

Creating Inclusion: Transgender Students on Campus

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Over the past 30 years many of our campuses learned that there are gay, lesbian, and bisexual students on campus and that we need to closely examine our campus services in order to ensure that heterosexism and homophobia do not exclude students on the basis of sexual orientation. Some of our campuses met this challenge more effectively than others, by opening resource centers, supporting student organizations, hiring openly gay, lesbian, and bisexual staff and faculty, and modifying previously exclusionary policies and practices to provide a more inclusive environment.

But as campuses began to deal with issues of sexual orientation, issues of gender identity remained in the closets. Few campuses had out transgender faculty, staff, or students on campus and even fewer had any policies that would support transgender members of the campus community. In the past few years this has begun to change. Transgender members of our campus community are coming out of the closets and it is once again time for us to examine our policies and practices in order to ensure that gender identity is not a barrier for our colleagues and our students.

Counseling centers have a particularly important role to play as students may have both a legitimate skepticism of the counseling profession and a need for the services, support, and referrals available through counseling centers. Much clinical practice with transgendered individuals, and particularly with transgendered youth, has been undertaken from a model that pathologizes the young person or attempts to confine young people into rigid models of gender. At the same time, transgender individuals may be dealing with a wide range of social pressures and institutional barriers that may prevent them from being able to access needed services.

As Shannon Minter writes in "Social Services with Transgendered Youth", practitioners who take the time to listen to transgender youth and acknowledge the realities and complexities of their lives:

have identified a number of external stressors—from isolation and parental rejection to violence in communities and schools—that account for many of the social and emotional problems that clinicians have erroneously viewed as evidence of inherent psychopathology. As a result of that fundamental shift in perspective, these practitioners have developed interventions that are effective and empowering because they are grounded in a realistic understanding of the severe prejudice and hostility that most young transgendered people face, simply for being who they are (1999, xiv).

This article does not pretend to be a comprehensive discussion of all issues that transgender students face—either on campus or off. Instead, I will try to provide some basic definitions, a brief discussion on some campus concerns for transgender students, and some resources for further education.

Language is an important component of working appropriately with transgender students. While definitions are always fluid and contested, the following can serve as an entry point for understanding common terms. These definitions are taken from *Transgender Equality* (see bibliography).

Gender Identity: Refers to a person's internal, deeply felt sense of being either male or female, or something other or in between. Because gender identity is internal and personally defined, it is not visible to others. In contrast, a person's "gender expression" is external and socially perceived.

Transgender: Transgender has become an "umbrella term" that is used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences, including but not limited to: pre-operative, post-operative, and non-operative transsexual people; male and female cross-dressers (sometimes referred to as "transvestites", "drag queens" or "drag kings"); intersexed individuals; and men and women, regardless of sexual orientation, whose appearance of characteristics are perceived to be gender atypical.

Transsexual: Most people experience their gender identity as correlating to, or in line with, their physical sex. For a

transsexual person, however, there is a conflict between one's physical sex and one's gender identity as a man or a woman. Female-to-male transsexual (FTM) people are born with female bodies, but have a predominantly male gender identity. Male-to-female transsexual (MTF) people are born with male bodies, but have a female gender identity. Many, but not all, transsexual people undergo medical treatment to change their physical sex through hormone therapy and sex reassignment surgeries.

Another important aspect of language is the use of pronouns. In working with or talking to a transgender student or colleague, it is most appropriate to use the gender pronoun preferred by the individual. If you are not sure which pronoun someone prefers, the easiest way to find out is to ask the person in a polite and respectful manner.

On campus, students may face a number of challenges. First, most campuses do not include gender identity or expression in their non-discrimination policy, and most campuses are not in states or municipalities that have non-discrimination policies covering gender identity or expression. These leave transgender members of our campus communities without effective legal redress in cases of discrimination. Changing campus policies to explicitly include gender identity and expression is one powerful way to send a message of inclusion.

But transgender students also face challenges at a much more basic level. Think about the forms that you have at the front desk of your counseling center. Do they have a check box for "Male" or "Female"? If so, this sends a clear message to transgender students before they even go through their first intake. Think about changing your forms to include an option for "Transgender". Or, even better, leave a blank space after "Gender" and let students fill in the blank in the manner that they feel is most representative of their self identity. Transgender students face forms like these throughout campus and are constantly reminded that they do not really "fit" within societal—and campus— notions of gender norms.

The same is true when a student tries to use the restroom. What is your campus policy on restroom use for transgender students? Can they use the restroom that most reflects their gender identity? Does your campus have single stall restrooms where they do not have to worry about the potentially harmful reactions of other restroom users? Having access to safe and dignified bathroom facilities is an important aspect of ensuring that transgender members of the campus community are able to work and study in an inclusive environment.

Housing is also a key area where universities need to think about the needs of transgender students. Each university has different types of housing available, and so the range of options for transgender students will be different at each university. In many cases, solving housing concerns is best accomplished on a case-by-case basis, examining each student's needs and the available housing options.

The list of areas where a university needs to think about how current policies and procedures differently impact transgender students goes on and on....we can talk about ID cards, or locker rooms, or health care, or name changes, or classroom concerns... For the counseling center, perhaps one of the most important areas to examine is how well the counseling center is prepared to assist students—whether they are just beginning to struggle with their own gender identity or whether they are out and proud and just trying to negotiate administrative and social hurdles.

So here are a few (and by no means comprehensive) suggestions to try and make your counseling center more transgender inclusive:

- Make sure that you and your colleagues are educated and trained on transgender issues.
- Make sure that your intake forms provide room for transgender individuals to self identify.
- Use appropriate and respectful language with transgender students, staff, and faculty.
- Do not assume that a student struggling with gender issues is gay, lesbian, or bisexual.
- Know your local resources—what local mental health and medical practices provide supportive services to transgender students.
- Be aware of local and/or campus support groups.
- Know what the laws are in your area—are people on campus protected under state, local, or campus non-discrimination policies?
- Work with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender campus or local groups to do outreach and education about transgender issues on campus.

- Be supportive of campus efforts to provide more trans inclusive facilities and polices. Even better, initiate efforts to make your campus more trans inclusive.

Educating yourself and others is always easier with resources. So the following list provides some organizations and books that provide a starting point to learn more about transgender issues.

Organizations/Websites:

American Boyz: <http://www.amboyz.org/> The American Boyz (AmBoyz) is an organization which aims to support people who were labeled female at birth but who feel that is not an accurate or complete description of who they are (FTMs) and their significant others, friends, families and allies (SOFFAs).

FTM International: <http://www.ftm-intl.org/> This site is the internet contact point for the largest, longest-running educational organization serving FTM transgendered people and transsexual men.

Gender Education and Advocacy: <http://www.gender.org/> Gender Education and Advocacy (GEA) is a national organization focused on the needs, issues and concerns of gender variant people in human society.

GenderPAC: <http://www.genderpac.org> The Gender Public Advocacy Coalition (GenderPAC) is a national organization working to end discrimination and violence caused by gender stereotypes.

International Foundation for Gender Education: <http://www.ifge.org> (IFGE), founded in 1987, is a leading advocate and educational organization for promoting the self-definition and free expression of individual gender identity.

Intersex Society of North America: <http://www.isna.org> Intersex Society of North America is devoted to systemic change to end shame, secrecy and unwanted genital surgeries for people born with atypical reproductive anatomies.

The National Transgender Advocacy Organization: <http://www.ntac.org> NTAC works for the advancement of understanding and the attainment of full civil rights for all transgendered, intersexed and gender variant people in every aspect of society and actively opposes discriminatory acts by all means legally available.

Transsexual Women's Resources: <http://www.annelawrence.com/twr> This web site is designed to empower transsexual women by providing factual information, informed opinion, and personal narrative.

Resolutions:

American Public Health Association. 1999. "9933: The Need for Acknowledging Transgendered Individuals within Research and Clinical Practice." <http://www.apha.org/legislative/policy/policypdf1.pdf>

The National Association of Social Workers. 1999. "Transgender and Gender Identity Issues" Published in the fifth edition of *Social Work Speaks*.

Books:

Boenke, Mary, ed. *Transforming Families: Real Stories About Transgendered Loved Ones*. Imperial Beach, CA: Walter Trook Publishing, 1999.

Bornstein, Kate. *Gender Outlaw—On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Chase, Cheryl. "Hermaphrodites With Attitude: Mapping the Emergence of Intersex Activism." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*. 4(2):189-211. 1998.

Currah, Paisley & Minter, Shannon. *Transgender Equality: A Handbook for Activists and Policymakers*. The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force & the National Center for Lesbian Rights. 2000.

Devor, H. *FTM: Female to Male Transsexuals in Society*. IN: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Ettner, R., & Brown, G.R. *Gender Loving Care: A Guide to Counseling Gender-Variant Clients*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1999.

Feinberg, Leslie. *Transliberation: Beyond Pink or Blue*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

Israel, Gianna E. and Tarvel, Donald E. *Transgender Care: Recommended Guidelines, Practical Information and Personal Accounts*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997.

Mallon, Gerald P. *Social Services with Transgendered Youth*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1999.