

How to Gain Cultural Proficiency and Accommodate Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students in Communication Centers

E. M. Lampkin

University of North Carolina at Greensboro

The importance of cultural proficiency within communication centers has greatly been discussed in *Students Helping Students: A Guide for Peer Educators on College Campuses* by Karim and Ross, where they focus on ways in which peer consultants can gain and react with cultural understanding and acceptance for various people groups (2010). In their chapter, "Enhancing Cultural Proficiency" Karim and Ross explain that culture is the unique blend of attributes, customs, preferences, and various personal factors (2010). Culture can refer to large groups, such as various races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, but also include smaller contributing factors (Karim & Ross, 2010, p. 59). All people belong to a culture and contribute to said culture. Moreover, a majority culture exists and subsequent minor cultures also exist (Karim & Ross, 2010). Karim and Ross state that the majority culture creates what is considered the norms in society and these norms naturally lead to societies creating biases against people and things different than these norms (Karim & Ross, 2010, p. 60). Karim and Ross argue that through learning cultural proficiency, the majority is able to move past biases, stereotypes, and prejudice by enacting empathy and equity for various minorities (2010, p. 61-63). This is done through examining differences, cultural misunderstandings, assumptions of culture, the exploration of other cultures, and understanding the context and content of cultural customs (Karim & Ross, 2010). Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming

students struggle to thrive in majority society, including college and university settings because of the cultural norms set as the expectation for all people. Transgender individuals have a sense of personal identity and/or gender identity that does not correspond with the sex they were assigned at birth. Whereas Gender Non-Conforming individuals can suffer from the same issues, but could also feel varying levels of discomfort with only their gender, only their body, or not identify with any gender. Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students face constant challenges throughout their college experience. As extensions of the University and as a place of intervention and student outreach, Communication Centers should be a place on campus where Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students feel comfortable and accommodated; allowing them to focus on being students, rather than being a minority within majority culture.

The first way we can utilize Karim and Ross' steps towards cultural proficiency is through gaining cultural awareness, through making oneself aware of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming culture. The first step to becoming more aware of a culture is by researching said culture through a credible source. There are many resources available explaining Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming culture, written by Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming folk themselves. Moreover, many university and college campuses have a multicultural center which educate people about Transgender and

Gender Non-Conforming culture. An additional resource to educate student and faculty staff would be incorporating multicultural training into either semesterly or yearly trainings through working with multicultural centers... Through becoming educated on Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming culture various stereotypes and cultural ignorance will be reduced. By having an educated communication center staff, you will be able to better serve your campus populations, including Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students.

Once a communication center has gained cultural fluency regarding Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming culture, they must begin working on their cultural fluency. To become fluent in Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming culture, we need to start changing how we address all people. Most communication centers create appointments, have check-ins, and forms. All of these common-place ways of record keeping or ways to run a smooth communication center are all things that make life for Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming people difficult. All of these logistical tools usually use legal names, naturally creating biases and assumptions of who someone is, before that person is spoken to. If someone's university ID is attached to a legal name with a cultural bias towards male or female pronouns, walking into that situation is uncomfortable and incredibly difficult. By being aware and practicing fluency, we can start to make our communication centers more Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming friendly. One way to accommodate our Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students is by asking all students for preferred names, as this allows them to choose to self-identify as who they are, removing biases within our practices. The same benefits can be achieved by asking for all students pronouns. Both of these questions could be implemented in a variety

of ways, such as: check-ins, appointment set-ups, during introductions, all of which could be done virtually, in person, or over the phone. These quick and non-evasive tactics, allows students to choose to self-identify themselves as who they are, and allows for your communication center to be culturally fluent; by being aware and asking simple questions that assure a safe and tolerant experience.

Finally, your communication center must work on becoming culturally tolerant. If we examine Karim and Ross' work again, we can see that major contributors to a lack of culture proficiency include being unaware of majority privilege and believing things should remain as they are. Statistically, most people working at, and running communication centers are not Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming. Assuming that the issues stated above are not important or worth the effort is in direct relation to a lack of cultural tolerance due to one's own privilege. Though the reader, may not be Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming, Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming people exist and need your help. By supporting Transgender or Gender Non-Conforming through accommodations and by gaining and growing cultural awareness, cultural tolerance, and cultural fluency, you can change the lives and educational pursuits of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students. If communication centers follow Karim & Ross' ideas of being a place where barriers are removed and students come to learn at their own ability level, why not help students be their best? Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming students need allies who will practice cultural awareness, cultural tolerance, and cultural fluency--both in and out of the communication center.

References

Karim, A., & Ross, R. (2010). Enhancing Cultural Proficiency. In *Students Helping Students: A Guide for Peer Educators on College Campuses* (2nd ed., pp. 57-93). San Francisco, CA: JosseyBass.