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The Experiences of Transgender Students in Massachusetts' Colleges and Universities

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Kayla Spagna graduated Bridgewater State University in December 2013 with Interdisciplinary Honors in English and Social Work. She graduated with a major in English, a concentration in Writing, a minor in Social Welfare, and a second minor in GLTB Studies. This research project was made possible through the Adrian Tinsley Summer Research Grant in 2012 under the mentorship of Dr. Laura Boutwell (Social Work). This project was presented in April 2013 at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research (NCUR) in La Crosse, Wisconsin. Kayla will be attending the University of Rhode Island in the fall of 2014 in the Masters of Arts in English program. Kayla has also applied for a Teaching Assistantship program at the University of Rhode Island in the hopes of becoming a college professor.

This research examines the experiences of transgender students attending four-year colleges or universities in Massachusetts. I pursued a series of qualitative interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the resources available to transgender students and to identify potential barriers to full integration on college campuses. Ten transgender students were interviewed; all were between the ages of 18 and 24 years. Data were coded using grounded theory and a constant comparative approach. Themes include: awareness, safety, college and university policies, and support by trans-inclusion through programs and policies. These findings highlight the importance of transgender-specific information and broader education for both students and faculty, an improved climate regarding safety concerns, the impact of barriers experienced by transgender students, and ways in which transgender students can be supported by colleges and universities. One significant finding of this study is that many transgender students in this study rely on their college or university and its programs for support due to a lack of understanding available in their home environment. While most studies on transgender youth focus on adolescence, this study focuses on emerging adults and provides new avenues for supporting transgender students attending colleges and universities.

"My life was kind of like mixed and matched little pieces at the time and then after starting everything, with my transition, it kind of all came together and I was able to piece together my life and be fully comfortable with myself and start succeeding and making my own paths."
–Travis

Introduction

Transgender is an umbrella term that encompasses people who transition from one gender to another and/or people who defy the gender binary. The gender binary is the traditional classification of sex as male and female. Also contained in this group are those whose gender identity or gender expression differs from the social norms concerning masculinity and femininity. These traditional gender stereotypes are determined culturally and place specific expectations upon individuals to conform to their assigned biological sex category of male or female. A person's gender identity is how a person identifies and expresses their own gender, which may or may not be consistent with their biological sex.

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Some transgender individuals choose to make a physical transition to their chosen gender identity; others do not. The most commonly understood experience of transitioning is through the use of hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery. Hormone therapy is the use of testosterone, testosterone blockers, or estrogen prescriptions to diminish or enhance biological secondary sexual characteristics. In gender reassignment surgery biological reproductive organs are surgically reconstructed or altered. Although these are the two most common ways of transitioning, they are not what exclusively defines one transgender. Male-to female (MTF), female-to-male (FTM), intersex, cross dressers, drag kings and queens, transsexual individuals, gender queer, gender benders, and androgynies, among others, are also included under the transgender umbrella (Davidson, 2007). Being transgender could also mean identifying as neither gender or as parts of both (Holmes, 2003; Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

While definitive statistics are not available, the transgender population lies somewhere around 1% in the United States (Miller, 2011). Due to both the limited available research on the transgender youth community, as well as the frequent combination with the gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth in research, this literature review also considers the experiences of GLB youth.

GLBT Experiences of Oppression
Transgender individuals, like most minority groups, face significant oppressions. These include a lack of trans-positive support, both medically and socially, a lack of culturally-competent services for those with substance abuse and mental health issues, and a lack of shelter (Mallon, 2009). Most significantly, transgender youth experience sexual assault and violence in rates far greater than the general population. In 2011 approximately 221 transgender persons were murdered worldwide (Balzer, 2011; Broverman, 2011). The 2011 Hate Violence Report recorded 87% of the reported victims were people of color, and 40% were transgender women (GLAAD, 2012).

Due to discrimination in housing, employment, and health care, transgender individuals are far more likely to become homeless; it is estimated that between 20 and 40 percent of homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (Cochran, 2001; Ray, 2006; Miller, 2011). Transgender youth face significantly more mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, and self-harming behaviors, than their gender conforming peers (Heck, 2011). Due to these mental health challenges, transgender students often feel marginalized and segregated from their peers and experience high rates of discrimination (McKinney, 2005). Individuals who reject the gender assigned to them, known as gender-nonconforming, often encounter hostility for not conforming to socially acceptable gender behavior (Bornstein, 1994; Feinberg, 1996; Bildeau, 2005). Compared to their GLB peers, transgender youth are often far more marginalized and disenfranchised, often finding themselves unwelcome even at GLB youth-serving agencies (Kosciw, 2001; Miller, 2011).

GLBT Students: Educational Experiences
The school context is one of the primary settings where social interactions occur during adolescence (Morrow, 2004). Effects of at-school victimization, such as negative responses from peer groups, may impact a person's life beyond high school years and can permanently affect psychosocial adjustment (Ellis, 2002; Bontempo, 2002). At-school victimization of GLBT youth is also perpetuated by faculty and staff. Experiences from non-accepting staff and faculty members negatively influence GLBT youth's access to education as they lead to feelings of being unsafe in school, increased discipline problems, and lower levels of school engagement and academic achievement (Kosciw, 2012).

The 2011 National School Climate (NSC) Survey consisted of 8,584 student respondents ages 13 to 20 from all 50 states in America and the District of Columbia (Kosciw 2012; Mara, 2012). An incredible 57% of students reported hearing these negative remarks from their teachers and other school staff members. Unfortunately, over 60% of students in the NSC Survey who were targets of assault or harassment did not report the incident to school staff, due to the belief that no action would be taken. The 36.7% of students who did report an incident stated that school staff did nothing in response (Kosciw 2012). The 2011 NSC Survey concluded that many GLBT students avoid school due to feelings of being unsafe. Students who experienced victimization due to their sexual orientation or gender expression were twice as likely to not pursue any post-secondary education (Kosciw 2012).

Transgender College Students.
There is no accurate measure of the number of transgender college students currently attending U.S. colleges and universities (Beemyn, 2003). However, the last decade has seen an increasing number of students identifying as transgender or openly addressing gender identity issues (Lees, 1998; Carter, 2000; Beemyn, 2003). One study found that campuses produce a hostile climate for transgender students and that they are further marginalized due to a lack of resources and education (McKinney, 2005).

As it relates to the specific experiences and lives of transgender students, GLB student leaders and center directors still have a limited understanding of the experiences of transpeople and many continue to engage in trans-exclusive practices (Beemyn, 2003). Issues such as inadequate housing, health support, and social support groups can hinder a transgender person's academic career. Without proper support, transgender students are sometimes unable to receive the best education possible (Kosciw, 2009). Of the 4,850 colleges and universities in the United States, 414 have non-discrimination policies that include gender identity/expression; 81 provide gender-inclusive housing; 30 provide a formalized process for a name change without legal change; and 15 provide health coverage for hormone therapy (Miller, 2011).

METHODOLOGY

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding about the challenges that Massachusetts transgender college and university students face, the primary focus of the study was to determine the available campus resources and to identify potential barriers to full integration on campuses. I gathered information from participants who identify as transgender and attend a four-year college or university in the state of Massachusetts. Four-year colleges or universities were selected as the focus of the study in order to explore resources, housing, and campus environment specifically related to these institutions.

Participants were recruited through flyers, e-mails, and by word of mouth. Of the ten participants in this study, four identified as transmen, one as a transwoman, three as transgender, one as female assigned at birth gender queer, and one as gender fluid. All participants were between the ages of 18 and 24. Of the four-year colleges or universities attended by the participants two were women's colleges. Six participants attended schools located in Plymouth County, two in Western Massachusetts, specifically in the Pioneer Valley/Springfield Metropolitan area, one in Bristol County, and one in the North Shore. In this paper, participants are identified by selected code names; no actual names are used.

Interviews generally lasted between thirty minutes and an hour and were conducted in an environment chosen by each participant. One interview was conducted over email at the participant's request. The interviews included questions pertaining to general personal background, resources, housing, health services, campus policies, and safety of the participants. The interview questions also explored participants' personal experiences of the college or university they attend. The full list of interview questions appears in Appendix 1.

After completing the interviews, the data were transcribed using the denaturalized, or loose verbatim, method, which focuses on the content of what participants are saying while disregarding natural pauses and stutters in speech (Mero-Jaffe, 2011). Once data were transcribed, I coded the data using grounded theory, which is created through the collection and analysis of data (Backman, 1999; Jones, 2011). This theory is used to develop thematic categories, and over time, to understand the data by identifying relationships between and among transcriptions. The major themes that develop through this process then allow the researcher to discover hypotheses and theories rather than creating them beforehand (Charmaz 2011).

FINDINGS

The primary themes are as follows: awareness, safety, college and university policies, and support by trans-inclusion through programs and policies. These findings highlight the importance of transgender-specific information and broader education for both students and faculty, an improved campus-climate regarding safety concerns, barriers experienced by transgender students, and ways in which transgender students can be more fully supported by colleges and universities.

Awareness

A majority of participants indicated that the first step any school should take, whether primary, secondary, or college level, is to inform and educate faculty, staff, and students about the transgender community. Knowing more about the existence and experiences of the transgender community is necessary for the implementation of trans-inclusive policies and for full integration of transgender students. A majority of participants signified their understanding of being fully integrated on campus as participating in and out of the classroom, the ease of communication with both faculty and peers, and comfort with seeking assistance.

Six of the ten participants indicated that they had no prior knowledge of the transgender community until reaching their college or university. Ashley stated:

> The first time that I really understood that I wanted to be female and that I was transgendered was during my senior year of high school. I didn't know that much about it until later when I did more research in college. Joining my college's GSA helped me get to know other transgender folk as well as talking to others online. So I didn't really discover the community until my first or second year of college.

Half of the participants confirmed that awareness and education about the transgender community could provide greater understanding and acceptance from the broader campus community.

Safety

Safety is an important factor in the life of students who identify within the transgender umbrella, as transgender individuals experience disproportionate rates of violence. All but one participant asserted feeling safe at their college or university. This is an important finding, as feeling safe and protected supports full integration into the community. Despite the comfort felt by the participants, all participants indicated risks involved with being "out" on campus. These safety concerns include: a lack of/or difficult accessibility of gender-neutral bathrooms and legal issues outside of the college or university's control.

According to the 2009 D.C. Trans Coalition Survey, 70 percent of transgender people interviewed reported being either harassed or assaulted while using a gender-specific bathroom (Our Survey Results, 2009). Gender-specific bathrooms are a significant concern to transgender individuals. Nine of the ten participants indicated that while their school has gender-neutral bathrooms, they were few in quantity and were located in places that were not easy to get to.

There are larger legal issues that impact the need for and use of gender neutral bathrooms. As Alex stated:

> I usually go into the men's bathroom, but we just recently found out that if anyone was to have an issue or kind of knew that you weren't actually biologically a male and got uncomfortable they could call the police and I could be arrested. If the charges go far enough you would have to register as a level one sex offender.

Here, Alex is alluding to a 2011 the Massachusetts *An Act Relative to Gender Identity* Law, which defines gender identity as an individual's gender preference, appearance or behavior, regardless if the gender identity coincides with the individual's assigned sex (O'Flaherty, 2011; GLADD, 2012). While this law prohibits discrimination based on gender identity in the multiple arenas, it does not prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in public accommodations (GLADD, 2012). Due to the gaps within this law, and depending on each town and state, transgender individuals who use a bathroom that does not match their biological sex face penalties or fines, jail time, or having to register as a sex offender.

One particularly significant finding is that nine of the ten participants confirmed feeling safe at the college or university they

attend, especially when compared to home. One participant stated that while he is unable to express his preferred gender identity while at home, on campus he does not experience that same fear or harassment. This participant, currently a first year student, moved from Texas to Massachusetts and specifically chose his university due to its trans-inclusive policies. When asked where he lives as a student and his experiences living on campus, another participant, Travis, indicated:

> I didn't actually have a room right away. I was sleeping on all my friend's couches because… my mom wasn't letting me live in the house… I just couldn't keep up with my classes while staying in everyone's rooms so I went to the housing department and I just talked with them about my situation and… they were able to get me a room.

Being kicked out of his home and unable to live on campus initially not only affected him emotionally, but it also reflected poorly on his academics. For a majority of the participants, campus offers protection and allows them the ability to be comfortable in expressing their gender identity; this is a luxury not often found in the home environment.

College and University Policies

College and university policies can serve as barriers to full inclusion on campus or can be a positive support for the transgender students. In discussing potential barriers, participants identified gender-neutral bathrooms, as previously discussed. Other concerns included housing options and preferred name policies. Barriers hinder transgender integration into communities and foster negative stereotypes and stigmas.

All participants who resided on campus faced revealing their gender identity in order to acquire proper housing. Many transgender students are offered rooms typically provided to students with medical or mental health diagnoses. Travis, stated:

> It knocks you down when you have to go into a medical room to figure out your rooming situations… until then you are taking a room from a blind student or someone who is disabled and I feel like you shouldn't be taking that space away from someone for something that should easily be situated with.

Offering a transgender student medical housing suggests that being transgender is a disability rather than a gender identity. It also takes away necessary housing to a student who has a disability and may require it.

One step of transitioning is through changing one's birth name to fit the desired gender. A transperson may change his or her names several times until they find the desired fit and then take steps for a legal name change. A preferred name policy allows any student to change their names on college or university records where the legal name is not required. Transgender students who attend colleges and universities that do not have a preferred name policy face the fear of having to "out" themselves in many different campus contexts, such as in classroom settings. Half of the participants confirmed that their colleges or universities did have a preferred name policy and indicated this as a positive experience, both emotionally and academically. Half of the participants did not have a preferred name policy at their college or university, but desired one greatly.

One participant, addressing the lack of a preferred name policy, stated, "It's extremely triggering for a transgender student, transgender persons in general, really, to see their birth name and assigned sex." Although preferred name policies are extremely helpful for transgender students who wish to not reveal their gender identity, this policy can only help so much if other trans-inclusive policies are not put in place. According to one university's preferred name policy, records such as transcripts, degree audits, commencement brochures, degree certificates, and financial records, will still show the individual's legal name. To change these records, an individual must make a legal name change and then inform the university.

Support: Trans-Inclusion through Programs and Policies
Social and institutional support is important and necessary for transgender students to feel connected and motivated during their college career. A majority of the participants indicated the need for programmatic supports, including both student-assisted and faculty-assisted programs, and trans-inclusive and trans-specific policies.

Programmatic Supports.
Programs and groups on campuses are designed to incorporate more of the student body in the campus community. A majority of the participants indicated that the primary source of trans-related information and guidance they received came from GLBT organizations in their colleges or universities. A majority of participants stated that colleges and universities have more student-run GLBT organizations than staff-run organizations. Four of the participants attend colleges that do not offer any staff-run GLBT supportive organizations. According to participants, student-run organizations offer secure and safe environments where GLBT students can connect, talk, and meet others of the community. These organizations, in some cases, also attempt to implement or change policies. One participant desired more transgender-specific organizations, stat-

ing: "There are some things I would like to bring up in a group of people who could share my point of view… I would love to see a group that is specifically transgender."

The four participants who attended a college or university that do not offer staff-run GLBT organizations stated the desire to have staff-run organizations supporting the GLBT community and advocating for trans-inclusive policies. Ashley stated that "[Student run groups are] good, but [they don't] really teach anything new and [they're] not really active in the community." Staff-run GLBT organizations not only allow students to work side-by-side with faculty and produce positive opportunities, but they also demonstrate support, interest, and commitment on the part of the college or university administration. Other advantages of staff-run groups are the sub-groups or programs that extend from them.

Trans-Inclusive Campus-Based Policies.
One interesting finding concerned the two participants attending women's colleges. Bradley indicated that his college implemented a policy to support members of the college community who identify as transgender. Incoming students to this college must have a female gender marker, whether biologically female or as a transwoman. Current students who undergo transitioning and identify as male, whether or not the student's gender marker changes, are allowed to both continue attending the all-women's college as well as to continue living on campus. However, due to Title IX, transwomen who still have a male gender marker are not allowed to attend these women's colleges.

While Title IX of the Education Amendments states that no person in the United States can be excluded from any education program based on sex, it does not prohibit private undergraduate colleges and universities from discriminating based upon sex in the admissions processes. Most female-only institutions do not have a formal policy regarding transgender students who come out, are outed, or begin transitioning after the time of admission. The most important implication of Title IX permits institutions offering single-sex education to receive federal funding. Therefore, if a women's college admitted students who identify as male (or not identifying as female), the institution's funding could be in danger (Kraschel, 2012).

The two participants who attend women's colleges discussed how attending an all-women's college helped them to discover what they consider to be their true identity as a transgender male. According to Bradley, not all students at his women's college identified as female, which surprised many students, including himself. Bradley stated that in his experience, single-sex institution students have a lot of freedom to explore their identities. The second participant stated: "I go to school where

I do because it was the best education I had offered to me." To these participants it mattered less whether the college they attend catered towards a specific sex, as long as their needs, emotional and academic, were met.

Discussion

Participants were forthcoming in discussing their experiences and opinions concerning attending Massachusetts colleges and universities. A number of trans-inclusive policy recommendations emerged from these student findings. Trans-inclusive policies remove significant and exclusionary barriers, which do not allow transgender students the opportunity for full integration, whether through in-class participation, communication with faculty and peers, or in other aspects of campus life.

McKinney (2005) noted that undergraduate students felt that faculty and staff were not educated about transgender issues, resulting in a lack of programming and a lack of resources for transgender students. This study is consistent with McKinney (2005), as participants discussed how a prevailing lack of information and resources negatively impacts educational outcomes. More transgender-related education for all members of the campus, can increase transgender student safety and support full inclusion in all aspects of campus life. A lack of basic information, even by well-meaning staff or faculty members, can further marginalize transgender students (Beemyn, 2003).

This study also highlights that education about the transgender community prior to college years is important. As previously noted, education about the community to children at a younger age could encourage understanding and acceptance of persons who identify as transgender. Earlier education can also provide those children who identify as transgender the opportunity to begin transitioning earlier, to develop positive feelings towards themselves, and to have a confident sense of the future (Ryan, 2009). However, due to the lack of early education of the transgender community, college is often the first opportunity gender variant students have to question their ascribed gender. Therefore, college administrators and faculty members need to improve the campus climate for gender variant students and foster an environment in which people of all genders can more readily be themselves. This would be made possible through supporting openly transgender students and providing accurate information about gender diversity (Beemyn, 2003).

Implementing easily-accessible gender-neutral bathrooms, rather than only offering gender binary bathrooms or handicapped restrooms, is one such change more colleges and universities can begin to make. Consistent with Carter's (2000) and Beemyn's (2003) studies, this research indicates that policies such as restroom designations and residence hall assign-ments can penalize students who do not fit the gender binary, further segregating them. Gender-neutral housing can be implemented to more fully address the needs of transgender students. Trans-friendly housing options offers safety, as well as social and emotional support. One participant, unable to acquire trans-friendly on-campus housing, found difficulty in making friends and becoming involved in the campus community due to commuting rather than living on campus.

Other trans-inclusive policies, such as the preferred name policy or the trans-inclusive policies implemented by the all-women's college, are advances colleges and universities can be making to become more responsive to the specific needs of their transgender students. This study also demonstrates that a combination of student-run and staff-run GLBT organizations provide the most advantages for the transgender student population. This study demonstrates that while student-run organizations cater more towards the individual's needs, the staff-run organizations can have a greater community outreach and opportunities. Combining education, and trans-inclusive policies and resources is important for transgender students to feel welcomed on campus (Johnson, 2011).

Due to its small sample size and a requirement for participants to attend a four-year college or university in Massachusetts, the conclusions in this study may differ from other states and countries. However, these findings do represent experiences of transgender Massachusetts students over a broad area and reveal important trends. Future studies can be taken to broaden the scope of the research.

Conclusion

College and university administrators should consider the importance of trans-inclusion on campuses, especially where transgender students are considered as a minority group. Transgender students, like most students, offer new insights, experiences, and opportunities to their colleges and universities; however, feelings of segregation can lead to a decline in participation and motivation, resulting in students who pass through college on the outskirts.

Colleges and universities should provide education about the transgender community to its faculty and staff so that these individuals can be better suited to understanding, advocating, and helping the students on campus. As demonstrated through this study, trans-inclusive policies and programs are what allow transgender students to fully participate on campus, receive a more inclusive education, and foster feelings of safety. It is my hope that this study contributes to the improved campus climate for transgender students.

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Appendix 1

PERSONAL BACKGROUND

     What does "transgender" mean to you?

     How or when did you decide to come out as transgender (whether to others or yourself)?

     How did this revelation make you feel?

     How have other people reacted?

     How has your life changed?

RESOURCES

What resources does your school have for GLBT students?

     Follow up questions (as needed)

     Does your school have a pride center or some other GLBT friendly group?

     Are there support groups or other programs for GLBT students?

     Are there any resources or programs specifically for transgender students?

     What kind of support do you receive or observe from these resources?

     What kind of resources would you like to see on campus?

HOUSING

Where do you live as a student? As a transperson, what is it like for you to live there?

     Follow up questions (as needed)

     What are the housing options at your school?

     Does your school offer medical housing or gender-neutral housing?

     If you live on campus, how easy or difficult is it to get proper housing?

     Tell me more about your experiences in on-campus housing.

     If you have friends who identify as trans, what have some of their experiences been?

HEALTH SERVICES

Does your school's health services meet your needs as a transgender person?

     Follow up questions (as needed)

     How easy or difficult is it for you to be taken care of medically?

     What challenges or obstacles do you face?

     What improvements would you like to see?

     Does your school provide gender-neutral or guest bathrooms?

POLICIES

Are there policies in place to aid, protect, or support transgender student?

     How do you think your school could improve to meet your needs?

     What specific policies have affected you the most?

     What policies do you want your school to implement?

SAFETY

How comfortable do you feel about being "out" on campus?

     Do you fear discrimination on campus? In the classroom? Additional places?

     Have you experienced hate crimes on campus? In the classroom? Additional places?

     Do you feel safe at your school?

     Is there anything else you would like to tell me?