

Transgender Student Experiences in Single-Sex Colleges

Abstract

This article reviews popular and scholarly literature on transgender students' experiences enrolled in single-sex colleges. Because such colleges rely on bounded conceptions of sex/gender to determine who can and cannot be eligible for admissions, the enrollment and matriculation of transgender students pose a challenge to the central organizing logic of the single-sex environment. As such, this article first draws upon theorizations of gendered and queer organizations to highlight the utility of sociology in analyzing the *transing* of organizations through transgender inclusion. Using this framework, I then address trans student experiences at the time of admissions and during matriculation at single-sex colleges. These perspectives frame transgender inclusion as a new organizational form, but one that is rooted in the social construction of transnormativity rather than institutional transformation.

Keywords

Transgender students, single-sex college, women's college, gendered organizations, higher education, diversity and inclusion, transnormativity

In Spring 2019, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* posed the question, “Who is a Women’s College For?” (Caplan-Bricker, 2019). In search of the answer, the article followed the lives of Kai, Leo, Francesca, and Sarah, four students enrolled at Mount Holyoke College. Mount Holyoke served as a particularly interesting case to explore such a question because of the college’s gender-expansive admissions policy adopted in 2014 that opened the gates to trans women, trans men, and non-binary students. The only group not considered for admission is cisgender men. Mount Holyoke, a gender-diverse women’s college¹, was the second women’s college in the United States and first of the Seven Sisters women’s college consortium to adopt such an admissions policy following protests surrounding Calliope Wong, a trans woman who was denied admission to Smith College in 2013 because of the sex marker on her financial aid (FAFSA) form (Nanney & Brunsma, 2017; Weber, 2016). As of 2019, approximately 29 gender-selective colleges in the United States² have public admissions policies that allow for the application of transgender students.

Public discussion about the presence of transgender students at gender-selective colleges, and women’s colleges specifically, however, began well before 2013. In 2005, for example, the Sundance Film Channel documentary series *TransGeneration* explored the lives of four trans college students, including trans masculine Smith College student Lucas Cheadle (Schneider, 2015; Weber, 2019). Additionally, articles in popular press with titles such as “Women’s Colleges and Ex-Women” (Grasgreen, 2011), “When Girls Will be Boys” (Quart, 2008), “Male, Female or Neither?” (Chen, 2010), and “When She Graduates as He” (Brune, 2007) expressed

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I use “gender-diverse”, “historically women’s”, “single-sex”, and “college predominantly for women/men” when referring to a specific institution in accordance to how the college describes itself, and “gender-selective” or “women’s / men’s college” when speaking about all such colleges collectively.

² This article focuses on higher educational institutions in the United States. There are, however, a few gender-selective colleges internationally that have adopted similar policies such as Chikushi Jogakuen University in Japan and Cambridge College in England, as well as gender-selective lower educational institutions.

concern with the presence of transgender men on campus, questioning whether people who no longer identify as women should remain enrolled at a college meant for women.

While few in number, gender-selective colleges have become a central site for discourse surrounding the presence of transgender students in higher education. Because such colleges rely on bounded conceptions of sex/gender to determine who can and cannot be eligible for admissions, the enrollment and matriculation of transgender students pose a challenge to the college's identity. In effect, these colleges must address the question Caplan-Bricker posed in the *Chronicle*: "who are women's colleges for" and, subsequently, how should these colleges define who a woman (or man) is?

In this review, I first draw upon theorizations of gendered and queer organizations (Acker, 1990, 2006, 2012; Britton, 2000; Britton and Logan, 2008; Lester, Sallee, and Hart, 2017; Williams and Guiffre, 2011) to analyze attempts to *trans* organizations through the adoption of transgender inclusive policies and practices. Using this theoretical framework, I review the small, yet growing, academic literature on transgender students' inclusion within gender-selective colleges, focusing on both the application process and experiences throughout matriculation. As Westbrook and Schilt (2014) have noted, the enactment of gendered policies is, at its core, about upholding the logic of gender segregation by determining what gender means through alignments of biomedical, identity, and legal criteria. I ask how the construction and enforcement of transgender inclusive policies within gender-selective colleges both rearticulates and transcends the gendering of organizations. In answering these questions, this research contributes to three research concerns within sociology: (1) educational experiences and outcomes beyond the gender binary; (2) (re)gendered and transgender-inclusive organizations; and (3) critical transgender policy development. In sum, this paper rethinks gender as a central

organizing principle and product of organizations; not simply in terms of the identities that are listed in policies or present in spaces, but in the negotiation of the construction of gender between interactional and institutional levels. Together, these perspectives frame transgender inclusion as a new organizational form, but one that is rooted in the social construction of transnormativity rather than institutional transformation.

Thinking Sociologically about Transgender

For the purposes of this paper, my use of *transgender* or *trans* is conceptualized as an umbrella term that includes any person whose identity crosses socially constructed and assigned identities that contain imposed gender roles, norms, and expectations, regardless of legal or medical intervention. This could include, but is not limited to, transgender men, transgender women, individuals who identify as nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, or gender nonconforming, and can include other gender-bending identities such as drag (see Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). The terms “binary” and “nonbinary” may also be used to differentiate between those who identify as either men or women and those that identify either as neither, both, and/or between these two categories, noting that identities may overlap and that not all people may self-identify with the broader umbrella (Siegel, 2019). The availability and openness of such categories validates those who self-identify with transgender as a category; but it also draws attention to how people are identified by others even though they may or may not identify with this term or experience (Hollander, 2013; Valentine, 2007; Westbrook and Schilt, 2014). For instance, butch women may be read as transgender for transgressing gender norms though not identifying as transgender, while transgender or non-binary people who do not transition medically may not be understood within the transnormative rubric of what constitutes transgender (Johnson, 2016). Thus, my use of transgender is meant to highlight how self-identity and gender determination by others are

complexly intertwined and shaped by relationships of social power. As such, by offering a definition of transgender, the use of the category is necessary yet limited, as the term may still leave people out or force others into such categories (Valentine, 2007).

While a relatively new subfield within sociology, the sociological examination of transgender identity and experiences has been central to the broader study of gender and sexuality for over half a century. Harold Garfinkel's (1967) case study of Agnes, for example, is considered the first sociological analysis of a transitioning person (Vidal-Ortiz, 2008). Schilt and Lagos (2017) document that, through the 1990s, the sociological case of "the transsexual" drew upon sexual deviancy models, wherein trans people were taken up as *objects* of study to categorize "normal" and "abnormal" sexual and gender models. Since the turn of the century, an emerging subfield of sociology of transgender studies has grown, wherein researchers use gender difference models to center trans people as the *subjects* of study. As Schilt and Lagos (2017: 426) write, "This paradigm positioned transgender people's lives as sociologically important in their own right, and prioritized qualitative data collection strategies that could more fully capture the diversity of transgender people's lived experience across institutional and interactional contexts." Recent research explores the diversity of transgender and non-binary people's identities and social locations, presents quantitative approaches to transgender and non-binary people's identities and experiences, and interrogates transgender and non-binary people's experiences within institutional and organizational contexts.

Despite sociological attention to transgender individuals within organizational structures including the workplace, the family, health care, and the criminal justice system, there is a noticeable dearth of sociological literature that centers transgender identity within postsecondary education (c.f. Garvey et al., 2019). Most extant research over-relies upon "campus climate"

studies for LGBTQ+ students. The problem with such focus, Nicolazzo (2017) and Siegel (2019) contend, is that measures of inclusion are policy-based, noting whether or not non-discrimination policy exists without examining the implementation or outcomes of these policies in practice. A student might receive support from particular individuals, such as an advisor, or spaces, like a gender-neutral restroom, but not others, thereby creating campuses that appear to be "LGBT friendly" while remaining unfriendly places. Rather, Siegel (2019) calls for a microclimates approach to capture intrainstitutional variation, examining how trans people's experiences are nested within classrooms, dormitories, departments, and whole institutions, leading to differential outcomes.

Gendered Organizations, Transing Organizations

As gender-selective colleges increasingly adopt transgender inclusive admissions policies, these questions arise anew: Can organizations that depend upon gender as a central organizing feature become friendly spaces to those who do not conform to this identity? As Johnson (2016) explains, trans people are held accountable to gender regulatory narratives of gender non-conformity across social contexts and institutions. Communities, health care, legal settings, media, and arguably administrative policies are conduits of *transnormativity*, structuring trans people's access to and interactions in everyday social life based on binary, medically based, and normative understandings of how sex and gender affect trans people's identity. While trans students are formally welcomed into these colleges through the recent adoption of transgender admissions policies, it is possible that these colleges are only inclusive to those who conform to normative ideologies of the "right way to be trans."

One place to find the answer might be in feminist conceptualizations of gendered and sexual organizations. In explaining gendered inequalities within the workplace, Joan Acker's

(1990) theory of gendered organizations contends that we should not see organizations as gender-neutral or genderless, but rather we should see that hierarchies are integral to the functioning of the organization, built into the structure's seemingly benign and neutral meanings, practices, and actions. While most research utilizing a gendered organizational framework has focused on gender inequality, Acker's theory has been further elaborated to examine how the integration of gender inequality into organizations is inseparable from axes of race, class, and other identities (Acker, 2006; Britton and Logan, 2008). As such, even in instances where organizations commit to non-discrimination and equity practices, organizations may still be *inequality regimes* in new form, (re)producing the inequality supposedly being redressed (Ahmed, 2012). For example, Williams and Giuffre (2011) argue that while "gay-friendly" workplaces are superior to the alternative—homophobic and heterosexist workplaces—such environments still depend upon homonormative ideals that expect (white) gay and lesbian workers to "enact a narrowly circumscribed and conventional performance of gender, family, and politics in the workplace" (p. 553). Therefore, even "gay-friendly" and queer-centered organizations may have limited success in impacting mainstream organizational structures and processes because the larger context in which they operate continues to privilege whiteness, hetero/homonormativity, masculinity and, as discussed below, cis and transnormativity (Britton and Logan, 2008; Johnson, 2016; Williams and Giuffre, 2011).

This theory does not suggest that the only solution is to have ungendered organizations. Rather, it may be possible to have "less oppressive" organizations that still center gender as a central function of the organization (Britton, 2000; Williams and Giuffre, 2011). The gendering of organizations depends on the context (Britton, 2000) and microclimate (Siegel, 2019) of the organization—different actors, policies, and practices can lead to the production of multiple

masculinities and femininities. As Stainback, Kleiner, and Skaggs (2016) find, women's increasing participation in the workforce and holding positions of power serve as "agent[s] of change," challenging prevailing gender hierarchies by decreasing workplace segregation and increasing diversity policies. As such, organizational structures and the hierarchies built within them are not static: as organizations change, the gendered organization is redone in new and potentially more equitable forms (Britton, 2000; Britton and Logan, 2008; Nanney and Brunnsma, 2017; Stainback, Kleiner, and Skaggs, 2016).

For trans populations in particular, sociologists have explored similar questions regarding trans inclusion in a multitude of institutions and organizational settings (see, for example, Connell, 2010; David, 2015; Meadow, 2018; Pfeffer, 2017; Schilt, 2006), and women's spaces in particular, such as sports, shelters, sororities, prisons, bathrooms and locker rooms, dorms, and communal lands/collectives (see for example Boyd, [1997] 2006; Gamson, 1997; Griffin, 2012; Westbrook and Schilt, 2014). For example, trans women, and especially trans women of color, are found to experience increased hostility and discrimination in the workplace, whereas white trans men receive increased social and monetary capital (Schilt, 2006). Similarly, in education, trans students of color have been found to experience higher rates of harassment (33%) than white trans students (27%), while trans feminine students (62%) report higher rates of exclusionary, intimidating, offensive or hostile conduct due to their gender identity than trans masculine students (57%) (Rankin et al., 2010).

Acknowledging that educational institutions are gendered (Bilodeau, 2007; Crowder, 2012; Lester, Sallee, & Hart, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017), applying an organizational framework to examine recent trans-inclusive efforts provides insight into how postsecondary institutions simultaneously use gender as a structuring agent and (re)construct the meaning of gender (Acker,

1990). As gender-selective colleges in particular shift their policies to include trans students, this change is accomplished by (re)institutionalizing how gender is to be determined in accordance to the organizational identity. That is, the evaluation of students' eligibility and right to belong on campus is both formally instated through the adoption of admissions policies as well as built into the college's seemingly benign and neutral meanings, practices, and actions that function in accordance to the institution's mission as a gender-selective college. Such inclusive organizational structures may, however, reproduce normative expectations of trans bodies in order to maintain, rather than change, the organizational identity as they often uphold hierarchies of race, class, sexuality, and gender presentation. As a result, inclusionary policies, despite best efforts, become accessible to only those most advantaged of trans students that can be recognized and legitimized in such policies.

Applying to Gender-Selective Colleges

At first glance, it may seem obvious that gender-selective colleges are intended for a specific sex/gender only, and therefore only those who identify with the institutional identity may attend. For individuals whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity do not match, this presumption forces gender-selective institutions to confront how they restrict admissions to a singular category. In this section, I take up the question of who can *legally* attend gender-selective institutions, reviewing feminist analyses of Title IX's oversight regarding single-sex institutions and transgender students both during application and matriculation, followed with a discussion of institutional policies and the barriers these policies (re)create.

The legality of transgender inclusion at single-sex institutions is ambiguous at best, with contradictory guidance provided by the federal government, leaving interpretation up to individual institutions. When considering (trans)gender discrimination and educational access,

scholars turn to Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, which mandates that any educational institution receiving federal funding cannot discriminate on the basis of *sex* (Heise, 2019; Kraschel, 2012). While most applications of Title IX have focused on athletics and sexual assault protections for women and girls, Title IX has also been upheld to protect transgender people as early as 1997 in *Miles v NYU*³, implying that Title IX protects against discrimination not only against *the* disadvantaged sex, but against disadvantaged genders as well.

This notion does not suggest, however, that sex-based exclusion is illegal. Title IX also includes an exemption allowing private colleges to restrict admissions on the basis of sex *only if* the exclusion serves a “compelling governmental interest” in ending gender discrimination and inequality. As outlined by Sidhu (2008), this rule authorizes single-sex colleges to limit admissions to men or women so long as the exclusion meets five criteria: (1) it does not perpetuate archaic sex stereotypes, (2) it intentionally and directly assists a sex in a manner related to disadvantage, (3) enrollment must be voluntary, (4) the institution must not include members of a non-disadvantaged sex, and (5) the single-sex exclusion must not last longer than the discriminatory conditions (Kraschel, 2012; Sidhu, 2008). In applying these criteria to the question of transgender admissions, Kraschel (2012) concludes that Title IX cannot be the basis for trans exclusion at single-sex institutions because admitting transgender students directly assists in addressing (trans)gender inequality.

In 2015, the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, which oversees Title IX implementation, released a Dear Colleagues Letter which offered further clarification on this matter. The letter instructed that the rights and protections guaranteed under Title IX extend to

³ In *Miles v. NYU*, graduate student Jennifer Miles brought a Title IX sex harassment suit against her professor. NYU claimed that Miles was not protected under Title IX because of her trans identity, but the court rejected this defense because Miles “was subjected to discriminatory conduct while perceived as female” (qtd. in Kraschel, 2012, p. 468).

include gender identity and presentation in any educational institution that receives federal funding. These protections extended beyond admissions to include enrollment, wherein transgender students are to be “treated consistent with their gender identity” (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 2). Though the letter has since been recalled under the Trump Administration, this guidance temporarily suggested that trans students are protected from discrimination on the basis of their sex *and* gender (Peters, Becker, & Davis, 2017). And, yet, the letter also provided a clause that allowed single-sex institutions, particularly women’s colleges, to exclude transgender students:

Single-Sex Schools. Title IX does not apply to the admissions policies of certain educational institutions, including nonvocational elementary and secondary schools, and private undergraduate colleges. Those schools are therefore permitted under Title IX to set their own sex-based admissions policies. *Nothing in Title IX prohibits a private undergraduate women’s college from admitting transgender women if it so chooses.* [emphasis added] (U.S. Department of Education, 2015, p. 3-4; see also Morrison, 2019).

Without clear guidance on Title IX, this situation leaves us back at the starting point regarding whether transgender inclusion at gender-selective colleges is legally permitted.

College Policy

Because there are no mandates in Title IX restricting single-sex colleges from admitting trans students, but single-sex colleges can also opt not to, the decision ends up being left to each college to define their intended student population: education for *which* women/men? This question has largely been answered through the adoption of institutional transgender admissions policies. Marine (2009, p. 4) defines these policies as the way colleges “codify, formalize, and endeavor to bring uniformity to institutional practice, and to thereby declare their official stance toward a population or issue.” While some gender-selective colleges have statements of affirmation, non-discrimination policies, or accept trans students on a case-by-case basis, Marine (2009) and others (see Nanney and Brunsma, 2017; Boskey and Ganor, 2019) contend that it is

important that institutions adopt formal, public policies in order for transgender applicants to easily determine their eligibility.

Nanney and Brunsma (2017), Boskey and Ganor (2019), and Kett (2015) take up these policies and show that these policies vary widely from institution to institution. For example, Mount Holyoke College's (2018) admission policy, which has been lauded as the "golden standard" and "most inclusive" of admissions policies⁴ (Kett, 2015; Nanney and Brunsma, 2017; Weber, 2016), states:

The College values each student's development, both academically and personally, and recognizes that self-identity may change over time...

The following academically qualified students can apply for admission consideration:

- Biologically born female; identifies as a woman
- Biologically born female; identifies as a man
- Biologically born female; identifies as other/they/ze
- Biologically born female; does not identify as either woman or man
- Biologically born male; identifies as woman
- Biologically born male; identifies as other/they/ze and when "other/they" identity includes woman
- Biologically born with both male and female anatomy (Intersex); identifies as a woman

The following academically qualified students cannot apply for admission consideration:

- Biologically born male; identifies as man⁵

The policy then goes on to detail, in question-and-answer format, how the policy allows Mount Holyoke to "remain committed to its historic mission as a women's college", the matriculation of trans students, and the logistics of applying. In contrast, schools such as Bennett College (2017) have adopted more restrictive policies:

Bennett College admits self-identified women and people assigned female at birth who do not fit into the gender binary. Within these parameters, Bennett College does not discriminate on the basis of gender identity and expression in its admission policy,

⁴ See Diamond, Erlick, and Wong (2015) for model policy and Erlick (2020) regarding its formation.

⁵ The Mount Holyoke website has since replaced the policy information with the following: "Mount Holyoke is a women's college that is gender diverse and welcomes applications from female, trans and non-binary students."

scholarship and loan programs or in the educational program, co-curricular activities and residential facilities. Bennett College does not accept applications [from] men.... Once admitted, the student must continue to self-identify as a woman throughout their matriculation at Bennett College. If a student decides to self-identify as a male, the student will no longer be eligible to receive a degree from the College.

In fact, there exist over fourteen different combinations of who may or may not apply and matriculate at gender-selective institutions on the basis of legal status/documentation, biology and medical transition, and self-identification (Nanney and Brunsma, 2017). At the time of this writing, at least nine women's colleges admit trans men (though this varies depending on self-identification or legal documentation) and approximately 10 admit non-binary applicants, though the majority of policies require non-binary applicants to also identify as women and/or have female documentation. Additionally, all but three women's colleges—Bennett, Converse, and Stephens Colleges⁶—will allow enrolled students to graduate regardless of their identity. Similarly, of the only three men's colleges (Morehouse, St. John's, and Hobart Colleges) that have policies, all admit trans men and allow students to transfer to the college's affiliate women's institution should they transition.

Despite this increasing shift towards transgender inclusion, critics have noted significant administrative and intersectional barriers within these policies, making admissions still significantly difficult to access for the majority of trans students, particularly trans women (Fogg Davis, 2017; Nanney, 2019). Using an intersectional analysis, Nanney (2019) shows that, because such policies only focus on a singular axis of identity—sex/gender—it is possible that inclusion policies may still disadvantage those who cannot access the transnormative expectations of the “right way to be trans” that are set up in such policies.

⁶ Hollins College had a similar policy that was revised in October 2019. Morehouse College's policy also stipulates that enrolled students who no longer self-identify as men are ineligible to matriculate.

For example, Scripps College (2015) “accepts all applications who indicate their legal sex as female submitted through the Common Application.” The required question on the Common Application presents only two options: male or female. Previous iterations of the Common Application site included icons providing more information regarding the question, but these were removed in 2016 (Fogg Davis, 2017), requiring applicants to decide what definition of sex the application requires—legal, biological, assigned—and how they fit within that definition. In some instances, the requirement for legal sex, as outlined within the Scripps policy, perpetuates biomedical barriers to admissions, as at least nine states require proof of having undergone some form of gender-confirming health care to change one’s legal sex on their driver’s license or birth certificate. Noting that many health insurance programs consider gender-affirming healthcare to be “elective”, accessing such care could take over two years and cost upward of \$25,000 out-of-pocket (Fogg Davis, 2017; Nanney, 2019; Spade, 2015). Additionally, many states are currently considering bans on transition-related health care for minors (Andrew, 2020), thereby making it altogether impossible for some trans students to apply to these colleges. Thus, despite seeming to be an equitable solution to sorting potential applications, by relying on transnormative determinations of gender—wherein one must medically and legally transition to be accepted as “truly” trans—such an understanding becomes yet another barrier for prospective trans students on the basis of residency, age, familial support, and financial situation.

Attending Gender-Selective Colleges

In theory, our examination should hear. Once transgender students successfully apply to the college of their choice, their academic experiences would ideally be similar to that of their peers. Gender, hypothetically, should no longer matter after admissions. Of course, this is not the case. Gender remains relevant within the gender-selective college environment through the

policies, practices, interactions, and resources made available to transgender students. In this section, I review the literature on transgender student experiences during enrollment, focusing on how institutional identity impacts trans students' social, physical/mental, and academic outcomes.⁷

As colleges straddle the sociopolitical line between upholding their traditional mission as a college *for women* and the twenty-first-century challenges to being transgender-*inclusive*, at stake is trans students' sense of belonging within the institutional community. For example, Nanney (2017) documents the panic that arose on one women's college alumni Facebook group as the college adopted a trans admissions policy. Through a series of discussions and debates that lasted over three years, alumni became divided on matters regarding who belongs within the alumni community and the role of women's colleges once their alma mater formally included trans students. A majority of alumni were supportive of trans inclusion, claiming that once a student attends their alma mater, they are forever part of the community. A small, but loud, faction of alum, however, openly expressed *trans exclusionary* ideology⁸, claiming that (cisgender) women's experiences of inequality are distinct from trans women's, and therefore "women's colleges were founded to afford women a comparable education to that of men, not to right every gender-related wrong in the history of ever" (qtd. on p. 143). While both sides of this argument wanted to continue to preserve and honor their women's college, they clashed ideologically in regard to defining womanhood: by identity and experience or by biology.

⁷ To date, no scholarly research has examined the experiences of trans women enrolled in these colleges. Exceptions to this include first-person narratives available in popular media and online such as Calliope Wong and Ninotska Love. Future research should center trans women's voices to understand the unique and intersectional experiences of transmisogyny within the women's college environment.

⁸ See also Weber (2016) for an overview of trans exclusionary ideology in relationship to these debates.

Similarly, Morrison (2019) uses Morehouse College as a case example to discuss the ways in which institutional identity at gender-selective colleges is rooted in racial ideologies. Morehouse, the only historically Black men's college in the US, promotes that its mission is to empower and graduate "respectable" Black men. This identity of the "Morehouse Man", however, is deeply invested in racialized and gendered norms, wherein there is a longstanding tension surrounding queer sexuality and gender non-conformity on campus including a now-rescinded dress code policy prohibiting students from wearing clothing associated with femininity such as dresses, tunics, purses, and heels. As Morehouse reconsidered its admissions policy to include trans men, the resulting policy sought to uphold the mission of the college to "accommodate the spectrum of Black men who want to embody all that Morehouse stands for" because Morehouse is "the only institution that is dedicated to the development of black men" (qtd. on p. 106). In other words, while trans students choose to apply and enroll at such colleges for a multitude of reasons, it is not to change the identity of the school, but because they want to be present in an environment with such a mission and also feel safe and empowered to explore gender.

A number of trans students and alum of gender-selective colleges have, metaphorically and literally, come out to provide first- and second-hand accounts of their reasoning behind attending gender-selective colleges and their experiences on campus (see Catalano, 2009; Johnston & Campbell, 2019; Jones, 2014; Moyer, 2016; Nanney, forthcoming; Weber, 2014, 2016, 2019). For example, in the recent volume *Trans People in Higher Education*, CJ Campbell (Johnston & Campbell, 2019) details his experiences as the first out trans masculine student at Sweet Briar College: "I could stay at Sweet Briar; purely for the reason that I had checked the box when I applied indicating that I was a 'woman.' I felt selfishly relieved. I was happy that I

did not have to leave the place in which I had come to recognize this part of myself” (p. 10).

Similarly, a trans alum from Smith, Reed Wetmore, documented his transition while at Smith on the online video sharing website *YouTube* (Wetmore, 2015). In a video called “Being a Man at a Women’s College,” Wetmore describes feelings of support from friends on campus after coming out, as well as simultaneously apathetic-to-hostile treatment from other students, staff, faculty and administration: “My experience was not that I was unwelcome... I didn’t want to change anything about how the college represented women and empowered women... I just wished that my identity as a trans man, as a trans person and as someone who didn’t identify as female was more acknowledged” (Drew, 2018, p. 31).

The back and forth tension that Wetmore describes as not being *unwelcome*, but also not *acknowledged* is what Hart and Lester (2011), Jones (2014), and Weber (2019) describe as the paradox of hyper/invisibility. Particularly for trans masculine students at women’s colleges, the ways in which gender-selective colleges codify and enact gender through language, resources, and promotional materials shape available gender identities and norms on campus. On one hand, as women's colleges continue to promote the institutional identity of a “college for women and women’s education” through actions such as using “she/her” pronouns to address large groups of students⁹ or using images of only women, trans masculine students are written out of the population of the college. On the other hand, however, trans students also experience hypervisibility by standing out *against* the backdrop of a college for women. For example, trans masculine graduates of gender-selective women’s colleges must grapple with the issue of having their diploma, transcripts, and resumes indicate that they attended a women’s college while

⁹ In 2003, the Smith College student body voted, by a slim majority, to change language in student body-generated documents to use gender-neutral pronouns. All official campus materials from the administration, however, still use she/her pronouns. Other colleges have followed similar suit (see Freitas, 2017; Perifimos, 2008-2009).

identifying as a man. This mismatch between personal identity (and perhaps presentation) and institutional identity outs the graduate as trans in other areas of their life, such as before they even step foot in the door for an interview for future employment opportunities.

Because these gender-selective colleges depend on gendered categories to exist, students who are determined not to belong within the gendered community experience heightened rates of violence and policing on campus. Most contemporary discourse and resistance to the adoption of transgender admissions policies surrounded what Westbrook and Schilt (2014, p. 48) term “penis panics”—the fear of penises which symbolically and hypothetically “destroy the sanctity of women’s spaces through their (presumed natural) propensity to rape.” The opposition to trans women on campus centered around the assumption that students with penises are not women and therefore trans women are dangerous and pose a threat to other (cisgender) students (Nanney, 2017). At the same time, trans masculine students at women’s colleges, too, have experienced heightened policing and exclusion on campus because they are determined to be men and therefore do not belong on campus. For instance, trans masculine students have documented problems in residential hall bathrooms or from peers in classes because they are assumed to be a student from another college. If the college is supposedly a women’s college, especially one that does *not* have a policy that is inclusive of non-binary or trans masculine students, masculine students do not fit within the defined institutional population, thereby they are made strangers in their own home. This concern often led to trans men participating less in class for fear of backlash for “speaking over women in a women’s space” (Johnston & Campbell, 2019). Additionally, trans masculine students have further documented instances of social exclusion wherein they were forced to move dorm rooms to preserve the comfort of cis roommates and not permitted to participate in extracurricular activities “for women.” In the extreme, on two separate

occasions in spring 2018, two trans masculine students at Smith College were forcibly institutionalized after being misgendered, verbally harassed, and physically assaulted by campus police who claimed that the students were not who their student IDs said they were (Nanney, forthcoming). Such reactions indicate that students' maleness was being read correctly, positioning them as hypervisible while also rendering their identity as a member of the college community invisible.

At the same time, some trans and non-binary students enjoy the benefits and privileges within a queer hierarchy or “queerarchy” that promotes transnormative ideals of the “right”—or at least popular—way to be trans on campus (Nanney, forthcoming; Weber, 2014, 2019). For example, Owen, a trans masculine student at one women's college, explains,

There's sort of this backwards system of the more queer a person is, the higher up in the social hierarchy they are hence the name Queer-archy. But then also, there's all sorts of racial, socioeconomic, everything, things tied into that as well. But typically the people at the top are white, trans masculine people...So, some ways it's flipped, but in other ways it's not. (qtd. in Nanney, forthcoming)

Describing social life on campus as both popularizing those who “break gender norms” and simultaneously venerating whiteness and upper-middle class, Owen describes a transnormative ideal on campus wherein particular embodiments of gender are (re)valued more than others such as sexual attraction to or aggression towards women, short or ambiguous hairstyles, tattoos and piercings, particular styles and brands of clothing, and having top surgery and/or being on testosterone (see Catalano, 2014; Johnson, 2016; Moyer, 2016). While there is space at gender-selective colleges to identify and express gender in a multitude of ways, as Owen discusses, these expectations become inaccessible to those who do not fit within these norms, particularly

for trans students of color, students with low incomes, and trans feminine students.

Consequently “the thing that gets called ‘the transgender community’ is not really a community that has space for them” (Weber, 2019, p. 197). Rather, the transgender community becomes a space wherein trans as a category of identity and experience is both understood and regulated through normative understandings of sex, gender, class, and race. Only those who are seen to fit within the purview of what the right way to be trans get to experience the privileges—however limited—of the campus social community. Those left out of such normative categorization are thus isolated both from the institution and the trans community.

Despite trans students’ experiences of exclusion, erasure, and violence, overall, trans students have reported significantly more positive experiences and feelings of support at gender-selective colleges than students at co-educational colleges (Freitas, 2017). This difference may be a result of increased efforts on the behalf of faculty, staff, and administration to address the needs of trans students on campus and to create an environment where students are free, safe, and empowered to explore their gender on campus. In 2018, for example, Mount Holyoke released the guide “Supporting Trans and Non-Binary Students”, wherein faculty are instructed to address groups of students as “Mount Holyoke students” instead of “Mount Holyoke Women” and avoid referring to *the two* genders. Other actions taken on campuses have included offering gender-neutral restrooms and trans-specific affinity housing; providing trans-informed health care and insurance; allowing for name changes on registration, identification cards, and diplomas; conducting Trans 101 trainings for employees; and creating dedicated student spaces with staff directors, such as LGBTQ resource centers on campus (Marine, 2009).

While some campus employees remain ambivalent towards accommodating trans students (Marine, 2011), unsure of how trans students fit within the mission of gender-selective

colleges, the impact of colleges and individual employees articulating commitments to the well-being of trans students cannot go understated (see Nicolazzo, 2017; Marine, 2009; Siegel, 2019). As scholars have noted, establishing a sense of belonging within an institution is a key feature of student persistence, particularly for non-majority students (Marine, 2009). Considering the degree to which trans students can experience exclusion and violence because of their identity (Rankin et al., 2010), the ways in which institutional and interpersonal systems support trans students, especially in gender-selective environments, matter.

Conclusion

In the same year Caplan-Bricker's (2019) article was published, heralding Mount Holyoke's admissions policy and institutional climate, trans students at Smith College delivered a list of demands to the college administration. As the preamble of the document read:

We as trans, non-binary, and gender non conforming [sic] students at Smith college want to begin our demands by affirming that first and foremost Smith College should be a space that includes, not just admits, trans women. While we are happy to see that the admissions statement was changed in 2015 to include trans women, we believe this is not enough...

We center the belief that Smith College should be open to all trans, non-binary, and gender non conforming (GNC) students, including trans men. As a historically women's college, Smith was founded on the conviction that gender identity should not be a factor in a person's ability to receive a quality education, and to be safe on their campus. Trans students actively meet this tennent [sic] of the founding Smith mission...If Smith College is a feminist institution, invested in the liberation and education of women, then it should also be invested in the liberation and education of other groups marginalized under patriarchy, who are invested in receiving an education built on a feminist and anti-patriarchal ethos and ideology... (Trans Demands, 2019)

The list then outlined 17 demands and 35 actionable steps/sub-demands that would build accommodating and even supportive environments for trans students ranging from official recognition of trans men and non-binary students in admissions and recruitment programs for

trans women, publicizing available resources and services available for trans students both on campus and within the community.

By applying a sociological framework of gendered organizations to the case of gender-selective colleges, I have argued that, as organizations transition towards being transgender-inclusive, the construction and enforcement of trans inclusion both rearticulates and transcends the gendering of organizations. As the trans student demands at Smith highlight, the adoption of formal admissions policies for trans students is a step in the right direction to recognizing and validating the gendered social inequities that trans populations experience. And yet, controversies persist nearly five years after the adoption of these policies because these policies and practices are rooted in the social construction of transnormativity rather than institutional transformation. By requiring trans students to medically or legally transition to access the institution, by continuing to use she/her pronouns and feminine imagery to describe the college population, and by perpetuating erasure and violence against trans students as strangers on their own campuses, these seemingly inclusive policies and practices serve as conduits of regulatory transnormative ideology, constraining gendered possibilities rather than creating new ones.

Future research in this area should continue to follow the progress on these campuses, examining not what they *say* they are doing to be inclusive, but what they are *doing*. Additionally, this work should seek to center the voices of trans women at women's colleges, not to ask whether trans women are women, but to analyze the ways in which trans women experience the regulatory norms of womanhood within women's colleges. Other future research should also examine the policies, practices, and transgender student experiences at men's colleges, which would provide a richer understanding of the production of masculinity beyond biology. Finally, missing from these analyses are trans students who are in the process of

applying to gender-selective colleges and those trans students who have left gender-selective institutions, either by choice or by force. Future research should attempt to center these voices, as these are the students currently navigating such policies as well as those who are excluded from the institutional community on account of gender.

As the subfield of the sociology of trans studies continues to grow, examining and centering trans subjects in numerous institutional settings, the language and measures we as scholars use to discuss transgender inclusion—including the existence of policies or resources—does not preclude the possibility that inequality can persist in these environments. Future research would benefit from a *transing organizations* framework. Building off of a gendered organizations framework, a *transing organizations* framework discusses the ways in which institutions are conduits for gender regulatory ideology, all while situating the unique institutional experiences of trans individuals. As a result, this framework provides a lens through which scholars can begin to examine and understand the ways in which gendered organizations attempt to redo or challenge gender within organizational processes, policies, and membership, and how this change impacts the most vulnerable of trans populations. As Johnson (2016) argues, we should begin to think of the regulations on transgender identity and autonomy as characteristic of a normative ideology that structures interactions in every arena of social life. As other organizational settings, both gender-specific and neutral, strive towards trans inclusion, including consumer markets and media, health care, legal systems, sports, and religion, I call for future research to be critical of the notion that inclusion can ever be fully realized without continued reflection on the ways in which organizational structures reproduce “trans enough” narratives rooted in other axes of inequality. Rather, we must find ways to support trans people not just because they conform to the institutional identity of what sex/gender is, but because

doing so “models the transformative change that the [institution] imagines for the world in the day-to-day operations of the organization itself” (Spade, 2015, p. 109).

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