

Chapter 8

Creating a Culture of Care: Supporting Trans–Spectrum Community College Students

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ABSTRACT

Research on LGBTQIA+ students in higher education has grown in recent decades, but that research has largely not resulted in additional support for students who identify as transgender or under the gender nonconforming umbrella. Also, most research has traditionally focused on four-year institutions. This chapter, therefore, focuses on trans-spectrum community college students and what they feel administration, faculty, and staff can do to help support and promote this population of students on campus.

INTRODUCTION

I identify as a cis-het woman who has never doubted her gender identity. On a day-to-day basis, I don't think about my gender identity too much. But in the context of this book, it is the most salient and important of my identities. To be frank, I am conflicted about my research and writing about trans students because of thoughts like this from an article titled “Dear Cis People: Stop Centering Yourself in Conversations about Trans Issues”:

My main problem with cisgender people centering themselves in trans conversations is that authenticity is incredibly important. How do you, as a cisgender person, fit into all of this? . . . [A]s someone who is not transgender, you inherently do not know what it is like being trans. You could be the child of a transgender parent, be dating a trans person, have a trans friend, and be doing gender studies at college, and you would still never know what it is like to be transgender. Thus why would you be in the middle of a conversation that you know nothing about? (Whitaker, 2017, para. 4)

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I fully agree with them, and I reflect on this as I work to actively create a more trans-friendly atmosphere at the community college where I work. On the one hand, I believe with all my heart that this work matters and that trans folx deserve my unflinching support and undying effort. On the other hand, I hate that I have become the default voice for trans issues at my institution and the person that senior staff consults first on these concerns.

Whitaker (2017) reminds me,

As a cisgender person, you need to always remember that your place in trans discourse is as an ally. You do not speak for us, over us or in place of one of us, because you'll most likely be taking up space that a trans person would be better suited for. ...Use your energy and your strive to support us by amplifying and uplifting our voices, where possible and when needed. (para. 7, emphasis added)

My opinion on trans issues does not matter. My voice does not matter. But I also must use my privilege and power as a cisgender woman to support and elevate the voices of those who feel they don't have voices, feel in danger when they do use their voices, feel their voices have been ignored, and/or feel exhausted from having to use their voices too often. I aim to make my institution inclusive of all gender identities so that anyone who does not identify as cisgender, as I do, will feel comfortable taking over the advocacy for trans individuals at my school. In the meantime, I will listen. I will not stop fighting. And I will hope that is enough.

PURPOSE

Community colleges have unique characteristics. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2020), in the 2019–2020 school year, 98.6% of public two-year institutions were open admissions meaning that they accept any student who applies regardless of admission test scores, high school GPA and/or rank, or recommendations (Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System [IPEDS], 2019). Additionally, community colleges tend to be less expensive than four-year institutions. In the 2018–2019 school year, tuition at a state school for in-state residents (the cheapest option for four-year schools) was around \$10,000 as compared to \$3,660 for two-year schools, not including funding opportunities such as grants (Mitchell & Kerr, 2019). These are important comparisons because gender-variant folx are more likely to live in poverty, be unemployed, work in the underground economy (e.g., selling drugs or engaging in sex work), and/or have housing insecurities (Grant et al., 2011). However, while fewer trans individuals 18–24 years old were in school than the general population, those 25–44 years old were 15% more likely to be in school than their cisgender counterparts, suggesting trans individuals experience interruptions to their education, but return to school later on to finish (Grant et al., 2011). Despite all these factors that lead trans folx seeking higher education to two-year schools, nationally, community colleges have failed to address achievement, success, and retention rates of this population (Haefele-Thomas & Hansen, 2019; Samoff, 2018). The best way to address these concerns is to listen to—and elevate—the voices and concerns of trans community college students and then use one's power and privilege to work to achieve that change.

I have sought to do this through research. The work presented in this chapter comes, mostly, from my dissertation (Schutte, 2022). My interest in supporting trans and gender nonconforming students took root when I encountered Julia Serano's (2013) "Trans Woman Manifesto." Before reading the piece,

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