The Experiences of Trans Students Today: What We Know and Do Not Know

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Supportive Terminology: Late 1980s

Lesbian  Gay  Bisexual  Trans

transsexual: FTM or MTF  crossdresser
Supportive Terminology: Today

QPOC/QTPOC: stud/AG, masculine of center

Aromatic

Lesbian

Gay

Non-binary attraction

Queer

Asexual

Demiromantic

Gray romantic

Queerplatonic

demisexual

Sapiosexual

Akoisexual/lithsexual

Gray-A

Agender

Intersex

dozens of variations

Neutrois

Demigender

Bigender

Third gender

Pangender

two spirit, boi

gender fluid, genderqueer, androgyne

Trans

Trans man/trans masculine spectrum

Trans woman/trans feminine spectrum

crossdresser

Supportive Terminology: Today

LGBTQIA+ Term Handout: www.umass.edu/stonewall/workshops
Research Possibilities

National Surveys of College Students Adding a Question(s) on Gender Identity:

- American College Health Association’s National College Health Assessment in 2008 (with expanded options in 2016)
- National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) in 2014
- Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshman Survey in 2015
Research Possibilities

National Surveys of Trans People:

- *National Transgender Discrimination Survey*, 2011
  National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE) and the National LGBTQ Task Force (*n* = 6,456)

- *U.S. Transgender Survey*, 2015
  NCTE (*n* = 27,715)

The most difficult part about being trans isn't being trans itself, which is actually pretty awesome in my opinion, but having to deal with everything society puts trans people through just to humiliate them.

Sophie Labelle, Assigned Male Comics
Research Questions

- How many college students are trans?
- How do they compare to cis students as they enter college? After their first year? As seniors?
- How do their experiences with sexual harassment and assault compare to cis students?
- To what extent do they experience discrimination and what are the effects?
- How does their mental health compare to cis students?
- How do the trans students who succeed in college do so?
What Percent of College Students Are Trans?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1%</th>
<th>3%</th>
<th>6%</th>
<th>12%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.7%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

From the American College Health Association’s *National College Health Assessment*, Fall 2017 \( (n = 26,000+) \)
includes students who indicated that they are trans \( (1.6\%) \) and students whose sex assigned at birth does not match their gender identity \( (1.1\%) \)

2017 National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE): 1%  
\[n = 168,000+ \text{ first-years, } 210,000+ \text{ seniors}\]
UCLA Williams Institute: .6% of adults, .7% of 13-17 year olds
What Were the Most Common Trans Identities?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Genderqueer</td>
<td>.6% (n = 149)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans man</td>
<td>.2% (64)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trans woman</td>
<td>.1% (15)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Another identity</td>
<td>1% (260)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From *National College Health Assessment*, Fall 2017

NSSE: gave choices as man, woman, another gender identity, please specify, and prefer not to respond

Most common write-ins: nonbinary, nonconforming, gender fluid, agender, transgender, genderqueer, and two spirit.

2016 NCHA (1.8% trans):

.9% “another identity,” .6% genderqueer, .1% trans man: .1% trans woman
Research on Incoming Trans Students

- Nearly 19% of incoming trans students reported major concerns about financing their college education, as compared to 12% of the overall sample.
- 47% of trans students indicated feeling depressed frequently, as compared to less than 10% of the overall sample.
- 55% of trans students reported feeling overwhelmed in the year prior to college, versus 34% of the overall sample.
- 48% overall anticipated seeking counseling during college, while nearly 75% of trans students did.

Source: Ellen Bara Stolzenberg and Bryce Hughes, “The Experiences of Incoming Transgender College Students: New Data on Gender Identity,” *Liberal Education* 103, no.3 (2017). Used Fall 2015 CIRP data
Research on Incoming Trans Students

**Figure 1. Students’ self-rated emotional health**

- **Transgender students**
  - Lowest 10%/below average: 12.7%
  - Average: 36.7%
  - Above average/highest 10%: 52.1%
  - Above average/highest 10%: 24.4%
  - Above average/highest 10%: 23.5%

- **National sample**
  - Lowest 10%/below average: 12.7%
  - Average: 36.7%
  - Above average/highest 10%: 50.6%
Almost 54% of trans students had a high school GPA of A- or higher, as did about 59% of all students surveyed.

About 47% of trans students reported having engaged in some type of activism within the year prior to college, which is more than double the percentage of students in the overall sample (21%).

43% of trans students indicated that they frequently share their opinions on important causes, versus 15% of the overall sample.

About 48% of trans students scored high on civic engagement, as compared to about 23% of the overall sample.

Source: Ellen Bara Stolzenberg and Bryce Hughes, “The Experiences of Incoming Transgender College Students: New Data on Gender Identity,” Liberal Education 103, no.3 (2017). Used Fall 2015 CIRP data
Figure 3. Students’ personal goals as shown by percentages indicating “very important” or “essential” for each:

- Influencing the political structure: 43.1% (Transgender students), 22.3% (National sample)
- Keeping up to date with political affairs: 55.7% (Transgender students), 40.4% (National sample)
- Influencing social values: 63.3% (Transgender students), 43.9% (National sample)
- Helping to promote racial understanding: 64.6% (Transgender students), 41.2% (National sample)
Research on First-Year Trans Students

- Trans students are less likely to report “high quality” interactions with students services staff and with administrative staff and offices than cis students.

- Trans students felt that they received less institutional support than their cis peers for:
  - Attending events that address important social, economic, or political issues
  - Using learning support services
  - Attending campus activities and events
  - Providing opportunities to be involved socially
  - Encouraging contact among students from different backgrounds
  - Providing support to help students succeed academically
  - Providing support for your overall well-being
  - Helping you manage your non-academic responsibilities

Source: NSSE, Annual Results, 2017
# Research on Senior Trans Students

## Major by Gender Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Field</th>
<th>Woman</th>
<th>Man</th>
<th>Another Id</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arts &amp; Humanities</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Sciences</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STEM</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: NSSE, Annual Results, 2017
“In four years of college, more than one-fourth of undergraduate women at a large group of leading universities said they had been sexually assaulted by force or when they were incapacitated” (New York Times, 9/21/15).

“Transgender students and others who do not identify as either male or female had higher rates of assault than women. Experts said this was the first large-scale study they knew of to measure the extent of the problem for transgender students.”
Research on Violence Against Trans Students

- 75.2% of TGQN* undergrads had experienced sexual harassment, as compared to 61.9% of cis female undergrads.
- 39.1% of TGQN seniors reported experiencing nonconsensual sexual contact at least once during their time at college, as compared to 33.1% of senior cis women.
- Only 15% of TGQN students reported an incident of sexual harassment to campus authorities.

Source: Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct, 2015

* “transgender, genderqueer or nonconforming, questioning, or not listed” (n = 1,398)
TGQN* students were the least optimistic that:
- Other students would support the person making the report
- Campus officials would take the report seriously
- Campus official would protect the safety of the person making the report
- Campus officials would conduct a fair investigation
- Campus officials would take action against the offender(s)
- Campus officials would take action to address factors that may have led to the sexual assault or sexual misconduct.

And were the most likely to believe that the alleged offender(s) or their associates would retaliate against the person making the report.

* “transgender, genderqueer or nonconforming, questioning, or not listed” (n = 1,398)
Trans students ($n = 204$), as compared to cis female and cis male students, reported significantly greater rates in the past 12 months of:

- **Partner violence**: emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and stalking
- **Sexual violence**: sexual touching without consent, attempted sexual penetration, and sexual penetration
- **Physical violence**: physical assault and being verbally threatened

Adjusting for other factors, trans students were still significantly more likely to experience 8 of the 9 types of violence (except for emotional abuse).

Research on Discrimination Against Trans Students

- 46% of the respondents to the U.S. Trans Survey ($n = 27,715$) said that people thought or knew that they were trans in college.
- 24% of respondents who were out or thought of as trans were verbally, physically, or sexually harassed on campus.
- 16% of these students left college because of the harassment, which represented 2% of all of the respondents who had attended a college.
- Trans people of color, specifically American Indian, Latinx, Black, and multiracial individuals, were more likely than white people to report leaving college because of harassment.

Research on Discrimination Against Trans Students

- Trans students indicated that their campus was a more discriminatory environment than did cis LGB and cis heterosexual students.

- Trans students reported a significantly lower sense of belonging within their campus community than did cis LGB and cis heterosexual students.

- Trans students had significantly lower scores on measures of complex cognitive skills and leadership ability than the other groups, likely reflecting a lower level of self-confidence.

Trans individuals who reported being denied access to a campus bathroom because of their gender identity were 1.45 times as likely than those who had not to have attempted suicide at some point.

Trans individuals who reported being denied access to gender-appropriate campus housing because of their gender identity were 1.64 times as likely to have attempted suicide at some point.

Trans individuals who reported experiencing anti-trans harassment, physical assault, or sexual assault were 1.36 times as likely.

Source: Kristie L. Seelman, “Transgender Adults’ Access to College Bathrooms and Housing and the Relationship to Suicidality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 63, no. 10 (2016), 1378-1399. Based on a secondary analysis of data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (2011). Note: people were not asked when they attempted suicide, so causality cannot be inferred.
Research on the Mental Health of Trans Students

- Compared to cis students, trans students reported much higher rates of diagnosis or treatment within the last year for 11 mental health conditions: anorexia, anxiety, ADHD, bipolar disorder, bulimia, depression, OCD, panic attacks, phobia, schizophrenia, and substance abuse.
- More than a third indicated anxiety and depression.

Source: Sara B. Oswalt and Alyssa M. Lederer, “Beyond Depression and Suicide: The Mental Health of Transgender College Students,” Social Science 6, no. 1 (2017). Used six years of data from the ACHA’s National College Health Assessment.
Resilience and Persistence of Trans Students

Trans students are better able to navigate genderism and develop a sense of belonging through creating kinship networks.

Sites where trans kinship develops:

- **Material Domain**: physical spaces on campus and locally
- **Virtual Domain**: online spaces, which are especially important if there are not physical, on-campus spaces
- **Affective Domain**: individuals’ support systems

Resilience and Persistence of Trans Students

How faculty and staff can help foster trans student kinship:

- Assist trans students in connecting with other trans people in both the physical and virtual world
- Support the development of formal and informal trans-affirming spaces, such as LGBTQ+ and trans-specific student groups and an LGBTQ+ center
- Seek the input of trans students on how they are affected by various campus environments and work with them to change unsupportive spaces

College Students with Nonbinary Sexual and/or Gender Identities

- 360 students, ages 17-25, from 199 colleges completed a survey; 208 students (84 colleges) did a follow-up interview.
- 111 of the 208 identified outside of a gender binary, including genderqueer, agender, gender fluid, nonbinary trans, demigender, and androgynous students.
- 102 of the 111 also identified outside of a sexual binary.
- Average age at which they began using their current gender identity label: 19 years old (17.5 years old for sexual identity).
- 91 of the 111 use gender-inclusive pronouns for themselves; most (91%) use “they/them/their”.
Being Out to a Parent(s)

- 51% of the nonbinary gender students were out or mostly out to at least one parent (58% of the students of color).
- 70% of the cis students were out or mostly out about their nonbinary sexual identity to at least one parent (48% of the students of color).
- Of the 99 students who identified outside of both sexual and gender binaries and who discussed their family:
  - Half were out or mostly out to at least one parent about both
  - A third were out about their sexual identity but not their gender
  - Only 2 people were out about their gender but not their sexuality
Being Out to a Parent(s)

- In cases where there was a difference in parental acceptance for the student’s sexual and gender identities, sexual identity was almost always more accepted.

**Why the students were not out to a parent(s):**
- a parent(s) holds anti-LGBTQA+ attitudes
- a parent(s) has conservative religious beliefs
- a parent(s) comes from a culture that is intolerant toward LGBTQA+ people
- believe that a parent(s) would not get or not take their identity seriously
- think that a parent(s) would be uncomfortable with their identity
Being Out to a Parent(s)

Out to at least one parent:
- 89 students with nonbinary sexual identity/binary gender
- 57 students with nonbinary gender identity

How they characterized their parents’ level of support:
- supportive or very supportive: 45% sexuality; 40% gender
- do not completely get or are uncomfortable: 11%; 32%
- unsupportive or completely intolerant: 17%; 15%
- OK but not great: 14%; 5%
- ignore the issue and will not discuss it: 1%; 5%
Learning about Their Identities

Where they first learned about their gender and/or sexual identity (could provide more than one answer):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nonbinary Gender</th>
<th>Nonbinary Sexuality/Binary Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Online:</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Met People:</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends:</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Learning about Their Identities

- Individuals with less visible nonbinary identities, like asexual, agender, and demigender, were much more likely to learn the terms online, typically on Tumblr (79% of nonbinary trans students who specified a website cited Tumblr).

- The students who had adopted terminology that, at least as of now, is not widely known even among trans people (e.g. condigirl) invariably learned it online.
Support for Their Identities

Where respondents received support for their gender and sexual identities (could provide more than one answer):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Nonbinary Gender</th>
<th>Nonbinary Sexuality/Binary Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Friends:</td>
<td>82%</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ+ Groups</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online:</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBTQ+ Center:</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner or Ex:</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family:</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- faculty member: 7%; staff member (beyond LGBTQ+ center): 2%
“Our Voices: Trans Millennials’ Experiences and Implications for Campus Change”

Genny Beemyn
Sue Rankin
U.S. Transgender Survey (2015)

- 27,715 participants
- 5,979 people provided a response to the last question:

  “Please tell us anything else that you would like to tell us about your experiences of acceptance or discrimination so we can better understand your experiences.”

- 2,168 (36.3%) of the respondents to this question were 18-24 years old [42% overall]: younger Millennials

- 1,788 (29.9%) of the respondents to the question were 25-34 [28.7% overall]: older Millennials
Responses about College Experiences

- 311 participants discussed their college experiences in the last question
  - 177 (56.9%) were younger Millennials
  - 79 (25.4%) were older Millennials
  - 55 (17.7%) were 35 years old or older

- 96 of these 311 respondents identified as nonbinary
  - 70 (72.9%) were younger Millennials
  - 18 (18.8%) were older Millennials
  - 8 (8.3%) were 35 years old or older
Nonbinary vs. Binary Student Differences

- Most of the respondents who learned about their gender identity in college were nonbinary. This seemingly reflects the lack of information they had about nonbinary trans people growing up and the absence of images in the media and popular culture.

“My first year in college, I found out that ‘agender’ was a thing I could be.”

“I was never really comfortable thinking about being trans*, especially since it didn't seem to fit, but when I went to college, I became friends with other non-binary people, and realized that I was non-binary and it helped me come to terms with it.”
Nonbinary vs. Binary Millennial Differences

- Binary trans respondents were more likely to report a generally positive college experience. This is not surprising, given that they better fit into dominant gender expectations and, for some people, may not be seen as trans.

- Both binary and nonbinary trans respondents reported being regularly misgendered and/or misnamed in college. Thus the issue goes beyond faculty and staff assuming a gender binary or refusing to use nonbinary pronouns.
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Positive* Experiences

- Almost all of the respondents who indicated a generally positive college experience were Millennials.

- The younger Millennials were much more likely to have had a positive experience than older ones. This seemingly reflects efforts by colleges to become more trans-supportive in the 2010s.

  “Grew up in a small, very unaccepting town and found overwhelming acceptance at a large Midwestern university. One of my professors unexpectedly became one of my largest supporters and has helped me so much.”

  “I go to a liberal 4-year college where my peers are not only tolerant but celebratory of my gender expression.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Positive Experiences*

- All of the respondents who indicated learning about their gender identities in college were Millennials, and all but one were younger Millennials.

This seemingly results from the greater number of out trans people on campuses in the 2010s and discussions about trans experiences becoming part of college discourses (as well as the lack of information they had growing up).

“I didn't know what transgender was until college.”

“I was not educated about gender variance until college. . . . i feel that if i had been educated on the subject sooner, i would have begun transitioning or at least presenting differently.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Positive* Experiences

- The younger Millennials were also more likely to state that they could be themselves and felt safe on campus. This demonstrates that some colleges are becoming more welcoming places.

- All but two of the respondents who said that they received support on campus, whether from friends, coworkers, faculty and staff, administrators, and peers, were Millennials (and one of these two was an older person who returned to college in the previous year).
Generational Differences Among Millennials: Positive Experiences

- All of the respondents who said that they had support from queer/LGBTQ people, groups, and spaces on campus were younger Millennials. This demonstrates the growing embrace of the “T” in “LGBT” by cis LGB youth.

- Most of the respondents who had support from college friends and faculty and staff were younger Millennials.

“Every once in a while someone will blow me away with how supportive they are. Like the registrar who came up with a whole new class so my college transcript wouldn’t say ‘women's tennis team.’”

“If not for the outreach I found as a young college student I would of ended my life.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Negative Experiences*

- All of the individuals who indicated not being out or mostly not out were Millennials, and almost all were younger Millennials. Many were not out because they had experienced or feared harassment and discrimination. Others did not feel that they had to disclose.

“I tried to be out as a transman in college, I was harassed so much that I left and didn’t go back to college until 3 years later when I was 2 years on testosterone. I am now stealth.”

“I was forced to remain in the closet in a college program because I felt very unsafe presenting as trans there. People would routinely use the t-slur and bad mouth trans people. These people were often very violent.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Negative Experiences*

- Harassment, discrimination, and violence were reported by a number of both Millennials and older respondents, as well as a lack of institutional support after harassment/violence.

- Discrimination related to housing, restrooms, and health care were more commonly reported by younger Millennials. This could reflect that they were more likely to be out and seek to have their needs addressed.
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Negative Experiences*

“I was physically assaulted by my RA, a huge transphobe, last spring. I reported it and my university told me I was either hysterical and didn’t really remember what happened, or I was faking it. I opened a formal investigation but it has not been completed. I lived in the room next to my RA and lived in fear for two months . . . I worried that he would attack me again.”

“Trying to go to an away college that doesn’t offer gender neutral dorms is horrid. I’d have to choose between male housing (where I could get harassed) or female housing which I really don’t identify with. I’m going to colleges near enough where I can stay at home until I can afford an apartment.”

“The school I go to doesn’t have any unisex restrooms and people generally do not know about genderqueer identities.”

“The school psychologist didn’t have the knowledge base about transgender people and especially non-binary transgender people to help me, and instead made me feel worse.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Negative Experiences*

- Younger Millennials were also more likely to report being misnamed and misgendered on documents and by individuals. This is seemingly because they more often sought to be treated as how they identify.

- All but one of respondents who stated that others at their college failed to respect their name and/or pronouns were Millennials.

“I have been an outspoken trans activist on campus and in my community. Still, professors and peers refuse to use my pronouns because I ‘don’t appear trans enough.’”

“My university, [redacted], insists on my keeping my legal name on all IDS, and will call my birth name at graduation.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Negative Experiences*

- Almost all of the individuals who had to leave college because of a lack of family support when they came out as trans, or who were not out to their families because they feared this would happen, were Millennials, especially younger ones.

“Due to my transgender status, my parents have threatened to withdraw financial support for my schooling. As I cannot afford to attend college without help from my parents, I am essentially forced to go along with what they want. . . . This has caused me to remain in an emotionally abusive relationship and without many other options.”

“I lost my entire family and extended family because I am trans. My parents cut me off from all financial support, and I am now struggling to get through college while self-supporting, transitioning, and fighting depression all at the same time.”
Twenty-seven respondents stated that they decided or were forced to drop out of college or took time off because of the effects of harassment and discrimination on their physical and mental health. Older Millennials were more likely to have left college. This could partly be a result of them being older—individuals who were currently in college may later leave.

“My university] created an environment where it was so difficult to get rights for trans people that I was so exhausted and stressed out that I could barely focus on my work (I’m an electrical engineering major), and had to transfer to a new university, and then take a year off to try to get my mental health up to speed.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: *Negative Experiences*

- Four younger Millennials stated that LGB students/student groups were unsupportive, demonstrating that ignorance and hostility toward trans people remain in some LGB(T) spaces.

“I found this out personally in my college’s LGBTQA+ club. They were all for gay, lesbian, and bisexual but when it came to anything else they were not so about it. I am agender and asexual and the club insisted that the ‘a’ stood for ‘ally’. They treated me like I did not exist when I attended so I stopped going to a group that I thought was going to support me.”

“I was kicked out of my college LGBT+ GSA DURING PRIDE WEEK for voicing the simple fact that cisgender (non-trans) individuals need to step back and listen when it comes to trans issues. I did nothing but say that simple fact and I got absolutely burned.”
Generational Differences Among Millennials: Negative Experiences

- Even at a time when many colleges are trying to take at least some steps to be trans-inclusive, three younger Millennials discussed their difficulties trying to find a trans-supportive college.

“I am limited in my choice of colleges to transfer to (I am currently in community college) because I want to find one where I will be relatively safe from verbal and physical violence. There are only two that fit my other requirements (unrelated to gender) that I know of that are safe enough for LGBTQIA+ students.”

“I only chose the college I’m at now because it’s supposedly ‘the top trans friendly school in the US.’ I felt I couldn’t just apply to any school I wanted; I had to think about safety and comfort first.”
What We Do Not Know

- Experiences by different gender identities and by other identity differences (race, country, family experience with college, sexual orientation, etc.)
- Out versus non-out trans students, undergrad versus grad trans students
- Experiences at different types of colleges and in different campus environments
- Experiences in the classroom and in different academic majors
- How discrimination affects GPA, family financial aid, and persistence
- What factors best contribute to trans student success and retention
- Numbers, numbers, numbers
- Anything about trans staff and faculty
Questions?

Also feel free to email me: genny@umass.edu