



**AMERICAN COLLEGE
COUNSELING ASSOCIATION**

Supporting Trans Students

The American Counseling Association Code of Ethics C.5. Non-discrimination states that “Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination against prospective or current clients, students, employees, supervisees, or research participants based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race, religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital/ partnership status, language preference, socioeconomic status, immigration status, or any basis proscribed by law” (p. 9). Therefore, it is crucial for counselors to recognize their ethical responsibility and duty to foster an open, safe, and supportive environment for trans students equal to their cisgender (i.e., those whose birth sex is congruent with their gender identity) peers.

Students identifying as trans are those whose sex assigned at birth is not congruent with their gender with which they identify. Initially this incongruence may manifest itself internally with thoughts and feelings that indicate incongruence between assigned sex at birth (and the expectations and social roles that the culture identifies) and their own gender identity, which frequently causes a great deal of psychological discord, pain and confusion. One of the first steps to relieve such pain is coming out to oneself, close and trusted friends, and/or family as trans. While some individuals will identify with a male or female gender identity, many will identify with a third gender or a non-binary gender, expanding past the conventional expectations of a binary male-female gender. This may be followed by a social transition, which may include the use of a more gender consistent name, dressing in more gender consistent clothes, and connecting with both other trans individuals and the larger LGBTQ+ community. They may additionally seek a legal transition, having their name or gender marker on their documents legally changed; however, they may not live in a state that allows for such changes. For some trans persons, they may wish to change not only their gender expression, but to alleviate body dysphoria they may use binding garments, prosthetics, hormones and other medical procedures to affirm their gender within their primary and secondary sex characteristics (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005).

Students who identify as trans face the same challenges as their cisgender peers (Swanbrow Becker, et al., 2017) such as the transition to the college experience and context as well as new financial academic pressures. In addition, trans students face unique issues related to navigating gender identity, gender-based discrimination, as well as emotional and physical health (Swanbrow Becker, et. al., 2017), all of which may result in a feeling or climate of oppression which can impact academic performance and social support, and have long-term effects on identity development (Newhouse, 2013). Examples of gender identity-based discrimination students may experience include the difference between their chosen name and their birth name, which is often the name used on official records and class rosters with no easy or identified process to change this (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015) as well as the frequent limitations of binary pronouns (e.g., man/woman or female/male) typically used on formal and informal documents. Other examples of gender-based discrimination include gendered only restrooms as well as gendered double occupancy dorm rooms which may result in transgender students feeling misidentified, uncomfortable and/or unsafe (Goldberg, 2018).

These findings further indicate the complicated nature of mental health issues for trans students. Fortunately, Swanbrow Becker and colleagues (2017) found that transgender students are more likely to seek counseling

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services than cisgender students. All of this together demonstrates how critical it is for college counseling centers and their staff to educate themselves on the needs of trans students and therapeutic models and interventions which have shown to be helpful in counseling, which include trauma informed care, trans-affirming cognitive-behavioral practices, person-centered therapy during the coming out process, and group therapy (Swanbrow Becker, et. al., 2017). The World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) has also developed a “Standards of Care for the Health of Transsexual, Transgender, and Gender-Nonconforming People” resource, which include competencies and roles of mental health professionals working with individuals with these identities (Coleman, et al., 2012).

It is not enough for counseling centers to provide therapeutic services to support trans students, they must collaborate with on campus partners (e.g. health services, student services, LGBTQ+ resource centers, disability services, residence life) and off campus partners (e.g. LGBTQ+ community centers, women’s centers, support groups, as well as specialized mental and physical health providers if/when they are available) to foster an environment of support for students as well as transgender faculty, staff, and administrators (Couture, 2017). This is often done by working together to provide and promote campus and community resources, engaging in outreach in the form of educational, prevention, and health promotion programs, and policy development. One program that is often used to help colleges and universities to get educated in developing and providing a supportive atmosphere and may serve as a foundation for resource, program, and policy development is The Safe Zone Project. The Project offers some free online resources as well as on-campus trainings designed to create opportunities to learn about LGBTQ+ identities, gender and sexuality, and examine prejudice, assumptions, and privilege and to increase familiarity and comfort with vocabulary, inclusive practices, and how privilege can help you identify ways that your institution can continue to be a more safe and inclusive space for LGBTQ+ students (source). Individuals who have completed a Safe Zone training are given stickers to display which indicates to LGBTQ+ students that an officer and/or a person is truly a safe space.

As we look at other elements of identity, there are some of note that may have even more unique needs or barriers. For example, transgender student military members may be experiencing distress due to restrictions placed on one’s ability to serve based on a diagnosis of gender dysphoria as well as gender identity and expression through the National Defense Authorization Act. The NDAA was recently amended to reduce barriers and increase inclusiveness as it relates to opportunities to serve. Trans homeless students frequently what Sheldon (2018) calls a false divide of “us” (housed) and “them” (homeless) which counselors may help address through increased empathetic interactions. In addition, trans homeless students often experience discrimination when attempting to obtain shelter. For example, recent proposals by the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) allows shelters to force transgender women to sleep in quarters with men and share male bathrooms (24 C.F.R. 5). In 2017, HUD withdrew policy proposals requiring HUD-funded emergency shelters to post notices regarding the rights and protections of transgender individuals. Both examples demonstrate the importance of counseling centers staying informed on both laws and policies that impact trans students.

Transgender students of color are a particularly socially vulnerable group who often must navigate through intersecting transphobia and racism (Singh, 2013). Physical and mental health care may help these students

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navigate these intersecting issues; however, these services may be difficult to access, due partially to lack of knowledge and lack of culturally competent providers (Bith-Melander, et al. 2010). Reinforcing the need to counseling centers to fill in this gap in services. According to Singh (2013), transgender students of color benefit from a resiliency strategy that includes advocating for oneself and making positive changes in one's environment. Therefore, one way that counseling centers can advocate for clients is by helping them learn ways to advocate for themselves when facing discrimination as well as connecting them with emotional support groups that foster a more positive environment. Therapeutically working on self-esteem bolstering, managing relationships, and dealing with transitional issues can also be particularly beneficial for not only transgender students of color, but all trans students (Bith-Melander, et al, 2010). Resources such as the True Inclusion Toolbox for providers, through the True Color Fund, can assist college counselors in understanding how to support these students in advocating for themselves and knowing their rights.

This piece is designed as an introduction to issues and needs of trans students, therapeutic modalities and interventions that have been found to be helpful working with individuals and even small groups, as well as ideas and resources that may help counseling centers work with on and off- campus partners to develop an inclusive, supportive, and safe space which is critical to the success of trans students.

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