

Transgender Students in Postsecondary Education

Gillian Dauer & Bekka Zawisza

Student Population/Overview

- There are an estimated 218,000 transgender students ages 18-40 in the United States (Conron et al., 2022). The Association of American Universities found that transgender students make up 1.7% of undergraduate and graduate students (Postsecondary National Policy Institute, 2022).
 - These numbers only reflect transgender students willing to disclose their identity; there are likely more transgender students in higher education.
- The term “transgender” covers a wide range of identities, including but not limited to non-binary, genderqueer, agender, genderfluid, and gender non-conforming.
- Transgender people hold multiple intersecting identities across race, ethnicity, age, dis/ability, religion, class, nationality, and gender.

Relevant Terms/Definitions

- Transgender: “An umbrella term for people whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth” (Kilgo, 2020, p. 2). Often abbreviated to: “trans”
- Cisgender: “An umbrella term for someone who identifies with a gender identity that corresponds to the sex they were assigned at birth” (Kilgo, 2020, p. 2). Often abbreviated to: “cis”
- Transphobia: “Fear and hatred of trans people” (Kilgo, 2020, p. 8).
- Misgendering: “The use of a pronoun, honorific, or term that is incorrect for a person” (Kilgo, 2020, p. 8)
- Deadnaming: “when a person uses a birth or legal name for a trans person, rather than the person’s chosen name” (Kilgo, 2020, p. 8)

Historical Background Trends, Statistics, Current Issues, & Concerns/Challenges

- Mental and Physical Healthcare
 - Transgender students report more serious indicators of mental health than their cisgender peers (i.e., suicidal ideation and self-harm) but exhibit more resilience among feelings of being overwhelmed and exhausted (Pascale & DeVita, 2022).
 - In one study, participants who were frequently misgendered or deadnamed by healthcare professionals were “more likely to avoid health care and suffered physical and mental health consequences” (Santos et al., 2021, p. 64).
 - Student health insurance sometimes covers trans counseling, and some cover hormone therapy (Kilgo, 2020).
 - Healthcare access also differs by each state as policies change.
- Title IX
 - Amendments to Title IX under the Biden administration would include and protect the rights of transgender students. It would "allow trans students to use facilities that correspond with their gender identity, prohibit bullying based on gender identity, and ensure students are referred to with the correct pronouns" (Bellows, 2022).
- Athletics
 - Title IX does not address trans-inclusion in athletics, leaving the sector to determine its stance. In January 2022, the NCAA Board of Governors voted for a sport-by-sport approach to transgender participation, following either the policies of their National Governing Board or the international policies for their sport. (NCAA Media Center, 2022).

Students' Collegiate Experience (social and academic realm, curricular and co-curricular)

- LGBTQ Resource Centers
 - Involvement in LGBTQ+ Resource Centers positively impacts students' campus experiences. However, only about 4% of the nation's degree-granting institutions have professionally staffed centers (Legg et al., 2020).
- Greek Life
 - LGBTQ+ students are often members of Greek Life organizations, but transgender students go through the struggle of being gender minorities alone, as there is not a large presence of transgender students in Greek Life. This is not universal, as the culture of Greek Life varies depending on the organization and the institution (Etengoff, et al., 2022). There are some LGBT and LGBT-friendly Greek Life organizations.
 - It is recommended that Greek Life acknowledge and address the history of LGBTQ+ discrimination as well as the current challenges these students face today to be more welcoming to LGBTQ+ students (Etengoff, et al., 2022). There are some LGBT and LGBT-friendly Greek Life organizations, including but not limited to Gamma Rho Lambda.

Diversity within the Population

- Research and studies on transgender college students often focus on white transgender student experiences. This is far from true to the lived experiences of transgender college students.
- Transgender students with multiple intersecting identities face different and more intense racial and gender discrimination, resulting in more severe mental and physical health outcomes. These students often do not feel represented within their racial or ethnic cultural spaces or the LGBT spaces on campus (Simms et al., 2021).

Issues of Development

- College and university independence promotes questioning of gender identity and expression in ways that have not previously been possible for students (Patton, et al., 2016).
- Existing gender identity development theories and research often use very broad umbrella terms of transgender instead of specifically exploring other identities' development. A population that is frequently ignored under the umbrella is nonbinary people.

Implications and Strategies for Advising/Working with this Group

- Dismantle biases and pre-conceived notions of trans students like the trans-as-tragic trope and work alongside trans students to dismantle these stereotypes (McGill & Joslin, 2021).
- Recognize the role that advisors play in supporting the resilience of transgender students through taking small actions to be a part of transgender students' support networks in ways individual and personal to the student (McGill & Joslin, 2021).
- Adopt the transgender gaze, which allows one to look with the transgender person rather than at them and see the world through their eyes to increase empathy and allow professionals to look beyond best practices (McGill & Joslin, 2021).
- Provide tangible resources for all transgender students that are culturally competent, inclusive, relevant, and well-informed. Offices should also pay attention to changing state laws.
- More scholarship is needed on general transgender student experiences but also on the intersections of other identities (e.g., race, class, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, etc.) with the transgender identity.

References and Recommended Resources

- Bellows, K. H. (2022). For transgender students, Title IX changes could reopen doors closed under Trump. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/for-transgender-students-title-ix-changes-could-reopen-doors-closed-under-trump>
- Conron, K. J., O'Neill, K. K., Vasquez, L.A. (2022). *Educational experiences of transgender people*. UCLA School of Law Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/publications/transgender-higher-ed/>
- Etengoff, C., Hopkins, Z., & Rodriguez, E. M. (2022). Transformative LGBTQ+ growth and leadership within greek life. *Journal of Homosexuality*. DOI: 10.1080/00918369.2022.2059966
- Kilgo, C. A. (2020). *Supporting success for LGBTQ+ students: tools for inclusive campus practice*. Columbia, SC: National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, University of South Carolina.
- Legg, K., Cofino, A., & Sanlo, R. (2020). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students: Revisiting retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 21(4), 417-430. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1521025119895513>
- McGill, C. M., & Joslin, J. (Eds.). (2021). *Advising lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer college students*. Stylus Publishing, LLC.
- NCAA Media Center. (2022). *Board of governors updates transgender participation policy*. NCAA. <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2022/1/19/media-center-board-of-governors-updates-transgender-participation-policy.aspx>
- Pascale, A. B. & DeVita, J. M. (2022). Transgender college students' mental health: Comparing transgender students to their cisgender peers. *Journal American College Health*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.2024212>
- Patton, L. D., Renn, K. A., Guido, F. M., & Quaye, S. J. (2016). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. Jossey-Bass.
- Postsecondary National Policy Institute. (2022). *Factsheets: LGBTQ students in higher education*. <https://pnpi.org/lgbtq-students-in-higher-education/>
- Santos, T. C., Mann, E. S., & Pfeffer, C. A. (2021). Are university health services meeting the needs of transgender college students? A qualitative assessment of a public university. *Journal of American College Health*, 69(1), 59-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1652181>
- Simms, S., Nicolazzo, Z., & Jones, A. (2021). Don't say sorry, do better: Trans students of color, disidentification, and internet futures. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000337>
- University of Washington Medicine. (n.d.). *LGBTQ inclusion: Glossary*. <https://www.uwmedicine.org/provider-resource/lgbtq/lgbtq-inclusion-glossary>.