

Gender Inclusivity and Discrimination on College Campuses:

Focusing on Gender Nonconforming Students

Mariah Palmer⁸

Previous research reveals that transgender individuals suffer with greater mental health concerns than cisgender individuals (Borgogna, McDermott, Aita, & Kridel, 2018). Moreover, transgender and gender nonconforming students are experiencing more difficulty in college than their cisgender peers. The data show that transgender students experience greater levels of trauma, stressors in life, harassment, and discrimination (Greathouse et al., 2018; James et al., 2016; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Further, James et al., (2016) found that the climate on campus has led some transgender students to drop out of their higher education institute. The current research examined both transgender or gender nonconforming (n = 19) and cisgender students (n = 139). The purpose of this research was to gather information on the experiences and perceptions of these students in order to give institutions further information and suggestions on how to improve campus environment. The results of this research were somewhat consistent with previous research mentioned in the literature review.

Keywords: transgender, gender nonconforming, college students, discrimination

According to the Williams Institute (2019), there is estimated to be over 1,000,000 transgender individuals in the United States. Moreover, transgender individuals are often excluded from research, making their identities invisible in academia and in day-to-day life (Greathouse et al., 2018). The research findings, however, currently tell that transgender and gender nonconforming individuals are at higher risk of poor mental health than when compared to cisgender individuals (Borgogna et al., 2018). Another intersectionality for these individuals is that of college participation. According to the National Survey of College Counseling Centers,

⁸Mariah Palmer, Department of Psychology, Lindenwood University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Mariah Palmer, Department of Psychology, Lindenwood University, St. Charles, MO 63301. Email: mkp622@lindenwood.edu

a higher number of clinicians reported an increase than a decrease or no change in clients experiencing anxiety disorders, crisis issues, and depression, than when compared to five years ago (Gallagher, 2015). If we know that those who are transgender and gender nonconforming are at a risk for poor mental health, and we know that this is also true for college students, one could guess that the lives of college transgender and gender nonconforming students may incorporate distress.

The definitions of transgender and gender nonconforming may be used interchangeably, but not in all cases. Typically, the term transgender is used to describe individuals who have a gender identity which contests the traditional norms for the sex they were assigned at birth (Halley & Eshleman, 2017; Transgender, 2019). Gender nonconforming often refers to individuals who do not conform to gender expectations (Human Rights Campaign, 2019). The current research study will use the terms interchangeably. Another term that will be utilized within this research is cisgender. Cisgender identifies a person that is not gender nonconforming or transgender, meaning that their gender is consistent with either the gender they were assigned at birth, or their biological sex (Halley & Eshleman, 2017).

It is known that transgender students experience greater trauma, life stressors, discrimination, and harassment on campus compared to their peers (Greathouse et al., 2018; James et al., 2016; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). In a survey which questioned a total of 23,987 college students, researchers wanted to examine the implications of clinical support for students who were transgender. Out of those participants, 0.2% self-identified as transgender, which is a moderately representative percentage for the population. The researchers pulled the survey data from The National Research Consortium of Counseling Centers in Higher Education, which was collected in the year 2011. Upon reviewing the data, they found support for their

hypotheses that transgender students would experience more trauma and life stressors. More specifically, they found that transgender students had higher rates of attempted suicide and suicide ideation, higher concern for gender identity, higher emotional health issues, and discrimination, among other items when compared to cisgender students.

The U.S. Transgender Survey (2015) reported further statistics on transgender students. The survey evaluated by James et al., (2016) was broad and focused on 27,715 transgender respondents. While their primary focus was not strictly on transgender students, they were still able to provide some information regarding this population. The results of this research specify that those others perceive as transgender, 24% faced some form of harassment on their higher education campus. The harassment noted in this survey ranged from physical, sexual, and verbal abuse. Within the group of participants that said they had faced harassment on campus, 16% responded that they had dropped out or left their higher education institute. The data clearly suggest individuals who identify as transgender face discrimination while attending college (James et al., 2016).

Greathouse et al. (2018) examined the experiences of queer individuals while at their higher education institutes and found further support to show the struggles of these individuals as a direct result of the institution. Their data were pulled from a compiled set of multiple previous studies on queer and transgender spectrum college students. When asked about campus climate, transgender individuals consistently reported fewer positive perceptions than when compared to their cisgender peers. For the question which wanted to know which participants felt that their campus was safe, on 33.1% agreed and only 39.8% thought that their campus was welcoming. Moreover, only 23.3% of transgender students felt like they were valued on campus and only 37.8% responded that they felt they belonged. It is important to note that their cisgender peers

reported that they did feel safe (55.3%), welcomed (64.6%), valued (36.0%), and 54.0% felt as if they belonged. These researchers also concluded that transgender spectrum students not only feel a more negative climate on campus, but also that they engage less with their campus than cisgender students do (Greathouse et al., 2018).

The prior research gives reason to encourage change on campuses of higher education. The current research will look at how transgender and gender nonconforming students have experienced college. The perceptions and experiences of cisgender students will also be examined. Utilizing the results of the current study and previous studies, suggestions to higher education campuses will be made.

Previous research has found that certain environments may better serve transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Pflum et al. (2015) found evidence to show that social support and connectedness among other transgender individuals have a connection with lower anxious and depressive symptoms. Further, Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, and Woodford (2018) found that LGBTQ+ specific resource centers and student organizations are helpful in reducing a hostile feeling on campus that these individuals may face. This suggests that there are possible ways to combat the current issues these students experience while in college. The current research will examine some of the experiences transgender students have while at college. Moreover, the current study will examine the perceptions that cisgender students hold of their transgender peers.

Method

Participants

Recruitment for this research study took place online. The websites utilized included Reddit, Facebook, and Psi Chi. Additionally, the website Sona Systems was used through the participant pool at Lindenwood University. In all, a total of 137 current students were recruited. Former students were also recruited, with a total of 19. As far as gender identity, 16 participants identified as gender nonconforming and 139 participants were cisgender. Participants were also asked if they were currently or if they had previously been a student at Lindenwood University, and 116 participants revealed that they were. For compensation, students recruited through the participant pool at Lindenwood University received extra credit towards an eligible course and all other participants did not receive any form of compensation for their time.

Materials and Procedures

The study was created using Qualtrics, a survey platform, and administered online (see Appendix A for full survey). Upon consenting to taking part in the study, participants were then led to further questions asking for their demographic information. I created all of the demographic questions for this survey. I first asked participants if they were currently or were ever a college student in the United States. If they indicated that they were currently a student, they were directed toward a question about gender identity. If they were previously a student, the participants were asked to clarify when they were a student. If respondents disclosed that they had never been a college student in the United States, the survey automatically led them to the feedback statement and did not request a response on any further questions. All participants

were also asked if they had ever been enrolled at Lindenwood University in order to directly provide feedback to the institution.

Current and past college students of any time period were asked to self-identify their gender identity by selecting one of two categories: cisgender and gender nonconforming. This question listed more than one gender identity; however, for research purposes, the survey led them to two different questionnaires depending on whether or not the participant identified as cisgender. Participants that identified as gender nonconforming were led to a set of questions adapted from the Trans Discrimination Scale (Watson, Allen, Flores, Serpe, & Farrell, 2018). The questions on this scale asked students to provide feedback on a Likert scale based on their experiences with discrimination on campus. There were a total of seven questions with four options ranging from “Never” to “A lot.” Participants who disclosed that they were cisgender were directed to a different set of questions created by the primary investigator. These questions were directed toward participants also through a Likert scale ranging from “Definitely yes” to “Definitely not” asking them to indicate how comfortable they would feel in a variety of situations regarding transgender students.

Following the Likert scale, gender nonconforming students were shown three specific, open-ended questions asking the participants their experience with accessibility regarding their gender identity on campus (e.g. restrooms, dorms, educational setting). Followed by this, two more open-ended questions asking for positive experiences, if any, and recommendations they would make to their campus. Cisgender students were given questions similar to the formatting of gender nonconforming students. These participants were offered one open-ended question where they could provide any feedback, comments, or experiences they wished to share regarding their experience with transgender students.

Results

The nature of this research was exploratory, so only descriptive statistics were used from the Qualtrics report tool. When gender nonconforming students were asked about their experiences of discrimination on campus, utilizing the Trans Discrimination Scale (Watson et al., 2018), only 13 answered the questionnaire completely. Many of the responses indicated that they had rarely experienced different forms of discrimination on campus (see Table 1).

As far as better accommodations and accessibility on campus, gender nonconforming students wished for more. When asked about how accessible the students felt their dorms were, there were some varying responses; however, a majority wished for better accommodations. When participants responded to the question about access to gender affirming bathrooms, all participants either responded negatively or wished for better access. A sample response would be: “Not great, while my campus has some, I often have to cross the street to get to one, [making] them impractical to use during class. There also aren't many gender neutral showers at all, to the point where I don't shower as much as I'd like to because my only option shower is full or it's across the street and too much work in the morning.” The response to a question asking about the accessibility of changing one's name or gender on student documents was varying. Students either felt as if they were supported, did not need this accommodation, or felt as if this process was difficult. As far as positive experiences on campus, many gender nonconforming students responded that they felt most positively when it comes to the social aspects of feeling supported. For example, many responded that they received social support: “My campus has a transgender support/social group where I met people who became my closest friends and allies during my transition. That group and the LGBT resource office at my school have been incredibly supportive and helpful in locating local resources” and “I did meet many trans friends

in college and felt a great sense of community.” Responses from cisgender students were, for the most part, positive toward their transgender peers (see Table 2).

Discussion

The results provide evidence for a need for change within higher education institutes. As indicated, many gender nonconforming students wished for better accommodations on their respective campus. Further, many cisgender students show support for their gender nonconforming peers and also show higher levels of comfortability. This means that cisgender students would likely not be impacted by better accommodations for gender nonconforming students. Similar to research findings of Pflum et al. (2015), the current research also found that one way to create a healthy campus climate for transgender students is better social support. Many of the transgender students indicated that their positive experiences involved groups specifically for LGBTQ support. This idea could be something of consideration for universities as well. While the results show through the discrimination scale that transgender students are not experiencing a high amount of discrimination, the qualitative data collected from this survey show that the students experience troubles just in other ways. This also shows that discrimination is not always shown in obvious ways and may be instead through little accommodations on campus.

Some changes for further research would include a more inclusive sample. This sample included many gender nonconforming students, particularly compared to the national population. Additionally, the sites this online research was posted on along with the recruitment may have only recruited participants who were interested. Other possibilities for future research could include different types of questionnaires or discrimination inventories. For the purpose of this study, one that could be easily manipulated to fit the population was utilized. The implications

of this research are essential and show a need for change for gender nonconforming students at the higher educational level. Further research might also consult with transgender individuals on the data gathering process. Another suggestion would be to look at transgender high school students, which is also an underrepresented population. The general theme for suggestions from gender nonconforming students would be that they just want to be listened to and respected, as their other peers are.

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Appendix A

Copy of Survey

Standard: Consent (1 Question)

Block: Demographic (5 Questions)

Branch: New Branch

If

If Do you currently identify as one or more of the following: transgender, gender queer, gender neu... Yes Is Selected

Block: Questions for GNC (1 Question)

Block: Questions for GNC pt.2 (5 Questions)

Block: Feedback letter (1 Question)

EndSurvey:

Branch: New Branch

If

If Do you currently identify as one or more of the following: transgender, gender queer, gender neu... No Is Selected

Block: Questions for cis students (3 Questions)

Block: Feedback letter (1 Question)

EndSurvey:

Start of Block: Consent

Q1 Survey Research Information Sheet

You are being asked to participate in a survey conducted by Mariah Palmer, mkp622@lindenwood.edu under the guidance of Michiko Nohara-LeClair, mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu at Lindenwood University. We are doing this study to examine the experiences and perceptions of students on college campuses in hopes to provide feedback to universities in areas where their policies or accessibility may be lacking. It will take about 15 mins to complete this survey.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate or withdraw at any time by simply not completing the survey or closing the browser window.

There are no risks from participating in this project. We will not collect any information that may identify you. There are no direct benefits for you participating in this study.

If you are a Lindenwood student an enrolled in the LPP you will receive one extra credit point in the course for which you signed up for the LPP. You will receive extra credit simply for completing this information sheet. You are free to withdraw your participation at any time without penalty. Participants who are not part of the LPP will receive no compensation beyond the possible benefits listed above. However, your participation is an opportunity to contribute to psychological science. By participating, you also have been given the opportunity to have your voice heard on a topic that is essential to college life.

WHO CAN I CONTACT WITH QUESTIONS?

If you have concerns or complaints about this project, please use the following contact information:

Mariah Palmer, mkp622@lindenwood.edu

Michiko Nohara-LeClair, mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu

If you have questions about your rights as a participant or concerns about the project and wish to talk to someone outside the research team, you can contact Michael Leary (Director - Institutional Review Board) at 636-949-4730 or mleary@lindenwood.edu.

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by closing the survey browser. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age.

You can withdraw from this study at any time by simply closing the browser window. Please feel free to print a copy of this information sheet.

By clicking the link below, I confirm that I have read this form and decided that I will participate in the project described above. I understand the purpose of the study, what I will be required to do, and the risks involved. I understand that I can discontinue participation at any time by simply not completing the survey. My consent also indicates that I am at least 18 years of age, or that I have parental consent on file with the Lindenwood Participant Pool.

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Demographic

Q2 Which of these describes you best?

- I am a college student in the United States. (1)
- I was previously a college student in the United States. (2)
- I have never been a college student in the United States. (3)

Skip To: Q4 If Which of these describes you best? = I am a college student in the United States.

Skip To: Q3 If Which of these describes you best? = I was previously a college student in the United States.

Skip To: End of Survey If Which of these describes you best? = I have never been a college student in the United States.

Q3 Which of these best matches when you attended college?

1-5 years ago. (1)

6-10 years ago. (2)

11-15 years ago. (3)

16+ years ago. (4)

Q4 Have you even been an enrolled student at Lindenwood University?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q5 Do you currently identify as one or more of the following:

transgender, gender queer, gender neutral, intersex, gender nonconforming, non-binary, gender expansive, gender fluid, and/or gender diverse?

Yes (1)

No (2)

Q6 The next part of this survey is going to ask you about some of your experiences on your college campus.

have parental consent on file with the Lindenwood Participant Pool.

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Demographic

Q2 Which of these describes you best?

I am a college student in the United States. (1)

I was previously a college student in the United States. (2)

I have never been a college student in the United States. (3)

Skip To: Q4 If Which of these describes you best? = I am a college student in the United States.

Skip To: Q3 If Which of these describes you best? = I was previously a college student in the United States.

Skip To: End of Survey If Which of these describes you best? = I have never been a college student in the United States.

Page Break

Q3 Which of these best matches when you attended college?

- 1-5 years ago. (1)
 - 6-10 years ago. (2)
 - 11-15 years ago. (3)
 - 16+ years ago. (4)
-

Page Break

Q4 Have you even been an enrolled student at Lindenwood University?

- Yes (1)
 - No (2)
-

Page Break

Q5 Do you currently identify as one or more of the following:

transgender, gender queer, gender neutral, intersex, gender nonconforming, non-binary, gender expansive, gender fluid, and/or gender diverse?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Page Break

Q6 The next part of this survey is going to ask you about some of your experiences on your college campus.

Page Break

End of Block: Demographic

Start of Block: Questions for GNC

Q7 Please answer the following as it relates to your college experience:

	Never (1)	A little (2)	Sometimes (3)	A lot (4)
I have had others deny or minimize [my] experiences of gender discrimination. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have experienced harassment or bullying from peers. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have been judged by others after they learned about my gender identity. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have had teachers or instructors refuse to stop abuse or bullying directed toward me. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have experienced people who refused to use my gender pronouns (e.g., he, her, they, zir) (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have experienced harassment from faculty, staff, and administrators. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have experienced social rejection. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

End of Block: Questions for GNC

Start of Block: Questions for GNC pt.2

Q8 How do you feel about the accessibility to gender affirming dorms on your college campus?

If you are no longer a college student, please indicate how you felt about it when you were a college student.

Q9 How do you feel about the accessibility to gender affirming restrooms on your college campus?

If you are no longer a college student, please indicate how you felt about it when you were a college student.

Q10 How supported do you feel by your educational setting in regard to changing your name or gender associated with your student accounts?

If you are no longer a college student, please indicate how you felt about it when you were a college student.

Q11 What are some positive experiences you have had on campus regarding your gender identity?

Q12 If you had any suggestions on how to improve the experience for students on campus, what would they be?

End of Block: Questions for GNC pt.2

Start of Block: Questions for cis students

Q16 Please answer the following as it relates to how you would feel about people who are transgender in a variety of different situations:

Transgender is defined as "relating to, or being a person whose gender identity differs from the sex the

person had or was identified as having at birth" (<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/transgender>)

	Definitely yes (1)	Probably yes (2)	Might or might not (3)	Probably not (4)	Definitely not (5)
I would feel comfortable sharing a dorm room with a transgender student. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would feel comfortable using the same restroom as a transgender student. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would feel comfortable being in the same classroom as a transgender student. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I would feel comfortable being good friends with a transgender student. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q15 Do you have any further experiences with transgender students that you wish to share?

Please list any experience that you wish to disclose, both positive and/or negative.

Q17 Do you have any other comments or thoughts that you wish to share?

End of Block: Questions for cis students

Start of Block: Feedback letter

Q17 Thank you for participating in my study. I was interested in gathering data on gender nonconforming students in order to provide feedback to universities, if any. This is an extremely vulnerable population, and many find that accessibility and acceptance is lacking on college campuses.

Participants were separated into two categories- gender nonconforming and cisgender students. From there, they were asked different questions. Gender nonconforming students were asked to provide feedback based on their own personal experiences and cisgender students were asked to disclose how comfortable they were and any experiences they had regarding gender nonconforming individuals. All of this was done to hopefully provide constructive feedback and suggestions to universities on how to make their campus more inclusive.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding any portion of this study, please do not hesitate to bring them up now or in the future. My contact information is found at the bottom of this letter.

Thank you again for your valuable contribution to this study.

Sincerely,

Principal Investigator: Mariah Palmer (mkp622@lindenwood.edu)

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Michiko Nohara-LeClair (mnohara-leclair@lindenwood.edu)

End of Block: Feedback letter

Table 1

Table 1

Trans Discrimination Scale

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Min</u>	<u>Max</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Variance</u>	<u>Count</u>
I have had others deny or minimize your experiences of gender discrimination.	1	4	2.07	0.96	0.92	14
I have experienced harassment or bullying from peers.	1	3	1.36	0.72	0.52	14
I have been judged by others after they learned about my gender identity.	1	4	1.93	0.96	0.92	14
I have had teachers or instructors refuse to stop abuse or bullying directed toward me.	1	3	1.14	0.52	0.27	14
I have experienced people who refused to use my gender pronouns (e.g., he, her, they, zir)	1	3	1.79	0.94	0.88	14
I have experienced harassment from faculty, staff, and administrators.	1	3	1.21	0.56	0.31	14
I have experienced social rejection.	1	3	1.71	0.8	0.63	14

Table 2

Table 2

Cisgender Responses

<u>Questions</u>	<u>Min</u>	<u>Max</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>Variance</u>	<u>Count</u>
I would feel comfortable sharing a dorm room with a transgender student.	1	5	2.47	1.35	1.81	133
I would feel comfortable using the same restroom as a transgender student.	1	5	1.77	1.09	1.2	133
I would feel comfortable being in the same classroom as a transgender student.	1	5	1.21	0.63	0.39	133
I would feel comfortable being good friends with a transgender student.	1	5	1.5	0.82	0.67	133