

“To Be Your Best Self”: Surviving and Thriving as a Trans Grad Student

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“Grad school presses buttons you did not even know were there,” related Loren, a nonbinary Ph.D. student in the social sciences, in an interview with us. His statement applies to many grad students, but it especially encapsulates the external and internal difficulties often faced by trans and gender-nonconforming grad students. This chapter examines the greater challenges that trans grad students may encounter in finding a supportive institution and local community; working with advisors, mentors, and other faculty; developing allies; preparing for a career; and looking for a job. Our findings and recommendations are drawn from quantitative and qualitative research we conducted with current and recent trans grad students from across the United States, including data from over 40 interviews.

Finding an Institution that “Fits”

All individuals who are applying to grad school should carefully research the institutions they are considering, looking at both the program in which they want to study and the larger university. For trans grad students, this examination is especially important because departments and colleges can vary significantly in their level of trans-inclusiveness, and a program that is among the best academically may not be at all trans-supportive. “There’s no program [worth it]

if you aren't going to be able to finish it" because it is unaccommodating to you as a trans person, stated Sam,¹ an agender Ph.D. student in the social sciences at a large research university.

Common advice among the trans grad students we interviewed was the need for trans prospective students to, in the words of Benjamin, a trans masculine master's student in education, "gather as much information as you possibly can" about the climate for trans people in the department and at the institution in general. Some information may be available on the school's website, especially if it has an LGBTQ+ center, but more likely you will have to reach out to faculty, staff, and other students. Benjamin suggested that trans prospective students "ask the hard questions at the beginning" about an institution's efforts to create a trans-inclusive environment in order to avoid choosing a program and university that will be unsupportive. Even if you do not intend to be out as trans, having a space where trans people are not disparaged is going to be important, and you can avoid having to out yourself in the process of obtaining information by communicating with school officials over the phone (such as speaking with the office manager of the department to which you are considering applying) or through the institution's social media or internet platforms.

Some of the questions you might want to have answered include²:

- Does the institution have a nondiscrimination policy that is inclusive of gender identity?
- Are hormones and gender-affirming surgeries covered under the grad student health insurance policy?

- If the campus has a counseling center, are its therapists knowledgeable and experienced working with trans students? If there is not a campus counseling center or if it is not trans inclusive, are there local trans-supportive mental health services?
- Does the institution enable students to use a chosen name on course rosters, ID cards, and diplomas?
- To what extent does the campus have gender-inclusive restrooms? Are they present in the building(s) in which you would take classes, work, and have an office?
- Does the institution offer LGBTQ+ educational training sessions? If so, does the department you are considering participate in these trainings?
- Is there an LGBTQ+ or trans-specific grad student organization? If so, how active is the group and how well-supported is it by the institution?
- Is there a campus organization for grad students in your field? If so, is it trans inclusive?
- Does the institution recognize gender diversity in its written materials, public pronouncements, programming, campus groups, etc., or does it seem heavily rooted in a gender binary?
- Are there out trans faculty members in the department you are considering or at least at the institution?
- If you are considering a department in the humanities or social sciences, does it have faculty members who are conducting research in gender and sexuality studies?
- Can the department or at least the institution connect you with current trans students and recent trans alumni?

Even if the department or university is unable to connect you with trans students, faculty, or alumni, you can reach out yourself to get a better sense of the climate for trans students and for students in general and the extent to which diversity and inclusion are part of a department's values. Some of the questions you might ask of trans and non-trans grad students and graduates include:

- In general, how comfortable are faculty members with trans students? Have there been out trans students in the department previously?
- To what extent do faculty members ask, rather than assume, students' pronouns?
- To what extent is the language used by faculty and administrative staff within the department inclusive of trans people, instead of perpetuating a gender binary?
- Are the experiences of trans people incorporated into the curricula to the extent possible?

Working with Advisors, Mentors, and Other Faculty

Even if you are readily seen as cisgender by others and decide not to be out as trans to the faculty in your intended grad program, you will still want to have an advisor who is not hostile toward trans people to avoid feeling uncomfortable. After all, you will be working closely with this person for the next 2-7 years, and for this reason, many of our interviewees suggested that grad students choose their advisor carefully. Gabriel, a trans male Ph.D. student in the health sciences, recommended that prospective grad students meet with different faculty members at the colleges they are considering to be sure that their advisor will have at least a basic knowledge of trans people and be supportive of their needs. In his own grad program, Gabriel did not have such an advisor and felt that he was disadvantaged as a result. Another interviewee, Jake, a Ph.D. student in teacher education at a public research university, likewise regretted not having had an

advisor who could serve as a mentor to him as a trans person and help him navigate being a trans educator.

In addition to interviewing faculty members to find the person with whom you can best work, Joseph, a trans male Ph.D. student in biology, suggested approaching students to learn about potential advisors and to get more than one perspective, because different students will often have very different thoughts about the effectiveness of a given professor as a mentor. He also encouraged trans prospective grad student to speak with alums, because they will be more likely to be forthcoming than current students, given that they are no longer working under faculty members at the institution and do not have to worry as much about potential retribution if they speak ill of an advisor. “If a mentor is really bad, most students will be too afraid to talk about it, or worse, they might think it’s normal,” he stated.

If you will be out or seen as trans in grad school, finding an advisor and other faculty members who will be trans-supportive is even more critical. All grad students want to have an advisor who will help them navigate grad school and position them for a successful career. But as Avery, a genderqueer Ph.D. student in higher education, pointed out, trans grad students can especially benefit from having a faculty member who will help “get stuff out of the way” and “be their ultimate cheerleader,” because they will face greater obstacles in college and on the job market. Avery was able to find such an advisor, which is a big part of why they chose to get their Ph.D. at the public research university they now attend.

If you are willing to be out as trans in grad school, one way that you can get a sense of whether you will be accepted by faculty within the departments to which you apply is by disclosing that you are trans within your application materials and in interactions with potential advisors. This was the strategy used by Victor, a trans male Ph.D. student in English. He

included his pronouns on his resume, grad school application materials, and in his email signature as a way to help screen out programs and faculty members who were not trans inclusive. A department that would reject him because he is trans is not one that he would have wanted to be a part of anyway, and he ultimately entered a program that is “hugely supportive” of him as a trans person.

Another interviewee, Kasidy, a genderqueer Ph.D. student in history, likewise encouraged trans people to be out during the grad school application process. Although doing so “can be scary,” they say that it is beneficial to know upfront if you will face discrimination. Kasidy had been open about being trans when they applied, which enabled them to find a program that not only embraced them as a gender-nonconforming person, but also encouraged their interest in conducting research in trans history.

Depending on your area of study and the college you decide to attend, you may be assigned an advisor who is less than supportive or even antagonist toward trans people. Research finds that many faculty members repeatedly misgender trans grad students, especially nonbinary individuals, in classes and meetings by using their dead (i.e., birth) name, the wrong pronouns, or an inappropriate form of address like “Mr.” or “Ms.”³ In some cases, if the faculty member is simply ignorant about trans people and terminology, you may be able to educate them, if you are willing to risk an uncomfortable or possibly confrontational situation. One of the students who decided to take that chance was Jeffrey, a Ph.D. student in bioengineering at a large public university. In response to a professor making an offhand negative remark about trans people, he met with the faculty member to express his concerns about her comment and felt that their conversation went well. The professor was Jeffrey’s Principal Investigator, so “it was hard for [him] to reveal that [he’s] trans for fear of what will happen to [their] professional relationship or

what she may say to other faculty and students in [their] department.” A trans grad student who is not taking classes with or being advised by a professor, and thus does not have to worry as much about the faculty member holding power over their grades or career, would likely find it easier to challenge the professor’s anti-trans statements or instances of being misgendered.

At the same time, some students choose not to confront faculty members who misgender them because they tire of constantly having to remind professors of their appropriate pronouns or feel that correcting them is more inconvenient and awkward than enduring misgendering. Casey, a genderfluid Master’s student at a private university, was among the students who reacted this way. They stated:

[When the program director or someone else] misgenders me, I just roll my eyes, just because—like, I feel like sometimes I’m uncomfortable about correcting people [and] I feel like it takes so much of a toll when you’re consistently correcting people. A lot of the times I just let it happen, because I would rather talk about what we’re talking about than spend time . . . correcting you and . . . having to educate someone on that. Because I think it takes away from . . . what we’re talking about, which is probably more important.

In some instances, a faculty member may continue to misgender a trans student, even after they have been corrected, because they do not believe that trans identities, particularly nonbinary identities, are legitimate or real, or because the student does not fit their assumptions about the appearance of a trans people. A student in this latter situation is Ariel, a genderqueer femme Ph.D. student in education at a public university. They often struggle to be seen as

nonbinary and referred to by “they/them” pronouns in their department because faculty members see them as “too feminine” to be genderqueer.

A few of the trans grad students we interviewed had especially horrific experiences with advisors and other faculty members. For example, Joseph was sexually harassed by the professor for whom he conducted research, who threatened to impede his progress in grad school and sabotage his career if he did not respond to his advances. Joseph “felt trapped” and “like [he] had no outlet.” He explained:

The people I spoke to seemed to not really believe me or didn’t know what to do. Mostly, I just kept it to myself. The stress was like a pressure cooker, and at some point I just broke. I ended up having a really severe nervous breakdown, unable to leave the bathroom in my apartment for over a month. [I] spent a week in a mental hospital.

Joseph endured three and a half years of harassment from the professor—only to lose his research position because the faculty member stated, in Joseph’s words, “that he was ‘uncomfortable mentoring me.’ I thought that was really ironic . . . him not being comfortable with me.”

Making his situation worse, Joseph could not find another professor who would take him on when he was so close to the end of his Ph.D. work. In desperation, he reached out to a leading biologist who is trans and who had served as a mentor. The biologist called a faculty member in Joseph’s department and convinced the professor to be his advisor. Joseph had to start a new Ph.D. thesis in an entirely different subfield, but he was relieved to be able to finish in his

program and extremely grateful to the biologist. “I have *never* felt so supported in my whole life,” he stated.

Developing Allies and Supportive Communities

Joseph’s experiences serve as a cautionary tale about the particularly vulnerable position that trans grad students can find themselves in and the potential for—and effects of—a lack of institutional accountability. But his story also demonstrates the importance of finding support among trans and non-trans professional colleagues. While the assistance that Joseph received to save his graduate career was an extreme case, many of our interviewees discussed how knowing other trans academics was critical to their scholarly success and mental health, especially if their department or college was not very trans-affirming. Lacking mentors in his program, Gabriel turned to the LGBTQ+ network within his field’s professional association for support and was able to receive advice and help from colleagues who were further along in their careers. He also benefitted from belonging to and communicating with other members of a Facebook group for trans grad students. Kasidy is part of the same Facebook group, which they have found useful in addressing concerns like how best to come out to the students you teach and how to confront a student who repeatedly misgenders you without alienating them. Like many interviewees, Kasidy suggested that incoming trans students look to build a supportive trans community around them because grad school is “so individual and isolating.”

The people we spoke to also indicated that having cis allies was critical to being able to navigate their grad programs, particularly in relieving the burden of having to educate others about trans people and always being the one to respond to instances of misgendering. Casey, for example, indicated how much they appreciated cis students speaking up when a faculty or staff

member used the wrong pronouns for them so that they did not have to do so themselves and feel that they were alone in confronting trans erasure. Trans allies could also be helpful in addressing institutional barriers. Evan, a trans male master's student, related this experience:

[There are] three single user showers [on campus]. . . . Three times now . . . I've gone to use them, because I go to the gym before work, and they've been locked. [It's] a big embarrassing scene to get them open, and what's the point of having them if they're locked? So I called [coworker on campus] and I was like, "Hey, I don't really want to make these phone calls because I'm kind of tired of it, can you deal with this?" And they like, totally were there to like, make a phone call.

“Be Picky in Terms of Location”: Considering Local Communities

While you will undoubtedly do in-depth research on departments and colleges in your grad school search process, you should also carefully consider the local community, as, unless you live in grad student or family housing, you will spend more time off-campus than on it. If you are considering a grad school that is not very trans-affirming or has few resources for trans students, moving to an area that will be supportive may help offset the limitations of the campus. At the same time, the most trans-inclusive department or university may seem a lot less welcoming if you will not feel safe in the area.

The importance of a safe and comfortable local community was stressed by many interviewees, especially those who presented as gender nonconforming or who were readily seen by others as trans. Kasidy, for example, explained that when they were looking at grad schools, they asked themselves questions like “Could I live and walk on the street looking the way I do

and it not be a problem?” and “Can I spend six or seven years in this town?” Kasidy not only found a department and college that were trans-inclusive, but also a local community in which their gender expression was not an issue. Similarly, Terry, a transmasculine Ph.D. student in economics who provided the quote above about being picky, was glad that they were choosy, because their college and the city in which it is located have been extremely supportive of them.

In contrast, Chase, a nonbinary psychology Ph.D. student, decided to attend a college in a rural community that she knew was not very queer- and trans-friendly, because she believed that the value of the program offset the challenges of being in a less than tolerant area. Chase gets “looks” from people in the town and has to be careful not to touch her wife in public, for fear of a verbal or physical confrontation. But she has survived in such an environment because she has built a community of friends who help sustain her, and she recommended that for grad students in a similar situation, “surround yourself with people who support you and have your back.”

In considering the communities in which your prospective colleges are located, some of the questions you might want answered include:

- What is the general political climate of the area? Would someone who is known as trans feel relatively safe living there?
- Are there LGBTQ-supportive local businesses, health-care providers, and places of worship?
- How visible are local LGBTQ+ and trans communities?
- Are there local LGBTQ+ and trans-specific social, cultural, and political organizations and events? To what extent are these groups and activities inclusive of younger trans people and trans people with multiple minoritized identities, such as trans students of color and trans students with disabilities?

- How difficult will it be to find trans and trans-supportive friends and partners in the area?
- How available is trans-affirming medical care locally, such as trans-supportive endocrinologists and surgeons?
- How available is trans-affirming mental health care locally, including gender therapists?

Prioritizing Mental Health Care

Many grad students experience a tremendous amount of stress, in large part because of their heavy course loads, but also often related to other work and family responsibilities, finances, uncertainty about the future, and, possibly, a lack of support and community. For trans grad students, the pressures can be even more intense, given the constant struggle to manage their gender identity in departmental and college environments that may be less than accepting and the potential for extreme isolation, as there are likely few, if any, other trans grad students in their program.⁴ Thus while all grad students may have a need for mental health services, such as therapy and support groups, and can benefit from taking steps to promote their physical well-being (e.g., exercise, meditation, getting enough sleep), trans grad students may have a greater need for self-care than their cis peers. As Jules, a genderqueer Ph.D. student in the humanities, stated, “being a grad student is difficult regardless,” so do not make it harder on yourself.

Many interviewees stressed the importance of trans grad students prioritizing their mental and physical health and doing so as soon as they enter grad school, before any issues arise. Jeffrey, for example, suggested that incoming grad students be proactive and immediately locate “all support systems you can find.” Even if you do not need them now, he said, you may need them later, and you do not want to be scrambling to get help when you are experiencing a crisis. Chris, a nonbinary Ph.D. student in education, agreed. They felt overwhelmed during their first

year of grad school and wished that they had taken the time to look into mental health care options and to find a trans-supportive physician at the outset.

Counseling may be particularly valuable for trans students who are coming out or newly out, adjusting to a new geographical area or position (in this case, transitioning to grad school), considering or starting hormones, or contemplating or wanting to have trans-affirming surgeries. Should you seek therapy, some of the questions you should ask include:

- To what extent does the therapist have experience working with trans students with a gender identity similar to yourself (i.e., trans woman, trans man, a nonbinary individual)?
- Will the therapist expect you to teach them or are they familiar with the general experiences of trans people?
- Will the therapist be able to separate the effects of anti-trans oppression from other mental health issues or will they see every issue as related to being trans?
- Does the therapist recognize that there is not one way to be trans and not one way to transition?
- Will the therapist respect the name and pronouns you use for yourself?
- Will the therapist write letters of support if you want to start hormones or have gender-affirming surgeries?

Prioritizing Other Forms of Self-Care

Along with knowing about and making use of mental and physical health care services, interviewees recommended that incoming trans grad students take care of themselves and their mental health by forming friendships with LGBTQ+ people outside of grad school so that they can get away from work or develop a better perspective on it. Some interviewees, like Kasidy,

benefited from having non-academic friends, as they did not have to talk about grad school with them and could escape the stressors of their program for a while. Other narrators, like Aiden, a trans Ph.D. student in anthropology, relied on non-academic friends to be able to discuss issues that they were having in school without having to worry about what they said getting back to people on campus. Aiden referred to the support they received outside of grad school as “lifesaving.”

Some interviewees discussed pursuing non-academic interests as a form of self-care. Joseph urged trans grad students to “find hobbies and activities that you love to do, that get you out of your head. Mine was rock climbing. You can’t not concentrate on the rocks, because if you do, you’ll fall. So it was very effective at getting me to not think about anything else.” Haley, an agender master’s student in an interdisciplinary studies program, mentioned that, to get away from school, “I like to work with my hands. I do crafts and stuff and I like to bake. I like to watch wholesome TV and then some less wholesome TV.”

Most of the interviewees were out as trans to some degree in their departments, and some saw coming out or being out as contributing to their mental well-being, because they did not have to try to hide a central part of their identity or be concerned about who knew. Loren, for example, came out last year, after he had completed most of his degree program, and found that doing so relieved a lot of the anxiety he was feeling at the time. “It was a big relief not having to worry about that aspect,” he stated. Moreover, Loren discovered that the process of coming out was a lot less stressful than he had expected, as no one made a big deal of his nonbinary identity and, as he is writing his dissertation, he does not interact with a lot of other students anyway. He recommended that grad students come out, if they can, before or during college “because grad school is stressful enough.” A number of other narrators, including Jeffrey, concurred with this

advice. While Jeffrey acknowledged that it can be difficult at times to decide between being open about who you are and being closeted, avoiding possible harassment and discrimination, he believes that it is important to have support in your department. It helps to be out to those you think you can trust, he stated, so “don’t be afraid to take the leap.”

In addition to being out to at least some other students and faculty, interviewees considered advocacy for themselves or for trans people in general to be critical to sustaining themselves in grad school. Through their activism, they frequently felt a sense of personal empowerment and a sense of community with other trans people, as well as a sense of relief and self-satisfaction if their aims were achieved. One of the narrators who successfully lobbied for themselves was Chris, who had been told that their legal name had to be on a particular campus record. Chris did not think that this was true, so refused to take “no” for an answer, and ultimately they were vindicated when another university official allowed them to use their chosen name on the record. From their experiences, Chris recommended that trans grad students “don’t be afraid to stand up for yourself and be your own advocate.”

Taking Time Off or Leaving Your Program

For a variety of reasons, including finances, changes in career path or interests, mental health, lack of support, transition-related demands, and stress related to anti-trans discrimination, trans grad students may leave or take time off from school and/or switch institutions.⁵ Some trans grad students face greater financial pressures than their cis peers because of the additional expenses of transition-related medical care, which can be compounded if they receive little or no emotional and financial support from their families of origin because of their gender identity. Trans grad students may thus have to spend more time working while going to school and may

not be able to turn to their families if they experience anti-trans discrimination or harassment in their department or at the larger institution. These and other stresses may “pile up” and lead trans students to feel that they need to take time off or leave grad school.

If you find yourself in similar circumstances, you should ask yourself what you can do to improve your situation (and your mental health), including:

- Would time off to focus on your mental health, transition-related medical care, and/or financial stability enable you to return to grad school and better focus on your studies?
- Do you have mentors, friends, or family members who might be able to offer you more support to help you stay in school?
- If you are not seeing a therapist, would doing so help you better handle the stressors you are experiencing to stay in school? What other self-care steps might you take to address the stressors?
- Are there individuals to whom you can turn to help you consider the pros and cons of taking time off, and perhaps help you strategize how you might improve your situation?

Preparing for a Career

It is important for you to be thinking about your career path as a trans person. How trans-aware and trans-inclusive is your area of study? Are there visible trans people in your field? Being out as trans in the humanities or social sciences, for example, may be quite different from being out in medicine, law, or engineering. However, you can find out trans professionals in any field, as many professional associations have LGBTQ+ caucuses or sections, such as the GLBT Round Table of the American Library Association, the Gay and Transgender Chemists and Allies Subdivision of the American Chemical Society, and the American Astronomical Society

Committee for Sexual-Orientation and Gender Minorities in Astronomy.⁶ In fields where the professional associations do not have formally recognized LGBTQ+ affiliates, there are often informal networks, such as LGBTQ+ Physicists and Spectra: The Association for LGBTQ Mathematicians.⁷ There are also a number of Facebook groups for LGBTQ+ and trans Ph.D. students and academics more generally, which several of our interviewees described as important sites for career support. Casey, for example, stated:

[A trans scholar] put out a thing on social media. . .“I’ll look over any cover letter, resume, for any trans or gender nonconforming. . .especially, like if you’re also a person of color.” So he went through and looked at my cover letter and gave me a lot of feedback, which I feel like I’ve never gotten before. So I just feel like, within the community, I can reach out to people if I’m not sure what to do or I need support with something.

Ideally, your advisor or mentor should connect you with others in your field, including other trans scholars and practitioners, if you want them to do so. But even if they help you meet colleagues, you will want to develop relationships on your own that extend beyond your advisor, program, and university. Having been sexually harassed by his advisor, Joseph especially emphasized the need for grad students to reach out to other academics in their field: “network, do good work for other people outside of the lab, and try to collaborate or find other mentors. Try to distribute the power away from one person as much as possible.”

Looking for Jobs

Whether or not you decide to be out as trans in the job search process, you will need to think carefully about how you “package yourself” as an applicant.⁸ For example, if you have written or presented on LGBTQ+ or trans topics, do you cite this work on your resume or curriculum vitae? What name is on your transcript(s), and if it is not the name you go by, do you want to legally change it to have the appropriate name on your records? What name and pronouns are you known by to the writers of your letters of reference, and do you need to come out to them (or make an effort to remind them) so that they use the appropriate ones?

In considering the pros and cons of being out as trans on the job market, you may be afraid of the consequences of doing so (e.g., will it limit who invites you to interviews or who hires you?), but also afraid of the consequences of not doing so (e.g., will you find yourself at an institution or in a workplace that is unsupportive of trans people and be miserable there?). For Casey, the most important factor in deciding whether to be open about being trans when applying for a particular university position is their perception of the climate for trans people in the area:

[Whether I’m out] depends on location of the school, and how safe and comfortable I feel. And because I’m doing a national search, and I don’t even know if I’ll have a support system wherever I’m going—then I’m much more cautious to share.

Another interviewee, Robin, a masculine of center, genderqueer Ph.D. student in medicine, has chosen not to be out in applying for jobs because there are so few positions available in their particular field. They stated:

I'm a little bit . . . wary to, publicly . . . be out, kind of, or just draw attention to myself as trans [online or on social media] because I'm worried about—you know, there's like two jobs in the country, and if . . . the person hiring is influenced by this in any way, and Facebook stalks me or whatever, then that's my one job goodbye.

In addition to being concerned about their visibility online as a trans person, Robin worried about what might happen if they were invited to an interview and certain “inconsistencies” were made apparent: “Like, say that they expect one thing, because they see female on the application form, for my gender. And then they meet me and they're like, ‘Oh, this person wasn't quite what I was expecting.’ . . . I'm not sure what to do about it.” Such a scenario had the potential to be uncomfortable, if not humiliating.

The possibility of potential employers discovering their gender identity online was also raised by Brook, a genderqueer Ph.D. student in the sciences at a public university. They had identified themselves as trans in a media interview, which they worried would affect their job search: “It's a little terrifying now with finding a job—because my name is not super common so . . . it's the question like, are they Googling me, is this coming up, like, where can I apply for jobs now?” These concerns demonstrate the importance of being careful about what you say and what might be said about you online, especially if you have a highly identifiable name or are in a relatively small field in which there are few out trans people.

Conclusion

There is no right way to be trans in applying to or attending grad school or in looking for a job afterward, just as there is no right way to be trans in general. No matter what decisions you make about your field of study, the school you attend, and the extent to which you are out, you should do what feels most appropriate for you. What really matters, as Benjamin emphasized, is that “you need to be your best self.”

Recommendations for Trans Graduate Students

- Research the trans-related policies of colleges and their climate for trans students when applying to grad schools, including talking to trans students at the institutions, if possible
- Research the climate for trans people in your chosen department at each of the colleges you are considering (such as whether they have out trans faculty and students and whether they ask for and respect students’ pronouns)
- Also research the climate for trans people in each local community and state, as you will want to feel safe and comfortable beyond the campus
- Once you have started grad school, reach out to other grad students, especially other trans grad students, at your own and other local colleges to develop a community of supportive people
- Make taking care of yourself mentally and physically a priority from the beginning of grad school
- Develop friends and hobbies that are unrelated to school so that you do not have to always live in the academic world
- Know trans-supportive mental and physical health resources on- and off-campus before you might need them

- Find an advisor who has at least a basic knowledge of the experiences of trans people and who will be a strong advocate for you in grad school and on the job market
- Do not be afraid to stand up for yourself and be your own advocate
- Find mentors and allies in your field through the LGBTQ+ groups within professional organizations
- Be out about being trans to the extent that you feel you can because it will lessen the stress you might otherwise experience

Recommendations for Faculty and Staff Members Who Work with Trans Grad Students

We end this chapter by providing recommendations for all faculty and staff members, and specifically for faculty, mental health professionals, and administrators, to create a more supportive campus environment for trans grad students.

Recommendations for All Faculty and Staff Members

- Learn about the experiences of trans people, particularly the experiences of trans grad students, and the issues they face in higher education
- Ask, rather than assume, the pronouns of students
- Do not use gendered language for a student or a group of students—such as he/she, Mr./Ms., sir/ma'am, and “ladies and gentlemen”—without knowing how they identify their gender
- If you misgender a student, sincerely apologize as soon as you realize your mistake, and learn from your mistake, so that you do not repeat it

- If you hear someone else misgender a student, be sure to correct them, preferably immediately after they have done so
- Ask the trans students with whom you work how you can best support them, recognizing that different students have different needs
- Never disclose the trans identity of a student without their explicit permission

Recommendations Specifically for Faculty Members

- In the small-sized classes you teach, have the students introduce themselves, including sharing their pronouns if they want. In larger classes, avoid calling on or referring to students in gendered ways. Instead, use the students' names or non-gendered forms of address (e.g. "as you were saying...")
- Where possible, include material by and about trans people in the courses you teach
- Do not expect the trans students in your classes to speak for all trans people or to speak about their experiences at all

Recommendations Specifically for Mental Health Professionals

- Recognize that there is not one way to be trans, including not one way to transition
- Affirm nonbinary trans identities as valid and authentic
- Consider creating a support or therapy group for trans grad students, as they have different needs than trans undergrads and will not feel comfortable in a group with students whom they may teach
- Know about campus and local trans resources, including area support groups and the most accessible options for obtaining hormones and gender-affirming surgeries

- Advocate for your institution to cover long-term therapy, hormones, and gender-affirming surgeries under graduate student health insurance, if it does not already do so

Recommendations Specifically for Administrators

- Immediately make the changes that trans students suggest to create a more trans-inclusive campus⁹
- Seek out and listen to the voices of trans students and involve them in the process of developing trans-supportive policies and practices
- Require all faculty and staff members to attend a training session on the experiences of trans people and the institution's expectations for valuing and respecting trans students
- Make sure that the staff members who address compliance with Title IX recognize that courts have ruled that gender identity and expression are covered under the law and that repeatedly and consciously misgendering a trans person or denying them access to a restroom that reflects their gender identity are forms of harassment
- Take part in the Campus Pride Index (www.campusprideindex.org) to gauge and improve the level of LGBTQ+ inclusiveness of your campus and to indicate the institution's trans policies to prospective students

¹ The names of all trans grad students are pseudonyms. The interviews with the grad students were recorded, and quotes were confirmed with the speakers.

² Abbie E. Goldberg, Genny Beemyn, and JuliAnna Z. Smith, “What Is Needed, What Is Valued: Trans Students’ Perspectives on Trans-Inclusive Policies and Practices in Higher Education,” *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation* 29, no. 1 (2019), 19.

³ Abbie E. Goldberg, “Higher Educational Experiences of Trans Binary and Nonbinary Graduate Students,” in *Trans People in Higher Education*, ed. Genny Beemyn (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2019), 135-57; Abbie E. Goldberg, JuliAnna Z. Smith, and Genny Beemyn, “Trans Activism and Advocacy among Transgender Students in Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 12, no. 1 (2019), 38-51.

⁴ Abbie E. Goldberg, Katherine A. Kuvalanka, Stephanie L. Budge, Madeline B. Benz, and JuliAnna Z. Smith, “Health Care Experiences of Transgender Binary and Nonbinary University Students,” *Counseling Psychologist* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011000019827568>.

⁵ Abbie E. Goldberg, Katherine Kuvalanka, and Kaitlin Black, “Trans Students Who Leave College: An Exploratory Study of Their Experiences of Gender Minority Stress,” *Journal of College Student Development* (in press).

⁶ Harrington Park Press, “LGBTQ Professional Societies/Caucuses/SIG’s,” <https://harringtonparkpress.com/lgbtq-professional-societies>.

⁷ LGBTQ+ Physicists, <http://lgbtphysicists.org>; Spectra: The Association for LGBT Mathematicians, <http://lgbtmath.org>.

⁸ Alex Hanna, “Being Transgender on the Job Market,” *Inside Higher Ed*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2016/07/15/challenge-being-transgender-academic-job-market-essay>.

⁹ Goldberg, Beemyn, and Smith, “What Is Needed, What Is Valued.”