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TRANSGENDER STUDENTS FACE “DIZZYING ARRAY” OF CRITERIA TO DETERMINE 'WOMANHOOD' WHEN APPLYING TO U.S. WOMEN'S COLLEGES "

Study of nine publicly-adopted transgender admissions policies reveals inconsistencies in biology-, identity-, and legal-based measures to answer the question, “*who is a woman?*”

As women's colleges in the United States formally adopt policies to make space for the admission of transgender students, they do so inconsistently, researchers conclude, through divergent measures of 'womanhood' based on a combination of biology, gender identity, and/or legal gender status. This is according to a new study published in the April 2017 issue of *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal in Gender Studies and Sociology. “*Moving Beyond Cis-terhood: Determining Gender through Transgender Admittance Policies at U.S. Women's Colleges*” is the first sociological examination of how newly-adopted transgender admission policies serve to institutionalize *who a woman is*.

Researchers Megan Nanney and David L. Brunnsma, sociologists at Virginia Tech, examined publicly-adopted transgender admission policies of the nine women's colleges who formalized them as of 2016—Hollins, Mills, Mount Holyoke, Simmons, Scripps, Bryn Mawr, Wellesley, Smith, and Barnard.

“We find up to *fourteen different combinations* of biology, legal status, and gender identities that these policies either say a person can or cannot be in order to attend,” says Nanney, “and trans students wishing to apply to these colleges face confusion and alienation as they try to determine if and how they fit within these disparate criteria.”

Based on their analysis, Nanney and Brunnsma identify a number of contradictions and gaps between policies among various U.S. women's colleges. For example, four universities—Mills, Mount Holyoke, Simmons, and Bryn Mawr—explicitly state that an applicant who was assigned female at birth and identifies as genderqueer may attend their college, while two universities—Smith and Barnard—explicitly state that these applicants are inadmissible. Scripps, Wellesley, and Hollins are silent on this issue in their policies.

The research differentiates between institutions that employ explicitly *exclusionary* policy language (i.e., students who cannot attend) versus explicitly *inclusionary* policy language, as follows:

Exclusionary

For example, policies at Hollins, Smith, Bryn Mawr, and Barnard exclude:

- Cis men - those whose gender identity (men) matches the sex (male) they were assigned at birth
- Individuals defined female at birth (“DFAB”) who identify as men
- DFAB individuals whose legal documentation shows a male sex status
- Intersex individuals who identify as men

Hollins is reported to have the “most exclusionary” policy, addressing enrolled students who are taking hormonal/medical or legal steps toward being something “other than” women. Their policy states: “If an enrolled student self-identifies as male and begins to transition by either undergoing hormone therapy or any surgical procedure, or by changing their legal name (before attaining 64 credits), then the student will be asked to transfer to another university.”

Inclusionary

Mount Holyoke and Simmons only explicitly exclude cis men and invite anyone who identifies as a woman, trans, or genderqueer to attend.

Scripps explicitly includes people who identify as either man or woman, regardless of legal documentation.

Simmons’ policy reads: “All applicants to the undergraduate program who were assigned female at birth and/or applicants who self-identify as women are eligible to apply for admission. We do not require government issued documentation for the purposes of identifying an applicant’s gender identity.”

Why is there is so much policy variation among women’s colleges, given they have legal protection to accept any individual who is not a cis man? Analyzing policy language, Nanney and Brunsma postulate that this is the case because women’s colleges contend with a “back-and-forth” between the *traditional mission* of the women’s college—one with a history of educating women to the same standard as men—and the *activist mission* of the college to challenge gender norms.

As Nanney explains, “Women’s colleges have always grappled with the contentions between their status as a college for *women* and to whom that applies in terms of expanding our expectations and norms of womanhood—including women of color, international students, poor students, and even Jewish women. In today’s socio-political environment, admissions policies for trans students, and trans women in particular, bring up these questions of tradition and activism once more.”

For example, as Mount Holyoke’s policy states, “Just as early feminists argued that the reduction of women to their biological functions was a foundation for women’s oppression, we must acknowledge that gender identity is not reducible to the body.” Womanhood is shown to be neither static nor natural, but rather is adapted over time, and the college’s traditional mission as a college for women was inherently activist to challenge prevailing sexist stereotypes of what a woman can do or be.

The study authors argue that what is at stake as U.S. women’s colleges [re]construct gender through trans admissions policies is *not only* the transformation of the women’s college, itself, as an institution organized by gender, but the ability/inability of trans students to access the education, community, and

networks offered by these schools. The consequences are politically powerful, as invented and restrictive definitions of “acceptable” gender become codified and further marginalize transgender students.

Further Information

Gender & Society is a peer-reviewed journal, focused on the study of gender. It is the official journal of [Sociologists for Women in Society](#), and was founded in 1987 as an outlet for feminist social science. Currently, it is a top-ranked journal in both sociology and women’s studies. Articles appearing in *Gender & Society* analyze gender and gendered processes in interactions, organizations, societies, and global and transnational spaces. For additional commentary, you can also read the [Gender & Society blog](#) and follow the journal on Twitter: [@Gend Soc](#). For more information, contact Gender & Society editor, Jo Reger, Professor of Sociology and Director of Women and Gender Studies at Oakland University. She can be reached at gendsoc@oakland.edu.

[Sociologists for Women in Society \(SWS\)](#), currently headquartered at the University of Kansas, works to improve women’s lives through advancing and supporting feminist sociological research, activism and scholars. Founded in 1969, SWS is a nonprofit, scientific and educational organization with more than 1,000 members in the United States and overseas. For more information, contact Dr. Barret Katuna, SWS Executive Officer, at swseo.barretkatuna@outlook.com. Follow us on Twitter and Facebook: [@socwomen](#) and facebook.com/SocWomen