

Transgender Graduate Students' Experiences in Higher Education: A Mixed-Methods Exploratory Study

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Little research has explored the experiences of transgender or gender-nonconforming (TGNC) students in higher education. Further, only 1 study has included the perspectives of TGNC graduate students (McKinney, 2005), and the experiences of students who identify with nonbinary gender identities (e.g., genderqueer, agender) are scarce in the literature (Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b). This study aims to address these gaps. Ninety-one graduate students completed an online survey aimed at understanding the perspectives of TGNC students in higher education. Of these 91 students, 27 (30%) identified as binary trans (e.g., trans man, trans woman) and 64 (70%) identified as nonbinary trans (e.g., genderqueer). Most respondents had concerns about their physical or emotional safety that impacted their gender presentation on campus (e.g., students presented as more masculine or feminine than they would prefer, to avoid negative treatment). Misgendering by peers, faculty, and advisors was a common stressor, the nature and meaning of which differed somewhat for nonbinary and binary identified students. Interactions with faculty advisors were identified as salient contexts for experiencing affirmation versus invalidation of one's gender identity. Findings highlight the need for institutions of higher education to better anticipate, support, and meet the needs of TGNC graduate students.

Keywords: graduate students, higher education, minority stress, nonbinary, transgender

Little research has explored the experiences of transgender and gender-nonconforming (TGNC or trans) college students (e.g., Bilodeau, 2009; Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Pusch, 2005; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012) and even less work has focused on the experiences of TGNC graduate students (McKinney, 2005). Further, existing work has mainly focused on trans students with binary gender identities (e.g., trans man, trans woman). However, there is evidence that an increasing number of young adults hold nonbinary identities (Connolly, Zervos, Barone, Johnson, & Joseph, 2016; James et al., 2016), including those with no gender, a gender other than man or woman, or more than one gender (e.g., agender, genderqueer, genderfluid; Beemyn, 2016; James et al., 2016). Such identities challenge assumptions that there are only two gender options (e.g., woman or man) and that these are "opposites" (Nicolazzo, 2016a). There is a need for research on binary and nonbinary trans students in higher education, especially those in graduate school, whose

experiences are understudied but important to examine given their unique social positioning in institutions of higher education.

This study uses data from 91 graduate students who completed a survey on TGNC students' experiences in higher education. (We use TGNC and trans interchangeably as inclusive terms.) We focus especially on students' perceptions of trans-affirming versus trans-negative reactions among students and faculty, especially mentors, and their experiences with and responses to misgendering. Of interest are potential differences in binary and nonbinary trans students' experiences, in that nonbinary identities may be unfamiliar to faculty and students, prompting qualitative differences in how students navigate and respond to perceived challenges to their authentic gender identities. We now provide an overview of our conceptual framework and a brief review of relevant research.

Conceptual Framework

We draw from concepts central to queer (McGuire, Kuvalanka, Catalpa, & Toomey, 2016), microaggressions (Sue, 2010), and minority stress frameworks (Hendricks & Testa, 2012; Meyer, 1995) in framing this study. We assert that *cisnormativity*—that is, the belief that there are only two genders and that bodies define gender, such that persons assigned female at birth will identify as girls/women, and those assigned male at birth will identify as boys/men—is enforced and reproduced in families, educational settings, and broader societal systems (e.g., the law; McGuire et al., 2016). Trans people challenge cisnormativity, and in so doing, may push cisgender people to expand and "queer" their ideas

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regarding gender, sex, physical bodies, and the inextricability of these constructs (McGuire et al., 2016; Roen, 2002). The degree to which individuals and institutions accept, adapt to, and create space for “complex genders” depends upon many factors, including whether the trans person’s identity is “intelligible” to the recipient (e.g., does it fit with their idea of what being trans should entail?), and the recipient’s openness to complex gendering (including fluid/nonbinary identities).

TGNC graduate students occupy a unique social position by virtue of their gender identity and their status within the higher education context. They are vulnerable to multiple institutional sources of stress (Grady, LaTouche, Oslawski-Lopez, Powers, & Simacek, 2014) that may vary considerably across discipline, which are diverse with respect to culture, norms, and contexts for learning (Austin, 1994; Barnes & Randall, 2012). TGNC graduate students’ awareness of existing power relations, as well as concerns about their physical, emotional, and academic well-being, may have implications for how they experience and respond to cisnormative and trans-negative behaviors and language. For example, a faculty member may intentionally or unintentionally *misgender* them (i.e., use the wrong pronouns, names, or social cues) when referring to or speaking to them, the impact of which can be devastating, as such communications negate the feelings and realities of trans people (Singh & dickey, 2017). Misgendering can be conceptualized as a type of *microaggression*, or everyday “othering” messages related to a person’s perceived marginalized status (Sue, 2010) that often reflect and perpetuate cisnormative ideas and stereotypes (e.g., notions of gender as binary and tied to biological sex; Nadal, Skolnik, & Wong, 2012; Nordmarken, 2014).

In response to misgendering or other forms of transnegative treatment (i.e., external stressors), TGNC graduate students may (a) conceal or mitigate expression of their authentic gender identity—a frustrating yet potentially adaptive response to mistreatment; (b) come to expect future instances of mistreatment; or (c) experience self-blame, all of which may negatively impact well-being (Meyer, 1995; Tebbe & Moradi, 2016). They may also respond by providing personal information about their particular trans experience (e.g., names, pronouns) or education about trans and gender issues more generally, behaviors that may be met with a range of negative responses (Nadal et al., 2012) that may reinforce the need to stay silent (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Trans students may experience anxiety and exhaustion associated with such educative efforts (Rood et al., 2016), and thus avoid bringing up gender in an effort to maximize personal resilience (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Alternatively, efforts to educate, if met by openness, might be empowering and reinforce students’ commitment to queering (Nicolazzo, 2016a). Graduate students—in the context of relationships with faculty and mentors—may wish to express their gender authentically, provide education about diverse gender identities, and actively resist invalidation (e.g., misgendering; Nadal et al., 2012), but also fear academic or social repercussions in light of existing power differentials.

Institutions of higher education are often cisnormative settings, and there is often great pressure on trans students to either “mask” their identities or express them (e.g., via appearance, names, and pronouns) in ways that are “coherent,” socially intelligible, and clearly comport with the gender binary (Bilodeau, 2009; Chang, Singh, & Rossman, 2017; Roen, 2002). The pressure to present as

distinctly masculine or feminine to be effectively “read” as male or female (and thus avoid harassment or questioning) can affect all individuals; yet, trans individuals especially must grapple with the fact that such gender performances may not meaningfully capture the complexities of their particular gender identity, and may feel compelled to downplay or obscure aspects of themselves, thus inhibiting authentic gender expression (Davis, 2009; Roen, 2002). In fact, the experience of “passing” as cisgender is not the goal of all trans people, and, thus, when encountered, may be experienced as an erasure of one’s trans status/identity (Nicolazzo, 2016c).

For nonbinary students, whose existence has been largely unfamiliar to even those who are aware of the existence of trans (binary) persons (Tebbe & Moradi, 2016), such pressures to “pass” may be nuanced by awareness that their identities (as indexed in part by gender identity labels, pronouns, names, and dress) are even less socially intelligible to others. As McGuire et al. (2016) pointed out, although the existence of trans people “disrupts the notion of an essential connection between sex and gender, the understanding of gender as a binary concept may persist” (p. 62). That is, those with nonbinary gender identities—and, perhaps, all trans individuals who “resist options to biomedically transition away from the sex they were assigned at birth” (Nicolazzo, 2016b, p. 1175)¹—may pose a greater challenge to institutions and individuals to “critically examine the embedded nature of gender binaries in human societies” (McGuire et al., p. 63).

Research on TGNC Youth and College Students

A body of research has established the harmful impacts of cisnormative educational settings on TGNC youth. Trans teenagers, for example, often navigate hostile school climates characterized by implicit and explicit denigration of noncisgender identities (Greytak, Kosciw, & Diaz, 2009; Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016). In one national survey of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transsexual (LGBT) middle and high school students, nearly two thirds of students reported having heard teachers or school staff make negative comments about a student’s gender identity or expression and 41% of students reported that they heard their peers make negative remarks about trans people often or frequently (Kosciw et al., 2016). Sixty percent of trans students had been required to use a bathroom/locker room that aligned with their sex assigned at birth, and 51% had been prevented from using their affirmed name or pronouns. Further, 65% of trans students described verbal harassment and 25% reported physical harassment related to their gender expression, and 75% felt unsafe at school due to their gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2016), which is concerning in that feeling unsafe is related to missing school, and, by extension, poorer grades and lower educational aspirations (Greytak et al., 2009).

TGNC students may experience a more trans-affirming climate in college than they did in high school, in that they theoretically have some choice in where they attend college; although such

¹ Nicolazzo’s (2016b) definition of nonbinary trans may seem broader than ours, in that it includes those with binary gender identities who have “resist(ed) options to biomedically transition.” We have chosen to focus on trans persons’ gender identities regardless of physical changes. We acknowledge the complexities of trans people’s identities and remind the reader to consider such definitions as conceptual tools rather than representative of a static or fixed reality.

choice is shaped by economic and geographic factors (Reay, Davies, David, & Ball, 2001). Furthermore, in that some TGNC students do not begin to question their gender identity until they arrive at college, the degree to which their college campus' climate is trans-affirming (or not) may not be considered or revealed until they begin their gender exploration. For some students, college may be the first time they feel safe to actively explore and resist their assigned gender, in that it is often the first time that they are living apart from family (Beemyn, 2016)—although notably, contemporary youth appear to be embracing gender-expansive identities at earlier ages (Connolly et al., 2016). Young adulthood is a time of identity exploration in general (e.g., sexual, racial, religious) and many universities are often open to, and may provide resources for, such exploration (Arnett & Tanner, 2006). However, students exploring their gender identity may encounter greater ignorance and stigma compared to other types of identity exploration (Beemyn, 2016).

Reflecting this possibility, trans students have been found to report greater exposure to harassment and discrimination on campus, and a lower sense of belonging, compared to cisgender students (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). For example, Dugan et al. (2012) compared 91 trans students with matched samples of cisgender lesbian/gay/bisexual and heterosexual students and found that trans students described more frequent encounters with harassment and discrimination and a lower sense of belonging within the college community. Some trans students report concealing their gender identity to avoid harassment or discrimination—a strategic response to the pressures and very real dangers imposed by a cisnormative climate (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012).

The classroom is a microcosm of the larger university (Noddings, 2007), and a salient context for graduate students, whose personal, professional, and academic lives revolve heavily around the classwork in which they are engaged and the students, faculty, and staff with whom they interact (Tompkins, Brecht, Tucker, Neander, & Swift, 2016). Within the classroom, trans students may experience threats to their emotional safety in the form of micro-aggressions enacted by faculty and students (Nicolazzo, 2016b). Pusch (2005) interviewed trans college students and found that the classroom was a salient site of potential misgendering, observing that trans students often felt vulnerable and uncomfortable in classes when, for example, rosters did not reflect the names that they used for themselves. Pusch (2005) noted that to avoid discomfort, trans students sometimes avoided coming out in class, thus “masking” their identities (Bilodeau, 2009) and rendering them invisible, which may bring about a sense of relief but also denies students their right to be “out” and precludes conversation that might “queer” others’ understanding of diverse gender identities. Similarly, Pryor (2015) studied five trans students (four college students, one graduate student), four of whom held binary identities and one of whom identified as genderqueer, and found that students struggled especially with coming out in the classroom, experiencing anxiety about revealing their chosen name and pronoun. Nicolazzo’s (2016b) examination of the experiences of nine binary and nonbinary trans college students revealed how participants’ sense of cisgender students’ “gendered expectations” differed across classroom environments and campus spaces; as one participant noted, “I feel entirely out of place in a non-Women’s

Studies class, or anytime I am outside the [LGBTQ] Center” (p. 544).

Unique challenges may be encountered by students who do not espouse binary gender identities. They may face particular resistance to nonbinary gender expressions or identities from faculty and students (Nicolazzo, 2016a). Of interest is how nonbinary identified students navigate and respond to cisnormativity as it is enacted at the campus, classroom, and interpersonal levels.

Research on Graduate Students

Graduate students’ relationships with faculty members often extend beyond the classroom. Graduate students, more so than undergraduates, are dependent upon faculty—and their advisors and mentors—for a range of practical and professional resources, including a sense of community, letters of recommendation, and formal and informal networking opportunities (Thomas, Willis, & Davis, 2007). Faculty–graduate student mentoring relationships provide valuable professional opportunities throughout one’s career, in that faculty mentors play a key role in students’ training, program completion, research collaborations, career advancement, and job placement (Noy & Ray, 2012). In addition to academic and professional support, emotional support (e.g., respect, empathy) is also a key component of what faculty mentors provide to graduate students (Malik & Malik, 2015).

Relationships with fellow students and faculty (particularly advisors) affect graduate students’ personal and academic well-being, as indicated by life satisfaction, program satisfaction, and academic outcomes (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001; Tompkins et al., 2016). Both instrumental and emotional support (e.g., in the form of mentoring relationships) appear to be important to the personal well-being and professional success of students with minority and marginalized statuses (Lechuga, 2011; Patton, 2009), who are vulnerable to isolation and possibly uncertainty about their capabilities in their respective fields (Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015). Racial/ethnic minority graduate students often lack access to appropriate role models and are vulnerable to ineffective mentoring and isolation (Girves, Zepeda, & Gwathmey, 2005; Williams, 2000). Sexual minority graduate students face similar challenges in terms of receiving sensitive and appropriate supervision and mentorship (Fletcher, Bernard, Fairtlough, & Ahmet, 2015).

Despite their vulnerability to cisnormative attitudes and beliefs within the classroom setting (Bilodeau, 2009) and, possibly, inadequate mentoring by supervisors and graduate mentors specifically, the experiences of graduate students who identify as TGNC have rarely been studied. In one of the only studies to include undergraduate trans college students ($n = 50$, M age = 20) and trans graduate students ($n = 25$, M age = 34), McKinney (2005) found that none of the students considered faculty and staff to be trans-supportive, with some noting that professors often made hostile, insensitive, or ignorant comments about trans people in class. Graduate students offered a negative assessment of faculty/staff knowledge of trans issues—and although some tried to educate professors and staff, they generally felt that such efforts were useless.

The Current Study

The current study aims to address TGNC graduate students’ experiences in higher education. Of interest are (a) at a descriptive

level, how these students describe their gender identities and expressions; (b) their perceptions of emotional and physical safety on campus, and whether and how such perceptions impact their gender expression; and (c) their perceptions of trans-affirming versus trans-negative reactions among fellow students and faculty and their experiences and responses to misgendering. In this way, we explore how TGNC graduate students navigate, accommodate, and push back against cisnormativity in a variety of intersecting contexts.

Method

Data Collection

The data for this study were drawn from a survey of TGNC students' experiences in higher education, which were collected using an online survey conducted by Abbie E. Goldberg. The survey was approved by the Human Subjects Board at Clark University and constructed using the Qualtrics software application. Focus groups with seven TGNC students—led by trained TGNC-identified members of the research team—helped to inform the development of the survey. It was pilot tested for both ease of use and technical functionality by four members of the target population prior to survey launch. Feedback was also sought from scholars who study TGNC populations. Based on feedback from the pilot participants and TGNC scholars, the survey was revised several times.

The online survey included questions on a wide range of topics, including gender identity, experiences with faculty and students, experiences with mental health services on campus, sense of belonging on campus, involvement in on-campus groups, involvement in trans advocacy, perceptions of campus policies, and career goals. Participants were instructed,

You may complete this survey if you (a) identify as trans, GNC, gender questioning, genderqueer, gender nonbinary, agender, or anywhere on the gender-nonconforming spectrum, and (b) are currently enrolled at least part-time in a college/university (or recently graduated). Graduate students may also participate. *Students with nonbinary gender identities are particularly encouraged to participate.*

They were told not to put any identifying information on the survey, and that upon its completion they would be directed to a link that allowed them to enter their name and e-mail—which would not be linked to their data—to be entered into a drawing for one of 10 \$50.00 Amazon gift cards.

Data cleaning and preparation. A total of 340 students responded to all of the survey items used in the current study, of which 93 (27.4%) were graduate students. The median time to completion was 47 min; there was a large range (10–557; $SD = 122$), with the high upper limit likely reflecting the fact that participants could start and come back to the survey. Respondents were prevented from completing the survey more than once, and although they could complete the survey in more than one sitting, partial survey responses were deleted after 1 week. To enhance the validity of our data analysis, participants' answers to similar questions (i.e., consistency indices) were carefully inspected for evidence of careless, inattentive, or fraudulent responding; response times and missing data patterns were also assessed for this purpose (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009; Meade & Craig, 2012).

Respondents who did not answer any of the open-ended questions, and respondents who completed the survey in under 15 min, were subjected to careful inspection of their data to ensure logical responding patterns (Meade & Craig, 2012). These methods resulted in the deletion of two cases: two respondents had completed the survey but failed to respond to about 40% of the questions, all contained within the second half of the survey. This resulted in a final sample of 91 participants.

The current study. The larger study explored a number of interrelated but distinct aspects of TGNC students' experiences in higher education. The broad scope of the study, coupled with the mixed-methods nature of the project, led the authors to determine that it was not possible to write a single meaningful, integrative article from the dataset (Fine & Kurdek, 1994)—particularly given close examination of the open-ended responses showed that graduate students were reporting a distinct and unique set of experiences from undergraduates. Their responses regarding their interactions and relationships with faculty were unique and compelling. Thus, it was determined that the current study would focus only on graduate students—and, in particular, their experiences of trans-affirmation and misgendering by faculty and students.

Survey questions. Relevant to this study were several questions that assessed aspects of participants' gender identity (i.e., they were asked, "What gender identity label or labels do you feel best describes you? [What best matches your internal gender identity?]") and given 15 response options plus the option to list other identities) and closed- and open-ended questions concerning gender expression, perceptions of trans-affirmation by classmates and faculty, and misgendering by classmates and faculty. Responses to the following open-ended questions were also a focus, and analyzed using qualitative methods: (a) Do concerns about physical and emotional safety affect how you present your gender on-campus? Please elaborate. (b) Please provide examples of instances when you were misgendered on or off campus. It is helpful if you describe the setting, the source of misgendering, your emotional response, and your response to that person or situation. (c) To what extent are faculty educated about and sensitive to transgender/gender diversity issues? (1) very sensitive; (2) somewhat sensitive; (3) neither sensitive nor insensitive; (4) mixed; some are sensitive, some are insensitive; (5) somewhat insensitive; (6) very insensitive. Please elaborate. (d) Please indicate specific ways that faculty have demonstrated awareness and sensitivity, or ignorance and insensitivity, regarding trans/gender diversity issues. Please speak to ways in which faculty are (un)aware of the nuances and spectrum of gender identities (e.g., nonbinary identities).

Participants

For this study, data from the 91 graduate students who completed all of the survey items in this study were analyzed. Graduate students (M age = 27.91 years; $SD = 6.92$, range 21–55) reported a range of disciplinary concentrations, with the largest number in psychology/social work/counseling (19.8%, $n = 18$); other social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology (12.1%, $n = 11$); gender/women's studies/LGBT and queer (LGBTQ) studies (6.6%, $n = 6$); education (6.6%, $n = 6$); English/literature (6.6%, $n = 6$); computers/information technology (5.5%, $n = 5$); law (5.5%, $n = 5$); and business (4.4%, $n = 4$). Three or fewer were

represented in areas as diverse as public health, divinity, medicine, and math.

Not all participants chose to report where they lived and attended graduate school, but most did (92.3%, $n = 84$). The largest number of respondents came from within the United States—New York ($n = 10$), Texas ($n = 6$), California ($n = 5$), Illinois ($n = 5$), Michigan ($n = 5$), Mississippi ($n = 5$), Georgia ($n = 4$), Massachusetts ($n = 4$), Iowa ($n = 3$), New Jersey ($n = 3$), Ohio ($n = 3$), Oklahoma ($n = 3$), Virginia ($n = 3$), and Colorado ($n = 2$). One respondent each lived in Florida, Indiana, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Washington, and Vermont. Fifteen respondents lived outside of the United States—Germany ($n = 6$), Austria ($n = 3$), the United Kingdom ($n = 3$), and one each from Australia, Canada, and Sweden.

With respect to race/ethnicity, participants were able to select multiple categories, and thus the percentage of students in each category add up to more than 100. Eighty-two percent ($n = 75$) identified as White/European American, 4.4% ($n = 4$) as Latino/a/x/Latin American, 4.4% ($n = 4$) as mixed race, 4.4% ($n = 4$) as Black/African American, 3.3% ($n = 3$) as Asian/Asian American, 3.3% ($n = 3$) as Middle Eastern, 2.2% ($n = 2$) as Native Amer-

ican/American Indian/Aboriginal, and 1.1% ($n = 1$) as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander. Regarding sexual orientation, most students identified as either queer (46.2%) or bisexual (15.4%). (See Table 1 for full breakdown.)

Researcher Positionality

We are diverse with respect to gender identity, sexual orientation, and professional discipline. We have conducted research on LGBTQ populations, including trans children and adults. Represented among them are expertise in qualitative and quantitative methods. Abbie E. Goldberg's research background, alongside her experiences teaching and mentoring a growing number of trans nonbinary students, led her to initiate this project in collaboration with three TGNC students. In an effort to ensure that participant meanings and experiences were accurately portrayed, we sought input from these students during each stage of the research process (see the Data Collection and the Data Analysis sections). Gaining their input facilitated researcher reflexivity and was instrumental in enabling us to identify underlying assumptions and areas of potential bias.

Table 1
Gender Identity, Expression, and Sexual Orientation

Gender/Sexual orientation variable	Total ($N = 91$) M (SD or % or 91, n)	Nonbinary ($n = 64$)			Binary ($n = 27$)		
		Total, M (SD or % of 64, n)	AFAB ^a ($n = 50$)	AMAB ($n = 14$)	Total, M (SD or % of 27, n)	AFAB ($n = 18$)	AMAB ($n = 9$)
Current gender identity (months)	52.37 (47.20)	50.38 (51.14)	51.15 (53.42)	44.31 (43.22)	57.24 (36.33)	56.00 (32.98)	60.43 (46.70)
Age first explored gender identity (years)	16.32 (8.49)	16.03 (8.12)	16.66 (6.63)	14.69 (11.54)	16.93 (9.39)	19.11 (19.50)	12.56 (9.34)
Security in gender identity (0–100)	80.35 (19.16)	76.71 (20.74)	81.50 (22.61)	79.84 (12.19)	88.70 (11.40)	88.39 (12.84)	89.33 (8.46)
Gender expression on campus ^b							
Feminine	27% (25)	25% (16)	22% (11)	35.7% (5)	33.3% (9)	0% (0)	100% (9)
Feminine of center	22% (20)	26.6% (17)	22% (11)	42.9% (6)	11.1% (3)	0% (0)	33.3% (3)
Masculine	37% (34)	29.7% (19)	36% (18)	7.1% (1)	55.6% (15)	83.3% (15)	0% (0)
Masculine of center	35% (32)	39.1% (25)	40% (20)	35.7% (5)	25.9% (7)	38.9% (7)	0% (0)
Gender-nonconforming	41% (37)	56.3% (36)	54% (27)	64.3% (9)	3.7% (1)	5.6% (1)	0% (0)
Androgynous	33% (30)	42.2% (27)	48% (24)	21.4% (3)	11.1% (3)	11.1% (2)	11.1% (1)
Genderless	15% (14)	21.9% (14)	22% (11)	21.4% (3)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Efforts to align gender expression w/ gender identity							
Clothing that matches GI-social	93.4% (85)	90.6% (58)	90% (45)	92.9% (13)	100% (27)	100% (18)	100% (9)
Clothing that matches GI-class	85.7% (78)	81.3% (52)	80% (40)	85.7% (12)	96.3% (26)	100% (18)	88.9% (8)
Changed hair	91.2% (83)	89.1% (57)	90% (45)	85.7% (12)	96.3% (26)	94.4% (17)	100% (9)
Adopted different name	63.7% (58)	50% (32)	50% (25)	50% (7)	96.3% (26)	94.4% (17)	100% (9)
Hormones	45.1% (41)	28.1% (18)	22% (11)	50% (7)	85.2% (23)	83.3% (15)	88.9% (8)
Nonsurgical cosmetic	18.7% (17)	12.5% (8)	6% (3)	35.7% (5)	33.3% (9)	5.6% (1)	88.9% (8)
Nongenital surgery	28.6% (26)	14.1% (9)	18% (9)	0% (0)	66.7% (18)	77.8% (14)	33.3% (3)
Genital surgery	5.5% (5)	3.1% (2)	0% (0)	14.3% (2)	11.1% (3)	0% (0)	33.3% (3)
Sexual orientation							
Queer	46.2% (42)	54.7% (35)	60% (30)	35.7% (5)	22% (6)	33.3% (6)	0% (0)
Bisexual	15.4% (14)	14.1% (9)	12% (6)	21.4% (3)	18.5% (5)	27.8% (5)	0% (0)
Lesbian	7.7% (7)	4.7% (3)	4% (2)	7.1% (1)	14.8% (4)	0% (0)	44.4% (4)
Gay	8.8% (8)	9.4% (6)	8% (4)	14.3% (2)	7.4% (2)	11.1% (2)	0% (0)
Pansexual	7.7% (7)	4.7% (3)	6% (3)	0% (0)	14.8% (4)	5.6% (1)	33.3% (3)
Heterosexual	2.2% (2)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)	7.4% (2)	5.6% (1)	11.1% (1)
Asexual	6.6% (6)	9.4% (6)	10% (5)	7.1% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
Something else (e.g., gay but open)	6.6% (6)	3.1% (2)	0% (0)	14.3% (2)	14.8% (4)	16.7% (3)	11.1% (1)

Note. GI-social = Gender identity in social situations; GI-class = Gender identity in classroom/job contexts.

^a Includes a participant who was intersex and AFAB. ^b Participants could select multiple categories; %s add to over 100.

Data Analysis

Means, counts, and percentages are provided for graduate student respondents as a whole and by binary versus nonbinary student status. We report the data separately for these groups for descriptive purposes, but statistical tests for differences between the two groups are not provided, as we recognize that this dichotomous variable is overly simplistic and that statistical tests might appear to reify or solidify boundaries around a category that is fluid and contested. Qualitative analysis (i.e., thematic analysis; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) was used to analyze responses to the open-ended survey portions, which ranged from several sentences to several pages of text, with most students providing responses of 3–5 sentences per question. This mixed-methods approach (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) achieved substantively unique findings: the qualitative data serve to nuance and amplify the quantitative data and the interpretations derived from them.

The thematic analysis focused on participants' experiences with faculty, staff, and other students, attending to both blatant and also more subtle instances of cisnormative practices and language. It also attended to the participants' emotional responses to transnegative treatment. Attention was paid to the potential role of participants' gender identity (e.g., binary/nonbinary) in shaping their experiences and emotional and behavioral responses. The analysis was informed by the relevant literatures and queer, minority stress, and microaggressions frameworks.

To develop themes, Abbie E. Goldberg initiated the coding process with open coding. Namely, she engaged in line-by-line analysis to generate initial theoretical categories (Charmaz, 2006). For example, she generated the initial codes "experiences of misgendering by faculty" and "no experiences of misgendering by faculty." As she moved to focused coding, she refined these codes (e.g., to denote general faculty vs. advisors/faculty mentors/supervisors; whether this misgendering occurred initially or after multiple requests for alternative pronouns or names; and whether it was seen as unintentional or intentional). She developed subcodes to indicate students' reasons and conditions for responding to misgendering (e.g., exhaustion; fear of retribution). These focused codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective, became the basis for the "themes" developed in the analysis (Patton, 2002). She also carefully examined these codes and subcodes for the full sample and binary versus nonbinary status, which revealed meaningful differences in how instances of misgendering were perceived and responded to by participants.

A secondary coder (an advanced doctoral student in psychology) coded a select number of responses (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013) to serve as an outside perspective on the emerging categories and to provide a reliability check. Initially they coded 13% of respondent transcripts; then, the two coders examined their level of agreement on codes. Inter-coder agreement was initially 86% (number of agreements/number of agreements + disagreements). Disagreements were discussed and the scheme refined and reapplied. The secondary coder then independently coded another 13% of transcripts. Inter-coder agreement was 95%, indicating good reliability. The final scheme was established when both coders had verified agreement among all of the coded data.

Results

Description of the Sample: Gender Identity and Expression

Students were able to select multiple gender identity options. These options, in order of most to least frequently endorsed, are: trans/transgender (51.6%, $n = 47$); nonbinary (44.0%, $n = 40$); genderqueer (35.2%, $n = 32$); gender nonconforming (19.8%, $n = 18$); transgender man (19.8%, $n = 18$); gender fluid (18.7%, $n = 17$); androgynous (14.3%, $n = 13$); agender (12.1%, $n = 11$); transgender woman (11.0%, $n = 10$); masculine of center (9.9%, $n = 9$); demigender (7.7%, $n = 7$); feminine of center (5.5%, $n = 5$); questioning or unsure (2.2%, $n = 2$); pangender (1.1%, $n = 1$); and bigender (0%, $n = 0$). Also, 15.4% ($n = 14$) chose "another identity not listed here." Two participants each listed man, woman, and FtM (female-to-male); one each listed trans guy, demiguy, gendernull, female-to-male-to-X (FtMtX), transmasculine, and third gender. A total of 62.6% of participants ($n = 57$) had previously identified with other gender identities (besides cisgender), other than those they endorsed currently.

We were interested in contrasting the experiences of students who identified with gender binary identities and those who identified with nonbinary identities, necessitating some reduction of categories. We recognize the problems inherent to collapsing across categories and reducing this complex array of gender identities to a dichotomous variable; in turn, such categorization should be viewed as an analytical and conceptual tool, and not as an essentialist dictum of duality.

We created a binary/nonbinary category whereby all those who identified as transgender, trans, trans woman, trans man, FtM (female-to-male), MtF (male-to-female), woman, man, or trans guy, and who did not endorse any gender nonbinary options, were categorized as gender binary. Participants who endorsed any of the nonbinary options (nonbinary; genderqueer; gender-nonconforming; gender fluid; androgynous; agender; demigender; gendernull; third gender; demiguy; FtMtX; transmasculine; masculine or feminine of center; questioning) were categorized as gender nonbinary.² We sought to balance the tension between our interest in exploring nuanced differences in experience by binary and nonbinary status with the awareness that this categorization falsely implies an essential and rigid bifurcation of these participants' identities. Thus, although we provide descriptive statistics by group status in the tables and, when relevant, in the text, we do not conduct statistical comparisons. Also, when quoting participants, we retain their selected gender identities. Finally, we seek to

² We recognize that (a) masculine of center and feminine of center can be conceptualized as gender expressions and not gender identities, and (b) endorsement of the term "questioning" is vague and does not clearly denote a binary or nonbinary identification. Thus, we carefully examined these participants' endorsement of other identities to best categorize them. Both questioning participants, all five feminine of center participants, and eight of nine masculine of center participants also selected one or more nonbinary identities (e.g., agender, genderqueer, nonbinary), and were categorized as such. One masculine of center participant also identified as a transman and was categorized as binary identified. Thus, we feel reasonably confident about our ability to meaningfully categorize these participants in ways that are consistent with their authentic gender identities.

emphasize salient experiences across our sample regardless of binary/nonbinary identity.

A total of 73.6% ($n = 67$) were assigned female at birth (AFAB), 25.3% ($n = 23$) were assigned male at birth (AMAB), and 1.1% ($n = 1$) was born intersex and AFAB. Respondents had identified with their current gender identity for a mean of 52.37 months ($SD = 47.20$), or a little over 4 years. (For breakdowns by binary vs. nonbinary status, and AFAB vs. AMAB status, see Table 1.) Respondents had started to explore their gender identity at 16.32 years old ($SD = 8.49$), on average. Reporting on their current level of security in their internal gender identity, on a 0–100 scale, participants' mean security level was 80.35 ($SD = 19.16$), with binary students reporting higher levels than nonbinary students ($M = 88.70$, $SD = 11.40$ vs. $M = 76.71$, $SD = 20.74$).

Participants were asked to identify their gender expression on campus and were able to choose multiple options. These were, in order of frequency, gender nonconforming (41%); masculine (37%); masculine of center (35%); androgynous (33%); feminine (27%); feminine of center (22%); and genderless (15%). As Table 1 shows, all binary AFAB students endorsed masculine or masculine of center expressions, and all binary AMAB students endorsed feminine and feminine of center expressions. Several binary students also endorsed gender nonconforming ($n = 3$) or androgynous ($n = 1$) expressions. Nonbinary students endorsed a more varied array of gender expressions; the most common were gender nonconforming (56%) and androgynous (42%).

Of the 91 respondents, 93.4% wore clothes that matched their gender identity in social situations, and 85.7% wore clothes that matched their gender identity to classes/jobs (see Table 1). Also, 91.2% had changed their hair (e.g., cut it/grew it out) in an effort to live more authentically in their own gender, and 63.7% had adopted a different name than they were given at birth, which they used in one or more settings (e.g., family, school, job). Forty-five percent of students had taken hormones, 28.6% had completed nongenital surgery (e.g., breast implants/reductions), 18.7% had engaged in nonsurgical cosmetic procedures such as electrolysis, and 5.5% had undergone genital surgery. Binary students reported higher rates of all physical modifications.

Institutional/Campus Climate and Gender Presentation

A total of 67% of students ($n = 61$) indicated that concerns about physical/emotional safety affected how they presented their gender on campus (nonbinary: 70.3%, binary: 59.3%); see Table 2. Students were asked to explain (e.g., how it did nor did not affect them); 85 of 91 students (93%) did so.

Safety concerns impact gender presentation. Among the 61 participants who expressed safety concerns, many shared that they were worried that their trans (and, typically, nonbinary) status might invite rejection, ridicule, and possibly violence—the likelihood of which they felt was enhanced, in some cases, by the religious/political conservatism of their graduate institution, or, the region in which it was located (e.g., the South). Many nonbinary students noted that such concerns had led them to alter their appearance in such a way that was more distinctively and stereotypically gendered (e.g., very masculine or very feminine) than they would prefer or felt comfortable ($n = 24$). They spoke to the academic and professional risks of dressing in a way that was less

clearly gendered and/or that deviated from the gender they were assigned at birth. As one GNC and questioning student said, “I tend to lean more cisgender on campus just for fear of what some professors would think. Especially since I’ll be depending on them for letters of recommendation.” One nonbinary identified student described particular challenges surrounding “emotional safety . . . When having to discuss difficult matters (such as whether I get another month to finish a paper) with sexist male professors, I don’t dress/behave as feminine, queer and/or otherwise non-male-ish as I’d do otherwise.” Thus, students balanced their desire to authentically express their gender with the need to present in a way that was socially accessible and intelligible (Roen, 2002)—a “passing” balancing act that can be psychologically taxing for trans individuals (Nicolazzo, 2016c, p. 1175).

Four students who espoused binary gender identities also expressed resentment surrounding pressures to comply with highly gendered requirements for dress and appearance. A student who identified as a transwoman, for example, described feeling pressured by faculty to wear feminine suits to fit in with the professional, “conservative,” and gendered, environment after receiving “disparaging” remarks that suggested that the participant was not adequately signaling their gender via dress (it was too “ambiguous”). Thus, both binary and nonbinary identified students described how cisnormative pressures on campus and fear of negative treatment led them to enact gender performances that did not accurately reflect their authentic gender identities (Catalano, 2015).

Safety concerns do not impact gender presentation. Among those who indicated that such concerns did not affect their gender presentation ($n = 30$, 33%; nonbinary: 29.7%, binary: 40.7%), half ($n = 15$) articulated that they “passed” fairly well (i.e., usually as a cisgender man) and thus were not concerned for their safety. One transman noted, “I present male and in our society, this can make one safe.” Another transman said: “Safety concerns [don’t affect me] too much, because dressing masculinely and androgynously isn’t very dangerous typically.” Four of these 15 students, all of whom were AFAB, asserted their sense that gender nonconformity was more acceptable among persons assigned female at birth, and, thus, they presented in a more masculine manner without safety concerns. As one participant, who identified as agender and masculine of center, stated, “Despite me presenting a little more neutral, I feel like I’m close enough to pulling off cis that I am not at risk. Being assigned female at birth gives me the privilege to be more masculine without people questioning me.” An additional three participants described their campuses as progressive and “LGBTQ-friendly,” which contributed to a sense of safety whereby they did not feel the need to modify their gender expression or presentation. Finally, three students noted that they “dressed however [they] want[ed],” despite feeling “not fully comfortable because of others’ judgment.”

Experiences of Misgendering on Campus: Other Graduate Students and Faculty

When asked how trans-affirming other students in their classes were, 13.1% indicated they were “very affirming” (nonbinary: 14.1%, binary: 11.1%), 30.8% said they were “somewhat affirming” (nonbinary: 23.4%, binary: 48.1%), 34.1% said they were “neutral” (nonbinary: 35.9%, binary: 29.7%), 15.4% said they

Table 2
Perceptions of Cisnormativity: Climate, Students, and Faculty

Campus experiences	Total (N = 91), % of 91 (n)	Nonbinary (n = 64), % of 64 (n)	Binary (n = 27), % of 27 (n)
Safety concerns impact gender presentation	67.0% (61)	70.3% (45)	59.3% (16)
Dress more stereotypically gendered than prefer	46.0% (28 of 61)	53.3% (24 of 45)	25.0% (4 of 16)
Safety concerns do not impact gender presentation	33.0% (30)	29.7% (19)	40.7% (11)
Because I “pass”	50% (15 of 30)	26.3% (5 of 19)	90.9% (10 of 11)
Progressive campus climate	10% (3 of 30)	10.5% (2 of 19)	9.1% (1 of 11)
I dress how I want	10% (3 of 30)	15.8% (3 of 19)	0% (0 of 11)
Trans-affirmingness of students in classes			
Very affirming	13.1% (11)	14.1% (9)	11.1% (3)
Somewhat affirming	30.8% (28)	23.4% (15)	48.1% (13)
Neutral	34.1% (31)	35.9% (23)	29.7% (8)
Not very affirming (somewhat transphobic)	15.4% (14)	17.2% (11)	11.1% (3)
Not at all affirming (very transphobic)	6.6% (6)	9.4% (6)	0% (0)
Misgendering by students in classes			
Never	20.9% (19)	7.8% (5)	51.9% (14)
Rarely	19.8% (18)	14.1% (9)	33.3% (9)
Sometimes	26.5% (24)	32.8% (21)	11.1% (3)
Often	32.8% (30)	45.3% (29)	3.7% (1)
Trans-affirmingness of faculty			
Very affirming	15.4% (14)	10.9% (7)	25.9% (7)
Somewhat affirming	36.2% (33)	35.9% (23)	37.1% (10)
Neutral	24.2% (22)	29.8% (19)	11.1% (3)
Not very affirming (somewhat transphobic)	20.9% (19)	20.3% (13)	22.2% (6)
Not at all affirming (very transphobic)	3.3% (3)	3.1% (2)	3.7% (1)
Misgendering by faculty			
Never	23.1% (21)	10.9% (7)	51.9% (14)
Rarely	17.6% (16)	12.5% (8)	29.6% (8)
Sometimes	27.5% (25)	32.8% (21)	14.8% (4)
Often	31.9% (29)	43.8% (28)	3.7% (1)
Misgendering ^a			
Faculty misgendering despite sharing pronoun/names	37.1% (26 of 70)	44.0% (22 of 50)	20.0% (4 of 20)
By faculty mentors/supervisors	22.9% (16 of 70)	30.0% (15 of 50)	5.0% (1 of 20)
Positive experiences with mentors/supervisors	14.3% (10 of 70)	14.0% (7 of 50)	15.0% (3 of 20)

^a 70 students provided open-ended data.

were “not very affirming” (nonbinary: 17.2%, binary: 11.1%), and 6.6% said they were “not at all affirming” (nonbinary: 9.4%, binary: 0%). Regarding instances of misgendering by students in their classes, 20.9% said it “never” happened, 19.8% said it “rarely” happened, 26.5% said it “sometimes” happened, and 32.8% said it happened “often.” Being misgendered occurred more often for nonbinary identified students than for binary identified students; see Table 2. Only 14.8% of binary students said it happened sometimes or often, compared to 78.1% of nonbinary students.

When asked how trans-affirming the faculty were, 15.4% indicated that they were “very affirming” (nonbinary: 10.9%, binary: 25.9%), 36.2% said they were “somewhat affirming” (nonbinary: 35.9%, binary: 37.1%); 24.2% said they were “neutral” (nonbinary: 29.8%, binary: 11.1%), 20.9% said they were “not very affirming” (nonbinary: 20.3%, binary: 22.2%) and 3.3% said they were “not at all affirming” (nonbinary: 3.1%, binary: 3.7%). Regarding experiences of misgendering by faculty, 23.1% said it “never” happened, 17.6% said it “rarely” happened, 27.5% said it “sometimes” happened, and 31.9% said it happened “often.” Nonbinary students again tended to report greater frequencies of misgendering: 18.5% of binary students said this happened sometimes or often compared to 76.6% of nonbinary students.

Participants were asked to provide examples of misgendering by faculty, as well as transphobic experiences more broadly; 70 of 91 students (77%) provided open-ended responses.

Impact of misgendering in graduate programs. Consistent with the data presented above, examples of misgendering and negative treatment were more often provided by nonbinary students. As detailed, nonbinary students more often endorsed androgynous and nonconforming gender presentations, which may have rendered them uniquely vulnerable to a particular form of microaggression—namely, explicit, unintended misgendering—in relation to their gender identity (Nadal et al., 2012). Nonbinary students were aware of their complicated situation when it came to misgendering by faculty, staff, and other students in that “nobody knows nonbinary is a thing.” As an agender and nonbinary identified student noted, “Because I am nonbinary, it is impossible for them to gender me correctly unless I have informed them of my gender and/or pronouns.” Inasmuch as misgendering can be difficult to confront (e.g., because it is often unintentional and embedded in conversation; Sue, 2010), students were sometimes uncomfortable correcting others or asking them to use gender-neutral pronouns and thus stayed silent, relying on concealment as a strategy for survival (Meyer, 1995; Rood et al., 2016). One genderfluid student shared that typically, upon being misgendered,

"my stress level is incredibly high because I'm both upset by this and am afraid to say something for fear of retribution." One AFAB genderqueer student stated,

I now appear masculine of center, so I am almost always gendered male and people use he/him pronouns for me automatically. This bothers me a lot, as I am not comfortable with any binary pronouns. However, I have a very hard time asking people to use they/them pronouns, as it rarely leads to an easy situation to deal with, so I most often say nothing.

Another genderqueer student said,

I began using a pronouns description under my name as a signature for my university e-mail. I work on campus in an office and I'm always referred to as her . . . I often feel frustrated . . . not only with the staff and faculty but with myself for not saying "this is how I identify." The situation is always that someone is referring to me as "she can do this or that" and I'm standing there thinking "hmm, that's not how I identify." In these situations, I go to a place in my head where I tell myself that I know who I am and that is all that matters.

Significantly, some of these participants emphasized that even faculty who were "aware of trans people in . . . that they know we exist" tended to be exclusively familiar with binary trans identities and "buy into the 'trapped in the wrong body' discourse and aren't aware that there are trans folks who don't believe or experience that" (genderqueer, feminine of center participant). These students expressed frustration and dismay with the fact that, as one genderqueer, nonbinary student noted, "Almost [all] faculty and administrators are unaware of nonbinary genders. All the focus is on transitioning from one gender to another, making nonbinary gender incomprehensible." One student shared, "As a nonbinary trans person, I get misgendered all the time . . . They usually just don't know that people have more than two genders . . . even my gender studies professors, who are among the worst bigots. It hurts each time, and I often just start to ask myself: 'How shall I go on with this for the rest of my life?'" Thus, participants expressed weariness associated with the frequent misgendering they experienced, pointing to the cumulative impact of "commonplace" microaggressions over time (Nadal et al., 2012; Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b; Rood et al., 2016).

Many participants ($n = 26$) explicitly stated that although they informed faculty of their pronouns and names, faculty continued to misgender them and to use cisnormative language (e.g., referring to students as "ladies and gentlemen"; generalizing about "men and women"). As one genderqueer participant stated, "Faculty will continue to call me by she pronouns when I have told them my preferred pronouns, as well as use gendered language since everyone else in my class are cisgender females. They use language like, 'okay ladies . . . ' even when I'm dressed as very 'masculine' presenting." One genderqueer student shared that professors have "repeatedly referred to me as 'her' even after pronouns were stated (at my request) during introductions, and even when I have had a name badge with my pronouns on it." Stated one genderqueer participant, who had informed faculty and other students in their program about their pronouns (them/they): "It made me frustrated that, despite my masculine presentation, my bound chest, and my gender-neutral pronouns, I was still being referred to as 'a girl' by people who really should know better."

Students voiced frustration over the fact that some faculty would "ask for pronouns . . . but never use them." That faculty solicited and acknowledged students' gender identity, but failed to change their behavior or language, was a "set up" for disappointment. "Professors have asked for gender pronouns the first meeting of class [but] most professors, if not all, forget to stick to our pronouns," observed one genderqueer student. One trans genderqueer student articulated, "Asking for pronouns is nice, but if they are not going to . . . make an effort to address us by our preferred pronouns, they continue to perpetuate the binary narrative that is so harmful to so many students."

In some cases, instances of misgendering are perhaps better understood as examples of microassaults, inasmuch as the speaker seemed to be consciously deploying language that negated or challenged participants' gender identity and implying a belief that trans was not a legitimate identity, and/or that there was a singular (i.e., male-to-female, female-to-male) trans experience (Nordmarken, 2014). One genderqueer participant shared how a faculty member, who was reportedly aware that the participant was in her class, asserted that "those who experienced gender as non-binary . . . or in a trans or queer way were 'confused' and there was in fact 'no such thing' as transgender." Another genderqueer participant described having told their boss and coworkers:

multiple times that I am nonbinary and to call me they/them. My coworker tries but mostly complains or makes a joke out of it. My boss straight up refused to call me "they" because "that's multiple people." I tried to laugh it off, joking that maybe I would start using the imperial "we" to make it easier, but on the inside I just felt defeated . . . It proved to me that it doesn't matter how up front you are or how much people insist they understand on the surface. Most people . . . will not take nonbinary identities seriously.

Similarly, one agender student shared how, upon sharing their pronouns (they, them) with a professor, the faculty member declined to use them, stating that "they were ungrammatical." This type of faculty response assaults not only a student's gender, but also their intellect—and could prove especially detrimental to a graduate student whose precarious position in the academy relies upon their being viewed as intelligent (Hicks, 2011). Similarly, a participant who identified as third gender said that, after approaching a faculty member to "invite her to consider that not all her students were binary identified [and] talk a bit about proper pronouns, she said she would 'take that with her' . . . that day, and 'think about it.' It was not a validating tone." These students provided many examples of how they resisted cisnormative pressures to attempt to educate faculty about the reality and diversity of trans identities. Yet they often concluded that the stress associated with such efforts was "not worth it," in that they often encountered unpleasant responses, ranging from shock to confusion to dismissal (Nadal et al., 2012; Nicolazzo, 2016a). Students who felt "shut down" tended to respond by conserving emotional resources to avoid further mistreatment—a strategic and arguably empowered response to a disempowering situation.

Binary trans participants experienced misgendering more rarely but also described distress surrounding these situations—which, in all cases, was related to their perception that they "passed . . . and [were] therefore startled when misgendered:" "I am usually in genuine shock and struggle to respond" (transman). One trans participant described how suddenly, at a departmental social gath-

ering—which may have been a critical student-faculty networking event for this graduate student—a “faculty member began messing up my pronouns and misgendering me. This had never happened before I shared my trans status with him. I didn’t say anything because I was scared to make a scene.” One transman described how one of their professors

who I was really close to, misgendered me after I had been out for over a year and had been on testosterone for 6 months. I was very hurt, disappointed, and shocked. . . . It was probably an accident, but I worried at the time that the slip-up revealed what she really thought of me (that I was actually a woman, that my identity was invalid). Again, looking back it was probably just a mistake but it just goes to show how big of [a] deal misgendering someone can be . . . Sometimes I am still insecure though that people who know I am trans might think of me differently or feel that deep down I am actually a woman or less of a man.

Thus, as Nicolazzo (2016b) noted, although “fail(ing) to pass” (p. 1175) is not the fault of the individual and is more likely due to society’s exceedingly stringent standards for gender conformity, such experiences can profoundly and negatively impact trans individuals.

Although all trans students must navigate cisnormativity, coming out as trans may pose different challenges for binary and nonbinary identified students. Nonbinary students who were misgendered spoke to the challenge of having to assert a self-experienced gender identity that was wholly unfamiliar to others. In this way, “an invisible gender identity is being claimed” (Zimman, 2009, p. 60), as well as, often, a set of pronouns (e.g., they, them) that were unfamiliar to, and sometimes provoked confusion or resistance among, faculty. In contrast, binary identified students tended to describe situations in which they were misgendered only upon coming out as trans, or after a period of time of being correctly gendered by a particular faculty member(s). In both cases, participants felt that recognition of their authentic gender identities was threatened—but, they navigated different pressures and expectations by actively asserting such identities. Notably, although the binary identified students in our sample often described distress surrounding instances in which they unexpectedly did not “pass,” it is essential to emphasize that many trans people—binary and nonbinary identified—are not interested in (and may resist) passing (Catalano, 2015).

Misgendering by advisors/supervisors. Experiencing misgendering by immediate supervisors and advisors was noted by some participants ($n = 16$). All 16 students described this as quite hurtful, perhaps in part because students expected more from these faculty (e.g., based on prior conversations about names and pronouns), and worked closely with them, rendering such incidents personal and salient (Tompkins et al., 2016). Participants were aware of existing power differentials and thus were often “scared” to address instances of misgendering, as the costs of speaking up seemed too great. They typically remained silent as a means of avoiding retribution and possible jeopardy to their academic and professional futures. Their status as both trans and graduate students rendered them vulnerable at the hands of interlocking systems of power and privilege (Noy & Ray, 2012). As a genderqueer participant shared: “My dissertation advisor, who is aware of my gender identity, refers to me exclusively using the wrong pronouns. It’s upsetting and frustrates me, but I haven’t corrected her

yet because I don’t feel comfortable doing so [because of the] culture [within] my department.” Even when participants informed their supervisors and advisors of their pronouns and names, such actions sometimes seemed to go unacknowledged. In meetings with their advisor and graduate committee members, one agender participant found that:

the faculty members would often misgender me when speaking to each other about me (e.g., “Oh, she did this much this week”) or to me (e.g., “You go, girl!”) despite the fact that I had introduced myself to and in front of them several times with my pronouns and had worn a large pin with my pronouns to our meetings. It always felt like a kick to the gut, like they didn’t care about or respect me, and like they do not care about trans students despite their vocal assurance that they do. I usually [do not] say anything because I had seen one of them grade my peers lower on assignments after they disagreed with her in class . . . I felt unsafe correcting someone who could and likely would seek some sort of vengeance.

Such incidents were highly upsetting and yet “fatigue, lack of support, fear of reprisal, and professional uncertainty” kept them from speaking up. “I can’t ask more vociferously or more often because it will endanger my [future],” stated one genderqueer student.

Positive experiences with advisors/supervisors. Ten participants, notably, described positive experiences with advisors and supervisors, whereby they felt that, even though these faculty were not necessarily highly aware of TGNC issues or identities, they had made a strong effort to learn from and respond compassionately to participants, and were described as “kind and respectful” in regard to their trans identities. These participants voiced appreciation for their advisors, who tended to “apologize” or “correct themselves” if they accidentally misgendered them, and who demonstrated a commitment to learning and “doing better.” As one genderqueer participant noted, “My PhD advisor uses they/them for me or at least beats themselves up about if they slip. It is great.” Another nonbinary, agender student noted how one faculty member with whom they worked closely made an “effort to use the correct pronoun, correcting himself in the moments when he slips up. His actions mean the world to me.” One agender student stated:

My professor and supervisor was proofreading a draft of an article that was going to appear in [publication]. I informed them that I preferred the pronoun “they” and they suggested that this was grammatically incorrect, and would “he” be all right? We . . . ended up having a productive conversation. I felt like the professor emerged with a new understanding of how grammar will need to change to accommodate individuals, not vice versa.

Such examples highlight how TGNC students’ offerings of self-disclosure and education can queer faculty members’ understandings of gender and transness (McGuire et al., 2016). Such shifts in perspective and knowledge on the part of faculty may also have broader consequences—for example, in terms of generating shifts in the cisnormative culture of graduate programs as a whole.

Three students noted that had it not been for their advisor’s support and affirmation of their trans identity, they may not have “survived” the stress of graduate school. Stated one genderfluid, nonbinary participant: “My advisor is sensitive and open to listening to issues. She has been a huge source of support since I moved [hundreds of miles] to attend this [program] and left my support

system of queer/trans individuals.” One transman shared how difficult it had been to physically transition during graduate school, on top of taking classes and teaching, and noted that his advisor and other faculty were “fantastic” and “very supportive of my decisions and offered to help out in any way possible,” which was a great “relief” during a challenging time. Such examples illustrate the potential for advisors to represent powerful sources of empowerment and resilience for TGNC graduate students (Patton, 2009), buffering against the broader stress associated with graduate school (Noy & Ray, 2012) and being a gender minority (Beemyn, 2016).

Discussion

This is the first study, besides McKinney (2005), to address the experiences of TGNC graduate students—a unique group in that their very enrollment in graduate programs as TGNC people suggests remarkable resilience, but who are also vulnerable to marginality in light of these dual statuses. This study goes beyond McKinney’s to center the experiences of nonbinary students.

Our descriptive data on gender identity are important in that they provide novel findings that can provide a platform for future study. Namely, although there was great variability in when this sample of TGNC graduate students had begun questioning their gender identity, on average, students had begun this process when they were high school age, suggesting that higher education settings can and should play a pivotal role in validating gender identity exploration and providing support related to this process (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). Nonbinary students felt less secure in their gender identity, which could reflect the fact that they encounter less affirmation for their gender identities (i.e., due to fewer visible nonbinary role models and less societal understanding of nonbinary identities; Rankin & Beemyn, 2012).

Two-thirds of students described how safety concerns related to the cisnormative institutional climate influenced how they presented their gender, and both nonbinary and binary students ultimately described efforts to alter their appearance to be more stereotypically gendered than they preferred. These findings reveal how the gender binary system that operates in society at large and within institutions of higher education specifically contribute to concerns about safety and intelligibility, which may in part be expressed in the form of variability and fluidity in TGNC students’ gender presentations across diverse contexts (Nicolazzo, 2016b).

Our findings highlight the difficult climate that TGNC graduate students face in higher education, and the challenges faced by students who identify as nonbinary in particular. These students do not “fit” the dominant (i.e., “trapped in the wrong body”) meta-narrative about trans people (Catalano, 2015; Nordmarken, 2014) and are thus vulnerable to misunderstanding by faculty, staff, and even their peers (Nicolazzo, 2016c). Nonbinary students, who were less likely to endorse bodily modifications as well as distinctly masculine/feminine gender expressions, were also less likely to be recognized as their authentic gender; that is, they were more likely to be misgendered. The difficulty of confronting misgendering was in some ways amplified for nonbinary students as well. Rather than requesting a pronoun with which faculty were likely to be familiar, they were often the first to broach the issue of gender-neutral pronouns and nonbinary ways of thinking about gender, thus challenging cisnormativity in ways that may have

been uncomfortable for faculty. Even when faculty seemed open to and aware of nonbinary identities (as evidenced by their participation in the “pronoun game” at the start of classes), they typically did not hold themselves, or other students, accountable for consistently using these pronouns.

Findings specifically related to TGNC graduate students’ experiences with their mentors and advisors are especially important to consider, alongside evidence that these relationships have profound implications for career outcomes. Mentor experiences during graduate school have been linked to self-efficacy, career interest, and professional outcomes (Curtin, Malley, & Stewart, 2016), among minority students in particular (Noy & Ray, 2012). Some participants described their advisors and supervisors as misgendering them even after participants oriented them to their names and pronouns. Such behaviors on the part of faculty represent a harmful form of microaggression, in that they are perpetuated by a person in power (Sue, 2010), and communicate a fundamental disregard and lack of respect for participants’ gender identities (Nadal et al., 2012). Aware of their advisors’ evaluative role, and their dependence on advisors for networking, letters of reference, and other forms of professional capital (Thomas et al., 2007), participants often relied on silence as a self-protective strategy. Rather than continually engaging in efforts to educate, inform, and “queer,” students conserved their emotional energy in order to survive graduate school.

Several positive findings are of note. First, some faculty advisors were portrayed as open to learning and as sincerely trying to use participants’ requested pronouns; such affirming experiences meant a great deal to participants. In this way, the data present a somewhat more optimistic portrait of TGNC graduate students’ experiences than McKinney (2005), who found that participants did not describe any faculty as trans-affirming. Second, whereas Pryor (2015) noted considerable anxiety in their sample of five trans students regarding names and pronouns, a fairly high level of self-advocacy was reported in this sample, whereby many participants noted that they had spoken to faculty and peers about their pronouns and names. Such findings underscore the resiliency of transgender individuals, including college students (Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b) and their ability to survive and thrive even in cisnormative contexts. Of course, students’ advocacy efforts must be viewed in the context of the reality that, reflecting ongoing issues of transnegativity in higher education, many faculty either refused to or forgot to use their stated names and pronouns.

Implications

Higher education leaders, such as student affairs professionals and graduate program directors, should seek to foster greater inclusivity of those who identify outside the gender binary. Such efforts can begin by recognizing the limitations of existing language, which supports dominant cisnormative discourse, and considering alternative gender-neutral language in student documentation, program materials, curricula, and classroom dialogue. Attention to language in educational policy and practice is important in disciplines (e.g., law, business) that rely heavily and unnecessarily on the gender binary in professional discourse (e.g., use of terms like sir and madam). This attention to language should be part of, and should reflect, a larger effort within higher education to resist, overturn, and “queer” dominant norms that privilege

the experiences of dominant groups (e.g., White cisgender male individuals; Pitcher, 2015). College campuses should seek to move beyond incorporating “best practices” for accommodating trans students to disrupting the cisnormativity that confines and restricts all campus community members (Nicolazzo, 2016b). For instance, inclusive graduate student recruitment practices should involve avoiding assumptions about gender identities, relationships, or family structures—such as in recruitment materials (e.g., websites), in-person interviews, and when discussing opportunities for students’ partners in the new location. Further, programs should actively develop relationships with trans communities on- and off-campus and offer to connect admitted students with these groups.

Our findings suggest that faculty members often lack knowledge of and sensitivity to TGNC graduate students. These findings point to the need for faculty development initiatives that promote radical shifts in understanding and knowledge of sexual and gender diversity (Pitcher, 2015) and which include nuanced training and guidance surrounding TGNC students’ needs and experiences. It is insufficient, for example, to suggest to faculty that they should “ask for pronouns.” Without appropriate context for this guidance, and appropriate follow-through by faculty, such advice is likely to be ineffectively deployed, and may do more harm than good. Faculty training should, for example, include guidance about how, after making a mistake with a trans student’s pronouns, faculty should respond—without further marginalizing or humiliating the student.

Senior diversity officers, in their mission to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout every aspect of the university, should seek to explicitly recognize and address TGNC students—including graduate students—in programming and written materials. Diversity officers can advocate for trans-inclusive health care services and all-gender bathroom access, as well as play an important role in ensuring that staff, faculty, and administrators across campus (e.g., career services, the registrar, counseling services) receive training in gender diversity and the unique needs and concerns of trans graduate students specifically (e.g., related to career planning).

Efforts to recruit and retain TGNC faculty and staff would benefit TGNC students, both undergraduate and graduate (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014), as research points to the beneficial effect of mentorship by faculty members who share students’ minority statuses (Fries-Britt & Snider, 2015; Patton, 2009). The presence of TGNC faculty and staff may indirectly and directly promote TGNC graduate student engagement, retention, and success, by (a) communicating a powerful message that TGNC people are valued, and (b) providing TGNC students with individuals who can offer support and guidance related to their professional development as TGNC people. Particularly important is hiring multiple nonbinary identified faculty/staff; such institutional practices will help to broaden campus members’ notions of what are “legitimate” and intelligible trans identities—ideas that often place a premium on “passing” and reinforce gender normativity (Roan, 2002). Successful recruitment of trans and specifically nonbinary identified faculty/staff will require careful and thoughtful efforts on the part of search committees. Faculty/staff search committees should consider, for example, soliciting advice from campus LGBTQ diversity offices regarding inclusive terminology for position announcements. They should also seek to advertise through professional or

discipline-specific lists geared toward LGBTQ graduate students and faculty.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, we did not ask explicitly about advisors; rather, themes related to these specific individuals emerged from the data. Future research should systematically examine TGNC graduate students’ experiences with supervisors, advisors, and other faculty. Second, because of the small number of AMAB participants, it was not possible to explore in depth the intersections between birth sex and binary/nonbinary status in our thematic analysis. Third, we did not ask students whether they applied to graduate school as an out TGNC student or not. It is difficult to know whether, for example, students’ gender identities and presentations were a “surprise” versus known to the programs and faculty that admitted them. Fourth, we are sensitive to the limitations of our binary/nonbinary classification, as it does not capture the diversity and fluidity of gender that lie within and across this category. Further, in that we assessed identities at one point in time, we were not able to capture potential fluidity over time. Fifth, we did not examine students’ experiences by discipline. Prior work suggests that graduate student experiences (e.g., stress, program satisfaction) may vary widely by discipline (Barnes & Randall, 2012). In turn, TGNC students’ perceptions of faculty program climate may vary by program type. Our findings regarding the significance of mentoring relationships may not translate to certain graduate training contexts, where students have little contact with a singular mentor (Austin et al., 2009).

Sixth, in light of the complexity of the existing identities under study (graduate students, binary/nonbinary trans), we did not attend to the specific ways in which students’ experiences as TGNC may have intersected with their race/ethnicity—although we do report students’ race/ethnicities, which is an advancement over the only prior study on trans graduate students which did not report racial, ethnic, or sexual orientation data for participants (McKinney, 2005). Research on the intersections of gender identity and race/ethnicity is important in that trans people of color navigate complex issues of visibility and marginalization that are distinctly different from those of their White counterparts (Nicolazzo, 2016c). Indeed, personal narratives of nonbinary people of color (Scruggs, 2016; Ziyad, 2016) reveal the unique lived experience at the intersections of gender identity, race, and ethnicity, and can—alongside the limited empirical work on nonbinary people of color (Nicolazzo, 2016c)—provide rich foundational material for future research.

Future Directions

This study examined TGNC students currently enrolled in graduate school. That they were both TGNC and pursuing advanced degrees suggests considerable resilience, self-discipline, and drive. An unknown number of TGNC students may consider but not pursue graduate education, or enter graduate school and drop out, due to the cisnormative and often trans-negative climate that they face in educational settings throughout their lives (Kosciw et al., 2016). Future research can explore the educational experiences and trajectories of TGNC students to gain insight into what enables

TGNC graduate students to persist in versus leave graduate school, and what supports are most beneficial in facilitating retention and success (Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2016).

Future research is also needed to explore how TGNC and especially nonbinary people navigate graduate school and the early years of their chosen field, including their experiences in leadership and collaborative roles (e.g., Jourian, Simmons, & Devaney, 2015). This type of longitudinal work can help to shed light on the types of challenges that TGNC graduate students face, and how they meet such challenges through personal and community resilience. Longitudinal work is essential in illuminating the fluidity and complexity of TGNC identities more broadly and the experiences of persons who hold nonbinary gender identities specifically. Such work is rare, but growing (Nicolazzo, 2016a) and has much to teach us about gender, identity, and resilience.

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