, has developed private changing rooms and gender-neutral bathrooms for patient use, offers women's health exams outside of women's health services in cases where students are not comfortable in a women's space, and allows for students to have their preferred name used on medical records and announced when seen for an appointment. These trans-inclusive practices are outlined in a brochure created jointly by the university's Office of LGBT Student Services and the Office for Wellness Learning.

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 reassignment surgeries in health insurance plans. Only a few institutions, such as the University of California-Santa Barbara, explicitly include hormone coverage for transitioning undergraduates. At some campuses, supportive physicians will provide transsexual students with a different diagnosis, such as an "endocrine deficiency," so that their insurance will pay most of the cost. But, students should not have to depend on finding a sympathetic doctor or have to hide their gender identities to receive appropriate, affordable health care. In 2004, the University of California system established an important precedent by changing its insurance plans to cover hormones, psychotherapy, and gender reassignment surgeries for its transsexual employees and their spouses/domestic partners and children, through which some students receive coverage. Given the size and influence of the UC system, this change will hopefully lead other colleges and universities to follow suit.

RESIDENCE HALLS

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. Most schools also assign housing based strictly on the individual's birth gender, creating a crisis for students who have transitioned or are in the process of transitioning or who otherwise do not present as their biological gender. Even when transgender students are able to receive a room assignment appropriate to their gender identity, they may encounter non-supportive or hostile roommate(s) and be faced with a single-sex bathroom or shower room. Consequently, transgender students often have extremely negative residence-hall experiences, and many move off-campus as soon as the college's housing policy will allow.

To begin to change this situation, some colleges are identifying and publicizing the names of residence-life staff members who can address the questions and concerns of transgender students and assist them in finding a housing option that recognizes and respects their gender identity/expression. The most appropriate option might be an upper-class, mixed-gender floor, a diversity floor, or a single room. If the only workable solution is to provide a single room, the college should charge the cost of half of a double room; the transgender student should not be financially penalized for the lack of housing alternatives.

Taking a more systematic approach, a few colleges are creating gender-neutral housing options, in which students are assigned a roommate regardless of gender. In 2003, Wesleyan University made national news by establishing a gender-neutral hallway in order to provide support to transgender students. But after a year, school administrators disbanded the hallway, reportedly because they were concerned about segregating the students and interest waning over time. Wesleyan now matches students who choose gender-neutral placements and houses them in various halls. In 2004, Sarah Lawrence College also began offering areas of "all gender" housing in campus residence halls.

It remains to be seen if this option is better for transgender students. While they are not separated from other students, they also do not have the opportunity to build a community. Moreover, housing transgender students throughout campus does not address the need for gender-neutral bathrooms and showers.

A larger number of colleges are opting to create GLBTA living-learning programs or theme floors with gender-neutral bathroom facilities; these schools include Carleton College, Tufts University, the

University of Colorado at Boulder, the University of Vermont, and the University of California schools at Berkeley, Irvine, Davis, and Santa Barbara. GLBTA living-learning programs can provide support to the many students who are marginalized because of their sexual and gender identities and help create a community of students with shared interests, as opposed to the wide range of individuals who may desire gender-neutral rooms. However, transgender students who identify as heterosexual may not be comfortable with a GLBT-focused housing option.

In the absence of trans-specific housing options, schools should enact a policy that supports transgender students in finding suitable, safe housing. Ithaca College, the Ohio State University, the University of California-Riverside, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Wisconsin are among the institutions with model trans-related housing policies.

BATHROOMS

Students who are perceived as violating traditional gender boundaries are vulnerable to harassment and violence when using campus restrooms designated for “women” and “men.” Trans women are especially subjected to verbal and physical assault and face being questioned or even arrested by the police. Given these threats, it is not surprising that bathroom safety is one the biggest sources of anxiety for many gender-variant students. Some trans people travel far out of their way to use restrooms that are safer and more private or avoid using campus bathrooms altogether, to the detriment of their comfort and health.

To aid transgender people in being able to “pee in peace,” colleges are publicizing the locations of gender-neutral or gender-free bathrooms (typically single-stall, lockable restrooms available to people of all genders), changing male/female restrooms into unisex ones, and making sure that new buildings include gender-neutral bathroom options. For example, the student association at San Diego State University passed a resolution in 2003 calling for the implementation of safe restrooms across campus for transgender students. As first steps, the group approved funds to change door signs and install door locks to convert a set of women’s and men’s bathrooms in the student union into gender-neutral facilities, and had the location of all gender-free restrooms listed in the university’s general catalog. Similarly, a Queer Action Campaign at the University of Chicago led to the creation of

gender-free bathrooms in two major campus buildings in 2004. The school now has 15 bathrooms around campus that are designated as gender-neutral. Students at the University of New Hampshire and Beloit College (Wisconsin) also successfully lobbied their school administrators to create gender-neutral bathrooms in some buildings. A few campuses that already have a significant number of gender-neutral restrooms, including New York University, Ohio University, and UCLA, list the locations of the bathrooms on their web sites.

LOCKER ROOMS

As with male and female bathrooms, public locker and shower rooms can be uncomfortable, intimidating, and even dangerous for transgender students. Most facilities do not offer any privacy, so that individuals have to undress and shower in view of others. For transgender students, being naked in front of others may out them as being transgender and can create awkward and unsafe situations. As a result, many transgender students avoid taking physical education classes when possible, and do not use campus recreational facilities.

Until recently, few transgender advocates have focused on this issue. And, because renovating locker and shower rooms can require more extensive changes than converting men's and women's restrooms into gender-neutral bathrooms, few campuses have created private locker rooms and individual showers with curtains. However, a number of schools are now developing such facilities, as campus leaders recognize that they not only serve the needs of transgender students, but also adults with children and people with disabilities who require the assistance of an attendant of a different gender. For example, the University of Maryland has created a "family locker room" in its Campus Recreational Center. While the facility was not specifically established for transgender students, they are able to take advantage of the greater privacy it offers. Transgender students, thus, may be more successful if they work in coalition with other campus groups to advocate for private locker and shower rooms in existing and new recreational facilities.

RECORDS AND DOCUMENTS

Transsexual students who decide to transition from one gender to another typically seek to change their gender and often their names on of-

ficial records and documents. Students who identify as genderqueer may also change their given names to match their gender identity. The process for making these changes varies from state to state and institution to institution. At some schools, the process is difficult or a means to do so does not exist.

Being able to alter their records and documents, though, is personally and legally important for many trans students. Not only does having the appropriate name and gender listed reflect and validate their identity, but it can also protect trans students from constantly having to explain why they use a name different from their birth name and why their appearance does not match a photo or gender designation on an identification card. Moreover, updated records and documents can ensure that trans students will not be outed and will 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.

Colleges can most easily address this issue by establishing a simple procedure for trans students to change the name and/or gender designation on all of their campus records, including identification cards, listings in electronic and print directories, and files in admissions, financial aid, the registrar's office, and the health center. For example, at the Ohio State University, trans students who legally change their names can fill out a form with the university registrar to change their name, as well as their gender designation, on their main college record. At the University of Maryland, trans students can change the name and gender listed on their records by obtaining a letter of support from a mental health professional. Through these processes, students at both schools effectively change the information on all of their campus records when that information is accessed in the future. No one outside of the registrar's offices knows that students' records have been changed.

A growing number of colleges and universities also enable transgender students to have an identification card that is in keeping with their gender identity/expression. At the University of Vermont, trans students who are not yet able to change their names legally can still request an identification card with a name other than their birth name. Transgender students at American University and the University of Illinois-Chicago can request a new ID at no cost that has a gender-appropriate picture and only their last name and the initial of their first name.

An institution should never insist that individuals complete gender reassignment surgeries before changing their records and documents, as trans youth are increasingly deciding that they do not need to have sur-

geries to be “real” men or “real” women, and even trans students who desire surgeries often cannot afford the procedures. Moreover, many transsexuals, especially trans men, feel that the surgical outcomes are still inadequate. Given that some trans youth may be uncertain about undertaking the long, arduous process of transitioning, colleges should not require them to make this decision just to have consistent records and documents.

PUBLIC INCLUSION

Although many lesbian, gay, and bisexual student organizations have added “transgender” to their names and mission statements, this move toward greater inclusiveness has often been more symbolic than substantive. Rarely do groups offer more than token trans-specific programming or include transgender experiences and perspectives in their overall programming. On a larger level, colleges also frequently ignore transgender and gender-variant people in their policies and practices. Few campus non-discrimination and anti-harassment statements include “gender identity or expression,” and as a result, transgender students, staff, and faculty have no formal recourse through college processes when they experience discrimination. The exclusion of transgender people from campus policies also sends a signal to members of the trans community that they are not valued or welcomed by the institution. Similarly, the limitation of the gender designation on college forms to “M” and “F” also makes gender-variant people feel disregarded, and with no means to identify themselves, they remain invisible to administrators and their needs continue to be overlooked.

Student organizations that have “transgender” in their names and/or constitutions should be encouraged to do more to include trans students. In addition to providing ongoing trans-focused activities and including trans perspectives and experiences in all programming, LGBT student groups can advocate for trans-supportive policies and practices. For example, students at the University of Iowa helped lead the campaign to add “gender identity and expression” to Iowa City’s human rights ordinance after a trans woman was discriminated against by a local business. Their effort prompted the University of Iowa to follow suit, becoming the first college in the country to amend its non-discrimination policy to protect the rights of transgender people.

Student advocacy has led many institutions to begin to provide a more inclusive and safer environment for transgender and gender-vari-

ant people. Since the University of Iowa revised its non-discrimination policy to include “gender identity or expression” in 1996, more than 40 colleges and college systems have done likewise, from small, private liberal arts schools (including Kalamazoo College, Knox College, Middlebury College, and DePauw University) to large public universities (including the University of California, the Ohio State University, the University of Washington, and the University of Wisconsin). Some colleges have also changed the “sex” category on forms to enable transgender students to self-identify. For example, Tufts University, and the University of Oregon have a blank on their housing applications for students to indicate their gender, as does Duke University’s admissions application. While changing an institution’s non-discrimination policy or having a more inclusive gender category on college forms will obviously not improve the campus climate overnight, these efforts provide critical support and validation to transgender students, staff, and faculty and indicate that the college will not tolerate discrimination of any kind against gender-variant people.

PROGRAMMING, TRAINING, AND SUPPORT

Transgender students can feel isolated on most campuses. Because only a handful of colleges and universities have a transgender support group or openly trans-identified student leaders, they may know few or no other trans students. Many schools also do not have out transgender faculty and staff or student affairs professionals who are well-versed on trans issues. Thus, transgender students lack mentors and role models and may feel that there are no supportive people on campus. Moreover, as few colleges offer regular trans-related programming, transgender students rarely see themselves reflected in campus activities.

Student affairs professionals can support transgender students by becoming knowledgeable about the needs and experiences of transgender people through staff trainings and other development opportunities. They can also assist students in establishing a transgender support group. The trans organizations at a number of institutions, including Carleton College, New York University, Princeton University, and the University of California-San Diego, are administered by their respective directors of LGBT student services. But in the absence of a campus LGBT office, a staff person in student activities, the counseling center, or a multicultural affairs office could advise and help facilitate the group.

Campuses should also sponsor trans-specific activities and events as part of regular student programming. In 2004, at least 30 colleges and universities marked the Transgender Day of Remembrance, an annual commemoration of the lives of individuals killed in the previous year because of their gender identity or expression. Schools can also help fund LGBT and transgender student organizations to bring in trans speakers and films and to hold large transgender events. For example, Oberlin College sponsors an annual drag ball that is one of the most popular activities on campus, and the University of Vermont organizes Translating Identity, a yearly conference on gender identity issues.

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