

Improving Trans Lives on Campus

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There are an [estimated 1.4 million people that are trans in the United States \(U.S.\)](#); the highest percentage of trans-identifying people reside in the states of Hawaii and California (Flores, Herman, Gates, & Brown, 2016) and the age group with the highest percentage of trans-identifying people are 18-24 (James, Herman, Rankin, Keisling, Mottet, & Anafi, 2016). Although these statistics demonstrate the existence of trans people in the United States, they do not communicate the realities under which many trans people live. The [2015 U.S. Transgender Survey conducted by the National Center for Transgender Equality](#) reports “disturbing patterns of mistreatment and discrimination and startling disparities between transgender people in the survey and the U.S. population [with regard] to the most basic elements of life” (James, et al., 2016, pg. 2). In addition to denying access to such basic necessities, the Trump administration repealed protections against health discrimination for transgender people that were included in the Affordable Care Act. The [new guidance from the Department of Health and Human Services](#) mandated that healthcare providers could refuse healthcare of any type to trans people as well as entrenching the conflation of gender with binary sex as only male and female. Until the recent Supreme Court ruling in [Bostock v. Clayton County](#) and [Harris Funeral Homes vs. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission \(EEOC\)](#), trans people were not protected from employment discrimination in 28 states and until recently, employers could fire you for being trans.

Discrimination against transgender youth can lead to attempted suicide and



impact on mental health. According to a [GLSEN \(Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network\) 2017 survey](#) on school climate in K-12 show that schools without supportive and inclusive policies are more likely to miss school (67% vs. 54.7%), are more likely to be prevented from using their chosen name and pronouns (47.5% vs. 22.5%), and are more likely to be required to use the incorrect restroom (51.9% vs. 23.5%) (Kosciw et al., 2017). Of those surveyed in the study by GLSEN, 83.7% of transgender and 69.9% of gender non-conforming students were harassed and bullied at schools due to their gender. The compounding factors of discrimination and prejudice experienced by trans people contribute to the fact that [at least 54% of transgender people attempted suicide at least one point in their lives](#). It is important to consider these experiences of trans people when addressing campus climate and policies at institutions and how it impacts measures of student success like retention and graduation.

Although discourse on the negative implications for trans people is important, so is research on the resilience and resistance of trans people amidst oppressive systems and structures, including postsecondary institutions. Trans students have created [ways to relate, connect, and create coalition with one another](#) in order to build “a constellation of kinship networks” that provides affirmation and an honoring of people’s gender expressions, identities, and embodiments. This also includes a place where gender binary discourse and *compulsory heterogenderism* are not perpetuated, as well as mobilization to create liberation for trans people.



In this policy brief, the [Race and Intersectional Studies in Educational Equity \(RISE\) Center](#) at Colorado State University highlights research from RISE scholars, [Dr. Kari Dockendorff](#) and [Dr. D-L Stewart](#) to spotlight how postsecondary institutions can show that trans people are not only accepted, but understood for their complexity and resistance to oppression. We will examine how institutions can address the gender binary in traditional institutional practices, highlight trickle-up policy that centers trans folx, and reimagine inclusive high-impact practices.

Address Gender Binary in Traditional Institutional Practices

In conceptualizing how postsecondary institutions can meet the needs of trans students, we need to recognize how [postsecondary institutions have centered the gender binary](#) to cause deleterious harm to trans students. The use of the gender binary comes in the form of separate housing, different codes of clothing, participation in extracurricular activities, and even in ceremonial moments like homecoming and graduation, and are all examples of [compulsory heterogenderism](#). Perpetuation of the gender binary has historically excluded trans and gender non-conforming students in practice and discourse of housing, academic classrooms, and involvement opportunities. Trans students struggle to show their whole identity, as well as prove and show their humanity to those who would argue against their existence (Stewart, 2017). This erasure in higher education is still present today as campus policies are updated but do not include language in admissions forms, health center forms, and information technology



accessibility for changing names and/or gender designation. The support of trans students in these myriad of ways will improve the climate for trans folx and gender for all.

Trans Centered Trickle-Up Policy Building

[Trickle-up activism](#) (Spade, 2015) discusses a praxis that centers people who are most vulnerable and prioritizes that activism is led for the benefit of people that have been deemed disposable (Nepon, Redfield, & Spade, 2013). An example of trickle up activism occurs within resource centers that serve the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans (LGBT) community on college campuses. The [first gay and lesbian resource center in post-secondary education](#) was founded in 1971 at the University of Michigan. The inclusion of transgender people thru its services and education in post-secondary resource centers began to occur 30 years later (Dockendorff, Nanney, & Nicolazzo, 2019).

Trickle-up policies can show up in a variety of ways on campuses such as excluding requirements of medical procedures of trans applicants at historically gendered colleges (Dockendorff, Nanney, & Nicolazzo, 2019). Admissions forms should include options for gender identification, non-legal name, and pronouns outside of the assigned-at-birth gender binary or requiring medical transition upon application (Dockendorff, Nanney, & Nicolazzo, 2019). Demographic information on transgender community members in admissions and institutional research can provide more information on how to better serve your campus community and should offer options outside of a gender binary with gender identification (Dockendorff, Nanney, & Nicolazzo, 2019).



In understanding how trickle-up policies are formed and processed, [higher education must understand these policies are also incomplete and open to change](#) (Dockendorff, Nanney, and Nicolazzo, 2019). Trickle-up policies allow for the possibility of reimagining policy and creates a pathway for these new policies to be envisioned by a community of folx that include the trans community. The process that trickle-up activism stresses also highlights that the process is more important than the policy created which shows that policies should not be replicated without the core process of community action.

Reimagine Inclusive High Impact Practices

High-Impact Practices (HIPs) are marketed by postsecondary institutions to promote unique experiences for students that are only possible during their time and can create more potential pathways to graduate and employment after graduation. These types of practices may be highly regarded to promote student learning and are not necessarily created by communities that are the most marginalized by these practices that may not be able to engage in such activities. HIPs fail to consider marginalization and oppression while also centering whiteness. For example, volunteering, studying abroad, and engaging in unpaid [white, hegemonic] internship opportunities provides opportunity for privileged students with access to resources such as time, labor, and finances. These practices do not account for familial obligations or financial accessibility that students may have that can limit their ability to participate (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). HIPs do a



disservice to the trans community and there is no magical fix (Dockendorff, 2017).

Institutions should focus on providing [Trickle-Up High-Impact-Practices \(TUHIPs\)](#) and the centering on the most marginalized first when making policy for and with trans students (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018). Post-secondary institutions should center the institutional needs and leadership of trans people on their campuses without having cisgender people lead trans policy initiatives (Stewart & Nicolazzo, 2018).

Conclusion

On June 15, 2020, the [Supreme Court ruled that sexual orientation and gender identity](#) are protected identities in the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and that employers cannot fire someone for these protected identities. Although employment discrimination on basis of sexuality and gender identities are addressed with the Supreme Court ruling, excluded are [legal protections for trans people against accessing homeless and tax-payer funded housing](#) and protection from [discrimination by landlords, public accommodations, or businesses](#). Also, the use of the [“trans panic” defense](#) (when trans people are killed or murdered by defendants pleading insanity or lack of capacity and self defense due to the victim’s sexual orientation or gender identity) continues to be an acceptable defense and is [only banned in eleven states](#).

The impact of the Supreme Court’s decision on postsecondary education remains unclear, but postsecondary institutions can show support of the trans community and provide guidance and create policies that strategically center and work in coalition



with trans students, faculty, and staff. By taking into consideration the impact of federal and state legislative policies on trans people when making campus policy decisions, postsecondary institutions can re-center current policies and practices that will positively impact the trans community and ensure that they are not left behind or forgotten. Addressing the gender binary, adapting trickle-up policy making, and reimagining high-impact practices are only three examples of the extant ways that trans folx lives can improve on campus. Research from RISE scholars Dr. Kari Dockendorff and Dr. D-L Stewart provides critical scholarship for postsecondary institutions to learn from and help build on the momentum of the Supreme Court rulings.



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