



Transgender Issues in Education

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Prior to the late 1990s, few educational institutions recognized the hostility of their climates for transgender students, staff, and faculty. But with youth whose self-identification or expression challenges traditional notions of "male" and "female" becoming much more visible on American campuses, some administrators have begun to consider the needs of transgender people and to change policies that discriminate against them.

Many school officials, however, still lack any understanding of transgender issues and only become cognizant of the community's concerns when a crisis arises, such as a conflict over a transitioning woman using the women's restroom.

Safety on Campus

Hate crimes against individuals perceived as gender variant are rampant in society and often ignored by the media, police, and lawmakers. Since 1990, an average of one person a month has reportedly been killed in the United States because of gender identity or expression.

Colleges are not immune to acts of anti-transgender violence. A 2003 study of the campus climate at 14 institutions found that 41 percent of the transgender respondents had experienced harassment in the previous year, as compared to 28 percent of non-transgendered lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals. The majority of all respondents indicated that transpeople were the most harassed group on their campus.

Unfortunately, most colleges do not address violence against gender variant people. Few institutions have a clearly articulated "zero tolerance policy" for hate crimes and hate incidents motivated by transgender bias or sponsor trans-related programming, such as the annual Day of Remembrance for transgender murder victims.

Even fewer colleges offer support services specifically for transgender students or provide awareness training to staff likely to encounter transgender students in need of help, such as student affairs administrators, counselors, police officers, residential advisors and hall directors, and health care workers.

Non-Discrimination Policies

College non-discrimination policies usually include "sex" and sometimes "sexual orientation" as protected categories. Neither necessarily applies to transgender people, who face discrimination based on their gender identity and expression, rather than their biological gender or sexual identity.

As a first step toward providing support to their transgender students, staff, and faculty, some colleges, beginning with the University of Iowa in 1996, have added the words "gender identity" to their equal opportunity statements. Other institutions that have written policies prohibiting discrimination against gender variant people include American University, Brown University, DePauw College, Kalamazoo College,

Knox College, Lehigh University, Rutgers University, the University of Maryland, the University of New Hampshire, the University of Puget Sound, and the University of Washington.

Changing a college's nondiscrimination policy not only gives transpeople necessary legal recourse, but it also sends a message to the campus community that people of all genders are worthy of respect.

Gender Designation on College Records

One area where transgender people experience discrimination in education is on school documents. Recognizing that college registration and personnel forms that ask students, staff, and faculty to indicate whether they are female or male ignore the complexities of gender and signal that gender variant people do not belong at the institution, transgender advocates are beginning to lobby school administrators to use more inclusive language.

They are also asking that individuals who are transitioning from one gender to another be able to have their new gender and name (if they assume a different name) appear on college documents, including identification cards, transcripts, financial aid and employment forms, and enrollment records. Besides being a matter of fairness and respect, an accurate gender designation in school files is critical to avoid outing transgender people and to help protect them from discrimination when they apply for jobs or graduate and professional schools, and at any other time that they would need to show a college document.

Bathrooms

Another area where transgender people experience discrimination is in their use of public restrooms. The "bathroom issue" is particularly a problem for transsexual women, but butch lesbians and other masculine-appearing women are also often harassed in women's restrooms.

While non-transgender women should be able to feel safe in this most private of public environments, so too should transsexual and other gender variant women, who have a right to use the restroom appropriate for their gender. College officials who have mediated a restroom conflict have sought to balance the desires of both the transgender individual and the complainant, while recognizing that a transperson should never be denied access to adequate bathroom facilities simply because of someone's bias.

To avoid potential confrontations and to make campus restrooms more accessible to gender variant individuals, some colleges are publicizing the location of single occupancy bathrooms and designating more unisex facilities. Ohio University's Office of LGBT Programs, for example, launched a "LGBT Restroom Project" in 2001 to identify bathrooms in residence halls and academic and administrative buildings that were not gender specified and to encourage administrators to make other single occupancy restrooms available to people of all genders.

Transgenderism in Academia

Faculty who transition on the job have to be concerned about how their students will react and whether their transsexuality will affect hiring and tenure decisions.

Significantly, however, transgender studies is increasingly being recognized as an important area of academic scholarship. Among the groundbreaking texts in this emerging field are Viviane K. Namaste's *Invisible Lives: The Erasure of Transsexual and Transgendered People*, Jason Cromwell's *Transmen and FTMs: Identities, Bodies, Genders and Sexualities*, and Joanne Meyerowitz's *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*.

Residence Halls

Transgender students who live in residence halls, especially single-sex dormitories, can face housing and roommate issues, as well as bathroom problems. Many colleges address such situations on a case-by-case basis, but the intent is to accommodate the transgender student. In many instances, a school will offer the student a single room on a mixed-gender floor and, where possible, access to a private bathroom.

Access to Health Care

Most college medical plans specifically preclude coverage for transsexual surgeries and related treatments, including the cost of hormones, based on the misguided belief that such procedures are cosmetic and therefore unnecessary. Increasingly, however, transgender advocates are successfully challenging the denial of basic health care services to transsexuals, often by filing suit against insurers. With more students, staff, and faculty coming out as transsexual and seeking to transition on the job or while studying at college, medical coverage will undoubtedly become a major issue on many campuses.

Transgender Issues in Secondary Schools

Many of the issues faced by transpeople in higher education, including safety concerns, bathroom and health care access, and the proper gender designation on records, also confront transgender students and staff in secondary education.

However, public junior high and high school environments are often more difficult for transpeople because of the greater peer pressure to conform to gender norms, the almost complete lack of knowledge about transgender issues, and the oversight of generally conservative school boards and parents. The climate in parochial schools can present even greater hardships for transgender students and staff.

The experience of Debra Davis, one of the first high school staff members to transition on the job, demonstrates both the difficulties of being transgendered in secondary education and the difference supportive administrations can make.

After Davis transitioned in 1998, another staff member, aided by a fundamentalist Christian organization, sought to have her arrested for using the "wrong" bathroom and filed complaints with the state human rights commission and the federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.

Students, other staff, and the school district supported Davis, and rather than restrict her access, the principal provided the complainant with the option of using other bathrooms, including single occupancy facilities.

But unsatisfied with the school's accommodation, the teacher sued, seeking to ban Davis from all of the women's restrooms in the building. Both a federal court and the U. S. Court of Appeals upheld the school's policy as a reasonable solution, creating a precedent that will, it is hoped, make it easier for other transgender people in secondary schools.

Conclusion

Transgender people are becoming increasingly visible at secondary and post-secondary schools across the country and expecting institutions to meet their needs. School officials thus can no longer ignore this population; they must quickly learn the appropriate language to describe transpeople, educate themselves on transgender histories, and seek to understand their lives and experiences.

If institutions are to be welcoming to people of all genders, issues of discrimination and equal access to facilities and health care need to be addressed.

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About the Author

Brett Genny Beemyn has written or edited five books in glbtq studies, including *Queer Studies: A Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Community Anthology* (1996) and *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Histories* (1997). *The Lives of Transgender People* is in progress. A frequent speaker and writer on transgender campus issues, Beemyn is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst.