

**Findings Report: Study of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students at UCLA 2013-2014**

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**Executive Summary**

This report presents key findings from a study on the experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming UCLA students. SAIRO researchers interviewed sixteen students to gain a better understanding of the campus climate for gender minority students. Specifically, this study explored sources of support and challenges associated with participants' gender identity and/or expression. Additionally, the research team asked students for their ideas and suggestions to improve the campus experience for other transgender and gender non-conforming students. Overall, findings indicate that UCLA has many areas for improvement that would enhance the experience for this student population.

Major findings included:

- UCLA's transgender and gender non-conforming student population is highly diverse but small in number, leading to challenges with building campus community and assembling a critical mass to actively advocate for transgender interests.
- Students characterize the campus climate as generally safe and welcoming, but not entirely comfortable. Existing campus diversity policies and practices are a necessary first step, but they are not sufficient for creating a truly inclusive student experience.
- Institutional ignorance of trans issues in policy and practice presents significant barriers to positive student experiences. The cumulative effects of this ignorance across the campus exact an additional burden on transgender and gender non-conforming students.
- Transgender and gender non-conforming students have many ideas for making UCLA a more positive and inclusive campus; however, busy student schedules, a lack of collective political clout, and

perceptions of campus disinterest make it difficult for students to advocate for themselves.

## Introduction

Over the past decade, efforts to foster and support diversity on college campuses have led to increased attention to the experiences of different populations including Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) students. While this student population has garnered attention from researchers and practitioners in higher education, much remains unknown about the heterogeneity that exists within the population. Specifically, attention paid to LGBT students as a single group has resulted in a limited understanding of the unique experiences of transgender and gender non-conforming students. Ultimately, there remains a limited understanding of the experiences of college students with minority gender identities and expressions, their perceptions of the campus environment, and how this identity shapes their overall impression of and access to campus resources. In an effort to contribute to knowledge about this particular student population, this study explored the following questions:

- How do transgender or gender non-conforming students at UCLA experience campus climate and make meaning of their identity in the campus context?
- What are the challenges faced by transgender and gender non-conforming students at UCLA and what are the sources of support they use to navigate those challenges?
- What do transgender and gender non-conforming students identify as areas for improvement at UCLA?

## Background

The term “transgender” is used as an umbrella term to encompass many different gender identities and expressions. These include, but are not limited to: cross-dresser, drag queen, transsexual, drag king, bi-gender, genderqueer, and two-spirit. Some individuals prefer not to identify as transgender because it connotes a physical transition from one gender to another, and prefer, instead, terms such as *gender non-conforming* or *gender variant* (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2005; Ryan & Futterman, 1997; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011). Throughout this report, we use the term *transgender* (and its shortened version of *trans*) to

refer to transgender and gender nonconforming individuals representing a broad range of identities including individuals who have or are transitioning from one traditional gender (man/woman) to the other (with or without gender affirmation therapies) as well as those who are gender non-conforming, genderqueer, agender, bi-gender, cross-dressers, and androgynous.

Although transgender individuals are often grouped as part of a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) category, such categorization can be problematic because transgendered identity and expression relate to a combination of one’s birth sex, gender role and gender identity whereas sexual orientation distinctly relates to an individual’s sexual attraction, sexual identity, and sexual behavior. Transgender individuals may identify as heterosexual, lesbian, gay, bisexual, or asexual (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2005; Ryan & Futterman, 1997; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011). Yet, gender and sexual orientation are commonly confused, which leads to misinformation about the various subpopulations under the LGBT umbrella (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2005).

Within the context of higher education, trans college students experience ongoing marginalization that can cause them psychological distress, physical harm, and undermine their educational goals (Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011). For example, a national survey revealed that trans students were far more likely to have negative perceptions of their campus climate, leading them to hide their gender identity out of fear for their safety, with some considering leaving college altogether (Rankin, Weber, Blumenfeld, & Fraser, 2010). Both graduate and undergraduate trans students have identified lack of faculty and staff education around transgender issues, inadequate college counseling services, and shortages of campus support resources as issues that lead to feelings of marginalization (McKinney, 2005). Student affairs professionals note that the most common problem areas on-campus for trans students are “programming, housing, bathrooms and locker rooms, counseling and health care, and records and documents” (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005, p. 49). Experts suggest that making our campuses more inclusive requires that educators and administrators raise awareness of trans issues, make trans-related information available, change institutional practices, and initiate long-term policy changes

(Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, & Smith, 2005).

It is important to note that trans individuals experience marginalization within the campus context and in society at large. Indeed, the trans population continues to face a host of obstacles including employment, housing, and health care discrimination as well as physical harassment and violence. Experiences with discrimination, harassment, and violence can take a serious psychological and physical toll on transgender individuals (Herman, 2013). Trans individuals experience disproportionate rates of self-harming behaviors such as substance abuse and suicidal behaviors (Clements-Nolle, K., Marx, R., Guzman, R., & Katz, M., 2001). Finding ways to effectively support transgender individuals on college campuses is one step toward a broader goal of equitable treatment for this population.

## Methods

SAIRO researchers used a qualitative study design to explore the experiences of transgender students at UCLA, their perceptions of campus climate, challenges and sources of support, as well as recommendations for improving campus. Semi-structured interviews (lasting approximately 60 minutes each) were conducted with 16 undergraduate, graduate, and professional students who identified as transgender. Audio recordings of interviews were transcribed and

coded for themes related to research questions. To protect the privacy of participants, potentially identifying information was removed from transcripts and pseudonyms were used in reporting their experiences. Due to the small size of the campus population, undergraduate, graduate, and professional students were recruited to maximize the total number of respondents. This strategy also permitted researchers to capture a wide range of student perspectives and experiences. In addition to selecting their own pseudonym, participants were also asked for their preferred gender pronoun (e.g. she, he, they, etc.) for use in reporting.

Information about students' gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, age, and student standing were collected through an online recruitment survey. Data about students' fields of study and housing arrangements were compiled from interview transcripts. **Table 1** displays interview participants' characteristics. Demographics are not further disaggregated to protect the identities of participants.

## Findings

This section is organized according to concepts that emerged as important themes in interviews with transgender students. First, we describe the extent of diversity within the trans population interviewed for this study. Second, we describe participants' perceptions of the campus environment and some of the

**Table 1. Participant Characteristics**

Gender Identity/Expression	agender, genderfluid (1); female/neutral (1); FtM (Female-to-male) with a non-binary concept of gender (1); gender neutral (1); gender non-conforming (1); genderfluid (2); genderqueer (2); genderqueer/neutral (1); transfeminine (1); transgender (1); transgender woman (1); (trans) male (3)
Sexual Orientation	asexual (1); bisexual (2); bisexual/queer (1); femophilic (1); lesbian (2); pansexual (2); queer (3); queer or pansexual (1); straight (2); unsure (1)
Race/Ethnicity	Caucasian (1); Chinese (1); European American (1); genetically Jewish/White (1); Indian (1); Latin@ (1); Latino Swedish (1); Mexican (1); N/A (1); Vietnamese (1); White (5); White/mixed (1)
Student Status	undergraduate direct admit (6); undergraduate transfer student (4); graduate/professional (6)
Area of Study	arts/humanities (2); physical/life sciences (4); social sciences (5); professional (business, education, law, health, public affairs) (4); undeclared (1)
Housing Arrangements	off-campus (10); UCLA housing (5); unknown (1)

challenges they have faced as transgender and gender nonconforming individuals. Next, we identify specific sources of support participants relied on to successfully navigate campus. Finally, we offer participant recommendations creating a more welcoming campus for transgender students.

### **Trans Diversity at UCLA**

Perhaps the most salient finding about the trans student population is that there does not appear to be one clear-cut pattern to describe this group of students or their overall college experience. Participants' perceptions of what it means to be a transgender or gender non-conforming student were incredibly diverse and represented a broad range of identities within the trans umbrella. While the heterogeneity of the trans population represents a challenge in terms of providing support for the entire group, it also highlights the tremendously rich diversity of the population and the need for institutions to welcome, engage, and capitalize on that diversity. This section will describe the transgender, gender queer, and other trans identities participants claimed for themselves.

#### *Transgender Identity*

Almost half of the study participants identified as transgender, having made the transition from their assigned gender at birth to living as their true selves. Overall, participants who identified as transgender were proud of their identities and generously offered to describe their experiences in the hopes of shedding light on the experiences of students like themselves. One important theme emerging from discussions with transgender students was, there are distinct differences in perceptions of trans identity between undergraduate and graduate students.

Transgender-identified graduate students tended to speak about their gender identities in less exploratory ways, presumably because they were older than the undergraduate students and had spent more years living as transgender individuals. Overall, graduate students tended to express a higher level of comfort with their identities and less concern about others' perceptions of them, as exemplified by Abhaya, who said: "I don't care a lot about what other people looking at me think about me. It has changed over the years. I think I identified more with the female gender when I was a bit younger because I was too sort of confused, and I didn't exactly know what was going on. But now I

moved beyond that." Indeed, it seemed that graduate students described their trans identity as something that they have been living with for a while and were comfortable with, even if others did not understand or accept their identity.

Gabe was a prime example of a graduate student with a developed sense of his transgender identity. As a teaching assistant in his department, he described himself as a potential source of support for trans-identified undergraduate students. He was able to reflect on his experiences as a first generation trans and genderqueer college student and having to deal with his undergraduate institutions' limited working knowledge of his needs. He said of the time between high school and college:

I came out when I was 16 as genderqueer, initially. When I came out, there were just not many trans people around, but there were especially not very many trans people in high school... At the time that I came out, there was a group of us high-schoolers who came out because we were around this older group of mid-20's radical, political types. That's where it was happening, and if you weren't willing to be really politically radical and really uncomfortable in most spaces that you were in, then you didn't come out as genderqueer 'cause it was just too much. It was too much for most people, and it's not – I'm not gonna say that kids have it easy now, 'cause they don't. But there's a little bit more knowledge and a little bit less resistance to gender bending now than there was back when. And in a way, if I were coming out right now, I don't know whether I would have maintained some sort of androgyny in genderqueer identity because there's less pressure to affiliate than there was when absolutely no one had heard of trans people. Absolutely no one had heard of the gender spectrum and so forth.

Here, Gabe is able to reflect on the sociopolitical context in which he first came out as genderqueer and reflect how such contexts change the extent to which individuals are comfortable coming out as trans. He also talked about the importance of acknowledging gender as a being characterized by fluidity and existing as a spectrum, not a binary of male/female. He said: "I certainly don't identify particularly as man resolutely, and I use "trans man" 'cause it's the best

label that fits. Gabe expressed great knowledge of his own identity as well as how it fit within a broader social context, which demonstrates the years he has spent reflecting on issues of gender and queer identity. Now, he was in a position to help others, including his students, understand these issues. He said:

I mean, I try to communicate with my students. I try to sort of teach by example. So I do some good language stuff of teaching them the difference between gender and sex and being a stickler on their papers and making them not use male and female if they're talking about gender. I've got a "queer and trans safe space" sign on my office door that's very, very prominent and clearly not distributed by the school since I made it as a freshman in college – out of construction paper. So they definitely get that this is my opinion.

Thus, Gabe had a firm grasp of his own identity, how that identity has developed and changed over time, and was now in a position to support younger students through his work as a teaching assistant. Although every participant's story was unique, Gabe's experience exemplifies the strength with which participants, particularly graduate students, spoke about who they were and the ways in which they were prepared to be ambassadors of sorts for younger individuals exploring their trans identity.

Undergraduate students' descriptions of their identity were characterized by much more exploration than their graduate counterparts. Undergrads were less sure about how to approach engaging with others about their identity and were in the process of learning how to navigate being trans and a college student. For example, Eddie stated: "I don't feel good about my body or who I am. I don't know, I just feel like there's no end to this. There's no way I can, here at Ashe, there's nowhere for me to get treatment, I don't know where to go. What do I do the next time somebody mistakes my gender? Do I correct them? Which bathroom do I go into? Things like that [are challenging]."

Undergraduates' exploration of their trans identities was linked to an overall exploration of themselves, including a developing sense of academic interests. For example, Al had general areas of interest but was

n't sure "what I want to do with that." Al went on to state, "I don't know whether I want to try to go for grad school or what that graduate degree would even be... I think everyone says everyone graduates, and then they don't get jobs in their field. So I'm not even going to be naive enough to expect that. I don't think optimism is really adaptive right now." This, and similar statements from other undergraduate students, revealed that students were developing their areas of academic interest in tandem with a trans identity. In other words, undergraduate students described exploring fields of study that would build on a developing trans identity. For graduate students like Gabe, there was a much more solidified sense of their area of study and how their professional/academic interests connected, or not, with their personal identity. Undergrads were uncovering the meaning of their trans identity in their academic and professional lives. That students' trans identities were at various stage of development and exploration highlights the complexity and diversity of this student population.

### *Gender Queer Identity*

Over half of the students who participated in the study identified as genderqueer or otherwise gender non-conforming, and 7 out of 9 were undergraduates. Although most of these students described themselves as fitting under the trans identity umbrella, they did not specifically consider themselves to be transgender. Instead, they used terms like genderqueer, agender, androgynous, gender fluid, bi-gender, and gender neutral to define themselves. Genderqueer students generally understood their gender to be fluid, and some rejected the idea of binary gender altogether. Some participants thought of gender as a spectrum while others offered up their alternative formulation of gender. For example, J.K., a transfer student, offered their idea of gender: "It's kind of a cloud. It's like a little rainbow cloud. It's just like there's different points where it can be – The gender cloud, the queer cloud." In describing a gender queer identity, J.K. said:

I started realizing that maybe my gender didn't necessarily match up with "female" ways that I view the world and stuff. And as I was searching more and more, at first, I was like, okay, well my idea of femininity just doesn't line up with the rest of the world. And then I was like, well, no I don't

necessarily feel like I'm female, but I also... I definitely don't feel predominantly male. But then I was very kind of like confused by all of it and trying to assert binary terms to it when the sheer fact is that my whole life, I've never fit... looking back at my childhood and stuff, I was a genderqueer kid. . I didn't want to do the gender things that are expected of people. The point is that I've always felt like I transgressed that line. Like there's male and female and there's a line in between and I've either always stood on it or walked across it or even been above it or below it and around it.

J.K.'s story exemplifies the diversity of perspectives and experiences within the gender-queer category and the ways in which these perspectives and experiences can change over time. J.K described arriving at a gender-queer identity but feeling that this identity is constantly evolving. J.K. said:

Less than six months ago, I finally was like, okay, for real, I'm gender queer. I'm going to own that. Then, particularly in the last few months, I've started to realize that for me...I identify as a trans person, like not just as gender queer....I have a feeling of misalignment with the prescribed gender that I was given, but also with some of the body parts that I was given....Sometimes I do feel like it lines up and then sometimes it definitely doesn't.

Most of the time, it's kind of somewhere in between and that I'm okay with it. But there's certain things if I have a period, that is completely – like I still don't understand why that happens to me. And it's hard. And this is something just so recently that I'm realizing is like huge. It's huge for me to even be able to say this right now.

Evident from J.K.'s discussion of their gender queerness is that they are in the midst of exploring the possibilities of their gender identity and, perhaps more importantly, are doing so in the college context. Students' experiences were further complicated by questions about whether they should transition to another gender. Most participants were either hesitant to make such a permanent commitment or they experienced their gender identity as too fluid to make a decision one way or the other. Joelle, a graduate student who identified as genderqueer, had thought about sur-

gery and hormones but she did not feel equipped to handle it:

I thought I was potentially trans because I always wanted to be a girl... I had all these feelings when I was younger that I suppressed... To me, 'trans' means you have the desire to transition to the opposite sex potentially, physically... It's something that I've talked with my partner about...and it's still a possibility... but it's not something I necessarily want to do at this point in my life... It's financially exhausting. It's emotionally exhausting...It's an incredibly powerful and significant change that is unlike pretty much anything else I can think of. To go through that, I feel like you really have to know beyond a shadow of a doubt and be ready to do it because...it's probably one of the hardest things for anyone to go through.

It is important to mention that most students did not view their genderqueer identities as developmental pathways to transitioning; instead, it appears that most had considered the many possible ways to be trans and had concluded that their particular genderqueer identities were the most appropriate fit for them at that period in their lives. Each queer identified person had a very unique experience and journey that they took to arrive at this identity. Eddie, for example, was in the process of gathering information about medically transitioning. He recognized the need to connect with other trans students on campus to gain information about transitioning, stating: "I want to be involved in the trans community...myself as a trans person; I'm not that experienced yet. I'm not on hormones; I haven't done any surgeries or whatever.... [My friends and I do] not know the best way to get around this stuff. We only have what we know." Eddie emphasized the need to exchange information among trans students as a way to support each other's development and success at UCLA.

Ultimately, gender queer participants were more different from one another than they were alike; in fact, among the nine who identified as gender non-conforming, no one used exactly the same set of identity terms to describe themselves. But what was common across trans and gender queer identified participants was that they underwent or were undergoing a deeply personal journey of self-exploration and self-

definition. Participants were alike only in their refusal to conform to societal expectations of what it means to be men and women, masculine and feminine, male and female.

### *Other Trans Identities*

The trans umbrella includes several gender identities and expressions that do not necessarily fit into the categories of transgender or gender queer. Abhaya, a graduate student introduced earlier, participated in the study because he felt it was important to provide a voice for cross-dressers like himself. While he identified with the trans community and its issues, he said he was not particularly invested in preferred gender pronouns and cared more about being accepted as the gender he was expressing during that given moment: “I still identify with the male gender, but – so when I’m dressed up as a female, then I identify as the female gender.” When probed to describe whether he sees his cross dressing behaviors as part of his identity, he suggested that his cross dressing was not his most salient identity and that it is a practice he engages in for fun and not to be viewed as another gender. He said:

I’m not exactly sure what my overall identity is. It varies with the role that I sort of have, and that’s the general situation with the identity as such. I don’t think I have a very strong affinity with any kind of gender expression...  
[Cross-dressing] is just something that I like to do from time to time, and I enjoy feeling like that when I’m doing it.

Again, this graduate student’s description of his cross-dressing behavior and identification with the trans community is described more as matter of fact rather than as if he is in the middle of discovering and exploring possibilities for his identity. Indeed, Abhaya relayed that he didn’t care how people perceived him and described cross dressing mostly as a private practice that he chose to share with only a select group of friends. Cross-dressing represents yet another specific identity within the trans umbrella. In terms of other trans identities, it is important to note that participants mentioned Native American two-spirit people as belonging to the trans community, and although none of the participants said they identified this way, this does not mean that UCLA does not have two-spirit students on-campus.

The purpose of this section was to highlight the diversity within the trans population at UCLA and to identify how participants in this study specifically identified. This section demonstrated that participants adopted specific terms that were meaningful to them. Their trans or gender queer identity was an integral to their identity as a person and member of the UCLA community. The next section will describe students’ perceptions of the campus environment in terms of how welcoming (or not) they thought it was for their trans identities.

### **Perceptions of Campus Climate**

One of the goals of the study was to learn more about trans students’ perceptions of the campus environment. Participants were asked to identify places on campus that were particularly welcoming as well as spaces that they thought were unfriendly for trans identified students. Trans students found the overall campus climate to be supportive and welcoming but mostly unaware of trans people and trans-related issues. Although most students said there was no specific place that was more welcoming than others, upon further reflection, they shared instances of feeling uncomfortable on campus directly related to their trans identity. Thus, despite having general impressions of safety and inclusiveness, students’ descriptions of their experiences at UCLA revealed a somewhat chilly climate for trans people, which students attributed to ignorance about trans issues rather than overt hostility. This section will describe participants’ perceptions of the UCLA environment as generally safe and welcoming as well as note spaces seen as unwelcoming.

#### *UCLA as Safe And Welcoming*

Participants generally felt that UCLA was a welcoming, safe environment for LGBT students, although many expressed that there was a lack of specific awareness about trans identities and concerns. Again, key differences between graduate and undergraduate students surfaced. Graduate students, as one might expect, talked more about the climate within their academic departments whereas undergraduate students reflected on the extent to which UCLA as a whole was accepting and welcoming for trans students. For example, Erin, a graduate student, made a statement that was reflective of comments of other graduate students: “I don’t spend a lot of time on campus, actually, I mostly come onto the integrated campus just to

like use CAPS or the gym or whatever, but I tend to have class for like three days a week, and I don't ever come on the other days when I can help it. So I've had kind of minimal interaction with a lot of the rest of the school." Erin went on to state that within her academic department, there is a lot of misunderstanding about her trans identity. This was something Erin became used to at an early age because, although born female, Erin began to identify as male and was sexually attracted to boys. With limited access to peers who also identified as gay trans men, Erin often faced pressure to choose between her sexuality and gender. Within her academic department, Erin again faced confusion about her sexual and gender identities, with most people thinking of her as a lesbian woman. She said about her program:

It's really, really frustrating, and actually people in [my program] get really annoyed about it, particularly queer people have been really frustrating about it because it's weird. It's been a decently frequent occurrence during my life that people think I'm gay or something, but in [my program] just everybody seemed to think it. It was weird. I had never been in an environment where everyone just assumed it, I was like, 'No!' ... I guess it really just bothered me for people to think that I've been just like this closet lesbian this entire time... There are a lot of frustrating things with all this, but I think my biggest thing is just people mistaking the fact that my sexuality changed for maybe just incredibly closeted because that's been the complete opposite of my approach to everything in life.

Thus, in Erin's case, although she was accustomed to others conflating gender and sexuality, she expressed frustration that within her program, her identity was again narrowly defined by sexuality. People could simply not grasp that she could identify as transgender, and that this identity was distinct from her sexual orientation. Erin's experience highlights the diversity of the trans population and the general perception of graduate student participants that their academic departments were safe and welcoming but altogether ignorant about transgender individuals and their experiences. As a whole, graduate students were able to identify specific programs and policies that

were less welcoming to trans students in higher education, more broadly, and some sought to explore these issues of trans social justice in their academic work. Kitsune, Erin, and Ben were graduate students who made trans issues the focus of their academic pursuits; they were actively involved in researching and writing about trans issues.

As a whole, graduate students tended to be more focused on meeting immediate academic needs and were less critical of the extent to which UCLA, specifically, was welcoming and supportive of transgender students. This might be explained by the fact that they generally had been negotiating their gender identities within the college context for longer periods of time.

Also, graduate students tended not to build their personal lives around the college setting, and they were therefore more likely to be sensitive about campus policies and processes that were not gender-positive or progressive, rather than climate more broadly. Those who did problematize campus' treatment of trans students did so through their academic work on trans issues.

Undergraduates had largely positive things to say about the campus climate, although this was qualified in their description of specific contexts on campus (discussed in the next section). For example, Alexis shared her perception that UCLA was racially/ethnically diverse and her excitement that there was an LGBT Center on campus. Although she could not find anyone else on campus who identified as both trans and Latina/o, she was able to find a sense of belonging with peers: "I know that I'm not the first trans Latino person, but I feel like it sometimes, and ... I have had a lot of support here from the Latina queer community, and it's really – they're really fantastic people, and I just feel so blessed to be here." Similarly, other undergraduates described feeling fortunate that UCLA has the resources that it does, which signifies support of the LGBT population.

Related to the racial/ethnic diversity on campus, Maxwell aptly pointed out an intersection between racist and misogynist behaviors and that trans people of color can sometimes experience both on campus:

I remember one time very clearly when I was arguing with someone about Affirmative Action.

And, they started calling me – I started getting very heated. And, they said, “Calm down, ma’am. Calm down.” I said, “No, it’s sir. Stop calling me ma’am.” Like, “Okay, calm down, ma’am. You’re being too aggressive.” I’m like, “It is sir. How many times do I tell you?” And, they’re just like, “Okay, sir.” I could tell I was like – *and I think that’s something. The racial climate on campus really informs how gender is perceived.* [He was] perceiving me as a woman. Which is again, it’s not like it’s mean. It’s misogyny. So, I try really hard to separate because I know some trans people like, “Oh, people perceive me as a woman and it’s so humiliating.” I don’t want to give the idea that it’s humiliating to be perceived as a woman because most of the people that I admire are women. And, so I try to separate when is it misogyny and when is it being anti-trans? Those two things are very different. (italics added).

Here, Maxwell points out that when one is faced with hostility or ignorance, it is not always easy to tell whether the perpetrator is acting out of hostility for him as a trans person, as a woman, or out of racial bias. Luckily, most participants did not experience direct hostility from others and they were confronted mostly by what they perceived as ignorant or curious people, not outright hatred for trans people. Furthermore, in terms of safety, participants expressed an awareness that they could potentially be a victim of a crime because of their trans identity, but said that they did not feel that they were in physical danger on campus. While most participants were relatively happy with campus climate and forgiving of ignorance of trans issues, most also identified particular contexts that were less welcoming.

#### *Uncomfortable Contexts*

Although participants described the overall campus environment of UCLA as safe and welcoming, they also described specific contexts and experiences that made them uncomfortable. Participants found several campus contexts to be problematic. These contexts included physical spaces like restrooms, locker rooms, and other gendered settings. Mixed LGBT settings, meaning those designed to be primarily LGBT spaces, were also brought up by several students as sources of stress, frustration, and discomfort.

Participants often talked about how they handled these uncomfortable situations, and although they did not change their opinions about UCLA’s overall welcoming climate, students’ accounts of negative campus experiences appeared to contradict their positive assessment of the campus climate.

#### *Restrooms, showers, and locker rooms*

The most common complaints among participants were challenges related to using public restrooms, showers, and locker rooms. The marked lack of appropriate and easily accessible gender neutral facilities caused several students significant anxiety and discomfort. Although most participants did not report personal assaults or harassment while using UCLA facilities, more subtle behaviors on the part of others often made them feel unwelcome. For example, Maxwell gave an explanation for why he generally chooses to avoid restrooms on campus: “Well, I guess that’s also out of consideration for other people, too. I won’t be like – people come in and be like, ‘Oh, God, there’s like a man here in the bathroom,’ and that kind of stuff. Then I’m like, ‘Yeah, I’m in the wrong bathroom. I’m really sorry.’ Run away kind of thing.” Further, other participants recalled negative experiences they had outside UCLA or recalled stories they had heard about violence toward trans people and used these experiences and stories as reasons to avoid using public, shared-space restrooms and dressing areas altogether. For example, Eddie, a transman, avoided campus locker rooms completely, choosing instead to go home and shower after working out. Having never used a locker room before, he expressed concern to the interviewer about how gendered gym facilities worked: “Are there naked people in there?” Building one’s daily schedule around opportunities to use safe restrooms was something that a few students said they did. Alexis said she often went without using the bathroom all day to avoid the stress of having to negotiate tensions in restrooms. More than one student felt that women were more likely to have problems with gender non-conforming people in these spaces than men, but they did not explain why.

#### *Housing*

For participants who wanted to live in student housing, the experience of living with roommates and suitemates was often personally taxing. Participants generally said that their overall experiences on campus were positive but that housing was sometimes

-pus were positive but that housing was sometimes problematic: "I think that my experience has been pretty positive with the exception of some housing things." UCLA's housing assignment practices do not provide trans students with gender-neutral roommate matching, and its policies prohibit opposite-sex co-habitation unless the student has official records documenting their gender transition. For example, Eddie said that he experienced challenge in finding housing because: "they don't have any preferred gender, preferred names on the housing application so if you go in, I would be roomed with a girl and I feel like that's kind of awkward so I prefer to live in a single. Also just my living style, I don't feel comfortable living with other people." Ultimately, Eddie did not identify UCLA housing policies as discriminatory, but did talk about how both his personality and the fact that he is legally identified as female played a role in his decision to live alone.

Other participants who did opt to live with roommates in UCLA residence halls shared experiences in which roommates and suitemates moved away from them in the shared bathroom they were assigned to use in undergraduate housing. Emery said of his housing experiences:

It was all right. Like it was kind of annoying, because there were gendered bathrooms and like also our dorm was right next to the men's which we weren't allowed to use. So I remember that was—like living in an apartment now has been way better for me, because I go to the bathroom all the time. And like having to use a gendered bathroom every single time I go to the bathroom was really—it was pretty stressful sometimes. So that was one of the things that bugged me a lot living there.

Other participants complained about more than just gendered bathrooms in the context of housing. For example, Rosario shared a story about a friend's homophobic roommate who demanded to be transferred out of his room:

Housing here is so expensive. There's something that seems a little problematic about being able to live in a place where you are comfortable and having to pay more for it. I had a roommate who was kind of homophobic. One of my friends, her roommate is like an international Chinese student who doesn't

even know anything about LGBT. And one of the guys, he – since it was too expensive, he was like trying to get a new place to live. And the person who he was switching rooms with, when he found out it was the LGBT floor, he was like, 'Oh, never mind. I don't want to get raped by some fagot.'

In this case, Rosario describes witnessing her friend experience discrimination and outright homophobia, which made her afraid to live somewhere without serious and careful consideration of who she would be living with. She also describes how sometimes students cannot afford to live where they want and feel comfortable, saying, "Housing is really broken." Most undergraduates living in on campus housing were similarly worried or upset about having to live in close quarters with intolerant, homophobic, and transphobic students. Thus, housing represented a gendered context that was a source of significant stress and concern for many trans students, but especially for undergraduate students whose student experience is heavily structured around residential life.

### **Campus Resources: Sources of Support and Challenges to Access**

Beyond experiencing the aforementioned challenges associated with less than welcoming contexts, participants identified a number of general challenges associated with being trans on campus. This section will describe challenges associated with various campus resources that participants experienced as they were transitioning or as trans identified students. Specifically, this section will describe three primary sources of support identified by participants: CAPS, ASHE, and the LGBT Center, as well as the factors that shaped access to these resources. Overall, participants relied heavily on these resources and experiences were positive. However, a number of participants demonstrated a lack of awareness of these important resources.

#### *Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)*

While some participants were knowledgeable about the resources provided by CAPS specifically for trans students, others demonstrated a lack of knowledge of what CAPS was or how it could serve as a source of support for transgender students. For example, Praline witnessed an incident in which both campus police and CAPS were involved in physically restrain-

-lice and CAPS were involved in physically restraining another student, which led her to think of CAPS as being for severely mentally ill students. She asked: "Is CAPS just like for like therapy? Can they prescribe things? Do you have to get like a psych evaluation?" Praline had a limited understanding of CAPS and the ways that she could potentially benefit from it. Moose, on the other hand, knew that they could benefit from services at CAPS but shared that they were turned away until they provided proof from the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) that they indeed were qualified to participate in a particular support group. They indicated that testing and acquiring a referral to CAPS would require a fee that they weren't willing to pay, and subsequently did not follow up with CAPS. Moose shared that they were unable to access all services on campus because they felt there was a "barrier laden process of going back and forth." They went on to state that their experience with CAPS and OSD "wouldn't leave me with a very good impression about other things I might want to take care of here on campus if that was the process."

Other students described having a positive experience at CAPS and no trouble accessing services. For example, Joelle described benefiting from CAPS services, once he learned about them from a professor. He stated:

That's what the professor told me to do. He's like, here, go to Caps. He recommended that I go to that for therapy. Then I guess there were people who specialized in LGBT stuff and then I got recommended to work with them. Then they're like okay, I work at the LGBT Center these days. Their appointments are much more free those days, so that's why I'm over there.

Joelle and others pointed out that once they learned about the trans-specific services provided at CAPS, they were generally willing and able to access them, albeit some more comfortably doing so in the context of the office hours offered in the LGBT Center rather than the CAPS building.

#### *UCLA ASHE Center*

Students reported having overall positive experiences at the ASHE center, however, students in the process of transitioning experienced a number of challenges related to accessing appropriate medical care. For example, one participant talked about the staff at ASHE

being nice, even if they were unfamiliar with trans individuals. She said:

I went to the Ashe Center, and they were all really nice. I thought it was going to be much more like the people there were going to be more problematic, and uninformed, but they were just super nice, and even if they weren't perfect, like in terms of their knowledge. They kept apologizing, I was like it's fine. I don't care. At least you're trying. Also I don't care, you know someone who's like 60 years old or 50 years old...not knowing how to approach it exactly, or not knowing specific terminology just because they weren't like immersed in that dialogue in time

Other participants critiqued the center and insisted that the staff should be more knowledgeable about trans students and their health needs. This was particularly true for those in need of medical intervention as they transitioned. Indeed, Eddie was less forgiving about the lack of direction the Ashe Center was able to give him regarding starting the process of medically transitioning. He said of his experience:

I feel like it's just a shot in the dark, really. I think that we used to have somebody here at the Ashe Center who could prescribe hormones. But I think they left or something like that. So now it's kind of like...I feel if you get sent to the right people at the right time with the right reason, you can get hormones. Maybe. *[Laughter]* But that's like a big maybe. I've talked to my PCP about it and they're just kind of like, 'Well, I'm not really sure what we can do, but here's a referral to the endocrinologist over there.' For a few months later. So I decided not to do that.

Eddie's experience was not positive- he went to the Ashe Center in search of information about how to start the process of transitioning with the use of hormones. Instead of receiving information, he was dismissed with a referral and not a clear sense of his treatment options or how to pursue them. This is an important instance in which this person looked for help but he received none because no one knew what to do with a trans person. He said: "I feel like the trans policy is kind of non-existent."

### *The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Campus Resource Center*

Although a number of participants relied on the LGBT Campus Resource Center for support, and the Director in particular, many participants brought up the issue that the center is designed primarily to support sexual orientation minorities, not transgender and gender queer students. Participants did not blame the center and acknowledged that the director does everything he can to support students, but they also expressed concern that the LGBT Center does not explicitly allow for social connection and community building among transgender students. Abhaya, who reported never having set foot in the center, articulated:

Again, the problem is that for the transgender people, because we get lumped within the whole LGBTQ community, sometimes it's hard to find other transgender people, even if there are clubs like that on campus because people don't really talk to each other and say – I think when they meet in quantity, they don't really say they're there because they are L or G or T. They're just there because they're queer, so it's hard to sort of find out the other transgender people.

For Abhaya, he did not utilize the LGBT Campus Resource Center because, like other graduate students, his engagement was primarily with his academic department. He said:

I don't think I've ever come to the resource center before. In the second year I have sort of tried, but not through the resource center, but just through social media. I thought that there's nothing much that I can actually get from resource center because I don't have those psychological issues that probably would make me go and seek sort of clarifying help or maybe resources to sort of get an HRT [hormone replacement therapy] done. So I never had those kind of questions, and so I wasn't thinking in my mind where I could go and actually ask. And if I just asked for contact of other transgender students, I thought that I probably couldn't get that because there wouldn't be a database...I didn't feel like there was a possibility that I can get some useful information.

This participant described that he had no interest in the center because he felt that it could not do anything for him that he couldn't do himself. He thought of engaging with the UCLA trans community on social media, but went on to talk about some sort of database that would help him to identify other trans students. When asked to clarify his position, as to why he didn't believe the LGBTC Center would be a helpful resource he said:

Maybe I was completely wrong, but that was my perception. Yeah, and it felt like it was just a center for information, right, more than actually interacting with people. Had there been events – I know there are some events like ice cream tastings they have in the summer and board games they have on Thursdays, but because they're on weekdays and we have classes till 10:00 p.m. sometimes, so I couldn't come to those, but other than that, I felt like it's just information center, so I didn't know what to go and ask.

As with Praline and her perceptions of CAPS, Abhaya demonstrated a limited understanding of the resources provided by the LGBT Center. Based on this limited understanding, he opted not to utilize this particular campus resource. Abhaya's point that the LGBT Campus Resource Center was not enough to effectively build a trans community on campus was a challenge that many participants, who had visited the center, identified. There was not a consensus among students about exactly how many transgender and gender non-conforming students might be attending UCLA, but they unanimously expressed that the number was probably small. Students mentioned that they personally knew of fewer than 10 students. The small number of trans-identified students on campus posed a significant challenge to establishing a sense of a trans community on campus.

Indeed, a major theme that emerged from the data was that students did not feel that there was a trans community. They identified "pockets" of trans-identified people as groups of friends or individuals who frequented the LGBT Campus Resource Center. For example, some students felt a sense of a trans community through their participation in umbrella LGBT student organizations and CAPS counseling groups. Most students who talked about connecting with other trans students framed those efforts in terms

of trying to figure out one's identity, finding support, and information. However, some students did not feel it necessary to connect with trans students in order to find social and emotional support.

## **Recommendations from Participants**

Participants described several, relatively small, changes that could improve their experiences on campus. Participants also identified broader changes, such as the recognition of sexual orientation as distinct from gender identity, and respect for diversity in society, that would improve the lives of trans individuals. Participants recognized that ideological changes in society were not likely to be solved by any one institution, but felt that UCLA was, for the most part, providing a safe space for transgender students to learn. Some participants, particularly graduate students, were committed to working to improve the lives of trans individuals by making trans issues the center of their academic work. What follows is a description of the smaller scale, but important, changes that participants believed could enhance their experience at UCLA.

### *Preferred name*

A number of participant recommendations centered on creating a process by which students could change their official university record to reflect a name different than that which they were given at birth. In other words, several participants had chosen names for themselves that reflected their true identities, but felt that there was no way to have this change reflected in their school records unless their name was legally changed. Some felt that it would be a relatively easy process to allow students to check a box or indicate in some way that their given name was not the name they actually used. Participants said that their records and BruinCard should have some inclusion of the name they actually use.

The most troubling aspect of being called by a birth name instead of a chosen name, was when instructors called out their name the name did not reflect the gender they presented to others in class. Though this did not cause a serious impediment to their academic success, participants indicated that allowing students to chose how they are referred to, in terms of name and gender pronouns, was a small step that the university could take to be a more welcoming environment for transgender individuals. Further, participants encour-

aged teaching assistants and professors to ask students their preferred gender pronoun, rather than assuming a gender identity and assigning a pronoun based on appearance. Also, participants noted the need for instructors and the broader campus environment to recognize the limitations of the gendered male/female binary.

Another recommendation related to fostering a more positive classroom environment was to incorporate trans perspectives into the curriculum when possible. Given that many students talked about their courses as a vehicle for exploring their own trans identity and development, it is not surprising that students would desire more explicit course content reflecting trans perspectives and experiences.

### *Gender Neutral Restrooms/Facilities*

Participants consistently advocated for increasing the number of gender-neutral restrooms and facilities on campus. During interviews, participants seemed to count the out loud the total number of gender-neutral restrooms on campus, noting that they are sporadically placed on campus and not in every building. Participants suggested increasing the number of gender-neutral restrooms in all buildings as a way to both further disrupt a gender binary, and provide appropriate access to necessary facilities for individuals who do not fall into traditional gender categories.

### *Access to Health Insurance and Care*

An important theme that emerged from a discussion of recommendations was that students desired a more streamlined process by which trans students could obtain trans-specific health information, particularly that pertaining to transition options. While most participants were not considering transitioning, some were or had in the past and did not find it particularly easy to acquire information about how to do this as a UCLA student. Participants suggested establishing a transparent process that would make information easily accessible, and advertising that process widely. The underlying theme regarding accessing health services was that clinicians and other staff should "know what to do with trans students." Study participants emphasized that clinicians and staff need to know what to do in the event a student has trans-related health issues and questions.

## LGBT Center

Although identified as a primary source of support, students understood the LGBT Campus Although identified as a primary source of support, students understood the LGBT Campus Resource Center as one designed primarily to serve LGB students, rather than trans students. They suggested increased outreach to trans students, including events specifically geared toward trans issues. Further, participants shared the recommendation to create a way to connect with other trans students at UCLA via social media. One participant suggested created a Facebook page for trans-identified students and ensuring that privacy settings protected the identity of participants. In terms of reaching trans graduate students, often siloed in their own departments, one participant suggested holding trans student events later in the evening (e.g. social networking nights) and marketing them widely to graduate students.

## Campus Climate

In terms of “big picture” changes, participants emphasized the need to educate members of the UCLA community about the distinction between sexual orientation and gender identity. They felt that the campus could do more to empower students to build community with other trans individuals and empower them to vocalize their presence and needs on campus. Though, the absence of a politically active and visible trans community did not appear to impede their individual success, students posited that trans students coming together could only result in more support for individuals and greater recognition and understanding of trans issues and concerns. While participants expressed an understanding of a unified trans community as a positive thing, they also emphasized the need to recognize intersecting oppressions that trans individuals may face on the basis of gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, disability, transfer student status, etc.

## Conclusion

This study has demonstrated the rich diversity of the trans student population at UCLA. I identified some of the challenges these students face as they navigate campus and interact with faculty, students, and staff. There are a number of changes (both big and small) that participants said they wanted to see made so that students like themselves can have a better experience.

These recommendations centered on equitable treatment in housing, access to gender-neutral public restrooms, and appropriate health care resources. Although, many students would definitely recommend trans peers attend UCLA, findings from this report suggest that there remain steps the campus can take to ensure that current and future transgender students feel not only welcomed and safe, but that the diversity they bring to campus is outwardly celebrated, respected, and valued.

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## Resources

National Center for Transgender Resources website:  
*Transgender Terminology*

[http://transequality.org/Resources/  
TransTerminology\\_2014.pdf](http://transequality.org/Resources/TransTerminology_2014.pdf)

UCLA Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Campus Resource Center website: *Transgender Resources*

<http://www.lgbt.ucla.edu/transresources.html>

The Williams Center at the UCLA School of Law website: Research on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy <http://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu>