AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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Title: Identifying Support Systems and Obstacles Transgender Students Encounter in College

Abstract approved:

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This qualitative study explored the experiences of transgender students at a large, public university. The focus of this study was to identify where transgender students found support systems and obstacles at Rivera University. Six students, who self-identified as transgender, participated in one-on-one semi-structured interviews directed by three research questions: (a) How do transgender students build trust in a campus environment? (b) Where do transgender students find allies and support systems on campuses? (c) What obstacles do transgender students experience while persisting at the university? The primary findings of this study are (a) transgender students do find support, although not in universal or necessarily expected locations; (b) transgender students that are comfortable in their college environment still face huge obstacles to persist in college; and (c) society, as a whole, is ignorant to the needs of transgender individuals.

Keywords: college, obstacle, support, transgender, trust, university
Identifying Support Systems and Obstacles Transgender Students

Encounter in College

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Meredith L. Pamp

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Identifying Support Systems and Obstacles Transgender Students Encounter in College

Introduction

Transgender students are found on nearly every college campus in the United States however these students remain largely underserved and under-researched (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bilodeau, 2005; Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). The number of transgender students who identify as transgender or realizing they may exist outside the gender binary is increasing on college campuses (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Dugan et al., 2012; Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Within the context of higher education, these students experience various levels of support and harassment (Beemyn, 2005; Grant et al., 2011; Pusch, 2005). As more research focusing on this student population is published it becomes obvious that there is a lack of services for these students and a general lack of understanding as to how these students experience college (Bilodeau, 2005; Dugan et al., 2012).

There are studies examining the needs of transgender students and processes to make campuses more inclusive, but this study hopes to add to this emerging field by examining where transgender students find support and what obstacles they face during their experiences in higher education (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2003; Dugan et al., 2012; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011).

This study fills a gap in current literature. Much of the published work on transgender college students is theoretical in nature and only offers general advice for serving the needs of these students (Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, & Smith, 2005; Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2003; Dugan et al., 2012; Rands, 2009). In contrast, this
research brings a qualitative approach to understanding transgender students’ experiences while attending a large, public university.

The participants echoed the importance of this study. Miles, a senior undergraduate participant who identifies as male, said:

We do want to talk to people and we want to share our stories with people so they can understand that we aren’t weird, we aren’t abnormal, we are not freaks, we are just normal people and we have different histories but we are humans.

In this study, I hope to show that these students experience college differently from other students and thus need specific support in order to persist in higher education.

**Topic of Study**

Based on the gaps found in the literature review, I focused my study on transgender college students and the support they find in college. My research was guided by three questions: (a) How do transgender students build trust in a campus environment? (b) Where do transgender students find allies and support systems on campuses? (c) What obstacles do transgender students experience while persisting at the university?

The preceding questions led to a qualitative study consisting of six semi-structured interviews. The interviews were analyzed with a grounded theory approach.
Literature Review

The literature review outlines the current research that surrounds the topic of transgender students as well as the topics of trust, support, and obstacles. I begin with a review of language to have an understanding of shared vocabulary.

Language

Terminology used to describe transgender experiences is evolving quickly, yet the current language remains insufficient to describe the complexities of gender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). I defined terms in Appendix A but elaborate on those definitions here.

Beemyn and Rankin (2011) asserted that language can be generational as well as regional and cultural, and that language used by some individuals may be highly offensive to others. As a result, I will do my best to use the most inclusive language available however I understand the limitations of using universal language to describe a diverse population. I also realize that some of the researchers I cite may not use the same vocabulary I strive to use. In these instances, I will explain the connection to the vocabulary that I use.

To begin, I find it necessary to define gender. Gender has two outlets, gender identity and gender expression (Teich, 2012). Gender identity is the internal expression of who one is; man, woman, masculine, feminine, or somewhere in between (Teich, 2012). Gender expression is the external representation of one’s gender, “usually expressed through feminine and masculine behaviors and signals such as clothing, hair, movement, voice, or body characteristics” (Teich, 2012, p.
Gender expression can be a fluid experience and can “vary over time and in different contexts” (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 21).

Note that neither of these aspects of gender are necessarily correlated with sex, the biological presence of who one is, generally defined by the presence of testicles and a penis or ovaries and a vagina (Shults, 2005). Although “sex is established through the complex interplay between genetic, hormonal, gonadal, biochemical, and anatomical determinants,” for the purpose of this study I will be defining sex as the signifier given at birth by a doctor or parent, generally male, female, or intersex (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 18).

Beyond biological sex, concepts of sex roles are socially constructed and have a large effect on the definitions of masculinity, femininity, and what roles are appropriate for each gender to perform (Butler, 2006; Rands, 2009). Rands (2009) describes this as “socially constructed ideas about how people will look, dress, and behave based on the gender category to which they belong” (p. 420). Along with performativity, pronouns are also socially constructed. People may identify with a variety of pronouns including, but not limited to: he/his, she/hers, they/theirs, ze/hirs, xe/xyrs (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).

An individual who shows congruence between their sex, gender identity, and gender expression are defined as cisgender (Teich, 2012, p. 130). The majority of the global population falls into the category of cisgender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). For the purposes of this study, individuals who do not find congruence between their gender identity, gender expression, and sex identity are defined as transgender.
Teich (2012) defined the transgender identity as “an umbrella term for many different identities. People who are transgender have a gender identity, sex, and/or gender expression that do not line up with the sex they were labeled at birth.” (p. 135). Transgender is also thought of as a spectrum which includes, although not limited to: transsexual, transman, transwoman, FTM, MTF, transfeminine, transmasculine, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender variant, androgynous, bi-gender, third gender, two spirit and crossdresser. Transgender students may identify with one, more than one, none, or all of these terms (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). I will allow the participants in my study to identify the term or terms that they use to define themselves.

The final term I will define for my study is trust. Simpson (2007) simply defines trust as “the single most important ingredient for the development and maintenance of happy, well-functioning relationships” (p. 264). Trust is the belief in the honesty and actions of another human or a population (Simpson, 2007). Trust is foundational for interpersonal relationship and individual development (Curzon-Hobson, 2002; Simpson, 2007).

Generalized vocabulary makes it difficult to honor the individuals involved in research (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). For this reason, my participants will be given the option to choose their identity, pronouns, and pseudonym I will use in publication. Although participants may or may not identify directly with the word transgender, I will use Beemyn and Rankin’s (2011) definition “anyone who transgresses or blurs traditional gender boundaries” (p. 22).
Experiences as Currently Known

Examination of the lives of transgender people is relatively new, however the experiences that have been published show a need for additional transgender research.

Genny Beemyn, also published under the names Brett Beemyn and Brett Genny Beemyn, is the most published educational researcher on the lives of transgender studies and hir research is the basis for much of my study. In the forward to Beemyn and Rankin’s (2011) *The Lives of Transgender People*, Shannon Minter (2011) writes “this groundbreaking study…is the first to examine the full diversity of the transgender community…it is the first major study to combine methodological rigor with an insider’s grasp of the nuances and complexities of transgender lives” (p. vii).

For my study, I heavily draw from Beemyn’s work on college campuses. In hir book with Susan Rankin, they survey almost 3,500 transgender individuals and attempted to explore all aspects of the transgender experience. In regards to the college experience, Beemyn and Rankin’s (2011) research suggests that campuses are an unwelcoming environment for transgender students (p. 84). Much of their data are based on a 2004 campus survey; however, the most recent National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS) reflects the experiences found in Beemyn and Rankin’s (2011) study.

In another work by Beemyn (2003), ze notes that “transgender youth have become more visible in the last decade but remain one of the most underserved populations on college campuses and have largely been ignored” (p. 33). Day to day examples of discrimination include: completing surveys with only two gender
options, uncertainty of restroom and locker room choices, explaining how and why their appearance might not match school records, having professors address them by the wrong name and pronouns, lacking easy access to healthcare and psychological services, and lack of information regarding their legal rights as transgender individuals (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005a; Beemyn et al., 2005b; Beemyn, 2012).

Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, and Tubbs (2005a) outlined a list of the most salient issues on college campuses. They identified the need for college events, activities, and educational programs to address transgender issues and be inclusive of transgender identities (Beemyn et al., 2005a). Support services, typically combined with gay, lesbian, and bisexual services, are often not as suitable as they could be; “even [services] that have added ‘transgender’ to their names in recent years, rarely address gender identity issues and often provide limited resources to transgender students, especially those who identify as heterosexual” (Beemyn et al., 2005a, p. 51). Further, transgender students need to be protected under institutional policies, including nondiscrimination clauses, school records, and healthcare policies (Beemyn et al., 2005a). The physical space of college campuses often reveals the most salient form of discrimination such as housing, restrooms, and locker rooms. Transgender students at community colleges may have extra barriers with regards to poverty, homelessness, and age discrimination (Beemyn, 2012; Ottenritter, 2012).

Pusch (2005) explored the reactions of others to transgender college students. He found that although friends were generally supportive, “the bulk of disapproving messages came from parents” (Pusch, 2005, p. 49). Even though most of his
participants did not see their parents on a daily basis, he noticed that the negativity that trickled down from family increased feelings of alienation and lowered self-esteem. Pusch (2005) noted that parental discouragement caused students to struggle to develop into an adult identity.

**Student Development Theory**

There is not a widely accepted transgender student development theory at the time of this study. Several theories can and have been applied to transgender students and are relevant to this study. I will present these those theories in this section.

**Erikson.** Erik Erikson, a pioneer of developmental psychology, noted that mistrust would lead to the inability to develop fully in life (Evans et al., 2010, pp. 48–52). Student development theory grew out of Erikson’s work and I will specifically be investigating this relationship with transgender students (Evans et al., 2010). Although there is no single transgender identity development model, several theorists have related other development models to transgender identity.

**Bilodeau’s application of D’Augelli’s LGB Development Theory.** In 2005, Bilodeau attempted to expand D’Augelli’s (1994) framework about lesbian, gay, and bisexual development to include transgender identities. D’Augelli’s model includes six developmental processes: exiting the heterosexual identity, developing a personal lesbian/gay/bisexual identity status, developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual social identity, becoming a lesbian/gay/bisexual offspring, developing a lesbian/gay/bisexual intimacy status, and entering the lesbian/gay/bisexual community. It is important to note that these are not stages, but processes that can be experiences in different orders, at the same time, or some not experienced at all (D’Augelli, 1994).
Bilodeau (2005) studied two transgender students and “their responses were analyzed using the D’Augelli (1994) lifespan model of sexual orientation development” (p. 31). Bilodeau found that the D’Augelli (1994) model loosely fit his study, however the study had significant limitations due to the exceptionally small sample size. Specifically, Bilodeau discovered that transgender students experience developing a social identity and entering the transgender community simultaneously.

**Beemyn and Rankin.** Similar to D’Augelli (1994) and Bilodeau (2005), Beemyn and Rankin (2011) did not use stages to define development and focus on what they define as milestones. In addition, Beemyn and Rankin did not have a singular development model, but instead choose to define the transgender experience in four different categories: FTM (female-to-male), MTF (male-to-female), CD (crossdresser), and GQ (genderqueer). They find it essential to identify these differences because their study showed all four groups develop in fundamentally different ways (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 115).

There are several key points I find important to highlight because these milestones present themselves in my study. In the FTM development, there is a milestone of “thinking of oneself as lesbian, but realizing over time it was not a good fit” (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 116). There is no milestone for MTF for thinking oneself as a gay man, but there is a milestone of discovering the transgender identity and realizing that one is not simply a crossdresser (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 116).

The genderqueer milestones are vastly different from the FTM and MTF milestones. In the genderqueer identity, Beemyn and Rankin (2011) made note that these individuals can “create a home within or outside of the transgender community”
(p. 116). This is tied to the disregard for the gender binary that is salient to the genderqueer identity which may be at odds with MTF and FTM individuals who have crossed this binary from one side to the other.

**Stress and Victimization**

In a study looking at victimization of transgender college students, Effrig, Bieschke, and Locke (2011) applied Meyer’s Minority Stress Theory to transgender students. This theory states “the increased stress faced by minority individuals leads to an increased level of psychological distress when individuals are unable to successfully increase their level of coping” (Effrig et al., 2011, p. 144). Effrig, Bieschke, and Locke (2011) used this framework to show that transgender students have this minority status and that their distress is “overwhelmingly higher than those students with a traditional gender identity (men and women)” (p. 154).

Snyder and Zubernis (2008) also identified that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students “experience the same stresses and concerns that affect college students in general, but have the additional stress related to managing the stigma of being a sexual minority” (p. 76). Snyder and Zubernis (2008) noted that children of other stigmatized identities can generally rely on family and friends for support but that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender children “must learn to cope with a stigmatized identity without the benefit of modeling and feedback from parents and family” (p. 77).

Since these students are often the targets of harassment and bullying, they may have a harder time forming relationships with their peers and family members (Moran & Sharpe, 2004). The National Transgender Discrimination Study (NTDS)
reported that 78% of transgender students in primary education, kindergarten through 12th grade, had experienced harassment because of their identity (Grant et al., 2011, p. 33). Snyder and Zubernis (2008) found:

The extent to which students find supportive relationships to buffer the discrimination in the larger society and develop positive coping skills can determine their successful identity development and quality of life. Coping with these challenges can be difficult, so connecting with supportive adults and peers can be very helpful in developing a positive identity. (p. 78)

My study will explore how students find supportive relationships and what institutional barriers exist to prevent these relationships from being built.

**Related Research**

My study has foundations and comparative ties to other higher education research. In this section, I will outline these other studies and highlight the key points that are relevant to this study. These studies do not examine the experiences of transgender students but instead provide a context through which to understand issues of trust and support.

Terrell and Barrett (1979) wrote what may be the first piece of research about trust and college students. Through quantitative research, the researchers surveyed students enrolled in introductory psychology classes at different institutions. They found that wealthier, white, males are “more trusting” than poorer, black, females and thus minority status affects the ability to trust (Terrell & Barrett, 1979). They also proposed “that mistrust serves as an adaptive mechanism in some instances” (Terrell & Barrett, 1979, p. 1194).
Sampaio, Perin, Simões and Kleinowski (2012) studied how higher education students in Brazil perceived relationships with trust. They concluded the importance to divide faculty, staff, and administration into different categories for data interpretation (Sampaio et al., 2012, p. 94). Students perceive those who teach them in a formal setting differently from those who informally advise or counsel with students. Therefore, faculty, staff, and administration should not be categorized together when researching interpersonal relationships.

In a response to his own and others research, Stevenson (2008) wrote commentary on the relationship between Black students and their relationships with their teachers. The author highlights that student-teacher relationships are not always positive and can increase stress, especially in marginalized populations. Stevenson (2008) also notes that students and teachers who share marginalized identities, in this case racial identity, may be the biggest marker for a relationship being supportive (p. 356).

Many studies outline the importance of historically underrepresented students finding role models of similar identities in faculty, staff, or administration (Barker & Avery, 2012; Dee, 2005; Palmer, Maramba, & Dancy, 2011; Santos, Ortiz, Morales, & Rosales, 2007; Seidman, 2012). Some of these studies also show marginalized populations may struggle if there are little or no faculty, staff, or administration of similar identities (Barker & Avery, 2012; Palmer et al., 2011; Seidman, 2012). While many minority groups are becoming widely represented at colleges and universities, most campuses lack out transgender faculty, staff, or administrators (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).
In some instances, campuses may have transgender faculty, staff, or administrators however, given the campus climate they are not able or chose to not be out (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). This could make it more difficult for transgender students to find role models or mentors on their campus community that share the same gender identity.

Baker (2013) focused her research on how “support from the college environment influences the academic performance of African American and Latino college students” (p. 632). She concluded that “a supportive college environment increases sense of connection to the college environment, which increases academic success” (p. 646).

Conversely, a negative campus environment can decrease success for students (Baker, 2013; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Sue, 2010). A negative environment can be produced by microaggressions. Sue (2010) defined microaggressions as “the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages target persons based solely on their marginalized group membership” (p. 3). Solorzano, Ceja, and Yasso (2000) examined how racial microaggressions affect the performance of African American college students. The researchers found that microaggressions left students with a “sense of discouragement, frustration, and exhaustion” (Solorzano et al., 2000, p. 69).

**Significance of Study**

Transgender students are an under-researched and underserved population (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bilodeau, 2005; Dugan, Kusel, &
Simounet, 2012; McKinney, 2005; Pusch, 2005; Rands, 2009). Previous research has found that 61% of transgender college students have been harassed, assaulted, or expelled because of their identity and that 15% of transgender students will leave higher education due to injustice because of their identity (Grant et al., 2011; McKinney, 2005). This research also shows that the transgender population is growing, that the coming out, the process of reveling something about oneself that has previously been hidden, is beginning at a younger age, and that there are more out transgender students on college campus now than in the past (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Teich, 2012). Although the amount of research is small, most of the published research on the transgender student population has simply been “programmatic interventions” to make campuses more welcoming, such as creating gender inclusive housing and restrooms, and does not dive deeper into qualitative research (McKinney, 2005, p. 64). I feel it is significant to add to the research of transgender students in a qualitative way.

Specifically I chose to study student support on a university campus because it is a basic need for human, and in turn student, development and it is important to understand the ways in which students are and are not finding trust (Evans et al., 2010; Simpson, 2007). If students are not finding places of trust on their campuses they cannot develop to their fullest ability and we should attempt to understand how students are building trust.

In his research, Curzon-Hobson (2002) explored the necessity of trust within higher education. He discovered that without a sense of trust, “the dialogical learning experience will be restricted, leading to the marginalization of the pursuit and
celebration of unique potentiality” (Curzon-Hobson, 2002, p. 276). McKinney (2005) wrote “as a profession, student affairs seeks to help college students develop to the best of their abilities. It is our responsibility to offer transgender students meaningful, humane, and knowledgeable support” (p. 74). It is imperative that students have trust with their campus environments in order to develop and thrive, however building trust from a marginalized population is not easy (McGhee, 2003).

There is a gap in literature concerning how transgender students find trust and support on college campuses. Given this gap in available research, I have chosen to focus on how transgender students experience trust on a college campus.
Methodology

In this study, I examined the experiences of transgender students at a large, public research university. I narrowed my study to look at how transgender students experience trust in college.

The questions that guided the research are: (a) How do transgender students build trust in a campus environment? (b) Where do transgender students find allies and support systems on campuses? (c) What obstacles do transgender students experience while persisting at the university?

Research Design Overview

Qualitative research allows the researcher to “get at the inner experiences of participants, to determine how means are formed through and in culture, and to discover rather than test variables” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12). In this study, I attempted to learn about transgender support directly from transgender students and explore a problem that has little existing literature.

Qualitative research also recognizes that “research has a role in advocating for change and bettering the lives of individuals” (Creswell, 2008, p. 51). Transgender students are found on nearly every college campus in the United States yet many find their college years to be filled with hostility and harassment (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). I wanted to conduct this research to create a better sense of understanding of transgender students and the problems that they face on college campuses in hopes of improving their experiences.
Research Tradition

For this study, I applied the tradition of grounded theory. Since there is little research surrounding the experiences of transgender students, grounded theory set the framework for me to systematically generate a broad theory. Grounded theory, creating meaning of data through a process of coding and discovering themes, allowed me to “develop a general abstraction of the interaction and action of people…. [and is most] suitable for sensitive topics” (Creswell, 2008, p. 448). This tradition allowed me to place my participants at the center of my research and allow themes to emerge from the data.

Research Perspective

The methodology of this study is qualitative and was intentionally selected to gain a deeper understanding of the stories told (Creswell, 2009). The reality that was shaped through this research was created and written through my perspective. As the researcher for this study, it is necessary that I explain how I came to this research and my worldview.

My lived experiences, my education, and epistemology all affect the way that I designed the research, interpreted and present the findings. I have lived a very different experience than any of my participants. I identify as a cisgender female and woman. I completed my undergraduate education at the age of 21 from a small, private liberal arts college thousands of miles from my family. I began my graduate studies at an institution 15 times larger than my alma mater but in a very close knit cohort of twenty-two students. These identities impact the way that I designed and
conducted my research and inferred the data. I came to this research topic after perceiving a lack of support for transgender students at universities across the nation.

Study Site

This study was conducted at a large, public research university in the United States. In order to protect all participants, the actual institution will not be named or described in any greater detail. The institution will be referred to as Rivera University (RU), in homage to the late Sylvia Rivera whose work first inspired my interest in transgender studies.

Participants and Recruitment Method

The participants for the study are self-identified transgender students, as defined earlier. The participants may or may not identify directly with the word transgender but I define transgender as anyone who transgresses or blurs traditional gender boundaries. This has been designated as a best practice by Beemyn and Rankin (2011) in their book *The Lives of Transgender People*. The students also had to be an enrolled student at RU at the time of the interview and be at least 18 years of age. The target enrollment for the study was between four and eight students, which was adequate given the small subpopulation from which to gather participants and the timeline to complete the research. The study concluded after reaching six participants.

Since this study required that student hold a potentially hidden identity and were part of a marginalized population the sample was collected by a variation on snowball sampling, a technique of recruiting participants through previous relationships, as outlined by Faugier and Sargeant (1997). Further, Lopez, Sharma, Mekiana, and Ctibor (2012) stressed the importance of recruitment through trustful
relationships. After Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval on December 19, 2013, I asked members of the transgender community and their allies at the research site to help locate potential participants by having transgender community members recommend the potential participants contact the researcher (Appendix C). I chose this method because I wanted to ensure that participants were in control of the recruitment process. These participants were at varying levels of “being out” and I did not want to interact with these students unless they were comfortable. In addition the research could not be more selective or broad in terms of gender identity, because the population was self-selected and there were few eligible participants.

Following contact by potential participants, I read eligibility criteria, and then asked the potential participant to confirm their interest in participating in the study. Once their interest was confirmed, interviews were scheduled.

Data Collection

Before conducting interviews with participants, I conducted two separate pilot interviews with non-eligible peers. These interviews allowed me to receive feedback on my interview dialogue, question flow, and to test audio equipment (Appendix D). The results of these pilot interviews are not included in the results (Creswell, 2008, p. 402).

I interviewed six student participants from RU. All six participants contacted me after being told of the study from a community member and met the eligibility criteria. I met with each participant once. All interviews took place during January and February of 2014 in a private study room of the main library on the RU campus, although participants were given the opportunity to choose another location if it was
more comfortable to them. Each interview lasted between 35 minutes and approximately one hour and was directed by a semi-structured interview guide (Appendix D). All interviews were digitally audio recorded and handwritten field notes were taken to note points for highlight and follow-up.

To facilitate an open environment, I arrived at the interview location before the participant and set up the room to allow for clear conversation. The doors to the study rooms had panes of glass, therefore I positioned myself looking out of the room and the participant was given a chair facing away from the door. This added to the anonymity of the research and provided greater protection for the participants.

Consent was obtained at the first meeting of the researcher and participant before any research was conducted. Consent was gained verbally because for some participants, signed documentation may not respect their gender identity and/or preferred name and could cause distress if signed documentation was revealed. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw from research at any time during the process. Participants were also allowed to choose the pseudonym and pronouns used in their stories for publication.

**Data Analysis**

To analyze the data, I used the systemic analysis of constant comparison found in grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). I began by transcribing all of my audio recordings. From these transcriptions, I highlighted key words and phrases. I then grouped together these segments into code. These codes were compared to each other, first individually and then all six interviews together, until themes began to emerge.
After the data were analyzed, I interpreted the results in relation to the research questions. These results will be presented and explained in a latter section.

**Strategies to Ensure Protection of Participants**

I took several measures to ensure the safety and privacy of my participants. First, I allowed the participants to choose a pseudonym and the pronouns that I use to identify them in the publication. I also chose a pseudonym for the university where the research took place and used very limited descriptors in describing the location.

To further protect participants, I allowed them to choose the location where the interviews took place. Audio recording was also optional and signed documentation was not required. I wanted to be cautious about causing psychological harm to my participants so I systematically provided resources to them that would provide sensitive support on their campus should they have needed them during or after the study. Due to the nature of my research, I could not automatically assume that these allies exist in conventional locations. Finally, participants were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point with no penalty.

**Limitations of the Study**

While this study offers some insight into the lives of transgender students, it has several limitations. Some of these limitations include: (a) limited sample size, (b) limited transgender identities represented, (c) single type and location of research site, (d) existing literature regarding transgender student experiences, (e) wide range of transition experiences, as well as many others. Since the research population was potentially hidden, I used a variation of snowball sampling. Therefore, my sample population is defined by the connections they have to members of the RU community.
**Generalizability.** This research only acknowledges the stories of six students at a single university at one point in time. Although the data may be transferable to other university campuses and similar demographics, it should be done with great caution. The results produced by my research only have a significant weight at RU.

**Researcher bias.** The data gathered were interpreted and analyzed through my worldview. It is important to note that I identify as cisgender and have had very different college experiences from my participants. My identities may have impacted participants’ responses. My research lens was that of privilege, a cisgender female exploring the experiences of a minority group, transgender students. My previous interactions with the transgender community in various publications or presentations may have also had an impact on the level of responses and involvement of the participants. Though it is difficult to express how my identities or previous interactions may have impacted the study, there is bias present.
Results and Discussion

I have organized my findings into four themes:

- supportive aspects of campus;
- interpersonal obstacles;
- institutional impediments; and
- uneducated masses.

These themes will be examined and discussed using narratives and quotes taken from the interviews and information analyzed from participant responses.

Participants

Participants are organized in Table 1 by (a) the pseudonym chosen or assigned to them for this study, (b) the pronouns that they use or chose to be used for this study, (c) gender expression, (d) gender identity, (e) sex assigned at birth, and (f) class standing. They are presented in alphabetical order, by pseudonym. These are the phrases or words that were mentioned in interviews, unless bracketed, which denotes that the phrase given was too unique and identifiable.
Table 1

*Participant Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronouns Used</th>
<th>Gender Expression</th>
<th>Gender Identity</th>
<th>Sex Assigned at Birth</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>He/him</td>
<td>Masculine</td>
<td>Transsexual Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>James</td>
<td>He/him</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Transguy</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markus</td>
<td>Depends; he/him or she/her</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>[Transgender femme]</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles</td>
<td>He/him</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>She/her</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Transgender, transsexual female</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Connor.** Connor is a traditionally aged, third year undergraduate student who identifies as a transsexual man. Connor returned to RU this term after taking last term off so that he could “focus on transitioning only.” He has found that many people do not seem to acknowledge his new name and status and instead he feels like “just a number.” Connor has difficulties with bathrooms on campus but has found support in Counseling Services and the Queer Resource Center. He has also found students to be ignorant about transgender identities and is often asked inappropriate “awkward personal questions.”

**James.** James began hormone treatments in the last few months and expresses “as male as [he] can get.” James notes that labels are difficult but for simplicity identifies as a transguy. James is a graduate student at RU and is struggling with all of the paperwork and steps put in front of him by RU and the United States government to change his identification status. He wishes there was a greater understanding in
society as to what gender and transgender means and desires more awareness on campus. James also struggles with gendered spaces on campus and does not know where he belongs.

**Linda.** Linda self-identifies as an older than average graduate student. She has children and transitioned in the same state as RU almost a decade ago. She is very out about her trans identity, although she is cautious in situations and spaces that may be less accepting. Linda is the only participant who considered their transgender identity when coming to RU. For Linda, she had “fallen off the career track” and knew of a transgender administrator at the college who helped her find funding at the University.

Linda believes that RU is “one of the most comfortable [places] to be at or in if you are trans” but does not identify with the LGBTQ community nor does she find the Queer Resource Center to be a supportive environment for transgender students. She thinks that RU is very supportive of trans community members and that the issues surrounding transgender acceptance are much larger societal issues that RU cannot solve.

**Markus.** Markus is at RU working on his second Bachelor’s degree. He identifies as a [transgender femme] lesbian. Markus has been forced to postpone transitioning and currently expresses as feminine. He is also not as out as he would like to be.

Markus had a severe falling out with a professor at RU which he attributes to delaying much of his coming out and transitioning. This negative experience left him with not trusting others and feeling “like [his] experience has been marginalized.”
The phrase that Markus uses to describe himself may be overly identifiable. I have used similar language, although not his own words, to label his identity for this reason.

**Miles.** Miles identifies “on the male spectrum, on the end of the spectrum.” He finds that language is limiting to his identification and that he gets too many questions if he uses other labels. Miles is a traditionally aged, fourth year senior at RU and came out and transitioned right after his first year at RU. Miles is very out and he has found that “most of [his] peers don’t understand” his identity but they are respectful. He has found relationships to be generally positive but struggles with self-confidence, especially to “call people out and be able to defend why what they are saying is incorrect of offensive.” Miles wishes that there was more education in society about transgender people because it has “been falling onto [him] to educate others.”

**Robin.** Robin is a graduate student and began her transition about one year ago. She only knew of transgender people as “sexually deviant” until two years ago when she read an article online about a transgender teenager and identified herself within with the article. Robin comes from a very religious background and “lost contact with eighty to ninety percent” of her past.

Robin finds RU to be “far more [comfortable] than anywhere else” because of the support of a transgender administrator. However, Robin has found herself fighting against the bureaucracy of the institution and being very vocal about issues because she does not “want to hide and then disadvantage my sisters and brothers.”

**Research Analysis**
After I transcribed all six of these interviews, I highlighted commonalities and narrowed down to four themes. I will provide an interpretation of each theme, a connection to my study, and narratives from participants if appropriate.

Supportive Aspects of Campus

In all of the interviews, participants mentioned various relationships that were supportive of their transgender identity. These relationships made them feel welcome and encouraged them to persist in higher education. Although these relationships did not all come from the same place, the connections were all described as encouraging and caring.

Peers. For example, Miles found support in his peers which he described as conservative. He described his relationships with peers as protective and understanding:

Generally yea, there are some assholes that are gonna say really messed up things but for the most part I think the group of people that I have surrounded myself with at college and my work and my classes have stuck up for me…I feel very supported there, knowing that others have got my back and I just feel general respect from them in terms of what I am going through and I think I have explained it well enough to the point that they understand that living in a life in a different body that’s not really yours would be kind of shitty. They kind of get that. They’ve got to the point where they are like if anyone says anything about it to them they are just like that’s not cool….Definitely positive experiences from my peers. I didn’t think it was going to be that easy.
While Miles’ description of his peers standing up for him was not unique, it was also not universal. Several of the participants mentioned a feeling of protection from their relationships. Unfortunately, Miles was surprised that his peers would be as accommodating to him after his transition and the feeling of understanding involved much explanation on his part.

**Martha, transgender administrator.** Robin, who also transitioned during her time at RU, found the most support from a transgender administrator, who I will give the pseudonym of Martha. Robin described her comfort level at RU as a transgender student:

> Far more than I probably would be anywhere else, because of [Martha]. Knowing that there is somebody in the administration that is above my immediate administrators who isn’t going to let people treat me badly, that is probably the only reason why I was willing to come out when I did…It’s just whenever you run into something, even if someone isn’t meaning to treat you badly but the rules just don’t allow you to exist properly, knowing that there is a place to go. There is always someone you can lean on, otherwise you are all by yourself.

Robin, and other participants, described RU as special and unique because they knew that there was an administrator that was willing to defend and protect them. Another participant noted “I wouldn’t be here without [Martha.]” RU may be unique in having an out transgender administrator but all of my participants found support in other locations on campus. It is also interesting to note that four of the six participants noted Martha as the first transgender person they ever met in person.
**Student Services.** Connor described a trifecta of campus support, “I have received an overwhelming amount of support from my advisor and people at [Counseling Services] and the [Queer Resource Center].” All of the participants mentioned more than one relationship or location on the RU campus that was supportive of their transgender identity and some support came from off campus. Other relationships included: advisors, transgender support groups, transgender peers, family, and the internet.

Although support is prevalent for each of the participants, one glaring standout was that no student directly mentioned faculty as a supportive relationship. That is not to say that all of these students had issues with faculty, only a few did, but none of them specifically identified faculty as a place for support.

**Interpersonal Obstacles and Microaggressions**

While all of my participants found support in some piece of RU, they also all faced difficult interpersonal obstacles. These people made my participants feel unwelcome on the RU campus and, at times, question their worth as a student and as a person.

One such example came from Markus. Markus had a professor who he admired greatly and who he had confided his gender identity with. Markus also identifies as a lesbian and had been part of a LGBTQ support group with this professor and assumed that this professor would be very supportive. I felt that it was a safe environment and that I could talk about this kind of stuff with this professor and I was completely shocked to discover that that was not the case… [after I came out to him] he started saying comments to me
in my lessons with him, in individual studies, that I was not developed enough of a human being to successfully accomplish my career goals. I asked him well are you telling me that this will affect my candidacy and timely graduation and he said oh no, I’m just letting you know that you’re not considered one of my closest students anymore…after he learned about my identity he started actively working towards making it looking like I was incompetent in that particular area, or I couldn’t do this or I couldn’t do that.

This relationship has caused Markus to delay transitioning and has left him with the feeling that his “experience has been marginalized.” Markus also noted that he no longer “trust[s] anybody” and is very cautious about opening up about his identity at RU.

Linda, a self-described “older” student, believes, “I’ll never work again. I honestly don’t think I’ll ever work again.” She considers RU to be one of the best places to be for transgender students and that because of her age and identity she will not be able to find work when she leaves. When mentioning this to a man on campus she was told, “if I can’t find work, this was somebody, a gay man on campus told me seriously, that if I can’t find work you can always work in the sex trade.” Linda expressed this as a very undesirable comment. She did not elaborate on the relationship with this man but I found it to be an interesting juxtaposition that she could find RU could be both the most comfortable place to be at and commonly experience microaggressions.

Another participant who is very early in his transition process, Connor, identified that the administrators in his college stare at him in bewilderment.
I get stared at a lot by people higher up in the food chain. It’s just I don’t know what it is I don’t know if it is my height or what is happening there, I walk by and they are just staring at me and it’s like “you know what you are doing is really obvious, so stop it.” I should just wear a ski mask…My college administrators, I got the name change, they did it, and then I had to give them my old ID to get them to change [my name in the system]. They were like “hmmm mmm……. you” is it really that hard? I mean come on, “can I help [pronoun mumbling]… you”… I’ve just tried not to develop relationships with them, because it would not be a fun experience.

Connor acknowledged the disinterest of even trying to interact further with staff and administrators in his college because of such awful previous interactions. Other participants also mentioned being stared at with confusion which made them feel “like a spectacle.”

A common topic was a notion of caution around faculty, staff, and administrators because transgender students did not know how they would react when, or if, they found out about their identity. Robin describes her experience interacting with staff and faculty:

Not having any idea who knew already and was ok with that or who didn’t know and was ok with me until they found out that I was trans and that would make me feel awkward. And the professors I talked about that I do trust don’t know [who is safe]. They assume that there are other professors around the department and things that will act professionally but it’s not something that
[they] know about each other. How would you react to a transwoman?

Nobody has any idea.

Robin was particularly cautious because she was trying to form a committee for her graduate defense. This feeling of needing to be careful was reiterated in every interview. Robin also revealed that some faculty and staff say that they are supportive of the queer community but “even LGB supporters are not LGBT supporters all the time. It’s really hard to know.” Three participants disclosed that they intentionally did not take certain classes from certain professors or otherwise changed their academics to make sure they were not at risk.

All six participants noted at least one interpersonal obstacle or microaggression on the RU campus. Other obstacles that participants revealed were: the Queer Resource Center, families, and friends. These obstacles caused students to adjust their academic schedules, delay transition, and feel insecure in what should be a safe environment.

**Institutional Impediments**

Along with interpersonal obstacles and microaggression, all participants recognized barriers in the institution that challenged their gender identity. Among these institutional impediments are: gendered spaces, records changes, healthcare, and computing changes.

**Gendered spaces.** All of the participants that transitioned while at RU struggle(d) with gendered spaces. The two spaces that came up frequently were restrooms and gym locker rooms. RU does have some gender inclusive restrooms and some ADA compliant or family restrooms that can double as gender inclusive. RU only has
men’s or women’s locker rooms. Miles, who transitioned three years ago at RU, described his experience as having to plan parts of his day around where he can go to the bathroom. He also depicted how the lack of gender inclusive bathrooms may have affected his studies because of the time it took to walk the long distance across campus. When he left class, he sometimes missed significant pieces of course material.

James expressed how awkward it is to go to the restroom on campus. James is early in his transition and is just starting to be comfortable using the men’s restroom.

Like every time I walk into a guy’s bathrooms I have to be really aware and I have to go use the stall. It’s just really awkward. I know that guys don’t notice that, because they are dudes and they don’t. Its bathroom culture, it’s ok. But it doesn’t mean that I’m not super anxious going to the bathroom every single day. It doesn’t mean that I haven’t been avoiding going to the gym for, I dunno, a year, because I don’t know where I fit. It just gets to you after a while.

James articulated a feeling of not belonging, not just in restrooms or locker rooms, but at RU as a whole because of his identity.

Connor also observed bathrooms as a hindrance, but to him it was even more than that. He perceived bathrooms as unsafe: “if someone discovers I am trans in the men’s room they will think I am a pervert and just want to look at other dudes, which is not the case. That could put me in a dangerous situation.”
Robin and James described the locker rooms on campus in more detail but with similar feelings as to the restrooms. These students do not feel safe in gendered spaces which “sends the message that [we] don’t belong” (James).

**Records and documents.** Another obstruction that participants frequently cited was changing records at RU and difficulties with the registrar. Robin was among the first of my participants to approach the registrar about changing her name and other participants mentioned her story as a pioneer.

Changing my name and gender at the registrar was crappy. It sucked. I had to go in four or five times and email many more. I actually had to track down the registrar who is not someone that students normally have access to. I found [their] name and email and phone number off of some official proceeds in some archive on the internet.

After Robin approached the registrar’s office, some policies were changed but participants who have attempted to change their names after these policy changes still have difficulties. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) noted that it is typical for “the individuals who sought and initiated changes were LGBT faculty, staff, and students” (p. 85).

To change your name and gender marker at RU, a student needs a driver’s license and a social security card. James feels as though this is an impediment because he has had a difficult time getting a new social security card: “I don’t have my new social yet but I’m working on that. The social security office in [the nearest city] is only open like 7 hours in the middle of every week day. It’s hard to get to.” James has been unable to change his name which means he still shows up on rosters
with his former name. He has to come out to every instructor and every administrator that scans his file.

I haven’t changed my name yet so if I ever [go to an office and they scan my ID card] I’m there as [my former name] and they talk to me as [my former name] and I have the choice to tell them but generally people that I’ll never see again I don’t need crap from if I don’t have any idea about their history and how they are going to respond to this I just won’t tell them and that is really uncomfortable for me because I’m not, I don’t go by that name anymore.

The bureaucratic system that exists at RU, and many other colleges and universities around the country, forms a negative campus climate which could create barriers for development (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007).

**Uneducated Masses**

The theme that came out almost uniformly in every participant interview was the feeling that the population around them was uneducated or ignorant about transgender issues. Beemyn and Rankin (2011) stated the paradox that exists in education:

Although the field of education is supposedly bound by ethical principles that require schools to serve the needs of all students, many school have not yet laid the groundwork necessary to provide education and social services to LGBT people. (p. 88)
All six participants felt that the RU campus, and society as a whole, was not educated about transgender issues and that RU was doing little or nothing to support others’ learning.

Most of the participants felt like the obligation of educating the RU campus fell into their hands. Miles explained:

I just feel that education about transgender education is not at all there.

Basically every single person I have met I have been their first transgender person that they know. So it’s kind of been falling onto me to educate them about that. I don’t even know how [Rivera University] would do that.

Other participants also noted feeling alone and obligated when explaining transgender concepts. These feelings became “scary” when they realized that they may be speaking on behalf of the entire transgender community, which they may have been new to outwardly join.

An additional point of unease came from the questions that were asked of them. James articulated that many people bombarded him with questions because of their curiosity but occasionally crossed a personal line:

Most people that I’ve told, they knew me previously before knowing all this stuff and the general response is curiosity. People, not instructors so much, but many of my friends or acquaintances will have questions that are more…inappropriate. But…people don’t come across trans people that often so they are just trying to figure out if all the stereotypes they’ve ever heard are true…[a classmate asked] “do a lot of lesbians feel that way? Do a lot of them go that way?” And I wonder how to explain this… So, most people fall into
two categories: The people that are like “ok, I’m going to forget your name, remind me” and they just leave it at that. Then there’s the other section of people that are like “ok, I’m going to forget your name, remind me. Also, what does this mean? Are you going to go ‘all the way’? Are you going to do…what’s going on? Genitals? What happens? How did you know?”

Most participants in this study stated that they did not know when they should answer these questions. One participant said that they had to answer all questions that were asked about their gender because if they did not “the world would continue to be uneducated about me.” Another participant was surprised that in this study I did not ask them invasive questions about their genitals.

Education is needed to make these students more comfortable. James suggested that this education begins earlier in schooling:

It would be really cool if we could have early education where people are like “people are different,” “there are different kinds of people and not everybody is aligned with these normative things.” It would be really great if we could have some recognition of that in early education. It would be cool to have it in college too so people aren’t asking me at twenty-five years old “what does that mean?”

All participants expressed a need for education and awareness for the RU community. Several participants widened this to include education for all of society, understanding that the campus reflects society’s prevailing views.
Conclusion and Recommendations

Anticipated findings. Although there is limited research about transgender college students, I anticipated some of the results from my study.

The first anticipated finding I will cover are the obstacles that students faced on the RU campus. Obstacles are one of the topics that is most researched about the campus climate for transgender students (Beemyn et al., 2005a; Beemyn et al., 2005b; Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn, 2012; McKinney, 2005; Rands, 2009). Gendered spaces, such as bathrooms and locker rooms, and document changing are a known issue for transgender students across the country. I actually expected that my participants would share more common obstacles identified in current research such as: housing, healthcare, transitioning services, and programming (Beemyn et al., 2005b).

The second anticipated finding from my study was transgender students finding support in their peers. This finding, that peers are generally supportive of transgender students during and after transition, has been shown in several studies (Dugan et al., 2012; Effrig et al., 2011). Therefore, I expected that some of my participants would find support in friends or classmates at RU.

The third is the huge impact that one administrator had to all of my participants. Martha, a transgender administrator on the RU campus, was mentioned by each participant as extremely influential in their feeling of safety and belonging on campus. It was not enough that other administrators and services at RU serve transgender students, it was overwhelmingly clear that having an actual transgender mentor on campus made a huge impact to all of my participants.
The final anticipated finding I revealed was the feeling of necessary caution when interacting with new people from almost all of my participants. Robin stated the feeling clearly:

Every time you meet a new group of people you have to be careful because you don’t know what kind of characters they are, what their biases are or aren’t.

One of the reasons I was drawn to this topic because of the stories of victimization of transgender people in the media. The common narrative that is formed in the media generally involves violence against transgender individuals and therefore I assumed that many of my participants could fear violence or victimization from new relationships if they disclosed their identity.

Unanticipated findings. Although I expected most topics to come out in my interviews there are two topics I was not anticipating. These findings were topics that all or almost all of my participants mentioned.

The first unanticipated finding that I found was how interconnected all of my participants were, even across disciplines and ages. Although Robin knew of other transgender people on campus, she did not believe that they were so connected:

We are so nicely randomly distributed in the population that there are very, very few people in your immediate family or close social circle that identify as trans. There are lots and lots of us but we’re not clumped up. It is really great even spread and so the chances of meeting anybody just happenstancally unless you are very out.
However, several other participants mentioned knowing that Robin was a groundbreaker to fight at the registrar’s office. Participants also mentioned knowing of other transgender students in their departments or in town. These were not necessarily people that my participants interacted with or considered peers but they all knew that they were not alone. It is important to note that this may have been a result of the sampling methodology of this research.

The final unanticipated finding I came across was the feel that all of my participants had about society as a whole. All six considered society ignorant and uneducated. This surprised me because it seemed to be a juxtaposition of two different thoughts that were shared, many participants talked about how welcoming of an area they lived in and that RU was a very open-minded and hospitable environment for the most part.

**General Conclusions**

I drew the following three conclusions based on the results that appeared and the anticipated and unanticipated findings.

**Transgender student resilience.** Although not all in the same place or in the same way, all of my participants found support on the RU campus. All of the participants suffered from some form of oppression and discrimination and to buffer those feelings they found supportive relationships. These coping skills may help with these students developing positive identities (Zubernis & Snyder, 2007).

Some of my participants found support in the Queer Resource Center and Counseling Services and others found these spaces to be obstacles. Some participants found relationships in advisors and others had not disclosed their transgender identity
to their administrators yet. There was only one support network that all of my participants mentioned as supportive and that was Martha, the transgender administrator at RU.

**Comfortable is not comfortable enough.** This conclusion draws from the conversations I had with my participants and my review of literature. All of my participants mentioned that RU is a very safe place and comfortable to be a transgender student however all of them also mentioned huge obstacles to persisting as a transgender student. This combination highlights that students are generally thankful for the opportunities that they have even in a space that presents a number of obstacles. If students are struggling to survive, they are not capable of thriving on our campuses (Curzon-Hobson, 2002).

**Society is ignorant to transgender issues.** As the only theme that was totally universal, it is important to draw the conclusion that society does not understand the needs of transgender students. All participants expressed the need for growth on the RU campus and several participants included the need for education for all of society. “As a microcosm of the larger societal environment, college and university campuses reflect the prevailing prejudices of society” (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 81).

**Implications for Practice**

I hope the results and findings from this study will add to the growing body of literature surrounding transgender college students. Transgender college student populations are steadily growing on college campuses and yet they continue to be “unprepared to meet [their] needs and are scrambling to provide support services and to create more inclusive policies and practices” (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 163). It
is essential that student affairs meet the needs of all of their students, including transgender students.

A major implication of this research is ensuring that transgender students have some sort of support on campus. The most prevailing support in this research was having a transgender administrator able to serve as a mentor for students on the RU campus. Although probably not possible at every institution, it is important to have some system in place for transgender students to relate to other transgender people.

Another suggestion from this research is creating a campaign to educate campuses about transgender students. Transgender scholars state that there are transgender students, faculty, and/or staff on nearly every college campus in the country but it appears that campuses are generally uneducated about transgender people. Higher education administrators should find it imperative to educate their campuses in hopes that this education will disperse to the masses. Markus highlighted the importance of this learning:

For people who are not comfortable with discussing and learning about this subject of transsexuality they are really marginalizing not just a transsexual peoples experience in life and their relationships, personal and professional and career wise. They are marginalizing their own experience.

The final proposal I have for colleges and universities explicitly relates to campus that consider themselves transgender friendly. I urge these campuses to find places where their students are struggling. RU is considered a transgender friendly campus and all of my participants believed that they were lucky for being a student at RU instead of at other campuses that may not have the reputation of being
comfortable. However, all of my participants faced obstacles at RU because of their identity. A campus may appear to be transgender supportive but there are still impediments for transgender student to persist easily at these institutions.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

There is only a small collection of research around transgender college students. This study was small scale and had several large limitations based on location and participants. In order to add to the field of study, the following areas need additional research:

**Location of research.** This study took place at one institution in the United States. To make this study more transferable and generalizable, it would need to be conducted at other institutions across the United States.

I would also suggest looking at where participants came from and delve deeper into their experiences of choosing a college. None of my participants directly chose RU because of their transgender identity.

**Identities represented.** Because this research used a variation of snowball sampling to recruit participants, the identities that were represented were not chosen or able to be limited. An area of additional research would be to narrow these identities to narrower transgender identities and/or to expand the study to include more transgender identities such as gender queer and gender non-conforming.

**Scope and length of research.** This research only consisted of a qualitative study and a single interview with six participants. The interviews ranged from 35 minutes to one hour. I recommend further research to include multiple interviews throughout a student’s time in college. With multiple interviews, there could be better
clarity as to the experience of transgender students and create a more rounded view of their lives in college.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This study examined the experiences of transgender students and their relationships with trust and support on a college campus. This study was qualitative in nature and involved the stories of six participants at a single institution. From these conversations, I concluded three ideas: transgender students do find support although not in a common location, campuses that are supportive of transgender community members still have huge obstacles for transgender students, and society, as a whole, is ignorant to the issues of transgender students.

This study and the experiences of my participants may help inform best practices for higher education professionals working with transgender students. Colleges have the ethical duty to serve all of their students and as policies and practices remain firmly attached to the gender binary students are left behind.
References


Appendices
Appendix A

Definitions of Terms

Terminology used to describe transgender experiences is evolving quickly, yet the current language remains insufficient to describe the complexities of gender (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). The following are the key terms and definitions that I will use in my research:

- **Cisgender**: a person whose gender identity, gender expression, and sex they were assigned at birth are the same (Teich, 2012, p. 130)

- **Coming out**: the process of revealing something about oneself that has previously been hidden; in this study coming out will refer to revealing a transgender identity and/or non-heterosexual identity

- **Gender Expression**: an external representation of one’s gender, “usually expressed through feminine and masculine behaviors and signals such as clothing, hair, movement, voice, or body characteristics” (Teich, 2012, p. 132); expression may or may not align with gender identity and/or sex

- **Gender Identity**: an internal expression of who one is; man, woman, or somewhere in between. (Teich, 2012); identity may or may not align with gender expression and/or sex

- **Out**: an individual who has disclosed their gender identity; on a spectrum, although not a defined process, nor is there always an end goal (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011, p. 95)
- **Sex**: a biological presence of who one is, generally defined by testicles and penis or ovaries and vagina; male, female, or intersex (Shults, 2005); assigned at birth by a doctor or parent

- **Transgender**: across gender; “an umbrella term for many different identities. People who are transgender have a gender identity, sex, and/or gender expression that do not line up with the sex they were labeled at birth” (Teich, 2012, p. 135); also thought of as a spectrum which includes, although not limited to: transsexual, transfeminine, transmasculine, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender variant, androgynous, bi-gender, third gender, two spirit and crossdresser; individuals may identify with some, none, or all of these terms. These students may also identify as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, asexual, or something else (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011)

- **Transition**: the process of publically changing one’s gender and/or sex to the gender and/or sex that they feel they are (Teich, 2012). This process is not the same for all people who identify as transgender but generally includes visually changing one’s gender expression and may or may not include hormone treatments and surgeries.

- **Trust**: belief of honesty and actions in another human or population; “the single most important ingredient for the development and maintenance of happy, well-functioning relationships” (Simpson, 2007, p. 264)
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Study Title: Examining the Impact of Trust on the Experience of Transgender College Students  
Principal Investigator: Robert C. Reff, Ph.D., College Student Services Administration Faculty  
Student Researcher: Dith Pamp, College Student Services Administration Graduate Student

The following questions will be used to guide semi-structured interviews for this study. It is important to note that these questions provide a list of possible areas of semi-structured interview questions. The researcher will maintain the option to ask follow up questions for clarification of anything the interviewee has said. Questions may differ between participants based on the flow of the conversation, their comfort level in the topic, and their responses the eligibility criteria. The order of questions may change depending on the flow of the conversation. This interview is meant to be more conversational than structured, as the words and experiences of the participants from their personal lens are important.

Interview Dialogue:
The following dialogue describes the general flow of the interview conversation. Phrases may not be stated verbatim, but this script will be followed in a manner that ensures consistency among participants.

Researcher: Hello, thank you for agreeing to meet with me. I appreciate your willingness to participate in this study and understand that your time is very valuable. We are about to start an interview where I will ask you a few questions about your experiences as a transgender student in college. There are no right or wrong answers to the interview questions. I hope that this structure provides a way for us to have an in-depth conversation about your experiences. This interview should take anywhere from thirty minutes to one hour to complete. Please remember that you do not need to answer any questions about which you feel uncomfortable. Before we begin, do you have any remaining questions?

General questions:
The following questions have been placed in the order that the student researcher plans to address them. Depending on the flow of the conversation, questions may be reordered to facilitate a more effective dialogue.

Demographic Information:
What is your gender identity?

What is your gender expression?
What was the sex assigned to you at birth?

What pronouns do you use?

Do you identify with any marginalized identities (race, ethnicity, disability, etc.)?

What pseudonym would you like used in this research? This is the name that I will refer to you as, I will never ask for your legal name.

**Coming Out:**

When did you first begin to feel “different” about your gender identity?

How long have you identified as ____?

When did you first “come out” as transgender? How did this process evolve?

When did you first meet another transgender person?

How “out” are you today?

How comfortable are your family and friends/close relationships with your identity?

**College:**

Why did you choose to go to college?

Why did you choose to come to this institution?

What factors played into your decision making process about attending this institution?

**Trust:**

How comfortable are you at this institution?

If you are open about your gender identity, how do people at this institution respond to your identity?

What were some aspects of college that surprised you?

How would you describe the interactions you have this community about your ____ identity?

Where do you receive support for identifying as ____?
What obstacles have you encountered at this institution because you identify as ____?

How did you find support at this institution for identifying as ____?

Are you a part of any transgender support groups on campus or in the local area?

Do you feel that this institution meets your needs as a ____ individual?

How would you describe your relationships with faculty? Staff? Students? Administrators?

Is there anything else you would like to mention regarding your experiences as a ____ college student?
Appendix C: Recruitment Email

Dear ____,
You have been identified as a transgender ally at [Rivera University]. For my master’s thesis, I am researching the impact of trust on the experience of transgender college students. If you are comfortable, I am asking that you help me identify potential participants. If you know of a student who meets the following criteria, please recommend that they contact me for more information.

“Participants must be enrolled at [Rivera University] when the interviews are being conducted. They must self-identify as transgender and be over the age of 18 to consent to the research. Participants may or may not identify directly with the word transgender but the researcher defines transgender as anyone who transgresses or blurs traditional gender boundaries.”

If you have any questions please let me know.
Thank you,
Dith Pamp

Title of the study: Examining the Impact of Trust on the Experience of Transgender College Students
Name of the PI: Robert C. Reff
Time commitment for participants will be less than 3 hours total.
Benefits: As a benefit of participating in this study, participants will be a part of a greater cause to assist in the success of transgender students in college. In addition, participants may benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon your student experiences in understanding participants’ individual development. This study is not designed to benefit participants directly.
Appendix D: Consent Guide

Study Title: Examining the Impact of Trust on the Experience of Transgender College Students
Principal Investigator: Robert C. Reff, Ph.D., College Student Services Administration Faculty
Student Researcher: Dith Pamp, College Student Services Administration Graduate Student

All potential participants should be informed of and understand the below elements:

Purpose. The purpose of this study is to gain knowledge and understanding about the lived experiences of transgender students in college. The results of this study will assist colleges and universities in learning about ways to further support this population. This study will be used in a thesis in partial completion of a master’s of science degree in College Student Services Administration at Oregon State University.

Activities. As a member of this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview with the researcher to discuss your experiences as a transgender college student. If you agree to take part in this study, your estimated time commitment is no longer than three hours. This is during two meetings the 2013-2014 academic year.

Audio recording. To ensure accuracy, this interview may be recorded. Audio recording is optional. You may still participate in this study without the interviews being audio recorded. The recordings will be transcribed by the student researcher, Dith Pamp, to insure confidentiality. Only the researcher and the principal investigator (Robert C. Reff) will have access to the recordings and transcriptions. The transcriptions of the interview will be used in writing the thesis, but all personal information will be protected. Audio recordings will be deleted once transcriptions are complete.

Risks. There are minimal risks involved in this study. You may face risk if your transgender identity is revealed to university officials, family, and/or friends. The possible discomforts associated include possible emotional distress in exploring your experiences. A strong effort will be made to avoid deeply personal topics. The researcher has identified places of support if you feel increased discomfort and can refer you at any time.

Benefits. As a benefit of participating in this study, you will be a part of a greater cause to assist in the success of transgender students in college. In addition, you may benefit from the opportunity to reflect upon your student experiences in understanding your individual development. This study is not designed to benefit you directly.
Confidentiality. The researcher will know your identity during this study and all information you provide will be kept confidential. There is a chance that we could accidentally disclose information that identifies you. All electronic materials will be kept safe on a confidential computer secured with a password. Information from this study will be kept three years after completion of this study. Pseudonyms will be used as identifiers in the final version of the thesis and all research materials. You will never be asked to provide your legal name during this study. If the results of this project are published, your identity will not be made public. The university will also be given a pseudonym and identifying characteristics of the university will not be published.

Voluntariness. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. There is no penalty for choosing to not participate in this study or to leave the interview at any time. You will not be treated differently if you decide to not participate in this study. You may also elect to pass or decline to answer any questions posed.

Contact information. If you have questions about this research project, please contact: Rob Reff at [redacted] or Dith Pamp at [redacted].

If you have questions about your rights as a participant, please contact the [redacted] Institutional Review Board at [redacted].