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Where Do We Belong? Addressing the Needs of Transgender Students in Higher Education

Wendy Schneider

Although there has been very little research conducted on the experiences of transgender college students, the reports which do exist indicated an overall lack of access and support on campuses across the country. A fairly strong nationwide student movement has grown in response to these concerns, focused on addressing specific obstacles transgender students face in higher education. The institutions which have experienced the most challenge and student activism concerning transgender issues are women's colleges. Smith College has been in the media as an example of the opposing opinions about whether or not transgender students, specifically students who identify as female-to-male, belong at women's colleges. As this issue continues to grow, it will become vitally important that student affairs professionals and people who work in higher education become aware of the unique experiences and needs of transgender students.

The field of student affairs is committed to educating students about and embodying diversity and multiculturalism. Sandeen and Barr (2006) named diversity as a critical priority for student affairs professionals and recognized the efforts of the last 40 years toward making higher education more inclusive and increasing students' awareness of multicultural issues. At the same time, the authors indicated that there are many challenges yet to be addressed in regards to diversity within higher education.

Gender Identity and Higher Education

As an identity-based realm of diversity, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues and concerns have risen to the surface in the last couple of decades within higher education and particularly within student affairs. Since 1990, 136 LGBT resource centers have been established on campuses across the na-

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tion (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2006). Numerous studies have been conducted and articles published on the experiences of college students who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual (LGB). Various climate indexes rated campuses on how welcoming and safe they are for people of minority status in terms of sexual orientation. The progress made in regards to education about LGB issues, as well as support for LGB-identified students, is commendable. At the same time, however, very little work has been done within higher education for individuals who identify as transgender (trans or T).

According to Beemyn (2005a):

[T]ransgender is an umbrella term for anyone whose self-identification or expression crosses or transgresses gender categories, including, but not limited to, transsexuals (individuals who identify with a gender different from their biological gender), cross-dressers (the term preferred over *transvestites*), drag kings, and drag queens. (p. 107)

In the mid-1990s, Kate Bornstein and other transgender activists began publicly embracing their gender identities in an effort to educate and build networks of support and community for transgendered people. As a result trans issues came “out of the closet,” and there began a “shifting [of] the discourse on transgenderism from a personal disorder to a cultural one: the inability of society to move beyond narrow gender categories” (p. 111).

The college years have proven to be a common time for young people to begin exploring their gender identity. Not only do many people establish various facets of their identities during college, but living away from home for the first time can provide gender-variant students with an opportunity to explore their gender identity in ways they were not previously able (Beemyn, 2005a). Although there is no accurate measurement of the current number of transgender college students, direct observation and anecdotal evidence indicate that an increasing number of students are challenging the traditional understanding of gender as binary. While some of these students self-identify as transgender, others have chosen instead to describe themselves as gender-variant, non-gender conforming, genderqueer, or something else entirely. Beemyn noted that language has historically been problematic in that it fails to communicate the complexities of gender. As a result, words used to describe gender-variant people are constantly in flux and there exists much disagreement between people who identify as transgender in regards to the meaning of certain identifying terms.

Because of the perceived connection between gender identity and sexual orientation, transgender (T) issues and activism were combined with the already established LGB movement, resulting in the acronym LGBT. Much in the same

way that other marginalized identities have been grouped together, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender are seen as part of one community, even though their individual identities and experiences can be vastly different. In order to more effectively work to meet the needs of transgender students on college campuses, faculty and staff must be educated about the differences between sexual orientation and gender identity. In his training entitled “Transgender Issues in College Health and Student Affairs,” Samuel Lurie (2008) made the distinction between gender identity and sexual orientation with the following statement:

Every individual has a biological sex, a gender identity and a sexual orientation. Being transgender does not mean you’re gay and being gay does not mean you’re transgender. Gender is about who we believe ourselves to be; sexual orientation is about who we are attracted to. Transgender people can identify as straight, gay, bisexual, pansexual and others, just like non-transpeople. (para. 2)

In higher education, many faculty, staff, and students (including LGB identified people and professionals who work at LGBT centers) have minimal knowledge and understanding of transpeople’s experiences and tend to engage in trans-exclusive practices (Beemyn, 2005a). The areas of campus life identified as particularly problematic for transgender students include housing, counseling, health care, bathrooms, locker rooms, documents and records, standardized forms, training, and programming (Beemyn, 2005b). With the increasing number of young people who identify as transgender, there exists a greater expectation of and demand for transgender-specific services and transgender-supportive professionals at college campuses. However, most institutions provide little-to-no transgender-specific programming or services.

In addition to the logistical, everyday challenges for trans students identified above, Lees (1998) outlined some of the personal thoughts and feelings these students may experience as a result of their identity:

Transgender people tend to go through “purge cycles” in which they alternately deny and embrace their feelings, disposing of and then reacquiring information, clothing, and so on. The feelings are too strong to remain buried, yet too dangerous to risk discovery. These cycles can be emotionally exhausting, interfering with everything else in one’s life. (p. 38)

The outward visibility of gender expression makes it impossible for students who are experimenting with gender identity and/or beginning the process of transitioning (changing their body through surgery and/or hormones) to remain closeted. As a result, it is not uncommon for transgender students to be victims

of bias incidents and harassment. Unfortunately, many administrators on campuses across the country fail to address the need for trans-specific services and education until they are forced to respond to acts of bias, hatred, and violence. Individual and institutional discrimination cause many transgender students to categorize their overall college experience as negative (Beemyn, 2005b). As a profession that values and embraces diversity in all forms, student affairs must work to change campus culture so that it is more inclusive and supportive of students who identify as transgender.

Movement for Change

Fortunately, there are a number of administrators, faculty, staff members, students, and activists across the country who are committed to working for change in transgender issues in higher education. In 1996, the University of Iowa was the first higher education institution to add “gender identity” to its non-discrimination policy (Beemyn, 2005a). While most non-discrimination policies include protection on the basis of “sex” and “sexual orientation,” the addition of “gender identity and expression” provides gender-variant students, faculty, and staff protection against discrimination while sending a message to the entire campus about the institution’s values surrounding diversity by using trans-inclusive language. As of January 2008, 254 colleges and universities in the United States had passed non-discrimination policies which included gender identity and expression as protected statuses (Transgender Law & Policy Institute, 2008).

Housing and bathroom facilities are two components of campus life targeted in recent years as a part of the effort to make higher education more accommodating for transgender students. From 2007 to 2008, both the number of campuses with gender-neutral bathrooms and the number of campuses that offer gender-neutral housing options nearly doubled, increasing from 141 to 271 and from 30 to 56, respectively (Gender Public Advocacy Coalition, 2008). At the University of Vermont, Annie Stevens, Assistant Vice President for Student and Campus Life, reflected on her university’s decision to designate gender neutral bathrooms: “It’s about inclusivity and accessibility and the importance of meeting all people’s needs, not just a few” (p. 6). Stanford University’s Greg Boardman, Vice Provost for Student Affairs, reflected on his university’s gender-neutral housing policy: “Stanford takes great pride in the variety of housing alternatives available to students and in the rich residential experience that results when communities are centered on principles of diversity and respect for individual differences” (p. 7).

A great deal of the work being done on campuses concerning gender-neutral policies has been student-initiated. Henneman (2003) noted, “Most of the new gender-blind policies are the result of student-led campaigns to educate faculty, staff, and classmates about how a traditional gender-segregated system can be

discriminatory” (para. 7). A prime example of the ways in which students are involved in this movement is the National Student Genderblind Campaign, which is a:

[R]apidly growing student movement to promote gender-neutral rooming options at colleges across the nation . . . [that] work[s] with college students, administrators, staff, LGBT organizations, and human rights groups to ensure that college policies and practices are affirmative to all students. (para. 1)

Another example of student-led change occurred in 2003 when students at Smith, one of the nation’s most well known women’s colleges, voted to remove the words “she” and “her” from the student government constitution and replace them with gender-neutral terms (Smith College Students, 2003). Student advocacy for the inclusion of transgender people at women’s colleges has been very controversial in recent years. This issue will be covered in more depth in the next section of this article.

An important component of any movement for change is tracking the progress made. The Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GPAC) created the Gender Equality National Index for Universities and Schools (GENIUS Index) to monitor the work done at colleges and universities towards eliminating discrimination and promoting education regarding gender identity and expression. The 2008 GENIUS Index included data on the number of campuses that have adopted gender neutral bathrooms, gender-blind housing, trans-inclusive policies, and trans-inclusive non-discrimination statements.

Transgender Issues at Women’s Colleges

More so than other types of higher education institutions, women’s colleges have experienced significant controversy around transgender issues. The first women’s colleges in the United States were founded in the nineteenth century as a means of providing women the opportunity to pursue higher education (Thomas, 2008). With the twentieth century came a growing number of coeducational institutions, with an increasing number of college-going women in attendance. By the mid-1970s the vast majority (more than 90%) of colleges and universities were coeducational. This shift in the higher education landscape, which reflected a societal change in consciousness regarding gender, had a significant impact on women’s colleges. The number of women’s colleges in the United States declined by nearly two-thirds between 1960 and 1986, causing administrators and governing bodies of these single-sex institutions to give serious thought to their future vitality. Thomas noted:

Decisions to remain women's colleges represented an "ideological swing back toward separate education for women" and lent support for debunking the myth that equal access to the classroom served both sexes equally. . . The leaders of women's colleges were called upon to strategically reposition their institutions in response to this evolving higher education environment, redefining their single-sex institutions for the outside world as places with contemporary relevance. (pp. 571-572)

Given the threat of being overwhelmed by coeducation that women's colleges faced in the second half of the twentieth century, it is not surprising that the leaders, alumnae, and current students of these institutions have taken their mission to educate women very seriously.

In 2005, the Sundance Channel released a multipart documentary entitled *Trans-Generation* which profiled the experiences of four college students who identified as transgender. One of the students, Lucas Cheadle, was female-born but identified as female-to-male (FTM) and lived his daily life as a male. What proved particularly challenging for Lucas was that he was enrolled at Smith, a women's college in Massachusetts. *Trans-Generation* publicized an internal struggle that Smith, along with other women's colleges in the nation, is experiencing over the admission and graduation of students who identify as transgender.

Smith College: A Case Study

Because Smith has received the most media attention concerning the presence of transgender students at a women's college, it serves as an effective case study to examine the larger themes of this controversy. Smith opened in 1875 and was named after its founder, Sophia Smith, who wanted a school where women could "develop as fully as may be the powers of womanhood" (Offman, 2005, para. 4). Today, Smith's mission reads as follows: "Smith College educates women of promise for lives of distinction. A college of and for the world, Smith links the power of the liberal arts to excellence in research and scholarship, developing leaders for society's challenges" ("Smith Tradition," n.d.). In a statement on its website, Smith's Office of Institutional Diversity acknowledges the diversity of its students in terms of gender identity while directly asserting the school's status as a women's college:

Is Smith still a women's college? Absolutely. As a women's college, Smith only considers female applicants for undergraduate admission. And like other women's colleges, Smith is a place where women are able to explore who they are in an environment that is safe and accepting. ("Smith College, Office of Institutional Diversity," n.d.)

According to a Smith admissions counselor,

Smith is a women's college. From an admission perspective, we're looking to see that it is consistently reflected in the application that the student is female. At the time of application, admission and enrollment a student needs to identify as a woman (we use the Common Application and students must check off female); official documents (such as transcripts) must identify the student as female; and the pronouns used to identify the students (as in recommendations) must be the female pronoun. Once a student enrolls at the college, the student must complete the graduation requirements as outlined by the college. (D. Shaver, personal communication, November 14, 2008)

With Smith's current admissions policy, students who are female-born and identify as FTM may enroll and continue until graduation so long as they were initially perceived by the admissions board as female. More controversy has emerged around FTM students who begin the process of transitioning while still enrolled at Smith. Within the last year, *The Boston Globe* and *The New York Times* both published articles that specifically address the phenomenon of students entering a women's college and graduating as men.

The first major effort towards transgender inclusion at Smith occurred in 2003 when students voted by a narrow margin to replace gender-specific pronouns in their constitution with gender-neutral pronouns ("Smith College Students," 2003). Nearly half of Smith's 2,500 students voted, and the initiative passed by just 50 votes. Students who spoke out in opposition to the measure claimed that it signaled a move from women's education to coeducation. Student government leaders assured the student body that this was not the legislation's intent. The change in language in the students' constitution did not affect any other official documents or practices at Smith ("Smith College, Office of Institutional Diversity," n.d.).

Among students, alumnae, and administrators opposed to making Smith inclusive for FTM students, the most common question was: Why would a student who identifies as male want to attend a women's college? Smith College student Samantha Lewis said, "I think it's ironic that there are Smithies who do not want to be women, and, to be completely honest, it seems to me that it defeats the purpose of being at a women's college" ("Transmen' Challenge Definition," 2007).

In response to this argument, people who favor making women's colleges accessible and supportive for transgender students noted that the climate at these institutions is built on empowerment and self-expression in a way that most co-educational institutions have not matched ("Transmen' Challenge Definition," 2007). This creates an environment which is conducive to identity development,

particularly around gender identity and expression. Maureen Mahoney, a dean at Smith, noted:

Questions about what it means to be a woman or a feminist are not new to the college discourse, whether at Smith or many other leading institutions. For the most part, these are issues of diversity, and diversity has clear educational benefits. (Brune, 2007, p. 4)

In 2004, a letter to the editor, *The Smith Sophian*, Smith's student newspaper, included the following statement:

[W]here do female-to-male transgender students fit in? Although these students identify as men, they were born and raised to be women, just like every other student at Smith. Society expects the same things of them as it does of any other female, but these individuals have chosen to challenge this by rejecting the label of 'woman' itself... Being transgender is just one more way in which Smithies are changing the definition of womanhood and giving individuals the power to define themselves. (Fredlund, 2004)

The controversy at Smith over the presence of transgender students is not going away any time soon. Smith's administration opened the Center for Sexuality and Gender as a resource for students. Educators outside of higher education have taken note of the need for training and dialogue about this issue at women's colleges. *Translate* is a non-profit organization located in Boston, MA, with the mission of providing outreach, advocacy, and training about issues relevant to transgender and gender non-conforming individuals (Sennott & Smith, 2008). In 2006, *Translate* launched the "Inclusion Initiative," which aims to adapt the already existing strategies for making campuses more accessible and supportive of transgender students to work more effectively at women's colleges. According to the developers of the project:

Translate's Inclusion Initiative has created a training curriculum that engages practical, theoretical and therapeutic approaches to mediation between students and administrators, faculty and staff... Critical to the philosophy of the Inclusion Initiative is the invitation for conversations about trans(gender) experiences as they parallel the experience of going to a women's college, and exploring how these experiences may be separate knowledge(s) but are not separate from one another. (para. 5)

Moving Forward

The rate at which transgender students and activism have become more visible on college campuses in the last five years leads me to believe that this facet of

diversity will continue to grow in the coming years. As an aspiring student affairs professional, I feel there is a dire need for education and advocacy about gender identity and expression within higher education. Like many students who claim subordinate identities, transgender students are underserved at most colleges and universities and even denied access to others. The enthusiasm and energy visible within the student-led movement for increased access and support for transgender students is an indication of the need for such change. However, if this work is to be sustained over time it is essential that staff, faculty, and administrators educate themselves and contribute to making their campuses more inclusive.

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