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INTERVIEWS WITH TRANSGENDER STUDENTS:  
ACADEMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FACTORS

by

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for a Degree with Honors  
(Psychology and English)

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## ABSTRACT

Although research on gay and lesbian students has taken off in recent years, there is a serious lack of research devoted solely to the transgender population, and even less specifically focused on transgender students. The research that has been conducted on transgender individuals is often focused on discrimination that they experience, and the effects of that discrimination. College is a period of personal growth and discovery for all students, but perhaps especially for transgender students. This study, therefore, aims to better understand how being transgender affects the college experience.

This qualitative study interviewed self-identified transgender students within the University of Maine system. Data was collected via interviews focused on the academic and environmental experiences of these students. The aim of this exploratory study was to gain further understanding of the unique needs of this student population, with the hope that it may inform future research on the trans community, as well as influence University of Maine policy to better suit the particular needs of these students. Results revealed a number of concerns regarding academic, residential, transgender-specific resources, health, and safety. Implications and recommendations for future research are discussed.

*Keywords:* transgender, college, students, academics, environment

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

There has been limited research conducted on the transgender population, especially transgender college students. In western society, and most other societies, there is an emphasis on an individual's gender matching their birth sex, and that they identify within a bi-gendered system - as either male or female (Nadal et al., 2014). Transgender individuals therefore often find it difficult to discover or come to terms with their variant identity. College is often the first opportunity that transgender students have to explore their gender identities, often because it is the first time these individuals are living away from their families (Beemyn, 2008). In the last ten years, there has been a steadily increasing number of transgender and gender-questioning students pursuing higher education (Beemyn, 2008; McKinney, 2005, Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013). While student affairs professionals have begun to take note of the struggles faced by gay, lesbian, and bisexual students, few have addressed the separate issues concerning transgender students (Singh, Meng, & Hensen, 2013; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005).

### **Terminology**

The term *transgender* is now largely used as an umbrella term for anyone whose gender identity or expression does not conform with stereotypical gender norms (Bazluke & Nolan, 2005; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Pusch, 2005). This would include individuals who identify as *male-to-female* (MtF) or *female-to-male* (FtM), whose gender-identity runs counter to their assigned sex (Beemyn, 2003). *Sex* here being

defined as the categorization of male, female, or intersex, based on the anatomical characteristics present at birth (Sausa, 2002). Many transgender individuals go through a process of *transition*, this could mean changing their physical appearance with different clothing or makeup, changing their legal name, or pursuing medical interventions like hormone replacement therapy (HRT) (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis & Tubbs 2005). The transition process can look different for everyone, and there is no right or wrong way to go about this process.

When an individual's gender-identity conforms with gender norms and their assigned sex, they are *cisgender*. Commonly, what we define as gender, when it is not confused with sex, is the outward presentation or behavior of an individual; examples of this would be attire, physical appearance, or mannerisms (Negrete, 2007). This would more accurately be termed as an individual's *gender expression*, it is how their gender is perceived by society. An individual's *gender-identity* refers to that person's inner-understanding of their place on or outside of the gender spectrum (Negrete, 2007), this does not necessarily need to match how they present themselves in terms of gender expression. These terms, or definitions of said terms, may be updated or removed as further research and advocacy is done with this population, but as of now they are believed to be the most accurate ones available.

## **Concerns**

As illustrated by a number of studies, transgender students are at risk of experiencing increased psychological distress because of the harassment and

discrimination they are faced with (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Grant et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014). Common areas where transgender individuals report discrimination or harassment are through microaggressions, health-care systems, government policies, housing, and education institutions (Dispenza et al., 2012; Dugan et al., 2014).

The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force surveyed thousands of transgender individuals, and an overwhelming 63% reported experiencing at least one form of discrimination at some point in their lives (Grant et al., 2011). Another study of over 500 self-identifying transgender individuals found 83% of both trans-men and trans-women had experienced verbal abuse related to their gender, and 36% had experienced physical abuse related to their gender-identity (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). This same study found that 59% of respondents had experienced rape or forced sexual contact. Another study found that transgender individuals are 1.5 times more likely to have experienced unwanted sexual contact and 1.5 times as likely to have experienced harassing, controlling, or abusive behavior than their cisgender peers (Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011). In a survey of LGBT college students, Rankin (2003) found that 41% of transgender students reported harassment on campus, while only 28% of LGB individuals reported the same.

Due to this prevalence of harassment and distress, transgender students are also far more likely to engage in self-injurious behavior and attempt or contemplate suicide (Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011). In a recent clinical study, results found that over twice as many transgender participants reported engaging in self-injurious behavior than their



cisgender peers. This same study also found that three times as many transgender participants reported making a suicide attempt, in comparison to the cisgender participants. In a survey of over one thousand trans individuals, results indicated a high incidence of depression (44.1%), anxiety (33.2%), and somatic symptoms (27.5%) (Bockting et al., 2013). In another study of over five hundred trans-identified individuals, 32% reported that they had made a suicide attempt at least once in their lives (Clements-Nolle et al., 2006). Another study conducted by Kenagy (2005) reported similar results, with 30.1% of transgender participants reporting making at least one suicide attempt, and of those 67.3% reported that it was related to their gender-identity.

Alarming, studies have shown that many transgender individuals chose to minimize or rationalize discriminatory behavior, choosing to believe that the perpetrators are simply uneducated or ignorant rather than actively hateful towards the trans community (Nadal et al., 2014). It was also found that transgender individuals tended to be hyper-aware of their surroundings, and were more cognizant of potential physical consequences that could occur if they confronted discrimination (Nadal et al., 2014). This presents a serious issue, if transgender individuals are too afraid of physical repercussion to report or call out discriminatory behavior, then it is likely it will simply continue and perpetuate itself. It is absolutely critical that we create an environment that allows trans and gender-variant individuals to feel safe enough to advocate for themselves, and ultimately one where they no longer need to.

## **Concealment and Disclosure**

The sharing of personal information, or self-disclosure, is a vital aspect of social interactions (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010). Disclosure helps express thoughts and feelings, develop a sense of self, and increase the level of intimacy within a relationship (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). However, for people with a concealable stigma (i.e. some aspect of their person or self that is not socially accepted or that is denigrated by society) there is a chance that disclosing this stigmatized aspect of self could lead to negative and even dangerous consequences. As was already expressed, transgender individuals are at a much higher risk of experiencing harassment or violence than their cisgender and LGB+ peers (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Rankin, 2003). Therefore, some transgender individuals remain closeted or concealed whenever possible, either by not presenting as their gender in public or by passing (as male or female) consistently while only disclosing their transgender status when necessary (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2008). In fact, Jaggi (2011) found that transgender individuals expressed an overwhelming preference for “passing” as their identified gender and not disclosing their transgender status.

There are both costs and benefits for individuals who decide to disclose their stigma, some of which have already been explored. A benefit that some studies have found is that it allows the individual to process previously repressed information; as well as alleviate some psychological stress that is often caused by concealing a stigma. This alleviation of psychological stress can also lead to an increase in cognitive performance (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010 ). Another positive effect could be an increase in the intimacy

in the relationship between the discloser and confidant. In fact, disclosure often leads to social support and increased awareness within a community, depending on the extent of the disclosure. Disclosure also allows individuals to advocate for and about their identities, and possibly reduce the stigma surrounding them (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). However, all of these effects could be dependent on the nature of the information that is disclosed.

Although all concealable stigmas are devalued by society, they are denigrated at varying degrees, often due to ideas of controllability or perceived social harm (Quinn & Chaudoir, 2009; Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010). If an individual is not met with full social support or is rejected after their disclosure, they can be left far worse-for-wear; while positive and supportive reactions to disclosure can benefit psychological well-being. Many individuals fear that if they disclose their stigmatized identity, they will be discredited by society (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010), and, in reality, disclosure could very well lead to an increase in prejudice or discrimination

That being said, regardless of the nature of what is being concealed, when one does refrain from disclosing any aspect of themselves, they are effectively cutting off their support system concerning that issue, as well as a population of potential peers who could offer support and advice from experience. Disclosure is often the only way for individuals to actively seek out their in-group, due to the concealable nature of their stigma. Group membership is known to provide a wide range of positive benefits (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010), and the deprivation of having that in-group support, especially for an individual with a stigma, can in fact be detrimental.

One of the most common themes in studies on transgender students is that they often feel isolated and out-of-place when attending school because they know few, if any, other transgender students, and generally lack a sense of belonging anywhere on campus (Beemyn, 2008). Having a known social in-group available to students on campus enables them to feel like a part of the larger campus community, increases self-worth, and increases the likelihood of the individual remaining in school (Beemyn, 2008; Bizumic et al., 2009; Bizumic, Reynolds, & Meyers, 2012). Not having such a system of support can, therefore, result in more negative experiences. The extent and effects of this alienation within the transgender community, however, has gone largely unexamined by the research community.

### **The Importance of Social and Professional Support**

Voelkl (1996) states that one of the biggest problems being faced by the U.S. school system today is the continued mental and physical withdrawal of students from school, often caused by students de-valuing and dis-identifying with school. Therefore, it has been suggested that the best way to increase the performance of our school system is to increase the student's identification with school, through the implementation of various programs, practices, and interventions that link individual students to the school as a whole (Bizumic et al., 2009). Bizumic, Reynolds, & Meyers (2012) found that group support and perceptions of group support have a significant influence on an individual's identification with school, even more so than academic support or leniency, especially if the group itself emphasizes a supportive environment.

The few studies that have focused on improving the lives of transgender college students have compiled several ways by which administrators and colleges as a whole could improve their treatment of transgender students (Bazluke & Nolan, 2005; Beemyn, 2008; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013; Negrete, 2007). Most of these recommendations include a support center that specializes, at least partially, in aiding transgender students. Beemyn (2008) states that having a center whose mission is to offer specialized services to transgender students, as well as lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, is a crucial step for a school wishing to improve the lives of transgender individuals. Although many campuses across the country have developed LGBT+ resources, most of these services are focused on the lesbian, gay, and bisexual population, and largely ignore the separate needs of transgender students. It is important, therefore, to have resources that are clearly directed at this population, and that acknowledge the different struggles that are faced by transgender students compared to their cisgender peers.

It is important that there is clear support for gender variant students on a campus, because having social support and a sense of community makes an individual have a greater sense of self-worth and will increase the likelihood of that individual remaining in school (Bizumic, Reynolds, & Meyers, 2012). An individual will feel a greater sense of belonging and identification with school if they see that there is a place and support for them and people like them. Additionally, it is a commonly held belief that groups can have a very strong influence on their members (Bizumic et al., 2009). Therefore, being connected with a group that strongly values or is present in education and campus life will likely lead to an individual taking on at least some of those beliefs and behaviors.

Additionally, group identification and perceptions of positive social support have been found to have moderating effects on the impact of overt or perceived prejudice (McCoy & Major, 2003). Therefore, an individual that is able to connect with their in-group on campus will likely benefit academically, as well as socially and psychologically.

Staff of these support systems, as well as other awareness groups, must strive to include trans-specific and inclusive content, and they must be well educated in transgender experiences (Beemyn et al., 2005; Beemyn, 2008; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013; Negrete, 2007). A college or university should attempt to include transgender-themed speakers, performers, and films into their regular campus activities (Beemyn, 2008), not only to facilitate an environment where transgender students feel included, but also to bring awareness and acceptance to that community by exposing the general population campus population to its existence. Colleges should also provide training to raise awareness about transgender individuals and develop programs to improve the college environment for people of all genders and gender expressions (Beemyn, 2008, Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013).

There should be strict and clear policies regarding harassment and violence against transgender individuals, and all students, staff, and faculty should know where they can go to report any victimization they experience and be given the option to make this report anonymously for their own safety (Bazluke & Nolan, 2005; Beemyn, 2008; Beemyn et al., 2005; Negrete, 2007). Along those same lines, a transgender individual should never be forced to disclose their gender identity. It is important, however, to have trans-inclusive language on school forms and materials and allow individuals a wider

selection of options to identify their gender than simply male or female. There should also be a safe and simple process for an individual to change their gender on school records and forms such as ID cards, transcripts, and financial aid (Bazluke & Nolan, 2005; Beemyn, 2008; Beemyn et al., 2005; Negrete, 2007). This will not only help to validate the student's identity by having the appropriate name and gender on their documents, but it is also a safety measure that keeps students from having to potentially explain why they use a different name than their birth name or why their appearance doesn't match the gender on their ID card (Beemyn et al., 2005).

Another common point of debate is that of public restroom policies and how they affect the transgender population. One way to partially make using public bathrooms easier for transgender individuals, is to make the location of every unisex or single-occupancy bathroom on campus known to the general population (Bazluke & Nolan, 2005; Beemyn, 2008). Although some transgender individuals may reach a point in their transition where they feel confident using the bathroom that corresponds with their gender-identity, some individuals never reach that point, or have a gender-identity that is not either male or female. Anyone who violates the gender binary is opening themselves up to the possibility of being harassed or even physically attacked, and this is especially true in places like restrooms and locker rooms that are identified as being for either "men" or "women". Therefore, using public restrooms is often a major source of anxiety for transgender individuals (Beemyn et al., 2005).

Although transgender college students face many more challenges than those that have been discussed, studies show that few of even these issues have been addressed in

any way by colleges or universities. McKinney (2005) conducted research concerning the experiences of some transgender individuals at university, and the findings were anything but reassuring. It was found that transgender undergraduates feel that faculty and staff are not sufficiently educated on transgender issues, that there is a lack of programming regarding transgender issues, that there are few resources for students who are transgender or who are dealing with their gender identity, and that there are not adequate counseling services for transgender students available on campuses. Transgender graduate students vocalized many of the same concerns, with the addition of insufficient health care services available for transgender students on campus, likely because they are older and therefore potentially further along in their transition process, which for many, though not all, entails medical interventions (e.g. hormone replacement therapy and/or sexual alignment surgery).

Largely, what the research that has just been examined boils down to, is that colleges and universities need to strive to create an environment for transgender students that is safe and supportive. Studies have found a great deal of overlap regarding the struggles and concerns of transgender students (Beemyn et al., 2005; McKinney, 2005; Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). Therefore, it is likely that there could be a very helpful and like-minded support system available to these students if it were possible for them to locate and approach one another in a safe and secure way.



## Research Goals

The current study was conducted to acquire insight into the academic and environmental experiences of transgender individuals pursuing higher education in the state of Maine. New England has long been a pioneer in the area of social justice (e.g. all of the New England States recently legalized same-sex marriage). As someone who worked on the campaign to win marriage equality in the state of Maine, I have long been interested in how Maine is handling other, perhaps less popularized, social issues. I knew from professional experience that research on the trans community is limited, at best, and I also had my own struggles navigating life as a trans-identified student to direct me down this particular research path.

To inform this research study, I formulated a primary research question: *What are the academic and environmental experiences of transgender college students?*

Additionally, I created four sub-questions to expand and guide discussion of this overarching question:

- *What are the experiences of transgender students in the academic setting?*
- *What are the experiences of transgender students with housing services?*
- *What do transgender students think about the availability of trans-specific resources on campus?*
- *How do transgender students feel about their health and safety needs on campus?*

Through these core questions, this study aims to expand our knowledge on the unique experiences of transgender students attending college. This will be an exploration of how these students navigate the college experience, especially classrooms, residential services,

health and wellness services, resources specifically for trans students, and safety. This study also aims to be a resource that will inform university policy-makers and professionals on the best ways to serve this population, and make the college experience as positive for trans students as it can be for others.

## CHAPTER II: METHODOLOGY

### **Participants**

Interviews were conducted with four students, three of whom identified as female-to-male, and one as male-to-female. All participants were 20 years of age, and of the four there was one junior, two sophomores, and one freshman. All participants reported beginning their transition at college, but that they had questioned their gender-identity before that point. Although more participants were desired, time constraints would not allow for further interviews to be conducted.

### **Qualitative Design**

A qualitative research methodology was employed for this project, because the aim of the study was to explore lived experiences of a select group within a population. The transgender community in Maine is relatively small, and we did not expect to get a large number of participants, thus in-depth qualitative interviews proved to be the most efficient means of receiving a sizable amount of input from a small sample. Additionally, as so little research has been done exploring the needs of transgender college students, it made the most sense to myself and co-researcher to employ this exploratory method.

### **Procedure**

This research project was approved by the University of Maine Institutional Review Board (IRB) (*See Appendix A: Approval from Human Subjects*) and performed

collaboratively with Cameron Holmes, whose thesis “The Social Lives of Transgender College Students” is forthcoming. Interviews lasted an average of one hour, the first half devoted to questions regarding the students’ experiences with academics and the campus environment (*See Appendix B: Academic and Environmental Aspects*), and the second half on social and romantic life (*See Appendix C: Social Aspects*). This thesis will focus on the information gathered from responses to the first set of questions, while Cameron Holmes’ will explore those of the second set.

To gather a sample group for this study, a recruitment email was circulated amongst Gender and Sexuality resources at each University of Maine campus (*See Appendix D: Recruitment Email*). The email asked these centers to then circulate the email with attached informed consent (*See Appendix E: Informed Consent*), to anyone that met the criteria for the study. The criteria for participation included: self-identifying as transgender, being a current student through the University of Maine system, and being at least 18 years of age.

Interested students were asked to contact myself or Cameron Holmes with dates and times when interviews could take place, as well as the channel by which the interview would be performed. Participants could chose to be interviewed in person, over Skype, or via phone call. Three interviews were done over Skype and one was done in-person. At the beginning of each interview, participants were reminded that any question(s) could be skipped, the interview could be stopped at any time, and they could chose to withdraw their data from the study at any point. At the conclusion of each interview, participants received a list of resources (*See Appendix F: Resources*) and were

offered a copy of the thesis upon completion. Only pseudonyms were included in interview transcripts, to protect each participant's identity. The names assigned to the participants were Alice, Brad, Charlie, and David. All interview transcripts and materials were kept on password-encrypted folders on the researchers' personal computers.

## CHAPTER III: RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following chapter will provide a comprehensive illustration of the interviews and how they may be used to answer the primary research question and related sub-questions: *What are the academic and environmental experiences of transgender college students?*

- *What are the experiences of transgender students in the academic setting?*
- *What are the experiences of transgender students with housing services?*
- *What do transgender students think about the availability of trans-specific resources on campus?*
- *How do transgender students feel about their health and safety needs on campus?*

The interviews will be discussed in the subgroups of: academics, housing, resources, and health and safety. These sections will include a synthesis and exploration of themes that emerged during analysis of interview transcripts. This chapter will also discuss what implications this study has for future research, as well as University policy, and the various limitations of the current research study.

### **Academics**

In this section I will present the academic experiences of participants, and how they answer the sub-question: *What are the experiences of transgender students in the academic setting?* During interviews, all four participants mentioned that their

experiences with faculty and other students were generally positive, but, as Brad put it: there were definite “ups and downs”.

Alice, a sophomore with a double-major, explained that those she has told about her trans-identity have been overwhelmingly supportive. Although she feels that people do not treat her any differently, she believes it is because she does not “stick out”, stating: “You know, if you look normal, you’re probably not going to get picked on”. This reaffirms results from previous studies that found trans-students held a decided preference for “passing” or being “stealth” (Jaggi, 2011). Although comforting to know that trans students that can blend into the binary are able to function in classroom settings without serious complications, this response does raise concerns about individuals who do not conform to this bi-gendered system.

Even though she had not yet had any trouble, Alice acknowledged that there were some professors that would probably not be so accepting: “There are some professors I know who might be against it, but not in a bigoted way, in a way that we could talk about it.” Undoubtedly there is a lack of discussion regarding trans-issues within the campus community. This lack of discussion is not only damaging to students directly, but is also hurting them indirectly by not properly preparing professors and staff with adequate information regarding the specific needs of this population.

*I don't think a lot of my classmates really get it, they just keep blundering along, and get confused on the rare occasions when professors get my pronouns right. There's this one professor who still has issues with it - I told him before I stepped foot in his class that these were my name and pronouns, and he still keeps messing up. (Brad)*

Brad's experience illustrates the effects of ignorance explored in the last section when escalated to a more severe level. While he did initially state that some faculty and students were "pretty good" when told his preferred name and gender pronouns, he then qualified that by saying that they "needed a lot of reminders". Whereas Alice seemed to believe that if she was able to talk to her professors and educate them, they would grow to become more accepting, Brad has had no luck doing so with at least one of his professors. Not respecting a trans individual's preferred pronouns is a form of microaggression (Nadal et al., 2012), and has been shown to cause feelings of anger, hopelessness, and not being understood, which can lead to serious physical and psychological repercussions if reoccurring over time (Nadal et al., 2014).

*It's just sort of annoying name-wise. I haven't changed my legal name yet and teachers sometimes get confused during role call; they'll call the wrong name and then I need to pretend not to know who that is. I'm also really androgynous, so new people don't always know what I am or what to think of me. (David)*

David reported struggles similar to Brad in the academic setting, with professors and students using the incorrect name and/or pronouns. Again, consistently using the incorrect name or pronouns is a form of microaggression (Nadal et al., 2012); however, David explained that after he approached his professors about using the correct name and pronouns in class, they corrected their behavior. This perhaps lends more support to Alice's assumption that educating her professors could result in an improvement of their behavior.



## Housing

In this section I will discuss the themes that emerged among participants' responses to questions regarding housing services, attempting to answer the sub-question: *What are the experiences of transgender students with housing services?* This emerged as one of the primary areas of discontent amongst participants. All four participants reported discomfort arising from some area of their residential life while attending school.

*I live off campus so I can have a room of my own. It was always uncomfortable getting dressed and undressed in my dorm. I wear my binder a lot and this is the only place I can not wear it and feel comfortable. (Charlie)*

Charlie, like many trans-men, uses a binder when in public to flatten his chest into a more masculine shape. This is a restrictive and often uncomfortable piece of clothing, sometimes so confining that sitting or even breathing can be difficult and/or painful. However, for Charlie, and many other trans-men, this discomfort is preferred over feelings of dysphoria or the threat of not passing in public. David stated similarly that “doubles are awkward” and that restrooms were a problem because none of the showers have locking doors. Privacy, beyond being an issue of comfort for many trans people, can also be a matter of safety.

*Part of it is with the other people who live in my hallway – they're not the most accepting bunch. For example, when I finally changed the name-tag on my door, it got taken down about 15 times before they finally got bored. Every day I would put a new one up, and they'd take it down. I was told at the beginning of the year that if my roommate and I wanted to move to get away from them we would have to move to the all girls floor, which – no. (Brad)*

This is a serious instance of harassment and, while not causing any direct physical harm, is certainly psychologically stressful and potentially even damaging. The fact that

this bullying behavior did not occur until after Brad changed the name-tag on his door makes it hard to deny that it was spurred by cissexism. This behavior creates a threatening, unsafe environment (Nadal et al., 2014), in a place where students are supposed to feel at home. Perhaps even more concerning than the actions of Brad's floor-mates, is the reaction of the University. When Brad approached residential staff about moving away from this threatening environment, he was given only the option of moving to an all-girls floor. This would have also been extremely uncomfortable for Brad, and given his response was perceived as a worse situation than living with routine harassment. A trans student should not have to choose between living under the threat of physical violence or in a state of constant dysphoria - forcing that choice on an individual is in itself a form of aggression perpetrated by the University.

*I haven't really had to interact with many new people on campus. It will be weird my senior year, because most of my friends will be graduating. They're [the University] probably going to make me room with a girl, and I've been preparing myself for that. I have one female friend that I'm hoping to be able to room with, but we're in different years, so I'm not sure if they'll let us. It's been stressful. I think maybe we need an LGBT floor, so we can feel more safety and comfort, feel more secure, so we can be around people who really understand what we are going through. (Alice)*

Creating an LGBT+ housing option, such as a floor for only self-identifying LGBT+ students, is one of several options that could be implemented to better house trans students. Safety and especially comfort, as shown by the responses of all four participants, are incredibly important. Even if LGBT+ or gender-neutral housing cannot be implemented on a large-scale, the University should work with individual trans students to find a housing option that suits their specific needs. For some, like Alice, this

may simply mean allowing students of different years to room together. For others, it may mean providing a single-occupancy unit at a standard rate.

## Resources

This section will examine the participants' responses to questions regarding trans-specific resources on their campus, with the intention of answering the sub-questions: *What do transgender students think about the availability of trans-specific resources on campus?* All participants reported a lack of trans-specific resources, and a general dissatisfaction with LGBT+ resources that are available.

*I haven't really seen that much on campus. I learned most on the internet, about how hormones work. I'd like to see some kind of open access to information on campus. I don't think there are a whole lot of resources for people experiencing any kind of stress. We have an LGBT club on campus but it's really more of a place to get news, not really support. It's definitely much more social. We really need more resources for transgender people specifically. (Alice)*

Without any other option, many trans and gender variant individuals turn to the internet for advice, support, and even information on self-medication, as Alice mentioned. She began self-medicating over the summer of 2013, and has been generally pleased with the results. She was the only one of the four that had begun using medical interventions as part of her transition.

*We have a gender and sexual minority group, and a resource center staffed by members of the group. It's supposed to be social and also for support. I've had some frustrating moments – like even some of the group members have issues with my pronouns. (Brad)*

It can be especially frustrating to face discrimination from people who you expect to be supportive or understanding. Research does support that it is easier for individuals

to minimize and rebound from instances of discrimination from strangers than from people they know (Nadal et al., 2014). While it is good for this collective to refer to themselves as a gender and sexual minority group, to only act in support of sexual minorities and disrespect those of the gender minority is false advertising, at best. It would be better to simply refer to themselves as a group for sexual minorities, than falsely promote themselves as a location where gender variant individuals can feel safe and respected.

*I don't think there's anything trans-specific. There's a couple of LGBT groups on campus, which is cool. I honestly don't know how to join the group, but I plan on pledging to the LGBT fraternity. (David)*

An interesting theme that emerged in this section was the involvement of several of the participants in Greek Life, and the overwhelming support of their brothers and/or sisters with their transition. Charlie, for example, stated: “No, I’m not part of any groups, but I’m in a sorority - they call me the brother of the sisterhood. [laughs]” Even though he identifies as male, and presents as such, his sorority sisters are very supportive and inclusive. Charlie also commented that because he is very early in the transition process, a lot of what he does on a daily basis he has to do with women, and having his sorority sisters around has helped him feel more comfortable. Brad also pledged to be a member of a fraternity on his campus, and when the University denied him membership because his gender marker still read female, his brothers came forward and advocated for him until he was able to successfully join. Such overwhelmingly positive comments are a breath of fresh air from the usual contrast that is often drawn between Greek Life and the LGBT+ community. However, why is it that so many of these students became involved

with these programs over those that supposedly target their population (e.g. sex and gender diversity organizations)? From the responses gathered in this survey, it would seem that trans students do not feel particularly connected to, accepted, or welcomed within the LGBT+ resources that are available to them. This further supports the need for more trans-specific resources and/or actual inclusion and sensitivity to trans students within combined LGBT+ resource centers and organizations.

### **Health and Safety**

In this final section, we will explore responses given by participants regarding issues of health and safety, aiming to answer the sub-question: *How do transgender students feel about their health and safety needs on campus?* Participants expressed mixed feelings about counseling and other health services available on campus. While some experiences with staff were positive, many involved the participants educating the providers in order to receive acceptable service.

*I have a counselor on campus, and she's been a massive support for me and I'm so grateful for that. But when I was having heart palpitations and went to the health center, the doctor didn't know what the effects of hormones were. He thought I had low potassium, but my meds raise potassium levels. I had to explain that he was wrong and give him all this information. It would be nice to have a doctor on campus who understands the effects of hormones on the human body. (Alice)*

As is clearly evidenced by Alice's commentary, lack of education regarding trans-specific health care can have very serious and potentially life-threatening consequences. If Alice had not been as well-educated on the effects of specific hormones on the body, she could have suffered a very dangerous overdose of potassium. Having an

endocrinologist available, either at the University or through referral, may be one way to increase the quality of care provided to transgender students. At the very least, all physicians should have at least a basic knowledge of the effects of hormone replacement therapy on the body.

*I went to the therapist that the school provides free of charge, to see if she would write a standard of care letter. She and I didn't get along well. It took her a month to even get around to reading what's supposed to be in the letter. Then she decided that she didn't want to write the letter for another year – she wanted to talk about other things that I didn't think were issues. Like, she thought my GPA was too high because I was using homework to push away my other issues. I ended up telling her that if she didn't want to talk about why I was there, I was going to get another therapist. And I did. (Brad)*

Although it is likely that Brad's therapist believes that she is protecting him by having him wait to begin various stages of treatment, this proves to be extremely frustrating for Brad, and he comes to decide that his needs are not being sufficiently met. Brad approached this therapist to receive a letter stating he was fit to begin hormone therapy and would have mental health counseling available during the process, which is currently an agreed upon requirement for the care of transgender individuals. When his therapist initially skirts his request and then ultimately states that she is going to prolong the process for another year, Brad is understandably displeased. He felt invalidated and recognized that he was not going to receive the help he needed through this service provider. It is unfortunate that some students, like Brad, can not take full advantage of counseling services provided on campus because staff is not educated or is potentially biased towards their population. One would hope that it is a matter of ignorance, rather

than out right hostility or aggression. Charlie reported similar issues with uneducated health staff:

*The first person I talked to had no idea what I was talking about initially. I guess I was their first actual experience with a trans person. The second person was really good, as soon as I told her my name and pronouns she switched right over. (Charlie)*

Charlie, like Alice, found himself needing to do a lot of educating during his initial visit to health services. It was an actual relief not to need to do all of that explaining the second time. Simply having his names and pronouns respected made all of the difference in Charlie's experience.

In general, all participants felt safe on campus, and were confident that they were not in any physical danger. No participants reported experiencing any physical violence, stating that if there was a problem, it was usually handled verbally:

*Mostly if people have an issue with me, it's just words. Even the people on my floor, they're not particularly violent. They'll take down my name-tag 15 times, but they wouldn't physically do me harm. (Brad)*

Brad's experiences with harassment were the most severe of those reported by participants, and yet he still reported feeling safe physically. There is a possibility this is a minimization of his own experiences, and the threat thereof, even though transgender individuals have previously been found to be especially aware of physical threats in response to their identity (Nadal et al., 2014). Although Brad may not have felt a threat to his physical well-being, he did feel enough discomfort to request a room change. He also felt strongly that residential life was too lenient regarding complaints, because he knew several of his problematic floor-mates had been reported multiple times, but no further

action was ever taken. Other participants shared the sentiment that, while their peers might express their prejudice, they would not do so in a way that was physically violent:

*I feel safe, for the most part. But I can see why people wouldn't want to be "out" on campus - I'm probably going to go stealth next semester. I can see people on campus finding out and acting - I don't know about violently, but maybe aggressively.* (Alice)

It is the choice of many transgender individuals to assume the traditional gender roles and expression that align with their gender-identity, so as to appear as that gender to others and not as a "trans" person. In a lot of cases, this is a matter of safety and survival. It can be dangerous to openly express oneself as transgender, evidenced by the significantly higher percentage of violent crimes experienced by transgender persons (Bockting et al., 2013; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Clements-Nolle et al., 2006; Grant et al., 2011). David also expressed a preference for concealment over disclosure: "I haven't had any trouble with anybody, but I'm not really "out" on campus. I don't go around telling people, only when it's relevant." All participants felt most comfortable when they were simply able to act as themselves and not have their trans-identity broadcasted to the public. This supports suggestions made by prior studies that focus on advocating for and creating a system of support for transgender students, without them necessarily needing to out themselves to people outside of the community (Bazluke & Nolan, 2005; Beemyn, 2008; Beemyn et al., 2005; Negrete, 2007).

## **Implications**

In terms of academics, our findings suggest that while transgender college students feel that they don't consistently face problems, there are certainly issues that



come up from time to time. The most common complaint was having the wrong name on class roll calls, and having professors continue to use the incorrect name and pronouns even after being corrected multiple times. This indicates that we need to provide sensitivity training or some other type of education program to staff employed at the University.

Housing emerged as one of the greatest concerns for all participants. The sharing of double-rooms with strangers and having gendered bathrooms and/or floors in residence halls caused a great deal of frustration and anxiety for many participants. One participant moved off campus because they found sharing a room too awkward, and the other three participants explained that the main reason they remained on campus is because they could not afford to live elsewhere or had no other options.

Participants were also not pleased with the availability of trans-specific resources on their campuses, and several did not know how to become involved in the general Gender and Sexual Diversity groups. One participant who did become involved in such a group had a negative experience with members continually using the incorrect name and pronouns. All participants felt that having a trans-specific group or resource would be beneficial. Much of this indicates that trans students identify more with each other than they do their LGB+ peers, and that lumping gender-variant students together with those of a sexual minority is not beneficial, especially when the members and leaders of combined LGBT+ groups are not trained or educated on the proper treatment and advocacy of this population.

Participants had mixed experiences with counseling and health services, some experiences, especially with campus counselors, were very beneficial to participants. However, several participants complained about the lack of education that much of the staff had at the health and counseling centers. It should not be the responsibility of the patient to inform their doctor or therapist on their condition, and having no or an incorrect knowledge of trans-health can have very serious consequences. This suggests that a gender diversity sensitivity training or something along those lines should be provided to and required of health care professionals, so that they may provide the best care for all of their patients.

### **Limitations**

There were a number of foundational as well as methodological limitations regarding this study. Due to the severe lack of literature published on the transgender population, there were limited resources to gather background information from, as well as gather and create materials that would be best suited to the study we wanted to conduct. Time constraints also proved to be a limitation to a study of our proposed and idealized breadth. This time constraint led to fewer recruited participants than we had initially anticipated, although we believe that the depth of the interviews that were conducted helped to moderate that. Another potential reason for the low sample size is the nature of the population, and the clear preference to not be outed.

It is important to also recognize that, due to the very specific nature of the sample, the results of this study should not be generalized to the entire transgender populations,

and not even all transgender students. A great deal more exploratory research will still need to be conducted following this study before we can be sure that we are advocating for this population to the best of our ability. However, it is the hope of this researcher that the results of this study can at least contribute some useful information to policy-makers and professionals on the needs of our transgender student population.

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## Appendix A: Approval from Human Subjects

Office of the Vice President for  
Research  
*Protection of Human Subjects Review  
Board*



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Orono, Maine 04469-5703  
Tel: 207-581-1498  
Fax: 207-581-1300  
www.umaine.edu

### MEMORANDUM

TO: Thomas Stevenson  
Cameron Holmes

FROM: Gayle Jones  
Assistant to the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
(IRB)

SUBJECT: "Interviews with Transgender College Students: Exploring the Academic,  
Environmental, and Social Lives," #2014-02-12

DATE: March 7, 2014

The above referenced project was approved by the University of Maine's Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) in an expedited review. The approval period is 3/3/2014 through 8/31/2014. A continuing review of this project must be conducted by the IRB before the end of the approval period. Although you will receive a request for this information approximately 6-8 weeks before that date, it is your responsibility to submit the information in sufficient time to allow for review before the approval period expires.

Enclosed is an approved, stamped copy of the consent document for this project. The approval for this consent expires on 8/31/2014. **This approved, stamped copy must be duplicated and used when enrolling subjects during the approval period.** The Board has waived the requirement for signed consent based on Section I.L.3.b.

Please remember that each subject must be given a copy of the consent document. Any unanticipated problems or harm to the subject must be reported to the IRB immediately. Any proposed changes to the research must be approved by the IRB **prior** to implementation. Any significant new findings must be reported to the subject.

If you have questions, please contact me at 1-1498. Thank you.

pc: Sandra Caron

## **Appendix B: Academic and Environmental Aspects Interviews by Thomas Stevenson**

### OPENING BACKGROUND QUESTIONS:

What is your age?

What year are you in college?

Have you been attending college continuously? How long?

How or when did you realize you were transgender?

What has been your transition (M to F? vs F to M?)

When did you transition? (e.g. high school, before college, while in college)

### CAMPUS

In general, what has it been like to attend college as a transgender student?

What have been some of the challenges?

What has been your experience within the classroom? Your major?

What has been your experience with faculty? with other students?

### RESOURCES

What have been your experiences with transgender resources on your campus?

Are you a member of any support groups, clubs, or organizations?

### HOUSING

What have been your experiences with housing?

Do you live on or off campus? Why?

### HEALTH SERVICES

Tell me about your experiences with health and counseling services on your campus.

What are bathroom facilities like?

### SAFETY

Do you feel safe at your school?

How comfortable do you feel about being “out” on your campus?

Is there anything you feel your campus could do to make the college experience better for transgender students?

What advice might you give to transgender individuals who are considering attending college?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the academic side of being a college student?

**Appendix C: Social Aspects**  
**Interviews by Cameron Holmes**

**GENERAL QUESTIONS**

What has your social life looked like since coming to college?  
How might you meet people to date or have a relationship with?  
What has that experience been like?

**PAST EXPERIENCES**

Did you date before coming out as trans? Discuss  
Did you date during your transition?  
Why or why not? Please discuss

**PRESENT EXPERIENCES**

Are you in a relationship now?  
Has transitioning affected your orientation/identity?  
How does being transgender influence the decisions you make around relationships?

**THOUGHTS ON THE FUTURE**

What are your thoughts about your dating and relationships in the future?  
What advice would you give to future college students about dating or relationships?  
Is there anything your campus can be doing to help with the social aspect for transgender students?



## Appendix D: Recruitment Email

### Interviews with Transgender College Students: Exploring the Academic, Environmental, and Social Lives

We are interested in interviewing transgender students attending any of the University of Maine campuses. We are Thomas Stevenson and Cameron Holmes, two senior Honors students at the University of Maine at Orono. Thomas is a Psychology and English double-major, and Cameron is a Psychology major. We are both transgender college students. We are doing a joint research project this semester focusing on the academic and social experiences of transgender students on college campuses within the University of Maine system. Thomas will be focusing his part of the study on the academic and environmental factors of college life, such as experiences with professors, other students, experiences with living on campus, the health center, and the campus climate in general. Cameron will be focusing on the social aspects of college life, such as dating and other intimate relationships in terms of understanding the social experiences of transgender students.

We are hoping you might be able to forward this email to transgender college students you might know on your campus who might be willing to be interviewed for our study. Students should be between the ages of 18 - 24, self-identify as transgender, and have attended university for at least one full semester.

Interviews will be entirely confidential, only pseudonyms will be included in field notes and our reports. Interviews will be about an hour long, and will consist of collecting some background information (e.g. age, year in college, how or when did you realize you were transgender?), as well as a series of questions on the student's academic and environmental experiences, such as: *What has it been like to attend college as a transgender student? What have been your experiences with housing? Do you feel safe at your school?*

There will also be questions regarding aspects of the student's social life, such as: *How do you meet people? Did you date before coming out as trans? Are you currently in a relationship?*

If you know someone who meets the criteria for participation and who would consider participating in this exciting research opportunity, please forward this email to them.

We have attached the **Informed Consent** form, which provides greater details on the study. Please feel free to contact either Thomas or Cameron with any questions: [thomas.stevenson@umit.maine.edu](mailto:thomas.stevenson@umit.maine.edu) or [cameron.holmes@umit.maine.edu](mailto:cameron.holmes@umit.maine.edu).

Thank you for your assistance in helping us find transgender students to interview.

**Appendix E: Informed Consent**  
**(to be attached to recruitment email)**

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by Thomas Stevenson and Cameron Holmes, Honors students in the Psychology department at the University of Maine at Orono. Our faculty sponsor is Dr. Sandra Caron, Professor of Family relations and Human Sexuality at the University of Maine. The purpose of this research is to explore the academic, environmental, and social experiences of transgender college students. We are using data from our interviews to write our honors theses. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate.

**What will you be asked to do?** If you decide to participate, you will be interviewed about your experiences as a transgender college student. The interview will take approximately one hour to complete. Questions will include such topics as your background (e.g. age, year in college, and how or when did you realize you were transgender?), a series of question about your academic and environmental experiences at school, including what your experiences have been like on campus (e.g. What have been your experiences with faculty Housing? Health Center?), and questions on your social and romantic life, including what your dating experiences have looked like (e.g. Did you date before coming out as trans? How do you meet people?). We will also ask if you have any suggestions for future transgender students or for the campus community as a whole.

**Risks.** There is the possibility that you may become uncomfortable answering the questions. You may skip any question you do not wish to answer and you may stop at any time. There is also the possibility that you may re-experience some of the emotions associated with discovering or expressing your trans-identity. We have attached a list of resources if you have concerns or wish to speak someone. There is also the risk of being identified – however we will use a pseudonym and hope you will chose a private location to speak with us via Skype or phone call.

**Benefits.** While this study may have no direct benefit to you, this research will help us to learn more about the experiences of transgender college students, and assist future trans-identified students and those who work with them.

**Confidentiality.** Your name will not be on any of the documents. A pseudonym will be used to protect your identity. We hope to speak to you via Skype or over the phone. If you chose Skype please know that it is not secure and calls are subject to monitoring by software vendors and government agencies. Please be sure to select a private location to speak with us. During the interview please do not name specific individuals (i.e., other students, staff). The investigator's de-identified notes from the interview will be kept in a single encrypted file on the investigators' computer. We will keep the notes indefinitely. Only the investigators and their faculty advisor will have access to this information. Data

will be reported in summary form for the entire UMaine system, not by individual campuses.

**Voluntary.** Participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to take part in this study, you may stop at any time during the study. You may skip any questions you do not want to answer.

**Contact Information.** If you are interested in being interviewed, or if you have any questions, please contact one or both of the co-investigators, Thomas Stevenson at: [thomas.stevenson@umit.maine.edu](mailto:thomas.stevenson@umit.maine.edu) or Cameron Holmes at: [cameron.holmes@umit.maine.edu](mailto:cameron.holmes@umit.maine.edu).

You may also contact the faculty advisor of this study, Dr. Sandra Caron, by phone: 581-3138 or email: [sandy.caron@umit.maine.edu](mailto:sandy.caron@umit.maine.edu).

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Gayle Jones, Assistant to the University of Maine's Protection of Human Subjects Review Board, at 581-1498 or email: [gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu](mailto:gayle.jones@umit.maine.edu).

## Appendix F: Resources for Transgender Students

MaineTransNet:

[www.mainetransnet.org](http://www.mainetransnet.org)

MaineTransNet on Facebook

LGBT Services:

[umaine.edu/lgbt/transgender-resources](http://umaine.edu/lgbt/transgender-resources)

GLBT National Help Center:

1-888-843-4564

The University of Maine System Counseling Centers:

University of Maine:

125 Cutler Health Center (581-1392 or [counselingcenter@umit.maine.edu](mailto:counselingcenter@umit.maine.edu))

University of Maine at Augusta:

Augusta Campus: 195F Jewett Hall (621-3044)

Bangor Campus: 126 Eastport Hall (262-7836)

University of Maine at Farmington:

252 Main Street (778-7034)

University of Maine at Fort Kent:

Student Health Clinic, Nadeau Hall (834-7530)

University of Maine at Machias:

204C Powers Hall (255-1305 or [aleaver@maine.edu](mailto:aleaver@maine.edu))

University of Maine at Presque Isle:

Campus Operator (768-9400: ask for counseling services)

University of Southern Maine:

Portland Campus: 105 Payson Smith (780-4050)

Gorham Campus: 125 Upton Hall (780-4050)

Lewiston-Auburn Campus (780-668)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Thomas A. Stevenson was born in Pembroke, Maine on April 3rd, 1992. He was raised in Waldoboro, Maine, and graduated from Medomak Valley High School in June of 2010. While at the University of Maine, Thomas majored in Psychology with a minor in English. Thomas has worked while attending college for several political and social nonprofits, and plans to continue his work advocating for minority groups throughout his life. Thomas expects to graduate in August of 2014, he then plans to find work as an assistant teacher and continue his education by pursuing a Master's degree in early childhood education.

## REFLECTION ON THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

This thesis was written with data collected in collaboration by Thomas Stevenson and his co-investigator Cameron Holmes. Both researchers were trans-identified Honors students within the Psychology major. The researchers worked together to create an exploratory research project that would allow them to better understand the comprehensive experiences of college life for transgender students. The researchers worked together on a proposal to the Institutional Review Board, including a proposed procedure, research questions, and a preliminary literature review. The study was divided into two parts, one on the academic and environmental aspects of college life, explored in this thesis, with the second half focusing on the social and relationship aspects that Cameron explored in his. Interviews were conducted consecutively in a single one-hour block, on average. Questions were asked by the interviewer doing research relevant to them, while the other researcher recorded responses. This allowed the interviewer to fully engage with each participant and not worry about recording information while listening and prompting for information. When the interview process was complete, analysis of transcript material occurred independently. Writing also occurred independently, although it was monumentally helpful to have a peer educated in the subject matter available to proofread work throughout the writing process. Additionally, and perhaps most importantly, the ability to work collaboratively on this project allowed the researchers to conduct a far more comprehensive study than would have been possible individually.