

DISSERTATION

EXAMINING THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF TRANSGENDER
STUDENTS AT SMALL, PRIVATE, LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTIONS: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

EXAMINING THE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS AT SMALL, PRIVATE, LIBERAL ARTS INSTITUTIONS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

As the population of students who identify as transgender grows on college campuses, it is critical that higher education identify the ways in which institutions can more effectively serve the needs of this population, creating an environment that is supportive and inclusive. The literature demonstrates that campuses have fallen short of this goal. This study was designed to understand the lived experiences of seven transgender students who matriculated at small, private, liberal arts institutions in the south and southeast. By understanding their lived experiences, institutions that are truly committed to creating an environment that is diverse, equitable, and inclusive can understand common areas where institutions fall short and understand the ways in which participants experienced support and inclusion in meaningful ways during their time as undergraduates.

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LIST OF KEYWORDS

In some contexts, the concepts of sex and gender have been used interchangeably, but in order to discuss issues related to gender identity, especially those who identify along the transgender spectrum, one must be distinguished from the other. Synthesizing the following concepts into manageable definitions is no easy feat. Developing terminology for identity groups is a bold and presumptive act, but as Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, and Frazer (2010) model, one can honor an individual's voice within research, as well as, provide clarity by offering "definitions" to terms used throughout research (p. 46). Thus, with clarity in mind, the terms/definitions noted in Table 1 serve as the foundation for this study, respecting that not all individuals self-identify with these generalized identity constructs.

Table 1. Relevant Terminology

Term	Definition
Birth Sex	Male and female distinction determined through bio-physiological indicators such as chromosomes and genitalia (Rankin et al., 2010).
Gender	A social construct used to categorize difference (e.g., physical, behavioral, appearance) between biological sexes; generally restricted to the gender binary of man and woman (Pusch, 2005; Rands, 2009; Rankin et al., 2010).
Gender Identity	Self-identified sense of one's gender, independent of bio-physiological indicators (Bilodeau, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010).

Gender Expression	How an individual chooses to display their gender identity through dress, behavior, appearance, etc. (Rands, 2009; Rankin et al., 2010; Wilchins, 2004).
Transgender	“Encompasses a wide range of identities, appearance, and behaviors that blur and cross gender lines” (Beemyn et al., 2005, p. 46). Individuals who identify along the transgender spectrum may identify as Transmasculine spectrum or Transfeminine spectrum (Rankin et al., 2010).
Trans*	A term intended to represent individuals “who transgress the socially constructed discourse of how we identify, express, and embody our genders” (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 169). The asterisk is designed to “signal the expansiveness and constantly expanding communities of trans* people” (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 169). The researcher will employ this term throughout the majority of the study as it most respectfully captures the breadth and complexity of each participant’s gender identity.
Gender Non-Conforming	Current gender identity is not man, woman, or transgender (Rankin et al., 2010). For the purpose of this research, GNC will be encompassed within the Transgender (T) umbrella.
Cisgender	An individual whose birth sex matches their gender identity (Evans, 2010).

CHAPTER 1 – INTRODUCTION

Research has shown that college campuses can be difficult environments for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (i.e., LGBTQ) (Rankin et al., 2010; Rankin, 2003). While efforts are being made to improve campus climate on colleges and universities, studies have yet to reveal the path towards inclusivity and identity celebration. Initiatives like Safe Zone trainings have a positive impact at the personal level—causing an LGBTQ student to view a trained individual as more accessible—but these programs do not shift an LGBTQ student’s perception of the campus climate as a whole (Ballard, Bartle, & Masequesmay, 2008). Despite the challenges, colleges have created their own issue by grouping sexual orientation identity and gender identity within a single subpopulation. As Pusch (2005) asserted, many studies assume that transgender students have the same, if not similar issues, as the lesbian, gay and bisexual population; however, the needs of the transgender population are unique as they navigate an environment built on the gender binary of man or woman, where assumptions are made that biological sex predicates gender identity. Genderism is built into the fabric of our institutional infrastructure, and its impact can be felt at every turn—every restroom, every residence hall, every athletic facility—by our transgender students.

Unfortunately, reworking the physical structures of campuses simply changes space; not culture, and thus, creating an inclusive ethos should be the primary focus of colleges and universities. According to the research, institutions are falling short in this endeavor, as well. Studies have shown that the transgender population experiences higher levels of harassment and discrimination on campus even in relation to their LGBTQ peers (McKinney, 2005; Rankin, 2003; Rankin et al., 2010). At the institutional level, transgender students reported that faculty,

staff, and even LGBTQ advisors lacked a basic understanding of their issues and needs (McKinney, 2005). Transgender students have found themselves absent from the curriculum and unacknowledged in campus policy (Hudson, 2007; McKinney, 2005; Rankin et al., 2010). Most dishearteningly, transgender students reported that perhaps their most vital resource, the LGBTQ student organization, did not serve them, but rather focused on the needs and issues of the lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations, causing transgender students to feel as though their “existence was buried in the LGBT[Q] group” (McKinney, 2005, p. 72). Notably absent from the literature was where transgender students are finding support both within and beyond the confines of campus. Institutional shortcomings are worthy of research—the story of the transgender college student would be incomplete without exploring that reality; however, it is critical to understand what is happening for these students, in spite of the aforementioned neglect, that allows them to endure, persist, and graduate. As Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, and Tubbs (2005) have noted, the transgender student population is growing on our campuses, therefore, colleges and universities cannot be passive in rectifying their shortcomings and most certainly must find ways to support them more effectively. To accomplish that task, greater understanding of these students and their experiences is required.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of the transgender students as they navigated the undergraduate experience at small, private liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States. By engaging smaller campus populations, the research detailed the experiences of transgender individuals who were one of just a few transgender students on campus.

Research Questions

The guiding research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of transgender college students as they navigate their undergraduate experiences at small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States?

For clarity and depth of understanding of the lived experience, the following sub-questions were explored:

1. How has being a transgender student impacted the undergraduate experience?
2. What are the lived experiences within the academic setting (e.g., class, faculty interactions, advising, academic resources)?
3. What are the lived experiences of the co-curricular setting (e.g., student organizations, orientation, campus involvement)?
4. What are the lived experiences in the residential setting (e.g., on-campus housing, roommate relationship, residential environment)?
5. What are the lived experiences in surrounding community (e.g., connections/resources/support beyond the college setting)?
6. What barriers exist that hinder transgender students from fully experiencing college?
7. What does support and inclusion look like on campus?

Delimitations

This study included seven participants currently enrolled in small (less than 5000 undergraduate students), private, primarily undergraduate, liberal arts institutions in the southern or southeastern United States. This study drew from multiple campuses, unique in nature, but similar in the make-up noted above. Though drawing from the same campus would have provided the opportunity to explore how lived experiences converge and diverge within the context of a single environment, it was valuable to explore the lived experiences of students

whose transgender campus community was extremely limited due to overall campus size. While many private liberal arts institutions are religious in nature, religious affiliation was not a delimitation to allow for the inclusion of private but independent campuses.

Limitations

There were limitations to this study. Because this study drew from multiple institutions, there were some attributes (e.g., programming, campus climate, etc.) unique to each campus environment that would influence the participants' college experiences. Additionally, since most participants were out as transgender to at least a portion of the campus community, this study did not fully capture the experiences of those individuals who have yet to share their transgender identity with others or are still coming to terms with their gender identity. With that said, this study did have two participants who were out only to a very limited portion of their campus community; and thus, this limitation was not as realized as originally considered. Further, since people identify as transgender very differently, a participant's individual view of self greatly influenced how they made meaning of their lived experiences and engaged with the world. Finally, as this study was limited to small, private, primarily undergraduate, liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States, there are certainly regional and institutional factors that shaped the lived experiences of the participants, causing their experiences to likely differ from transgender students in a different environment.

Significance of the Study

This research contributed to the sparse, but ever growing, literature that exists on transgender college students. Further, the outcomes of this study provide guidance as to where colleges can make critical adjustments in order to create a positive impact in the daily lives of transgender students. These outcomes inform the work of current student support services and

possibly identify new areas where resources, both human and fiscal, should be added or redistributed. Additionally, this study helps campuses chart a path towards a more inclusive environment for transgender students, including physical evolution of campus facilities, policy development, and as noted earlier, resource allocation. Finally, this study helps those students, faculty, and staff who desire to be accomplices to the transgender population but find themselves struggling to do so for a variety of reasons—a lack of knowledge and understanding, minimal institutional support, or simply not knowing where to begin. This research provides greater clarity for individuals and campuses that have the responsibility to be make a positive difference in the lives of transgender students.

Researcher's Perspective

The researcher's education on transgender student issues did not begin until the start of their as a doctoral student, and serendipitously, they were charged with researching this subject and educating peers on the findings during one of their early courses. Almost simultaneously, a transfeminine student on the researcher's campus elected to participate in sorority rush, which created a bit of tension within the sorority she was interested in joining. Upon exploring this tension, it became clear that misinformation and a lack of understanding was the greatest source of conflict, and the researcher volunteered to share their limited knowledge at the time to help the sorority make a decision from an informed place. What occurred following this presentation is the impetus for the research.

Shortly after the researcher presented, the transfeminine student, the only out transgender student within the campus community, came forward and shared her story. In that moment, academic knowledge became humanized, and the researcher felt compelled to help others share their story with the world both informally and through academic research. The experiences of

this population are moving, powerful, and sometimes tragic, and there is much still to learn from their perspective.

As a cisgender individual, the researcher recognizes that they are limited in their ability to understand and relate to the transgender experience. Additionally, the majority of their identity exists in the privileged status, and thus, the researcher has minimal knowledge as to what it means to be systematically oppressed, neglected, or ignored. And yet, it is the researcher's recognition and ownership of that privilege that compels them to conduct this research. The researcher wants to be known as an ally, not a privileged individual, and hopefully, their actions and research reflect that intent.

CHAPTER 2 – LITERATURE REVIEW

As Marine (2011) noted, published research on transgender college students remains relatively sparse; however, a review of the existing research regarding the transgender college student experience is divided into four major sections: ignorance, discrimination, neglect, and impact.

Ignorance

Whether it is considered a lack of knowledge or pervasive ignorance, studies have shown that campus entities lack the requisite knowledge to foster and effectively safeguard an inclusive environment for the transgender student population (Finger, 2010; McKinney, 2005). The transgender knowledge gap was evidenced within three subcategories: language (Finger, 2010), education (Ballard et al., 2008; McKinney, 2005; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012), and developmental frameworks (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bilodeau, 2005).

Language

The mere fact that a table of relevant terminology is a critical aspect of this article highlights the challenges that language presents when it comes to respecting the needs of the transgender community. As Finger (2010) noted, “transgender students do not fit neatly into the usual descriptions of demographic diversity” (p. 3). Unfortunately, those “usual descriptions” coincide with an unyielding but marginalizing gender binary. Finger (2010) emphasized the importance of language that supports transgender students and their identity. Language can be an empowering or a disempowering tool. Misgendering was a recurring theme within both Finger’s (2010) and Pryor’s (2015) studies as faculty mistakenly or flat out refused to use the correct pronouns and classroom peers doing little to offer support in the moment. Whether a language

misstep was an intentional slight or inadvertent negligence, these incidents created an environment that ignored and devalued that student's gender identity.

Education

Rankin and Beemyn (2012) asserted that the majority of faculty, staff, and students within higher education have much to learn about the transgender student population, going so far as to equate ignorance with discrimination—be it unintentional or otherwise. For many, the issues surrounding language above are predicated on a lack of understanding about this community. In McKinney's (2005) research on the transgender student experience, participants were asked if faculty and staff were educated about their issues. Both graduate and undergraduate students noted that faculty and student services providers—counseling, health services, and even LGBT advisors—lacked the requisite knowledge to provide support or discuss transgender concerns with any level of understanding.

It is important to note that education is simply a starting point regarding effective transgender student support. Ballard et al. (2008) examined the impact of Safe Zone training on the LGBTQ population. LGBTQ students reported feeling more comfortable at the individual level with participants of the Safe Zone training, but that individual comfort did not shift their negative perception of the overall campus climate. This distinction is important for the higher education environment that is typically looking for one-time, high impact initiatives in response to campus concerns or issues.

Developmental Framework

For student affairs scholars and practitioners, the issue of transgender ignorance begins and ends with understanding the developmental framework in which transgender individuals first recognize, come to terms with, and embrace their gender identity. Until recently, very little

research existed on this subject. Bilodeau (2005) was one of the first to explore transgender identity development by examining if D'Augelli's (1994) model of sexual orientation identity development could translate to transgender identity development. Bilodeau's (2005) research, which entailed qualitative interviews with two transgender college students, found that the model worked for transgender identity development—exiting a traditionally gendered identity; developing a personal transgender identity; developing a transgender social identity; becoming a transgendered offspring; developing a transgender intimacy status; entering a transgender community (Bilodeau, 2005, p. 32).

More recently, Rankin and Beemyn (2012) detailed research into the lives of transgender individuals in which they collected over 3500 surveys and conducted 400 interviews with transgender and gender non-conforming individuals, and the research yielded eight milestones that many respondents experienced as they came to acknowledge their transgender identity.

Rankin and Beemyn (2012) presented these milestones as follows:

- (1) feeling gender different at a young age;
- (2) seeking to present as a gender different from birth sex;
- (3) repressing their identity in the face of hostility and/or isolation;
- (4) initially misidentifying their identity;
- (5) learning about and meeting other trans people;
- (6) changing their outward appearance to match their self-image;
- (7) establishing new relationships with family, friends and coworkers; and
- (8) developing a sense of wholeness within a gender normative society. (p. 3)

Findings such as these not only can inform the work of practitioners, but it also enables others to understand a transgender individual's own process of self-discovery—a developmental process that occurs in the face of hostility, personal misunderstanding, and eventual acceptance.

Discrimination

Sadly, Rankin et al. (2010) portrayed a difficult reality for LGBTQ students, faculty and staff in a nationwide, quantitative study that examined incidents of harassment and discrimination, as well as, the perceptions of the campus climate as compared to heterosexual and cisgender individuals. That reality was even starker when transgender individuals were considered as a separate population. As research detailed, discrimination comes in a variety of forms, including harassment (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Rankin et al., 2010), isolation (Dugan et al., 2012; Rankin et al., 2010), and lack of policy support (McKinney, 2005; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012).

Harassment

In Rankin's (2003) study of higher education, the respondents (LGBT students, faculty, and staff) saw transgender individuals as the population at greatest risk for harassment at colleges and universities. In a follow-up study of over 5,000 LGBT individuals, Rankin et al. (2010) confirmed these findings. Not only were transgender individuals more likely to be harassed due to their gender identity, but transgender respondents (87% - transmasculine; 82% - transfeminine) were significantly more likely to indicate gender expression was the reason for the harassment than their cisgender counterparts (Rankin et al., 2010). Harassment can evidence itself in many forms. In a national study, almost all transgender youth reported being verbally harassed and the majority were physically harassed in the past year (GLSEN, 2009; Rands, 2009). With this evidence in mind, it's not surprising that transgender individuals viewed the campus climate as less comfortable and reported observing incidents of harassment based on gender identity with significantly greater frequency than their cisgender peers (Rankin et al., 2010). Dugan et al.'s (2012) study supported Rankin et al.'s (2010) findings. In a study of 91

transgender students and 91 of their heterosexual and cisgender peers, transgender students reported significantly more incidents of harassment and discrimination than their heterosexual and cisgender peers, which ultimately impacted their view of campus climate (Dugan et al., 2012).

In a study of transgender and gender non-conforming graduate students, Goldberg, Kavalanka and Dickey (2019) found that 2/3 of respondents (n=61) reported that safety concerns impacted their gender presentation, causing them to dress more according to gender stereotypes than they would have preferred. Respondents stated that their transgender identity “might invite rejection, ridicule, and possibly violence” (p. 44). Of those respondents that did not feel unsafe (n=30), fifteen indicated that it was because they “passed.” Similarly, Garvey and Rankin (2015) found that gender non-conforming LGBTQ participants experienced the classroom environment as less accepting than their gender conforming peers, causing students to avoid disclosing their LGBTQ identities out of concern of harassment or mistreatment.

Isolation

In addition to overt forms of harassment, Rankin et al.’s (2010) study found that isolation occurred differently for transfeminine and transmasculine individuals. For transfeminine respondents, isolation evidenced itself as “being deliberately ignored or excluded (69%) and isolated or left out (62%)” (p. 62). For transmasculine respondents, isolation came in the form of unwanted or unfair attention, being asked to serve as the authority for all transgender people (Rankin et al., 2010). Dugan et al. (2012) also found that transgender participants felt less a sense of belonging than their heterosexual and cisgender peers. Being ignored or singled out can lead to isolation for anyone, especially for an already marginalized population.

Isolation can also be experienced when policies or institutional practices create a highly

individualized process because of one's identity. Nicolazzo and Marine (2015) conducted a case study on the RA selection and placement process involving a trans* student. After initially assuring the student that they would be able to live according to their gender identity, the Residence Life department altered that decision, highlighting their own lack of understanding around gender identity. By the end of the selection process, the department had consulted with legal counsel and crafted a justification based on assumptions around risk and safety, all without consulting the student. No one likes to feel singled out, but in this case study, the college did so in a way that not only isolated this student but also removed their agency around decisions connected to their gender identity (Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015).

Lack of Policy Support

Despite the evidence that transgender students are experiencing harassment both before and during college (GLSEN, 2009; Rands, 2009; Rankin et al., 2010), gender-identity is not a part of most universities' non-discrimination policies. In McKinney's (2005) qualitative study, which yielded participants from sixty-one different colleges and universities, respondents reported that none of their institutions included gender identity or expression in the nondiscrimination policy. Supporting that finding, Beemyn and Rankin (2012) noted that 90% of colleges and universities have done nothing to make their campuses more transgender inclusive, including adding "gender identity and/or expression" to their nondiscrimination policies. At the most basic policy level, transgender students are not offered the same protection against discrimination as other identity groups. To remedy this, Beemyn (2003) believed that "gender identity" should be added to an institution's non-discrimination policies.

As policy support is an essential aspect of trans-inclusion, Beemyn (2003) advocated for a comprehensive review of all print and digital materials to incorporate trans-inclusive language,

setting a new institutional norm. Clear and accessible procedures to respond to the needs of the trans* students, faculty, and staff are also critical. From name changes on student records to established protocols for incidents of violence or harassment, the college must codify their commitment to trans-inclusion (Beemyn, 2003).

As colleges seek to develop trans* or gender inclusive policies, it is incumbent on higher education professionals to be mindful of the narrative behind this work. In a qualitative study with Student Affairs professionals, Marine, Wagner, and Nicolazzo (2019) found that as professionals described the college's efforts to implement gender inclusive housing, normative narratives emerged. These narratives framed responding to the needs of trans* students as burdensome or "a charitable act, rather than an essential service" (p. 222). Participants articulated concerns related to assumed opposition rather than centering on the needs of their trans* students. This study signals the dangerous disconnect that can occur when inclusive policy and practice is not partnered with an inclusive mindset that actively challenges normative narratives.

Neglect

As noted previously, discrimination can come in many forms. For marginalized populations, a silenced voice or one that is simply neglected can be a significant challenge to overcome. On college campuses, neglect can reinforce institutionalized oppression and hinder the positive outcomes that come from increased exposure to difference. This section is subdivided into curriculum (Furrow, 2012; Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Hudson, 2007), facilities (Finger, 2010), resources (McKinney, 2005), and peer support (McKinney, 2005).

Curriculum

For LGBTQ students, findings demonstrated that the college curriculum remains an

instrument of neglect, but research also detailed ways in which the academic setting can be a powerful tool for awareness. For instance, Hudson (2007) engaged in a review of composition readers, which demonstrated a lack of LGBTQ representation in the academic offerings. Furrow (2012) yielded similar results through interviews with writing faculty, as well as, LGBTQ students who had taken a composition course. Students expressed a desire for LGBTQ issues to be included in the curriculum. Hudson's (2007) findings detailed the value of personal identity exploration when LGBTQ stories were added to the curriculum while Furrow's (2012) respondents noted that increased LGBTQ exposure might adjust prevailing stereotypes. Both findings yield positive outcomes for all classroom participants when LGBTQ negligence in the curriculum is addressed. For trans* students, a non-inclusive curriculum yields negative perceptions of the classroom environment (Garvey & Rankin, 2015).

The literature does highlight an important caveat when trans* representation emerges within the curriculum. Duran and Nicolazzo (2017) conducted a qualitative study in which participants spoke to the challenge of being forced to serve as a subject matter expert based on their identity—"classmates *look at* them and exploit their experiences, rather than seeking understanding *with* the trans* individual" (p. 535). It is worthy of note that the distinction between "looking at" versus "looking with" was not isolated to the academic setting, but rather was an important concept in romantic relationships and social connections for trans* participants.

Facilities

As Rankin and Beemyn (2012) asserted, 90% of American colleges and universities have done nothing to make campus facilities more gender-inclusive. For transgender students who do not fall within the gender binary (i.e. the assumption that all individuals identify as either male or

female), campus facilities serve a consistent reminder of transgender neglect. Finger's (2010) research emphasized the value of gender-inclusive facilities, including but not limited to bathrooms, locker rooms, and housing. Gender-inclusive facilities should not only provide appropriate privacy, an important consideration for all students but critical for transgender students, but also seek to neutralize gender normative messaging (Finger, 2010).

Heller, Berg, and Prichard (2021) analyzed the 2017 National College Health Assessment data and found that students who identified gender diverse (e.g., trans* or non-binary) experienced greater incidents of interpersonal violence, psychological distress and suicidality when living in university housing as compared to off-campus living. These findings highlight the importance of gender-inclusive facilities as most university housing reinforces “fixed gender binaries” (p. 1).

Resources

McKinney's (2005) research revealed that transgender students do not view student services such as counseling and health services in a positive light. As McKinney (2005) notes “students who are struggling with gender-identity issues often need to speak with a trained therapist, but such assistance is often not readily available” (p. 69). “Only 3 of out 50 participants reported that their counselors had been helpful, knowledgeable, and very supportive” (McKinney, 2005, p. 70). For graduate students, health care was viewed as a critical service especially for those undergoing a transition, but one student even noted that student health insurance offered through the campus had transgender exceptions in the policy (McKinney, 2005).

Rankin et al.'s (2010) national study confirmed the general sentiments of McKinney's (2005) findings. LGBTQ “respondents were less likely to agree that the University/College

provided adequate resources on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning (LGBTQ) issues and concerns” (p. 15). This recurring concern regarding resource availability and accessibility is highly troubling. Effrig, Bieschke & Locke (2011) found that transgender respondents were two times more likely to engage in self-injurious behavior and three times more likely to attempt suicide than cisgender respondents. The lack of access and trust in counseling and health resources could have dire consequences for this population.

Peer Support

Most salient to this study is neglect in the area of the LGBTQ center and its associated student organization. McKinney’s (2005) research revealed that only a third of the participants even had an LGBTQ center on their college campus, and unfortunately the faculty and staff associated with the center were viewed as inadequate support personnel. As McKinney (2005) notes:

Even the LGB staff/faculty are largely ignorant—though not overtly bigoted, their ignorance takes a toll. Trans issues are still seen as add-ons/expendable as opposed to being an integral part of so-called LGBT on campus. The campus LGBT center staff lack even a basic understanding of the realities facing trans folk on this campus. (p. 70)

Beemyn (2003) highlighted that faculty and staff dedicated the LGBTQ centers must have a requisite knowledge of transgender experiences to ensure their work and the trainings with which they are associated are trans-inclusive. By having that foundation, faculty and staff can help address the disconcerting reality within LGBTQ student organizations.

McKinney (2005) detailed that most campuses offered an LGBT student organization, but transgender students found the organization neglected their issues, focusing primarily on

sexual orientation identity instead. One graduate student noted, “Our existence is buried in the LGBT group. Trans people are acutely aware of this. I would say it really hampers the accessibility of it” (McKinney, 2005, p. 72). In an era where colleges and universities continue to grapple with how to support transgender students at the institutional level, it is vital that LGBTQ student organizations are a source of transgender support and not transgender neglect.

Nicolazzo’s (2017) research furthers that point in detailing the trickle up approach to diversity and inclusion. Nicolazzo (2017) suggested that it would be more effective for the trans* community to build partnerships with other communities whose goals aligned with theirs. Rather than waiting for the college to take inclusive action, a coalition of peers would yield the most positive change. This research reflects the momentum of grass roots efforts in which the community drives change rather than an established system of power.

Impact

Research has shown that allowing the status quo to remain for the transgender student population is unsound. For transgender students, discrimination, ignorance, and neglect can lead to an increased risk of attrition (Rankin et al., 2010), but what is lost for the broader campus community when representation is diminished? Two studies addressed this question.

Brown (2004) explored how different populations perceived the campus climate for LGBTQ students rather than developing a generalized sense of campus climate across all populations. While findings reinforced previous research—LGBTQ discrimination, harassment, and fear (Evans, 2001; Rankin, 2003), Brown (2004) noted between group differences. For instance, LGBTQ students perceived campus climate more negatively than others—a finding supported by Rankin et al. (2010). Additionally, when compared to upperclassmen, freshman reported less involvement with LGBT-related activities, less attitude change during the year, and

a lower perception of anti-LGBTQ attitudes on campus. Further, Resident Assistants (RAs) reported a greater change in attitude and increased learning about LGBTQ issues and concerns as compared to the general student population (Brown, 2004). But what do the differences indicate? Evans and Herriott's (2004) research may provide some insight.

Evans and Herriott (2004) explored the experiences of student researchers assisting with an LGBTQ campus climate study. Participants journaled throughout the study and met regularly with the researcher in order to make meaning of their experiences. Findings indicate that through exposure to the LGBTQ population and their related issues and concerns, student's perceptions changed over time, they became more aware of their own values, identities, and interactions related to gender/sexual orientation, and became more involved in LGBT-related activities and advocacy.

Evans and Herriott (2004) provided some initial impressions related to the value of education regarding LGBTQ issues and opportunities for interaction between LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ students. Related to Brown's (2004) findings, it is possible that RAs gained greater awareness of LGBTQ issues through training, as well as, increased exposure to the LGBTQ population due to their helping role, yielding positive developmental outcomes.

Education and exposure are a start, but Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, and Smith (2005) offer guidance beyond awareness. Trans-inclusion a process; not an arrival point. Beemyn et al. (2005) highlighted beginner, intermediate, and advanced recommendations for a variety of content areas—residence halls, bathroom facilities, programming, etc. These recommendations will certainly serve the campus, but most importantly, they challenge the status quo and create a more inclusive environment for transgender students.

Campuses and practitioners who experience the positive impacts of education and awareness are well-positioned to engage what Nicolazzo (2017) described as the epistemology of love. In this framework, people “see and hear each other for who we are, which requires giving each other the agency to define who we are for ourselves as well as allowing each other to change and amend” over time (Nicolazzo, 2017, p. 153). By centering on an individual’s humanity as they define it, a person (be they a peer or practitioner) would be more inclined to consider how actions, policies, or processes impact others and be responsive to their expressed needs.

CHAPTER 3 – METHODOLOGY

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the lived experiences of transgender students as they navigated the undergraduate experience at small, private liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States. By engaging smaller campus populations, the research detailed the experiences of transgender individuals who were one of just a few transgender students on campus.

Research Questions

The guiding research question for this study was: What are the lived experiences of transgender college students as they navigate their undergraduate experiences at small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States?

For clarity and depth of understanding of the lived experience, the following sub-questions were explored:

1. How has being a transgender student impacted the undergraduate experience?
2. What are the lived experiences within the academic setting (i.e., class, faculty interactions, advising, academic resources)?
3. What are the lived experiences of the co-curricular setting (i.e., student organizations, orientation, campus involvement)?
4. What are the lived experiences in the residential setting (i.e., on-campus housing, roommate relationship, residential environment)?
5. What are the lived experiences in surrounding community (i.e., connections/resources/support beyond the college setting)?

6. What barriers exist that hinder transgender students from fully experiencing college?
7. What does support and inclusion look like on campus?

Research Design

This study uses qualitative phenomenology. More specifically, the researcher employed interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), which seeks to provide a detailed examination of the “human lived experience” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, p. 32). The researcher also employed a constructivist philosophy, exploring how individuals construct meaning by engaging their world around them (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The participants of this study consisted of seven undergraduate students who identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. The participants attended small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern or southeastern United States. Participants were drawn from a convenience sample (Creswell, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994) of institutions in relative proximity to the researcher’s home institution. The sample was purposeful as all participants identified as gender non-conforming or transgender, but each participant defined their gender identity their own way. A purposeful sample helped ensure the participants were able to answer the research questions driving the study (Creswell, 2014).

Methodology

The use of IPA was appropriate for this study as the researcher was attempting to understand the lived experiences of a certain population within a specific type of setting (Smith et al., 2009). In this study, the research questions were designed to understand the lived experiences of transgender students during their undergraduate experience. In keeping with that end, the questions were “exploratory not explanatory” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 47). This meant the

questions were open-ended, allowing the participants to respond in the manner of their choosing rather than to be guided by the researcher.

This study also lent itself to IPA because homogeneity was critical to answering the research questions effectively. As Smith et al. (2009) noted, the levels and factors of homogeneity were determined by the study. For this study, those factors were transgender identity, undergraduate student status, and attendance at small, private liberal arts institution in the southern or southeastern United States. Since qualitative research is not focused on generalizability of findings, homogeneity was not a limitation and was incredibly important for IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Data Collection

To gain access to transgender students from a variety of small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern or southeastern United States, the researcher contacted staff members most directly connected to the campus LGBTQ student organization, likely a member of the Multicultural Affairs office or the LGBTQ student organization advisor upon receiving IRB Approval from Colorado State University (Appendix I). If a transgender support group existed on a campus, the researcher contacted the coordinating officials for that group, as well. Initial contact was made by email, and if the staff member was willing to assist in reaching out to possible participants, the researcher sent a follow up email to confirm support and provide clear instruction on study parameters and participant qualifications (Appendix B). A sample participant recruitment letter (Appendix C) was provided, as well, to aid this process.

After participants were selected, an email was sent to them that provided additional details and facilitated the scheduling of interviews (Appendix D). The researcher met with each participant at a mutually agreed upon location to conduct the interview. Prior to the start of the

interview, participants signed an Informed Consent Form (Appendix F), which reviewed: the purpose of the study, time requirement, possible risks, expected benefits, compensation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw participation at any time without penalty. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format that allowed the participant to share their lived experiences in their own way while still connecting to the research questions (Smith et al., 2009). All interviews were recorded for future transcription, and the researcher took minimal notes in order to fully engage the participant. Participants selected an alias to protect confidentiality, and the student's home institution was removed from the transcript in the event it was mentioned during the interview. Following the interview, the recording was uploaded to a password protected drive, and informed consent forms were stored separately from all data and transcriptions to protect participant confidentiality.

Following each interview, the recording was transcribed by a transcription service for coding at a later date. Once transcribed, the researcher provided a copy of the interview transcript to the participant to review for accuracy (Appendix G). The transcript was shared via electronic link to a password protected document for confidentiality. Participants had ten days to review the transcript and request any changes. After that time, the transcript was considered an accurate portrayal of the interview. At the conclusion of the study, all participants received a summary of the findings along with a final letter of appreciation (Appendix H).

Data Analysis

Once transcription was completed, coding occurred in a manner representative of IPA analysis. First, the researcher read and re-read a single interview transcript (Smith et al., 2009). This allowed the researcher to get an overall sense of the interview. Second, initial transcript notation occurred (Smith et al., 2009, p. 90). As a part of this process, the researcher highlighted

substantive comments and phrases, providing the foundation for the next step. Third, emergent themes were identified within the individual transcript (Smith et al., 2009) by capturing representative quotes and noting possible themes in a word document next to each quote. At this time, the researcher intentionally stepped away from the transcript, returning later with fresh eyes as means of checking to ensure coding remained consistent and refined as needed (Saldana, 2012). Next, connections were examined across emergent themes (Smith et al., 2009). In this step, the researcher designated thematic clusters under a created “super-ordinate” theme (abstraction) or by grouping other themes under a unifying emergent theme (subsumption) (Smith et al., 2009). Once steps one through four were completed with the first transcript, those steps were revisited with the next transcript (Smith et al., 2009). When moving to a new transcript, it was critical to allow themes to emerge naturally rather than seeking to have them mirror the prior transcripts. To address this issue, the researcher engaged in an exercise of reflection to explore current assumptions and premature conclusions in an attempt to prevent those biases from impacting the research (Creswell, 2014). In the final step, thematic clusters were explored across all cases, identifying recurring concepts and ideas, as well as, noting particularly significant data within a single case. Additionally, special attention was paid to convergence and divergence in the data.

Trustworthiness

In qualitative research, trustworthiness is a critical issue (Creswell, 2014). Trustworthiness was enhanced through the following measures—reflexivity, member checking, and code/re-code. Throughout the study, the researcher engaged in reflection to ascertain how the researcher’s assumptions both impacted and influenced the study (Creswell, 2014). For example, the researcher assumed all parties would be largely out within their campus

community, but that was not the case for multiple participants, and the researcher quickly adjusted that perspective so as not to impact the study. Additionally, while the researcher had an intellectual understanding of the transgender community, he found that it was critically important to allow the participants to define their identity for the researcher so that he could mirror their language and maintain rapport and trust with the participants and limit how prior research influenced his analysis of the data. After each interview, the researcher reflected on the interview process, initial thoughts, and possible biases that could negatively influence data analysis. By engaging in this process, the researcher was aware of possible pitfalls when it came time for data analysis; therefore, being intentional to avoid them in that phase of the research process.

Member checking was utilized to ensure the researcher had captured the primary ideas and concepts each participant was trying to convey during interviews (Creswell, 2014). Following each interview, the researcher provided participants access to their interview transcript for review. The researcher gave the participants ten days to clarify or correct anything. Member checking helped the participants feel engaged in the research process and demonstrated a desire to reflect their perspective as accurately as possible.

During the coding phase of the research, the researcher employed the code/re-code method to verify that similar themes were emerging from the data and to refine the coding process (Saldana, 2012). After coding the data initially, the researcher stepped away from the interview transcript for a minimum of twelve hours before returning to the original transcript and recoding the data. After recoding, the two data sets were compared to verify that similar themes were emerging. This process was done within a Word document as it allowed the researcher greater ease of theme notation while preparing for the writing process.

CHAPTER 4 – FINDINGS

Seven students who identify as transgender or gender nonconforming were interviewed as a part of this study. Participants attended small, private, liberal arts, primarily undergraduate institutions in the southern and southeastern United States. The study sought to explore the lived experiences of these individuals as they navigated their undergraduate years by answering the following research questions:

1. How has being a transgender student impacted the undergraduate experience?
2. What are the lived experiences within the academic setting (i.e., class, faculty interactions, advising, academic resources)?
3. What are the lived experiences of the co-curricular setting (i.e., student organizations, orientation, campus involvement)?
4. What are the lived experiences in the residential setting (i.e., on-campus housing, roommate relationship, residential environment)?
5. What are the lived experiences in surrounding community (i.e., connections/resources/support beyond the college setting)?
6. What barriers exist that hinder transgender students from fully experiencing college?
7. What does support and inclusion look like on campus?

Participants

Each participant brought a rich narrative to this study, sharing not only how their trans* experience has shaped their time in college but reflecting on their experiences as their whole selves. In sharing fully of themselves, a more nuanced understanding emerged of their lived experiences as students who identify as trans*.

Sam was a junior who came to understand her transgender identity after arriving at college and being exposed to the language to describe how she viewed her gender identity. During her time as an undergraduate, she found a difficult dichotomy of supportive allies and individuals and systems that did not affirm her identity. Still, Sam recognized that her college was attempting to become more responsive to the needs of trans* students, and she felt fortunate to be a part of a community that was making an effort (personal interview, January 27, 2017)

Echo was a sophomore who had transferred to her undergraduate institution after having attended a bible college in her first year. Echo was the only black-identified participant of this study, and that aspect of her identity shaped her lived experience in distinctive ways. In one poignant moment for this researcher, Echo reflected on the nature of the interview questions, which focused on support and inclusion, as it compared to her lived experience. Echo shared she was often consumed by the plight of black, trans* women in today's world—a plight marked by violence and murder. For Echo, while she did aspire for greater representation and campus education on trans* issues, she was also simply hoping to survive (personal interview, February 1, 2017).

William was one of two participants who transitioned at a younger age, and thus, was not open about his transgender identity while at college. William's story had received national notoriety earlier in life, but that attention also brought unwanted repercussions among his peers, especially in regards to bullying. Because of this, William opted not to disclose his trans* identity except to a few trusted individuals. As a highly involved senior, William was able to provide a great deal of insight into how his institution could improve its support and advocacy for future trans* students (personal interview, February 16 & 17, 2017).

Rob, a junior, was the other participant who transitioned at a younger age, and ultimately

decided that he did not want to be “out” while in college. Rob opted to attend college in the south so that he could more fully experience an environment that he perceived as less LGBTQ-friendly. Rob aspired to be a doctor that served the LGBTQ population, and he felt this was an important experience to have regardless of where his career took him. Not being “out” was a prominent aspect of Rob’s lived experiences, especially when experiencing challenges of protecting his identity, negotiating intimate relationships, or advocating for trans* inclusion (personal interview, February 17 & 18, 2017).

Emory was a first-year, Latinx student who viewed her college experience through a positive lens, especially when compared to her conservative home environment. Emory embraced a newfound freedom to explore her gender identity, which she described as gender fluid, among the safety of faculty and staff allies and supportive peers. Emory’s lived experiences highlighted a distinct narrative compared to the more senior participants. When evaluating her college environment regarding support and inclusion, she used a challenging home environment as her reference point; whereas, other participants had the time and distance from their pre-collegiate space to more fully consider their college environment as a distinct entity. While different, Emory’s perspective provides important insight into how an imperfect, yet supportive, environment may be experienced positively by incoming trans* students when compared to their home or K-12 environment (personal interview, February 17 & 19, 2017).

Prior to transferring to their current institution, Craig attended a residential, women’s college in the northeast where they began identifying as male. Overall, Craig reflected on their time at their original institution as positive, but they reported needing to return home after developing an alcohol problem. After spending multiple years away from college, Craig enrolled at their current institution in their home city where they opted to identify as gender fluid. Craig

reported their gender identity was driven primarily by what they believed was acceptable for their family. Throughout the interview, Craig struggled to reflect on their experience as a gender fluid student; yet spoke with great ease of their earlier time as a male-identified student at a women's college. Craig's internal conflict was apparent, and while it is this researcher's belief that Craig likely would have preferred to have been identified in this study as male, unfortunately, current circumstances appeared to have made that difficult for them (personal interview, February 17, 2017).

Alix was a second year student who began identifying as two-spirited upon discovering the concept in her academic studies. While Alix's identity existed outside the gender binary, she opted to use female pronouns in recognition that she most often presented as feminine. Alix's college experience was shaped by alternating extremes of acceptance and exclusion, as well as, uncertain waters within certain spaces. Alix, at times, chose to brave those spaces and other times felt the need to remove herself for her own protection. Thankfully, Alix eventually found important opportunities and spaces in which she felt seen, validated, and celebrated (personal interview, March 20, 2017).

Emergent Themes

Multiple themes emerged during data analysis, revealing five major phenomena within the research—trans* identity as test case, self-protection, marginalization, institutional indifference, and trans* affirmation. First, participants experienced their college environment as if they were the initial test cases for trans* students on their campuses, navigating environments and systems that were uneducated or ill-prepared for trans* issues. Second, many participants took strategic steps to protect themselves and their identity during their time in college. Third, participants detailed several experiences of marginalization due to indifference, rejection, or

exploitation of their trans* identity. Fourth, institutional indifference to trans* student issues caused facility challenges, lack of representation, and problematic silence from senior administration. Finally, participants did report experiences of trans* affirmation involving faculty, staff, and student allies, as well as, finding a community of support among other trans* students. Each of these themes, these phenomena, will be explored in depth, highlighting the voice of each participant as they shared the challenges, pain, and joy of their college experience.

Trans as Test Case*

Most college students desire simply to fit in upon matriculating to college, and that was certainly the case for the participants of the study. They wanted nothing more than to navigate their time at college like any other student—making friends, living with roommates, and pursuing their degree. Unfortunately, as this theme connotes, participants experienced an environment in which they were often the institutional trailblazer when it came to trans* related issues. As the campus “test case,” participants felt they were facilitating a learning opportunity for others upon their arrival. Because of this, participants were left to navigate systems and policies that were not effectively prepared to respond to their needs. Thankfully, despite experiencing painful missteps due to lack of education or understanding, participants reported that systems and policies were often updated to address their needs more effectively. For the participants, this was an unseen benefit to a negative experience.

The Learning Experience for Others. For the participants, their lived experiences as trans* individuals (and the missteps they endured because of their identity) served as a continual learning opportunity for others. As they navigated the college environment, it became clear that departments had little to no experience with trans* individuals and facilities were not designed to respond to the needs of the trans* community. It was also evident that campus policies had not

considered their identity, instead reinforcing exclusory concepts such as the gender binary and sex assigned at birth. Finally, through personal interactions, participants discovered that many individuals lacked knowledge and awareness of the lived experiences of the trans* community.

Much of what emerged in the research is delineated more comprehensively in the sections to follow as these issues affected the lived experiences of the participants in the academic, co-curricular, and residential settings. For the participants, these experiences shaped their overall undergraduate experience. They were not isolated aspects of their experience, but rather a collection of the whole, representing an environment that was not ready to accept or serve them effectively.

For Rob and Echo, the learning curve for their respective institutions meant fighting to be placed with roommates that shared their gender identity, and in Echo's case, enduring a year with male roommates before being placed in a single room the following year (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017; Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). For William and Rob, facility challenges led to moments of extreme discomfort—a lack of access to gender-neutral or gender-inclusive restrooms for William and concerns of being outted to his male roommates due a lack of privacy for Rob (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017; Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017). The challenges were a marker of cisgender privilege that demonstrated a lack of awareness or thoughtfulness about the trans* student experience. For Sam and Echo, it meant engaging with faculty and staff who continually failed to or refused to use their correct name or pronouns and experiencing the dual fear of being outted to others and confronting someone in a position of authority regarding their grades and academic progress (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017; Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). Both Sam and Echo struggled to navigate a system that requires respect for people in power,

especially faculty, even when those individuals failed to employ the minimum markers of respect for the trans* community.

When these learning moments were met with responsiveness and adjustments, the participants of the study saw hope amid uncomfortable and sometimes painful moments in their undergraduate experience. When these moments were met with ignorance or indifference, it caused them to question just how welcoming and safe their college environment was, and safety, as this study highlights, is a critical aspect as to how the participants navigate and evaluate the world.

Lack of Preparedness. When discussing their initial interactions with the Residence Life department, participants described practices and policies that were underprepared for the needs of the trans* individuals matriculating on their campus. Rob reported that he had to advocate to live with other male-identified students as he was initially paired with female-identified students because that was reflected as his sex assigned at birth.

Initially that was not going to be the case because I was still legally female at that time and they told me that I was going to have to live with a female roommate. I was like, "Absolutely not," and eventually we got my gender on my transcript changed because my [state] ID card had male on it. (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

While not a legal change, Rob had been able to obtain a state ID due to an oversight at the government—not noticing the discrepancy between the application and his birth certificate (Rob, personal interview, February, 17, 2017).

It wasn't so much that the people involved were like, "No, you should be living with a woman," so much as they had these rules and they were trying to make them work for a situation that they hadn't had to work around before. That was really nice and that was a

huge relief because when they initially told me that I was going to have a female roommate I was like, "Shit. No." (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Rob had a friend who had not been able negotiate this policy effectively, and he was assigned to live with women, which was not a positive experience for his friend. Based on Rob's understanding, the policy has not been amended to allow a trans* student to live as they identify as opposed to being assigned based on their sex assigned at birth (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

Echo, who identifies as female, was assigned to live with men upon transferring to her current institution. "I live in one of the, it's a co-ed residence hall, but the rooms are gendered. I have three male roommates, which I hate with a passion" (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). As was noted earlier, this issue was later resolved for future years, but Echo lived a constant reminder that her institution was ill prepared for her presence on campus and did not affirm her gender identity.

I think it's like you're having a bad day. You go to your room, and you're just looking out at all these guys, and that can be one of the things. It's just stopping you from having a good experience or even a comfortable experience. (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017)

For Echo, her residential reality piled on already difficult circumstances and blunted the positive effects of a good day.

Emory, who viewed her institution in a positive light overall, did express concerns about the lack of gender-inclusive housing on her campus.

It makes me feel as if I'm a burden having to ask for special housing because I feel more comfortable with the people that I've met, etc. If that policy had already been here, then it

would have been easy. It would have been simple, 'Oh, wow. My university has already thought about me and people like me and wants to facilitate a healthier environment for us' (Emory, personal interview, February 19, 2017).

Emory aspired to be an RA and was hopeful to serve a gender-neutral floor for students who felt more comfortable in that environment.

Responsiveness. Participants in the study, while often disappointed with their institution, were also deeply appreciative of the times in which their institutions were considerate of their needs or corrected previous missteps. It was clear that they did not expect perfection from their institutions but rather responsiveness. Little wins for the trans* community made a huge impact.

For instance, Sam put voice to the fears associated with communal bathroom use for the trans* population in a world designed for the gender binary:

There's a constant anxiety of if you've just discovered yourself or if you're not out or whatever of, "Well, if I go in here, I'm going to feel horrible because I'm going to be seen as this gender, but if I go in there, I could get beat up or slapped or reported, or any number of things." You're choosing to either feel horrible because people see you one way, or be assaulted, whether verbally or otherwise. (Sam, personal interview, January 30, 2017)

That fear was a recurrent theme among many participants, and Sam was excited that her institution was seeking to implement some gender-neutral restroom facilities around campus.

What they're doing is they're finding secluded bathrooms, like there's a second floor in our cafeteria building where there's this hallway that's kind of away from everything and you don't really know it's there unless you've been down there or up by the stairs, and they're trying to turn those into gender-neutral bathrooms by putting locks on the doors,

that way you get your own privacy. (Sam, personal interview, January 30, 2017)

In Sam's view, it did not matter that these gender-neutral restrooms were secluded areas of campus. It was meaningful that her institution was seeking to be supportive and inclusive of the needs of trans* students. Convenience was not even a factor in Sam's evaluation of the efforts.

For Rob and Echo, the responsiveness of their institutions removed a stressor that should not have existed in the first place—being assigned to live with roommates that did not match their gender identity (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017; Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). That stressor would have been a significant barrier to their educational experience, and so, both students viewed the outcome with relief and appreciation. Again, a basic level response from the institution made a huge impact for these students.

Sam's words captured the power of institutional responsiveness as she spoke to the importance of allowing preferred names on student IDs:

I know that preferred names are printed on ID's, whether it's a nickname or not. I feel like it's one of those things where the university understands where it has been, and never wants to be that again, and it's trying to move forward in a very positive way. I definitely feel like this campus, while in the south and while in a technical danger zone, is at least trying to be a safe space, which matters a whole lot, even in instances where there is a little bit of unease, I feel like I can definitely come to the proper people over it and make it a better space. (Sam, personal interview, January 30, 2017).

In Sam's eyes, responsiveness was a restorative action on the part of the college and impacted her view of the college as a safe (or safer) environment that it once had been.

Self-Protection

Over the course of the study, multiple participants detailed the steps they had taken to protect themselves and their trans* identity. Experiences prior to college had shaped their need to focus on personal safety, their mental health, and critically examine their view on “passing.” Like any other student, they wanted to believe their undergraduate institution was as safe place to be their authentic selves, and yet, the past, and even current experiences, had taught them differently. For the participants, safety was an ever-present concept. This constant state of uncertainty around safety affected the mental health of participants. For many of them, self-protection influenced their decision to disclose their trans* identity to others, even if it meant opting out of certain college experiences in order to feel safe.

Personal Safety. The most prevalent theme to emerge from this study was the participants’ focus on the concept of “safe” as it related to their environment and the people with whom they came in contact. For some, safety was a factor in not sharing their trans-identity upon arriving at a new college. William transitioned at age seven, and his story was highlighted on a popular television program, which meant his was a very public transition. Because of this, William experienced a great deal of bullying in high school (personal interview, February 16, 2017). As William considered his college experience, he decided not to disclose his transgender identity:

My parents and I talked about what it was going to be like when I came down here. A bunch of my family and friends were worried. And my parents and I ultimately decided, do I want to, and it was my decision, but I did consult them, do I want to be out? Do I want to tell people that I'm trans* when I get down here, or do we think it's not safe for me to do that? I erred on the side of it not being

safe. Because I would rather be incognito in the south...than be open and run the risk of something happening. (personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Having come from a high school environment that had been defined by harassment and bullying, William made the decision to choose safety over fully sharing this aspect of his identity. This decision would have unexpected repercussions for him as will be explored later in this chapter.

Rob chose to guard his identity for similar reasons, but instead of framing it as choosing not to share, he wanted to be secure in the knowledge as to who knew about his trans-identity. For Rob, safety was defined by restricted access to this part of his identity:

I guess it's less that I'm trying to prevent a lot of people from knowing, but I'm trying to prevent losing control over who knows because it's not really that I mind the people knowing, it's that I mind not knowing if someone knows because that is what feels unsafe to me" (personal interview, February 17, 2017).

For some, the college environment provided a contrast to their family dynamic—one that was safe (or safer) than home. For Emory, she had seen the statistical realities for transgender teens evidenced through friends, and she knew that it was not safe to test that possibility with her parents.

I'm actually not out to my parents. I don't think it's safe to be out to my parents. When I was a senior in high school, I had a boyfriend, and he actually ended up being homeless. We then met a friend who came out as trans to their family and was kicked out. The statistic, that one in 10 homeless youth are trans or queer, it's very true. I've lived with the statistic. I'm very aware of the homeless LGBT youth issue in the United States. (personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Craig identified as masculine and chose a different name when they attended an all-women's college, feeling safe and affirmed in that environment. Since transferring closer to home in the south, they no longer felt it was safe to do so, identifying as gender fluid in order to minimize the risk associated with their previous identity.

Now that I think about it, my family is definitely not supportive of the transitioning and all that. When I went to school at the other institution, they [the women's college] were very open and receptive to that. Then when I came back here, I felt like I have to just stop that process entirely also because you feel less autonomous, yes, when you're close to your family and everything. I just tried to be more feminine, whatever that is. I felt like I had to be gender fluid instead of going by the other name. (personal interview, February 17, 2017)

For Craig, forgoing their masculine identity in order to feel safe meant giving up what felt most comfortable.

I guess when I felt the most confident was when I identified as male. All my friends knew and were okay with it. I just embraced it. I felt safe, and that's a big thing. I was like, "I don't care if it's weird. At least my friends are okay with it. I feel awesome, so that's cool." (personal interview, February 17, 2017)

In Craig's view, "...you don't want to walk around being like, 'I'm gender fluid.' Not only because it's not safe but also because you'd just be ridiculed which I guess is not safe, that's a big major thing" (personal interview, February 17, 2017). For Craig, the ever-present fear and lack of assurance that they would be accepted at their institution held them back from truly engaging. "If anyone would know how to make this better, it would be me potentially. I know I could be doing more. But it's scary" (personal interview, February 17, 2017).

For each of these participants, the concept of “safe” was borne of very real fear based on lived experiences prior to arriving at college or within the context of their family environment. Those fears often played a significant role in the other themes that emerged from this research. Negative interactions with faculty, staff, or students reinforced that individuals within the community could not always be trusted as safe. Facility challenges often failed to meet their basic needs or threatened their manufactured sense of safety. Even well-intentioned allies overstepped in their efforts to provide support, compromising trust and creating fear. And silence—personal and institutional—came at a significant cost in different ways, but always in manner that impacted the participants’ sense of safety.

Mental health. Challenges surrounding mental health affected the lived experiences of participants significantly. Sam alluded to this barrier when discussing a problematic faculty member, but her mental health struggles extended beyond that situation.

That [the faculty member], on top of discovering my gender and trying to find a label, really, my mental health, it didn't quite go down the toilet, but it was suffering really, really badly. My biology started changing because I had been on this medication for like three or four years, and so between all of that, I ended up attempting suicide my sophomore year. That's not something people talk about a whole lot, because it's like so hush-hush in society where it's like, "Oh, that's bad, they were in a bad place. We can't talk about it. It's better now." (Sam, personal interview, January 30, 2017)

For Sam, mental health awareness and mental health stigma were also a part of the problematic silence of her campus and society in general. “I do feel like that maybe if these things weren't taboo, then I could have maybe known how to ask for help sooner, and things maybe wouldn't have happened the way they did” (Sam, personal interview, January 30, 2017).

William, too, struggled with mental health the year he transferred to his current institution, struggling to make friends and connect with organizations stemming from the knowledge that certain groups (i.e., fraternities) might not be willing to accept his trans* identity.

I think for me personally, I have struggled with mental health at [college]. Part of that is my gender identity. Part of it comes from that. Part of it is an inclusivity aspect. I got really depressed my sophomore year. I had a hard time making friends. I felt like if I didn't join a fraternity, I wasn't going to make friends, and fraternities are not a place where I can necessarily fit in, so to speak. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

William recognized that his mental health was impacting his academic performance, and he sought help from Counseling Services. “The counselors here on campus are amazing people” (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017). “They worked really hard with me. They're great, phenomenal people. It's not a fault of them, and I don't want it to be or come off that way, but that [mental health] has just been an issue for me” (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017).

Rob quantified mental health challenges in the context of stressors and burdens related to his trans* identity, and how it impacted his willingness to approach faculty for assistance when those challenges interfered with his ability to perform.

I guess if I felt confident that a professor was at least somewhat knowledgeable about these [trans*] issues and that they understood to some extent the additional stresses and burdens that an identity like mine creates, I would be a lot more willing to talk to them about it. I think that's because if I was going in to talk to someone who did not have that background understanding, that this was, at times, really tough, I guess I would feel

anxious that I was coming across as a whiny college student who was just trying to make up excuses. (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Rob's hesitation highlights a barrier to seeking help. Because he lacked confidence that his support resources would understand or be equipped to respond to his needs, Rob chose to struggle in silence. He worried that the resources, in this case his faculty, might misconstrue his intent and possibly doubt his capacity as a student. Add to this the complicated layer of Rob's privilege/pain of passing, and it's understandable how students like Sam reach a crisis point (attempting suicide) before reaching out for help.

Passing Conundrum. Participants explored the concept of passing in a variety of ways—from a recognition of the privilege associated with passing to exploring the pain of not feeling like they could fully share of themselves with others. Participants recognized that they navigated the campus differently due to their ability to pass. Alix, who identified as two-spirited, felt comfortable presenting to the world as a woman.

I like 'She, [Her], Hers'...it works for me because it doesn't offend my masculinity. I do present femininity to my [sic] ... Nobody could call me out and be like, 'Oh, she's part of the queer community,' just by my appearance. I don't fit into the stereotypes looking-wise. I think that's kind of where I am personally. (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017).

Alix's ability to pass has made it easier for her to navigate collegiate athletics, participate in sorority life, and navigate other gendered opportunities.

Rob also shared the privilege of passing, opting not to be out within the college environment, but he spent a great deal of time reflecting on how passing came with a price. Rob

struggled with the decision not to share an important aspect of his identity with his closest friends.

Even though I do consider it [my transgender identity] only one part of who I am. At the same time, it feels hard to feel close to someone and to feel like they know you when they don't know this part of your life that is so influential, and so in some regard it's a response to feeling isolated because like I said, it was really, really hard to be here, have no one know this about me, have no one that I can go to talk to, to rant about, "Oh, this thing happened," and being able to have just a couple people who do know, and in that I feel like really know me, and that I can have that kind of intimacy with is really important for me emotionally (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

For Rob, the price of passing was a feeling of isolation as he attempted to build authentic relationships with his peers. Rob detailed further:

More freshman year than sophomore year, but freshman year it was a big stressor to be living in a dorm with a bunch of other people, none of whom knew I was trans*. Even though that was something that I had chosen, it was still tricky to navigate. There is [sic] all sorts of conversations that you get into that you'd find yourself having to make excuses for certain things that you do to protect this part of your identity, and try to appear normal, you know? (Rob, February 18, 2017)

William, who also made the decision not to share his transgender identity prior to coming to college, discussed feeling compelled to share more broadly following the Pulse Nightclub shooting in Orlando.

I told one of my friends this past summer. I told her the week after the Orlando shooting. Some of that was emotionally motivated by the event because to me, it was like if I don't

start taking steps, even in a micro way, to work on the community around me, then I will be doing nothing for the people that passed and for this homophobic, anti-trans, not persona, that's not the right word, sentiment that has been going around. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

For William, Rob, and Alix passing provided protection—safety from discrimination and harassment that they had experienced in the past, but it was also barrier to fully sharing of themselves with others and investing in their campus community in hopes of making it a better place for other trans* students.

Marginalization

For the participants, marginalization was evidenced through multiple lived experiences—faculty indifference to their identity, rejection in the co-curricular setting, and exploitation of the trans* identity by cisgender peers. Each of these subthemes highlight the ways in which participants experienced substantive harm in the curricular and co-curricular setting at the hands of faculty, staff, and students. Unfortunately, experiences like these outweighed the instances of ally behavior that will be detailed in another section, and demonstrated the level of institutional growth needed for the sake of trans* students and the importance of institutional support.

Faculty Indifference. Multiple participants reported incidents of marginalization—being misgendered and being outed due to repeated use of their “dead name”—by faculty. These incidents eventually caused them to remove themselves from spaces in which they no longer felt safe engaging. Sam experienced significant challenges with a professor who taught in her intended major.

There was one particular professor I had who I have nothing nicer to say about him other than he was a dick. I email all of my professors before I start their class, any ones I have

new, and say, “Hey, my name is Sam. I'm transgender. Here's my legal name that's on your roster. Please call me Sam. I'll be attending your class from this time on these days, and I look forward to having your class." He's the only one who's ever given me crap. He's the only one who insisted on using my legal name in front of freshman...by the way, who I made friends with who had no idea that that was not my name; that my name was Sam. It was a nightmare of a semester. That was a semester that I had to take off too for medical reasons, and it was horrible because I would go home and the dysphoria was so bad. (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017)

Sam felt she had no choice but to switch majors in order to avoid this professor and protect her mental health. Sam noted that the same professor easily adjusted to calling her lab partner by her middle name, making the professor's refusal to use her name all the more discouraging (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017).

Echo also reported experiencing challenges with faculty regarding her name and pronouns. “Well, basically it's like, I guess, there's a perceived hierarchy, which exists. There's a real hierarchy there. It's like they're the professor, so you don't want to correct them when they use the wrong pronoun, the wrong name” (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). For Echo, her respect for (or at least deference to) her professors hindered her ability to address the ways in which she felt marginalized, but that silence came at a cost of her own feelings about the incident(s). “I try to be understanding that a lot of people come from a different time, as well, but that also doesn't invalidate my feelings and where I come from” (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017).

For these participants, the power dynamics between faculty and student regarding grades, future courses, and the realities of a small campus environment made it difficult to address the

impact of these moments. Sam elected to file a complaint, but not before removing herself from this professor's direct sphere of influence by changing majors (personal interview, January 27, 2017). Echo met marginalization with deference to positional power, extending understanding and respect to faculty who did not extend her the same (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017).

Co-curricular Rejection. Participants reported a lack of acceptance within co-curricular groups and activities, which resulted in participants feeling like they needed either to step away or endure an inhospitable environment. For Alix, that meant leaving behind a sport that she enjoyed and a team she valued being a part of rather than addressing the problematic behaviors of an established coach.

It kind of hurt when I found out that she [the coach] found out that I was gay...or identified as queer, and kind of gossiped to the rest of the team about me. I was like, 'Wow, I don't really need to be in a space like that anymore.' Even though I love tennis, I had to, I decided to quit. I just could deal with being bullied anymore. (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017)

In another context, Alix opted to remain in a faith-based group that was not accepting of her queer and trans* identities because of her personal faith. When Alix introduced herself, she shared that the two most important things in her life were her queer identity and "her relationship with Jesus" (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017). For Alix, her faith caused her to remain connected to a religious student organization that did not accept her fully.

I enjoy going to Christian functions, because I am one, so I enjoy going and being in that place. It has provided me some struggles because especially [the Christian student organization] is non-affirming of transgender identities or any kind of identities like that,

or gay. Even if you're gay, you shouldn't act on it and stuff like that. (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017)

An organizational advisor appeared to be key to Alix's ability to negotiate a non-affirming environment so closely connected to her faith. Alix viewed this person as an ally "even though she may not believe that it's okay or biblically correct to be a part of the queer community" (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017).

William decided to join a fraternity on his campus but later opted to step away out of concern that his trans* identity would not be accepted. William shared:

I was uncomfortable because there's this whole idea of, there's not secrets between you and your brothers when you're pledging. And I realized that if I were to really do it, I would have to most likely reveal to everybody where I was at. And while I thought that was going to be fine within the immediate group of people that I was pledging with, I did not at all think it was going to go over well with the overarching, the overwhelming population of the fraternity as a whole. (William, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

For reasons of safety, William was not out to the majority of campus, and his sense of the fraternity culture was one that expected full disclosure, something William saved for the most trusted members of his social network.

I felt as if I was going to tell them that I was transgender, and then that bid that they gave me, that voting that they did on me, was going to change their perspective. It was going to change. And that fear of betraying someone, so to speak, was creeping up on me, so I decided not to. (William, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Trans* Exploitation. Rob's co-curricular experience centered on the theater department, a group that he had found generally affirming despite the occasional moments of trans-phobia,

usually embedded in student-run productions (Rob, personal interview, February 18, 2017). In one instance, Rob felt very strongly that a student was exploiting a sensitive transgender topic, gender affirmation surgery, for the sake of an “interesting” script idea. Rob decided that he needed to put his concerns in writing to this student, deciding to come out to him in order to strengthen his perspective. In recounting his interaction and his reasoning for sharing his transgender identity, Rob stated:

I felt like I had to do that in order for there to be weight to what I was saying. I said, ‘You are not trans*, and you can try to be really respectful in this, but I think trying to write a skit about these surgeries that are immensely complicated, that are emotionally complex, that trans* people struggle to write accurately about, this makes me feel really nervous.’

It was a longer letter than that. He was very dismissive. I know that's just one guy in the theater department, but that's kind of been my overall experience in that regard, there has been interest and intention in trans* people for the sake of a story without much regard to the fact that these are actual people and not just plot devices. I think especially in the theater department, a lot of it gets ‘OK'd’ because of the whole artistic license thing.

(Rob, personal interview, February 18, 2017)

By disregarding Rob’s perspective, the student only strengthened Rob’s assessment that this script was borne of trans* exploitation—without respect for or knowledge of the lived experiences of trans* individuals. For his own safety, Rob sought to control who had knowledge of his trans* identity, and he chose to place that sense of safety at risk in order to raise the awareness of another student. Unfortunately, Rob’s courage and trust were met with indifference.

When considering her co-curricular experience, Sam produced an interesting frog metaphor to explain the difference between identity exploitation and genuine interest.

A lot of cisgender people don't think outside of their little bubble because they're so used to the binary that you're taught in third grade science, XX equals female, XY is male and there's nothing else. For some reason gender's like a Rubik's cube to them, if it's other than that then they have these weird invasive questions they wouldn't ask a cis person. It's super, super great when instead of focusing on genitals, they're like, "How can I help you? How can I be respectful of your pronouns? How can I let other trans* people know that I'm a safe person to come to?" It's the coolest feeling ever honestly...I feel like it's the difference between dissecting a frog and watching a frog in its natural environment, if that makes any sense...Because I feel like they want to dissect me and poke me because I'm weird and new and they're going to put me up when they're done versus legitimate respect. (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017)

In Sam's view, respectful inquiry can lead to greater understanding—one that can lead to positive outcomes for both parties, but simply focusing on the biological parts misses the broader aspect of someone's identity and can be a painful, exploitative experience for the trans* individual.

Institutional Indifference

Participants detailed several ways in which their institutions were indifferent to the needs of the trans* community or even to their existence. Some of this connected to the institution's lack of education regarding the trans* community, and thus, their preparedness for trans* students, but the indifference was a distinctive concept within the research, permeating several subthemes—campus facilities, lack of trans* representation, trans* neglect, and institutional

silence on trans* issues.

Facility Issues. Regarding facility issues, bathrooms and its various associated accoutrements were a consistent topic for the participants and how it affected their lived experience on campus. William captured the importance of private restroom facilities for the trans* community:

I would say, this kind of extends itself to more than just trans* people. It's just like one of the bathrooms where you can go in and lock the door behind you and that's it. It's just one toilet in there and one sink. I believe, I choose to use the male restrooms. I'm not completely done with my surgery so I can't tell you how many disgusting toilet seats I've had to sit down on in my day. It's part of the job. But for other people who aren't comfortable going in there because they don't pass as well or they're afraid of the looks they're going to get, or people who just are really uncomfortable by the notion of public urination as a trans* person. It's huge. You don't think about it. You really don't until it hits you in the face. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

For William, the desire for private restroom facilities connected back to the overarching theme of safety, as well as, personal hygienic needs related to his transition, but it also had a practical component. On his campus, gender-inclusive restrooms were non-existent so bathroom use for himself and his trans* peers became a strategic aspect of their day. William shared, “[but] we don't even have one single stall in all of the [academic] buildings on campus” (personal interview, February 16, 2017). He noted that even if one was in place in the Student Center or within the academic area of campus:

[I]t would change a student's life because instead of sitting in [an academic building] and bursting [from a need to urinate] and having to run back to their room, they can continue

to study. It stops being their main priority. They're able to focus on school instead of how they're going to go to the bathroom. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

For William, this wasn't simply about safety, this was about his academic success.

Bathroom privacy and the safety it provides was underscored by Sam's experience on her campus in a public restroom in one of her academic buildings. Sam shared that she started the day feeling particularly positive about how she was presenting to the world, reporting no sense of gender dysphoria.

I had gone into the female bathroom to just adjust some stuff and to just go pee basically, and this creepy woman was looking in the mirror trying to figure out what gender I was and it ruined my whole day. (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017)

Sam understood that the indiscreet voyeur was attempting to ascertain if Sam "belonged" in the women's restroom, and while, upon reflection, Sam was able to report that the women's actions reflected more so on the woman than her, the incident had a salient impact nonetheless (personal interview, January 27, 2017).

When it comes to the residential environment, participants highlighted how small facility issues made a significant impact on trans* students. Rob detailed how a shower curtain presented serious challenges for him:

In the dorms, I got lucky freshman year, we had a disabled [sic] bathroom, and so I wasn't sharing a bathroom with anyone besides my roommate. That was nice because I hadn't had top surgery yet so it was a little bit less stressful. It was a really good thing I had top surgery by sophomore year because sophomore year we were sharing, it was four guys, and the fucking shower curtain was like, the upper third of it was clear. Why would you make a curtain like that? Who designed that? (Rob, personal interview, February 17,

2017)

Rob expressed initially that he still had a lot of anxiety due to the shower curtain design, and the lack of privacy it afforded, but eventually he and his roommates navigated that shared space effectively. Rob did notice that this shower curtain design was not consistent throughout campus, and thus, was an intentional installation by someone at the institution (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

When Rob was a first year student, he wore a binder on a daily basis as he had not had top surgery as of yet, which presented a challenge when the fire alarm would activate in the middle of the night. Rob explained:

The thing about chest binders, you're not supposed to wear them while you're sleeping, it's a health risk. And so, there were all sorts of, it was tricky then if you were sleeping and then the fire alarm went off and you're like, "Okay, do I try to go into the closet, take off my shirt, put the binder back on, and then leave, or do I just leave for this fire drill, and just keep my arms crossed or something?" (Rob, personal interview, February 18, 2017)

In Rob's experience, the middle of the night alarms were always false alarms, and while every other resident found themselves in safe circumstances, his inability to bind prior to evacuation jeopardized his ability to control who was aware of his trans* identity.

Participants who raised concerns about residential facility issues spoke to a general lack of privacy within the traditional double room design, which complicated daily tasks such as putting on a gender-affirming attire, hormone injections, and other trans-related care. As Sam shared:

Mostly it has to do with my gender identity because some days I would want to bind.

Binding is a very weird process because what you have to do is you have to part your chest and then I didn't have a particularly great binder, so I would have to use a sports bra and a binder, and it's a long freaking process just to get everything situated and it looks weird when you watch it. There was some times where I was like, "This would be nice without a roommate." I usually got around that by going into one of the showers and trying to change, but it's like so small. It's really hard to change in those and they're really slippery. It wasn't like a huge issue, it was just more like I would like a little privacy with my gender moment right here. (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017)

Rob also navigated privacy issues related to binding, but his main issue dealt with his weekly hormone injections.

Also, just doing the testosterone injections. This is something that I do on a weekly basis, and it's a relatively quick procedure. I mean, it only takes about 5, 10 minutes to get everything set up, and then draw up, and do the injection and put everything away, but there is still that added stress of, "Okay, I think my roommate's not going to come back. I think he's in class right now. I'm going to try to do this really, really fast, just in case." Hoping no one is going to come knock at the door. A lot of those little aspects of my life that are pretty unique to me being trans*, and trying to keep it a secret. Again, theoretically, that could've been avoided had I just been put with a roommate that I knew was supportive, and that I was comfortable coming out to, but even then, I think it still would've been stressful. (Rob, personal interview, February 18, 2017)

For both Rob and Sam, the need for privacy went beyond the need for personal space. These were regular tasks that were deeply intimate and personal, connected to their transgender

identity—an identity that neither had shared broadly with others. For them, privacy was connected to safety. That safety was a central narrative for every participant in this study.

Facility challenges and their impact on the participants were not isolated solely to the academic setting and residential setting, but with each emerging facility issue that was explored by the participants, William’s words—you don’t think about it until it hits you in the face—proved prescient time and time again.

Lack of Representation. When it came to exploring trans* issues in the academic setting, examples were few and far between. “I can’t remember a time that it’s come up even once here” (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). “Yeah, you can walk away with a degree without ever having even necessarily heard ‘transgender’” (William, personal interview, February 1, 2017). “[We] never really talked about trans* issues in any of my classes. We had like one slide in one sociology class, and it was over in two minutes” (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

William found it odd that the topic rarely arose despite the current relevance of trans-related policies and legislation.

This also goes to my roommate who's a business major. They don't necessarily, I mean they've talked about cases where in which women are discriminated against, but he has not learned that in multiple states at this very moment, I could be fired tomorrow for people finding out. The hiring practices are extremely difficult, especially for male-to-female trans* women. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

William felt strongly that this was a missed opportunity in his classmates’ educational experience. “Higher education allows you, especially liberal arts, allows you to really reflect

upon what has come, but if you are not applying it to what is happening now, then you're not learning how to accurately use your degree” (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017).

Craig shared a similar perspective, wanting to explore the growing population of out trans* individuals within society.

The trans* population has increased a lot. We need to discuss these extremes about male, female. That needs to be an issue if so many people are, or at least we're now aware of it or something. I don't know. Then I don't want to bring it up because then it's like, ‘Oh, the trans* kid bringing up their issues.’ So I hide that part of myself as best as I can.

(Craig, personal interview, February 18, 2017)

For Craig, the lack of representation in the academic setting led them to hide their identity even more. Having already done so within the context of their family environment, the classroom setting became one more environment in which they could not be themselves.

For Alix, the lack of representation emerged in a classroom experience in which any identity outside the gender binary was ignored (personal interview, March 20, 2017). A particular professor, whenever she wanted the class the work in pairs, would ask men to partner with women.

I was just like, ‘Okay, she's old school.’ I got to see where she's coming from, but it's like ... I don't know. I guess where it is, it's like, I wish my side or the queer side of it would just be recognized. (personal interview, March 20, 2017).

For Alix, as a two-spirited, gay student, the emphasis or reinforcement of the gender binary, as well as, heteronormative pairing meant that she wasn't truly seen or represented in the classroom setting.

Echo saw the lack of attention paid to trans* issues as mirroring the experience of the

LGB population in decades prior.

I feel like we're at a point where we're probably like where lesbian and gay issues were in the 80s. I feel like that's where we are with trans* issues. I think with time things will definitely improve, but there is a serious lack of education when it comes to trans* issues or even discussing trans* issues. (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017)

Echo felt it was time for her college to proactively educate the community on trans* issues so that she and her peers did not shoulder the burden of helping the campus learn about this aspect of identity.

That lack of curricular presence on trans* issues reinforced a critical point that William made as he reflected on the mindset of some of his faculty:

There are some professors here who operate under the belief that, or don't acknowledge...that there are cisgender, transgender, bisexual, gay, lesbian, black, Latino, first year college—all of those things are what make this institution great, and if you're not seeing that and if you're not acknowledging that in the way that you're teaching, then you're excluding people because only a small percentage of your class that are born and bred in [this state] and are white and are affluent are hearing it. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

William went on to articulate why such a narrow view is so problematic. “[I]f that was how the world was solved, then it would just be white, straight men fixing everything, but by including multiple groups of people from diverse backgrounds, you give all of us the opportunity to problem solve what is coming our way when we take positions in the world” (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017).

Trans* Neglect. Whereas lack of acceptance presented itself in environments not known for their trans* affirming practices—intercollegiate athletics, religion, and fraternity life—trans* neglect was most prevalent in the student organization that colleges and universities (and students) expect to be trans affirming—the LGBTQ student organization. For the most part, participants (Craig, Rob, Sam, Alix, and William) were not engaged with this student organization, opting to participate in other student involvement experiences. For those who tried, participants often found an organization dedicated to the majority identities of the group, often lesbian and gay identities, as well as, strong expectations as to how LGBTQ identities should present themselves.

Rob, whose involvement revolves around theatre, shared that he had attended the LGBTQ meeting on a few occasions but did not find it committed to trans* issues.

In the past two years, it was very, very gay oriented. There was almost no discussion of trans* people, and I remember for Trans* Day of Remembrance emailing the president about what he was going to do and it was like he had no understanding of what he even ...

I did not get the impression that it was remotely invested in trans* issues. (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Rob had grown tired of being the lone voice for trans* awareness; thus, he was not interested in remaining connected to an LGBTQ group that was neglecting one or more of its organizational identities. Since that time, Rob had heard that new leadership had taken steps to be more trans*-inclusive, but he has remained disconnected from the group. (Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

When discussing her experience with the campus' LGBTQ student organization, Emory felt that discussions/programming skewed toward sexual orientation identity because many

trans* individuals were not out on her campus. Emory shared:

I feel like it's more sexual orientation, but definitely there are ... Because a lot of times the trans* youths on campus don't want to come out as trans. The term is "stealth."

Especially if you're a trans*, like MTF/FTM, once you start passing you're stealth, nobody can tell that you're trans*. Therefore you're not going to say anything, because why would you say anything? A lot of the trans* youths are stealth, and so people perceive them as allies. That's not their fault. I agree, they have that liberty to do that.

Nobody can tell automatically that I'm gender fluid unless I tell them, or they can see that I'm not conforming because of the way I dressed that day. (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

In her first year of college, Emory still felt a connection to the LGBT group because she saw it as a community of shared experiences—united even if not equally represented in meeting and programming content (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

When Echo joined her LGBTQ student organization, she was looking for a community of shared identities but was disappointed with the lack of productivity within the organization (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). Echo stated:

I just felt like in the past it wasn't a positive environment just because all the meetings would just be people not wanting to talk about real issues. It was just like this is a safe space. We won't talk about things that are happening out there. That didn't really help me.

(Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017)

Seeking to improve the group for its members and the campus as a whole, Echo stepped into the role of president the next academic year, wanting to place emphasis on education and broadening the group's perspective.

Of course, they say respect people's pronouns, but it has to go deeper than that. You have to educate people on trans*-ness and various gender identities. You have to tell stories of people who are trans* because that's how you humanize trans*-ness by making it personal for people. I just felt like in this scenario it was just centered on white, gay and lesbian people. That's been the center of the group in the past. (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017)

Rather than leaving behind an organization that wasn't meeting her needs, Echo elected to change the organization from within, hopefully leaving it better for the next generation of LGBT students.

Institutional Silence. When participants spoke of barriers, they repeatedly mentioned the lack of institutional leadership on trans* issues—no open dialogue, no institutional messaging, and no education. Any initiatives that were taking place were predominantly student-led. “I think the clubs at this school do the majority of the legwork, and the institution gets to take a lot of the credit for it” (William, personal interview, February 17, 2017). In William's opinion, the students and the Student Affairs professionals had done their part, but senior-level institutional leadership needed to make their perspective known.

And not to diminish the Dean of Students role, or to diminish res life [sic] in any way, because they are important, and they're job is to support all students at any capacity in which they can. When someone who is sort of a face of the institution, or who is a board of trustees member, can really say, “We have your [transgender student's] back.,” it's different because there are jobs of the Dean of Students and the [Residence Life staff] to support their students. That is what they do. It is not explicitly stated by the higher ranked position of the president of the university that they have to be trans*-inclusive. (William,

personal interview, February 17, 2017)

For William, the problematic silence goes back to the questions transgender people are continually asking themselves: Am I safe? Is this campus safe? Are the people who call this place home safe? And are institutional leaders working to make it safer for the trans* community?

William served as a tour guide in the Office of Admissions, and he understood that prospective trans* students and their families were looking for signals during their visit to answer these questions for themselves.

They are going to be okay because if the president or this person is explicitly stating it [support for trans* people], okay, the students will feel more comfortable, and the school will follow. The school will naturally follow if someone puts their foot in the sand and says, this is where we are going. We are no longer going to stay stagnant. You begin to open the door. You allow progression to begin. Unless someone really states it, these grassroots movements within an institution will go so far. (William, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Echo shared a similar perspective with William, wanting institutional leadership to begin demonstrating trans*-inclusion through their actions, but she also noted that education on trans* issues needed to come first.

I think the first thing would be for administrators and people who are in roles to make decisions, like on housing and things of that nature, to become informed on trans* issues and LGBT issues in general because you're eventually going to have to deal with it because there will be trans* people. I think reaching out and getting informed are the number one things because most things happen from a top-down thinking. (Echo,

personal interview, February 1, 2017)

For Echo, silence should not be simply replaced with lip service, but talk has to include action.

Echo challenged leadership to:

Invite speakers who can talk about trans* issues. Make it [an open period event] so people will actually come. Take active steps. Because I know a lot of times when people are talking about inclusion and diversity, it's usually just a lot of talk and not really a lot of action. Be about it. (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017)

Emory, whose first year on campus had been incredibly positive, still saw the need for greater campus-wide dialogue and education on trans* issues in hopes of laying a foundation for acceptance—acceptance of others and acceptance of self.

Talking about trans* issues and maybe trans* history because we don't get a lot of trans* history anywhere on campus. That could facilitate acceptance because I feel like a lot of times it boils down to acceptance by society, by the community and of yourself in your own body. (Emory, personal interview, February 19, 2017)

Right now, in the absence of education, dialogue, and clear support from upper-level leadership, participants are still unclear as to whether they are accepted by their institution, which impacted their overall sense of safety in the college environment. Participants reported looking for answers to their most critical questions and experiencing nothing but silence.

Trans* Affirmation

Participants detailed a number of challenges related to their college experience, but many remained positive when discussing their time at their undergraduate institution because of the ways they felt affirmed in their trans* identity. The institutional missteps or systemic issues were present, but individual members of the community gave them hope for a better experience for

themselves and future trans* students. Trans* affirmation evidenced itself in three significant ways—individual allies, affirming leadership opportunities, and a community of support with fellow trans* students.

Allies. While the academic setting left much room for improvement, participants highlighted the importance of the personal connections they made with allies within the academic community—people they viewed as safe, caring, and instrumental in moving the needle forward in this area of campus. For Sam, despite her challenges with an individual faculty member, her faculty advisor was a positive presence in her academic experience:

Luckily, thank god I chose [this college], not all that bad because my advisor, who was actually the advisor of [another trans* student], so we're all kind of connected. She already knew what it was like to have a trans* person as an advisee. She already kind of got that, and sometimes she would slip up and be like, 'Is that okay? Are you fine?' It's really cool because we're close enough that she'll ask me questions and be like, 'Hey, is this an okay thing? Is this P.C.? How are you with that?' Which is awesome because I actually really like being asked questions by cis people. Not in a 'What's in your pants kind of way,' but in a 'How can I most help?' 'How can I be most respectful and stuff like that,' because to me that says that you're willing to sit down for like five seconds and think about somebody else. (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017)

Sam reflected multiple times on the value of having respectful dialogue with cisgender people about the trans* experience, and her advisor was a prime example of someone who was interested in her; not simply her biology. Additionally, her advisor was willing to acknowledge when she got things wrong and worked to correct her missteps (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017; Sam, personal interview, January 30, 2017).

Emory had an advisor, too, who turned out to be an important ally very early on in her time at college (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017). During orientation, Emory elected to share that she was gender fluid, and after receiving a positive response from her advisor, she sought her guidance about navigating her academic environment:

I asked her if I needed to explain to every single one of my professors, and she said that if I didn't feel comfortable I didn't have to do it. I never had to do anything I wasn't comfortable with. I never had to label myself. Class was class, and I came to class, as long as I was prepared, nobody gave a damn. As long as I came having done the reading, nobody gave a damn if I was wearing a binder or not. Whatever pronouns I felt with that day, I could tell the professor and they would accept me. I remember her saying if they didn't, to go talk to her, to go talk to somebody, because this institution needs to be accepting, is how she labeled it.

For Emory, that was a defining moment in her short time at college, and for the most part, her experience, which was still in its first year, had mirrored her advisor's description—accepting, affirming, and safe.

William also had an advisor that not only supported him, but actively sought to challenge the problematic actions of her colleagues.

Some of the things maybe said by professors or by her colleagues, she's actually called out and said, 'Well, you have no idea. You yourself have had students that are transgender in your classes and you don't even know,' because she knows that I've taken them, and they have no idea. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

For William, who was not out on his campus except to a few people, experiencing the positive outcomes associated with disclosing his trans* identity often caused him to grapple with his

decision not to share further. The actions of a faculty ally were powerful for him (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017; William, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

A positive aspect of the residential setting for participants was that it connected them to allies—people within their community who accepted and affirmed their transgender identity. In Emory’s view, the close proximity made it easy for her to identify those she could trust. “It’s almost innate, when you can tell that somebody isn’t okay with gender nonconforming or LGBT” (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017). For Emory, it was important to see that her Resident Assistant identified as an ally.

As I came to university and as I started meeting people, something about the university makes it feel very welcoming. I remember going into the residence halls, and there's a little ally sticker on my RA's door, and automatically I was like, ‘Okay, nobody's going to make them say that they're allies,’ so I feel comfortable. (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

Emory described her floor as a “motley crew” who “I feel comfortable with because they feel comfortable with themselves,” but it was evident she saw the RA as a tone setter for the hall (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

Echo had an equally positive view of the Residence Life student staff at her institution, having developed personal relationships with many of the staff. “Yeah, because I’m friends with a couple of the [RAs], if they're around and someone mis-genders me, they'll correct them. I think they've been supportive in a lot of the ways” (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). For Echo, not having to be the lone voice advocating for herself and trans*-related issues was important, and by stepping in, the RAs demonstrated valuable ally behaviors. For Echo, this went beyond training on how to be respectful and inclusive to something more innate in who they

were as people. “I would just say I think that’s why they’re chosen to be RAs” (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017).

Recognizing the importance of safety for each participant, exposure to and connection with allies was an important component of the residential setting, which is why allies must work diligently to nurture and protect the trust of those with whom that are allied. William’s experience with a well-intentioned but over-stepping ally drove that point home.

My RA my sophomore year when I transferred, she was in the residence hall and no one really else was. She's like, “Oh, do you want to go get dinner at [the dining hall]?” I was like, ‘Sure,’ and we were walking and she just really uncomfortably was like, “Oh, and by the way, I'm an ally and it's totally cool that...” I was like, “

‘Oh no’ (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017).

For William, “it immediately became known to me that I had been outed by the administration” (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017). As noted earlier, William had made a conscious decision not to be out to the campus community, and he had primarily spoken with Residence Life about his identity simply to ensure he was assigned a male roommate. William acknowledged the value in certain individuals being aware of his transgender identity on campus, but at minimum, he would have liked to have been informed as to who was aware, and ideally, been a part of that decision-making process (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017).

Inclusive Leadership Opportunities. Despite the short-falls of the co-curricular experience, multiple participants were able to articulate ways in which they felt affirmed and seen in the co-curricular setting. Two participants, Echo and Alix, described their experience applying for student leadership roles, Resident Assistant and Orientation Leader respectively,

and feeling affirmed in their trans* identity in ways they had not previously experienced. Alix reflected:

I was actually really surprised when I saw it [non-binary gender identity options] on the Orientation Leader application because I was like, ‘Yes, oh my gosh.’ Then I was like, ‘Should I answer it? I am applying for this, but he did put it on the application, that means he is kind of thoughtful.’ Then I was like, ‘Am I going to get judged for this because I may never have the experience to explain what it means to be two-spirited. They might just be like, that’s weird. Let’s include that to the bunch. I don’t know.’ (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017)

It’s interesting to note that despite Alix’s excitement around her identity being affirmed on the application, it also led to a great deal of doubt about whether she could trust the individual(s) to whom she would be disclosing. Alix later shared that she worried that she would be tokenized; selected to the role based on her identity and not her qualifications. In the end, she decided to share her two-spirited identity. “I was like, well, this is something else I bring. It was nice to have that space” (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017).

Echo had a similar experience when she applied to be a Resident Assistant (RA) during her sophomore year of college. Prior to that, she had been assigned with male roommates.

Especially with me wanting to apply to be an RA, that’s been one of the things I’ve been worried about, like being assigned to a male residence hall because that’s what I was born as. That’s been one of the huge things that has me worried. I definitely wish there was gender neutral situations or I don’t know. (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017)

During the process, she was informed that she would be living among women going forward, affirming her gender identity and removing that worry for her in the interview process (Echo,

personal interview, February 1, 2017).

Community of Support. In the experiences above, intentional adjustments led to important moments for participants, but the most consistent example of trans* affirmation came from participants who had a trans* student support group on campus. William was a sophomore when his group started with three people:

Then this past fall, I started going much more often. It had grown. It was great. There were like four new trans* self-identified first year students. They were able to come, and I saw them beginning to be close outside the group, which was great because it was right off the bat. They didn't even necessarily know anybody. I saw that doing a lot for people, not necessarily for myself, but I saw it being a safe haven for new trans* students.

(William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

William shared that he was not particularly close to the other two students who started in the group with him, but that did not diminish the importance of their presence in his life.

If I'm in the library and I see [one of the other trans* students] working, something about that gives me a sense of peace and calm, to know that you're not alone. I have loved the group, and I wish I could get more of it. (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017)

For William, knowing that he had trans* peers within his community made an incredible difference. While their connection did not extend beyond the support group, their presence in his life was significant.

Emory also described feeling a sense of solidarity with her peers in the trans* student support group. “The first meeting was micro-aggressions, and I remember that, I remember dealing with that, and feeling solidarity with these people. I see some of them around campus, and automatically it's a head nod, or automatically it's, ‘Hey, how are you doing?’” (Emory,

personal interview, February 17, 2017). For Emory, this group also broadened the understanding of the lived experiences of her Trans* peers. She shared:

Definitely understanding that there are a lot more people going through this than people assume. Understanding different paths within the community, because not everybody fits within the rhetoric of the trans* narrative or whatever. There's FTMs, there's MTFs, and they don't always go about doing that the same way. There's deeply closeted, and then there's people like me who are half-in, half-out, or who are fully out but just can't transition because of money. (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017)

For Emory, the diversity of gender identities and personal journeys combined with the solidarity of shared experiences affirmed her own sense of self, recognizing that her own identity was validated through her connections with others in the group.

While not many of the participants noted a support group of this nature, William and Emory shared the importance of being able to connect with their trans* peers on a regular basis (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017; Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017). For them, coming together based on a shared trans* identity, as well as, seeing group members around campus, knowing that they shared a common bond or lived experience was a critical source of support. These were people who understood their lived experiences...at least as a student who identified as a trans*, and that brought a sense of “peace” for William (personal interview, February 16, 2017) and a feeling of “solidarity” for Emory (personal interview, February 17, 2017).

Research Questions

The phenomena above greatly shaped the lived experiences of the participants—informing how they approached their undergraduate experience, how they evaluated

interpersonal and organizational relationships, and how they ultimately decided to disclose (or not disclose) their transgender identity. For the participants, each research question provided fertile ground for experiences of pain and moments of progress. No one facet of the college experience was free of marginalization or void of inclusion. In many ways, the answers to these question showcase that there is clearly room for growth, but also, a clear path forward—one that can lead institutions to a greater capacity to support their trans* students if they simply desire to commit themselves to their work.

How has being a transgender student impacted the undergraduate experience?

For the participants, safety was a dominant consideration in every aspect of college life. Every interaction, every interpersonal connection, every organization, and every decision had to be evaluated against the threat to their personal safety as trans* individuals. Unfortunately, as is the case with gender identity, safety was not a “yes/no” binary construct. For the participants, their safety had to factor a great deal of unknowns and subjective measures as they navigated the complexity of college. For some, that meant establishing clear walls regarding who they trusted regarding their trans* identity (Rob, Will). For others, it meant opting out of certain opportunities because of negative experiences (Will, Alix).

Additionally, for participants, simply asking to be seen and considered by their institution often meant they had to endure being the learning experience for others as their trans* identity had not been anticipated. Participants experienced uncertainty while departmental policies were revised on the fly (or exceptions granted) to compensate for a lack of awareness or preparation. Additionally, participants were required to challenge cis-normative practices through uncomfortable self-advocacy and unwanted self-disclosure. Oftentimes, individuals and departments had to correct previous missteps after gaining a better understanding of participants’

issues and concerns. In short, participants often felt like a trans* trailblazer regarding some very fundamental inclusive practices.

What are the lived experiences within the academic setting (i.e. class, faculty interactions, advising, academic resources)?

The academic environment is central to the undergraduate experience, especially at small, private, liberal arts institutions where direct interaction with peers and professors are a hallmark of the touted educational experience. Unfortunately, participants shared numerous instances where the academic environment was not inclusive of their trans*-identity through the direct actions of individual professors, facility deficiencies that underscored cis-normative systems, and a lack of representation in the curriculum. Despite the challenges faced by participants, affirmation, progress, and hope were found in moments of support and inclusion that were often singular, but impactful, especially through relationships with individual faculty mentors who over time proved themselves trustworthy and safe allies within the academic community. Those allies helped participants endure the more disheartening aspects of the academic experience.

What are the lived experiences of the co-curricular setting (i.e. student organizations, orientation, campus involvement)?

Participants engaged in a wide variety of co-curricular experiences, ranging from fine arts to leadership to religious groups to athletics. As participants reflected upon their co-curricular experiences, their trans* identity did not drive the activities to which they were drawn, at least initially. They selected experiences that connected with them personally—how they enjoyed to spend their time, where they wanted to contribute to campus, and what they needed from their non-academic experiences. For the most part, participants spoke of their co-curricular experience as positive despite facing consistent challenges (e.g., lack of acceptance, trans* exploitation, and

trans* neglect). Participants responded to these challenges in unique ways—some left a group or a team, some made peace for the sake of a deeper connection, and others confronted the issues head on. Additionally, many participants reported important moments of trans* affirmation, especially as they sought out leadership roles and found community with other trans* individuals. Unsurprisingly, participants who felt affirmed in their co-curricular involvement reported a more positive experience as opposed to those who felt unsupported in their trans* identity or unable to share fully of themselves.

What are the lived experiences in the residential setting (i.e. on-campus housing, roommate relationship, residential environment)?

Small, private, liberal arts institutions are generally residential in nature, requiring students to live on campus for a designated period of time during their college experience. For the participants of this study, the commitment to the residential experience created some challenges, as well as, some important connections. For many, housing policies and practices had not adapted to be inclusive of trans* students, requiring adjustments to be considered in the moment, which caused participants to experience an even greater level of trepidation about their transition to their chosen college. As was the case in the academic setting, facility issues created problematic realities for participants as they navigated close quarters with their peers, sparking fears of being outted or in close proximity to unsafe individuals. Despite the challenges, the residential setting connected participants to key resources and important allies in their educational journey, peers who affirmed their identity and student leaders, particular Resident Assistants, who worked to create inclusive environments.

What are the lived experiences in surrounding community (i.e., connections, resources, support beyond the college setting)?

For the most part, the off-campus setting was not a significant presence for participants of this study. Participants reported issues with access to off-campus opportunities, generally due to a lack of a transportation (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017) or time (Rob, personal interview, February 18, 2017), as well as, an already fulfilling on-campus experience (William, personal interview, February 17, 2017). William shared, “I think that living on campus for the first two to three years, however long you are, really is very fostering and nurturing to this environment and this mentality that your home base, your source of whatever you're looking for, is [the college]” (William, personal interview, February 17, 2017). And for Craig, who had transferred to a college in their hometown, when asked about their support network beyond campus, they replied, “Not really. Ever since I moved back, I’ve felt like I had to hide that part of myself. It’s been pretty difficult” (personal interview, February 18, 2017).

For Alix, her connections beyond campus provided something she was unable to find on campus—complete acceptance within a Christian community. Alix found a church home that was open and affirming to the LGBTQ community, and the impact of that community was significant to her. It meant she was not alone because of who she was. Alix shared:

First of all, it was hard to find. It is just another voice that I'm like, “You're not alone. Even in [this state], you're not alone.” I think that's the most significant thing that I've experienced of being in the “other”, or being in the marginalized, in the fringes. I feel weird saying that because I'm not perceived as that anyways, but having that piece of, you are not alone and you are fine the way you are. We are not going to judge you when you walk in the door, or just you when you say, "I'm two-spirited." Or "I'm part of the queer community." Not having that and having somebody saying, "You're not alone in this." is the biggest piece of all of it. (Alix, personal interview, March 20, 2017)

Alix was able to fill a critical void that her on campus experience could not, finding a Christian community that allowed her to practice her faith without judgment.

What barriers exist that hinder transgender students from fully experiencing college?

Participants considered additional barriers that existed on their campuses that hindered transgender students from fully experiencing college. For some, the barriers were systemic in nature, stemming from the actions or inaction of the institution itself—a silence that caused them to question where they stood in the eyes of institutional leadership. That silence caused a lack of trust for many, unsure of whether their home was safe and if they would be supported, should they experience incidents of discrimination or harassment. For some, the barriers were much more personal, stemming from the privilege and the pain of passing or a fundamental rejection of the construct of passing altogether. For others, the barriers were mental health as they grappled with issues quite consistent with their peers and complicated by issues related to their trans* identity.

What does support and inclusion look like on campus?

The participants had far more to share about how their institutions *could* provide greater support and efforts for inclusion rather than speaking to how support and inclusion had been evidenced during their time on campus. For many, the pain of interpersonal and institutional missteps were the most prominent markers of their experience. However, as has been shared in prior sections, support and inclusion were found at key moments—through interactions with critical allies, by establishing a community of support with fellow students who identified as trans*, and at times when the college made efforts that demonstrated a willingness to be responsive to trans* issues.

For Sam, Emory, and William, their faculty advisors were an instrumental source of

support and inclusion while on campus (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017; Emory, personal interview, February 19, 2017; William, personal interview, February 16, 2017). After an unsupportive experience with a faculty member, it was critical that Sam viewed another faculty member, her advisor, as a supportive entity. Sam knew her faculty advisor had worked previously with a friend who was trans*, and every effort Sam's advisor made to be inclusive of her trans* identity made a significant impact (Sam, personal interview, January 27, 2017). For William, not only was it important that he saw his advisor as an ally, but over the course of their relationship, he became aware of the advocacy she was doing for the trans* population, using her voice to raise awareness among others within her department (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017).

Emory not only received tone-setting support from her faculty advisor when she decided to share her gender fluid identity during their initial meeting, but Emory noted the power of seeing ally stickers across campus—on her RA's door and outside the offices of many faculty—as a symbol of acceptance. Emory shared:

It was funny because I remember, I think this was yesterday, my friend was talking about this one very alt-right guy, Milo [Yiannopoulos]... I can't say his last name, but everybody knows him and how he was like, "Oh. The faculty will have ally stickers and that means that they're not teaching you anymore. They're just trying to, it's therapy or something." It's like, "Okay. Just because my professor says that she accepts me, and she understands what I'm going through, and she wants me to be healthy, doesn't mean she's going to give me an A in the class. I got a C in chemistry. It doesn't matter that she accepts me or not." I think that's just absolutely false rhetoric. (Emory, personal interview, February 19, 2017).

For Emory, during a time in which the voices of bigotry have been given a national platform, those symbols of acceptance are all the more important. Not because it gave her an academic advantage, but rather, it reaffirmed that she was accepted by at least some within her community while the world that was sending a very different message.

Essence Statement

Through this study, it is evident that the participants have incredible clarity as to what positively impacted their college experience and where they need their institutions to grow. What was both impressive and heartening was that the participants had measured expectations for their institutions. They are not looking for revolutionary shifts in their campus culture. They are simply looking for recognition. They want to know that their institution sees them, acknowledges their humanity, and affirms their gender identity. They are not demanding perfection; simply consideration. For in that, they know positive progress can be made for themselves and future generations of trans* students.

Participants recognized a real positive momentum at the individual level as compared to the institutional level. As participants described positive interactions with allies, they noted those individuals were striving to educate themselves and make themselves known to students. These personal efforts were compensating for the systemic issues that participants were navigating on a daily basis. Institutional systems signaled to the participants that they have not been considered, anticipated, or prepared for in advance. The actions of allies are what gave the participants hope that safety and support could be found in pockets of the institution. Unfortunately, based on the lived experiences of the participants, allies were not visibly (and vocally) present within the senior leadership of the institution.

Beyond the personal interactions, participants found their institutions' brick and mortar

facilities and its associated systems as not inclusive. Restroom and shower facilities were not designed with consideration for a trans* student's need for safety, privacy, and sanitation. Campus policies and procedures reinforced the gender binary and are cis-normative, which meant the participant were often left in precarious situations as their institution played catch up when responding to trans* students' needs (if that effort is even made). The participants want to feel anticipated, and current complacency was not simply a signal for a lack of preparation but rather intentional indifference.

As participants progressed through their college experience, they often developed a more sophisticated and nuanced perspective on their lived experiences. For Emory, the college environment was an incredibly liberating environment—one in which she could explore and share her gender identity. When compared to her home environment, her college was a far more affirming place even if it wasn't perfect. For Will and Rob, despite being active and engaged members of the community, they both could articulate the ways in which their institution was not meeting the needs of trans* students. While individual moments caused pain and discomfort, they fortunately viewed their lived experiences through a positive lens. In many ways, their affinity for and investment in their institution created the desire to be critical, knowing the lived experience could be so much better for future generations of trans* students.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

This study sought to explore the lived experiences of students who identify as trans* during their undergraduate years at small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States. Participants were asked to share their lived experiences in a variety of contexts—the academic setting, co-curricular environment, residential setting, and the environment beyond campus—and share what barriers exist for trans* students and how they experienced support and inclusion. In exploring the lived experiences of these students, several critical takeaways were gleaned that can inform future efforts for colleges and universities in order to make their campuses more supportive and inclusive of the trans* community.

Summary of Findings

Small Efforts, Big Impact

During a time in higher education and society in which historically marginalized identities are finding their voice and rightfully demanding that institutions deliver on their promises of equity and inclusion, this researcher was surprised to find that participant expectations were rather tempered when considered against the national narrative. In fact, small acts of inclusion yielded significant impacts on the participants' assessments of the campus climate.

For instance, William recognized that it would be unrealistic to transition all campus restrooms to gender-inclusive. In his view, a singular stall in the academic section of campus would address the needs of trans* students in a significant way. William was not advocating for a gender-inclusive restroom in each academic building, but rather, a single stall. For William, he saw that as a difference maker in his and other trans* student's ability to focus fully on their

academics. One single stall. Similarly, Rob drew attention to the importance of a shower curtain to student privacy, especially trans* student privacy, which carries with it an emphasis on safety. Opaque shower curtains for all students, instead of purchasing different shower curtains for male-identified students and female-identified students, Rob felt his institution could ensure all students enjoy a consistent level of privacy when showering. For Rob, privacy was critical as he was living with other males but still had not had top surgery as of yet. In Rob's eyes, little to no financial resources would have made a huge difference in his feeling of safety within the residential setting.

Additionally, participants noted critical moments in which they felt seen, heard, and supported in ways that may seem insignificant but were powerful for them. Alix was used to having to amend her true identity in order to fit within the context of the gender binary, but when she saw a space on a student leadership application that allowed her to own her two-spirited gender identity, she felt valued for her whole self. That moment was such a rarity that she wasn't sure she could fully trust it, but she opted to share her identity and was met with affirmation. For Sam, the ability to have their chosen name reflected on their student ID had a similar positive impact, demonstrating to them that their college recognized them and not some dead name on legal paperwork. Even in instances where their college's initial response was not ideal, Rob and Echo affirmed the willingness to adjust policies in order to more effectively meet their housing needs.

These findings are a bit disconnected from the literature as most research expressed the ways in which institutions were failing to meet the needs of the trans* student population. This was a fair critique and certainly the issues described reflect the impact of institutional ignorance to the needs of trans* students (Ballard et al., 2008; Finger, 2010; McKinney, 2005; Rankin &

Beemyn, 2012) and a fundamental failing of policy that neglects to consider how existing standards only serve majority identities and reinforce the gender binary (Rankin and Beemyn, 2012). Additionally, these findings connect to the research related to the neglect of the trans* population when considering facility design (Finger, 2010; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). When the research is considered in total, the task of creating a supportive and inclusive college environment feels overwhelming, that is until one considers the perspective of the participants. What they are seeking are small wins that will lead to a slightly better environment than the one they currently experience. Those small wins pay huge dividends in their eyes and represent the most basic of supportive efforts on the part of the college. In short, they are simply looking for their college to recognize their needs and respond accordingly.

“Passing” is a Fraught Concept

In examining the concept of “passing,” participants had an unexpected reaction to that term. For some, it was term of privilege—an evaluation of their status as a trans* person. For others, it was a term that encapsulated the pain of choosing to hide a significant aspect of their identity from others. For others, the concept of “passing” was viewed as an external judgment on the legitimacy of their gender identity. And for no one did the term evoke joy or pride in their capacity to “pass” as their gender identity.

Echo reacted strongly to the concept of “passing,” remarking that it insinuated that she was simply pretending to embody her gender identity. For William and Rob, both participants acknowledged a painful aspect to their ability to “pass” as men and opt not to be out about their trans* identity. Both chose not to share their trans* identity with others when they came to college for reasons of safety, and while both acknowledged a comfort in doing so, they also experienced a loss of connection with others because they were hiding a huge part of their lived

experience from friends and loved ones. For William, that meant opting out of fraternity life, recognizing that it would likely one day become an issue with his fraternity brothers. For Sam, that meant holding back in his relationship with others, except for those with whom he was most intimate.

For Emory, “passing” was a loaded term, as well. Her goal was never to “pass,” but rather to “show out” in a way that reflected her sense of gender identity on any given day. As someone who identified as gender fluid, “passing” reinforced a binary sense of gender that did not reflect how she experienced her identity. “Passing” was a restrictive concept in Emory’s eyes and appeared to assign privilege to fixed gender identities over fluid ones.

In the review of the literature, the concept of passing was not discussed at length, but the researcher was aware of the concept through experience in the field of higher education. It was enlightening to find the concept viewed negatively by participants, and those reactions inform the evolving nature of identity work—what is an acceptable/relevant construct in one moment in time may not work in the future. The lived experiences of our students evolve and must inform current research/practices always.

Vocal Support at the Institutional Level

Participants spoke highly of the support that they had received during their time as undergraduates. Student organization-based initiatives and the individual work of accomplices provided powerful reminders across the participants’ time on campus. However, participants noted an important gap in their desire for support and inclusion—an absence of an institutional voice that their trans* identity was affirmed, supported, and protected.

Participants were not idealists, expecting to be treated fairly and respectfully by every member of the campus community. They had made peace that would not always be the case.

They understood that there would be fellow students, faculty, and staff who would create uncomfortable and at times unsafe circumstances. For participants, the absence of clear policy and a strong voice from institutional leadership, particularly from the college president and Board of Trustees, left them to guess whether, in difficult moments, they would experience support and be able to consider their college campus a safe environment.

The call for a vocal leadership on trans* issues was a new finding compared to the literature, likely because prior research had not even gotten to the point where institutional leadership could be expected to vocalize support for the trans* population. Just as recent events have called upon institutional leaders to address systemic racism and promote anti-racist initiatives, participants wanted to know that the most senior leaders of the college, beyond student affairs professionals, supported an environment that was inclusive of the trans* community. Where this finding does connect to existing literature is a continued absence of policies that are protective, supportive, and responsive to trans* students (Beemyn and Rankin, 2012). While participants shared experiences in which their institutions made adjustments to meet their individual needs, participants experienced a reactive institutional dynamic rather than policies and process that reflected their needs.

Trans* Affirming Space

A few participants attended institutions that provided a confidential affinity group for trans* students, and it was clear how important that it was for them to have a time and space to come together with their trans* peers. William spoke about the significance of this group in helping him feel connected to others with common lived experiences even among students that were not in his regular friend group (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017). For William, it was important to know that others like him were a part of his community and seeing

them around campus, even unacknowledged to maintain privacy. Because of this group, William experienced a campus that was less lonely. For Emory, the affinity group was a highlight of her first year of college, again knowing that she was not alone as she navigated campus as a gender fluid individual (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

In contrast, multiple participants noted that their LGBTQ student organization was rarely focused on trans* issues, opting to primarily focus on issues and topics that served their majority sub-population—lesbian and gay students (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017; Rob, personal interview, February 17, 2017). Most chose not to join this organization or found that they did not feel accepted in the few times they tried to engage. Echo reported that her LGBTQ organization was focused primarily on the white, gay and lesbian experience (Echo, personal interview, February 1, 2017). Emory felt a greater connection to her LGBTQ organization, but even she noted that trans* issues were not at the forefront of this group likely due to a lack of trans* membership (Emory, personal interview, February 17, 2017).

The lived experiences of participants aligned closely with the literature, especially in relation to the neglect of the trans* community within the LGBTQ student organization (McKinney, 2005). This finding reiterated the important distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity and the fallacy in asking one student organization to meet the needs of LGBT&Q students. For the participants, this resulted in experiencing neglect within a sub-community that was designed to be (or at least was intended to be) of support for the trans* community. As participants note, students who identify as trans* would be far better served in a group or space that was established primarily for their community rather than trying to create a one size fits all model for LGBTQ population that inherently falls short of responding to divergent need of sexual orientation identity and gender identity.

Trans* Representation

Participants struggled to identify clear moments in which trans* issues or concepts were discussed in the academic setting. William identified several missed opportunities across multiple areas of study that could have connected curricular concepts to real life issues facing the trans* community (William, personal interview, February 16, 2017). Craig noticed a similar opportunities for trans* representation in the curriculum but opted not to raise them out of concern of being viewed as promoting their personal issues (Craig, personal interview, February 18, 2017). For Alix, a lack of trans* awareness caused her to experience a classroom activity that reinforced the gender binary, a construct that did not reflect her identity (personal interview, March 20, 2017).

As was discussed in other sections, participants reported a lack of trans* representation in the co-curricular experience, as well. While Echo experienced a similar dissatisfaction with her LGBTQ student organization, she took it upon herself to run for president so that she could integrate trans* education into the organization's efforts (personal interview, February 1, 2017). She saw it as important to humanize the trans* experience for LGBT students and allies. Rob, on the other hand, felt required to confront an inaccurate and exploitative trans* representation within a theater production (Rob, personal interview, February 18, 2017). A classmate aspired to write a script involving gender affirmation surgery without seeking to reflect and honor the lived experiences of the trans* community who had undergone such a procedure. For his classmate, the trans* representation was simply an interesting plot device—one that would likely do more harm than good for fellow students like Rob.

The literature shows that exposure to trans* issues, albeit effective exposure, was not simply a positive for students who identify as trans*. Studies show that trans* representation

yields greater understanding of self and others, adjusts perceptions, and increases involvement in LGBT-related activities and advocacy (Brown, 2004; Evans & Herriott, 2004). In short, trans* representation was a critical aspect of creating a more educated, aware, and inclusive environment for trans* students.

Implications for Practice

Trans* Inclusion at the Institutional Level

After the literature revealed the multitude of ways higher education was failing trans* students, it was gratifying to hear participants express a different, be it ever so slightly, more positive lived experience. But it should be noted that often the positive experiences were borne of individual moments with campus accomplices whose actions affirmed a participant's identity, expressed care and support, and demonstrated a desire to learn from missteps and do better in the future. Rarely did the positive emerge from a participant's experience navigating the policies, departments and systems or the college. Instead it was at those levels that the greatest challenges emerged—a lack of gender-inclusive facilities, policies that were insensitive to trans* issues, a lack of leadership from the highest level on trans* inclusion. In short, participants saw individuals doing the work of creating a positive lived experience for them, and the institution was disengaged to the needs and issues facing them. As participants noted, it is time for institutions to take an active role going forward of creating an environment that is gender inclusive—facilities that serve all genders, policies that are not simply cis-normative, and leadership that speaks openly about their support of trans* students.

Oftentimes, the work of inclusion can feel overwhelming, an insurmountable task to achieve, but the participants articulated several key ways in which colleges can make major strides with little to no fiscal or human resources. A single gender-inclusive restroom, an opaque

shower curtain, vocal support from the institution, and the chance to gather with fellow trans* students are all easy adjustments for institutions truly committed to the work of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Integrating trans* representation into the curriculum and co-curriculum may be a larger endeavor, but the research demonstrates the positive outcome of exposure to diverse identities and is why other underrepresented groups are calling for similar representation. At the most fundamental level, participants wanted to be treated with respect and dignity. They wanted to be acknowledged by the accurate name. They wanted to be referred to by their correct pronouns. They wanted to live in an environment that honored their gender identity. They wanted to navigate the campus and the surrounding community safely. They wanted to be protected and supported should they experience discrimination or harassment. The participants felt these expectations likely would not differ from the cisgender population; therefore, they wanted their institutions to demonstrate a similar level of responsibility to them.

Individual Responsiveness

While participants made a strong case for institutional level inclusion, their lived experiences also demonstrated the importance of being seen and heard as an individual. As is the case with all identities, there is not homogenous trans* experience. As findings indicated, each participant had a different reaction to the concept of “passing.” Echo’s remarks reminded this scholar/practitioner that one should mirror an individual’s word choice when referring to their identities. For some, the concept of “passing” is a part of trans* identity, but for Echo, it was a word that was offensive to her gender identity—an unwarranted qualification in relation to other women. For some, it was a sign of unearned privilege. For others, the term represented a hidden aspect of who they were within the context of their community.

By focusing on the personal narratives and lived experiences of the participants, an

accomplice could ascertain what was important to each participant and respond accordingly. Obviously, that is easier to do if the institution has made a concerted effort to be gender inclusive, but as this study indicated, individual acts of kindness and respect did a great deal to compensate for institutional shortfalls in the eyes of the participants. What is critical is those individual moments start of discern overarching themes, much like this study, that can inform institutional-level inclusion.

Mental Health Care

For many participants, the lived experience took a significant toll on their mental health. Microaggressions, cisnormative systems, self-protection, isolation, institutional silence and more surely weighed on the hearts, minds, and psyches of participants. Each would be a substantive topic to explore with a mental health professional before even treading into common mental health territory like depression, anxiety, and stress. The importance of effective mental health care for trans* students was punctuated by Sam's narrative. Sam attempted suicide and took a leave of absence after a particularly difficult semester in which she negotiated multiple mental health struggles, as well as, a series of transphobic incidents with a professor.

As I explore below, seeking care, be it for physical or mental health, requires a level of trust in the office and the individuals that provide that care. As the research shows, the participants repeatedly met offices and systems that were unprepared to meet the needs of trans* students, and they endured being a living case study for the department from which to learn and grow. Therefore, it is vital that counseling services departments build their capacity to support students who identify as trans* in advance of being called upon to do so. Furthermore, it is likely critical that the department actively champions inclusive practices and publicly demonstrates their competency in order to establish their credibility with trans* students. Providing in-services

to faculty and staff, partnering with the trans* student affinity group, and helping destigmatize help seeking throughout campus are just some ways that mental health professionals can bolster their credibility among the trans* student population. As the participants showed, their lives might depend on that care.

Recommendations for Research

This researcher noted multiple areas for future research related to the trans* student experience. First, five of the seven participants in this study identified as white, and it became clear both in interviews and during the coding process that white students experienced their predominantly white institution (PWI) and the world in general differently than the participants of color. Certainly, there were common experiences that were strongly linked to their shared trans* identity, but it's clear there is further research to be explored in relation to the intersection of race and trans* identity, especially within the context of a PWI. Additionally, the researcher noted a distinct difference in the lived experiences and issues raised by participants based on their class year. The shorter a participant's time at their institution, the more positive they experienced their campus as compared to the more senior participants. While it is to be expected that a longer tenured participant would have a more comprehensive and nuanced view on their campus, the difference in lived experiences was stark and should be explored further to discern what defines that difference. Also, the researcher assumed incorrectly that participants would likely be "out" to their campus as a trans* student; however, for two participants, that was not the case. It would be valuable to explore that difference more thoroughly to determine how being "out" or not shapes the lived experience of trans* students. Finally, while the socio-political climate for the trans* population was not examined closely in this research, it often came up informally in conversations with the researcher. During the time of the interviews, following

positive achievements in trans* rights and protections, an anti-trans* backlash gained momentum within the national landscape (e.g., bathroom bills, removal from Title IX protections, loss of medical benefits). Certainly, these external forces impacted the lived experiences of participants and remains worthy of additional study. Every step of progress for the trans* community and their accomplices has been met with an equally fervent anti-trans* response based in fear, misunderstanding, and hatred. Currently, the anti-trans* movement is playing out at the local and state levels with policies, legislation, and other efforts to keep trans* youth out of organized sports and from seeking gender-affirming health care. One needs simply to follow the socio-political progress of any marginalized population to understand the long-term relevance of this research for decades to come.

Reflections on the Research

Expected Findings

Based on the review of the literature, the researcher fully expected that health care would be a subject that emerged from the participant interviews. The literature had highlighted many ways in which students who identified as trans* struggled to find health care that was willing or capable of meeting their needs. Surprisingly, the participants had very little to say on the subject. William was the only participant who even mentioned campus-based health care, and he simply relayed the positive experiences of some of his trans* acquaintances. Upon reflection, the researcher thinks this may have been an unexplored topic for a few reasons. First, the participants who had already engaged with a medical transition had done so years prior to college, and so, their medical care routine likely was fully established and referrals made to local providers with an established record of a trans* inclusive practices. All other participants either did not have an interest in or have an immediate plan for medical-based transitions. Second,

almost all participants were attending institutions in or near large cities. It is very possible that they had established health care beyond the campus without even engaging campus health services. Finally, it is possible that based on other lived experiences with departments and systems that were unprepared to respond to and meet the needs of trans* students, participants simply decided there was too much risk in pursuing care on campus. Seeking medical care requires every patient to enter a state of vulnerability during an appointment. Patients are measured and weighed, vital signs registered, personal details explored, and clothes sometimes removed before a doctor even steps into the room. It is possible that seeking medical care may have been avoided as a form of self-protection even if it compromised their overall health. Another topic to explore further in the future.

Impact of Research

The researcher found it difficult to remain detached from the participants in an ethical and responsible way. It was a humbling experience for a group of undergraduates to lay themselves bare and entrust them with their narratives, and the researcher found themselves becoming deeply invested in their lived experiences beyond that moment in time. Where would their lives take them? Would their career aspirations become a reality? Would they find greater acceptance or pain in the world beyond their campus? And could the researcher help them chart a better path forward? Obviously, it was not my place to insert myself into their lives. The researcher had not been invited to do so, and more importantly, the researcher had promised them anonymity in this research. To do more was to meet my needs; not theirs.

Still, as the researcher reflect on this research, they recognized a responsibility to honor their stories by helping it shape my work as a practitioner. As a researcher, it is easy to examine the emergent themes and discern an idyllic path forward for institutions of higher learning.

Inclusive practices feel evident and attainable, and the researcher can be an expert voice that leads organizations to low hanging fruit to achieve a better campus for the trans* population. As a practitioner, the researcher is acutely aware of the resistance to change, the pitfalls of idyllic thinking, and the political landmines that often undermine well-intentioned efforts before they even get started. But as this research effort comes to a close, the researcher is acutely aware that they must embrace the label of scholar/practitioner. The participants have voiced clearly their lived experiences with all their joys and pain and have entrusted the researcher to listen to those within their campus who have additional stories to offer. Certainly, their lived experiences will share common ground with this study and provide new insight and understanding, and it will be important to use their experience as a practitioner to identify other accomplices and skillfully navigate a fraught landscape in hopes of creating a more inclusive and socially just community for trans* students (and other marginalized populations). The work will not be easy or without missteps, but the status quo serves no one, not even those with privileged identities.

Conclusion

This researcher was humbled by the willingness of each participant to lay bare the joy and pain associated with their college experience. Every student experiences hills and valleys along their educational journey, but these participants navigated systemic obstacles, overt discrimination, and institutional uncertainty at multiple points along the way. Yet, each participant spoke of their time in college with pride, hope, and promise, knowing that their experiences would chart a better path for the next generation of trans* students. The participants did not simply aspire for a better experience for trans* students, they wanted a better experience for all students—those that were oppressed by the status quo and those that had unrecognized privilege within it. The participants understood that the path to inclusion would yield a better

community for all.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Guiding questions

Gender Identity:

- How do you self-identify in terms of gender identity?
- When were you first aware of this aspect of your identity?
- How open are you with others about this aspect of your identity? What influences how/when you share your identity with others?
- How is your gender identity expressed on campus? In other communities?
- How has being transgender impacted your undergraduate experience?

Academic setting?

- What has the academic environment been like for you?
- What have been your experiences with the faculty? Advising? Academic support?
- How has the classroom experience been as a transgender individual?
- How often do transgender-related topics get discussed? What was that experience like for you?
- How has the academic environment been supportive/inclusive of you? How has that impacted you?
- What barriers to your education exist in this setting? How might they be resolved?

Co-Curricular setting?

- What organizations and activities are you involved in?
- What has influenced your involvement in general? With these specific organizations?
- Are you involved with an LGBTQ student organization on campus? What's that experience been like?
- How would you describe your orientation experience?
- What kinds of messages (overt/implicit) were sent about diversity/inclusion during orientation? How did that impact you?
- How has the co-curricular setting been supportive/inclusive of you? How has that impacted you?
- What barriers to your education exist in this setting? How might they be resolved?

Residential setting?

- Have you lived in the residence halls? If so, what was that experience like?
- Did you live in a setting that matched your gender identity or biological sex? How did that impact you?
- What were bathroom arrangements in your residence hall (e.g. private, suite-style, community bath)? What was that like for you?
- What have your roommate relationships been like? How has the experience differed if you were matched with someone as opposed to choosing your roommate?
- What has been your experience with the student staff (i.e. Resident Advisors)?
- How was your relationship with other hallmates?
- How has the residential environment been supportive/inclusive of you? How has that impacted you?
- What barriers to your education exist in this setting? How might they be resolved?

Surrounding community?

- What connections do you have beyond campus? How have they impacted your college experience?
- What resources have you sought beyond campus? Where these resources offered on campus? If so, what caused you to choose off-campus resources?
- What does your support network look like beyond campus? How does that network differ from on campus? What's been the impact of that support?
- How has the surrounding community been supportive/inclusive of you? How has that impacted you?
- What barriers to your education exist in this setting? How might they be resolved?

Support/Inclusion?

- In your opinion, what are the most critical ways in which a campus can be supportive of the transgender student population? How has your campus done in this area?
- In your opinion, what are the most critical ways in which a campus can be inclusive of the transgender student population? How has your campus done in this area?
- When you have felt supported during your time as an undergraduate, how has that impacted you?
- When you have felt a part of an inclusive environment during your time as an undergraduate, how has that impacted you?
- How can campuses make strides in this area?

Barriers?

- In your opinion, what are the most challenging barriers that exist for the transgender student population on college campuses?
- How do these barriers evidence themselves on your campus? What is the impact of these barriers?
- How have they hindered your ability to fully experience college?
- How have they influenced where you've sought support, resources, community, etc.?
- How can campuses make strides in this area?

Other questions

- How do you view the overall campus climate for transgender students?
- What has been the impact of the campus climate on your experience?
- What needs to change about the campus climate? What you that mean for your college experience?

Appendix B: Letter of Introduction to Multicultural Affairs staff/LGBTQ advisor

Date

Name

Institution

Dear (Name),

Thank you for your time today and your willingness to assist me with my research study. As I mentioned by phone, I am a doctoral candidate in the College and University Leadership program at Colorado State University's School of Education.

In my study, I am exploring the undergraduate student experience of transgender students on small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States.

As we discussed, I am asking you to invite up to 15 students to participate in this study. I've attached a sample letter of invitation to assist you in this process. Invitations should be sent to those students who self-identify as transgender, gender non-conforming or non-cisgender and are currently enrolled as undergraduate students at your institution or have graduated from your institution within the last year.

I have also enclosed my IRB approval and understand that this will need to be submitted to your research approval board before you are able to invite any of your students.

Thank you again for your assistance. I will contact you within the next week to begin the research board approval process. I am available to answer questions at any time.

Sincerely,

Ben J. Newhouse
1604 Mountain Gap Cir
Birmingham, AL 35226
Phone: 210-216-9117
Email: bnewhous@bsc.edu

Appendix C: Letter Seeking Participants

Date

Name

Institution

Dear (Insert Name),

As a staff member in the Office of Multicultural Affairs and/or an advisor to (LGBTQ student organization name) at (institution), I have agreed to send this letter on behalf of a doctoral candidate seeking participants for a research study involving the undergraduate experiences of transgender or gender non-conforming students. Ben J. Newhouse, a doctoral candidate in the College and University Leadership program at Colorado State University will be conducting this research.

The research study will explore how transgender students experience their undergraduate education. Participants are being selected from small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States.

This letter is being sent to student who self-identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-cisgender. Mr. Newhouse is seeking up to fifteen participants for this study. Those who express a willingness to participate will be contacted within one week to schedule an interview time.

Participants will be asked to participate in a 60-90 minute interview at a mutually agreed upon location with Mr. Newhouse. The purpose of the interview is to gather information on your experiences as an undergraduate student and how those experiences have been impacted by your gender identity. Your identity and responses will be kept confidential. Participants will select an alias prior to the interview and the participants' home institutions will be given a pseudonym. Participation is solely voluntary and under no circumstance will the names of participants be provided to me. There is not penalty for electing not to participate.

All students who participate in the interview process will be compensated for their time by receiving a \$25 Visa gift card.

If you are willing to participate in this study, please contact Mr. Newhouse directly at 210-216-9117 or bnewhous@bsc.edu. Also, feel free to contact him directly if you have any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

College Official

Appendix D: Letter to Students Selected to Participate in Study

Date

Name

Institution

Dear (Insert Name),

Thanks for your willingness to participate in my study. My name is Ben Newhouse, and I am a doctoral candidate in the College and University Leadership program at Colorado State University.

For my dissertation research, I am examining the undergraduate student experience of transgender students at small, private, liberal arts institutions in the southern and southeastern United States. In order to explore this topic, I will be interviewing up to fifteen people.

In order to participate in this study, I will need to schedule an in person interview with you. This interview is anticipated to last between 60 and 90 minutes. Below are a list of dates that I will be in your area along with possible meeting times and locations. Please review the list and let me know what date and time work best for you. If you none of these times are amenable to your schedule, please feel free to offer alternatives.

(List of dates, times, and locations)

These interviews will be recorded and subsequently transcribed. All data (recordings and transcriptions) will be kept secure and confidential, and all consent forms will be stored separately from the data to protect participant confidentiality. Once the interview has been transcribed, you will be emailed a copy of the transcript so that you can review for accuracy and submit any corrections within ten days.

Maintaining confidentiality is an essential aspect of this study. In addition to keeping all data secure, at the start of the interview, you will select an alias that will be used throughout the research. Your real name will not be released to anyone. The data being collected is a part of my dissertation research. At the conclusion of this research, a summary of my findings will be available upon request.

Feel free to contact me with any questions at bnewhous@bsc.edu or by cell phone at 210-216-9117.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Ben J. Newhouse

Appendix E: Letter to Student Not Selected to Participate

Date

Name

Institution

Dear (Insert Name),

Thank you for your interest in my research study.

Unfortunately, I am unable to include you as a participant at this time. In the future, if I pursue additional avenues of this research, I will keep your name on file as a potential participant.

I greatly appreciate your willingness to give of your time.

Sincerely,

Ben J. Newhouse
1604 Mountain Gap Cir
Birmingham, AL 35226
Phone: 210-216-9117
Email: bnewhous@bsc.edu

Appendix F: Informed Consent Form

Project title: Examining the Undergraduate Student Experience of Transgender Students at Small, Private, Liberal Arts Institutions

Researcher: Ben J. Newhouse

Faculty Advisor: Linda Kuk, Associate Professor Colorado State University

Introduction:

You are being asked to participate in a research student conducted by Ben J. Newhouse for completion of a dissertation under the supervision of Dr. Linda Kuk in the School of Education at Colorado State University. You are being asked to assist in this study because you self-identify as transgender, gender non-conforming, or non-cisgender, and are pursuing your undergraduate education at a small (less than 5,000 undergraduate students), private, liberal arts institution in the southern or southeastern United States. Up to 15 students will participate in this study. Before deciding whether to participate in this study, please review this form carefully and feel free to ask questions.

Purpose:

The purpose of this research is to examine the undergraduate student experience of transgender college students at small, private, liberal arts institutions. Participants in this study will assist in gaining a greater understanding as to how higher education can better support transgender students.

Procedures:

Participants in this study will be asked to participate in a 60 to 90 minute interview. The interview will include questions regarding your gender identity, your experiences within various settings of your undergraduate education (e.g. academic, residential, campus involvement, surrounding community), perceived barriers on campus, and occurrences of support and inclusion. The interview will occur at a mutually agreed upon location and will be audio recorded and then transcribed at a later time. To protect your anonymity, you will select alias to be used during the interview and your home institution will be given a pseudonym. To ensure your statements are accurate, I will be sending a copy of your interview transcript for your review.

Risk/Benefits

The probability and magnitude of harm or discomfort anticipated in the research are no greater than encountered in everyday life; however, you may feel discomfort talking about your gender identity and how that has impacted your undergraduate experience. As a benefit, participants will be provided a summary of the findings to allow participants to learn from the experiences of their peers. Finally, the study will contribute to the literature to help colleges and universities better support the transgender student population.

Compensation

All participants in the interview process will be compensated for their time by receiving a \$25 Visa gift card even if they do not complete the interview and terminate their involvement at any time for any reason.

Confidentiality:

The identity of all participants and their home institution will be kept confidential and safely secured by the researcher. Participants will select an alias during their interview and home institutions provided a pseudonym. All consent forms will be stored separately from interview transcripts to keep participant identities confidential. All data, including the audio recordings, will be kept in a secure location with access only by the researcher. All data will be destroyed within two years of the completion of the study.

Voluntary participation:

There is no penalty for students who do not wish to participate. Participation is completely voluntary, and you have the right to terminate your involvement at any time for any reason. You can decline to answer any question or withdraw from participating at any time.

Questions:

If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact the researcher, Ben J. Newhouse or the faculty advisor, Dr. Linda Kuk at the contact information listed below:

Researcher:

Ben J. Newhouse
1604 Mountain Gap Cir
Birmingham, AL 35226
Phone: 210-216-9117
Email: bnewhous@bsc.edu

Faculty advisor

Linda Kuk
Associate Professor
School of Education
209 Education Building
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO 80523-1588
Phone: (970) 491-7243
Email: linda.kuk@colostate.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact XXXXX.

State of Consent:

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided, have been given the opportunity to ask questions, and agree to participate in this research study. The researcher will provide you a copy of this signed form for your records.

The undersigned freely and voluntarily consents to participation in the research.

_____ Date

_____ Date

Appendix G: Member Check Instructions

Date

Name

Institution

Dear (Insert Name),

Attached is a copy of the transcript from our interview on (Insert Date).

Please review this transcript and contact me if you would like to clarify any of your responses.

If I do not hear from you by (Insert Date - 10 days delivery), I will assume you consider the transcript to be an accurate reflection of the interview.

Once the study is complete, I will forward you a summary of the findings.

Thank you for your participation and for taking the time to review this document. I greatly appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Ben J. Newhouse
1604 Mountain Gap Cir
Birmingham, AL 35226
Phone: 210-216-9117
Email: bnewhous@bsc.edu

Appendix H: Summary of Findings Email

Date

Name

Institution

Dear (Insert Name),

I'd like to thank you again for your assistance with my dissertation research. I have attached a summary of my findings for your review. I am hopeful that my research has provided a better understanding of the transgender student experience, yielding positive change in the future.

Please accept my sincere thanks for your participation.

Sincerely,

Ben J. Newhouse

1604 Mountain Gap Cir

Birmingham, AL 35226

Phone: 210-216-9117

Email: bnewhous@bsc.edu



Knowledge to Go Places

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