



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Campus Policies/Campus Climate

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Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

Chapter Title: "Campus Policies/Campus Climate"

Pub. Date: 2021

Access Date: April 13, 2021

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc.

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781544393810

Online ISBN: 9781544393858

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781544393858.n34>

Print pages: 93-98

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Even though more and more college students are coming out as trans and often demanding that institutions do more to address their needs, higher education remains a largely hostile environment for trans students, especially those who do not conform to a gender binary and those who possess multiple minoritized identities (e.g., trans female students, trans students of color, trans students with disabilities). Studies have shown that trans students have more negative perceptions of curricular and cocurricular inclusivity, classroom climate, and the overall climate on their campuses than do cis students, including cis LGBTQ+ students, and have a significantly lower sense of belonging within their college communities. Trans students commonly report discrimination in campus restrooms, housing, and counseling and health centers; institutional and individual misgendering; and verbal, physical, and sexual assault.

Lack of College Support

While hundreds of colleges implemented some trans-supportive policies and practices in the 2000s and 2010s, most institutions still offer little or no support to their trans students. Moreover, even the colleges that have taken steps to be more inclusive of and welcoming to trans students have a long way to go before they truly are. For example, in considering the experiences of trans students at two large, midwestern public universities that have implemented some trans-supportive policies and practices, education researcher Brent Bilodeau found that genderism—that is, the societal, institutional, and individuals beliefs and practices that assume that there are only two genders, that they are opposites of each other, and that they are determined by one's sex assignment at birth or by specific sex characteristics—still permeated every aspect of life on these campuses, including in classrooms, campus employment and career planning, student organizations and communities, and campus facilities. The nonbinary trans students in the study had an especially difficult time finding campus support, as the institutions remained firmly entrenched in a gender system that assumes that students are either male or female. It is noteworthy that these colleges had made some progress in recognizing and addressing the needs of trans students; institutions that have done little or nothing to support their trans students are presumably even more toxic environments.

Campus Restrooms and Housing

Discussions about the needs of trans people are often reduced to the issue of restrooms, with transmisogynists arguing that the passage of trans rights laws will lead to individuals who are not women—cis men pretending to be women—and individuals whom they see as not “really” women—trans women—using women's restrooms. That said, restroom access is a critical concern for many trans people because they often experience harassment and discrimination in trying to use women's or men's rooms, and they cannot reasonably hold a job or attend school if they are constantly worrying about having a place to pee in peace. In the 2015 United States Transgender Survey, the largest study to date of trans people in the country, more than a quarter of the respondents reported that they were denied access to a restroom, had their presence in a restroom challenged, and/or were verbally, physically, or sexually assaulted in a restroom in the previous year. Because of such experiences or a fear of them, a majority indicated that they sometimes or often avoided using a restroom. They “held it,” which ultimately led some to develop urinary tract or kidney-related problems, and limited what they drank and ate to prevent needing to go to a restroom, which can likewise have negative long-term health effects.

Restroom access is also an extremely important issue for trans college students. Research indicates that many trans students experience harassment when they seek to use gendered campus restrooms, such as being stared at, questioned about their gender, told they are in the wrong facility, or ordered to leave. In the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, which was conducted in 2008–2009, about a quarter of those who had attended college stated that they were not allowed to use the appropriate bathroom facility on campus at some point because of their gender identity or expression.

Because of the threat of discrimination in gendered restrooms, many trans students will use only gender-inclusive facilities, but most colleges fail to provide enough of them. Surveying more than 500 undergraduate and graduate trans students, Abbie Goldberg, Genny Beemyn, and JuliAnna Smith found that the respondents rated having gender-inclusive bathrooms in most campus buildings as the most important trans-

inclusive practice among a list of 17 different trans-supportive policies and practices. But only 45% of the participants indicated that their college had taken this step. In a study by Beemyn, which involved more than a hundred nonbinary trans students, a majority of the interviewees stated that what most made them feel unsupported by their colleges was a lack of gender-inclusive restrooms. Many of the students were able to indicate the exact location of all of the gender-inclusive facilities on their campus, because these were the only restrooms that they felt safe and comfortable using, and their college had so few of them. Moreover, the gender-inclusive restrooms that did exist were not always well marked and in convenient locations. Some of the students reported that they made sure to go to the bathroom before they left for classes and planned their day so that they could get back home in time to avoid needing to use gendered facilities, which caused them tremendous stress and personal discomfort.

As with restrooms, having a safe place to live is a basic need for trans students that is often not met by colleges. Many trans students report being assigned housing and roommates based on their assigned sex, rather than their gender identity; not having access to a gender-inclusive or a single-room housing option; having to use the “wrong” gendered bathroom in a residence hall; and being harassed by other residents without much recourse. For example, in the study by Goldberg and colleagues, less than half of the participants stated that their college enabled trans students to be housed in keeping with their gender identity/expression, and in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, about one fifth of the respondents who sought to live on campus said that they were denied gender-appropriate housing.

By failing to provide gender-inclusive restrooms and housing options, institutions not only discriminate against trans students and expose them to potential harassment but also may be negatively affecting their mental and physical well-being in the long term. Using data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey, social work researcher Kristie Seelman discovered that individuals who had been denied access to a campus restroom because of being trans were 1.45 times more likely to have attempted suicide at some point in their lives than those who were not denied access. Those who had been denied access to gender-appropriate campus housing because of being trans were 1.64 times more likely to have attempted suicide. The survey did not ask when the participants had attempted suicide, so access discrimination cannot be said to have caused suicidality, but these findings should still give college administrators pause. Institutions that do not have written trans-supportive policies and practices and that do not actively ensure that these measures are followed risk causing irreparable harm to their trans students.

Mental and Physical Health Care

Along with higher rates of suicidal ideation and attempted suicide, trans students are more likely than their cis counterparts to experience negative mental and physical health outcomes because of the effects of discrimination, including anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anorexia, bulimia, phobias, and substance abuse/addiction. As a result, many trans students need and seek out mental health supports. For example, in a national study of incoming college students, nearly three fourths of the trans students indicated that they would likely pursue counseling at their institution, compared with less than half of the overall sample. At the same time, trans students who are medically transitioning often want or are required to have therapy before they are able to obtain a prescription for hormones or undergo gender-affirming surgeries. Having access to hormones is especially important for trans students who do not have families that support their transitions, as they had to wait until they were legally adults to begin the process.

But while trans students in general are more in need of counseling than are their cis peers, they commonly struggle to find campus therapists who are knowledgeable about and sensitive to their experiences. Trans students report that they are often placed in the uncomfortable position of having to educate mental health professionals about trans people and being asked inappropriate questions about their bodies. Nonbinary trans students are especially likely to encounter therapists who do not understand their identities; many indicate that mental health professionals expect them to want to medically transition, dismiss them or take them less seriously because they do not fit into a gender binary, and fail to respect their use of nonbinary pronouns, which means that they are regularly misgendered.

Similarly, trans students who seek services from campus health centers also often report a lack of competent care. In addition to commonly having to educate their providers and being misgendered and deadnamed

(i.e., being referred to by their name assigned at birth, rather than their chosen name), they are frequently unable to receive transition-related health care and are sometimes denied health care altogether. Although an increasing number of colleges, including the school systems of the University of California, the University of Texas, the University of Minnesota, and the University of Michigan, are covering hormones and gender-affirming surgeries under student health insurance, the vast majority of institutions offer no support for transitioning students.

Individual and Institutional Misgendering

The frequent misgendering of trans students is not limited to campus counseling and health centers. In Beemyn's study of nonbinary trans students, their biggest complaint about their colleges, after the lack of gender-inclusive restrooms, was being misgendered in classes because there was not a way for them to indicate the name and pronouns they go by on course rosters, and faculty members did not ask them to indicate their name and pronouns at the beginning of courses. Education researcher Eleanor Finger similarly found that a mismatch between their chosen name and their legal name on course rosters and other institutional records was one of the most stressful situations encountered by the trans students she surveyed. Students were placed in the awkward position of having to come out as trans to faculty members whom they did not know before their first class to prevent being outed, if the instructor read the roster aloud, and to avoid possibly being referred to by the wrong pronouns. Many trans students are reluctant to approach professors about their name and pronouns, not knowing how their instructors will react, so they endure being misnamed and misgendered in their classes, even though this often makes them feel invisible and marginalized.

Nonbinary trans students are more likely to experience misgendering from both faculty and other students because, operating from a gender binary framework, many cis people automatically refer to them as "she/her" or "he/him." For example, in a study of trans grad students, psychologist Abbie Goldberg found that 44% of the nonbinary respondents stated that they were misgendered often by faculty members, and 45% indicated that they were often misgendered by other students. Among the binary trans graduate students, the figures were 8% and 4%, respectively, with more than half saying that they were never misgendered. Similarly, sociologist Tre Wentling found that, among more than 500 trans students, only 15% of nonbinary students reported that their instructors always used the appropriate pronouns, compared with 63% of binary students. The nonbinary individuals assigned female at birth and the trans men who attend women's colleges are even more likely to experience misgendering by others because of the institutional assumption that all of the students identify as female and go by "she/her."

To limit being misgendered, trans students rate having the ability to change their name on campus records, including ID cards and course rosters, without a legal name change as one of the most important trans-supportive campus policies, but a majority of the students in the study by Goldberg and colleagues said that their college did not offer this option. In fact, less than 10% of all colleges do so, and even fewer give students the ability to indicate their pronouns on course rosters. Enabling students to have a chosen name and their pronouns on nonlegal campus records and documents is permissible in all states and is possible in all major student information software systems with little expense. Thus, an institution that wants to be trans supportive has no legitimate reason not to enact such policies so that trans students are not forced to be invisible by being misgendered or to be hypervisible by being outed.

Negative Campus Climates

Classroom Invalidations

Of course, indicating a chosen name and pronouns on course rosters, or coming out as trans to a faculty member in the absence of this option, does not ensure that the faculty member or other students in the class will respect how a trans student identifies. Many trans students, especially nonbinary trans students, have described incidents where a faculty member purposely addressed them by their deadname or the wrong pronouns. Even graduate students, who typically have a closer relationship with faculty members than undergraduates, commonly report being misgendered and misnamed. More than a quarter of the grad students surveyed by Goldberg stated that, even though they had asked the professors in their program to

use the appropriate pronouns and name, the faculty members continued to misgender and misname them, as well as used cisnormative language in their classes, such as referring to the students as “ladies and gentlemen.”

The frequent invalidation of their gender identities by professors contributes to gender-nonconforming students perceiving the classroom climate as more negative than gender-conforming students. All five of the trans students interviewed by education researcher Jonathan Pryor, for example, described feeling disrespected and marginalized in their classes by both faculty and other students. According to participants, their professors had little understanding of how to be supportive of trans students, and some reinforced a hostile, cisgenderist classroom environment by refusing to use the names and pronouns requested by students and by making anti-trans remarks. Participants also shared how some cis students similarly did not respect the gender identities of their trans classmates and made harassing comments. It is noteworthy that the trans students in Pryor’s study experienced this negative classroom climate despite having taken steps to minimize mistreatment, such as by seeking to take large classes, where they would not be called on and potentially misgendered by professors, and by avoiding online courses, which often require the use of a student’s legal name, and courses in STEM fields, which they believed had instructors and students who were more antagonistic toward trans people. The extent to which cisnormativity pervades academia is evident in that some trans students reported being misgendered in the presumably most supportive classroom context—small classes in Women’s and Gender Studies.

Harassment

Outside of the classroom, trans students also encounter a chilly if not hostile campus climate. Among the respondents to the U.S. Transgender Survey who had attended college or vocational school and who indicated that people at their institution thought or knew they were trans, nearly one quarter stated that they were verbally, physically, or sexually harassed while they were students. The participants who identified as American Indian, Black, and Middle Eastern were even more likely to report having experienced campus harassment. In the 2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People, the respondents were asked whether they had observed someone being intimidated or bullied because of their gender identity; answering in the affirmative were 38% of the gender-nonconforming participants, a third of the transmasculine participants, and more than a fifth of the transfeminine participants. More than three fourths of each group had also observed derogatory remarks being made about someone’s gender identity.

Other research, which used data from more than 100 colleges, similarly found that trans students rated the climate on their campuses as more hostile, compared with their cis LGB and cis heterosexual peers. The trans-identified students indicated encountering more frequent harassment and discrimination, including from faculty and staff members, and had a lower sense of belonging within their campus communities. Because of harassment and discrimination, less than two thirds of trans students in another national study reported a sense of belonging on their campus, compared with 82% of cis students and about three fourths of LGBTQ+ students.

Physical and Sexual Violence

In addition to frequently experiencing verbal harassment, trans students report extremely high rates of physical, sexual, and intimate partner violence. The largest study to date of sexual assault and misconduct on college campuses that explicitly included trans students was conducted in 2019 for the Association of American Universities (AAU) and involved 33 institutions and nearly 182,000 students, more than 3,000 (1.7%) of whom identified as a trans woman, trans man, nonbinary or genderqueer, questioning their gender identity, or a gender not listed (abbreviated as TGQN by the researchers). The study found that the TGQN undergraduate and graduate students reported the highest rates of experiencing harassing behavior, intimate partner violence, and stalking since starting college. For example, 65% of the TGQN undergrads and 53% of the TGQN grad students indicated that they had experienced sexual harassment, compared with 59% and 37% of the cis female undergrads and grad students, respectively. The TGQN undergrads had a similar rate of experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact by force or inability to consent as their cis female counterparts (23% vs. 26%), whereas the rate was significantly higher for the TGQN grad students (15% vs. 10%). A 2015

AAU study, which included slightly more than 150,000 participants, likewise found that trans students are more likely than their cis peers to experience sexual violence on campuses.

But even with such high rates of abuse, many of the TGQN respondents in both AAU studies thought that reporting incidents of sexual harassment and assault would further victimize them, seemingly because they did not have faith in the system on their campus to support and protect the rights of trans people. The TGQN students were less likely than the cis female and male students to believe that a report of sexual harassment or assault would be taken seriously, that a fair investigation would be undertaken, and that college officials would protect the victimized student's safety and address the factors that may have led to the attack. In addition, the TGQN students were more likely to state that the alleged perpetrator(s) or others would retaliate against the victimized student in response to a report of sexual harassment or assault. Given that many colleges have few if any trans-inclusive policies and are seen by trans students as doing little to address the negative campus climates they experience, it is not surprising that the students would not trust their institution to support them even when they have been sexually victimized.

Improvements Over Time

Among the U.S. Transgender Survey participants who wrote about their time in college, those who described having a positive college experience overall were mostly the younger respondents, especially members of Gen Z (i.e., individuals 18–24 years old at the time of the survey). The Gen Zers were the most likely age group to state that they felt safe and could be out on campus and to indicate that they received support from faculty, staff, administrators, and peers. The generally more positive experiences of trans students in the 2010s seemingly resulted from the efforts of a growing number of colleges to create more inclusive and supportive environments for their trans community members. But all colleges can do much more to improve their negative campus climates, challenge gender binary structures, and foster trans inclusion.

Genny Beemyn

See also [Campus Residence Halls](#); [Classroom Experiences, Higher Education](#); [College Graduate Students](#); [College Undergraduate Students](#); [United States Transgender Survey](#); [Women's Colleges](#)

Further Readings

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781544393858.n34>
10.4135/9781544393858.n34