

Sue Rankin and Genny Beemyn report on results from the first large-scale study of transgender diversity; they describe the gender identity development processes of transsexual, cross-dressing, and genderqueer individuals and suggest ways that colleges and universities can disrupt binary gender systems.

*By Sue Rankin and Genny Beemyn*

# Beyond a Binary: The Lives of Gender-Nonconforming Youth

**A** COLLEGE PROFESSOR IS ASKED BY A STUDENT AFTER CLASS to use gender-inclusive pronouns when referring to “hir.” A student assigned male at birth takes advantage of the ability to have one’s preferred name, rather than one’s legal name, on the institution’s online directory in order to change his male given name to a culturally female one. A female-assigned student contacts the campus lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender resource center to inquire about the process for having “top surgery”—that is, the removal of female breasts to have a traditionally male chest—covered by the college’s health insurance policy.

These and similar situations are increasingly encountered by college educators, particularly student affairs professionals, and exemplify what we discovered while conducting research for our 2011 book, *The Lives of Transgender People*. Through data collected from 3,500 surveys and 400 interviews with trans-masculine, trans-feminine, and gender-nonconforming people in the United States, we uncovered growing gender diversity, especially among young people. Just how diverse this country is becoming was revealed when our respondents used more than a hundred different ways to describe their gender identity. Many said describing their gender was not easy, with some resort-

ing to percentages to describe their identities (such as one-third male, one-third female, and one-third transgender) and others saying simply, “I am me.”

The vast majority of college students, classroom faculty, student affairs educators, and administrators have a tremendous amount to learn about gender diversity. For this majority and for gender-nonconforming students and educators, opportunities are all but untapped to leverage this diversity to enhance learning, as well as to support and celebrate these individuals. On the other hand, every day that too many students and educators remain ignorant about this population is another day gender-diverse students face overt or unintentional discrimination. This article is intended to report some of the findings from the first large-scale study conducted to examine the diversity that falls under the term “transgender.” In seeking to support gender-nonconforming students, we had been particularly concerned with the absence of studies that compare the identity development processes of different transgender groups, especially people who identify outside of the gender binary of “man” and “woman” and people from different age cohorts. Therefore, our study, this article, and our book focus on these identity development processes. We begin with a discussion of the life milestones encountered by gender-diverse individuals and end with recommendations for supporting

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the learning, development, and success of college students who identify as gender-nonconforming.

## TRANSGENDER IDENTITY MILESTONES

IN COMPARING THE GENERAL EXPERIENCES of the participants who identified as MTFs/trans women, FTMs/trans men, female-presenting cross-dressers, and genderqueer individuals, we uncovered eight “milestones” or significant life moments that many of the respondents in each group experienced in common as they came to recognize and accept themselves as transgender. The milestones were (1) feeling gender different from a young age; (2) seeking to present as a gender different from the one assigned to them at birth; (3) repressing or hiding their identity in the face of hostility and/or isolation; (4) initially misidentifying their identity; (5) learning about and meeting other trans people; (6) changing their outward appearance in order to look more like their self-image; (7) establishing new relationships with family, partners, friends, and coworkers; and (8) developing a sense of wholeness within a gender normative society (see Table 1).

Some of the milestones were less (or not at all) applicable to a number of the younger transgender participants, who grew up with greater access to information and resources than did transgender people in previous decades. Because they often learned about

and accepted the idea of being transgender at a young age, they did not repress their gender identity or see themselves as some other identity first. Many of the younger transgender respondents also reached certain milestones sooner, such as knowing about and meeting other transgender people.

### Feeling Gender Different From a Young Age

OUR PARTICIPANTS WERE ASKED TO IDENTIFY when they began to feel “different” from others because of how they perceived their gender. The mean was 5.4 years old. Almost a fifth of the respondents said that they “always” or from their “earliest memories” felt a sense of gender difference. “Rickey,” a nineteen-year-old white and American Indian (Cherokee) transsexual man, remembers playing with other male children from the time that he was four years old and “didn’t understand why everyone would put things in terms of ‘me’ and ‘them.’” After years of being told that he was a girl, Rickey was “painfully aware that [he] wasn’t the same as them, and [he] could never really accept that.” He states: “I would deny [being female] until I couldn’t breathe, but it never made any difference to anyone else.”

Obviously the participants who were in their late teens and early twenties would have had to recognize themselves as different from other people of their assigned gender at a relatively young age in order to have subsequently identified as transgender and taken part in the study. But almost all of the participants (97 percent) indicated that they realized that they did not fit in with others of their assigned gender by the end of their teenage years.

### Seeking to Present as a Gender Different From the One Assigned to Them at Birth

ROUGHLY EQUAL PERCENTAGES OF THE TRANSEXUAL women (82 percent) and transsexual men (78 percent) indicated that they dressed and acted as the gender they felt themselves to be when they were young. But while the FTM indi-

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**TABLE 1. SUMMARY OF MILESTONES FOR EACH GENDER GROUP**

<b>FTM Milestones</b>	<b>MTF Milestones</b>	<b>CD Milestones</b>	<b>GQ Milestones</b>
Feeling and often expressing a male gender identity from a young age	Feeling and often expressing a female gender identity from a young age	Experiencing attraction to “women’s” clothes and cross-dressing from a young age	Feeling and often expressing a different gender identity from a young age
Repressing or hiding one’s identity in the face of hostility and/or isolation	Repressing or hiding one’s identity in the face of hostility and/or isolation	Buying or obtaining one’s own “women’s” clothing	Realizing that genderqueer is a viable identity
Thinking of oneself as lesbian but realizing over time it is not a good fit	Learning about and meeting other transsexual women	Repressing the desire to cross-dress and purging clothing because of shame	Deciding how to express oneself as genderqueer
Realizing that there are FTM individuals and that transitioning is possible	Recognizing oneself as transsexual, rather than a cross-dresser	Learning about and meeting other cross-dressers	Encountering resistance to a non-binary gender expression or identity
Learning about and meeting other transsexual men	Overcoming denial and internalized genderism to accept oneself as female	Overcoming shame to accept oneself as a cross-dresser	Not fitting in to transgender/LGBT communities
Overcoming denial and internalized genderism to accept oneself as male	Taking hormones and perhaps having surgery to look more like self-image	Cross-dressing in public for the first time and adopting a feminine name	Creating a home within or outside of transgender/LGBT communities
Taking hormones and having top surgery to look more like self-image	Choosing whether and when to tell others, and developing new relationships after disclosure	Choosing whether and when to tell others, and developing new relationships after disclosure	
Choosing whether and when to tell others, and developing new relationships after disclosure	Having a sense of wholeness even if not always able to be seen as a woman	Arriving at a comfortable place with cross-dressing	
Having a sense of wholeness as a different kind of man			

viduals largely did so openly and were often allowed to be tomboys without concerns being raised initially about their sexuality or gender, all of the MTF individuals did so secretly, fearing punishment from their families for gender-inappropriate behavior. This concern was not misplaced; the male-assigned children who were caught cross-dressing were often harshly disciplined, with some reporting that they were physically or sexually assaulted, and others indicating that they were sent to therapists or institutionalized to be “cured.” Soon after Diana began cross-dressing at age six or seven, she was caught by her mother and subsequently whipped by her father. She was more careful about cross-dressing thereafter but was still caught a

number of times and severely punished. Eventually, her parents grew tired of beating her and locked her in a room instead, what she calls being “treated like an animal.” These experiences made it difficult for Diana to accept herself, and by her twenties she was using drugs “to go numb” and subconsciously, she now believes, trying to kill herself.

As discussed by Diane Ehrensaft and Belle English, a growing number of families today are sharing how they have accepted that their child might be transgender and allowing them to present as the gender to which they identify. But these families remain the minority. Many children, especially male-assigned children who identify as female, are sent to counselors

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for reparative therapy in an attempt to prevent them from becoming transgender adults. As with such therapy aimed at lesbians and gay men, it only succeeds in causing the individual to repress their sense of self.

### **Repressing or Hiding Their Identity in the Face of Hostility and/or Isolation**

**GIVEN THE EFFORTS TO PREVENT MANY** of the MTF participants from growing up to be gay or transgender, it is not surprising that they were more likely than the FTM participants to have felt guilty about or to have denied their gender feelings. Thirteen (22 percent) of the transsexual women whom we interviewed stated that they had been ashamed of this part of themselves, or had thought it was sinful and prayed to be able to stop cross-dressing. Gwen's stepfather "beat the hell out of [her] a lot" for being feminine, leading her to deny her gender identity for more than 20 years and "spen[d] a lot of time praying, hoping it would go away." But her sense of herself as female kept coming back. She finally realized that she would have to learn to live with herself, and states that she is "much happier now."

In contrast, only one transsexual male interviewee said that he had felt guilty about being male-identified. Nearly twice as many of the MTF as FTM respondents (42 percent versus 22 percent) indicated that they sought to hide or overcome their gender feelings by trying to fit into traditional gender roles.

The Internet and increased attention to transgender people in the news media and popular culture have made it possible for young people who are transgender to access information more readily and to meet other transgender people virtually, if not in person. However, openly embracing a transgender identity can still be difficult, especially for MTF individuals in their teens and early twenties. We have observed that at many colleges and universities, more FTM and female to different gender students are out than MTF and

male to different gender students. On some campuses, the ratio of openly trans men to openly trans women appears to be as high as 10 to 1.

### **Initially Misidentifying Their Identity**

**FEELING DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS** of their assigned gender eventually led all of the participants to realize that the gender attributed to them was not who they were, or at least not all of who they were. But many of the respondents, especially those who grew up prior to the 1980s, initially did not understand their experiences or have the appropriate language to describe them, leading many to remain confused or to mischaracterize their identities. In particular, the older heterosexual FTM individuals frequently first considered themselves to be butch lesbians, and the older MTF individuals often first thought that they were cross-dressers.

For more than three-fourths of the heterosexual FTM respondents, identifying as butch lesbians initially satisfied their desire to date women and dress and present in more traditionally masculine ways. Over time, however, they felt uncomfortable with this identity because they recognized that they were much more male than the butch lesbians around them, and they discovered or learned more about FTM individuals (most had only known about individuals assigned male at birth who transitioned to female).

Some participants who were attracted to women did not identify as lesbians because both they and their partners saw them as men. It did not matter that they had female bodies. Others did not have female partners, despite being attracted exclusively to women, because they knew that they were not lesbians and did not want to be considered as such by partners just because of their female anatomies. Mark, for example, became a loner beginning in his teen years because he did not want to be in relationships in which he would be treated as female. Unhappy in a society that could

not recognize him as he saw himself, Mark turned to alcohol and other drugs as a coping mechanism until he learned more about transsexuality in his late thirties and realized that he could transition.

By comparison, many of the MTF participants began to recognize themselves as female through cross-dressing, so it is not surprising that some thought that they were simply cross-dressers and not transsexual individuals. Some also did not want to believe that they were transsexual, fearing how it would affect their lives. Thirty-eight percent of respondents mentioned that they first identified as cross-dressers before realizing or admitting to themselves that their female gender feelings went beyond expressing a feminine side. They began to identify as transsexual when they recognized that they never wanted to stop being women.

Having greater access to resources and to images of people similar to themselves, younger FTM and MTF individuals today are less likely to misunderstand their gender identities. However, transgender people who do not present and identify as women or men still often continue to lack information, support, and role models, all of which makes it more difficult to adopt a genderqueer or another non-binary gender identity. “I thought that trans people were all transsexuals,” remembers Eric, a twenty-two-year-old interviewee who describes himself as an “FTM boi.” “I didn’t know until college that transgender, a more general term, encompassed genderqueers.”

### **Learning About and Meeting Other Trans People**

**TWO-THIRDS OF THE PARTICIPANTS DID NOT KNOW** another trans person before they identified as transgender. However, among the traditionally college-aged participants, it was the exact opposite, with 69 percent indicating that they knew another transgender person at the time they “came out.” This generational shift is indicative of the growing number of youth who are open about being transgender. Twenty years ago, it was rare to find a student at any college or

university who publicly identified as transgender. Today, informal and organized transgender groups exist at many institutions, and even small colleges, religiously affiliated schools, and military academies report having transgender students on their campuses.

### **Changing Their Outward Appearance in Order to Look More Like Their Self-Image**

**THE FTM PARTICIPANTS WHO WERE ON** testosterone for even a short period of time often began to look little different from other men—as they developed thicker facial and body hair, deeper voices, and greater muscle mass—and were rarely perceived by others as not having been assigned male at birth. For this reason, the vast majority of the FTM participants viewed taking hormones, as well as having chest reconstruction surgery, as critical to their identity development. The FTM individuals typically traced the start of their transitions to when they began altering their bodies, as demonstrated by their ability to remember the exact date they began testosterone and/or had top surgery.

As with the FTM participants, the vast majority of the MTF respondents considered beginning to take hormones as an important milestone that marked a turning point in their lives as women. However, the two groups differed significantly with regard to having bottom surgery. Few of the FTM interviewees had or expressed an interest in having genital surgery because of the high cost, what they perceived as the inadequate results of some of the procedures, and a feeling that they did not need a penis to be men. Burton, for example, “doesn’t feel like an incomplete man” just because he hasn’t had genital surgery. “My masculinity exists separate from the world’s construction of it,” he states. In contrast, more than a fourth of the MTF interviewees had or were scheduled to have bottom surgery, and most of the rest hoped to have it someday, when they could afford the procedures and were in a position in their lives to do so.

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# The disclosure that someone is transgender and is planning or starting to transition often placed a strain, at least initially, on relationships with family members, coworkers, friends, and partners—especially if the other people were surprised by the revelation.

The genderqueer participants expressed their identities in a multitude of ways. Some of the interviewees who had been assigned female at birth were taking hormones and had undergone or were contemplating top surgery. Others chose not to alter their bodies permanently; instead, they modified some of the more visible markers of gender in other ways, such as by breast binding, bodybuilding, having a traditionally male hairstyle, not shaving their body hair, and “packing” (wearing a phallic object under their clothing to give the appearance of having male genitals). The genderqueer respondents who had been assigned male at birth likewise changed aspects of themselves that typically indicate gender. Among these changes were growing their hair long, undergoing electrolysis or other techniques to remove facial hair, using makeup and nail polish, and wearing “feminine” earrings and other jewelry.

Clothing and mannerisms were also important ways through which many of the genderqueer participants expressed their gender identity and sought to destabilize traditional gender markers. Some of the interviewees dressed androgynously—wearing non-gender-specific shirts, pants, and shoes—or combined elements of traditionally men’s and women’s clothing to indicate that they identified as neither, both, or somewhere in between “woman” and “man.” Other participants, like Eric, completely cross-dressed. Eric combines aspects of lesbian and gay cultures to present as a “gay boi” and buys all of hir clothes from the men’s departments. Another genderqueer participant, Shannon, acts in ways that challenge the behavior expected of individuals assigned female at birth: ze makes eye contact with strangers and sits with hir knees apart. These mannerisms, combined with hir “usually androgynous clothing, hairy legs, small breasts, and shaved head,” mean that Shannon frequently receives what ze describes as “that ‘Is it a boy or a girl?’ look.”

## **Establishing New Relationships With Family, Partners, Friends, and Coworkers**

THE DISCLOSURE THAT SOMEONE IS TRANSGENDER and is planning or starting to transition often placed a strain, at least initially, on relationships with family members, coworkers, friends, and partners—especially if the other people were surprised by the revelation. The extent to which respondents’ relationships were affected varied, but few close relationships escaped unchanged. In a sense, the participants had to establish new relationships with the people they knew because others did not know their “true selves.”

After transitioning, most of the FTM individuals surveyed were readily seen by others as men and could choose whether or not to tell new friends and acquaintances about their female-assigned pasts. Some of the respondents were open about their transsexual histories, considering it a part of their identity and often wanting to educate cisgender (non-transgender) people about transgender issues. Others sought to leave their previous lives behind them. Now that they could finally be themselves and be recognized as men, they did not want to provide an opportunity for people to think of them as less than other men. As Aaron offered, “once someone knows that I am FTM, then they find it hard to treat me as simply male without thinking about my female past or wondering about my genitals.” For this reason, he generally does not disclose to people he meets, but this approach has presented difficulties for him, too, because he has many friends from before he transitioned. “It is a delicate balance to deal with those who know about my trans status and those who don’t.”

Many of the MTF participants had the opposite issue. Even when they sought to present as female, they were still recognized, at times, as having been assigned male at birth because they were taller and had larger hands, more extensive facial hair, and deeper voices than

most women and exhibited masculine facial features and prominent Adam's apples. As a result, they had no choice about whether or when to disclose their transsexual histories to new friends and potential romantic partners, and many had problems dating because they did not look "female enough" to others. "At six-foot-four and a size twenty-two, I hardly expect to pass as a genetic woman," states Barbara, an MTF individual who continues to present as male at work. But her inability to look like most other women does not deter her from being comfortable and self-assured in public as female, and this includes attending an Episcopal church with her wife and speaking to high school and college classes. "By being open and honest and somewhat self-deprecating, I have made many friends. I have also been blessed to be invited into what I can only call sacred women's space and a community of faith and friendship."

### **Developing a Sense of Wholeness Within a Gender Normative Society**

**SINCE FEW OF THE FTM PARTICIPANTS SAW** bottom surgery as a viable option for at least the near future, respondents developed a sense of themselves as a different kind of man—a man who had been born and raised as a woman and who still had elements of a "female" body. They did not feel that these distinctions made them "incomplete" or less "real" than other men. "My masculinity was so tested by being born female," states Burton, a transsexual male. "It cannot be taken away from me." Like many of the FTM participants, Burton defines his gender as how he feels about himself, rather than how he grew up or how he might physically compare to other men.

Many of the MTF interviewees stated that they too are much happier today after transitioning because they are comfortable in their bodies and are finally able to be seen by others as they have long felt inside. Even the female participants who were often "read" as transgender (because they retain some traditionally male body characteristics) reported feeling a sense of inner peace and expressed relief that they could now be themselves. Like the FTM interviewees who recog-

nized that not having a penis did not make them any less of a man, many MTF interviewees stated that they did not feel less "real" or less "whole" for not always appearing like other women.

In contrast, the genderqueer and gender-nonconforming participants more frequently indicated that they continue to feel isolated because of a perceived lack of support from transgender and LGBTQ communities. When asked where ze receives support for identifying as genderqueer, Esther replied, "I really don't. There's a LJ [Live Journal] genderqueer community, but most of the people there are androgynous or transgendered. Only a few others have identified as I do." Kelly expressed a similar sentiment. The few people to whom ze has disclosed hir gender identity have been supportive, but most of these individuals live far away from hir. As a result, Kelly feels that ze does not have a local community and is "constantly on guard because [ze doesn't] feel as though that safety net is close by."

Whereas the transsexual and cross-dressing participants typically found a sense of safety and support within transgender and/or LGBTQ communities, the genderqueer interviewees could not always count on being embraced by other transgender people. Thus, to a greater extent than many of the other respondents, they had to create their own communities. In many cases, these friendship and support networks consisted of individuals who shared their experience being genderqueer.

Along with the difficulties of finding an established community to which they can belong, some of the genderqueer participants felt isolated by virtue of having to live in a society that largely adheres to a strict gender binary. The college student respondents, for example, had to contend with residence hall rooms, locker rooms, bathrooms, sports teams, fraternities and sororities, and certain social traditions that were divided along gender lines; furthermore, they had to choose between marking "male" or "female" when filling out campus forms. Workplaces are generally less gender segregated, but bathrooms (and sometimes locker rooms) often remain an obsta-

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cle for people who do not feel safe or comfortable in gender-dichotomous spaces. But as more and more gender-nonconforming youth come out and expect to have their needs addressed by schools and other institutions, policies and practices that had been based on a gender binary are changing, according to the Transgender Law and Policy Institute, to be more inclusive of people of all genders.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

**WITH MORE AND MORE TRANSGENDER PEOPLE** coming out to themselves and others during childhood or adolescence, many colleges and universities are witnessing a steadily growing number of openly transgender students. These students expect to be recognized and to have their needs met by their institutions. However, campuses have been largely unprepared to meet these needs and so now are scrambling to provide support services and to create more inclusive policies and practices. As documented by the Transgender Law and Policy Institute, a rapidly increasing number of colleges and universities are adding “gender identity and/or expression” to their nondiscrimination policies; creating gender-inclusive bathrooms, locker rooms, and housing options; providing a means for transgender students who have not legally changed their names to use a preferred name on public records and documents; and covering hormones and surgeries for transitioning students as part of student health insurance. However, more than 90 percent of two- and four-year institutions in the United States have not taken any of these steps and remain completely inaccessible and inhospitable to transgender students.

Furthermore, even those colleges and universities that have implemented transgender-supportive policies and practices still remain, like the broader society, firmly entrenched in a binary gender system that largely privileges gender-conforming students. In his study of the experiences of transgender students at two

large, Midwestern public universities that offer some transgender support services, Brent Bilodeau found that genderism permeated every aspect of campus life: the academic classroom, campus employment and career planning, LGBT and other student organizations and communities, and campus facilities. The student interviewees who identified or expressed their gender outside of a binary had an especially difficult time finding support on their campuses. Even though some progress had been made to recognize and address the needs of transgender people, the overriding assumption governing individual attitudes and institutional structures was that students were either male or female.

Similarly, even though the general campus climate for transgender people has improved during the last decade as transgender students and allies have increasingly organized and sought to educate others, many transgender students indicate that they continue to experience a hostile college environment. A recent study by John Dugan, Michelle Kusel, and Dawn Simounet compared the experiences of 91 transgender-identified students with matched samples of nontransgender lesbian, gay, bisexual, and heterosexual students. The researchers found that the transgender students “reported more frequent encounters with harassment and discrimination as well as a significantly lower overall sense of belonging within the campus community” and significantly lower capacities on two educational outcome measures (18).

Colleges and universities can be supportive of transgender students by implementing the transgender-inclusive policies and practices that have been suggested by Genny Beemyn and other educators and advocates in the field. However, the changes needed cannot end there. Having a process whereby students can switch the male/female designation on their college records, for example, is of little value to gender-nonconforming students who fit into neither box. Gender-segregated cocurricular activities (e.g., fraternities, sororities, and athletic teams) and “women’s” health and support services likewise ignore and exclude the growing number of genderqueer and androgynous students.

Obviously, policies related to participation in intercollegiate sports and fraternities and sororities are beyond the purview of an individual college. But institutions still have the ability to implement transgender inclusion in other ways, such as through intramural athletics and multigendered fraternities, while advocating for change on the national level. Similarly, colleges and universities that use the Common Application for undergraduate admissions can support efforts by campus LGBT center administrators to expand the “gender” category on the application form to enable transgender and other gender-nonconforming students to self-identify.

Beyond developing practices and policies throughout the institution that are inclusive and supportive of both transgender and other gender-nonconforming students, colleges and universities should establish a no-tolerance policy for anti-transgender harassment and discrimination. Like the process for addressing sexual harassment, a gender identity harassment policy would involve development of a formal grievance procedure with clearly defined penalties and implementation of a mandatory transgender awareness training program for all faculty and staff supervisors. Only after a complete transformation of institutional

cultures will colleges and universities become truly welcoming to transgender students.

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