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The Experiences of Transgender Students in Massachusetts Colleges and Universities

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Requirements for Interdisciplinary Honors in Social Work and English

Bridgewater State University

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Abstract

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.

Keywords: transgender, higher education, campus climate, student support

“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, limited to two: 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. There are many different forms of gender expression, including clothing, make up, voice inflection, hair style, mannerisms, and behavior (Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, 2012). Therefore, while a transgender individual may be assigned female sex at birth and have a feminine gender expression, where the world reads the individual as a girl or woman, this individual nonetheless could have a male core gender identity.

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. A transgender person may or may not choose hormone therapy, which is the use of testosterone, testosterone blockers, or estrogen prescriptions to diminish or enhance biological secondary sexual characteristics. Likewise, transgender individuals may or may not have gender reassignment surgery, where 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 as identifying as transgender. Male-to female (MTF), female-to-male (FTM), intersex, cross dressers, drag kings and queens, transsexual individuals, gender queer, gender benders, androgynies, among others are also included under the transgender umbrella (Davidson, 2007). Being transgender could also mean being gender queer: while some individuals identify as one of the two socially constructed genders, male or female, others identify as neither or as parts of both (Holmes, 2003).

Gender identity and gender expression are separate from sexual orientation, which relates to the gender identity a person is attracted to. A person's sexual orientation could be heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, pansexual, etc. A transgender person, regardless of their biological sex or their transitioning sex, can be any sexual orientation, the same as a person who is cisgendered. Cisgender refers to a person whose gender identity matches their biological sex (Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition, 2012; Badgett, Lau, Sears, & Ho, 2007).

Theoretical Orientation

This interdisciplinary paper is informed by two theories: queer theory and human population ecology theory. Queer theory draws from the field of Gender Studies and explores issues of sexuality and sexuality difference through philosophy, literature, and culture (Stein, 1994). Human population ecology is based in the field of Social Work and studies the relationships of humans and their natural environments (Netting, 2011). Following a discussion of these two theories, I also review identity development.

Queer Theory

According to Stein (1994), many GLBT individuals found the term "Lesbian and Gay Studies" not-inclusive enough: "Queer Theory" became a demand for new ways of thinking

(Stein, 1994). Once, the term queer held a negative connotation and was used as a definition of not normal. Not only was it slang for homosexual, but more commonly, it was a term of homophobic abuse. Today the term queer is often included in the GLBTQ acronym and has become an umbrella term itself to include not only the gay and lesbian community, but also others whose sexuality and/or gender identity places them outside of the societal norm (Jagose, 1996; Dilley, 1999).

Queer theory draws heavily upon deconstruction, which derived from the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida was a French philosopher who argued that understanding something, such as literature, requires a grasp of the way it relates to other things and a capacity to recognize these relations in other occasions and contexts. His theory of deconstruction, especially through examination of language, brought about new insights into the meaning and power of language (Kierans, 1997; Attridge, 2004).

Queer theory explores sexual and gender identities and seeks to transgress socially conventional categories (Stein, 1994; Namaste, 1994). Queer theorists attempt to answer questions such as, “How do categories such as ‘gay’, ‘lesbian’, and ‘queer’ emerge...How are these borders demarcated, and how can they be contested?” (Namaste, 1994, p. 224). While they recognize the impossibility of moving outside current conceptions of sexuality and gender, queer theorists seek to question these boundaries, how they exist, how they are created, maintained and challenged (Namaste, 1994).

Informed by queer theory, this study questions what socially constructed categories limit the transgender community. I sought to identify these barriers and to ascertain why the limitations exist. Through exploring participants’ stories and their personal worlds, I sought to uncover solutions to the discriminatory barriers placed upon them.

Human Population Ecology Theory

The human population ecology theory claims that by studying one specific population in one area, the knowledge could then apply to the same population in different areas (Netting, 2011). Ecological theorists focus on the interaction of resident characteristics, such as age, gender, and race; the use of physical space, such as housing and land use,; and the social structures and technology within communities (Freese, 2001; Netting, 2011). From an ecological perspective, transgender students have often had limited access to an adequate college or university education, whereas people who do not identify as transgender have had more freedom to choose what kind of educational experience they will have. Drawing from the ecological perspective, social workers, however, can educate local communities about such possibilities by working to change the relationship between resident characteristics, the use of physical space, and how the social structure of communities can better integrate transgender students.

Human ecologists are particularly concerned about how communities deal with the process of competition, centralization, concentration, integration, and succession (Netting, 2011). For example, the degree of competition in a college or university concerns acquiring residency and necessary resources, in part depending on power dynamics. Concentration relates to the extent to which transgender students enter a college or university community based on the presence of other transgender students and/or resources within a particular locale (Netting, 2011).

Human population ecologists explore ways in which systems, a population and their environment, can become more harmonious and work better together. They recognize competition as an ongoing process for which conflict is inevitable (Netting, 2011). There are three community practice implications: 1) recognition that community groups are competing for

limited resources, with survival of those with power, 2) realization that groups without power must adapt, and 3) acknowledgement that social structures are heavily influenced by the physical environment and changes in the physical environment can make a difference in the social environment (Netting, 2011).

This theory often fails to address how groups that do not have power can gain it. It implies that the physical environment essentially determines the social structure, leaving little potential for change. Further, it assumes that there must be accommodation to existing environments (Netting, 2011). While this study draws from the ecological perspective, I seek to move past a focus on barriers to more fully explore ways to support and achieve full integration on campuses for transgender students.

Identity Development

Having addressed queer theory and human population ecology theory, I now turn to gender and sexual identity development. To be certain, the people in the GLBT community are not the only individuals who have a sexual identity. Because most heterosexuals do not think about their sexual identity, due most likely to heteronormativity, heterosexuality is conceptualized as a silent and unmarked identity (Morgan 2012). Erik Erikson has been one of the most influential writers on identity; his 1968 conceptualization of a healthy identity advances identity as significant, personally meaningful, and integrated with other aspects of the individual self in relation to the social world (Marcia, 1980; Morgan, 2012). While not addressed by Erikson, GLB sexual identity typically only becomes a visible aspect of development once an individual begins diverging from the heterosexual norm (Morgan, 2012). This can also be applied to those individuals who begin to diverge from expected gender norms. Eliason and

Schope (2006) suggest that transgender individuals go through two developmental stage processes: one for gender identity and another for sexual identity.

GLB individuals move through a series of identity development stages, more commonly termed as the “coming-out” process. This model, developed by Cass in 1979, is now a fundamental theory of gay and lesbian identity development. The model consists of six stages: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. The first stage, *identity confusion*, is characterized by an awareness of an attraction to the same sex. The individuals in this stage attempt to deny or block out these attractions. While not all individuals go through this stage, for those who do, the time period for which these defensive behaviors are maintained is undetermined. This step typically can result in negative consequences for emotional health. For many individuals, a gradual recognition and acceptance of same-sex attraction emerges, which leads to behavioral experimentation and a sense of personal normality (Cass, 1979).

Additional stages include identity comparison, identity tolerance, and identity acceptance. During *identity comparison*, an individual accepts the possibility of being gay, lesbian, or bisexual and examines the implication of this realization. An individual understands that they are not alone and their process of seeking out others of the GLB community characterizes the *identity tolerance* stage. During *identity acceptance*, an individual moves from tolerance to acceptance and attaches a positive connotation to the GLB identity and community. During stage five, *identity pride*, an individual segregates the world into heterosexuals and GLB individuals and typically minimizes their contact with heterosexuals, as heterosexuals are labeled as “bad” and GLB individuals as “good”. The final stage is *identity synthesis*, where an

individual comes to understand that the GLB aspect of the self is only one aspect of the self and not the entire identity (Cass, 1979; UNC Safe Zone, 2001).

While this is the general coming-out process, for both transgender individuals and GLB individuals, most scholars recognize that there are starts, stops, and backtracking than can occur throughout it (Cass, 1979; Bilodeau, 2005). Not everyone goes through each stage. There are also other outside factors, such as race, religion, culture, gender, and ability that influence identity development (UNC Safe Zone, 2001).

Transgender Identity Development.

Devor (2004), through his study on female to male transsexuals (Saltzburg 2010), proposed one of the few theories to explore transgender identity formation, based upon the Cass Model. The Devor theory, which includes the specific identity of transexualism and the broader category of transgenderism, focuses on fourteen stages that an individual must pass through. (See Table 1 on page 10.) This theory explores identity comparisons with the individual's birth sex which is followed by identification with being transgender. It also identifies "delay" stages. This theory focuses on two main concepts: witnessing and mirroring. Witnessing explores the objective and external view of the self and refers to the longing an individual has to be seen by others as how they see themselves to be. Mirroring refers to seeing oneself in the eyes of another who is similar; for example, a person with an insider perspective on the group with which the individual identifies. One critique of the Devor (2004) theory is its reliance on the gender binary. This theory states that for transgender to be considered a social category at all, societal assumptions must state that there are two clearly distinct categories: male and female (Eliason & Schope, 2006).

Table 1	
<i>Devor Theory of Transgender Identity Development</i>	
<i>Stage</i>	<i>Description</i>
<i>Stage 1: Abiding anxiety</i>	Individual expresses discomfort with assigned sex and the corresponding expected gender roles and demonstrates a preference for the opposite sex and gender roles.
<i>Stage 2: Identity confusion about originally assigned sex</i>	Individual experiences doubts about originally assigned sex and their corresponding gender conforming activities.
<i>Stage 3: Identity comparisons about originally assigned sex</i>	Individual seeks and experiments with alternative gender identities.
<i>Stage 4: Discovering transsexualism</i>	Individual learns that transgenderism exists.
<i>Stage 5: Identity confusion about transsexualism or transgenderism</i>	Individual doubts the authenticity of identifying as transgender. Individual seeks out information about transgenderism.
<i>Stage 6: Identity comparisons about transsexualism or transgenderism</i>	Individual explores the transgender identity through transgender reference groups. Individual begins to de-identify with their originally assigned sex.
<i>Stage 7: Tolerance of transsexual or transgender identity</i>	Individual begins to identify as transgender and to de-identify with their originally assigned sex.
<i>Stage 8: Delay before acceptance of transsexual or transgender identity</i>	Individual waits for confirmation of transgender identity.
<i>Stage 9: Acceptance of transsexual or transgender identity</i>	Individual shares their acceptance with significant others.
<i>Stage 10: Delay before transition</i>	Transgender identity develops and there is a final de-identification with the assigned sex category. Individual learns how to transition and organize support systems.
<i>Stage 11: Transition</i>	Individual transitions to their chosen gender identity.
<i>Stage 12: Acceptance of post-transition gender and sex identities</i>	Individual's post-transition identity is established and they live successfully in their gender identity.
<i>Stage 13: Integration</i>	Transgenderism is mostly invisible and the goal is identity integration.
<i>Stage 14: Pride</i>	Individual is openly transgender and engages in transgender advocacy.

Since Cass (1979) proposed the first model of GLB identity development, two types of sexual identity and transgender identity models have emerged: stage models and process

models. Stage models are based on norms and have a beginning and end. They suggest that identity development is a progression upon completing each stage and moving to the subsequent one. A criticism of stage models is that they revolve around the implication that an individual is less than fully developed in their self-identity if they do not complete all the stages. Process models, on the other hand, are non-linear and have no beginning or end. They imply an ongoing process of meaning-making through the interactions with others (Saltzburg, 2010).

As one example of a process model, the Mason-Schrock's (1996) Model focuses narrative constructions of transgender identity, exploring identity formation through interactions with others. According to the Mason-Schrock model, transgender individuals tell new and different stories about themselves and through these stories, create a differently gendered "true self." The remaking of the self begins with stories of childhood events, which typically concern actual or fantasized cross-dressing experiences, getting caught cross-dressing, and sports participation. The remaking of the self involves explaining away prior involvement in activities that did not signify with the wanted gender identity, or the "stories of denial" (Saltzburg, 2010, p. 10).

Literature Review

Informed by these queer theory, human population ecology theory, and identity development models, I turn now to the literature on transgender college students. While definitive statistics are not available, the transgender population lies somewhere around 1% in the United States (Miller, 2011). Research on the transgender community is relatively limited. Due to both the limited available research on the transgender youth community, as well as the frequently 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 rates of sexual assault and violence in rates far greater than the general population. Every month in the U.S., more than one person is murdered for being gender-nonconforming (Herman, 2009; Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation [GLAAD], 2012). Fifty percent of GLBT murders in 2009 and 44 percent of GLBT murders in 2010 were of transgender women (Law, 2011). In 2011 approximately 221 transgender persons were murdered worldwide (Broverman, 2011; Transgender Day of Remembrance [TDOR], 2011). The 2011 Hate Violence Report recorded thirty murders of transgender individuals in 2011. Eighty seven percent of the reported victims were people of color, and 40% were transgender women (GLAAD, 2012).

Transgender individuals lack social privilege. Privilege, in this context, is defined in relational terms and involves unearned benefits, which are afforded some at the expense of others (Case, 2012). As one example, cisgender individuals have unearned social advantage over transgender individuals. Social norms of the privileged groups become the generalized expectations for those not of the privilege group, thus fostering oppression for these marginalized populations. Race, heterosexuality, and class are examples of privileges that impact a transgender person's experience of oppression. A white, heterosexual, upper-class transgender person, for example, may benefit from more social privilege than a working class lesbian of color. It is the socially constructed societal norms which impact the discrimination of the GLBT community and other marginalized groups.

Due to discrimination in housing, employment, and health care, transgender individuals are far more likely to become homeless or experience other negative outcomes (Cochran, 2001; Miller, 2011). National estimates of homeless and runaway youths range from 575,000 to 1.6 million annually. It is estimated that between twenty and forty percent of homeless youth identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (Ray, 2006).

GLBT youth, compared to heterosexual and cisgender youth, face more mental health challenges including depression, suicide, and substance abuse (D'Augelli, 2002). Transgender youth face significantly more mental health difficulties, such as depression, anxiety, and self-harming behaviors, than their gender conforming peers (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011). Due to these mental health challenges, transgender students often feel marginalized and segregated from their peers and experience high rates of discrimination (McKinney, 2008). 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, 1998; 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 & Collen, 2001; Miller, 2011).

GLBT Students: Educational Experiences

The school context is one of the primary settings where social interactions occur during adolescence (Morrow, 2004). GLBT youth often report experiencing harassment, discrimination, and other negative events in school, often related specifically to their sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or gender expression (Kosciw, Greytak, & Diaz, 2009; D'Augelli, 2002). Two-thirds of GLBT youth (64%) reported being sexually harassed during the past school year. The frequency of sexual harassment was higher for females and transgender

youth (Heck, Flentje, & Cochran, 2011). Peer reactions to gender-non-conforming behavior are often negative, ranging from verbal to physical abuse. Bullying and violence are a significant concern for transgender youth. 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 & Eriksen, 2002; D'Augelli, 2002). Gender-nonconforming individuals who experienced victimization are at a greater risk for developing posttraumatic stress disorder later in life (D'Augelli, Grossman, & Starks, 2006).

At-school victimization of GLBT youth is also perpetuated by faculty and staff. In one study, two-thirds of school counselors had negative attitudes about gay and lesbian youth and one of three prospective teachers could be classified as "high-grade homophobes" (Woodiel, Angermeier-Howard, & Hobson, 2003, p. 2). 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, Greytak, Bartkiewicz, & Palmer, 2011; Diaz, 2006).

The 2011 National School Climate (NSC) Survey consisted of 8,584 student respondents ages thirteen to twenty from all fifty states in America and the District of Columbia (Kosciw et al. 2011; Mara, 2012). Over 90% of respondents reported feelings of distress due to negative language. Eighty two percent of students heard the term "gay" used in a negative way and 61.4% of students heard negative remarks, such as not being "masculine enough" or "feminine enough," concerning gender expression.

An incredible fifty-seven percent of students reported hearing these negative remarks from their teachers and other school staff members. More than 63% respondents felt unsafe due to their sexual orientation, and 43.9% felt unsafe due to their gender expression (Kosciw et al.,

2011). First year students were significantly more negative toward GLBT persons than their peers (Brown, 2004). 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 et al., 2011).

The 2011 NSC Survey concluded that many GLBT students avoid school due to feelings of being unsafe. Many students who experienced higher levels of victimization, due to sexual orientation, were three times as likely to miss school in one month, and those discriminated due to their gender expression were twice as likely to miss a day of school in one month. Roughly thirty-two percent of students missed at least one day of school in the months measured by the NSC Survey. Due to this hostile or non-supportive climate, most GLBT students are hindered in their academic success and develop poor psychological well-being. Students who experienced victimization due to their sexual orientation or gender expression were twice as likely to not pursue any post-secondary education (Kosciw et al., 2011).

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, 2003).

There is a prevailing lack of information on college campuses related to GLBT lives: while GLBT students have proven knowledgeable of GLBT history, issues, and culture,

heterosexual and cisgender students, RAs, and faculty members are not as well versed or interested (Brown, 2004). 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).

Transgender college students require unique support on college campuses, which is not always available to them. 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 (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 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. Students attending 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. Students attending both private and public schools were included in the study.

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, all were co-ed except for two, which are women's colleges. All participants were Caucasian and able-bodied. Information about socioeconomic status or forms of disability were not addressed.

In this paper, participants are identified by selected code names; no actual names are used. The names of the colleges and universities that the participants attend are not included, as transgender population is small and those who are "out," or openly transgender, may be the only transgender student "out" at their school. Rather than stating the names of the schools, the regions in that the colleges and universities are provided: 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.

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.

Personal background questions such as, "What does the term 'transgender' mean to you?" allowed participants to express their knowledge about the transgender community. These questions also demonstrated the subjective nature of the community as every person views the

community in a unique way, depending on personal experiences, education, and environment. Some questions focused on the resources, or lack of resources, available to transgender students, such as: “Are there any resources or programs specifically for transgender students?” These questions were designed to compare resources and programs between schools.

Questions also addressed the participants’ concerns over housing and health opportunities: “If you live on campus, how easy or difficult is it to get proper housing?” and “Does your school’s health services meet your needs as a transgender person?” are two examples. These questions allowed participants to vocalize specific needs that would support full integration necessary to succeed in their higher education career.

Final questions concerned safety within the college or university. Examples include: “Are there policies in place to aid, protect, or support transgender students?”, “Do you fear discrimination on campus? In the classroom? Additional places?”, and “Do you feel safe at your school?” These questions assessed schools’ ability to include all students in an environment designed to offer both knowledge and social support networks.

I pursued a qualitative study in order to seek an understanding of human behavior from the perspective of the population involved (Mack, 2005). Qualitative researchers focus on data that does not demonstrate ordinal values, but instead allow for a deeper understanding. Surveys, an example of quantitative research, while offering valuable and large quantities of information, do not always allow for an in-depth understanding. Open-ended questions, a quality of qualitative research, however, can more fully elicit feelings, provide depth to the issue being addressed, and can potentially lead to further ideas and questions (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). The qualitative method allows for connectivity between personal stories and experiences within the research.

After completing the interviews, the data was transcribed: a practice central to qualitative research (Davidson, 2009). I chose to transcribe using the denaturalized, or loose verbatim, method. This method transcribes the conversation while limiting the descriptions or records of accents or filler sounds such as “uhms,” stutters, and other vocalizations that are not words. This transcription approach 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, searching for themes within each transcription. The data collected was coded using grounded theory, which can be used to advance social justice inquiry (Denzin, 2011). Grounded theory is created through the collection and analysis of data (Backman, 1999; Jones, 2011). Grounded theory is used to develop thematic categories, and over time, to understand the data by identifying relationships between and among transcriptions. In other words, as the researcher moves further throughout the research, based on the gathered data from participants, and through patterns and connections within the data, the project develops in ways that may or not be predicted (Charmaz, 2004; Denzin, 2011). Once these themes are determined, the next step is to see where the connections lie between each transcription. The major themes that develop through this process then allow the researcher to discover hypotheses and theories rather than creating them before hand.

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, the presence of 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. Bradley stated, “General more awareness of the [transgender] students on campus that they have is what I’d like to see.” Education of the campus is critical to the 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, comfort with seeking assistance, and participating in the college/university community.

Participants discussed the importance of greater awareness of the transgender community prior to college years. Six of the ten participants indicated that they had no prior knowledge of the transgender community until reaching their college or university. Before beginning college, one participant recognized that she was a transwoman; however, it was during her college career, and the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) she joined, that she was introduced to the broader transgender community. 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 on college.

Half of the participants stated that broader awareness about the transgender community could provide greater understanding and acceptance from the broader campus community. It could also provide assistance to those individuals who understand that they are gender non-conforming or transgender, but have no knowledge about the community, the term itself, or the potential support they could be receiving. Early knowledge can help a transgender person begin transitioning at an earlier and a more crucial age, as the best time to begin transitioning is before puberty: Hormone blockers are available to “pause” puberty and ensuing bodily changes (Brill, 2009).

Safety

As outlined in the literature review, safety is an important factor in the life of students who identify within the transgender umbrella, as transgender individuals experience disproportionate rates of violence. Nine of the ten participants asserted that they feel safe at their college or university. This is an important finding, as feeling safe and protected supports for full integration into the community. However, one participant stated that he does not feel safe on campus. According to this participant, the college he attends not only has a majority of heteronormative students, but it is also not racially diverse. He stated that he never visits campus at night and prefers walking from classes with a group of friends. Despite the comfort felt by the participants, all participants indicated risks involved with being “out” on campus. These safety concerns include: a lack of/ difficult accessibility of gender-neutral bathrooms, legal issues outside of the college or university’s control, and outside visitors to campuses.

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. Nine of the ten participants expressed concerns due to the lack of gender neutral bathrooms, the

lack of accessibility to gender neutral bathrooms, or the desire to have gender neutral bathrooms available to all areas on campus. One participant did not indicate gender neutral bathrooms as a personal concern due to easy access to single-stalled bathrooms on his campus as well as poorly marked restroom signs. According to this participant, it is common for students on his campus to use the single-stalled bathrooms, regardless of gender identity.

In relation to the difficulties of accessing gender neutral bathrooms when they are available on campuses, one participant, Ryan, reported that his university was promised gender-neutral bathrooms in a recently constructed building. However, once the building was open to the student population, only male, female, and faculty bathrooms were available. Ryan stated that university administration had indicated that gender-neutral bathrooms would be a part of the second phase of the new building's construction. Ryan reported that the campus center of the college did recently add gender-neutral bathrooms. Unfortunately, they are not handicapped accessible, which limits those transgender students who also have a disability. Another participant, Alex, stated that a few buildings of his university did have gender-neutral bathrooms, but that they were far from classrooms in the building. To use the gender-neutral bathroom meant missing out on important class time and involvement.

There are larger legal issues that impact the need for and use of gender neutral bathrooms. The interview excerpt below discusses the availability and use of bathrooms on campus:

Kayla: Does your college or university provide gender neutral or guest bathrooms?

Alex: We have gender neutral bathrooms in some of the buildings, but not all of them are easy to find...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 charge go far enough you would have to register as a level one sex offender.

Kayla: Are you still going to use the men's bathroom?

Alex: Yes. I'm not comfortable using a handicapped bathroom because I'm not handicapped. Even before becoming transgender, I got a lot of issues with the women's bathroom, I have short hair and I dressed like a guy so a lot of older woman thought I didn't belong there.

Here, Alex is alluding to a 2011 Law that the Massachusetts legislature enacted and that went into effect on July 1, 2012. The law, *An Act Relative to Gender Identity*, 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). This law prohibits discrimination based on gender identity in the areas of employment, housing and commercial space, credit, and bonds and insurance, mortgage loans, and admissions or enrollment of a student in charter or public school. This law does not, however, prohibit discrimination based on gender identity in public accommodations (GLADD, 2012). Due to the gaps within this law, depending on each town and state, transgender individuals who use a bathroom that does not match his or her biological sex face penalties of fines, jail time, or having to register as a sex offender. In addition to the legal ramifications, transgender individuals can also experience harassment or assault in gender-specific bathrooms. 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).

One participant expressed safety concerns when outside visitors are present on campus:

I feel like [concern of personal safety] is more when people who start coming on campus who don't go to this school, like night life. I feel it more then, than when everyone is walking around to classes during the day.”

While students are held responsible for their actions upon campus, visitors to the campus do not face the same reprimands.

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 himself as 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:

When I transferred here 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. As Travis also indicated, “I don't think there has ever really been a time when I've felt unsafe.” For a majority of the participants, campus offers protection and allows them the ability to be comfortable in expressing their personal identities; 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 as current or potential barriers on their campuses. Barriers hinder transgender integration into communities and aid negative stereotypes and stigmas.

Housing options were another cause for concern to study participants. 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. One of the participants stated that being offered a medical housing room “puts you apart from the rest of the school community and makes it seem like you have a handicap when you don’t.” Another participant, 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 attaches a negative stigma to the student and 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.

A preferred name policy allows any student to change their names on college or university records where the legal name is not required. This is especially important for transgender students. 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. Half of the participants confirmed that their colleges or universities did have a

preferred name policy and indicated this as a positive both emotionally and academically. 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. Bradley stated, "I've changed my name so many times and they're [the college] still on top of it."

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." Aside from the constant reminder of their assigned sex, transgender students also have to contact professors to discuss preferred names ahead of time. For one participant, contact with the professor was never acquired before the beginning of the semester, and the professor accidentally "outed" the student in front of his peers. In this case, when the participant quickly addressed the situation, both the professor and students reacted positively. This participant wished that his school had some sort of name policy in place so this situation no longer needed to be a concern. Another participant, Ashley, stated:

I think it would be great if they had a preferred name policy, even if they required some proof that you have a legitimate reason, it would be better than not because on attendance lists and your ID they only show your legal name... Luckily, I have changed my legal name this spring so I hopefully won't have to deal with that any more. Before that the first day of class, I was always nervous. I'd try to email my professors before and be like 'Hey, could you please call me this name?' and you never really knew if they'd actually get the email.

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, changing an individual's preferred name does not change his or her legal name with the university. 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, especially since, as noted previously, transgender college students often do not find support in the home, whether initially or ever. A majority of the participants indicated 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 their 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 organization. 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. Two participants indicated that through a student-run

transgender advocacy group they were working on a policy for safe bathroom policies. One participant desired more transgender-specific organizations, stating: as “a transsexual who plans to live his life as stealth, [that] there are some things I would like to bring up in a group of people who could share my point of view, i.e., not cis-people. I would love to see a group that is specifically transgender people.”

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, who attends a college that does not offer staff-run GLBT organizations 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 and can produce positive opportunities, but they also demonstrate support, interest, and commitment by the part of the college or university administration. Another positive of staff-run groups are the sub-groups, usually student-run, that extend out of the staff-run group. For example, at one university, a group called Queer People of Color stemmed from the campus’ staff-run pride center. This group, through open discussions of racism, white privilege, cisgender privilege, and heterosexual privilege, provides a safe space where GLBT students of color are actively supported.

Trans-Inclusive Campus-Based Policies.

One interesting finding concerned the two participants attending women’s colleges. Bradley indicated that his college, a women’s 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 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 receiving 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. Bradley stated that attending a women's college exposed him to not every student being a woman, which was new for many students, including himself, since he attended a women's institution. Bradley stated that in his experience, single-sex institutions students have a lot of freedom to explore their identities. The other participant stated:

Why go to a women's college?' is the most prevalent question I face. Strangely enough, people from the last generation—generally cispeople—understand the most: 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 their experiences attending Massachusetts colleges and universities. A number of trans-inclusive policy recommendations emerge from 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 (2008) noted that undergraduate students felt that faculty and staff were not educated about transgender issues, resulting in a lack of programming on transgender issues and a lack of resources for transgender students. This study is consistent with McKinney (2008), as participants discussed how a prevailing lack of information and resources negatively impacts educational outcomes. More transgender-related education 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 is consistent with previous findings that education regarding gender expression and GLBT issues to students, administrators, faculty, and staff is extremely important (Toomey, Card, & Russell, 2010).

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 positive sense of the future (Ryan, 2009). College is often the first opportunity many

gender variant students have to question their ascribed gender, especially due to the lack of information received prior to college attendance. Therefore, college administrators and faculty members can improve the campus climate for gender variant students and foster an environment in which people of all genders can more readily be themselves by supporting openly transgender students and by learning 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 (2000) and Beemyn (2003) studies, this research project indicates that policies such as restroom designations and residence hall assignments can penalize students who do not fit the gender binary, further segregating transgender students.

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 be able to live on campus.

Other trans-inclusive policies, such as the preferred name policy as well as such policies as implemented by the all women's college one participant attends, are advances colleges and universities can be making to be 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. Individually, both organizations have a lot to offer to the transgender students as well as to the community.

However, as this study shows, while student run organizations cater more towards the individuals needs, the staff- run organizations can have a greater community outreach and opportunities. Combining education, and trans-inclusive policies and resources are 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 the experiences of transgender Massachusetts students over a broad area in the state and reveal important trends. Future studies can be taken to broaden the scope of the research. A future study could explore the experiences of transgender students in a Southern or Western state to provide comparative data.

I am interested in conducting a future study to address the experiences of transgender emerging adults who are not attending a college or university. I would be interested in examining the environment and experiences that may have affected the decision, or inability, to not attend a college or university. One individual who was interested in participating in this study had to be turned away because they attended a community college. Although I was not able to interview this individual, they did provide some interesting information about the difficulties transgender emerging adults face. This individual confirmed that he had a strong desire to attend a four-year college or university; however, he also wanted to focus on his transition, which takes a lot of time, resources, and money. The individual compromised his desire for a four-year education by splitting his funds and attending a two-year school while transitioning simultaneously.

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. For most transgender students, as I have come to experience through attempting to obtain interviews, trust of individuals outside of their inner circles has become a necessity in their lives. If transgender students do not feel that they can trust their college or university or the staff and faculty within, they will not be able to receive the best education possible.

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. A lack of trans-awareness can lead to a lack of programming and resources for the transgender students. 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. Transgender students deserve the same opportunities as any other students; otherwise transgender students will continue to be isolated and will miss out on the education and experiences that colleges and universities provide. It is my hope that this study, in some small way, contributes to the improved campus climate for transgender students.

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?

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