

Chapter 3

How Trans and Nonbinary Students Are Changing the Nature of Gender in the 21st Century

Genny Beemyn

University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA

ABSTRACT

In the last decade, there has been a profound generational shift in how gender is lived and viewed. While there has been a steady rise in the number of young people openly identifying as trans and nonbinary since the early 2000s, the degree to which students today are coming out as trans and nonbinary is unprecedented. Most are identifying as nonbinary, and by challenging the female/male gender dichotomy, they are bringing about major changes in laws, language, and popular culture. These changes, in turn, are encouraging more young people to feel comfortable identifying as nonbinary and leading to even greater societal shifts. This chapter examines the growing number of trans and nonbinary students; how they identify, including the gender labels and pronouns that they are using for themselves; and the effects that nonbinary young people are having on society. The main source is data from the Common App, the online admissions form used by more than 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, there has been a profound generational shift in how gender is lived and viewed in the United States. Although there has been a steady rise in the number of young people openly identifying as trans and nonbinary since the early 2000s, the degree to which students today are coming out as trans and nonbinary is unprecedented (Beemyn, 2022a; Herman et al., 2022). Most are identifying as nonbinary, and by challenging the woman/man gender dichotomy, they are bringing about major changes in laws, language, and popular culture (Flint et al., 2019; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). These changes, in turn, are encouraging more young people to feel comfortable identifying as

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nonbinary, which will likely lead to further societal shifts, despite the proliferation of laws that limit the rights of trans and nonbinary youth in most Republican-controlled states (Movement Advancement Project, 2023).

In this chapter, I will examine the growing number of trans and nonbinary students; how they identify, including the gender labels and pronouns that they are using for themselves; and the effects that nonbinary young people are having on society. My main source is data from the Common App, the online admissions form used by more than 1,000 colleges and universities in the United States, which more than 1.22 million students filled out for Fall 2022 admission and nearly 1.18 million for Fall 2023.¹ Although the Common App is used disproportionately by predominantly white, 4-year institutions,² it is the largest data set of college students that provides information on their gender identity and pronouns and it is more representative than many surveys and other instruments. The 2021-22 admissions cycle was the first year that the form gave students the ability to indicate their gender and pronouns.

PROCESS AND METHODOLOGY

I had advocated for the Common App to add optional questions asking gender identity and sexual orientation for more than a decade, including organizing an open letter to the Common App in 2015 along with Campus Pride that was supported by 25 national lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+), education, and youth advocacy organizations (Campus Pride, 2015), and working with a then competitor to the Common App to have them add a question asking gender in 2016 (Universal College Application, 2016). In response, the Common App added a text box to its question on sex in 2016 so that students could explain their gender, but it did not add a specific gender question. However, in 2020, the organization launched a data warehouse that helped them analyze up-to-date application activity and amplify trends as they emerged. The data warehouse, combined with new initiatives, led them to add a question asking gender, as well as questions on chosen name and pronouns, and included me among those it consulted on the wording for the questions. Having established a good, working relationship with the Common App, I approached them about analyzing their data on gender identity and pronouns across different demographic variables for the first admissions cycle in which these questions were included. I contracted with the Common App to review the data for one year; after a positive outcome, the agreement was extended for three more years.

For students who applied to college for Fall 2023, I received information from the Common App on the students' gender identity, pronouns, legal sex, race, first-generation status, citizenship status, U.S. armed forces status, state of residence, parents' marital status, whether they have any children of their own, cumulative GPA, and type of high school attended. The Common App's question on gender identity gives students the options of identifying as female, male, nonbinary, or adding another gender, with a fill-in box provided. For pronouns, students could select from "he/him," "she/her," "they/them," or indicate another pronoun set in the fill-in box provided. Students were able to choose more than one response by making multiple selections, but the questions did not explicitly state that this was an option, so, in the case of pronouns, thousands of students wrote-in a response that was among the choices offered (e.g., a student marking their pronouns as "she/her" and writing-in "they/them," instead of marking both "she/her" and "they/them"). Such responses were recoded accordingly.

In recoding the write-in and multiple responses to the gender identity question, I chose not to follow the common practice among researchers (including by me in the past; Beemyn, 2022a; Goldberg et al.,

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