

Title: TRANSlating Boyer's Principles and Community Impact on
Transgender/Gender Variant Campus Populations

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Most people may think that gender is fixed and immutable and that everyone is either a man or a woman, male or female. Gender identity is complex and determined by many factors, the most important of which is considered by some to be psychological, even spiritual, rather than physical. As transgender/gender variant people "come out of the closet" of rigid gender roles and identities, both the general public and professionals within the health care and social service professions find themselves lacking even a basic understanding gender identity, gender expression, and gender perception.

“Why is there a sudden presence of transgender/gender variant voices?” Where were these individuals 10, 20, or 30 years ago?” The “recent” appearance of trans/gender variant people is due to several factors. One of the most important is the increased availability of surgical procedures and/or hormonal therapies that enable people to transition (physically alter their bodies) fully. Many of these techniques were unavailable just a couple of decades ago.

Another factor in the increased visibility of transgender people is perhaps a direct result of both the women’s movement and the gay and lesbian movement. Both have given our country a legacy and a blueprint for activism and advocacy. Indeed, many (but by no means all) transgender people came of age in the gay and lesbian rights movement.

Of course, not all people who transgress cultural norms in regards to gender are, or should be, considered gender variant. The Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States use training modules where sex, gender, and sexual orientation are three separate and unrelated identities of each individual. Trans activists and authors, like Leslie Feinberg, Kate Bornstien, Judith Butler, Alexander John Goodrum, and Riki Anne Wilchins conclude that a person can identify with personal

feelings and express any identification as desired and that the key is that we must examine our perceptions of people and recognize that most of us have been socially trained to connect these three distinct identities based on socially constructed norms. There are many voices within the transgender community which reflect rich diversity and some of them contradict, and even conflict, with each other.

Each year when Housing and Residence Life departments across the country plan their training schedules they hopefully plan at least one module that addresses issues of diversity. And hopefully at least some part of the diversity training individuals working within Residence Life encounter deals with issues pertinent to LGBT students. Not surprisingly, the T in LGBT is often the least understood. A number of Resident Assistants and Professional Staff members have most likely walked away from a Safe Zone Training or from an LGBT awareness program without gaining much insight into the specific needs of transgender individuals.

By applying Boyer's Principles of Community to the needs of transgender and gender variant students we can see how community life can be made better not just for transgender students but also for the greater university community. Boyer has written extensively about the role of community and the value of connections in higher education institutions. He believes that colleges and universities are unique institutions that have the possibility to establish milestones and precedents that have tremendous impact on the rest of the world. What follows is an attempt to integrate Boyer's Principles of Community with the steps that colleges and universities, we believe, should be making to make their communities more trans/gender variant accepting.

A PURPOSEFUL Community- a place where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus (p. 9). Residence Life professionals should make an intentional effort to increase awareness of trans related issues. Staff members can bring faculty members who specialize in gender studies into the residence halls to discuss films or articles about transgender individuals. Staff members should also make a focused attempt to provide more training to their RAs about transgender students, and staff members should have a bias response protocol in place so that there is adequate response should harassment, in any form, of a transgender student take place.

An OPEN Community- a place where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed (p. 17). Boyer views successful communities as places where individuals can express themselves in an inviting, supportive, and civil environment. To create an inclusive and open community for your trans/gender variant populations it is important to have visible ally programs, ask each person what their preferred name is and which pronouns they would like to go by (he, she, ze, hir) and limit the bureaucracy that a person would confront to make appropriate name changes on permanent records (registrar, transcripts, medical records, etc).

A JUST Community- a place where the sacredness of each person is honored and where diversity is aggressively pursued (p. 25). In order to feel valued in your community, one must feel valued as both an individual and as part of a group. A campus community can be more welcoming for trans students, faculty, and staff by listing single stalled/single occupancy bathrooms, providing gender neutral bathrooms and consistent

labeling of these areas including locker rooms, changing rooms, and other gendered spaces on campus for the inclusion of gender variant community members.

A DISCIPLINED Community- a place where individuals accept their obligations to the group...where well-defined governance procedures guide behavior for the common good (p. 37). Housing and Residence Life departments should make every attempt to ensure that nondiscrimination policies exist that include a protection from discrimination on the basis of gender identity and gender expression. Housing policies should allow transgender students to be housed in keeping with their gender identity, or they should be permitted to live in single occupancy rooms.

A CARING Community- a place where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and where service to others is encouraged (p. 47). To prepare campus and improve the over-all well-being of the environment for your students, faculty, and staff, conducting a formal campus climate review and including trainings in all employment and student orientation, hiring diverse staff, and admitting diverse students. Furthermore, asses these issues before they are identified as a need, make the changes swiftly and public ally to set a standards for other benchmark institutions like your own.

A CELEBRATIVE Community- The heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming both tradition and change are widely shared (p. 55). Residence Life staff members should strive to bring awareness of transgender issues to their respective residential communities. RAs should be encouraged to do programming relative to transgender issues, bulletin boards should feature transgender resources, support groups should be established, and each year the residential community should do

something public on November 20th in honor of Transgender Remembrance Day to commemorate those individuals who have been killed for being gender variant.

It is important to remember when we are working with students that we must be open to learning if we are going to teach. By recognizing the needs of an invisible population, a more welcoming community can be formed. Once community members feel welcome, we can all learn from each other.

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References

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