

Down to Basics

An introduction to transgender issues

Notes for College and University Communities

Michelle O'Brien, May 2003

Transgender and transsexual people are a growing presence at many colleges and universities. At some schools, students have begun coming out as trans. They've established gender support groups and organizing groups, become active in queer student organizations, and at many schools are developing a visible presence on campus. In many other cases, trans students are attending colleges and universities, but choosing to not share their identities or histories publicly. Many professors have begun including transgender issues in courses on gender and sexuality. At a few schools, the issues of transgender students and faculty have begun to be felt by university administrators. Gender segregated and gender binary admissions, dorms, bathrooms and a lack of trans-sensitive student care and services have led many trans students to demand institutional change.

This text is meant as for the bare basics of trans issues and identities for students. Mostly, this is meant to be handed out at workshops. This text is far, far from enough to understand or hear the needs of gender variant students and faculty. But it does provide some very basic vocabulary and thoughts. It is meant for non-trans people who sincerely want to be supportive and respectful of gender variant people and our rights to self-determination and dignity.

More than just basic information, I mean this text to help people in finding ways of treating trans students with respect and dignity. No amount of reading can substitute for listening to trans students themselves, being there when you are asked for support, and bringing thought and care to your actions.

Basic Definitions

Definitions are difficult for many trans people. Trans people have lived part or all of our lives being identified with a gender we don't feel entirely

comfortable with. Trans people have all been mislabeled. Sometimes this discomfort is extreme. As a result, many trans people are uncomfortable with any easy labeling – with tossing out words and quick explanations and thinking that covers the full complexity of someone’s experience. Please understand that how each trans person understands these words is different; they vary geographically and culturally. Use these basic definitions only as a place to start. Most importantly, listen to what trans people say about how we identify ourselves and wish to be understood.

Trans is an abbreviation of transgender or transsexual. Often used as slang by trans people.

Transsexual is used to describe people who identify with a gender different than what they were assigned at birth. For example, a person who understands themselves as a woman, but was identified as a male at birth, might identify as a transsexual woman.

Transsexual people might choose to alter their appearance, the ways they are referred to and their bodies. A transsexual person might engage in hormone therapy, have surgeries or other procedures to become more comfortable with their bodies. In some circles, particularly conventional medical discourse, transsexual is used exclusively to refer to people who have had or intend to have Genital Reassignment Surgery (GRS). Today, however, many understand that transsexual people might choose to not have any form of surgery.

Transgender refers to many different kinds of people who experience some discomfort with their assigned gender or expected gender role, including transsexuals, drag kings and queens, genderqueers, cross-dressers and other gender variant people.

Trans women are trans people who identify and understand themselves as women. Respectful labels usually refer to where someone is heading, to their future, and not to their past. A trans woman might identify as ‘MTF’ or ‘male-to-female’, referring possibly to their assigned gender (male) and self-identified gender (female).

Trans men are trans people who identify as male. A trans man might call themselves ‘FTM’ or ‘female-to-male’, again referring to assigned gender (female) and self-identified gender (male).

Assigned gender refers to the gender one was identified as at birth. Sometimes people call this one’s ‘birth gender’. Often this assignment is made on the basis of genitals. Usually this is the gender someone was raised as before transitioning or coming out as trans. Trans people experience some discomfort with their assigned gender and the social expectations people attach to that gender.

Intersex people are born with bodies that don’t easily fit into categories

of male or female. Often intersex people undergo surgical procedures on their genitals as newborns, and might have been raised with hormone therapy and further surgeries. Today, many intersex people stand with transsexuals in demanding the rights to self-determine the form of their own bodies, opposing treatments on infants.

Genderqueer is an increasingly popular identity among some young gender variant people. It is often used by people who feel their gender identities don't easily fit into a male/female binary. Maybe a genderqueer person feels they are both male and female, or neither one, or flexible transform between expressions or identities.

Transphobia many use to refer to the hatred, oppression, violence and discrimination gender variant people facing in many parts of our society. Transphobia can take many, many forms: from violence by partners, police or strangers to gender segregated facilities, from outright denial of services to people refusing to take our gender identities seriously, from lack of access to affordable care to anger from our families.

From sex worker slang to gender identity clinic jargon, there is a vast specific vocabulary used by trans people and around trans issues. These words here are only a beginning. Many more glossaries are easily accessible online, including one at outproud and through gender.org , in their resources section. Take the time to educate yourself, taking advantage of the many resources out there. Listen to how trans people describe themselves. Showing respect to trans students depends on listening to and respecting people's own needs and requests around labels, pronouns and identities.

Common misconceptions and mistakes

Sexual orientation is not necessarily tied to trans identity. A trans person might be gay, bi, straight, or understand their sexual orientation in many different ways. Often, but not always, trans people identify their orientation with reference to their self-identified gender. For example, a trans woman who dates other women might call herself a lesbian. Each person decides for themselves their sexual orientation, and how they wish to describe it. Many trans people are also commonly assumed to be lesbians or gay men based on their presentation. These assumptions are often inaccurate and disrespectful.

Not listening, and listening inappropriately is perhaps the most common mistake. Trans people are the most qualified sources about our lives, our

needs, our communities and our identities. If you want to be respectful, ask and then take our answers seriously. While asking how to be respectful is a great place to start, it's also important to not ask inappropriate questions. Ask what is necessary for you to relate to someone respectfully -- like their pronoun preference -- and to deal with the situation at hand. In nearly all cases, the specifics of someone's genitals, the intimate details of their sex lives or the complexities of their gender identity are really not your business. Too often, trans students are called on to constantly educate those around them. This is often exhausting, inappropriate and unfair. The work of education on gender identity issues cannot solely fall on a handful of out, visible individuals.

Assuming and imposing knowledge can be alienating to many trans people. There is a whole world of gender theorists, psychologists, surgeons and sexologists who have written a great deal on trans people. Much of this writing is far from the actual experiences and self-defined needs of trans people themselves. Too often, information on trans folk is produced and disseminated without our real control or say. Further, much of the writing and perspectives of trans folk themselves -- like this text -- is somehow falsely taken to be representative of all trans people. People who are transgender, transsexual, genderqueer, intersex or otherwise gender variant are as diverse as anyone else. Trans folk face strong divisions are race, class, social privilege, gender identity, sexuality, personal history and identities -- and applying any one person's perspective to all trans people just doesn't work. Instead each trans person, and each community of gender variant people, needs the space and power to define and demand their own needs. Students, faculty and staff can become significantly more aware on trans issues generally; that doesn't mean, however, that you really know what any particular person is dealing with or needs.

Transphobia -- On Campus and Off

Transphobia takes many forms. Most trans people face extreme economic discrimination, having difficulty in finding jobs, healthcare, housing or basic social services. Many of the key issues for trans people are inseparable from poverty, racism, homophobia or misogyny. Most trans people face discrimination, violence, hatred or disrespect in many aspects of our lives. All trans people deserve dignity, healthcare and financial stability, and for too many these things are a struggle every day.

Trans students face some of the same problems. In addition, trans

students must deal with many of the difficulties specific to being in a college or university. Schools often have gender binary admissions, forcing students in the sometimes difficult choice between 'male' and 'female'. Some schools maintain gender-specific admissions, excluding many trans people based on their histories or IDs. Once accepted, trans students often deal with gender segregated dorms, bathrooms, locker rooms and other facilities. Being inappropriately forced into a gender segregated setting can be scary, hurtful and traumatizing for gender variant people. Too often, visibly gender variant students face harassment from hostile, transphobic students, faculty or staff. Even at the most respectful of environments, trans students can be inappropriately tokenized, and might face a barrage of inappropriate, invasive and personal questions.

Trans people have particular needs around accessing medical care. If trans people choose to physically transition, we need to access hormone therapy, counseling, surgery and other trans-specific medical services. As well, many trans people have complex, non-traditional bodies. Medical providers are rarely adequately trained to treat trans people respectfully, provide basic medical care to people with differently gendered bodies, or to provide any trans-specific care. This is a pressing issue for student health services and university health centers. Student health programs have a great deal to learn about meeting the basic health needs of trans and gender variant students.

Much of the difficulties of trans students are just beginning to be documented. There are few publications that discuss these particular problems. Instead, through meetings, conversations, conferences and discussion boards, students and others are just beginning to move ahead in articulating and demanding changes in university policies that effect transgender students.

A Few Basics on Support

Names and pronouns – Many trans people change their names and their preferred gender pronoun at some point in their life. Sometimes we might use a name that is different than our IDs, or prefer pronouns that differ from how we might visibly pass. It is absolutely crucial to always respect people's own choices around their names and pronouns. Repeatedly making mistakes in referring to trans people is not okay. Using someone's correct name and pronoun is a place to begin in the long work of treating people with real dignity. Institutionally, it's crucial for

colleges and universities to have flexible, accessible systems for name and gender changes on all student records, and for students using more than one name.

Outing – Sometimes trans students might not be comfortable outing themselves in all settings. Some students might choose to not share their identities or histories with roommates, some classes or some professors or administrators. It is important to be careful and sensitive to never out someone – to identify them as trans – without their consent. If you are unsure of their preference, ask them in a private setting.

Making mistakes – Everyone makes mistakes sometimes. If you mess up someone's pronoun or name, or make some other sort of mistake, don't necessarily make a huge deal out of it. Apologize when and where if it's appropriate, don't assume someone didn't notice, but also continue the mistake by taking up too much of someone's time and energy in your apology. Along with this, understand that sometimes taking risks and looking foolish is crucial to learning.

Privilege and Power – People who are not trans or gender variant have many privileges. Our culture, institutions and society is set up to work for people that easily and clearly fit into the gender they were assigned at birth. Non-trans people have real social power every day, in all aspects of one's life. Developing respectful relationships with trans people depends on being aware of these privileges and how they benefit your life at the cost of other people. Absolutely key to this awareness is being committed to real institutional change. Just treating people well is not enough – we all need to be out there demanding the change of policies that unfairly hurt or marginalize trans and gender variant people.

Self-education – Throughout this document, I've emphasized listening to trans people themselves. Though this is unquestionably crucial, it's important to not put all the work of learning about trans people and trans issues on trans people themselves. Many trans people are simply not that interested in giving a trans 101 workshop every time they want to talk to someone. Instead, take on some of the work of education yourself – get out there and read and learn what you can, pursuing information and resources, without necessarily hassling trans people inappropriately.

Resources

Online, there are several decent resources. gender.org offers a range of excellent short essays, resource lists and other valuable pieces of information. strap-on.org offers a discussion board used by many genderqueer and trans people in college or connected to college environments.

There are many books that offer similarly remarkable explorations of the politics of transphobia and trans liberation. Leslie Feinberg's books, *Transgender Liberation*, *Transgender Warriors* and *Stone Butch Blues* are all excellent, offering a breath of brilliant material. Kate Bornstein's *Gender Outlaw* and *My Gender Workbook* are amusing, enlightening and fascinating accounts of the complexity of gender. Patrick Califia wrote *Sex Changes*, an in depth look at transgender politics. The anthology *Genderqueer*, edited by Joan Nestle, Clare Howell, and Riki Wilchins, includes several powerful personal stories of people challenging gender binaries. Holly Devor collected the results of interviewing trans men in the text *FTM*. New books are coming out every month, offering new insights, new research and new material.

Closing words

As trans people, we have to fight for our pride, our dignity and our health. In this pamphlet I've emphasized listening to trans people themselves. While putting the responsibility of education yourself onto trans people is not appropriate, looking to trans people to define their own needs is absolutely key. When we choose to, trans people can identify our needs, ask for the changes we need, and articulate our own understanding of ourselves. Trans people's own diverse voices are the best, most qualified, most accessible resource for anyone trying to learn about these issues. This can be supplemented by reading clinical, autobiographical and social literature on trans people and trans issues. The resources are out there, in print and on the web, from individuals and organizations. By reading, by listening, by being out there working with people, we can all learn how to best support trans people in finding real dignity in our lives.

Instead of a comprehensive guide, this is just meant as a place to start – to encourage you to think about these issues and to start the process of learning.

This text is posted on the author's website, at www.deadletters.biz. The author can be reached through her site.