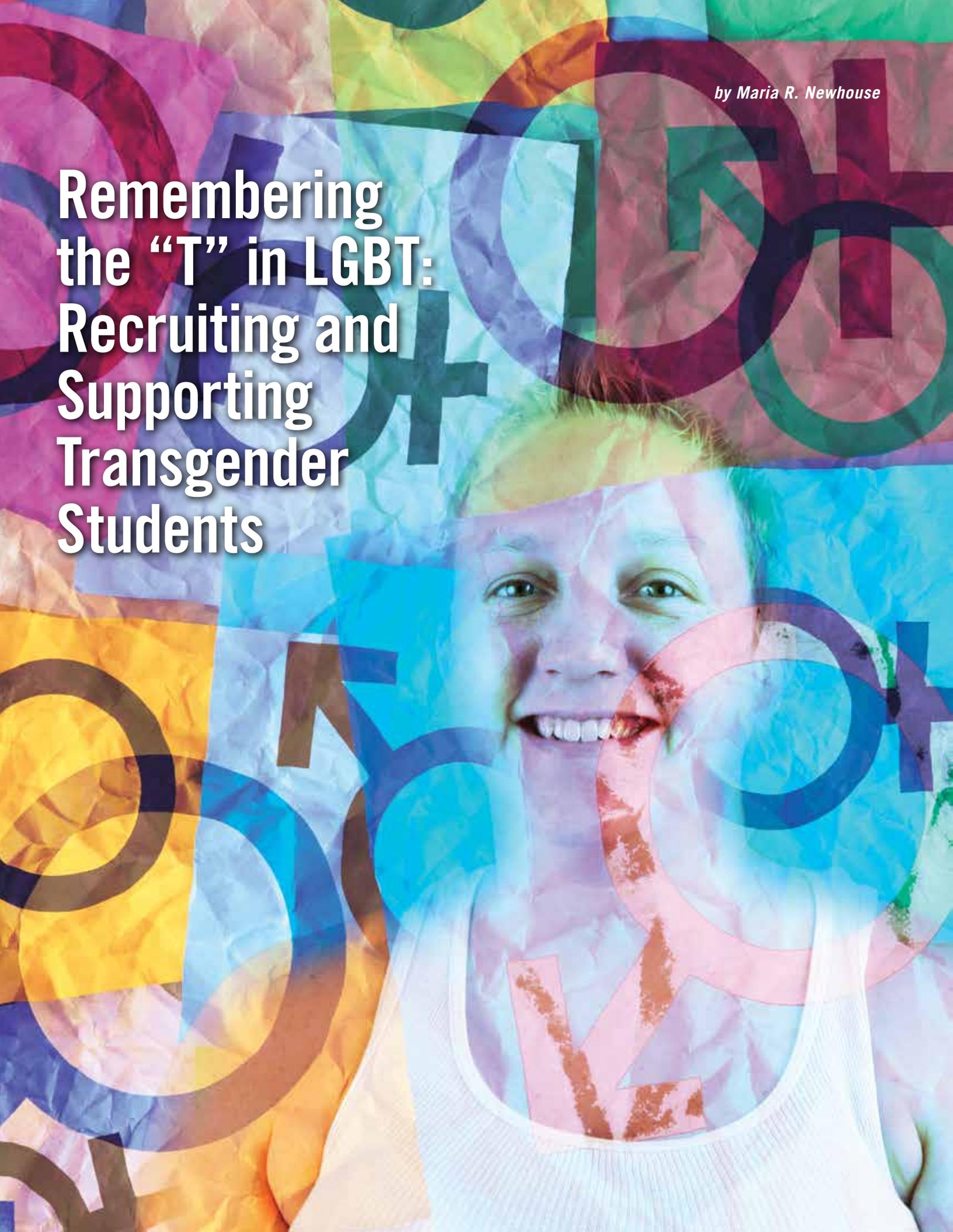


by Maria R. Newhouse

Remembering the “T” in LGBT: Recruiting and Supporting Transgender Students



Overview

It is exceedingly important for student affairs professionals to have an understanding of the types of students living, working and learning on our campuses in order to strategically enhance their experiences. One group on college campuses that is often overlooked is the transgender population of students; the lack of focus on the “T” in LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) comes, in part, because working with this group of students requires that professionals truly begin to understand some of the complicated gender constructions we often take for granted. This population of students is coming out and being open about their gender identity at the average age of 16, just as they begin to search for potential colleges and universities (Almeida-Neveu, 2010). The initial contact they have with universities, especially with admission and recruitment representatives, sets the tone for their college years.

Transgender Politics: Understanding Gender, Gender Identity and Gender Expression

For transgender students on college campuses and off, gender is not something that can be taken for granted; likewise, student affairs professionals who work with these students cannot take gender for granted if we hope to promote open and accepting environments for all students. While exact numbers are difficult to come by, estimates suggest that as many as seven percent of college students identify with the LGBT community and transgender students are becoming more visible in higher education (Agans, 2007; Beemyn, 2003). Therefore, having a basic understanding of common terms, concepts and assumptions surrounding transgender politics is important in successfully addressing the needs of this population (Stryker, 2008).

Discussing gender is more complicated than we often realize, due in part to the fact that we frequently fail to notice its existence. Blinded as we are to the complicated structures that influence our gender identities, it can become all too simple to assume that gender is something innate—something we have little control over and little power to shape and change. Understanding transgender politics requires that we break from this assumption and begin to closely examine the assumptions that define our society with regard to sex, gender, gender expression, and gender identity (Agans, 2007; Lorber, 1994; Stryker, 2008).

The goal of this conversation is to break from the binary, making room for more than two genders within our culture and eliminating the stigma of “otherness,” and bring transgender students in from their current marginalization (Agans, 2007). Beginning this discussion is not simple, because it requires that we examine our basic assumptions about what it means to be a man or woman in society today. As Susan Stryker (2008) notes:

“Because transgender issues touch on fundamental questions of human existence, they take us into areas that we rarely consider

carefully; usually, we simply experience these things without thinking about them too much—as we do with gravity, for example, or breathing... But gender, like gravity or breathing, is a really complicated topic when you start taking it apart and breaking it down.” (Stryker, 2008, p.7)

Author Judith Lorber (1994), whose work in gender identity development is still referenced today, echoes this sentiment, noting that “[t]alking about gender for most people is the equivalent of fish talking about water” (p. 1). To begin a discussion of gender, and begin to understand the complexity of transgender politics, we must break from this tradition of silence and be the fish that begin to talk about the water.

In discussing gender, there are several important assumptions we must challenge. The first of those is that gender is equivalent to sex. In fact, while sex and gender are terms which are often utilized interchangeably, they are not the same. Gender, in the most simplistic terms, is generally considered to be cultural, and sex, biological (Lorber, 1994; Stryker, 2008). This distinction does not assume that there is no connection between the two, but that they do not necessarily go hand-in-hand and that gender is a fluid and socially constructed aspect of our personal identities. By understanding and accepting that our cultural assumptions of what encompasses gender often flow directly from expectations created around our understanding of a person’s biological sex, we can discuss the concept of gender identity and gender expression, which are the basis of the discussion around transgender politics.

Gender identity refers to our internal sense of self, or the subjective sense of fit that we feel with a particular category (American Psychological Association, 2002; Stryker, 2008). In other words, our gender identity encompasses who we feel we are with regard to our gender. For many individuals, termed “cisgender” or “cissexual,” there is a sense of congruence between one’s

personal gender identity and the biological sex to which they were assigned at birth. However, transgender people are often held up as an example that this congruence does not necessarily exist inherently; in other words it is possible to form a sense of self that is not like other members of the gender one has been assigned to, or to think of oneself as properly belonging to another gender category (Stryker, 2008).

When this sense of congruence does not exist, it is often made evident in one's gender expression. Gender expression refers to the way a person communicates their internal sense of self—their gender identity—to others through external expressions of that gender, which may include behavior, clothing, hairstyles, voice, walk, stance, gestures, or body characteristics (American Psychological Association, 2002; Negrete, 2007). It is important to understand that gender expression may not always be congruent with a person's gender identity, depending on one's personal development, feelings of personal safety and comfort level with his or her emerging identity. However, gender expression is often the way that we identify individuals as male and female, masculine and feminine. In fact, our utilization of this method of identification is ubiquitous that our expectations have to be deliberately disrupted before we pay any attention to gender (Lorber, 1994).

Of course, disruptions occur, as many individuals do not fit the linear pattern of gender identity and expression that we have come to accept as normal. Recognizing this non-linear paradigm brings us closer to an understanding of transgender politics and what it means to be transgender. Today, the term “transgender” is commonly used as an umbrella term for persons whose gender identity, gender expression or behavior does not align with that typically associated with the biological sex which they were assigned to at birth (American Psychological Association, 2002). This modern understanding of what it means to be transgender only developed in the early 1990s with the growth of the transgender movement, both in the US and Europe (Beemyn, 2003).

Socially and politically, as the history of the term implies, transgender is more than a definition. Transgender implies a movement away from an initially assigned gender position, generally referring to any and all kinds of variation from so-called gender norms and expectations (Stryker, 2008). In other words, the term transgender moves beyond the gender binary that many of us have grown to view as the “norm” and encompasses those who identify as gender variant or queer (Negrete, 2007). At the center of transgender politics is this very issue, which is that the sex of the body does not bear any necessary or deterministic relationship to the social category in which that body lives—although our entire social construction seems to imply that this is the case (Stryker, 2008). This incongruence and break from the “norm” leads to many issues for transgender students on college campuses, and within our society at large.

Basic Issues in Higher Education for Transgender Students

The issues that transgender students face are often directly linked to their transgender identity, and can have lethal consequences for this population of students. While the environments on college campuses do not necessarily create these issues, they can often compound the identity issues these students arrive on college campuses with. For student affairs professionals, creating safe and accepting college campuses can be the difference between validating these students' existence and further marginalizing them by upholding the social messages they have been inundated with throughout their lives.

While most research on life-threatening behaviors in sexually marginalized populations have focused on lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals, research focusing specifically on the transgender population has found a high level of life-threatening behaviors in this population of students. In a study of 55 transgender students, Grossman and D'Augelli (2007) found that almost half of the youth in the study had thought of taking their lives, with half of them directly linking these thoughts to their transgender identity. One quarter of these students reported a suicide attempt, with almost three quarters of those relating their first or only suicide attempt to their transgender identity. This is higher than the proportion of LGB youth found in a similar study (Grossman & D'Augelli, 2007).

Moving away from home is often the first time that many transgender students are able to fully express themselves; like most college students, this is a time for identity development and for transgender students it is also a time to question and explore their gender identity as they move away from family and friends (Beemyn, 2003). While some transgender students experience acceptance and support on their college campuses, many others experience a chillier climate, making their transition all the more difficult and potentially compounding some of the identity issues they are already facing. From chilly campus climates and microaggressions, to exclusionary policies and practices, transgender students face a variety of challenges on college campuses across the nation.

Campus Climate: Chilly At Best

There is a certain privilege ascribed to cisgender individuals that most are unaware of. That privilege includes the ability to move across campus more or less unmolested, safe and secure in their cocoon of gender privilege. They walk across college campuses unaware of it and all of the unearned advantages that come with it (McIntosh, 1988). Transgender students do not necessarily have this same privilege.

To gain this privilege, some transgender or questioning students do not disclose their transgender identity to be accepted as cisgender; this is also called living or going stealth. Kroger (2004) noted that this phenomenon of “passing” refers to the actions individuals

take to present themselves as other than who they understand themselves to be (as cited in Smirles, Wetherilt, Murphy & Patterson, 2009)—it can provide a heightened sense of safety and belonging for transgender students. In passing as cisgender, transgender students have the ability to gain access to those unearned advantages that come with belonging to the dominant class—like safety and acceptance on their campus.

For transgender students who do not wish to pass as cisgender, the campus can be an uncomfortable landscape. Transgender students may face alienation, rejection and exclusion on a daily basis. Studies on campus climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students suggest that this is the case, noting that these students experience discrimination, harassment and fear. In other words, the campus climate experienced by this student population is often chilly at best (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004).

Many assume that a chilly campus climate is the result of outright aggression toward an individual population on campus—that is not always the case. Transgender students do experience violence at the hands of transphobic individuals, but that violence and aggression are not the only means of isolating and marginalizing this population on college campuses. Instead, daily exposure to microaggressions can cause transgender students to perceive their campus climate as less than accepting, or downright disapproving, of their presence.

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Microaggressions, whose study has traditionally focused on race and gender, are unconscious forms of prejudice and discrimination (Nadal, Rivera & Corpus, 2010). While many transgender individuals, and other gender non-conforming students, would agree that these experiences are part of the daily lives of LGBT students, it is only in recent years that researchers have begun to focus on the idea that sexually marginalized populations might also experience these subtle, or not very subtle, behaviors as a result of their sexual orientation. These microaggressions take many forms, and are experienced at all levels of campus life.

Social and Environmental Microaggressions

The social climate on campus is often affected from the moment a student is asked to check a box marked “male” or “female” on admission forms (Beemyn, 2003). Socially, this binary divide is further reinforced each time a transgender student walks past a cisgender student and receives a pointed stare, an incredulous look or is pointedly ignored. In this way, he or she is reminded that his or her gender nonconformity is not widely accepted. This lack of acceptance, especially during a time of transition, sends a very clear message to transgender students about who fits in, who is accepted, and who is not and can be incredibly impactful to identity development.

Acceptance by peers and their institutions is not only important in student development, but is vital in creating a safe space for transgender students on our campuses. There is no question that the microaggressions experienced on a daily basis by many gender

nonconforming students directly impact their sense of safety and wellbeing on campus. In a study conducted at the University of Vermont, transgender students provided clear examples of the types of microaggressions they experienced on a daily basis, and how extremely relevant these experiences were to their sense of safety on campus. One student recalled experiencing outright harassment on campus, stating that:

“One instance where I felt unsafe was on my way to the Common concert at Patrick Gym, and on my way in, there were people outside harassing me, wanting to know if I was a guy or girl. They were obviously responding to my gender expression, forcing me to identify myself to them. It was very uncomfortable for me, and I did not stay at the concert long, I mean, who wants to go into a huge dark room full of people when you are getting yelled at outside?” (Negrete, 2007, p. 32)

This experience highlights the lack of gender privilege for transgender students. It also highlights how clearly organized our social structures are around the gender binary; when individuals do not fit into one particular category, or into the category that others

assume they should fit into, they are questioned and called out to explain their gender identity and expression.

The same student noted how these experiences come together, affecting how safe particular areas of campus feel, especially those areas of campus that are clearly designated for males or females. “Locker rooms, bathrooms, and the gyms are really ‘anxiety provoking’ for me” the student noted “because there is a strict gender binary that is enforced in all of these places” (Negrete, 2007, p. 32). Unfortunately for transgender students, most areas of campus life are segregated into gender binaries, making it difficult for transgender students to find a safe and accepting space.

Microaggressions in the Classroom

The lack of recognition of transgender student populations on college campuses is also reflected in the approaches taken to teaching and working with transgender topics and transgender students in the classroom. Historically, these pedagogical approaches to directly discussing gender theories have been problematic in their tokenizing approach as transgender people are often held accountable for upholding the gender binary (Wentling, Schilt, Windsor & Lucal, 2007) or are used as proof that our current system of gender is flawed. These approaches lack both insight and acceptance of the gender diversity and fluidity experienced within the transgender community.

Of course, most classroom environments unconsciously uphold and support the gender binary, thereby inadvertently outing transgender students or forcing them to pass as cisgender in the classroom. When a classroom instructor asks students to separate based on male or female, or addresses the classroom in a traditionally gendered fashion, transgender students receive the message that who they are does not fit in with the social norm accepted on campus. For most transgender students, these types of microaggressions in the classroom uphold and support a chilly campus climate.

Even instructors attempting to create an accepting classroom environment often misstep as a result of their lack of experience with the transgender community. For example, well-meaning instructors often ask students to identify themselves by their “preferred” pronoun as a way to make transgender students feel comfortable within the classroom. However, this very practice is asking students to acknowledge that the pronoun by which they identify is not their normal and natural pronoun, but their “preferred” pronoun. As one transgender student noted, “it is not my *preferred* pronoun, it is just my pronoun” (Catalano, C., personal communication, 25 March 2012). Faculty who wish to avoid this type of scenario should seek out professional development and training, if offered by their institution or professional organizations. Alternately, they can take some time and look at current research on working with transgender students.

Policies and Procedures: Recruiting and Supporting Transgender Students

One method of alleviating many of these issues is for universities to consider their policies and procedures. Often, the complexity of addressing the needs of transgender populations prove difficult for administrators to understand and adequately address; for instance, it is not until a student raises concerns over issues like available gender neutral housing and restrooms, athletic facilities, and health insurance that many of these issues are acknowledged by university officials (Agans, 2007). To be truly inclusive and supportive of transgender students, universities need to be proactive in their policies—as many universities are already looking to be.

In a controversial move, Elmhurst College (IL) led the way in reaching out to LGBT students on their campus by revising their admission application to include the question “Would you consider yourself a member of the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) community?” in 2011 (Ray, 2011). The move by the college received landmark recognition from Campus Pride, as well as national news and media sources. When asked the quintessential question about why they did it, the college said:

“This year we decided to include self-identified LGBT students in the process. We wanted them to know that they, like all our students, would find abundant resources at Elmhurst to enable them to succeed. We wanted them to know that they would not feel isolated on our campus because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. On the contrary: We clearly, openly, emphatically want them here.” (Ray, 2011, para. 6)

Citing a similar rationale, the University of Iowa recently became the first public university to ask whether enrolling students identify with the LGBTQ community (Hoover, 2012). Admission policies and procedures that clearly emphasize a commitment to diversity are a first step towards creating a campus climate that is accepting of transgender students, but cannot be the only step that universities take. As a method of backing policy changes, universities also need to consider specifically reaching out to students from the LGBT community. By allowing students to identify with the LGBTQ community on admission applications, colleges and universities can strive to send the message that they are open to—and want—transgender students on their campuses.

Of course, recruitment of transgender students is not the only answer, and will certainly not change campus climate overnight—that will require more work. Outreach efforts must be supported by resources that support this student population—and admission professionals must be knowledgeable about these resources. This means that colleges must provide a supportive

infrastructure and make sure that employees are appropriately trained and aware of student resources. This training should also be for admission representatives who are often the first ambassadors for the university. As noted by Almeida-Neveu (2010) an ill-informed admission representative “is a sure sign that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students are not a priority for that institution,” especially as it becomes more and more likely that representatives will encounter these students in their recruitment efforts.



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