

Inclusive Campus for Transgender People

**Addressing the Complexities to Create an Inclusive Campus for Transgender
People**

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Abstract

Making transgender people feel accepted into the campus community goes beyond education programs to encourage inclusion. The process needs to also include many facets of an institution from IT to housing. This paper examines the changes made or in the process of being addressed at a regional university in Arkansas.

Addressing the Complexities to Create an Inclusive Campus for Transgender People

As universities evolve and adapt to meet the needs of their transgender students and employees, they will experience stumbles and mistakes along the way; however, it is essential that as they respect academic freedom in the face of popular pressure and pro-actively develop policies for transgender inclusion and accommodation.

The University of Arkansas – Fort Smith, a Mid-South public, regional university, operates in a culturally and religiously conservative state and area. In the past ten years, the state legislature has taken up anti-trans bills, passing one law banning transgender persons from sports and athletics and another banning puberty blockers, hormone therapy, and sex-reassignment surgery on individuals under 18. This has fostered a campus climate previously slow to change. Public criticism or complaints – or the avoidance of – has, at times, perpetuated an environment unsupportive of transgender individuals, favoring cisgender norms.

Literature Review

In order for a student to stay in college and succeed, they need to feel like they are accepted for who they are and that they feel safe at the college. (Letsoalo et al., 2020) O’Keefe (2013) noted that student retention is dependent on the student feeling connected to the institution, a sense of caring from the faculty and staff at the institution, and good support services. The lack of feeling safe, welcomed, and part of a community can also lead to mental health issues. (Pluckett et al., 2019) While these are the characteristics of a university that will help with student retention and the wellbeing of the student, this is not the environment many transgender students find themselves.

Interpersonal relationships and support from family and friends help reduce the negative impact on the mental health of transgender people. Due to living life as a gender minority, transgender people suffer from depression and anxiety. (Pluckett et al., 2019) In the study conducted by Pluckett et al. (2019), they found that only 5.1% of the participants who had support from family and friends responded that they suffered from severe depression symptoms. This was significant considering the 42.6% of participants that had low support from family and friends suffered from severe depression and 89.4% showed moderate to severe anxiety. This shows the importance of support in terms of the mental health of transgender people. Isolation from others leads to high incidence of mental health issues, which can hinder a person’s ability to persist at college. (Bantjes et al., 2020)

One of the means of obtaining sense of community is through living in campus housing. In a study by Dumford et al. (2019), living with a roommate increased the sense of peer belonging more than when the student lived alone. The study also showed that a greater institutional acceptance was seen with those living on campus as opposed to off campus, even though they were within walking distance. (Dumford et al., 2019) While Dumford et al. (2019) did look at the sense of community and acceptance in terms of race, they did not look into the sense of community in terms of LBGTQ+ students. These students, particularly transgender students, often find campus housing on heterogender campuses difficult to find an acceptable living arrangement with a roommate.

Pryor et al. (2016) studied 12 transgender students and their campus housing experience. The majority of participants had high anxiety when it came to the assigning of their roommates.

They were unsure how they would be accepted by the random roommate. Only one student had a positive experience with a roommate. Four of the students ended up living in an individual room and two were isolated by their roommates and cut off from social interactions. One of the participants shared that they were excited about living in an individual room at first, but soon started to feel isolated. Additionally, single living spaces cost those living in them more money. For cash strapped college students, with transgender students often with less money than other students, this can increase the anxiety of living on campus.

Many had to make special arrangements to use the bathroom facilities in order to feel safe using them and allow them to dress and undress in private. One participant, a transgender woman, would take her shower at 6am in order to avoid shower conflicts with her floor mates. These actions, which many cisgender people do not think about, only add to the isolation transgender people feel when living in campus housing. Many of the participants noted that their grades suffered due to the isolation they felt. (Pryor et al., 2016)

Feeling accepted and a part of the community not only impacts the success of the transgender student in their studies, but also on their mental health overall. Seelman (2016) conducted a study on the acceptance of transgender students and the use of the bathroom of their identity and be housed as their identity on suicide rates. When transgender students are not provided the access to the bathroom and housing of their identity, there is a significant increase in suicide attempts. Additionally, being harassed, experiencing prejudice, and assaults from other students greatly increase the rate of suicide attempts.

The inability to address the needs of trans students can have an impact on their ability to succeed in school and hence life and on their mental health. The steps needed to address the needs of trans students should not have to be initiated by a trans student, but by the institution administration in a proactive manner. When it is left up to a trans student, it can cause additional issues within the campus community.

Catalyst for Change

Prior to 2011, UAFS did not have policies or accommodations in place for its trans community. Jennifer Braly, a non-traditional trans student, challenged this status quo, prompting changes in university policies and accommodations. Ms. Braly enrolled at UAFS in 2010 using her birth name and sex and began to transition in early 2011 by changing her name and winning a court petition to switch her legal gender. (Smith, 2012) The university's absence of policies and accommodations came into focus with Ms. Braly's transition as an openly trans student in 2011. In response, UAFS created gender-neutral bathrooms – family restrooms – in some buildings on campus that she was instructed to use by university administrators. The university erred with this instruction to use the gender-neutral bathroom as it singles out trans individuals and creates an unwelcome environment where trans individuals may prefer to use the restroom that aligns to their gender identity. (Smith, 2012)

An incident in Spring 2012 brought the university's treatment of trans issues into sharp relief. Ms. Braly, previously invited by other Psychology faculty to guest lecture on topics of gender and sexuality, was invited by a Psychology professor to give a guest lecture on April 20. The university, either in response to complaints or acting to avoid complaints or criticism, made the decision to cancel the lecture, citing the timing of the lecture, then the absence of credentials, and finally the absence of IRB-approval for surveys used for lecture-purposes. The department head, in an email, citing the "timing at the end of the semester", attempted to cancel the lecture.

(Stout, 2012) The dean of the college appeared at the start of the class and, citing Ms. Braly's lack of qualifications, stated that she "would not be allowed to speak in any classroom at this University from that day forward." (Stout, 2012) A later meeting with the university provost confirmed the concern over credentialing. (The City Wire Staff, 2012) The university later issued a statement expressing the matter was a miscommunication that "had absolutely nothing to do with the subject matter or the student's status" but concern over IRB-approval for a survey instrument Ms. Braly uses in her lectures. (The City Wire Staff, 2012) There was an absence of consistent messaging and reasoning from all levels of the university administration as to why the lecture was cancelled. In response to the situation, the course's instructor and students expressed the feeling that the university's administration was infringing on academic freedom and freedom of speech because the speaker is transgender. (The City Wire Staff, 2012) In the fall-out from the incident, the university issued an amended statement allowing Ms. Braly to resume her guest lectures. (Anderson-Minshall, 2012) The university's reaction to the situation seems motivated by a response to or the avoidance of criticism, and resulted in a chilling effect for trans visibility at UAFS.

This situation created new challenges for transgender individuals at UAFS. As her hormone replacement therapy progressed, and she became more comfortable living as a woman, she started to use women's restrooms. Following the lecture incident, at least one student complained that she was not comfortable sharing a bathroom with a transgender person. In response to criticism, UAFS administrators responded by directing Ms. Braly to only use gender-neutral bathrooms; additionally, she was informed she would be assigned to a single dorm-room for the following year. Ms. Braly then filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Justice's Civil Rights Division. The Justice Department sent a letter to the university system's lawyers at which point the university changed its policy to allow transgendered individuals to use its restrooms based on an individual's gender identity. As admitted by the university's spokesman: "The issue of accommodating transgender student needs has been a threshold that we had never had to go up to before. It's been a learning curve for us, both in terms of the law and what gender identity disorder is in the first place." This was a victory for transgender inclusion; however, it was not followed-up with formally documented policies, which is essential when creating a trans-inclusive environment. (Smith, 2012)

Changing Paradigm for Trans Inclusion

Initially unprepared to respond to its first openly transgender student, UAFS began to make tentative, cautious, and quiet steps toward trans inclusivity, while navigating a state environment, at various times, hostile to transgender rights. These efforts, largely spearheaded by individual units or departments and faculty and staff advocates, resulted in modest campus climate and policy changes.

Leading efforts at changes to campus climate, university policies, and accommodations has been the university's Student Affairs division. Creating policies and procedures to support trans students as they transition is an essential component of creating a trans-inclusive and supportive campus environment. Through formal and informal networks, they have mobilized faculty and staff on campus to be involved in changing the campus climate to be one more welcoming to transgender students. Beginning in 2016, Student Affairs underwent Safe Zone training from the Safe Zone Project and now offer this to the campus community. This is mandatory training for all housing staff and Resident Advisors. Further, in 2017, Student Affairs

designated April as “Pride Month” at UAFS and planned activities intended to engage the campus LGBTQ community.

One important area of change has been university records for transgender students. Deadnaming, or calling a trans person by their birthname, can be a painful, harmful experience for a trans individual. Students may be inadvertently deadnamed from class rosters, the use of their legal names on email addresses, and dozens of other ways. The Dean of Students created an informal process for trans students to update their records to try to avoid instances of deadnaming by university faculty or staff who have access to student records. Unfortunately, this process currently remains informal and undocumented and awareness of it is largely through word-of-mouth.

Beyond changes in policies and training is the need for direct student engagement and interaction. The Student Activities Office restarted the inactive student LGBTQ organization in 2017. PRIDE at UAFS promotes LGBTQ awareness and creates an inclusive space safe for LGBTQ students. The students are regular guest speakers in the Diversity in the Workplace class. They help plan campus activities, like the Pride Month in April, and hosted a Drag Queen Story Hour in December 2018. This event drew the ire of some in the local community as well as state legislators. To the university administration’s credit, the event was not canceled; however the university’s response fell short of supporting their LGBTQ community: they requested the use of its logo be removed from the event’s flyers and issued a statement clarifying it was not a university-sponsored event and no university or tax funds had been spent. (Hardy, 2018) The organization has also been active in recent efforts to promote inclusivity and a welcoming environment for LGBTQ students and participated in a campus forums to this effect. (Bryan, 2020)

There is also a need to have identifiable and known campus advocates for transgender students. The LGBTQ student organization’s faculty advisor is a visible figure on campus and a frequent contact point for administrators, staff, or students needing help or who have questions. This advisor has been able to advocate for trans issues within the university, such as informally addressing instances of transphobia by university employees or students. They also followed up with the Vice-Chancellor of Student Affairs to clarify the campus restroom policy as no formal policy had been documented or distributed following Ms. Braly’s incident in 2012. Further, they were able to secure LGBTQ student involvement in recent campus diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. We are fortunate to have many other campus advocates and allies in the form of other faculty and staff – Safe Zone stickers dot the office windows across campus.

The university’s administration began to actively pursue diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, from the top down, in 2019: a new chancellor was hired and she created a campus Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee following a racial incident involving a student-athlete and coach. This committee, and its seven subcommittees, includes a broad spectrum of employees, community members, and students. Additionally, a Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion was hired to lead and coordinate campus efforts.

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