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Bringing Visibility To An (In)visible Population: Understanding the Transgender Student Experience

Nicholas E. Negrete

This study explores the experiences of several transgender students at the University of Vermont. Utilizing ethnographic interviews, this research highlights and examines the social and academic experiences of transgender students. Additionally, this study provides best practices for student affairs administrators in order to better support transgender students on our college campuses.

Certainly, our society's binary gender construct is bad news for millions of people—a prison for some, house arrest for others, poverty of self-esteem for many, invisibility for still others, and blindness for those of us who cannot see one another's constriction and suffering. (Mollenkott, 2001, p. 13)

Today's colleges and universities are experiencing an increasingly high number of students who identify as transgender, gender variant, or genderqueer. In fact, "transgender youth have become more visible in the last decade but remain one of the most underserved populations on college campuses and have largely been ignored in the higher education literature" (Beemyn, 2003, p. 33). Unfortunately, little research has been dedicated to this topic. Selected research highlights the needs of transgender students and suggests ways colleges and universities can better support their transgender communities.

The increased visibility of this population on our college campuses has prompted many colleges and universities to raise awareness regarding gender identity and expression. The ultimate goal is to develop an inclusive campus environment for transgender students. Unfortunately, as with all oppressed populations, it often takes a crisis for the visibility of transgender students to emerge. The crisis or conflict may be a transitioning woman using the women's restroom or a transitioning man seeking safe and inclusive residential housing on a college campus (Beemyn, 2003). Raising awareness among student affairs educators around transgender students' experiences will allow educators to be more inclusive in their practices so that it does not take a crisis in order for a change in services, programs, and support to occur for transgender students on college campuses.

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Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to develop in-depth knowledge of the transgender experience of two students at a small, public research university in the Northwest. In-depth interviewing of the participants enables their transgender (trans) voices to be heard in the realm of academia. The research questions specifically explored in this study are

1. Do the experiences of transgender students at The University of Vermont (UVM) differ significantly from those of non-transgender students?
2. Do transgender students feel safe on campus?
3. What services would increase the campus support for transgender students?
4. What is the academic and social experience of our trans students?

Rationale for the Study

Studies such as this are crucial at this point in the history of U.S. higher education because, as Conway (2004) notes, transgender people often choose college as a location in which to transition (i.e., move from one gender to another). Although it may seem that college provides a less threatening space for students to question their gender identity, most college and university administrators are unaware that transgender students are actually choosing to wait until college to fully transition. With this lack of awareness from college administrators, there is a high risk of the development of a hostile and unsupportive campus climate.

Unfortunately, even well-meaning student affairs professionals and multiculturally-minded instructors often lack basic knowledge about transgender issues, resulting in policies and practices that continue the marginalization of gender variant individuals. (Beemyn, 2003, p. 41)

Instead, one will often find colleges and universities looking toward their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) support services, consulting educators who specialize in trans concerns, or calling on the trans students themselves to educate their communities. The latter approach, however, also increases the burden that is already felt by trans students on our college campuses.

Qualitative accounts of transgender college students, assessment of services available to this population, and delineations of best practices concerning this population are conspicuously absent from the literature. This study represents two efforts to fill that gap: 1.) an overview of the literature about the community's struggles and needs and 2.) the findings of a qualitative analysis focused on personal testimonies of two students who identify as transgender at UVM.

Literature Review

Re-defining Gender

Language has the capacity to label a plethora of characteristics, elements, and ideas. In the same way, the power of language can exclude those characteristics, elements, and ideas that many ignorantly label as “the other.” Not only can language exclude and constrict, but it can also unfortunately make one’s identity invisible. “They seem to believe that all these named things really exist and that anything that isn’t named somehow doesn’t” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 2).

The performance of gender can be associated with the way someone presents him/her/ *zirsself*, (a gender neutral pronoun) through one’s attire, physical appearance, stance, walk, and gestures, to name a few. This is known as *gender expression* and is best described by Wilchins (2004) as “the manifestation of an individual’s fundamental sense of being masculine or feminine through clothing, behavior, grooming, etc.” (p. 8).

Gender expression should never be confused with *gender identity*, which can be described as the inner feelings that guide a person in identifying as a man or woman. Wilchins (2004) articulates the definition of gender identity eloquently as she states, “gender identity refers to the inner sense most of us have of being either male or female” (p. 8). A person could express *zir* gender as a man, but have an inner sense that *zir* gender identity is that of a woman. However, this might cause feelings of dissonance because what *zie* is expressing outwardly does not align with *zir* innermost feelings. In order to address these feelings of dissonance, an individual can begin a transition to match the inner being with the outward expression in an attempt to feel whole, thus experiencing what it means to be transgender.

The term transgender deconstructs the gender binary (i. e., male and female), encompassing those who identify as gender variant or gender queer. Such individuals transgress those lines society has established, which force individuals to identify with male or female, one or the other, never in between (Wilchins, 2004). Transgender is an umbrella term for those who identify as drag kings and queens, crossdressers, gender non-conforming, and transsexuals. Wilchins associates gender with symbols and meanings, understanding that gender is something we perform and is fluid in character. In essence, everyone is affected by gender, and everyone “does” gender differently—some perform gender that conforms to society’s notions of “masculine” and “feminine.” Others perform gender in ways that provoke, evoke, and rub against the grain. Nonetheless, “this notion of how each of us must look, act, and dress because of our sex is deeply embedded in our society” (Wilchins, p. 8).

In much research, transgender is used as an all-inclusive term, providing a space

for anyone who wishes to identify as such, with the understanding that “description becomes an act of replacement and erasure” (Wilchins, 2004, p. 39). This is particularly important because Western society often defines “unknown” or marginalized concepts by their juxtaposition to the non-marginalized. In other words, someone is defined by what they are not rather than by what they actually are (e.g., non-White, non-heterosexual, disabled). In a genderized society, no one is ever exempt from performing gender in some way, shape, or form.

College campuses are not exempt from being genderized (and gender politicized) environments. Colleges and universities must first develop awareness around the concepts of gender identity, gender expression, and transgender. This awareness can take many forms, including institutionalizing policies to protect and validate those people who identify as trans. Colleges should not only create institutional policies to protect their transgender communities but also educate entire campus communities about gender identity and expression, working to eliminate the fear that is typically associated with the trans community. Gender identity is not just a “trans issue,” but rather, everyone’s issue, as gender is constructed by society as a whole. Moreover, it is our own society’s gender norms that constrict and imprison many of us, not just those who identify as transgender.

Who are our Transgender Students?

According to Conway (2001), approximately one in 500 people attempt to transition at some point in his/her/zir life. Additionally, approximately a quarter of this population is attempting to transition during high school and college years (Conway, 2004). Based on this assumption, one might envision that, statistically, a large state university of approximately 20,000 students will have a handful of transitioning or transitioned students at any one time. An institution of this size will also likely have many times that number of students who are seriously questioning their gender (0.3% or more, i.e., about 60 students), and/or students who are gender variant in appearance (perhaps 1% or more, i.e., about 200 students) sometimes as part of signaling their sexual orientation (noting the intersection of gender and sexuality). The institution will also likely have students who engage in occasional cross dressing (perhaps 2% or more, i.e., 400 students) (Conway, 2004). It is important to account not only for those who are in the process of transitioning or who have transitioned but also for those who are gender non-conforming, gender variant, or genderqueer. Every one of these specific identities is affected by *transphobia*, an aversion toward transgender people, and can be heavily affected by trans-exclusive practices that are so prevalent among colleges and universities within the United States.

According to Beemyn (2003), “direct observation and anecdotal evidence suggest that youth who do not fit stereotypical notions of ‘female’ and ‘male’ are becoming much more visible on North American campuses and a growing number

of students are identifying as gender variant or, as many describe themselves, 'genderqueer'" (p. 34). Although limited statistical knowledge exists of who transgender students are (whether or not they identify as trans), one should argue that even if an institution had one self-identified trans student, validating zir student experience would be important. Qualitative accounts highlight the ways some trans students at UVM are being validated through policies and practices and offers suggestions on how to provide an even more inclusive environment for this marginalized population.

Methodology

Ethnographic interviews were the chosen methodology for several reasons. There is little, if any, qualitative research that provides an in-depth exploration of the transgender student experience. An ethnographic interview, if done under the proper circumstances, will provide the researcher with rich data concerning this topic, usually data that is "impossible to obtain through surveys, document analysis, or observation" (Ortiz, 2003, p. 35).

This particular methodology was selected because of the small number of available respondents who self-identified as transgender. A focus group setting would have provided equally rich data, but the small respondent population precluded this data collection option. Kvale (1996) suggests "knowledge produced during the interview is in fact a product of the interaction between both research participants" (as cited in Ortiz, 2003, p. 37). Prior to the interviews, relationships were established with the prospective respondents through numerous informal interactions, therefore gaining their trust and assistance. The ethnographic interviews served to meet the goals of the study and answer the research questions in-depth.

Sampling

Participants were selected from a purposive homogenous sampling of self-identified transgender students at UVM. Several gatekeepers were identified on campus, enabling interested transgender students to inquire about the study and contact the primary researcher. Group emails were utilized through Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, and Ally (LGBTQA) Services at UVM, which aided in the recruitment of potential respondents for this study. Snowball sampling was also utilized once contact had been made with several transgender students who expressed interest in participating in this study. As a result of these various sampling procedures, two self-identified female-to-male (FTM) transgender students were selected and invited to participate in an ethnographic interview. The students who were the only two who expressed an interest and willingness to follow through with participation in the study.

Data Collection

Data was collected by tape recording all interviews as well as taking field notes during the interviews. Participant names were changed in all of the field notes to ensure confidentiality throughout the study. The researcher transcribed all tape recordings and delivered each transcription to the appropriate participant to ensure the validity of the interviews. Written field notes were taken during and after the interview to capture anything not captured on the tape recording, such as body language, facial expressions, and other nonverbal cues.

Data Analysis

The data in this study were consolidated into meaningful constructs that meet the goals of the study and address the research question. Constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used such that interview transcripts were unitized to capture a specific idea later categorized under a specific theme. The majority of the data collected (at least 90%) was categorized into specific thematic categories and reexamined for any overlaps that might have occurred among themes. The emergent themes within the data collected provide the necessary information to address the research question in an organized way.

Findings

Trans on Campus: The Transgender Student Experience at UVM

What is the campus climate at UVM like for trans students? What are trans students' perceptions of UVM policies and procedures? How can student affairs educators work to create a safe and inclusive environment for these students? These questions could not be answered without background knowledge of the transgender student experience on college campuses. Addressing the content in policies and procedures should include assessing the effects of such policies and procedures and addressing those students directly affected by these institutional practices.

“You don't have to be gay to understand that experience (or be capable of doing so), nor need you to be female to be attuned to the limitations of a woman's life under patriarchy. To believe otherwise is to let our enemies slip off the hook of accountability” (Califia, 2003, p. xiv). In the same way, student affairs educators do not need to be trans themselves in order to work toward an equitable campus environment for transgender students. Instead, student affairs educators must look toward qualitative and quantitative research on the experiences of transgender students, or better, assess their own campuses in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of their campus climate and of the issues facing their trans community members.

Safety

In most places I feel safe, but the one place I feel less safe than anywhere else is the gym and any sporting events. For example, during my first year I went to several hockey games and realized how much the atmosphere at sporting events is driven by homophobia, making it “excessively uncomfortable” for me to be. Locker rooms, bathrooms, and the gyms are really “anxiety provoking” for me because there is a strict gender binary that is enforced in all of these places. (Alex)

Campus safety is one of the most important factors to consider for any college student. Safe campuses enable students to have an empowering experience with minimal fear that their safety will be compromised. Sanlo (2000) found that many directors of LGBT resource centers found a strong connection between the support provided to students who identify as LGBT and their academic success. There are many different ways to support students, including providing safe havens for students on campus. Sanlo’s research found that “nearly all [directors] said that they have heard from students that those students’ educational careers and sometimes even their lives were saved because they had a safe place to go” (p. 493). This is important to note as student affairs educators must work to develop a campus climate that will enhance the student life experience, an experience that is surely affected by safety initiatives on campus.

Transgender students often assess their safety in any given location, taking note as to which places are safe for them to go and which places to avoid for fear that they will be vulnerable to a physical or verbal attack. Alex paints a picture of fear and vulnerability he experienced at UVM:

One instance where I felt unsafe was on my way to the Common concert at Patrick Gym, and on my way in, there were people outside harassing me, wanting to know if I was a guy or girl. They were obviously responding to my gender expression, forcing me to identify myself to them. It was very uncomfortable for me, and I did not stay at the concert long, I mean, who wants to go into a huge dark room full of people when you are getting yelled at outside?

Students who do not feel safe on campus often use the term *uncomfortable* to describe their experiences. These feelings of discomfort force trans students to avoid certain situations, in this case, a concert. A student’s experience is built around a feeling of general safety, an issue that can most definitely be addressed and improved.

The issue of safety also transcends students’ social lives as some students, especially women, assess their safety when going to parties or drinking among friends. Not surprisingly, trans students take similar precautions, as they become potential victims of violence and harassment due to their transgression of the gender binary. In fact, Alex discusses the anxiety experienced with making decisions to go to a college party:

Off campus, I party a lot, and I know a lot of trans people who don't go out and party at all, and it has a lot to do with anxiety. Sometimes I do feel anxious in social settings, especially when you're either not passing or just paranoid about not passing, which happens more often than anything. I think that is just why a lot of trans people don't party. They don't want to put themselves in an unsafe situation.

In this personal account, “passing” refers to how well the trans student passes as a man, as he is transitioning from FTM. Trans students must take additional steps to insure their safety, causing their college experience to be filled with anxiety and mistrust. This is unacceptable for any student to experience, and it is student affairs educators' responsibility to do their part in creating a safe, inclusive, and educated community around transgender concerns.

Classroom Climate

Constantly throughout the semester, students along with the encouragement of the professor made numerous comments about our classroom being a “women only” space and feeling safe in a women only space, and how it is great to be in a women only space. I had to say over and over that it is not a women only space. I felt completely ostracized. At the end of the course, someone sent an email to the entire class, and started it off by writing “Hey Ladies.” It was so painful, to sit in this class all semester and have my identity nullified. It was just torture. (Alex)

The classroom setting influences a large part of the college student experience, as it is in the classroom that students have the opportunity to explore their intellectual capacities and take part in dialogue and debate. Experiencing a stifling classroom environment would be a detriment to a student's college academic experience. Something as common as speaking in class is of concern to some trans students, causing them anxiety and uneasiness.

Last year I was in a psychology class where I was required to speak, and I was really self-conscious about “passing” and my voice, because more than anything your voice will give it away. At least that was what I perceived. Being required to speak in a class with 250 students is unnecessary and stress provoking. I was self-conscious about being mistaken for a girl and just speaking in a huge setting like that. (Zaidyn)

It is important for professors to understand how this can cause anxiety and heighten a student's stress level, undoubtedly affecting the student's academic performance in the course.

If a trans student is aggressive in developing a classroom experience conducive to his/her/zir learning experience, it is often the trans student creating awareness, restructuring the class climate, and taking responsibility for creating a conscious, inclusive space.

I was a TA [teaching assistant] for a speech class for the College of

Agricultural and Life Sciences (CALs), and the professor was nice, but uneducated about basic gender stuff, and the students had to give speeches throughout the semester, and he had specific dress codes for the speeches. His dress code was totally gender stereotypical. Girls had to come in a blouse, skirt, and heels and guys had to wear a shirt and tie. So, I questioned him about it right away, and he didn't really fully understand, but he was receptive to my concern. I let him know that I was going to rewrite his syllabus for him and hand it back to him the next day. Throughout the rest of the year, I had to constantly bring it to his attention, but in a playful way. He did eventually get that what he was doing was associating certain dress attire for specific gender identities. (Zaidyn)

Although it is refreshing that this student was empowered enough to address his concern to the professor, it is problematic for a student to carry the burden of educating the professor. This is further evident in another classroom experience Alex describes:

In one of my psychology courses, my TA had said she had done some of her graduate research around trans issues, but when I received our evaluation form for the course there was a place where it read "gender: male or female." In essence, they were asking the incorrect question. If they want to know my sex, then ask the question, but don't confuse sex with gender. I ended up writing all over the form, educating them about how they should have asked the question. It was just so surprising that the TA stated that she worked with trans people, but passed out a form, confusing sex with gender.

A concern is that the student will soon become tired of having to educate his professor to avoid feeling invisible inside the classroom. Student affairs educators and university faculty must work to deconstruct this implied invisibility factor and address transgender concerns in order to develop and maintain an inclusive classroom environment that alleviates the unjust burdens and stresses of trans students.

Campus Housing

I think residential life needs to realize that some trans students feel like they're just a typical student at UVM, and they don't have to elect queer housing or be out to the whole world, having to live in a room by him or herself, so there are important decisions the university needs to make to create more inclusive housing that will not socially ostracize trans students. (Zaidyn)

Wanting to feel safe and accepted in campus housing is a primary issue that concerns most transgender students. Most colleges and universities require first-year students to live on campus, but with such a requirement, there is a student expectation about personal safety, acceptance, and inclusion. Some universities provide

alternative housing options for transgender students; however, some of the options available to trans students isolate them socially from their peers. These forms of alternative housing make it difficult for the student to have a traditional residential life experience. Alex describes the difficulties faced with campus housing:

With the exception of Living and Learning suites, there really isn't an option for trans students to have roommates. It's just really ostracizing. Last year my roommate left to study abroad and I ended up with a double as a single, and did not want to move into L/L because I was comfortable on my current floor. In res life at UVM, your options are either to live in a single room with a private bathroom on a floor or in one of the L/L suites.

For this student, feelings of isolation within residential life result in a negative overall student experience. Alex argues that there is little housing in which trans students can be comfortable. Although they can freely elect to live on a traditional floor, this option depends on how far along a trans student is in their transition, making each housing request very individual from student to student. It is important to create and develop housing options that actively include all students, thus increasing the factors that contribute to the entire student experience. Although there are several housing options that offer student interaction and engagement at UVM, these options are few.

It is clear that these transgender students are hyper-aware of the isolation that is constructed when offered single rooms with a private bathroom. The best housing practice is not just to offer a safe and inclusive community but to build a community in which the trans student can actively participate and engage. Student affairs educators must be cognizant of these issues and develop housing options that are inclusive of trans students. The goal is to provide a holistic and nurturing student living experience.

Recommendations for Best Practices

Excellent college administrators and student affairs educators find themselves asking the question, "What can we do to make our campus as inclusive and safe as possible for every student?" The answers to this question can be infinite, and student affairs educators must understand the power they have in communicating the values of diversity and inclusion to their campus community. Below are proposed recommendations that a college or university can consider implementing in order to address the needs of its transgender community. Although these recommendations do not cover every aspect of college student life, they provide a starting point from which student affairs educators can begin to expand their commitment to inclusion and equity for every trans student on their campus.

Updating Student Records

- Consider implementing a name change policy that allows students to change their name on their university identification cards and some of their university records.
- Develop or designate an office to handle the multi-layered process of changing personal records; this would ultimately serve all students, avoiding the potential for a trans student to be “outed.”

Updating student records to be consistent with the identity with which a trans student adopts, such as their preferred name and identified gender, is a process that can potentially be complicated. But if the policy is developed sensitively, it can be used as a larger effort to make the university more accessible to its trans community.

Campus Housing

Obtaining safe housing is a major concern for today’s transgender students. Colleges and universities must institutionalize policies and procedures that protect the privacy and needs of their trans students.

- Train housing staff around transgender concerns to develop a more culturally competent staff serving residential students.
- Implement alternative processes, which would allow all students, including prospective trans students, the opportunity to choose housing that is inclusive to their needs.
- Consider creating and developing “gender-free” housing, where students of different genders can live together without the restrictions the traditional gender binary imposes, providing a sense of openness to a living situation.

There are many possibilities in creating safe and inclusive campus housing that would validate a trans student’s identity on a college campus. It is important to recognize that transgender students may have additional needs and those needs should be accommodated naturally without making these students feel additionally marginalized.

Classroom Climate

In the classroom, trans students become hyper-aware of the trans-exclusive language that is used and that ultimately establishes a feeling of invisibility and vulnerability.

- Encourage academic departments to address the issues of heterosexism and transphobia that are undeniably present within classroom settings.
- Consider establishing a “train the trainers” program where university faculty and staff have the opportunity to be trained on trans issues. These individuals can then facilitate an educational workshop on the pressing needs of transgender students throughout the campus.

- Infuse queer theory into courses, addressing theories that pertain to and include the transgender community.

Final Thoughts

College and university personnel must consider the ways they are currently serving and not serving the transgender population. They must establish partnerships among campus departments that affect the experience of a transgender student. There are many offices and organizations that could be included in these partnerships, such as affirmative action, police services, and the counseling center. If these offices would be more inclusive in the ways they serve their transgender community, it is hopeful that the campus climate will change and will be perceived as a safe and welcoming campus for trans students.

In addition, student affairs educators must develop training on transgender issues for campus administrators, additional staff members, and faculty who regularly interact with students. Furthermore, college administrators must take steps to develop policies and procedures that address transphobic violence and harassment. In support of transgender student development, student affairs practitioners can spearhead the creation of support groups for transgender and gender questioning students. Lastly, one very small but powerful step that colleges or universities can take to create a more inclusive environment for their trans students is to use inclusive language on school forms, printed materials, and websites. This action would not only establish a comforting environment for trans students but also create awareness about trans people throughout the college community.

The investment of student affairs practitioners in every student's social, academic, and personal development is at the heart of the student affairs profession. This investment must occur regardless of the race, gender identity or expression, religion, or sexual orientation of each student. An inclusive, accepting, and fulfilling environment is paramount for student success. The transgender population has been overlooked for many years, and it is time for student affairs educators to examine and address ways to better support transgender students, creating a place where they will be successful personally, socially, and academically.

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