

On the Margins: A Study of the Experiences of Transgender College Students

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ABSTRACT. Transgender students are becoming more visible on college campuses. This qualitative study examines the experiences of undergraduate and graduate students who self-identify as transgender. Most of the participants reported that a hostile climate for transgender students exists on their campuses and that their colleges lack resources and education on transgender 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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College campuses today are more diverse than ever before, necessitating student affairs professionals to become even more culturally competent (King & Howard-Hamilton, 2000). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students are part of this diversity. They have become more visible in the last few decades and colleges are making some progress in addressing their needs and concerns (Evans & Wall, 2000). In a review

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of student affairs literature on GLB issues, Lark (1998) found that a small but significant number of research articles consider how student affairs practitioners can support GLB students.

The last decade has seen an increasing number of students identifying as transgender or openly struggling with gender identity issues (Beemyn, 2003; Carter, 2000; Lees, 1998). However, little has been published on transgender students, beyond programmatic interventions (Sanlo, 1998; Sanlo, Rankin, & Schoenberg, 2002). The scant empirical research finds that transgender students often feel marginalized and experience high rates of discrimination (Pusch, 2003). For example, in a national study of the campus climate for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students, faculty, and staff, Rankin (2003) reported that nearly three-fourths of the respondents believed that transgender people were more likely than other population groups to be harassed at their colleges and universities. A handful of campuses have implemented trans-inclusive policies in residence life, health-care services, and physical facilities in the last few years, but most colleges and universities remain unaware of transgender issues (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005).

Many student affairs professionals recognize that gay, lesbian, and bisexual students often struggle with establishing their sexual identities. Less acknowledged are the gender identity issues frequently faced by transgender students. At an early age, these students typically feel that they do not fit into the sex assigned to them at birth. They may question whether they are male, female, or something else, and may feel uneasy in their bodies. These internal conflicts affect the students both emotionally and physically (Feinberg, 1998). For example, recalling an early experience with gender identity issues, Rogers (2000, p. 15) describes a conversation he had with his mother:

“Mom, I’m a boy,” I remembered saying around age 5 or 6.

“Now,” my mother had answered firmly, “don’t you mean you wish you could do the things that boys do? Girls can do anything they want, you know, just like boys.”

I’d already tried to pee standing up, and it had been a messy disappointment, so she obviously didn’t understand me. It was also clear from other exchanges like this that there was something wrong with feeling the way I did . . . there was something wrong with me . . . and I’d better not mention that I was a boy ever again.

These feelings of confusion are widely reported in the literature on transgender and gender-variant people (Brevard, 2001; Cromwell, 1999; Devor, 1997; Feinberg, 1996; Feinberg, 1998; Namaste, 2000; Pauly, 1998). However, most of this research fails to consider the experiences of college students.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative study examines how undergraduate and graduate students who self-identify as transgender perceive the climate for transgender students on their respective campuses. The research design and data analysis utilize a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 1998). According to Moustakas (1994, p. 13), the main tenets of phenomenology are

to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it. From the individual descriptions, general or universal meanings are derived, in other words, the essences of structures of the experience.

Thus, this study operates from the premise that transgender students can provide powerful insights into their own experiences.

Participants

A total of 85 surveys were returned by the end of the recruitment period. However, ten surveys were not fully completed, so were not included in the final study. The participants were asked to write in their gender on the survey form. Of the 75 students who completed surveys, 42 identified as female and 33 as male. The average age was 26.9 years old. Fifty respondents were undergraduate students (avg. age = 21.1) and 25 were graduate students (avg. age = 33.6). The participants came from 61 different colleges and universities, including small, two-year schools, large public universities, and prestigious private institutions, from across the United States. The students were not requested to provide other demographic information, such as their sexual orientation or race.

The sampling for this study involved selecting possible undergraduate and graduate student participants who would be able to provide the most helpful information. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to

target a specific group that is likely interested in the research project (Creswell, 1998). For this study, the target group was a nationally-distributed GLBT electronic listserv. Each subscriber was emailed the survey, with non-respondents being sent the questionnaire again at approximately three-week intervals.

Data Collection Instrument

A written survey was used to collect data from a large number of transgender college students efficiently. Respondents were instructed to answer eight open-ended and two closed questions by drawing on personal experiences, knowledge of resources, and the experiences of friends/colleagues (see Appendix A). The open-ended questions focused on available resources and support and their experiences with campus services. The closed questions related to the inclusion of gender identity and expression in the institution's nondiscrimination policy and the existence of a campus GLBT office or center.

The construction of the survey was informed by Patton (1990), who offered six types of questions to help guide research:

- Experience/behavior questions aimed at finding out what a person has done
- Opinion/value questions designed to understand the cognitive and interpretive process of the subject
- Feeling questions aimed at understanding the emotional response of people to their experiences and thoughts
- Knowledge questions to find out factual information from the respondent
- Sensory questions about what is seen, heard, touched, and felt
- Background/demographic questions regarding the participant

The study also adapted some of the questions from the Reflective Assessment Tool, developed by Eddy and Forney (2000), to assess the campus environment for GLBT students. This tool asks respondents "to assess which campus constituency(ies) have control over, or the ability to have an impact upon, the area explained in the question" (p. 139).

Data Analysis

The responses from the participants were analyzed for common themes through the application of qualitative techniques congruent with

phenomenological research. The data were considered several times to clarify possible differences in interpretation. These themes are not meant to be exhaustive or representative of all the participants. Instead, the themes discussed are a starting point for student affairs professionals interested in learning more about transgender issues.

Limitations

All of the participants were members of a nationally-based GLBT electronic listserv who volunteered to participate in this study. Relying on this one distribution method may have missed many transgender students, especially those who are heterosexual or more closeted. A more diverse sample may have been obtained by disseminating the survey through additional means, both electronically and on paper. Another limitation of the study was that it did not examine how responses may have varied depending on the number of years the students had been in college and the size, type, and location of the institutions. The participants were also not asked their race or ethnicity.

FINDINGS

None of the students indicated that their college or university included gender identity or expression in its non-discrimination policy, and only 25 participants (33%) reported having a campus GLBT office or center.

The responses to the open-ended questions were analyzed separately for the undergraduate and graduate student participants. Four common themes were developed for each group. Each theme is described below, followed by a representative sample of the students' comments.

Undergraduate Students

1. *Undergraduate students feel that faculty and staff are not educated about transgender issues.* Almost all of the undergraduates surveyed were dissatisfied with the perceived lack of knowledge among faculty and staff. Many of their responses to the question, "Are faculty and staff educated about transgender issues?," indicated their displeasure:

"Only the ones who educate themselves."

"Hardly, except for our LGBT Concerns guy."

“Many professors do not have up to date information. They even discuss homosexuality being caused in men by a dominant mom and submissive dad. Homosexuality and transgender were taught in social problems as a strain on society and deviant acts.”

“The human sexuality teachers are. I would say the majority of the faculty/staff is not educated on trans issues.”

“Hahahaha, are you kidding?”

The responses provide a clear indication of how undergraduate students feel about the level of transgender awareness among faculty and staff on their campuses. Undergraduates offered few examples of faculty support.

2. *There is a lack of programming on transgender issues.* The undergraduate participants indicated that little trans-related programming was available at their colleges and universities. The responses to the question, “What programming is offered on your campus concerning transgender issues?,” were consistent:

“The campus gay alliance hosts drag shows on campus but that is all.”

“Mostly student-driven, and there’s always a lot more that can be done. After all this time that the T has been ignored, it needs to be in the spotlight.”

“No . . . none at all!”

“Is there EVER sufficient programming for Trans issues???? NO!”

“I am a senior and I have never seen programming regarding trans issues, not even from the GLBT group on campus. It is hard to believe that I am the only one here who is willing to talk about these issues.”

For the undergraduates surveyed, programming seemed to be a major issue at their respective schools.

3. *Campuses throughout the country lack resources to address transgender/gender identity issues.* Students reported little or no access to transgender resources at their colleges and universities. Responding to the question, “What type of transgender resources, if any, are available on your campus?,” the participants had similar complaints:

“Myself and a few faculty are working to provide resources, but the university does not provide any for the campus.”

“Other than the GSA (gay-straight alliance) there’s nothing there for us. Basically, we’re on our own here on campus.”

“My human sexuality class has some resources, but that is it.”

“The actual university does almost nothing for glbt issues in general. The glbt group on campus does attempt to cover transgender issues, but they often are spread too thin to cover everything. Often times trans issues go somewhat unnoticed.”

“Absolutely none. In fact, they do not even have resources on campus for gays/lesbians. This sort of thing is almost unheard of.”

Few students reported any effort on the part of their institutions to provide transgender resources.

4. *Students with transgender issues are not receiving adequate counseling on their campuses.* Students who are struggling with gender identity issues often need to speak to a trained therapist, but such assistance is often not readily available. When asked, “What type of counseling, if any, is available on your campus?,” typical responses included:

“No. From what I hear our psych folks here aren’t even GLB friendly. Anyway, as a trans person, I would NEVER seek counseling here as I don’t want to be diagnosed with some gender identity disorder.”

“No good counseling is available. I was referred to a mental institution for expressing such feelings. I was at that point with my parents, them trying to claim I was insane.”

“I suppose anyone can go get counseling at the center, but I certainly wouldn’t feel comfortable talking to them about these issues.”

“The one counselor that I talked to said I would be welcomed, but she said that I should educate her on trans issues since it was not something she knew anything about.”

Campus counseling centers seem to be inadequate for students with transgender or gender identity concerns. Only 3 out of 50 participants reported that their counselors had been helpful, knowledgeable, and very supportive.

Graduate Students

1. *Graduate students feel that staff and faculty are not educated about transgender issues.* Consistent with the undergraduates surveyed, the graduate students offered an extremely negative assessment of faculty and staff knowledge. Answers to the question “Are faculty and staff educated about transgender issues?” included the following:

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

“No. As far as I know, faculty and staff are not educated about trans issues in any way.”

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

“Most are not. The ones who are have very limited information.”

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

2. *Graduate students find that the counseling available on campus is inadequate.* Like the undergraduate participants, graduate students expressed disappointment with campus counseling services:

“I DO NOT recommend Psych Services on campus because they are not properly educated.”

“I tried to get counseling through campus resources and was eventually told that I need to find a counselor familiar with gender issues. I now pay for private counseling away from campus.”

“I went to the university health services. They had no counselors with experience dealing with trans folk. Nor were they able to refer me to any experienced counselors anywhere in my state. It even took them several weeks to come up with a list of five therapists who might at least be queer friendly—one was 50+ miles away and another 70+ miles away. Having access to effective counseling resources would have made a substantial difference in my experience.”

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

The lack of adequate counseling was a major issue for these respondents. Of the 25 graduate students in the study, only one mentioned a positive interaction with campus counseling services.

3. *There is a lack of adequate health care for transgender graduate students.* The lack of transgender-specific health care was an important issue for the graduate participants, who seemed to use health-care services more than the undergraduate students. (Undergraduates did not consistently answer this question.) The graduate respondents agreed that their campuses did not provide adequate health-care services for transgender students:

“No. In fact, there are tg exclusions in our graduate student health insurance.”

“I got a lot of ‘no, we cannot help you’ from the student health services before I was able to convince them to refer me to someone.”

“Absolutely not. I stopped trying. They don’t even have a good rep at handling LBG students, let alone transfolk. I avoid dealing with the medical services here.”

“No. I have to educate all Student Health care providers about my condition. I still receive testosterone injections through an outside

endocrinologist (which is not covered by my student insurance) rather than through student health, which is a one-fee provider.”

Many graduate students have limited insurance coverage through their assistantships, making it difficult for them to turn to community health-care providers when campus services are inadequate.

4. *Graduate students do not have enough opportunities to participate in transgender and trans-supportive campus groups.* Many of the respondents reported no desire to participate in a transgender organization, but for those who were interested, the opportunities to do so were nearly nonexistent. Some of the students joined GLBT organizations; however, they often felt marginalized in these groups:

“There are no real trans groups on campus. I co-chair the grad student LGBTQ group, but I would have to stretch to say that it is really welcoming or supportive. People are very much superficially supportive.”

“There is a grad LGBT group. Of course it’s mostly LGB people. I feel really lonely there at times.”

“Our existence is buried in the GLBT group. Trans people are acutely aware of this. I would say this really hampers the accessibility of it.”

“There is the LGBTA and I am the only one to attend. Another problem with this is the fact that the gay leadership likes to tokenize me as a trans student.”

While transgender graduate students can typically interact with non-trans GLB grad students, rarely did they report opportunities to meet and get to know other transgender graduate students.

DISCUSSION

Both the undergraduate and graduate students surveyed reported that the staff and faculty at their institutions lacked knowledge about transgender issues. Many of the responses to this question were quite negative, suggesting that the problem is widespread and needs to be addressed comprehensively.

There also appears to be a general lack of transgender resources at many colleges and universities. Resources, such as gender-neutral restrooms and recreational facilities, knowledgeable faculty and staff (especially at counseling and health-care centers), student groups for transgender students, a well-funded GLBT center, and responsive student affairs professionals, are important for transgender students to feel welcomed on campus, as well as for non-trans people to educate themselves about the issues confronting transgender students. Schools that have insufficient resources may lack institutional support for addressing transgender issues. Support and advocacy groups are needed for all transgender students, but the lack of such groups for graduate students appears to be especially acute.

Counseling issues were important for both undergraduate and graduate students. Transgender graduate students may be better situated than undergraduates to transition or otherwise change their gender presentation and, as a result, may be more likely to use counseling services. Participants in the study who sought help at campus counseling centers reported that they were turned away, referred to unknowledgeable or unsupportive professionals, or otherwise did not receive adequate assistance.

Health-care providers likewise failed to meet the needs of transgender students; some did not even seem to participants as willing to try. Graduate students reported more difficulties with health-care services than did undergraduates, which may reflect their greater health-care needs. Graduate students who seek to transition may be further along in the process than like-minded undergraduates and therefore, as with counseling, may require greater medical attention.

Participants in this study did not paint a very positive image of their respective colleges and universities. Transgender students encountered ill-informed faculty and staff, insufficient trans-related programming and resources, and inadequate health-care and counseling services. Yet few of the respondents' colleges and universities seemed to be aware of these issues, much less providing institutional support to address them.

CONCLUSIONS

This study is one of the first to examine the experiences of transgender students on campuses across the country. While the themes addressed by this survey only scratch the surface of campus life for transgender students, it is clear from the perspective of these undergrad-

uate and graduate student participants that their schools offer few resources and little support. Much needs to be done if transgender students are to feel welcomed and included on college campuses. While the task seems daunting, student affairs administrators can begin by educating themselves about the diverse range of issues and problems faced daily by transgender students. As a profession, student affairs seeks to help college students develop to the best of their abilities. It is our responsibility to offer transgender students meaningful, humane, and knowledgeable support.

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