

TRANSGENDERISM AND THE COLLEGE EXPERIENCE: TRANSITIONING CHALLENGES DURING HIGHER EDUCATION

Rodney L. Parks

Ashley D. Edwards

Description:

The purpose of this study was to collect the experiences of male-to-female and female-to-male transgender students in order to shed light on the challenges and needs of this vulnerable student population. The authors also provide recommendations to campus administrators to help address the needs of students dealing with gender transition.

Research Methods & Procedures

This study followed the tenets of a dual instrumental case study, chosen to allow the researchers to chart the parallel trajectories of the two students' experiences, (one male-to-female student, and the other a female-to-male, both of whom began transitioning during college), and to gain insight into the relationship between transgenderism and college experiences. By drawing on two students' histories and experiences, the authors seek to explore the complex relationships between university policy and student success, retention and career and major decision making skills.

Highlight of Findings/Description of Themes

Identity Development

"My mom, I didn't quite explain everything to her because she wouldn't know what I'm saying. She doesn't quite have the vocabulary for it. I've been trying to...educate her, but right now, she's pretty panicky."

"I...dealt with a lot of bullying even before I understood that kind of sexual orientation fluidity. I ...dealt with a lot of bullying from the other boys because I was feminine, or girly. I tended to be more interested in traditionally feminine things...I wasn't really a rough-houser. Those very gendered ideas of what a little boy is supposed to be... I transcended that."

"I started performing in drag, [and] it became part of my college experience. I felt more comfortable not particularly for being a caricature of hyper-femininity, but just to be able to embrace femininity for once and not having to hide how I felt most comfortable."

Transitioning

"...people put their hopes and dreams and everything on these surgeries and hormones and how they're going to look, and I wanted to work on just being okay with who I was regardless of whether I ever had the chance to transition or if I had the means to."

"On one hand, it's a giant pain in the ass. On the other hand, it needs to be there because it's a really big step. Testosterone...is a legitimate hormone. But for trans women...there are a lot more steps they have to go through to get medical surgery and hormones than trans guys do. For all

trans people, changing names legally is a giant pain in the ass. It's a bureaucracy and it takes forever."

"They just recently updated...[the] diagnostic journal, where they changed the classification of gender identity dysphoria (GID). People have been back and forth on whether it's a good thing or a bad thing...It's changing how transness is regarded and how it is diagnosed and how much of a mental, medical condition it is considered."

Community

"Trans misogyny...its against trans women. 98% of hate crimes against trans people are against male assigned at birth people, usually transwomen. A lot of times within the trans community, guys talk over trans women, they call them 'not really women'."

"Any guy who gives up masculinity to become feminine is someone to deride, to make fun of, to kill."

"With trans-women, especially ones who transition after their first round of puberty, the masculinizing effects of testosterone have already run their course for the most part. So your voice is permanently deepened, you're not going to get less hairy. So trans-women have to deal with facial hair as far as electrolysis or laser hair removal. They have to go to voice therapy or practice their voice so that its softer, or more feminine. Then there is the whole issue of fitting in as a typical woman. The typical woman...spends an hour and a half getting ready. ...Its doubly difficult for trans-women because they don't even start at the baseline."

Institutional Factors

"I know of people who...had issues with housing because he was put into the all-female dorm... so he decided to live off campus his freshman year...so that really impacted him. It was really difficult for him." (P2)

"One time I had an issue [with public restrooms], getting ready for a drag show....One of the workers, who was cleaning restrooms...came in and kind of stopped and looked at me. It was a very scary experience and they...went outside and [said] 'there's a boy in here putting makeup on' ...and was very ignorant and loud about it. It was a very unnecessary situation and it made me feel very unsafe."

"The professors...still use the names on the rosters when they call you out, which is not a good system at all, but you have to deal with it. It can still be difficult because...when they use their roll... that can really out somebody who is not trying to be out. It's difficult because you can't change any of your school records or your name until you have a legal court order for it."

"They need a diversity seminar. And it [wouldn't] just cover trans-gendered issues, it would cover queer issues in general, it would cover being religiously sensitive, being racially sensitive... We're not doing enough as an institution to get people on board with diversity and what that means...Not just the students, but we need to start with the administration."

Limitations

Limitations of this pilot study include a small sample size with very little information to act as a basis for the research of the study. Very little is known about the hardships transgendered students endure through higher education, as very few students are willing to express their opinions on the issue.

Summary & Implications

- The results of this study indicate that transitioning students experience a number of internal and external barriers that weigh on their ability to focus on their higher education.
- Steps to inclusivity include programs that focus specifically on transgender issues. Transgender students may feel invisible or marginalized if little or no effort is made to acknowledge their presence.
- Campus nondiscrimination policies include the categories of “sex” and sometimes “sexual orientation”, but neither category necessarily covers transgender people, who face discrimination based on their gender identity and expression rather than their biological gender or sexual identity. (Beemyn, 2003)
- From a student housing perspective, a formal written policy can guide institutional practice and provide a foundation for ensuring the fair, safe, and legal treatment of transgender students.
- Students who self-identify as genderqueer may also seek changes to college records and documents to match their gender identity.
- Having the appropriate name and gender reflects and validates their identities, but also prevents transgender students from being placed into uncomfortable and dangerous situations where they would have to explain why they use a name different from their birth name.
- Updated records and documents ensure that transgender students will not be forced to disclose their gender identities and thus be subject to discrimination when they apply for jobs, seek admission to graduate and professional schools, or at any other time when they must show a college document.
- This issue can be resolved by establishing a simple procedure for transgender students to change the name or gender marker on all of their campus records, including ID cards, listings in electronic and print directories, and files in admissions, financial aid, the registrar’s office, and the health center.