

## **Beyond the Binary: Gender, Identity, and Change at Brandeis University**

Lyndsay J. Agans\*

*This article offers a case study outlining promising practices and effective dialogues on gender identity, privilege, and transgender issues. Also presented are methods for student affairs professionals to foster organizational change to serve transgender student needs.*

To provide an effective, student-centered approach, colleges and universities must work to meet the needs of all students. Today, it is estimated that more than 7% of college students identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered (GLBT) (Eyermann & Sanlo, 2002). The term transgender refers to individuals who do not identify with the traditional gender categories of male or female. For many colleges and universities, the complexity of transgender student's needs prove to be difficult to understand and challenging to address. Some of the needs of transgender students seem, at first glance, basic. For instance, university administrators overlook issues such as availability of housing and restrooms or more complicated and costly matters such as health insurance options and athletic facilities (e.g. locker rooms) until a student in need raises the question. Treating such situations on a case-by-case basis can be problematic for both the student and the institution. Thus, while dialogue is an essential starting point, success in meeting transgender student's needs must manifest in the hard print of policies and in the physical changes in the institution.

The purpose of this article is twofold (1) to suggest approaches to effectively educating students around privilege and gender identity and (2) to share strategies student affairs practitioners can use that will aid them in approaching difficult dialogues around transgender issues. Using examples from the Watt Privilege Identity Exploration Model (Watt, 2007) and my experience as a university student affairs administrator, I will unpack the 'invisible knapsack' of gender and illuminate the struggles transgender students experience associated with privilege.

---

\* Lyndsay J. Agans is the Morgridge College of Education Scholar and a Ph.D. candidate in higher education at the University of Denver. Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to [Lagans@du.edu](mailto:Lagans@du.edu).

***Gender and Privilege***

Gender, in its invisibility, and normative position, exists as one of the most deeply embedded aspects of identity. For these reasons, gender identity also tends to be hidden and an aspect of privilege that is culturally constructed and mandated (Goldner, 1991). By going beyond the binary, that is, making room for more than two normative genders (Butler, 1988), the aim is to eliminate the stigma of “otherness” and draw transgender students away from a marginalized state toward a community core that is open and accepting of diverse gender identities (Schlossberg, 1989). To do so, it is imperative that the student affairs profession explore the privileged status of those conforming to the gender binary.

Difficult dialogues are an important focus point for creating change around matters of identity and acceptance. Signal of acceptance or rejection within a culture come from the power of language and its embedded layers of meaning. In discussing gender matters, in general and transgender matters in particular, there tends to be confusion in regards to meaning of terms. The term transgender signifies the fluidity of gender in a non-specific manner, it also shows that between two polarized, binary, locations -- male and female -- there is little room for language, let alone identity. Deconstructing meaning is a good starting place in initiating dialogue around issues of privilege, sexuality, and gender identity (Roof, 2002). After all, when there is no name for - no language - to describe who you are, how do you make meaning of self or of identity? A second area of confusion stems from the assumed combination of gender identity and sexuality (and vice versa). Matters of sexual orientation and gender identity do overlap; however, clarifications between those who identify as transgender are not interchangeable with transsexual.

***Applying the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model***

Frequently, students who identify as transgender struggle to find social and structural acceptance because many colleges and universities have not taken the initiative to provide non-gendered bathrooms and housing options. When student affairs practitioners are challenging their colleagues, students, and administrators to reflect on their privilege through discussion and exercises, they also need to have an understanding of how these individuals may respond. Practitioners can better support positive outcomes of these challenging interactions when they can anticipate responses.

Watt (2007) offers eight defense mechanisms/modes from the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model: *denial, deflection, rationalization, intellectualization, principium, false envy, minimization, and benevolence*. I will rely on

Watt's PIE Model to help me to describe how I observed privilege (associated with gender) explored at Brandeis University and to demonstrate my understanding of how these campus dialogues about transgender issues progressed. Specifically, I will draw examples from the Queer Brandeis Campaign, passive program for community education; diversity training provided for student leaders (community advisors and orientation leaders); and "dorm-raps" – a Queer Resource Center peer facilitated educational programs - provided by trained student-volunteers in residence halls.

### *Recognizing Gender Identity and Privilege*

The Queer Brandeis Campaign, funded through the support of a Brandeis Hewlett-Pluralism Grant, was one of the first initiatives on campus aimed at getting the campus community to recognize issues associated with gender identity and privilege. Student leaders, Aaron Schwid, Andrew Wiechert, and Kate Moore, of the Queer Resource Center designed the campaign. They describe the campaign as such:

We conceived the Queer Brandeis Campaign as an activist group with the goal of bringing queer theory and issues of discrimination to students' notice campus-wide. Our primary vehicle was an enormous art project in the form of 10,000 flyers distributed throughout major campus buildings overnight. The flyers each contained a simple statement, such as "I live on campus" or "I don't like coffee," followed by the word "queer" in bold, capital letters underneath. We also put up flyers explaining the point, which was that there is no standard of normalcy, that our society dictates which behaviors and preferences are the "correct" ones, and that queerness embraces theory, politics, and practice. These succeeded in inciting discussion and questions, which students could pose at a subsequent panel discussion (personal communication, June 12, 2006).

The response of the greater community was mixed. By its sheer magnitude and sentiment, the campaign jostled the university in its comfort around queer matters, and succeeded in making visible issues of sexual orientation, and gender identity. A testament to the organizational saga (Clark, 1972) of the university, student clubs and organizations followed up the campaign with panel discussions and dialogues around gender identity issues.

**Denial and Rationalization.** Butler (1988) explains that gender is socially constructed, and fluid; and as such, rejects the normative binary of a male or female gender identity. For many, this non-fixed concept of gender identity is a

difficult to comprehend, and students are inclined to reject and deny the existence of gender identities beyond male or female. Continuous societal reinforcement of gender as a fixed norm creates a challenge to those who question gender identity, as well as normalizing for many students the concept of gender in such a way that anything outside of this norm is un-natural. A reliance on biological classifications of “sex” are sometimes utilized to deflect conversations on gender identity. Finally, rationalization took place when the students felt that, as a male or female, transgender issues are not relevant. In attempting to overcome these defensive responses, educational programming, such as the Queer Brandeis Campaign, was critical.

### *Contemplating Gender Identity and Privilege*

Diversity training for student leaders was designed with high student input and intentionality around matters of gender identity and risk-taking activities on privilege. Moreover, the orientation programming for incoming first-year students also was specifically attentive to transgender matters. *Brandeis Boxes* was an activity created to provide a context-specific discussion around perception and privilege. In a small group of no more than 9 students, each group member had a small box in front of them along with scraps of paper and a pencil. Each individual disclosed an attribute of themselves and each box was then passed around. Each member of the group was to answer three questions in response to every attribute and drop it into the box until everyone had responded to every attribute. Attributes disclosed were things such as: male, conservative Jew, biracial, upper middle-class, left-handed, etc. Students were asked to use the attributes to complete three statements, “(1) I think of others who are (insert attribute) as (fill in blank); 2) Other people at this university think being (insert attribute) is (fill in blank); and, 3) If I were (insert attribute) I would feel (fill in blank)”. After the rotation, each member would open their box and read out the responses. Subsequent group discussion questions included: level of comfort with the activity, concepts of truth in disclosure/risk-taking, differences in perception around attributes. The activity is then repeated using attributes that were absent from the group (e.g., transgender, blind, Muslim). Student leaders were also trained on how to facilitate the exercise in their roles as community advisers or orientation leaders to engage the entire community around issues of gender identity and privilege.

*Intellectualization, Principium and False Envy.* Common defenses of the privilege of gender identity during these exercises were *intellectualization* and *principium* (Watt, 2007). As intellectually engaged students, the proclivity toward distancing themselves from their emotions on what is already an uncomfortable topic was the most prevalent response to dialogues on gender identity. Furthermore, as a predominately Jewish community, basic tenets of

the male/female binary stem from principles based firmly in religion, are relied on to avoid engaging in dialogue around transgender student needs or identity. In training student leaders, we have to be aware that many are sensitive to issues of diversity but may fear not appearing sophisticated around issues of gender identity. As a university with a mission of social justice, students at times were inclined to reject conformist gender identity behavior and exhibit *false envy* by heaping judgment upon traditional gender roles. In other words, students would focus on downplaying traditional gender roles as confining and share sentiments of how nice it would be not to feel confined to them like transgender students.

### *Addressing Gender Identity and Privilege*

Peer educators within the university's Queer Resource Center (QRC), a student-run and facilitated group, provided for in-hall education programs around lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and gender identity issues. In addition to challenging their peers, the peer educators dealt with their own perceptions of gender, which revealed defensive behaviors.

*Benevolence and Minimization.* For students in leadership roles and as student affairs practitioners with experience in many aspects of diversity, recognizing *benevolence* is important to making true and substantive progress on transgender issues. Regarding social groups, grassroots movements rely on community education and empathy. The environment for social tolerance established a long-standing culture of openness toward social justice issues at Brandeis, and the autonomy and continuous work of the student leaders on transgender matters, as well as the shifting paradigm of sexuality, manifested a climate of change. However, such an environment reified responses toward gender identity and privilege minimized the issue by considering the campus already open and tolerant. The incremental change predicating the shift in the non-discrimination policy was due in large part to student influence.

Engaging students through their own experiences to explore their sense of empathy and understanding of a person without *privileged* status is an important aspect to allowing for a reflexive, analytic approach to the privileged self. Moreover, as student affairs practitioners it is imperative that we engage in reflective self-analysis of our own acts, as males or females, so that we do not reinforce the normative binary and silently and invisibly marginalize transgender students.

### *Reflections on Practical Significance*

Major commitments of the Brandeis University culture revolve around student empowerment and open discussion of community matters. While this commitment provided a platform to open dialogue around transgender issues, other deep-rooted cultural commitments, particularly those relating to religion, make for a complex, sometimes contentious, environment. For example, while the Jewish influenced values of the university include tolerance and social justice, students of the Orthodox movement of Judaism may find themselves fundamentally opposed to policies which (could seem) to reject the traditional male/female identity.

Through dialogue, coalition-forming, awareness-raising and educational programming efforts, transformation has occurred both formally and informally to better meet transgender student needs. Formally, changes in the university non-discrimination policy included gender identity and expression and all university restrooms were mapped to begin the effort of making available a greater number of (conveniently located) gender-free restrooms. Informally, the momentum around advocating for increased services for transgender students continues to build.

Gender identity and transgender student needs are complex matters and the issues related tend to be diverse and sensitive. How might we approach the more difficult conversations around transgender needs? The nuance to gender identity and development is sensitive to us as it is at the core of our own personal sense of self. When in doubt, begin with self. Exercises on gender privilege such as guided meditations or questionnaires offer ways to uncover the orthodox and make normative practices in higher education more visible (Sandeem & Barr, 2006). For students who struggle with male or female gender identity, defer to their choice of language for self-identity. Empower their use of that language by supporting it through your usage. If confused, ask for an explanation so that you may in turn facilitate effective conversations on transgender issues. Each university setting is different and holds its own unique set of challenges. The practices described are malleable to fit contextual needs and intend to serve as a starting place for unpacking privilege related to gender matters.

Rejecting the gender binary allows for interesting discussions, the embedded cultural expectation of gender identity as male or female tends to produce a sense of right (you fit the binary) or wrong (you identify as neither male nor female) and may trigger what Watt (2007) identifies as fear and entitlement in confronting ones' own identity. Exploring this fear and the resolution of mixed identities students may hold, as both a person with privilege and one without

privilege, may more effectively create open communication around gender identity

### Conclusion

The PIE model offers universal concepts that identify student behaviors through their recognizing, contemplating, and addressing of privileged identity (Watt, 2007). In approaching difficult dialogues in particular, the PIE model enables us to anticipate student responses so that we might have enhanced learning opportunities. Dialogue may be difficult but is the primary and essential factor in creating an environment that meets the needs of all of its students, including those beyond the binary.

### References

- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531.
- Clark, B.R. (1972). Organizational saga. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 17(2), 178-184.
- Eyermann, I. & Sanlo, R. (2002). Documenting their existence: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender students on campus. In R. Sanlo., S. Rankin, and R. Schoenberg (Eds.), *Our Place on Campus: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Services and Programs in Higher Education*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Goldner, V. (1991). Toward a Critical Relational Theory of Gender. *Psychoanalytic Dialogues*, 1, 249-272.
- Roof, J. (2002). Is there sex after gender? Ungendering/the unnameable. *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association*, 35(1), 50-67.
- Sandeen, A., & Barr, M. (2006). *Critical issues for student affairs: Challenges and opportunities*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Schlossberg, N.K. (1989). Marginality and mattering. In D.C. Roberts (Ed). *Designing campus activities to foster a sense of community* (5-15). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Watt, S. K. (2007). Difficult dialogues and social justice: Uses of the privileged identity exploration (PIE) model in student affairs practice. *College student affairs journal* 26(2), 114-126.