

## **Supporting Transgender and Gender Expansive College Students**

Within the past years decade there has been a significant shift in college counseling and higher education to recognize those who identify as Transgender and Gender expansive (TGGE), a population that is unique and distinct from the LBGQ community (Bryne et al., 2012). A such, there are significant implications for counseling centers. As a response to this trend, this white paper aims to educate clinicians who work in college counseling centers who may not have received formal training in working with TGGE clients. This paper also aims to empower counselors to advocate for this often-marginalized college student population on their campuses.

### **Foundational Ideas of Sex and Gender**

In discussing the TGGE college population it is important to explore the current societal and cultural definitions and perspectives on sex and gender. Sex is composed of the physical, chromosomal, biological, and hormonal characteristics of being male, female, or intersex (Brown & Rounsley, 1996). Typically, individuals have physical and chromosomal characteristics that are in alignment with a binary sex: male or female. However, there is a subset of the general population, about 17 out of 1,000 births, for which an individual is born with chromosomes, internal reproductive organs, or internal or external genitalia that are neither male or female (Moore, 2000). This population is referred to as intersex, and within our current culture, parents are advised to assign a binary sex identification to their children. Over time, these individuals may not experience congruence with the sex they were assigned at birth (Krane & Barak, 2012). More recently, experts of human sexuality have recognized that there are unknown and unidentified intersex presentations that are not accounted for and that the total estimates of all intersex presentations may be as frequent as 1 in 100.

Although gender is often used as a synonym for sex, it is distinctly different. It is widely understood that gender is a social construct and encompasses a grouping of characteristics that are then defined through another binary lens: culturally assigned as masculine or feminine. Foundational to this belief is that males and females are expected to differ in mannerisms, personality, attire, and appearance (Krane & Barak, 2012). Additionally, socially accepted behaviors may shift over time. However, within certain time periods and contexts there are typical behavioral patterns for what is considered masculine and feminine within the culture (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011). Some stereotypical gender characteristics for masculinity include strength, assertiveness, independence, and stoicism. Common stereotypical gender characteristics for femininity are weakness, gentleness, meekness, emotionality, and grace (Choi, 2000; Messner, 2002). Even though these gender differences are not realistic or accurate, identified boys are expected to be masculine and identified girls are expected to be feminine (Krane & Barak, 2012).

### **Gender Expression and Gender Identity**

Gender expression is another social construct for counselors to understand and affirm in students, and it refers to how an individual outwardly conveys their gender (Cho et al., 2004). Individuals often express their gender through clothing, jewelry or hair styling choices. Differing from gender expression, gender identity is the personal understanding or internal feelings associated with how students view themselves: male, female, or non-binary (Cho et al., 2004).

In the college student population, some students' gender identity does not match the sex they were assigned at birth. When a person's gender identity and assigned sex are not in alignment, they may identify as transgender (Burdge, 2007). It is important for college counselors to comprehend and validate how students express their gender identity in their individual and unique manner (Griffin & Carroll, 2010). Transgender people often face misunderstanding, bias, discrimination, and bullying on college campuses (Young & Sweeting, 2004). Underneath the transgender and gender expansive umbrella, is another set of identities: those whose gender is more fluid (i.e. genderfluid), a combination of genders (i.e. genderqueer), and/or non-binary gender identification (i.e. sometimes abbreviated as NB or enby) (Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011). College students who identify as gender fluid or gender queer go beyond the constructs of male and female for whom they consider as inflexible categories; rather, they may exhibit a spectrum of gender expressions that combine traditionally masculine and feminine characteristics or shift between appearing male, female, and/or other genders (Krane & Barak, 2012).

### **Additional Population Considerations: Gender vs. Affectional Identity**

Another recommendation for those who serve this population is that how students identify their gender may be wholly separate from whom they may be attracted to or love; those who identify as LGBTQ are predisposed to romantically, sexually, emotionally, and/or spiritually bond in a non-heterosexual manner. Whereas, those with the TGGE identities capture the definition of who they love, affectional identities refer to whom they love. TGGE individuals may have varied affectional identity i.e., they may identify as heterosexual, gay, queer, bisexual, pansexual/polysexual, asexual or other identities (Siegel, 2016). Therefore, it is vital to avoid heteronormative assumptions that all LGBTQ and TGGE individuals have the same needs and desires (Messinger, 2006). This shift in recognizing the TGGE community while lacking the population-based knowledge has confused those working with TGGE individuals among mental health counselors. Thus, it is no surprise that this confusion has shown up in higher education in general and in college counseling centers in particular, as they are increasingly serving and supporting more students who identify as either transgender or gender non-conforming.

In accordance with the ACA code of ethics regarding advocacy (ACA, 2014, A.7.a.), it is essential and ethical for those who work in college counseling settings to comprehend the challenges this marginalized population faces, their development process, and how their identity related challenges manifest as a student in higher education. Additionally, such practitioners must realize the unique mental health risk factors of college students who identify as TGGE, how other intersecting identities of oppression factor into their lived experiences, and how this special population may best be served.

### **Adjustment to College for Gender Non-conforming Individuals**

For most rising first year students the excitement of matching and meeting their new college roommate and planning their living quarters is a fun and foundational rite of passage for college students. However, for the student who identifies as TGGE the experience is much more nuanced and may be layered with worries and fears regarding their gender expression, whether their roommate will be accepting of their identity, and how to negotiate the relationship with significant others and social circles. Matching and successfully navigating the residence hall

roommate experience with a complete stranger is often difficult in its own right yet adding the complexities that come with a TGGE identity can make this experience exceptionally challenging. Any identity-related rupture in a roommate relationship may lead to oppression or bullying, exacerbate the student's level of stress, create additional pressure to fit in, and possibly trigger mental health concerns. If the student does not have well developed coping skills, adequate resources, or ample social support, the experience will be particularly taxing.

An additional challenge may exist for TGGE college students who have experienced past trauma. Due to the binary and inflexible-gendered culture, variance in gender and affectional identities are often met with bullying in middle school or high school. Identity related trauma may induce social anxiety and feelings of loneliness and increase shyness or isolation in social settings as a means to minimize future distress related to their TGGE identity. As a result, these interpersonal behavioral patterns may negatively impact the important transitional stage from their home community to higher education setting.

Past trauma and resultant maladaptive behaviors can create significant obstacles in finding a healthy and safe friend group on campus. This challenge can be exacerbated by colleges and universities that do not have well-developed multicultural and diversity centers that provide TGGE-welcoming programming to assist students to connect with those who may share similar experiences. Therefore, counseling centers have a unique responsibility to help TGGE students who seek services related to difficulty adjusting to college that is often influenced by their past or current interpersonal experiences. Their edict is to support students as they cope, manage, or work through these identity related traumas in counseling, and to provide space for students to be empowered so they may flourish in their new community.

A further challenge that TGGE college students may face when transitioning to a higher educational environment is with faculty, staff, and administrators who are not familiar or trained to work with gender non-conforming student populations. Faculty, staff or administrators may unintentionally misgender a student or use oppressive behavior, e.g. be unwilling to use the student's chosen gender pronouns. Another example is when a student is speaking in a small group class and the faculty member may unintentionally or intentionally misgender students in front of their classmates, outing them and disregarding their identities. This may engender a classroom environment as uncomfortable or unwelcoming. The TGGE student may perceive that the way they identify is not acceptable, threatened, or unwelcomed. The result could be poor attendance, anxiety related to the course, and difficulty communicating with faculty, which could significantly impact the student's academic performance.

A final important issue that TGGE college students face when transitioning to a new higher education environment is identity-related discrimination. This type of discrimination was identified in the findings of the 2015 National Transgender Discrimination Study (James et al., 2015). This groundbreaking research found that within the TGGE population there are disparities regarding health, housing, and public accommodations. Universities, colleges, and community colleges often have significant deficits when it comes to TGGE confirming health services, residence halls, restrooms, and common areas. For a TGGE college student who is adjusting to new institution this disparity can be a significant factor that amplifies their stress in their adjustment.

## **Other Issues related to Gender Non-conforming College Students**

A well-known and highly publicized concern for TGGE college students is the use of bathrooms, which affected their use of restrooms on their college campuses. In 2016 the “Bathroom Bill” legally required people to use bathrooms and changing facilities based on their sex assigned at birth as opposed to their chosen gender identity. However, colleges and universities have challenged this bill by responding in alignment with the Title IV of the civil rights act of 1964, which covers discrimination based on a person’s nonconformity with stereotypes associated with the individual’s real or perceived gender (Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, n.d.). As a result, increasingly more colleges and universities instituted “All-Gender” bathrooms. Despite these improvements, TGGE bathrooms are typically single use spaces, and there continues to be discomfort with using other larger gendered bathrooms that exist on many college and university campuses.

A second issue for TGGE college students is when accessing care at a counseling center, they find that the staff and counselors do not have the knowledge or training to work with them and their tacit needs. Often counseling, psychology, social work, and psychiatry programs do not have specialized training in working with transgender or gender non-conforming individuals. Therefore, when TGGE students access services, their counselor may struggle to understand their lived experience related to their identity, their specific mental health risk factors, and have difficulty in connecting them to appropriate resources that could improve their mental health and their overall collegiate experience.

An important tertiary obstacle that TGGE students may face when going to the counseling center is that the intake forms and data collection methods may not be gender inclusive. This means that they must add a space to enter their pronouns or name (separate from their legal name) in addition to what is on the form. They also may have to give the staff or provider this information in person during their first encounter, which can be anxiety provoking. This process could be exacerbated if the TGGE student has had poor interactions with health care providers in the past who were not sensitive about their identity. Ultimately, a center’s lack of training and awareness regarding gender non-conforming students may be a significant obstacle for a student to overcome in seeking services. As a best practice it is important that counseling center staff and counselors indicate their preferred gender pronouns into their emails, and introduction as a form of advocacy for the TGGE student population.

A tangential challenge for TGGE students may be fitting in with the LGBTQ community on campus. Gender non-conforming students along with transgender students may experience oppression and discrimination within queer spaces, meaning that these groups are not always safe or supportive.

Finally, it is important to mention that there are still instances of hate speech and hate crimes that occur every year at colleges and universities. This means that staff and counselors need to be aware of how TGGE students may be impacted by these incidents and provide a timely response with resources and support. Moreover, counselors will need to have a collaborative relationship with campus safety or security to help TGGE students feel safe and secure when these incidents occur.

## **Mental Health Issues in Gender Non-conforming Students**

A recent study of more than 1,200 gender minority (GM) students on 71 campuses offer strong evidence of mental health inequities. The proportion of GM students screening positive for depression, anxiety, and eating disorders, and reporting non-suicidal self-injury are more than twice that of cisgender students. Rates of suicidal ideation, plans, and attempts are three to four times higher (Lipson, et al., 2019). An unfortunate reality for most college students who identify as TGGE is that they experienced health care providers who were inadequately trained in gender related issues as they went through their important developmental stages. Additionally, it was unlikely they got good mental health care because the number of providers with TGGE expertise is significantly out of proportion to the rising number of adolescents seeking mental health services regarding gender related issues (Vance Jr et al., 2015). This being the case it may be difficult for a TGGE student to believe that when they access their university or college's mental health services that they will find a competent, compassionate, and skilled provider to meet their mental health needs. Recent research points to this gap in gender competent mental health care providers. A Benson (2013) study identified concerns the TGGE population has when working with mental health professionals. This includes the assumption that TGGE individuals seek mental health care solely because their gender is an issue, when in reality these individuals experience normative life challenges and stressors including finances like any other student (Benson, 2013).

### **Students with Additional Intersecting Identities**

A lesser known concern for the TGGE community of college students is being viewed through the lens of "whiteness." TGGE individuals are represented in all racial, ethnic and cultural populations and have many intersecting identities. They are a complex, nuanced, and varied community of students. As such, how a student expresses their TGGE identity is unique to that individual. Not all trans persons seek to transition or exhibit a binary gender, meaning that there is no one way to be transgender (Siegel, 2016). The more marginalized identities a student has, the higher at risk they are for experiences of bias and oppression; they are less likely to find "safe" spaces that are appropriate for all their intersecting identities.

### **Considerations for College Counselors Who Identify as TGGE**

An important consideration for counselors who identify as TGGE is how to manage and navigate with colleagues, staff, faculty, and members of the TGGE community who attend counseling as clients. This question is important in a clinical setting where a TGGE counselor can be placed in a difficult situation regarding the appropriateness of disclosing their gender such as being asked or whether to request the use of nontraditional pronouns from their colleagues or clients. A similar experience was well documented in a manuscript by a former Ph.D. student who identified as gender queer and a sexual minority but did not feel adequately trained in how to broach these matters with clients. She struggled with the idea of expecting professionals to be competent with LGBTQ clients when she herself did not know how to negotiate this dynamic as a future professional because of her lack of training (Messinger, 2013).

## **College Counselors Standards of Care and Practice Guidelines**

In pursuing the goal of having a high standard of care for clinical practice when working with TGGE college students, college counselors have access to two substantial competency-based resources. These two resources are the *ALGBTIC Competencies for Counseling Transgender Students* and the *Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Transgender and Gender Nonconforming People*. Both documents are comprehensive in helping to create a framework for a college counselor's standard of care and practice when working with TGGE college students. The ALGBTIC competencies (ALGBTIC, 2009) addresses a theoretical framework, transgender affirming language, human growth and development, social and cultural foundations, helping relationships, group work, professional orientation, career and lifestyle development, appraisal, and research. The guidelines for psychological practice text (APA, 2015) includes foundational knowledge and awareness, stigma, discrimination, and barriers to care, life span development, assessment, therapy, and intervention, and research education, and training. These essential resources are helpful in defining competencies and standards of care practices for counseling centers, and in assessing and identifying any potential training needs that counseling centers may have regarding working with the TGGE college student population.

### **Conclusion**

This white paper has attempted to bring together some of the essential issues about TGGE college students and the counselors who provide mental health services for this population. This includes identity considerations for TGGE, their lived experiences in college, their mental health risks, and additional challenges for individuals with additional intersecting identities of oppression. Moreover, this paper strove to bring to light important insight about TGGE counselors who are working with college students and the importance of having a clear standard of care or practice guidelines. The authors hope that highlighting this marginalized college student population that face multiple intersections of oppression will equip counselors to be increasingly competent in their practice and expand advocacy efforts for TGGE students in higher education.

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