

# TRANSforming Higher Education

alithia zamantakis, Jordan Forrest Miller, and Alexandra Chace | Georgia State University |  
 azamantakis1@student.gsu.edu, jmiller115@student.gsu.edu, achace@student.gsu.edu

## Introduction

On May 13, 2016, the Departments of Education and Justice released a “Dear Colleague” letter, announcing to institutions of public education that Title IX protections should extend to trans, non-binary, and/or gender-nonconforming (TGNC) students, thereby protecting assigned sex and gender identity. This letter was intended to foster a “safe and nondiscriminatory environment” that ensures TGNC students’ access to gender-segregated restrooms that most correspond with their gender identity; however, the directive falls short of understanding the difficulties and harassment TGNC students still face when accessing gender-segregated spaces. Much of the existing literature on TGNC restroom access highlights the need to create more gender-neutral restrooms in public spaces, rather than in hidden corners or unknown pockets. In part due to “naturalized assumptions about bodies, genders, and sexuality,” TGNC individuals are especially vulnerable to violence and misunderstanding in public spaces (West, 2010); therefore, we call for the centering of the lived experiences of TGNC students in decisions affecting us. Using the examples of restrooms and campus housing, we argue that a transformation of gender-segregated spaces, *in addition to* creating more gender-neutral spaces, is a highly effective and tangible way to address issues of accessibility on college campuses.

## TGNC Restroom Access

Due to cissexist fears of TGNC individuals “peeking” at cisgender women through the stalls, TGNC students who do not “pass as cisgender” are often stared at while in the restroom; some are outright denied restroom access by strangers (Seelman, 2014; Seelman, 2016; West, 2010). Many TGNC students avoid using gender-segregated restrooms altogether. Because so few gender-neutral restrooms exist on college campuses, behaving according to one’s “bladder’s leash” can lead to negative health outcomes, such as urinary tract infections, bowel and bladder problems, or an overall decrease in participation in public conversations (OSHA, 2015; West, 2010).

The Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Association (OSHA) Sanitation Standard necessitates equal “toilet rooms separate for each sex,” which has been interpreted to mean equal male and female-designated restrooms; however, multiple-occupancy, gender-neutral restroom facilities with lockable single-occupancy stalls are recommended (OSHA, 2015). A truly liberatory restroom environment requires the removal of gender or sex-specific bathroom signs, and the installation of changing tables and accessibility infrastructure, including automatic doors, braille, and wider stalls. While schools can, and should, create policies stating that TGNC students have a right to access restrooms on campus, degendering restrooms changes the culture around restrooms, displaying to all restroom users that people of all (a)genders can, and already do, use the restroom together without physically or sexually assaulting one another. Fears often revolve around cisgender women (rarely cisgender men) being raped by a male perpetrator “pretending” to be a woman in order to access isolated space with women. This fear ignores several key facts: 1) TGNC students, particularly trans femmes (of color), face enormous violence within restrooms, 2) perpetrators of rape already have the capacity to enter women’s restrooms, and 3) rapists are typically individuals that the victim

already knows. The perpetuation of this panic to protect cisgender women in restrooms infantilizes women, as it assumes they cannot protect themselves, creates harmful expectations of men, as it assumes they can protect themselves, and further perpetuates a binary framework of gender that is harmful to people of all (a)genders.

### **Housing Accommodations for TGNC Students**

Beyond providing restroom access to TGNC students, institutions must recognize that residence halls, as sex-segregated spaces, also require transformation. Conservative policies within academe have assumed that men must live with men and women with women, otherwise rape, sex, and any other supposedly or truly harmful behavior may ensue. LGBTQ+ students, students of color, and students with disabilities may not always feel comfortable living with any random person, as university housing is not free of bigotry and discrimination. For example, while a Resident Advisor at the University of Utah, alithia was witness to the writing of racist and queerphobic slurs in their hall and the vandalizing of social justice bulletin boards by their residents. The housing administration did little to address these instances of violence, leaving their students' needs unmet.

Although gender-neutral housing is becoming increasingly available on campuses, these programs often fail to consider the preferences of TGNC students. Until her third year as an undergrad, Alexandra's university offered no program for TGNC students to be placed in gender-congruent or gender-neutral housing, and she was forced to live with cisgender men throughout her social and medical transition. In her third year at Georgia State University, the university introduced a "Gender Inclusive Housing" program that sought to offer students housing with people regardless of biological sex. However, the program was poorly documented; to opt in on the housing contract was not sufficient for placement in the program. Alexandra worked for several weeks to contact housing staff and ultimately was not placed into the program until a few days prior to move-in. Her assignment further failed to take into account her preference to not live with men, and she was forced to share a room with a transgender man.

As autonomous adults, students should be given the capacity to express their discomfort living with particular (a)genders for any reason. Students of color may not feel comfortable in a space with white students; students with disabilities may not wish to live with abled students; likewise, trans students may not feel comfortable with students of their assigned sex. Secondary and higher education has far to go in educating students about racism, ableism, cissexism, heterosexism, consent, and sexuality. Institutions accepting students must trust that students can make choices regarding their own body, can understand other people's desires and choices to not live with them, and can use public spaces without enacting violence upon others.

### **Campus Climate for Gender and Sexual Minorities**

While we begin with a discussion of gender-segregated spaces, accessible facilities are only the foundation. Institutions of higher education must create opportunities for TGNC students to be mentored by other TGNC students, staff, and faculty who can relate to their experiences, needs, and wants. On many campuses, this space comes in the form of LGBT Resource Centers or Multicultural Centers. Spaces such as these have been critical for queer students to make space for themselves on campuses; however, trans students are significantly more likely to avoid LGBTQ spaces on campus (Seelman, 2016). Jordan previously worked as a graduate assistant in a Multicultural Center, a space that was predominantly cis, straight, and of color. Although competency around issues of race was high, the same cannot be said for TGNC issues. Efforts to alleviate tensions around gender and

sexuality, such as Safe Zone trainings, were well-intentioned, but by their very nature, rudimentary. Participants of such trainings often expressed an obsession with “not offending people” by “saying the wrong thing.” Many participants felt the need to memorize the terminology that TGNC use to describe themselves instead of challenging their binary views of gender and sexuality.

If our goal is transgender liberation, universities must create spaces for TGNC students, as well as advance programming, policy change, and advisement. To do so, these spaces need to center their hiring practices around ensuring staff are representative of marginalized students, as students often look for places where they can find others like themselves. These centers also need full-time staff and directors that are paid wages comparable to other student affairs directors and staff who are provided with budgets to implement necessary programming, workshops, and institutional change. Centers devoted to gender and sexual minorities are often envisioned as solely “safe spaces” for students to congregate. If provided the proper budget, however, they have the potential to offer the mentoring that many students of color, TGNC students, queer students, and disabled students need to navigate and transform racist, cissexist, homophobic, and ableist institutions. These institutions are sites in which marginalized populations should be able to seek advice from people they trust. Additionally, these spaces can host social networking events for TGNC faculty and staff, as students are not alone within often unsafe, isolating, and unsupportive institutions.

### Conclusion

As these spaces manifest, we must construct them in such a way so as to ensure intersectional policy change. Treva Ellison, an interdisciplinary scholar at Dartmouth, explained, “For harm and violence based on sexual orientation to be legible, it is delinked from other types of violence. Racialized sexualities are produced as the excess of sexual orientation rendered through multiculturalism” (2016). Even though TGNC people of color face more systemic violence than white TGNC people, “[t]he protection of sexual orientation... is narrated as racially neutral” (2016, pp. 332). Because institutions often assume that they already have protections against racism, they fail to understand the specificities of racialized sexual violence and racialized gender violence. Patricia Hills Collins described intersectionality as a crash at a traffic intersection in which a car or cars may hit from any direction producing varying and disparate results (1989). In this same fashion, the crashing of heterosexism, cissexism, racism, and ableism is not additive but rather a complex system of violence that must be addressed by centering the lived experiences of TGNC students (of color and/or with disabilities) in our efforts to radically transform institutions of higher education.

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