



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies

College Undergraduate Students

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Trans students in general have a more positive experience in college today than ever before. But this improvement is relative and remains uneven. The extent to which trans students continue to frequently encounter institutional and individual discrimination depends on a number of factors, including the type of college they attend, their academic major, the cocurricular activities in which they participate, and personal characteristics, such as how visible their transness is to others, their particular gender, and other aspects of their identities. Students who are known or perceived as trans, especially trans women and nonbinary individuals, often have a much more negative experience because colleges largely remain rooted in and continue to foster a binary understanding of gender and fail to challenge the anti-trans prejudice that is all too common among cis students, staff, and faculty. At the same time, trans students who also belong to other minoritized groups, such as trans students of color and trans students with disabilities, experience multiple marginalizations and often feel that at least one aspect of their identities is unacknowledged or unwelcomed in most spaces on campuses. In addition, some types of schools, such as community colleges, conservative religiously affiliated institutions, historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), and historically women's colleges, and some microclimates, such as athletics, fraternities and sororities, and residence halls, present unique challenges to trans students. Thus, even though trans Gen Z students (i.e., students born in the mid-to late 1990s through the early 2010s) receive greater support than previous generations of trans students, they cannot count on feeling included and appreciated at all institutions and in all institutional environments.

How College Experiences Vary by Aspects of Identity

The experiences of trans students in higher education are greatly affected by a number of individual factors, including their academic interests, campus connections and involvements, personal identities, and level of outness. For example, research suggests that trans students generally have more positive experiences in smaller classes, as well as in courses and majors in the social sciences, arts, humanities, and education, rather than in courses and majors in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields. Trans students benefit as well when they receive support from faculty members in and outside of the classroom, when they connect with other trans students, and when they form romantic and social relationships with supportive peers.

Differences by Gender Identity

One of the main factors in how trans students experience college is their gender identity, with trans women and nonbinary trans individuals more likely than trans men and gender-nonconforming individuals to report instances of harassment and discrimination. For example, nonbinary trans students are more likely to be misgendered than binary trans students, as others fail to ask them how they identify and typically categorize them as female or male. Moreover, because their gender expression may not be stereotypically masculine or feminine, nonbinary trans students also report being more concerned than binary trans students about their safety on campus, and some decide to present themselves in more masculine or more feminine ways than they desire in order to lessen the risk of harassment.

At the same time, trans female students more often experience mistreatment in relation to gendered campus facilities. In analyzing data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (2011), social work scholar Kristie Seelman found that, compared with the gender-nonconforming participants who had attended college, the trans female participants were more than three times as likely to have been denied access to gender-appropriate campus housing and nearly three times as likely to have been denied access to campus restrooms. Because of the pervasiveness and severity of harassment and discrimination, trans women are more likely than members of other trans groups to drop out of college. Seelman suggests that the targeting of trans women relates to how they are often not seen by the larger society as "real" women and how "women-only" spaces are policed to exclude trans women. These experiences reflect what writer Julia Serano called "transmisogyny," the ways in which the hatred toward trans people and hatred toward women intersect in the oppression of trans women.

Differences by Race and Other Minoritized Identities

Similarly, the intersecting of racism and bias against trans people results in trans students of color experiencing campus discrimination more frequently and more harshly. Seelman found that trans people of color were nearly 1.4 times as likely as white trans people to be denied access to gendered college facilities because of their gender identity. Trans people of color, particularly American Indian, Latinx, African American, and multiracial individuals, are also more likely than white trans people to report having left college as a result of repeatedly encountering harassment and discrimination.

Little research has examined the experiences of trans students with other minoritized identities. A notable exception is a 2018 study by Ryan Miller and Sandra Dika on the experiences of more than 400 LGBTQ+ students with a psychological disability (e.g., anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder) at a southern research university. They found that less than 20% of the trans students indicated that they felt that their gender was respected on campus, compared with 85% of the cis male students, and nearly one third of the cis female students and less than 40% of the trans students felt a sense of belonging, compared with close to half of the cis students.

Differences by Level of Outness

Another factor that has a significant role in the college experiences of trans students is their level of outness. If someone is not known as trans, they are unlikely to encounter harassment and discrimination based on their gender identity, and conversely, the more someone is thought or known to be trans, the more visible they become and the more likely they are to encounter anti-trans bias. For this reason, out trans students often view the climate on their campuses more negatively than students who are more closeted. Education researchers Jason Garvey and Susan Rankin found that trans students who indicated being more out about their gender identities also had more negative perceptions of the inclusivity of the curriculum, the classroom climate, and the overall campus climate than those who were less out.

Similarly, a 2019 national study of more than 500 trans undergraduate and graduate students by Abbie Goldberg, Genny Beemyn, and JuliAnna Smith found that the greater the participants were involved in campus activities, the more negatively they perceived the climate on their campuses. Given that trans students are among the most marginalized college groups, it could be that greater campus engagement more frequently exposes individuals from these groups to staff, faculty, and other students who are hostile to their identities, which leads them to view their institutions as more hostile. While this finding makes intuitive sense, it runs counter to decades of research on students in general, which shows that students who are more involved at college, including having more frequent interactions with faculty, socializing more with a diversity of people, and spending more time working with other students, express greater overall satisfaction with their college and a greater willingness to reenroll.

Given that out trans students more commonly experience harassment and discrimination, it is also not surprising that those who report feeling more at risk for mistreatment are more likely to try to avoid the disclosure of their gender identity. Obviously, not all trans students can or want to be closeted. If they are medically transitioning or identify and present as gender nonconforming, most students will be readily seen as trans. But other trans students, who can and want to keep others from knowing their gender identity, often do so in order to lessen the risk of negative consequences. For example, nearly half of the respondents in the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey who indicated having attended college stated that none of their classmates knew that they were trans. Among the participants in the 2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People, 65% of the transmasculine students, 55% of the transfeminine students, and 18% of the gender-nonconforming students surveyed stated that they did not disclose their gender identity to avoid harassment and discrimination. The significantly lower percentage for the gender-nonconforming students in the study seemingly reflects the desire of many of these students to be open about their identities in order to avoid being placed within a gender binary, even if this means an increased likelihood of experiencing mistreatment.

How College Experiences Vary by Aspects of the Institution

Along with individual factors like identity differences and level of outness, trans students' college experiences are greatly influenced by both the type of institution and the specific institution they choose to attend. While all colleges remain rooted in a gender binary and none do enough to create a welcoming and inclusive campus environment for trans students, especially nonbinary students, some do much more than others to create a supportive climate. For example, the Campus Pride Trans Policy Clearinghouse lists more than 250 colleges that have a gender-inclusive housing option; a similar number that enable students to use a chosen name, instead of their deadname, on campus records and documents; and about 40 colleges that provide a means for students to indicate the pronouns they use for themselves on course rosters.

An examination of the colleges on these lists shows major differences between the types of institutions that have and do not have trans-inclusive policies. Not surprisingly, institutions with trans-inclusive policies tend to be large state universities and small liberal arts colleges, in urban areas, and in the Northeast, on the West Coast, and in parts of the Midwest. Relatively fewer campuses with trans-inclusive policies are religiously affiliated institutions and community colleges, in rural areas, and in the South, the Great Plains, and Mountain West. Similarly, the study by Goldberg, Beemyn, and Smith found that private, 4-year, nonreligious colleges and universities provided the largest number of trans-inclusive services and supports, followed by public 4-year colleges and universities. The public and private 2-year colleges included in the survey had the fewest, even fewer than 4-year religiously affiliated institutions.

Community Colleges

Studies involving out trans students at community colleges indicate that they often experience particularly hostile climates and lack access to supportive campus resources. Community colleges can be especially unwelcoming because most are commuter campuses that provide limited services to students in general and do not sponsor any programs specifically for trans students. Campus life at these schools is almost exclusively focused on the classroom, yet most community colleges do little to address the classroom climate for trans students. Community college students surveyed in the 2010 State of Higher Education for LGBT People felt that faculty members at their institutions were generally indifferent to or unsupportive of trans people and indicated that few lectures and readings were trans inclusive. Overall, many of the students were uncomfortable with the classroom climate and did not feel safe to be seen as trans at their community colleges.

Conservative Religiously Affiliated Institutions

Similar to their peers at community colleges, trans students at institutions affiliated with conservative religious traditions often receive little support, if not outright opposition, from other students and sometimes from faculty and staff members. But because cis students at conservative Christian and Jewish colleges generally hold more negative views of trans people than do their counterparts at secular and more liberal religious colleges, the environment at these institutions may be especially hostile.

The negative climate is fueled by institutional doctrines and codes of conduct that often condemn trans people and gender nonconformity. For example, Ozark Christian College (2019) in Joplin, Missouri, included in its "Community Guidelines" the following statement:

Consistent with our commitment to God's design for gender identity, the public advocacy for or the act of altering one's birth-gender identity through medical transition or transgender expression is prohibited. This commitment to gender identity also applies to, but is not limited to, the use of bathrooms, locker rooms, student housing, and participating in gender-specific college groups, clubs, and organizations. (p. 3)

Because the Trump administration did not consider trans students to be protected from discrimination under federal law, schools like Ozark Christian College could openly deny them admission or expel them, and several religiously conservative colleges received media attention in the late 2010s for indicating to trans students that they were not welcome at their institutions.

On the positive side, because of the resiliency of trans students, which leads some to come out and push back against the oppression they experience on campus, the climate at a number of conservative religiously affiliated institutions is beginning to improve and will likely continue to do so. The growing acceptance of trans people in the dominant society, especially among members of Gen Z, is also contributing to more favorable campus environments. For example, in response to advocacy from students, staff, and alumni, three Mennonite colleges announced in 2015 that they would start to hire openly LGBTQ+ staff and end their membership in the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities, an association consisting primarily of white evangelical Protestant institutions that opposes employing and enrolling LGBTQ+ people.

Historically Black Colleges and Universities

Some of the religiously affiliated colleges that have sought to improve their climates for trans students in recent years are HBCUs. A majority of HBCUs were founded by churches, and about half of the slightly more than 100 HBCUs that exist today remain religiously affiliated. Being rooted in the Black church and other socially conservative religions, as well as having firmly entrenched race and class expectations about what constitutes the ideal for a “race man” or “race woman,” has meant that HBCUs have traditionally been hostile toward trans people.

A prominent example of the historically negative climate for trans students at an HBCU was the decision by Morehouse College, a men’s institution, to enact an “Appropriate Attire Policy” in 2009 that included a ban on traditionally women’s clothing on campus. Students who repeatedly violated the dress code risked academic suspension. The prohibition received significant support among cis, heterosexual students and alumni but was challenged on campus by gay and gender-nonconforming students, which led to the provision being quietly removed from the policy in 2015.

Many contemporary trans students at HBCUs report having a more positive experience because many of the institutions have become more supportive in response to LGBTQ+ student activism. Prior to the 2010s, few HBCUs had taken even the basic step of adopting LGBTQ+-inclusive non-discrimination statements, but since then, more than two thirds have added “sexual orientation” and more than one third have added “gender identity” to their policies. Although HBCUs still lag behind many predominantly white institutions in having LGBTQ+ student groups and resource centers, it is noteworthy that many of the leading HBCUs are now seeking to facilitate the inclusion of trans students, rather than ignoring them or trying to keep them marginalized. Reflective of these trans-positive changes, the two HBCUs that are women’s colleges—Spelman and Bennett Colleges—have changed their admissions policies to accept applications from trans women, and Morehouse now considers trans male applicants.

Historically Women’s Colleges

The inclusion of trans students at women’s colleges became a contentious issue in the late 1990s and early 2000s, when trans students began to publicly self-identify in greater numbers at the leading women’s colleges, as they did at many other colleges across the country. But the situation was different at women’s colleges because the trans men and nonbinary individuals who had been assigned female at birth (AFAB) who came out did so in an environment in which all students were expected to identify as women. The result was that they experienced invisibility, hypervisibility, and oppression from administrators, faculty, and other students. They were frequently misgendered if people did not know or respect that they identified as trans and often had their right to be on campus questioned if they were known or thought to be trans. Transmasculine and nonbinary AFAB students at religiously affiliated and more conservative women’s colleges have often had even more negative experiences, with students being expected to adhere to traditional feminine norms in their appearance.

Since the mid-2000s, support for trans men and nonbinary AFAB students has grown among their cis peers at women’s colleges—at least at some of the more prominent, nonreligiously affiliated institutions—as more transmasculine and nonbinary individuals have come out and advocated for change. Because of this increasing visibility, many women’s colleges have been forced to consider how having non-female-identified students aligns with their institutions’ missions and values. As of 2020, 17 women’s colleges, including

such leading institutions as Barnard, Bryn Mawr, Mills, Mount Holyoke, Smith, Spelman, and Wellesley, had published policies that enable individuals assigned female at birth who begin to identify as trans men after matriculating to continue to earn a degree. Thirteen women's colleges have also explicitly stated that they consider nonbinary AFAB individuals for admission, but only Mount Holyoke, Simmons, and Agnes Scott unambiguously accept applications from openly trans men.

As controversial as the presence of trans men and nonbinary AFAB individuals at women's colleges has been at times, the inability of trans women to be considered for admission if their legal sex was still male became an even bigger concern. The issue gained national attention in 2013, when Smith College declined to consider a trans woman's application because her financial aid form indicated that she was male. In the wake of the rejection, students at Smith organized to change the college's admissions process, and other women's colleges began to adopt trans-inclusive policies without the need for students to protest. In 2014, Mills, Mount Holyoke, Simmons, and Scripps announced that they were expanding their admissions policies to consider any student who self-identifies as a woman and were joined by Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, Smith, and Barnard the following year. As of 2020, 19 women's colleges have published policies indicating that they accept applications from trans women without requiring them to have transitioned or to have all of their legal documents reflect their gender identity. At least another five women's colleges reportedly do the same but do not provide this information publicly.

Given that trans women are women, denying them the chance to apply to women's colleges sends the message that their identities are fake and not to be believed. Thus, the institutions that have changed their policies are demonstrating their acceptance and support of trans women in a significant, tangible way. But, for some of these colleges, considering trans women for admittance seems to be the extent of the support they currently provide. They do not have a chosen name option for nonlegal campus records and documents, cover hormones and gender-affirming surgeries under student health insurance, or offer academic and personal assistance tailored to the needs of trans people. Hopefully, as more trans women attend women's colleges, the institutions will implement additional trans-supportive policies and practices.

Other Types of Institutions

Although 4-year public universities and private nonreligious and more liberal religious colleges may not present unique challenges to trans students, these types of institutions still have histories of trans exclusion and often negative campus environments. Research shows that trans students at such institutions indicate having higher levels of alcohol abuse, anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation and behavior, and other mental health issues than do their cis peers because of discrimination and harassment and, as a result, encounter greater obstacles to their social and academic well-being. For example, a meta-analysis of seven national college surveys from 2015 to 2017, which involved more than 900 institutions, found that the trans participants were three times more likely than their cis counterparts to report self-injury and having seriously considered suicide and two times more likely to report being so depressed that it was difficult for them to function in the previous 12 months.

Campus Microclimates

Along with ignoring differences between types of colleges, research on trans students generally fails to consider differences within individual college environments, treating a campus as a single entity. But trans students have often had more negative experiences in some college settings than others; in particular, they report a greater extent of discrimination and harassment and less support in athletics, fraternities and sororities, and residence halls than in other campus microclimates.

Athletics

Few studies have examined the experiences of trans student athletes, presumably because only a handful have been public about their trans identities while they were competing. Notable out trans male athletes have included Kye Allums and Keelin Godsey, who played on women's teams before medically transitioning

(basketball at George Washington University and the hammer throw and other field events at Bates College, respectively), and Schuyler Bailar and Taylor Edelman, who switched from women's to men's teams after they began identifying as trans men and taking testosterone (swimming at Harvard University and volleyball at Purchase College, respectively).

From media accounts, it seems that, of the four, Bailar and Edelman had the most positive experiences as out trans athletes. They described their institutions' athletic administrators and coaches as supportive and felt embraced by both their former female teammates and their new male teammates. They also did not receive negative reactions in the media and from members of other teams. The fact that Bailar and Edelman were playing on men's teams and were not leading the athletes on their teams undoubtedly contributed to their largely favorable reception. By seeking to become a part of the dominant gender group, they reinforced patriarchal values but, at the same time, were not seen as intimidating or emasculating because they were less successful in competing against other men.

In sharp contrast, Godsey, the first widely known trans college athlete, encountered a tremendous amount of hostility, seemingly because he remained on the women's team and was extremely successful, including being a 16-time All-American and holding the Division III record in the women's hammer throw. Critics repeatedly accused him of cheating by taking testosterone, even though Godsey had announced that he was not planning to medically transition until ending his athletic career and, as evidence, regularly passed drug screenings. Characterizing his college athletic experience after graduating in 2006, Godsey indicated that he found it nearly impossible to be trans and an athlete, even though both were central parts of his identity.

Trans female college athletes have encountered even harsher opposition to their right to participate on women's teams than nonmedically transitioning trans men, because of the common misperception that they have an unfair competitive advantage due to being assigned male at birth or, worse, that they are actually still men. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) requires trans women to complete 1 year of hormone therapy before playing on a women's team in order to address any possible physical edge, but even after they do so, they are not necessarily accepted as women. The first publicly out trans woman in women's college sports, Gabrielle Ludwig, a basketball player for a California community college in 2012 and 2013, received negative media coverage and regularly encountered anti-trans harassment from the fans of rival colleges. She was embraced by her coach and teammates, but that may not always be the case for trans female athletes when roster spots, playing time, and unwanted public attention are at issue or when they have not had bottom surgery, as Ludwig had done.

More recently, two college runners have come out publicly as trans women. Competing for Franklin Pierce University, CeCé Telfer won the 2019 Division II National Championship in the 400-meter hurdles, becoming the first out trans woman to win an NCAA title, and June Eastwood, a cross-country runner at the University of Montana, became the first out trans woman known to have competed on a NCAA Division I women's team in 2019. Both were strongly attacked by conservative media outlets for being "really men" who were racing against women because they could not be as successful on men's teams. Until the climate for trans female athletes significantly improves, few trans women will feel comfortable being out while they compete, and many will forgo competing altogether to avoid the possibility of disclosure and subsequent harassment.

Fraternities and Sororities

With the other two historically single-sex environments—women's colleges and collegiate athletics—taking significant steps in recent years to incorporate trans people, fraternities and sororities are the last major bastion of trans exclusion on college campuses. Not until the mid-2010s did some non-LGBTQ+-specific national fraternities and sororities issue formal policies enabling trans students to be eligible for membership. The first fraternity to admit trans men was Sigma Phi Epsilon in 2015; the first sorority to admit trans women was Alpha Chi Omega in 2017. Only a few other national fraternities and sororities have since followed suit. All have policies that allow any individual who identifies as either a man or woman to be considered for membership, but some require legal documentation that proves the person's gender identity, which is a difficult if not impossible hurdle for many traditionally college-aged trans men and women. Moreover, some of these policies are silent on whether a fraternity member who transitions to female or a sorority member who transitions to male can remain in the chapter, and none address the inclusion of nonbinary trans students.

With fraternities and sororities just beginning to accept openly trans women and men for membership, little has been written about their experiences. The students who are out as trans will presumably have a mostly positive experience because chapters will not be accepting them for membership if they are unsupportive. Less clear is the climate for trans students who come out after becoming members, especially for those who identify as a gender different from the sex designation of the chapter and begin to transition. And even more uncertain is the extent to which fraternities and sororities may continue to covertly discriminate against trans students by denying them membership based on their gender identity. Hopefully, as campuses in general become more supportive of trans students, so too will fraternities and sororities, as has been the case with cis LGBTQ+ students.

Residence Halls

Living in a residence hall can add to the challenges that trans students face at college, because if other residents are hostile toward trans people, it can be difficult to avoid them; they literally know where you live. Trans women and men who are not out in their residence hall are often placed in an even more difficult situation by having to hide aspects of their bodies from roommates and other residents if they have not medically transitioned. For students in this predicament, their residence hall—their home at the institution—is far from a safe place.

It is understandable that trans students would not want to be out for fear of encountering harassment and discrimination or being treated differently, such as a trans man no longer being respected as male if he discloses that he was assigned female at birth. Unfortunately, most colleges exacerbate these fears and the likelihood of mistreatment for those who are out by failing to develop a means for incoming trans students to find other trans or trans-supportive roommates and by basing housing on sex assigned at birth rather than gender identity, so that many trans women and men are forced to live with roommates whose gender is antithetical to how they see themselves and nonbinary students are unlikely to be matched with another nonbinary person. Trans students also often have to contend with gendered bathrooms in residence halls and a lack of support from hall staff to be able to use the facility that best reflects their gender identity.

The extent to which trans students often face institutional and individual discrimination in residence halls is shown by a 2016 study conducted by Jonathan Pryor, David Ta, and Jeni Hart. Interviewing a dozen trans students from 11 different colleges, they found that most of the participants were either assigned a roommate of the “wrong” gender who was unsupportive of them as a trans person, which led them to feel unsafe, or forced to be housed away from their friends in a single room because of the lack of a trans-supportive housing option, which led them to feel lonely and marginalized. The absence of gender-inclusive bathroom facilities in their residence halls was also a tremendous problem for some of the students, who feared harassment or violence if their hall mates discovered that they were trans. One interviewee got up at 6 a.m. just to shower without being seen by other residents and then often went back to sleep before she awoke for classes. As a result of these experiences, almost all of the participants sought support and a sense of community away from their residence halls, and only a few developed significant relationships with the people with whom they lived.

Trans student activism in the 2000s led colleges to begin providing gender-inclusive housing, in which students are assigned roommates regardless of gender, starting with Wesleyan University in 2003. As of 2020, more than 270 institutions have established this type of housing option, with most limiting it to specific floors, buildings, or parts of campus. Some programs are targeted to LGBTQ+ students, whereas others are open to any student wanting to live with someone of a gender different from themselves. But gender-inclusive housing does not address the underlying problem—that most campus housing continues to normalize a gender binary and remains closed to trans students. Thus, although gender-inclusive housing is an important reform to traditional housing options, advocates argue that colleges need to do more. To be truly supportive of trans students, institutions must change their housing process to have all students indicate their gender identity and then use this information, rather than assigned sex, for residence hall placements. Such a system enables trans women and trans men to be treated as women and men, respectively, and gives nonbinary trans students the ability to live with other nonbinary people. At the same time, colleges should allow all students to have roommates of any gender, as there is no legitimate reason why students should not have the choice to live wherever they want with whomever they want on campus, just as they can do if they live

off-campus.

Other Microclimates

While athletics, fraternities and sororities, and residence halls may be the three most hostile microclimates at times for trans students, they are by no means the only aspects of campus life in which trans students can feel marginalized or excluded. Other microclimates, including classrooms, campus workplaces, college offices and centers, student activities, and student organizations, can also be discriminatory environments. Thus, trans students cannot be assured of having a positive experience in any campus setting, which is a stark indicator of the need for colleges to be doing much more to create trans-inclusive climates.

Genny Beemyn

See also [Athletes, College Sports](#); [Campus Policies/Campus Climate](#); [Campus Residence Halls](#); [Classroom Experiences, Higher Education](#); [College Graduate Students](#); [Sororities and Fraternities](#); [Women's Colleges](#)

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