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Transforming Higher Education for the Betterment of Trans* Students

Erin Adams

College represents an increase in autonomy for students, and this allows for trans* students to explore their gender identity. However, many institutions have policies and practices that are discriminatory of trans* students. This paper explores the ways in which institutions of higher education can transform their institutions and policies for the betterment of trans* students.

Keywords: trans*, identity development, housing, bathrooms, dead names, pronouns, transforming

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Transforming Higher Education for the Betterment of Trans* Students

College is a time of exploration for many students. Students get to experience living away from family, navigating a new system, trying new foods, meeting new people, and exploring who they are as a person. College represents an increase in autonomy and offers more information and space for students to explore their identities, particularly their gender identities (Enke, 2012). When students begin to explore their gender identity, they fall under the T of LBGTQ+, which represents transgender. Trans* students are students whose “gender identities do not align with cis-normative expectations for the gender assigned to them at birth, or with the expectations associated with that gender,” (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018, p. 107). It has been suggested that LGBTQ+ identities are fluid throughout one’s life span, dependent upon environmental and biological factors (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Most LGBTQ+ folks move through a series of identity development stages during their late teens and early twenties, the exact time in which a typical student is enrolled in institutions of higher education.

Institutions of higher education have thus become ideal spaces for students to experiment with their gender. However, there are many systems in place that are not inclusive of trans* students within institutions of higher education. Many trans* students face issues surrounding gender neutral bathrooms, gender affirming housing and having their dead name appear on legal documents such as their transcript. A trans* student’s dead name refers to the name they were given at their birth that they no longer identify with (Fiani & Han, 2019). These negative experiences influence how students come to develop their sense of belonging and their sense of self (Allen et al., 2022). To support trans* students, we need to first explore the context of a hostile campus environment marked by genderism. This paper will explore how trans* students come to understand their gender identity while living in a cis-normative society and offer suggestions for how student affairs professionals can transform higher education into an environment that is accepting and welcoming for trans* students.

Purpose and Audience

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate systems of oppression that exist for trans* students within institutions of higher education. It will then propose ways in which student affairs practitioners can help eradicate systems in place that hinder students’ abilities to explore their gender identity development.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on genderism. Genderism describes the systematic power that exists within a binary, two-gendered society (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). The systems in place within society that support genderism excludes those who do not identify as male or female, thus not allowing space for trans* people to express themselves. I will use genderism as a theory

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1 This paper will use trans* as a way to be inclusive of the multitude of gender identities.
to outline the prevalent experiences that occur for trans* students while enrolled in institutions of higher education. These experiences often include micro aggression on campus such as the use of their deadname and non-preferred pronouns, gender binary forms, housing, and bathrooms. I will then use trans* student theory to outline ways in which I believe that student affair practitioners can create a more inclusive environment for trans* students at institutions of higher education.

**Literature Review**

There is currently a lack of data surrounding trans* students and their identity development in college because they have historically been excluded from higher education. Institutions of higher education were not built to accommodate trans* students, and that has become increasingly evident as the national discourse shifts to include trans* students and their needs (Nowicki, 2019). There are multiple systems put in place that make it so that trans* students experience varying levels of micro aggressions, which violates Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972. This states that “no person . . . shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program for activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Porter et al., 2022, p. 4). Therefore, Title IX protects trans* students from gender-based harassment and bullying. However, institutional policies and practices that further the gender binary including gendered bathrooms, gendered locker rooms, clubs, and housing, demonstrate that gender identity is not a priority for the university (Woodford, et al., 2017).

**Identity Development in College**

College is typically the first opportunity for students to explore their identities in a low risk setting, since this is often the first time that they are living apart from their families (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Identity is defined as “one’s personally held beliefs about the self in relation to social groups...and the way one expresses that relationship” (Duran & Jones, 2019, p.456). Systems of power influence how one comes to understand their identity development and sense of self (Duran & Jones, 2019). Psychosocial theorists such as Erikson (1994) outlines eight stages of identity development that occur when one addresses conflict to progress developmentally, which emphasize the importance of environment when it comes to shaping development (Duran & Jones, 2019). This theory describes identity development as nonlinear, and it is continuously shaped by the environment or context that the student is in. When this is applied to trans* students entering institutions of higher education, one can see how interlocking systems inform identity development.

Many trans* students struggle with their identity because of internalized heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and/or transphobia, which can hinder one’s identity development (Sue et al., 2019). As one begins to establish this authentic identity, there is also a period of grief for individuals to let go of old, sometimes idealized by the individual or family, identities. As trans* students become
more comfortable with their gender identity, they undergo a reduction of stress. This is because trans* students are no longer trying to appear as the gender they are assigned at birth and are instead focusing on establishing a new self-identity in which they feel seen as their true self.

**Genderism on Campus**

Society is structured around two genders, male and female, and thus leads to the exclusion of various trans* identities (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005). Genderism, or the reinforcement of a gender-binary society that results in systematic privilege of the binary is visible within institutions of higher education. In this section I will outline the various ways in which trans* students interact with genderism on campus. These aggressions are often apart of systems in place that were designed for the gender binary and not inclusive of various trans* identities. I will review deadnames and pronouns, gender binary forms, housing, and gender inclusive bathrooms to underline the impact that genderism has on trans* students.

**Deadname and Pronouns**

Part of gender identity development includes navigating names. A trans* student’s dead name refers to the name they were given at their birth that they no longer identify with (Fiani & Han, 2019). Instead, some trans* students will use a preferred name that is reflective of their gender identity and some trans* students chose to change their names, legally or informally. The shift in name can be seen as “a critical process of reclaiming their identities and bodies” (Fiani & Han, 2019, p.189). While not everyone chooses to change their name, for those who do, there is a lot of tension surrounding the use of their dead name. If a trans* student changes their name informally, then their dead name will most likely be what appears on transcripts, rosters, diplomas, and other official university documents. This is because student information systems (SIS) that are used by institutions of higher education were built to accommodate cisgender students, or students whose gender identities align with their assigned sex at birth (Nowicki, 2019). SIS can be difficult to change because they have been in place for decades and these systems were not created with the idea that there are more than two genders (Nowicki, 2019). Trans* students often feel vulnerable in class when a class roster does not reflect their chosen name and instead, has their deadname (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Patton et al., 2016). Enke (2012) details a conversation where a trans* student said:

I’ve had some very awkward situations with other students when roll was called. At this point, I’m over that, and if someone doesn’t get it, I’ll just be like, “I used to be a girl. Get over it.” But when you don’t have that level of self-confidence in being trans, it’s very distressing. (p. 88)

This can cause heightened anxiety for trans* students because they then must out themselves, or reveal their identity, to the class and/or professor. There is also anxiety surrounding whether the professor will be respectful and use the students preferred name. As a result, some trans* students will choose to
be invisible and allow themselves to be referred to with a name that is not reflective of their being (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). If a professor chooses to not be respectful of the trans* students chosen name, that can lead to a decrease in the student’s academic success because one of the most important relationships to foster in college is the relationship between student and faculty (Pryor, 2015).

This makes navigating college academia difficult for trans* students because each time that a class roster is not reflective of their preferred name, pronouns and/or gender, they must decide if they want to be correctly referred to in class or if they want to keep their privacy (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Trans* students have noted that when they do come out and publicize their gender identity, other people will make comments or ask questions about the student’s body and birth name (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Thus, trans* students have to determine in each situation where these inconsistencies occur in if it is easier to be rendered invisible or make their identity public.

**Gender Binary Forms**

Institutions of higher education tend to be based on and help reinforce the gender binary (Bilodeau, 2005). Institutions do this through policy, physical environment, and interpersonal communications. A key example of this is only including the options male and female when it comes time for a student to check the box off that categorizes their gender identity. This furthers cisnormativity because institutions of higher education are only acknowledging two genders (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). When trans* students do not have the option to properly identify their gender identity on forms, it can lead to heightened stress and anxiety. This also causes issues for the student when it comes to housing, the use of bathrooms, and gendered extracurriculars such as sports or fraternity and sorority life. By not including multiple options for genders on forms, institutions are setting the tone of the campus climate as non-inclusive and non-welcoming for trans* students.

**Housing**

Trans* individuals experience heightened levels of distress when it comes to campus housing (Seelman, 2016). When trans* students do not have access to gender-inclusive housing, they face isolation, rarely feel comfortable on campus and struggle academically (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). Navigating housing is an issue for trans* students before they even step onto campus because they need to fill out forms that typically adhere to the gender binary about their living situation. It can be difficult beforehand to find information about gender-inclusive housing on institutions websites, and some institutions deal with trans* student housing on a case-by-case approach (Seelman, 2016; Woodford et al., 2017). These gender binary forms can lead to trans* students being improperly housed, which then increases their stress levels and decreases their academic performance due to the
microaggressions that are furthered through institutions lack of policy and resources surrounding housing trans* students (Woodford et al., 2017)

Additional problematic issues can arise depending on where the institution chooses to place a trans* student. When an institution does not know what to do with a trans* student, they will often place them in a single room (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). This creates a financial barrier for the student because single rooms are more expensive than traditional double rooms or even triple rooms. Some students will choose to become residential advisors to help manage the cost of a single but one student in a study done by Woodford et al. (2017) commented that:

I can’t be out because it’s just not supported at all. I work in residence life, so I work in an all-female dorm, and it just wouldn’t work out. I can afford to go to [name of college] because I work in residence life, so I get my housing and my meal plan for free, and then I have scholarships. It’s just kind of like, if I come out, I lose my job. (p.104)

This student faces an undo amount of stress since to be able to afford at their institution, they must hide who they are as a person. Living in a single room has also led to increase levels of isolation from the students’ peers (Garvey & Dolan, 2021). If institutions don’t put trans* students in a single, then they might put the student in a suite or apartment styled housing. In these housing accommodations, a few students typically share a common room and private bathroom with each other. There is again, the issue of finances here because these styles of housing tend to be more expensive. Other institutions will put trans* students with students who identify as LGBQ. For example, in the Woodford et al., study (2017), one of the participants who was transitioning was put with a gay male, even though the trans* student was not comfortable with that living situation.

**Gender Inclusive Bathrooms**

Trans* students face higher levels of stress compared to their cisgender counterparts when navigating what it means to exist at an institution of higher education (Woodford et al., 2017). Institutions of higher education were built with the notion that there are only two genders: man and woman. This means that there is little space for those who do not identify as man or woman or for those that have undergone gender reassignment that is inclusive of their gender identity. One of the key issues surrounding trans* students and their experiences within institutions of higher education are bathrooms. Issues surrounding trans* bathroom use have to do with access, being questioned if they belong in the men’s/women’s bathroom, being stared at and/or told to leave (Seelman, 2016). Not only are trans* students actively discriminated against when it comes to utilizing a bathroom facility, but sometimes a student cannot find a bathroom that is labeled gender inclusive and that signals to the student that the institution does not see trans* basic needs as a priority.
When a trans* student does not have access to a safe bathroom, their academics suffer because it can interfere with a student’s ability to engage in the class (Woodford et al., 2017). Students have noted in a study done by Allen et al. (2020), that even when there are gender inclusive bathrooms, they can be hidden and difficult to find (Allen et al., 2020). Students discussed having to go to obscure places to find a gender inclusive bathroom or having to go into an office and ask the secretary for a key to the bathroom located within that office (Woodford et al., 2017). This also means that the student must make a show of going to the bathroom, rather than just being able to use a restroom like their cisgender counterparts. The difficulty of trying to find these gender inclusive bathrooms during short breaks in between classes or when leaving class to use the restroom further increased trans* students stress levels (Woodford et al., 2017). Often, trans* students have to weigh the options of if they will stop and get food or talk with a friend while on the way to class, or if they will go out of their way to use a restroom that is inclusive of their gender. This is not something that cisgender students have to navigate and further demonstrates that institutions of higher education were not built for people who does not fit into the stereotypical gender binary.

Campus climates that are not welcoming to trans* students can determine whether they feel comfortable sharing their trans* identity. In a study done by Garvey et al., (2019), a trans* student stated, “I was closeted trans* in college and there were no real accommodations or acknowledgment of trans* people outside of their LGBT center” (p. 166). This means that students must hide their trans* identity in order to navigate campus in a safe way. Bathroom access puts a continuous burden on trans* students who are simply seeking a safe place to use the restroom (Garvey & Dolan, 2021).

**Discussion & Implications**

Currently, institutions of higher education have created a hostile environment that trans* students need to navigate. This is unfair to trans* students and a failing of the universities to abide by the law. The U.S. Department of Education has indicated that trans* students are included in the protections of Title IX, which provides protection to students against discrimination and violence (Seelman, 2016). Trans* students should no longer have to decide if they want to come out and express their gender identity or face multiple forms of discrimination while enrolled in higher education (Garvey et al., 2019). Practitioners should be mindful of these forms of discrimination that trans* students face and assist them in overcoming these systems of oppression.

**Transforming Higher Education for Trans* Students**

While there are multiple levels of discriminations that trans* students face while attending institutions of higher education, there are multiple ways of transforming institutions of higher education to be a more welcoming and accepting environment for trans* students. In the following
section, I will propose ways to change systems that perpetuate the gender binary to be more inclusive of trans* students.

**Deadnames and Pronouns**

When a trans* student’s preferred name is not listed on campus records, it leads to misnaming the student and possibly, unintentionally, outing the trans* student (Goldberg et al., 2018). Trans* students have commented that it is often difficult to find out how to change their name within the SIS. The opportunity to change one’s name is not widely publicized, so not every trans* student is aware of it as an option. Even when that option is made available, it only changes their name regarding school login. Everything else, from school emails to official documents, still presents with the student’s dead name.

To make SIS more inclusive of trans* students, institutions of higher education should advertise that students have the option to change their name within the system. This change should be reflected wherever the students name appears from class rosters to official transcripts. It has also been suggested that wherever a student’s name appears, their preferred pronouns also appear. That way, it saves the students from having an awkward conversation with faculty or staff, who might not honor the students’ preferred pronouns. Trans* students have also demanded that faculty and staff be held accountable when they do not use the trans* students preferred name or pronouns, because this is a violation of nondiscrimination policies.

**Gender Binary Forms**

Gender binary forms are perhaps one of the easiest fixes that institutions of higher education can make. When students must fill out any form that requires them to check a box regarding their gender, there should be more than two boxes. Institutions of higher education should, at the bare minimum, include a ‘fill in option for gender,’ where students are able to fill in the gender that they identify with (Goldberg et al., 2019). Alternatively, if institutions want to be perceived as more inclusive, they can include several other gender options such as transgender, nonbinary, gender fluid, gender queer, etc. There have also been calls to create a separate sex and gender category on forms, especially health services forms (Goldberg et al., 2019).

**Housing**

Denying access to gender appropriate housing is a form of discrimination and institutions of higher education should strive to be as non-discriminatory as possible (Seelman, 2016). However, there are various ways that institutions can work to solve this issue, such as creating a gender inclusive floor of a residential hall or to categorize an entire residential hall as gender inclusive (Goldberg et al., 2018). This would mean that students are not separated in rooms based upon the gender that they were
assigned at birth. Rather, students will be housed within their gender identity and specifically have “options to be roomed with roommates that understand [their] gender identity, to avoid transphobia” (Goldberg et al., 2019 p. 52). Additionally, all bathrooms on the floor or within the hall would be labeled as gender inclusive. This way, students can freely use the restrooms within the building that they live in, rather than having to potentially go to another building.

In institutions where this cannot be accomplished, either due to lack of trans* students or to administrative push back, there should be some sort of suite styled housing that is reserved for students who prefer a gender inclusive bathroom. Ideally, this suite would be reserved only for students who identify as trans* and they would be able to determine among each other who they live with. Additionally, the institution should not charge these students more for housing. If access to safe and inclusive housing is only offered at an additional cost to students and their families, that is an active form of discrimination. If funding for this is an issue for institutions, then there are various ways they can make that money back such as asking alumni to pick up the additional cost or by creating a fundraiser in partnership with the LGBTQ+ center to raise the additional funds needed. Funding could additionally be taken from the funds that institutions receive from Title IX, which provides federal financial assistance to universities (Seelman, 2016).

**Gender Inclusive Bathrooms**

When it comes to trans* inclusive policies and practices, the policy and practice that is most important to trans* students are gender inclusive bathrooms (Goldberg et al., 2018). When these gender inclusive bathrooms do exist, they are typically inaccessible, either tucked away in a corner or not centrally located in highly trafficked buildings (Goldberg et al., 2019). When these bathrooms are present on campus, they are also typically poorly maintained and not frequently cleaned. To make gender inclusive bathrooms more accessible on campus’s, they should be put in central buildings that are highly trafficked. Not only that, but institutions should also create a campus map that locates where gender inclusive bathrooms are so students do not have to wander around campus looking for a place that they feel comfortable to use (Goldberg et al., 2019). It should also go without stating, but these bathrooms should be attended to as frequently as bathrooms that are labeled men’s or women.

**Conclusion**

Trans* students must navigate their gender identity within institutions of higher education that uphold and support genderism. They are consistently reminded that there is no place for them within institutions of higher education. This is continuously reinforced though various policies and practices within institutions, which have long upheld cis-normative values. These policies include gendered forms, difficulties changing one’s name in the SIS, including one’s pronouns on all university documents, housing, bathrooms, and athletics.
However, institutions are in a unique position to transform their campuses for the betterment of trans* students. Through deconstructing gendered policies and systems, institutions will not only be benefiting trans* students but will promote a more positive educational and personal environment for all students, regardless of their gender identity. Institutions must play an active role in deconstructing genderism on campus, due to how enforced the gender binary and harmed trans* students. Institutions of higher education must consider best practices when it comes to creating policies that involve gender. Practitioners, using the lens of social justice, should assist in the centering of trans* students voices and their input to create a lasting change within universities.
References


