Starring Students: Gender Performance at a Women's College

Jeni Hart
Associate Professor
Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis
University of Missouri

Jaime Lester
Assistant Professor
Higher Education
George Mason University

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand how gender is constructed at a women's college. Specifically, the researchers use Judith Butler's (1990) work on performativity to frame how members of the campus community perceive transgender students are integrated into the college. Through semi-structured interviews with faculty, staff, and students, three themes emerged: transgender students are both invisible and hyper-visible and they experience a certain degree of oppression in their lives, oppression that carries with it unique circumstances due to the location of this study. The influence of these themes on the campus community and on what it means to be a women's college when gender is considered as performance are explored. Finally, implications of the findings for research and practice are also considered.

Much of the research on gender and sexuality among student subcultures in higher education relies on traditional assumptions about gender. Those assumptions include gender as an essentialized and dichotomous trait (Bilodeau, 2005, 2009; Renn, 2010). Individuals are born with a biological sex, which in turn defines their gender; simply put, a girl who is born with female genitalia is expected to adopt only feminine gender traits. Thus gender is prescribed—individuals are only able to be masculine or feminine.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Jeni Hart, hartjl@missouri.edu.

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

The belief that there are only two genders is what Bilodeau (2009) refers to as genderism. He argued that higher education reinforces the concept of genderism through policies and practices that prohibit considering gender as a fluid and dynamic construct. Ultimately, genderism seeks to maintain privileges afforded to those who consider gender as a binary. Further, the rigidity of genderism has made it difficult for researchers to consider other students who fall into more amorphous gender categories (e.g., transgender students). We define transgender individuals as those "whose gender identity conflicts with their sex[1] assigned at birth and/or societal norms for their gender expression" or performance (Bilodeau, 2005, p. 30).

Transgender persons are seen as violating strict notions of gender essentialism; they rebut the gender dichotomy by performing (and then often seeking surgical alterations, thus becoming transsexual; Kessler & McKenna, 1997) in ways contradictory to their sex. This performance is often a blending of genders (Devor, 1989, 1997; Ekins & King, 1997), demonstrating gender as a fluid category. For example, some may think of themselves as being both women and men. In other circumstances, this performance creates a third gender—one that is not exclusively "feminine" or "masculine" in the socially constructed sense (Ekins & King, 1997). They willfully violate social rules of dress, communication styles, and emotions by adopting and performing the gender different from their sex (Harley, Nowak, Gassaway, & Savage, 2002).[2]

We argue that all institutions, and in particular those in higher education, face challenges related to biases centered on gender. However, colleges and universities for women pose a unique situation related to how transgender individuals are included (or not), due to an organizational structure for students that limits enrollment to one sex—female. Thus, any variation of gender or the expression of gender can create disharmony. While less than 1% of all college students are educated at women's colleges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009), the institutional context makes it an

[1] We are also aware that some scholars argue that sex is also a social construction (e.g., Butler, 2004; Fausto-Sterling, 2000), which further complicates the ideas presented in this paper.

[2] As scholars struggling to challenge gender binary, we recognize that the use of masculine and feminine pronouns and concepts like "opposite gender" and "complete transition" are problematic. While we have tried to limit their use, we have not yet found suitable substitutes and, although problematic, continue to use *she* and *he* and other binary terms throughout this paper.

ideal setting to explore the implications of gender because of the seemingly obvious contradictions.

As such, the purpose of this study is to explore how students, faculty, and staff at one women's college think about gender identity—and particularly transgender identity—on their campus. To achieve this goal, we rely on a nuanced definition of gender identity that conceptualizes gender as a performance rather than an essentialized and dichotomous trait. Performativity theory will bring together contextual and cultural definitions of gender and how individuals negotiate those definitions alongside power. As will become clear, how colleges discursively present gender can influence the resistance or acceptance of transgender students. Finally, we hope that a better understanding of how individuals at one women's college struggle with new definitions of gender will assist those at other colleges in understanding how to better serve transgender students.

Literature Review

Transgender Students

What we do know about transgender students relies on a small number of studies (Renn, 2010), some of which are becoming dated. Many of these studies are found bundled into the literature on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students (e.g., D'Augelli, 1994; D'Augelli & Patterson, 1995; Fassinger & Miller, 1996; Herdt & Boxer, 1993; Rankin, 2005). This research, although crucial to understanding those students who are often considered sexual minorities, portrays LGBT students as a homogeneous body and assumes all LGBT students have similar experiences and undergo a similar process of identity development. Yet unlike other sexual minorities who can often "pass" as heterosexual, many transgender students, particularly those who are at women's colleges, are unable and/or unwilling to mask their transgender nature (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005). Furthermore, including transgender students under that larger umbrella of LGBT conflates sexual orientation with gender expression (Renn, 2010). As Leslie Feinberg (1998) states, "Confusing our gender expression with our sexuality denies the reality of our battles as transgender people" (p. 59).

Only recently has research begun to deconstruct the larger category of gay students, calling attention to subcultures, the intersection of multiple identities, and the fluidity of gender identity and its implications (Bilodeau, 2005, 2009; Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Pusch, 2005). For example, transgender students question the use of and participation in gender specific

facilities (Nakamura, 1998). Bathrooms, athletics, the Greek system, residence halls, scholarships, and locker rooms are often separated based on societal constructions of gender. In addition, classroom-based interactions, which rely on use of names and pronouns, offer challenges to faculty and transgender students (e.g., referring to a student as he or she; Gagné & Tewksbury, 1996; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006).

While many, if not most, gay, lesbian, and bisexual students experience discrimination on campus, including harassment, violence, and faculty passivity (D'Augelli, 1989, 1992; D'Augelli & Rose, 1990; Grossman & D'Augelli, 2006; Love, 1998; Myers, 1993; Norris, 1992; Rankin, 2005), transgender students may also experience discrimination and harassment because they do not align their sex with their gender (Bilodeau, 2005, 2009; Carter, 2000; Gagné, Tewksbury, & McGaughey, 1997; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005). In fact in a survey conducted by Campus Pride, nearly 40% of transgender and 30% of non-gender conforming students, faculty, and administrators reported experiences of harassment on campus (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Frazer, 2010).

The aforementioned challenges have significant implications for transgender students on campus. For example, a recent national study found 41% of transgender people have attempted to commit suicide (Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2010). When considering college students specifically, studies indicated that transgender students are two or three times more likely to attempt suicide and are more likely to drop out of school for one semester or longer (Sherrill & Hardesty, 1994). These concerns are further exacerbated by evidence that transgender students perceive a significant lack of resources from colleges to support transgender students (McKinney, 2005). These same students also reported limited education on campus about transgender issues. For these reasons, transgender student issues create uncharted territories for higher education institutions and create situations in which institutions must review their policies, culture, and inherent biases of gender.

Women's Colleges

At one time, women's colleges were the only option available to women wanting to pursue higher education. Maggie Coats (1993) defines women's colleges as intentionally created for women only. However, other scholars argue that the schools' very existence challenges traditional ideas about gender by opening doors to women (Bank & Yelon,

2003). Women's colleges historically have advocated for new ideas about who women are (Bank & Yelon, 2003; Horowitz, 1984; Tidball, Smith, Tidball, & Wolf-Wendel, 1999). In fact, Tidball and colleagues purport that women's colleges are sites where women who are secure and women who are struggling with identity have a place to commiserate and be taken seriously.

Additionally, while the purpose of women's colleges is similar, they vary in terms of how they are organized (Tidball et al., 1999). For example, women's colleges include those that emphasize serving women of color, women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, and/or returning women students. These colleges also differ in many other ways: some are Catholic, some are more or less selective, and some are more expensive to attend than others. However, given the overarching value of taking women seriously, women's colleges provide unique settings to think about gender in a more complicated way.

To date, we found only one study that explored transgender issues in a women's college context. Perifimos (2008) conducted a legal analysis of the assumed conflict between admission practices at women's colleges and transgender rights. She found Smith and Mount Holyoke did amend their student constitutions to eliminate gender specific language (i.e., she/her), demonstrating some evidence of recognition of transgender students. However, students instigated these policy changes, not administrators. When considering administrative policies, Perifimos found there were few policies about how to address issues of transgender student admission. Campuses that did admit transgender students did so on a case-by-case basis, providing some opportunity to transmen (female to male or FTM), but not to transwomen (male to female or MTF). This practice raises interesting questions in that those who are born male but identify as women are not able to enroll, despite the consistency of their gender performance with the image of what is expected at a women's college (Perifimos, 2008).

Despite limited consideration of transgender issues at women's colleges in the research and scholarly literature, other media outlets have started the conversation about transgender issues at women's colleges (Pincus, Rose, Lee, Opatut, & Michalchyshyn, 2005; Wenniger, 2007). These discussions about transgender issues at women's colleges, coupled with the lack of research in this area and the increasing number of transgender students at women's colleges (Quart, 2008), reinforce the need to conduct studies like the current investigation.

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

Theoretical Framework

To examine the influences of transgender students on assumptions of gender at a women's college, we turn to Judith Butler's concept of performativity. In her groundbreaking book, *Gender Trouble,* Butler (1990) theorized that gender is a socially constructed category created during gendered "performances." Butler argued when individuals perform feminine or masculine traits, they create and define gender. Simply, there is no preconceived notion of gender that is based on biological fact or simplistic notions of gender as dichotomous (either entirely masculine or feminine). In addition, when individuals perform gender, they construct their gender identity. If individuals are to act feminine (regardless of their biological sex), they construct feminine identities; acting masculine leads to the construction of masculine identities. Further, transgender students can assume the performance of a gender that contradicts their sex and, therefore, at least temporarily adopt another gender identity. Another aspect of performativity is the role of power and the relationship between agency and power. This is precisely why performativity and not other gender performance theories, such as those of Erving Goffman (1959), were chosen for this study. We were interested in not just how transgendered students performed gender that contradicted their sex, but the impact on individual identity and the role of power found in the institutional context. To further explain the theory of performativity, we now turn to an explanation of the main tenets—discourse, identity, and power.

The theory of performativity relies first on the notion of discourse, which includes words, objects, and symbols that convey meaning within a specific context or culture. A discourse could be the specific words or phrases in a speech given by a university president or the ideas and attitudes individuals have concerning homosexuality. Discourse must, however, have meaning that can be understood by the observer thereby providing information about those culturally accepted ideas, attitudes, and practices (Lather, 1991; Paechter, 2001). Moreover, discourses are laden with power dynamics that determine which discourses are acceptable in each context (Weedon, 1997). For example, a president in a women's college who only uses the pronoun "she" when referring to the students defines all students as women, placing those transgendered students who identify as "he" outside of the norm. Transgendered students are then not seen as students, but a group of individuals who exists outside of normative expectations.

The second tenet of performativity is that of identity, which refers to the ways in which individuals understand themselves in relation to the world. Within performativity, individuals construct their identity in relationship to the specific context. As individuals move from one context to another (e.g., moving from high school to college or the classroom to residence halls), their identities may also change. For example, an individual may identify as a gay, female student in an all-male science classroom, but identify as an activist when working within the LGBT community. Importantly, identity is a fluid process that is able to change. The experiences of transgender students often provide salient examples of the changing nature of identity outlined in performativity. Students who identify as transgender change the gender from one that is linked to their biological sex (e.g., *male* is equivalent to masculinity) to a gender identity that is more congruent with their identities.

Although identity may change from one context to another, certain identities are considered more contextually appropriate and define which identities have power. For example, a female instructor in a male-dominated profession such as auto mechanics, physics, or welding, who acts very feminine is contrary to the norms of masculinity. When one does perform a gender that is considered inappropriate in a specific context, regulatory powers, such as the law and medical diagnosis (e.g., the claim that homosexuality is a psychological condition), work to identify those actions as inappropriate and problematic. For transgender students, policies for single sex admissions are a form of regulatory power that align biological sex with performance of gender. In addition, this study illustrates other regulatory powers—for example, administrative discourse and the hiding of gender-inclusive restrooms—that function to reinforce the "deviance" of transgender.

Research Design

We conducted an instrumental case study at one women's college (Cady College) in an eastern state to explore how individuals at one women's college struggled with the presence of transgender students. Cady College is one of the largest and most selective women's colleges in the United States. Over 40% of the undergraduate students at Cady identify as non-White, which is a point of pride for the college. Because of the small numbers of women's colleges in the United States and our desire to protect

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

the confidentiality of the participants, we have decided to provide limited details about the institution itself, including using a pseudonym to refer to the institution; however, we do not feel this decision compromised the transferability of our data.

The case study approach allowed for an in-depth analysis of diversity-related issues, with a specific interest on issues related to transgender students.[3] We conducted semi-structured interviews to allow participants to articulate how they perceived the climate at Cady College. Specifically, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences related to diversity; the intent of the study was to understand the participants' experiences and the phenomenon of diversity and climate, supporting the methodological use of qualitative approaches (Allan & Madden, 2006). It was within the broader context of diversity that participants raised issues of transgender and gender and these data are the focus of the current study. We specifically sought to understand how members of one women's college community understand gender identity, especially transgender identity. Of particular interest were the ways in which individuals articulated the cultural practices and norms of gender at a women's college and the relationship between gender norms and power.

Participants

Identifying salient patterns and themes from the voices of the broadest range of constituents within the community of Cady College was essential for gaining an institutional understanding of diversity and the campus climate. To do so, the college generated and provided the researchers with random stratified samples of students, faculty, and staff. The college oversampled for race/ethnicity and other underrepresented characteristics within the population when possible in order to enhance the opportunities of receiving any unique experiences related to these characteristics. Invitations were sent to 808 people (264 students, 255 faculty, and 289 staff), asking them to participate in a 90-minute focus group or individual interview. About one-third (246) agreed to participate through this method.

[3]N.B., the college president and the chief diversity officer supported the study and assisted in helping the two researchers identify potential participants and space on campus to collect data. Also, the data were collected and analyzed as part of an institution-wide campus climate study; we reanalyzed the data for the current study using the theory of performativity to inform the analysis.

Twenty additional faculty, 23 additional staff, and 39 additional students participated in discussion groups (pre-organized campus groups whose missions focused on some aspect of diversity, including one student group whose focus was on transgender issues), and 11 other students participated in an e-mail survey. The researchers conducted 58 individual interviews, 34 focus groups, and 14 discussion groups that each ranged between five and eight participants. In addition, separate groups were conducted for faculty, staff, and students, and were further disaggregated by rank, job type, and academic year. Initially, the faculty and staff focus groups were designed to be separated by gender; however, early feedback from participants led to reconfiguring the groups to be gender inclusive.

In total, 339 students, faculty, and staff participated in the study. One student and one faculty member self-identified as transgender on a demographic survey that each participant voluntarily completed prior to engaging in the interview protocol. Participants in focus groups and individual interviews were asked to reflect on the following questions: (a) How is diversity understood at the college?; (b) What factors related to diversity have contributed to your ability to meet your own goals and objectives?; (c) What factors related to diversity have hindered or impeded your ability to realize your goals and objectives?; and (d) What specific strategies/recommendations/suggestions can you make for change/improvement regarding programs, procedures, policies (either academic, personnel, or student life) that would enhance diversity at the college? Follow up questions and probes were posed to foster additional consideration of the four broad questions. However, no question specifically asked about transgender or any other identity-related aspect of diversity. As such, any themes that emerged related to a specific aspect of diversity were participant-guided and contributed to the trustworthiness of the findings.

Analysis

When agreed upon by all participants in an interview or focus group, the conversations were taped. The tapes of all interviews were transcribed and the data were coded and analyzed during the fall of 2005 and the winter of 2006. In some cases, participants asked that the interviews not be recorded. In those situations, extensive field notes were collected and used for analytic purposes. Qualitative software, NVivo, assisted the process of indexing thematic categories and identification of salient patterns. While some categories and themes from the protocol framed and organized the

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

initial analysis, all existing and emerging themes from the data were checked and compared across respondent and constituent type.

Through the analysis, open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) were utilized to discover emerging themes in the data. Field notes facilitated development of the categories and concepts through open coding. From the initial codes, the data were analyzed through axial coding where subcategories began to form. Finally, the researchers used selective coding to refine the codes to generate the emergent themes (Merriam, 1998). It is through selective coding that themes related to gender, including transgender, became salient, and this subset of data is the focus of the current study.

Integration of a constant comparative approach supported the notion of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transcribing the data verbatim allowed for a constant comparative analysis and the ability to follow up on information with participants before analyzing the data formally. To increase the trustworthiness, these data were triangulated among qualitative data sources, existing institutional data, and the researchers conducting the study. Trustworthiness was also enhanced through the use of a peer-debriefing group, who helped the researchers identify assumptions and biases in the analyses.

Limitations

The perspectives of those non-participants cannot be considered because the pool of participants was randomly generated by the staff at the college and not all sampled participants agreed to participate. Further, the college commissioned the campus climate study; this may have influenced participation and what the participants felt comfortable sharing. It is worth noting, however, that the researchers were not hired as consultants and the college administration agreed to allow us to use the data for presentation and publication beyond the completion of a technical report for the college. In addition, the researchers were not and have never been employed at the college beyond the scope of the climate study. However, because the current study was part of the larger climate study, we were limited in the extent to which we deeply probed the subtleties about gender. Finally, readers must decide whether the findings are transferable to their own settings. Thus, it is likely that the findings will not be meaningful in all contexts.

Results

While the protocol did not specifically ask about the treatment of transgender people on campus, many participants (students, faculty, and staff) shared perspectives related to transgender issues, almost all of which focused on students. The themes that emerged were consistent among faculty, staff, and students, as well as among all self-identifications of gender. In other words, perspectives from men, women, transgender, and androgynous individuals informed the theme development, as did the perspectives of students, faculty, and staff. The themes include invisibility, hyper-visibility, and oppression, which carry unique circumstances due to the location of this study at a women's college.

Each of the findings refer to the ways in which discourse shapes available gender identities and the ways in which regulatory power (all concepts central to performativity) function to promote gender performances that adhere to the contextual and cultural acceptable gender roles. First, invisibility refers to lack of recognition of transgender students in public discourse broadly. From the rhetoric of the president to the use of discourse as symbolic text, the growing population of transgender students was largely ignored. In contrast, individual activists and sub-groups have called attention to the transgender student population, making a public transgender identity available. We label this theme hyper-visibility. Finally, the presence of a transgender identity coincided with regulatory powers that work to challenge the notion that female to male transgender students are acceptable at this women's college. In other words, the very idea of transgender students matriculating at this women's college seems to disrupt the very essence of a women's college, and that disruption is not without consequence. Ultimately, on this all-female campus, acceptable performances of gender are singular; they are aligned with traditional notions of femininity.

Invisibility

Transgender students were considered invisible and go unrecognized in public forums. One student explained that the president maintains the discourse of a women's college and this discourse excludes transgender students, despite the reality that some students openly identify as transgender. The student shared:

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

> How about the way the college president addresses the student body . . . it is never in a gender-neutral way. Never. I have never heard it that way. It is always like, "we women do this" and "be proud to be a woman."

While many would not see this statement as surprising for an administrative leader at a women's college, it does not eliminate the feelings of exclusion for those who do not identify as a woman. This invisibility of transgender issues and individuals was not only perceived as a presidential dictum. It pervaded the administration.

Moreover, even if there was an effort on the part of the administration to be more inclusive of transgender individuals on campus, the efforts were perceived as minimal and did not seek to alter the public discourses of gender. For example, a student described the following:

> There actually is now by college policy as of last year one unmarked restroom in every academic building, but you can't find them. So they do exist, but that's part of the problem. They're invisible and that goes for a lot of the transgender issues on campus, it really is overlooked in a lot of ways.

Several other participants reinforced the lack of recognition that has been paid to transgender individuals on campus. For example, one student noted,

> There are unisex bathrooms, like here in the campus center, but not in other buildings. The students went through last semester and tore all of the gender specific signs off of the bathrooms and nothing has been put up in its place . . . unless they are pushed forward, nothing really happens.

This was particularly surprising on a campus that is perceived both on and off campus as very open about multiculturalism and diversity. One student lamented: "People of transgender orientation don't come up at all. We talk about gays, we talk about lesbians, but what if you don't fit into the male/female box?"

A faculty member recognized the tension transgender expression has created at Cady. As she explained, transgender is not entirely hidden, but it is far from being part of the dominant discourse.

> I think there is increasing awareness of the transgender population and it creeps into a lot of conversations now and use of the female pronoun. I think that is creating a buzz around issues of diversity right now in

> terms of it being an institution that admits women and the pressure to move to a gender-neutral language in our descriptions of ourselves as an institution. I think that is creating a tension, but it is still underground.

When the underground tension has been forced to the forefront, the responses by the institution, as explained by several participants, have been attempts to placate the students and not to honestly address the campus culture around transgender issues. One female faculty member explained:

> I think something should be mentioned about the transgender circumstances here on campus . . . I think that has been a real hot ticket for a lot of people and I think the college, in an effort to soften that, did bring in [a consultant specifically for that]. But for as much respect that I have for that specific consultant, it would not have been anyone who would have challenged the college to think any differently than what the college already had. It was more someone to appease . . . and I think to appease the students. I think that is tokenizing of this.

Community members thought the efforts to address transgender students on the campus were ineffective to diffuse the potential unrest on the campus. Furthermore, these attempts appeared to make no efforts to honestly address the needs and challenges transgender students bring to the overarching discourse of gender homogeneity. Responding to the transgender students in cursory ways has reinforced the cultural notion that transgender students need to remain invisible.

Hyper-visibility

Hyper-visibility is understood and experienced in two ways. First, the theme is affirming and is characterized by a concerted effort by student activists to intentionally include transgender students in activities, programs, and policies at the college. By doing so, these activists (most of whom do not identify as transgender) have worked hard to educate the community about transgender issues. One staff member noted, "This might be trivial, but there are some transgender students on campus. Once a year they go around and put notices on the men's bathrooms deeming them whether they are good transgender bathrooms. That was a perspective that I hadn't really thought about." These efforts by other students legitimize transgender notions of gender, diversifying culturally defined gender identities. Simply, transgender identity becomes a possibility for students in an all women's college.

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

A faculty member considers the activism around making transgender issues hyper-visible unique to the larger socio-cultural context. This position contradicts the invisibility of the issue above and the notion that the campus is embracing a broader idea of gender than the community outside academe (and this college in particular). The faculty member explains: "The whole transgender issue is something new coming to this college that is something rare outside this campus." When asked to define diversity, many other participants included transgender as part of their definition, when considering it in the context of the college. For example, one student said: "Obviously, this college is an all women's school and it is very varied gender-wise and I think that adds to the diversity as well."

Hyper-visibility may initially appear as a step forward on transgender issues—with the possibility of changes in policies and practices to accommodate the needs of transgender students. But, the hyper-visibility has created backlash and brought forward the contradictions that transgender students bring to a campus that is specifically designed to serve women-performing students. Thus, a student who identifies as a man stands out as hyper-visible. As such, it becomes difficult to hide how gender is performed. One student explains:

> We were going to watch the movie and there was a young woman who had a friend sitting next to her and she also went here, so she was a she, and she said to another woman who walked into the room "oh, is he going to join us?" That was the first time that I have heard a woman referred to as a he. I was taken aback from that—the extreme masculinity in dress and manner.

Another student shared, "I had a transgender friend of mine and I said to him, 'How did so many people know you?' and he said he was only one of 20 transgender kids on campus and that raises his profile." These quotes represent the connection between discourse and gender performances. Not only are pronouns closely connected to appearance, but also the normalization of women at this college makes the use of alternative pronouns and different styles of performing gender awkward and unusual.

Moreover, the implications of gender performance at this women's college after graduation have become an issue for transgender students. A staff member explained: "Students who are transitioning from F [female] to M [male] want to know if their resume says they graduated from Cady College what the impact will be." So, not only are transgender students thought to be experiencing hyper-visibility while at college, that hyper-visibility

continues after college when employers and graduate schools receive a transcript from Cady College for a candidate who now performs as a male.

The theme of hyper-visibility can make people uncomfortable, particularly for those who have never knowingly interacted with someone who identifies as transgender. In the case of one staff member, she expressed her concerns about performative choices transgender individuals make in relation to others who she feels do not have the same degree of choice. She remarked:

> I am uncomfortable with students going from F [female] to M [male]. It is a handful. I know of one at least one who is very prominent in the student affairs area. I have a hard time knowing how to react to someone who has voluntarily had breasts removed when I have friends who have had cancer and have had to have a mastectomy. I have heard from students that "we are one sex, but many genders."

Other students expressed frustration with the attention transgender students have received on campus. One noted, "I hate to keep bringing this up, but transgender people are a small group but they are not underrepresented. Sometimes the smallest group has the loudest voice." Staff also expressed frustration with the attention given to transgender issues. One staff member explained, "Only at [this college] are we told the party line from the administrators with letters sent to tell us that the college publicly supports staff going through transgender issues. You don't have to shove it down my throat!" Ultimately, the transgender students are hyper-visible in that they embody a departure of the gender singularity of the women's college. And some see this departure as a call for education and activism to refute socially constructed norms of gender and gender performances, while others see it as a violation of the notions of sex and gender.

Transgender Oppression at a Women's College

While the intent of highlighting transgender issues on campus was embedded in social justice, the hyper-visibility came at a cost. Participants perceived that transgender students often experienced oppression because of assumptions about what this women's college should be. Further, invisibility of the performativity of transgender also seemed to come at a cost, not only to those performing transgender, but also to the entire campus community. Participants explained and provided evidence of discriminatory practices toward and perceptions of transgender students. Often, the transgender students were excluded from networks and opportunities because

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

others perceived their gender identity as incongruous to the mission of this women's college. This theme of oppression represents most accurately the presence of regulatory power in the performing of gender. Transgender students are performing gender in ways that may seem inappropriate and are consequently exposed to those power structures that seek to force assimilation into gender norms. One student shared the challenges he faced in terms of working on campus. This quote exemplifies the overt discrimination toward someone performing gender outside the "expectations" of what a student at this women's college should do. He shared:

> I have experienced forms of interesting gender oppression. It is different. I would call it the Cady College gender oppression: Because of the way I look, I was not allowed to be a waiter or waitress [for campus alumnae catering events] because they said it would offend the alums to have someone like me waiting tables.

Another student discussed the harassment experienced by someone in a campus bathroom due to gender performance and expression. She said: "A couple weeks ago, someone was harassed in the bathroom. A trans person. For using the male bathroom. And, again, people say, 'that can't happen [on this campus].'" The following quote from a staff member reinforced the difficulties members of the campus community have seeing students express gender in ways seemingly inconsistent with what someone should do at this women's college:

> We had a student worker who was transgender and preferred to be called a he and that caused some confusion. But he would also tell stories on campus and people did not agree with him. They would say, "[this college] is an all women's school and so how does that work?"

Another staff member purported:

> Girls come [to Cady] and now they want to be boys. They want to be known as a boy, but this is a girls' college and that is a big issue that has been going on in the last year or so. So, if you are a girl and you know you are coming to a girls' college you should accept that because that is what you are coming for. If you want to be considered a boy, then go to a college that has both, then you can fit in better.

Further illustrating the power of discourse and the challenges some face when language, gender performativity, and "normalized" expectations of gender are incongruent, a student remarked:

> Last year when we were going through the second voting round of changing the student gov[ernment] constitution from "she" pronouns to "student," I was very much challenged, and I even have several transgender friends . . . But I was challenged because we are at Cady College and we are at an all women's institution. . . . Are we next going to start admitting men?

A student who identified as an ally and activist for transgender students on campus reflected similar sentiments when saying:

> Now I feel like the climate around trans issues is treated like . . . " Why are you going to a women's college if you are a boy, what are you doing here?" Even, "What in the hell are you talking about—you are not a boy. You don't have a penis."

These statements reflect a certain lack of understanding about transgender, and may be part of the process society must consider if transgender issues are to become part of the dominant discourse. However, they also demonstrate discriminatory attitudes toward those who perform gender outside what the "norm" is, according to assumptions about what it means to be (or perform as) a woman, particularly at this women's college.

Discussion and Implications

The themes that emerged from this study highlight the ways in which discourse, identity, and power in one women's college work together to complicate the inclusion of transgender students. As a reminder, performativity argues that gender is socially constructed and created during performances (not determined by biological sex) that are limited by power. The ways in which power operated is revealed in discourses related to gender. In this way, performing as a transgendered student is not just an individual choice, but connected to the historical and political definition of gender on the all women's campus. For example, the lack of public discourse by the college administration and the hiding of more inclusive restrooms illustrate the power of discourse in reinforcing the appropriate gender identities. By virtue of ignoring the transgender issues that were emerging on the campus, the administration reinforced the notion of a homogeneous gender norm and mitigated the potential of having a culturally acceptable transgender identity. The administration aligned with the discursive subject position of gender homogeneity. In this regard, the discourse becomes a form of

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

regulatory power that controls the gender homogeneity by making all other genders and gender performances deviant. Transgender students could continue to perform masculinity, but must do so as deviants. This suggests that even in an all women's college, which has a history of gender exclusive (i.e., only women) discourses, considering multiple discursive approaches could have a positive impact on those students who are forming new gender identities. Administrative acknowledgement of gender fluidity has the potential to redress some of the negative experiences and oppression related to transgender performance.

In contrast to the perceptions of existing administrative discourse, activist groups have used their power to include transgender discourses and have made transgender identities as a discursive subject position (identity) available and legitimate. While multiple and competing discourses can and do exist simultaneously (Butler, 1990, 1993, 2004), each discourse is aligned with power. At the local level, individuals may perform masculinity or support those transgender students who do, thereby redefining the local gender norms. Once the individual students leave the local context, they are susceptible to other gender norms. This suggests transgender students may find local microclimates where they experience inclusivity and differing definitions of socially acceptable gendered performance, such as specific students affairs offices, students groups, or even academic departments (e.g., gender or women's studies). Yet, the overall college culture, as defined and expressed through administrative discourses, still appears to have a profound influence on the experiences of transgender students. As our findings imply, in order to create more gender inclusive institutions (even those that are single sex) the administration needs to consider its use of words, symbols, and rhetoric and the implication of them to the entire campus community.

The opposition between the historical gender homogeneity represented in the administrative discourse and the activism of the students and faculty creates conflicting perspectives on transgender performance and highlights the presence and function of regulatory powers. For example, despite pro-transgender campus activists, the transgender student who was unable to be a waiter and the harassment and marginalization expressed by other transgender students illustrate how regulatory powers seek to reinforce the social norm of essentialized gender. This is not to suggest the college purposefully created a culture in which transgender students are considered gender deviants. In many cases, the administration appeared to be supporting a single conception of gender (i.e., woman) that

characterized the campus since its inception. Yet, protecting and managing the institutional image and history as an all women's college does create a deviant category that marginalizes a group of students who are grappling with their own gender identities.

We do note, however, the complexity administrators at a women's college must consider regarding gender. In a society dominated by those who perform as men, women's colleges have provided a necessary place for women to explore and be proud of their gender identity (Tidball et al., 1999). At the same time, we want administrators at women's colleges (and all colleges and universities) to be inclusive of transgender students. To accomplish both goals is not easy.

The findings in this study have additional implications for how colleges address the presence of transgender students as well as for the notion of a gender-exclusive college. Transgender students negotiate contexts that have differing gender norms. While the college administration, in this case, has not actively included the transgender identity, local activists have worked to advocate for the inclusion of female-to-male transgender students. The implications for transgender students are many. First, the conflict places the transgender students in the middle of a discursive paradox of essentialized notions of gender (Bilodeau, 2005). Transgender students become hyper-visible and therefore susceptible to criticism and discrimination. Second, these students are targets of discrimination by those who believe their performances of gender are deviant (Gagné et al., 1997; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005). Transgender students began to form their own groups and move underground. Third, given the lack of resources on most campuses for transgender issues (McKinney, 2005), hyper-visibility perpetuates tokenism and positions transgender students to be called upon to educate entire campuses.

Further, transgender students challenge genderism or the homogeneity of gender of an all women's college in the most basic ways (e.g., the exclusive use of the pronoun "he" or "masculine" dress; Bilodeau, 2009). Yet, despite some efforts on the parts of members of this campus community (primarily students, but also some faculty and staff), the organizational culture, practices, and discourses still essentialize gender and maintain the essence of this women's college, where the female sex defines gender. It appears as if there is a substantial amount of resistance that directly influences the transgender student population—resistance and harassment that is supported by existing literature (Bilodeau, 2005; Gagné et al., 1997; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005). This resistance splinters the campus

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

community and reinforces the power of the dominant discourse about gender that is narrated by the administration.

However, this women's college is not ignoring the performativity of transgender. The college is beginning (albeit slowly) to confront genderism and consider that gender may not be a binary. This consideration has implications for the community and for women's colleges more broadly. Specifically, and perhaps most profoundly, the implication that this college, and others like it, must confront is: What is the responsibility to students of women's colleges who admit female students who later express gender in ways that are not normatively female? One faculty member aptly stated, "The students will say that we should not use 'she' and not use 'her.' I haven't engaged in discussions [with the administration] about that this year, but I know there is anxiety and issues around this, in that we are an institution that admits women and we are an institution that graduates women. It is tricky."

It seems too simplistic to recommend that Cady and other single-sex colleges become women's colleges by admitting any qualified student who identifies as a woman on her application, because we argue gender is fluid. At every moment the essence of a women's college is disrupted because gender performance shifts continuously. This means that a women's college defined by who is admitted may never truly exist. This, however, does not resolve the policy issues women's colleges confront related to admission and graduation. Perhaps the best colleges can do is to create policies that try to eliminate genderism and to be transparent about the complexities and nuances related to policy, practice, and gender. We hope policies and practices will support the fluidity of gender and will foster a campus climate where gender can be explored and experienced without discrimination or repercussion.

Moreover, this issue is not just a women's college issue. While there are unique aspects to this story due to the gendered nature of the campus and how gender is expected to be performed, all campuses must address what the performance of gender means and how they support members of the community who identify as transgender. In fact, this study specifically addresses Bilodeau's (2005) call for scholarship showing higher education's role in reinforcing gender binary and gender oppression. This study also provides evidence of small steps members of one campus have made to consider the fluidity of gender and to educate about transgender issues and begin to confront gender discrimination. Further, this study highlights the complexity of this issue, suggesting that a "one size fits all" approach to creating inclusive communities will not work and that confronting

normative discourses may be a slow, difficult process. Yet, it is a process that is fundamental for a campus to be considered truly inclusive and supportive.

Conclusion

This study generates additional questions higher education scholars and practitioners should consider. First, what *is* a single-sex institution? Second, do transgender issues and the performance of gender challenge the existence of such institutions? Third, because power is central to performativity, oppression is still a very real construct. Therefore, how can we look at oppression, power, privilege, and campus climate in light of the performance of gender and the social construction of identity? We recommend that researchers address these questions in the future. Further, as researcher, disaggregating transgender from the experiences of LGB college students is essential.

We recommend the aforementioned questions be asked by practitioners as well. In responding to these questions, it is crucial that educators consider whether there are policies and practices (e.g., gender neutral bathrooms, gender inclusive Greek organizations, demographic forms that include transgender as a category) that can be implemented to support transgender students, even at a single-sex institution. Moreover, as one faculty participant said, "I think [the issue of transgender] always needs to be on the front page, and I don't mean on the front page of the news. I think it needs to be in the forefront of our mind. This is a reality in this institution and this is not going away."

Although transgender students are only a fraction of the overall student population, their presence, particularly at a women's college, has the potential to question the very foundation of assumptions of gender. Therefore, this study provides insight into and has implications for how complex gender identities can alter the policies, practices, and assumptions of higher education institutions. The findings from this study begin to illustrate the complexities that emerge when a group of students challenge the very nature of a college that is founded on the notion of serving one gender.

References

Allan, E. J., & Madden, M. (2006). Chilly classrooms for female undergraduate students: A question of method? *Journal of Higher Education*, *77*(4), 684–711.

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081

Bank, B. J., & Yelon, H. M. (2003). *Contradictions in women's education: Traditionalism, careerism, and community at a single-sex college*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

Beemyn, B., Curtis, B., Davis, M., & Tubbs, N. J. (2005). Transgender issues on college campuses. In R. L. Sanlo (Ed.), *New directions for student services: Gender identity and sexual orientation: Research, policy, and personal perspectives. No. 111* (pp. 49–60). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Bilodeau, B. (2005). Beyond the gender binary: A case study of two transgender students at a midwestern research university. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, *3*(1), 29–44.

Bilodeau, B. (2009). *Genderism: Transgender students, binary systems and higher education*. Saarbrüken, Germany: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller Aktiengesellschaft & Co. KG.

Bilodeau, B. L., & Renn, K. A. (2005). Analysis of LGBT identity development models and implications for practice. In R. L. Sanlo (Ed.), *New directions for student services: Gender identity and sexual orientation: Research, policy, and personal perspectives. No. 111* (pp. 25–39). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Butler, J. (1993). *Bodies that matter: On the discursive limits of "sex."* New York, NY: Routledge.

Butler, J. (2004). *Undoing gender*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Carter, K. A. (2000). Transgenderism and college students: Issues of gender identity and it's role on our campuses. In V. A. Wall & N. J. Evans (Eds.), *Toward acceptance: Sexual orientation issues on campus* (pp. 261–282). Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

Coats, M. (1993). *Women's education: The cutting edge*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

D'Augelli, A. R. (1989). Lesbians and gay men on campus: Visibility, empowerment, and educational leadership. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *6*(3), 124–142.

D'Augelli, A. R. (1992). Lesbian and gay male undergraduates' experiences of discrimination and harassment and fear on campus. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, *7*, 383–395.

D'Augelli, A. R. (1994). Identity development and sexual orientation: Toward a model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development. In E. J. Trickett, R. Watts, & D. Birman (Eds.), *Human diversity:*

Perspectives on people in context (pp. 312–333). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

D'Augelli, A. R., & Patterson, C. J. (Eds.). (1995). *Lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities over the lifespan: Psychological perspectives*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

D'Augelli, A. R., & Rose, M. L. (1990). Homophobia in a university community: Attitudes and experiences of heterosexual freshman. *Journal of College Student Development*, *31*, 484–491.

Devor, H. (1989). *Gender blending: Confronting the limits of duality*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Devor, H. (1997). *FTM: Female-to-male transsexuals in society*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Ekins, R., & King, D. (1997, July–September). Blending genders: Contributions to the emerging field of transgender studies. *The International Journal of Transgenderism*, *1*. Retrieved from http://www.symposion.com/ijt.ijtc0101.htm

Fassinger, R. E., & Miller, B. A. (1996). Validation of an inclusive model of homosexual identity formation in a sample of gay men. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *32*(2), 53–78.

Fausto-Sterling, A. (2000). Sexing the body: Gender politics and the construction of sexuality. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Feinberg, L. (1998). *Trans liberation: Beyond pink or blue*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Gagné, P., & Tewksbury, R. (1996). No "man's" land: Transgenderism and the stigma of the feminine man. *Advances in Gender Research*, *1*, 115–155.

Gagné, P., Tewksbury, R., & McGaughey, D. (1997). Coming out and crossing over: Identity formation and proclamation in a transgender community. *Gender and Society*, *11*(4), 478–508.

Grant, J. M., Mottet, L. A., & Tanis, J. (2010, October). *National transgender discrimination survey report on health and health care*. Washington, DC: National Center for Transgender Equality and the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York, NY: Anchor.

Grossman, A. H., & D'Augelli, A. R. (2006). Transgender youth: Invisible and vulnerable. *Current Issues in Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Health*, *51*(1), 111–128.

Harley, D. A., Nowak, T. M., Gassaway, L. J., & Savage, T. A. (2002). Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students with disabilities: A look at multiple cultural minorities. *Psychology in the Schools*, *39*(5), 525–538.

Herdt, G., & Boxer, A. (1993). *Children of horizons: How gay and lesbian teens are leading a new way out of the closet*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Horowitz, H. L. (1984). *Alma mater: Design and experience in the women's colleges from their nineteenth-century beginnings to the 1930s*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf.

Kessler, S., & McKenna, W. (1997). Who put the "trans" in transgender? Gender theory and everyday life. *The International Journal of Transgenderism*. Retrieved from http://www.symposion.com/ijt/gilbert/kessler.htm

Lather, P. A. (1991). *Getting smart: Feminist research and pedagogy within the postmodern*. New York: Routledge.

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Love, P. G. (1998). Cultural barriers facing lesbian, gay, bisexual students at a Catholic college. *Journal of Higher Education*, *69* (3), 298–323.

McKinney, J. S. (2005). On the margins: A study of experiences of transgender college students. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, *3*(1), 63–75.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Myers, P. (1993). Lesbian studies and multicultural teaching: A challenge in diversity. In D. Schoem, L. Frankel, X. Zuniga, & E. Lewis (Eds.), *Multicultural teaching in the university* (pp. 133–146). Westport, CT: Greenwood.

Nakamura, K. (1998). Transitioning on campus: A case studies approach. In R. I. Sanlo (Ed.), *Working with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender college students: A handbook for faculty and administrators* (pp. 179–186). Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2009). *Digest of education statistics: 2009*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences.

Norris, W. P. (1992). Liberal attitudes and homophobic acts: The paradoxes of homosexual experience in a liberal institution. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *22*, 81–120.

Paechter, C. (2001). Using poststructuralist ideas in gender theory and research. In B. Francis, & C. Skelton (Eds.), *Investigating gender: Contemporary perspectives in education* (pp. 41–51). Philadelphia, PA: Open University Press.

Perifimos, C. (2008). The changing faces of women's colleges: Striking a balance between transgender rights and women's colleges' rights to exclude. *Cardozo Journal of Law & Gender*, *15*(1), 141–168.

Pincus, A., Rose, A., Lee, B., Opatut, E., & Michalchyshyn, L. (Producers). (2005). *Transgeneration*. New York, NY: New Video Group.

Pusch, R. S. (2005). Objects of curiosity: Transgender college students' perceptions of the reactions of others. *Journal of Gay and Lesbian Issues in Education*, *3*(1), 45–61.

Quart, A. (2008, March 16). When girls will be boys. *New York Times*, p. 2.

Rankin, S. R. (2005). Campus climates for sexual minorities. *New Directions for Student Services*, *111*, 17–23.

Rankin, S., Weber, G., Blumenfeld, W., & Frazer, S. (2010). *2010 state of higher education for lesbian, gay, bisexual & transgender people*. Charlotte, NC: Campus Pride.

Renn, K. A. (2010). LGBT and queer research in higher education: The state and status of the field. *Educational Researcher*, *39*(2), 132–141.

Renn, K. A., & Bilodeau, B. L. (2005). Leadership identity development among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender student leaders. *NASPA Journal*, *42*(5), 342–367.

Sherrill, J. M., & Hardesty, C. (1994). *The gay, lesbian, and bisexual students' guide to colleges, universities, and graduate school*. New York, NY: New York University Press.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). *Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Tidball, M. E., Smith, D. G., Tidball, C. S., & Wolf-Wendel, L. E. (1999). *Taking women seriously: Lessons and legacies for educating the majority*. Phoenix, AZ: American Council on Education.

Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Wenniger, D. (2007). "Transmen" challenge definition of "women." *Women in Higher Education*, *16*(5), 5.

  http://journals.naspa.org/njawhe/ doi:10.2202/1940-7890.1081