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# Hiding In Plain Sight: How Binary Gender Assumptions Complicate Efforts To Meet Transgender Students' Name And Pronoun Needs

Dot Brauer  
*University of Vermont*

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HIDING IN PLAIN SIGHT: HOW BINARY GENDER ASSUMPTIONS  
COMPLICATE EFFORTS TO MEET TRANSGENDER  
STUDENTS' NAME AND PRONOUN NEEDS

A Dissertation Presented

by

Dot Brauer

to

The Faculty of the Graduate College

of

The University of Vermont

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Education  
Specializing in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

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Dissertation Examination Committee:

Jill Tarule, Ed.D., Advisor  
Brenda Solomon, Ph.D., Chairperson  
Judith Aiken, Ed. D.  
Kelly Clark/Keefe, Ed.D.  
Cynthia J. Forehand, Ph.D., Dean of the Graduate College

## ABSTRACT

Existing literature about transgender college students calls upon higher education organizations to support trans students' use of self-identified first names (in place of legal names, given at birth) and self-identified pronouns (in place of assumed pronouns based on sex assigned at birth, or other's perceptions of physical appearance), but that literature lacks guidance on how to achieve this work, which is deceptively complex. This study addressed this gap in the literature in two ways. First by using critical theory to show how hegemonic, binary notions of gender shape intellectual, social, and regulatory dimensions of higher education in ways that complicate practitioners' efforts to provide trans students with support. Second, by using institutional ethnography (IE) as a critical framework and methodology to uncover what IE refers to as *texts* and *relations* that operate in unintended ways to undo practitioners' efforts to provide desired supports. I use examples from my experience as a higher education LGBTQ resource professional at the University of Vermont (UVM) to add depth to my analysis and present the results in two articles.

The first article presents the rationale for changing campus information systems to enable transgender students to use self-identified names and pronouns on campus, and presents examples of the work accomplished at the University of Vermont and the University of Michigan. The second article extends beyond logistics to explore the complex questions that are the focus of this dissertation.

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## **DEDICATION**

My sister Deb was the inspiration to my pragmatism. Though our lives took us in different directions, her dreams often brought us back together. One of her dreams was for us to one-day work together as Dr. Brauer and Dr. Brauer. Deb was diagnosed with a fatal illness the same week I was accepted into the doctoral program; she died two years later. I dedicate the completion of this dream and this milestone to her.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to acknowledge my mom, who stood fiercely between her children and homelessness. She did without the smallest comforts, so that my siblings, nieces, and I could experience less hunger and want; I owe my survival to her. Her deprivation did not diminish her love of knowledge, imparted to her by a teacher at her tiny high school in Cowen, West Virginia, and passed by her to her children. My curiosity and the joy I feel with discovery and understanding, are gifts she bestowed. It is her courage, idealism, and love that led me to work for a more socially just and caring world.

I wish to acknowledge my partner Anita who took care of me and our household for seven years, so I could complete this work. Her encouragement and support convinced me to take on this challenge and kept me going at many points. She deserves a share of the credit for my achievement.

I must also acknowledge my advisor, Jill Tarule, whose gentle persistence finally convinced me I (and my ideas) were worth the time and effort required to complete this dissertation. She provided me with precisely what I needed. I am lucky that work so many others dread has been for me, exciting and gratifying. I believe this is thanks, in large part, to you, Jill. You did not have to reach out to me and offer your support. That you did made a tremendous difference in my life for which I am forever grateful.

I will miss all four members of my committee. Judith Aiken supported me from the first day of orientation, helping me build conceptual foundations and procedural expertise, from start to finish. Brenda Solomon graciously and generously agreed to bring her institutional ethnography expertise to my project. Without her as chair of my committee I literally couldn't have done the project as I wanted to; I owe her a special debt of gratitude. The critical and queer theory vision of Kelly Clark/Keefe enabled me to tie everything I had learned together. Her insights and resources allowed me to express my ideas with confidence and eloquence. The collective intellectual energy of my 'dream-team' committee ignited my excitement and vision. Through the writing and editing process, their constructive critique of my ideas sustained me and carried me forward. I thank you all for attending to the careful 'watering,' 'feeding,' and 'weeding,' that helped me grow from a naïve student to a confident colleague. I carry you with me as I go forward, hoping to make good use of what you have helped me learn.

There are many others, colleagues, co-workers, friends, and family members, whose encouraging words, hugs, and smiles are all in my heart as this project draws to a close. Your loving acts and thoughts through the seven years since I started are all right here with me in this moment. Your many kind acts and encouraging words are like brightly colored flowers in a massive bouquet that fills my heart with gladness and joy as I write these final words of acknowledgment. With humble gratitude, I thank you.

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## CHAPTER 1: JACE GOES TO COLLEGE

### *Jace Goes to College – fall 2001<sup>1</sup>*

*Jace grew up in a medium-sized city in the American Midwest, with a single mom, in an upper middle class home. Around the age of 13 Jace realized he would have to leave home before he would finally be able to ask people to call him Jace, instead of the name on his birth certificate. Jace struggled through being taunted by kids at school, feeling alone, and thoughts of suicide over the next five years, as he endured being called a name that wasn't his, and being referred to by female pronouns that embarrassed and humiliated him. Jace was a good student and loved writing. He worked hard and got good grades, because he knew college wasn't just an option; it was where he would finally figure out a way to live as his real self. Jace believed his mother loved him, but he also knew she couldn't picture herself having a transgender child and wouldn't allow Jace to be open about his identity as long as he lived at home.*

*Jace also knew his mom would be really upset once she learned he had changed his name and pronouns when he got to college. She had threatened to remove him from her insurance if he did. Because of all of this Jace waited until orientation, after his mom had left, and found a quiet moment to tell a staff member that he was transgender. He asked if the name his RA had put on his door could be changed from 'Amanda' to 'Jace.' It was clear to the director of orientation that Jace's masculine appearance and being*

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<sup>1</sup> Note: The story of Jace is a compilation of actual experiences, as they have been related to me by several trans and gender non-conforming students I have encountered over the years at the University of Vermont, where I work as the director of the LGBTQA Center.

*introduced as Amanda would not only be really uncomfortable, it could possibly even put Jace at risk of harassment or physical harm. Jace was relieved and happy when she smiled, and said it would be no problem, and that she would take care of it personally. She spoke with Jace's RA directly that weekend, and contacted additional offices (with Jace's permission) the following Monday. For the first time Jace felt like things really might go better at college than they had back home.*

*Jace knew enough from his experiences in high school though, to realize that he would encounter more problems. His plan was to keep a low profile, and limit the number of people who knew he was transgender; hopefully that would keep the harassment and intrusive questions to a minimum. He felt so fortunate that he had been able to get a single room, but what Jace didn't realize was how often he would need his ID at college. Every time he went to the dining hall for a meal or tried to check out a book at the library, he had to hand his ID to someone who would look at him and see a guy and then look at his ID and see the name Amanda and a photo of what he looked like before he got the buzz cut that helped transform him into a pretty convincing male-appearing person. After a worker in a dining hall made a scene, accusing him of having stolen someone else's ID, he avoided the dining halls all together until he got too hungry. Now he just tried to be careful about who was at the checkout when he went through the line.*

*It took Jace a few weeks to find the least used single access bathrooms on campus so he would have a reasonably safe place to go to the bathroom between classes. He still had to be careful. None of them had unisex signs, and there was always the chance that*

*someone walking by would take issue, no matter which bathroom he used. There were a couple of buildings he had to just leave if he needed to go to the bathroom, so he had to be careful how much water he drank and when.*

*What made the rest bearable was being able to introduce himself as Jace, without having to worry about his mom finding out. He had come almost two thousand miles from home in order to have this kind of privacy. It was still really stressful having to write to each faculty member before the semester started. Each email started by explaining that he was transgender—of course he had no way of knowing how the faculty member would react to this. Then he would ask them to please call him Jace and use masculine pronouns to refer to him in class. Most of the faculty members were confused and awkward, but also nice about it. It was really frightening when they messed up (which happened way too often), because Jace never knew who might have noticed and whether they would follow him and threaten or assault him. So far only one professor had written back asking him to sign up for another section of the course with a different instructor...*



## **CHAPTER 2: INTRODUCTION**

### **Statement of the Problem**

Trans students have a real and pressing need to be able to specify the first name and pronoun used to refer to them on campus. Being misnamed and/or misgendered by the use of an inappropriate name or pronoun causes a trans student significant distress, if not immediate threat of harm (Beemyn, 2003). Staff, faculty, and administrators have key roles to play in supporting trans students' safety and wellbeing. Existing literature about the needs of transgender college students calls upon higher education settings to support trans students' use of chosen names (in place of legal names) and pronouns (in place of pronouns based on sex assigned at birth), but provides little guidance on how to go about it.

The purpose of this study has been to address this gap in the literature. I began by conducting an ethnographic review of existing work records from my own campus to examine the work processes undertaken at my university to amend the student information system to support transgender students' use of chosen names and pronouns. During my review, I applied ethnographic methodologies, including ethnographic review and auto-ethnography to guide my research process. My auto-ethnographic analysis included consideration of my dual role as a practitioner and as a researcher within the setting and the significance of my own non-binary gender identity. In addition to the analysis provided by the process of review and reflection, I applied several additional frameworks to my findings. I used sociolinguistic analysis to consider the importance of names. I applied queer and critical theories to the ways gender figures into higher

education settings. Finally, I used an institutional ethnographic framework to guide my examination of work processes before, during, and after changes to the student information system, and to compare intended versus actual outcomes.

## **Background**

### **Terms and Concepts**

In order to establish a shared understanding of the topic, it is important to begin with a brief review of terms and concepts. Much of the language being used today to communicate about gender identity is still evolving. The working definitions I offer here are for the purpose of understanding the research I am proposing. It is important to acknowledge that definitions and terms as they are used in this proposal may change in the future, and later readers may need to refer to this section of this proposal in order to appreciate my intended meanings. Terms are presented in a logical order; some terms build upon an understanding of a previous term.

**Gender versus sex.** The concept of gender throughout the modern and postmodern eras has been commonly assumed to be virtually interchangeable with sex (Wilchins, 2004). This misconception arises from a series of assumptions that will be examined more closely during the queer theory analysis portion of this study. A simple way to delineate between gender and sex is to understand sex as physical, represented by physical sex characteristics. Gender should be understood as a social construct that supposes that certain tendencies and patterns of behavioral characteristics vary consistently along sexual lines.

**Gender binary.** I refer readers to the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993) who began delineating the non-dichotomous nature of sexuality over twenty years ago. A recent interview with Fausto-Sterling (2016) includes a segment where Fausto-Sterling carefully explains the false logic that leads people to conclude that sex is a dichotomous human characteristic. While biologically human reproduction is indeed dimorphic (it requires the combination of two separate human biological forms—an egg and a sperm), every aspect of both primary and secondary human sex characteristics vary, well beyond the limits of an either-or dichotomy. Tying the idea of gender to (mistaken) dichotomous notions of sex has led to an almost universal presumption of what gender diversity advocates call ‘the gender binary.’ Binary notions about gender place unnecessary constraints on the varied ways a person can, and people have, imagined gender as a fluid, not fixed facet of human behavior and experience.

**Gender expression v. gender identity.** Gender is typically thought of as a characteristic or a role, something both externally apparent and essential or fixed about a person. Ideas about ‘gender’ include notions about the ways people (should) express themselves (e.g., “she walks like a man,” or “he throws like a girl”), as well as notions about identity (i.e., “he is a man,” or “I am a woman”). These two different ways of thinking about gender can be broken into gender expression and gender identity. Gender expression includes clothing styles, hand gestures, vocal tone, head tilt, posture, and manner of walking and speaking. Everyone expresses themselves through these means and many other subtle cues. These cues (along with physical characteristics of a person’s body) are ‘read’ or perceived by others, who then make assumptions about a person’s

gender identity and sex. Gender identity, in contrast is based in a person's internal experience, a feeling or sense about whether various forms of expression are authentic to, or fit with, who they believe themselves to be. This experience is often described in terms of which forms of expression feel genuine, and which feel like a 'lie' or an 'act.'

The social consciousness arising out of the gender diversity movement imagines gender identity as something one person should not expect to be able to guess or assume about another person. The illusion that gender aligns neatly with a sex dichotomy which is or should be visibly obvious (girl or boy, man or woman), leads people to believe that gender is easily 'read' by others and thus can and should be taken for granted. Since anyone 'should' be able to immediately tell who or 'what' another person is, without needing to ask, if a person's gender is confusing, that is necessarily an indicator of that person's abnormality or defect. It then follows that asking about a person's gender necessarily implies an offensive suggestion about the other person's 'abnormal' way of representing their gender. Contemporary gender advocates call for a new understanding of gender as something that is not fixed or definable by others. Accepting gender as something people experience about themselves allows individuals to define and declare their own gender identity based on their internal experience. At present the gender-diversity movement appears to be successfully transforming the role of gender in society from an externally defined classification system to an individually declared aspect of self-identification and expression.

**Gender non-conforming.** The idea of being gender non-conforming is based entirely on traditional notions of gender as a fixed binary. As long as the dominant

ideology about gender presumes it to be a dichotomous human presentation that is identifiable at birth, and fixed throughout the lifespan, people who don't fit within that set of expectations will be seen as being gender non-conforming. However, if the notion of gender continues to evolve as it has been recently, more and more people will think of gender as a fluid form of expressing one's inner sensibilities in terms of dress, tastes, and styles of self-expression. Some other not yet imagined sense of what is meant by 'gender' might yet emerge. Within a new way of seeing 'gender,' forms of expression that are seen as disruptive and non-conforming today could become ordinary and contained within, not beyond, newly defined boundaries of what is considered possible.

**Cisgender.** The origins of 'cisgender' seem to still be under discussion. An interesting theory can be found on a Bilerico blog post (Browning, 2013) that includes photos of a 1914 German medical volume where the author used the term cisvestitismus to refer to people who dress according to the gender assigned to them at birth. This attribution is supported by the RationalWiki website ("Cisgender," 2016), which offers this definition: "Cisgender is an adjective[1] indicating that someone identifies with the gender that they were designated at birth. It is a neologism coined as the antonym to "transgender," and its first documented usage was on the Internet in 1994.[2]"

**Heteronormativity and cissexism.** Heteronormativity defines limits within which people are expected to express themselves and live their lives. Within heteronormative expectations for example, infants born with vaginas are expected to be little girls who grow up to be women who are attracted to men, want to marry them, and settle down and have children and raise them. Within the strictest limits of

heteronormativity anyone who doesn't conform to those expectations is abnormal.

Cissexism is the belief that people whose gender aligns with their sex assigned at birth are superior and people who experience themselves as possessing a gender that does not align with the sex they were assigned at birth are inferior.

**Trans.** Trans is an intentional contraction of the term transgender. 'Gender' is sometimes intentionally left off the shortened term 'trans,' which is used interchangeably with 'transgender' to describe an individual's identity and/or to describe an array of identities that encompasses individuals' sense of their sex assigned at birth, and/or the gender assigned to them (based on their sex assigned at birth) being different from their internal sense of identity. The definition below, taken from GLAAD's (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders) online Media Reference Guide provides a common understanding of the term transgender:

Transgender (adj.)

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms - including *transgender*. Some of those terms are defined below. Use the descriptive term preferred by the individual. Many transgender people are prescribed hormones by their doctors to change their bodies. Some undergo surgery as well. But not all transgender people can or will take those steps, and a transgender

identity is not dependent upon medical procedures (“GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Transgender Issues,” 2011).

### **Existing Literature on Trans Students’ Needs**

Research on trans college students in higher education documents patterns of marginalization and victimization experienced by trans students throughout higher education (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Grossman et al., 2009; Herman, 2013; McKinney, 2005a). This research also describes what campuses need to do to meet the needs of transgender students (B. Beemyn, 2003; B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; Case, Kanenberg, & Tittsworth, 2012) through consistent calls for specific changes in policy and practice, including improving supports for students’ use of chosen names and pronouns on campus. However, earlier research has fallen short of containing guidance on how to go about making the needed changes. The most recent studies have benefitted from larger numbers and greater diversity of transgender participants and has provided important confirmation of conclusions presented in earlier literature (Seelman, 2014; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013). Still overall, research on the transgender population in general and within higher education settings in particular has remained scant. During the same period of time covered by this research, the University of Vermont (UVM) has emerged as one of a small number of campuses that are providing leadership in terms of establishing policies and practices that support the specific needs of trans people.

At the time of this writing, the United States' Office of Civil Rights and Department of Education have just issued a joint memorandum of understanding about the obligation educational organizations have to take proactive steps to address transgender students' safety and inclusion (C. E. Lhamon & Gupta, 2016). The first item covered in the MOU is a school's obligation to provide a safe and nondiscriminatory environment. The second item pertains to the proposed focus of this research, namely a school's representation of a student's name and pronoun. The MOU instructs schools that they must:

treat students consistent with their gender identity even if their education records or identification documents indicate a different sex. The Departments have resolved Title IX investigations with agreements committing that school staff and contractors will use pronouns and names consistent with a transgender student's gender identity (2016, p. 3).

The importance of names and pronouns has been identified in the literature as critical to transgender students' safety and well-being for over a decade (B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; Bilodeau, 2009; Seelman, 2014). A growing number of colleges and universities are considering how to meet this need, but most have yet to act.

### **Brief History of Conditions for Trans Students at UVM**

To establish context I include here a brief history of the problems trans students encountered on campus in 2003, before efforts to address their needs had been made, as



well as an account of steps taken to address students' problems prior to significant changes that were eventually made to the student information database (SID) in the fall of 2008; how the work to change the SID was approached, how it proceeded, and how system changes have functioned since they went into effect in January of 2009.

I assumed the leadership of the LGBTQA Center at UVM in the fall of 2001. I had worked for the previous nine years as a mental health counselor for UVM. I identify within the LGBTQ spectrum of identities myself and had been open about my identity, and active in my LGBTQ related outreach and advocacy. My professional background included LGBTQ research and presentations, a brief stint as executive director of Vermont's LGBTQ youth advocacy organization, Outright Vermont, and nine years of volunteer service on a committee that planned and hosted a week of visibility and advocacy programming that was designed to shift campus culture toward greater LGBTQ awareness and inclusion.

I first learned of the existence of transgender students at UVM in 2002. I quickly became aware of difficulties these students were experiencing, which I would later see reflected in literature like that mentioned earlier in this proposal. The students I met were being outed in each situation where they were required to present their ID, including the purchase of meals in dining halls and when they needed to check out books at the library. They had to out themselves prior to the start of each semester by emailing each faculty member to ask the faculty member to call them by their chosen name and pronoun instead of by the legal name that appeared on the class roster, and by a presumed pronoun. I recall at least one situation where a faculty member responded to a trans

student's request by suggesting the student enroll in a different section of the course. I also recall numerous instances of trans students reporting a faculty person using an incorrect pronoun or name in class. The trans students reported fearing possible attacks by other students who might see their trans identity as a reason to target them. Students described feeling anxiety and distress about these situations. As a student services professional, I felt the situations placed an unreasonable burden on trans students, who had to navigate hurdles other students did not face. I recall one student who confessed to 'hiding out' in his room most of the time in order to avoid what felt like constant threat of being outed and potentially targeted with harassment or shaming.

In 2003 I approached administrators about addressing the challenges faced by trans students on campus. The result was a series of meetings with managers and junior administrators to assess and plan how best to meet trans students' needs regarding restrooms, shower facilities, housing, class rosters, and student IDs. Within approximately six months, the number of 'gender neutral' restrooms (those with signage that included both male and female pictograms) on our main campus went from a handful to 42. UVM's housing department decided to include transgender students among those considered eligible for a small number of rooms that had private access to a toilet and shower. UVM's Registrar agreed to change trans students' first name on class rosters manually, upon request. The Dean of Students worked with me to develop a separate manual process to allow students to acquire an alternate student ID with their chosen first name in place of their legally assigned first name. Changes to the student information

database did not take place for another six years, because of the significant cost, in terms of programmer hours, that would be required to make the necessary changes.

In 2008 approval was granted for a project to change my university's student information database to allow students to specify a chosen name that would be used on campus. Work commenced quickly and was completed within four months. Starting in January of 2009, students at my university were the first in the nation to have web-based access to changing the first name and specifying which pronoun would be used on campus to refer to them in on-campus communications.

### **Significance of This Research**

The University of Vermont has received significant positive publicity in local, national and international media regarding the changes made to our SID to support trans students' use of chosen name and pronouns of campus. Both the registrar and I have received calls from other schools regularly since news began circulating about the name and pronoun system changes that went into effect in 2009. This study involved reviewing the details of how my university's project was conducted. For example I considered who was selected to participate in the project task force, what questions emerged along the way, how they were resolved, what choices were made, and what reasoning influenced those choices. My review included documenting the original goals of the project and how students' present day experience of the system lines up with those goals. It also includes documenting problems that have emerged where the workings of system changes have not anticipated all of the complex scenarios involving student identification on a

university campus. It included a review of periodic utilization data collected over the years and of the correspondence from other colleges and universities and the questions they have asked about how UVM went about establishing our system. The review of those communications included the range of schools and roles of people who have inquired, what their questions have been, and the concerns they have expressed. Experience at UVM was compared to questions asked by practitioners from other campuses, to look for principles that might be useful for helping to guide efforts at other colleges and universities that wish to take similar steps.

## **CHAPTER 3: COMPREHENSIVE LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

A growing body of research that documents the unmet needs of transgender students, also lays out specific recommendations for changes in policies and practices to meet those needs (B. Beemyn, 2003; B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; McKinney, 2005a; Seelman, 2014). Higher education professionals have a responsibility to engage this literature directly in order to better understand the needs of transgender students. Where existing literature falls short, is addressing any complexities and challenges practitioners may encounter as they work to provide trans students with effective and consistent support within environments that were created before trans students' existence was anticipated or accounted for. Other sources practitioners might turn to, like organizational change and leadership literatures, are similarly inadequate for managing efforts to address trans students' needs.

As stated earlier trans students have a real and pressing need to be able to specify the first name and pronoun used to refer to them on campus. Being misnamed and/or misgendered by the use of an inappropriate name or pronoun causes a trans student significant distress, and possible threat of physical harm (B. Beemyn, 2003). Members of the staff, faculty, and senior leadership have key roles to play in supporting trans students' safety and wellbeing. A growing number of colleges and universities are taking steps to meet this need, but most schools have yet to act. What follows is a review of literatures reviewed for this study.

## **Organizational Change and Leadership Literatures**

The substantial literature on organizational change addresses many complexities and challenges leaders encounter as they drive organizational change to improve their organization's productivity, quality, innovation, flexibility, reliability, and worker satisfaction and engagement (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Burke, 2010; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006). Close examination of this literature reveals a virtually universal, though unspoken assumption that change efforts take place within neutral/unchanging political and social conditions. Some organizational leadership literature examines differences in organizational cultures (Morgan, 2006; Schein, 1992), but these too ignore issues of social and cultural diversity within an organization's workforce and within the public with which organizations interact.

One notable leadership text addresses the political realities of leading non-profit organizations, but this volume too remains neutral on complexities associated with diverse identities among employees and the public (Jenkins & Jenkins, 1998). A publication by law scholar, Kenji Yoshino (2006) provides compelling reasoning for leaders about why they cannot count on affirmative action law alone to make their organizations substantially more diverse in terms of the workforce and/or inclusive in terms of practices. While this cutting edge work has been found useful by LGBTQ and other diversity leaders, it has not found its way into mainstream leadership or organizational literature.

Arguably, the more complex the conditions effecting an organization are, the more fraught with potential pitfalls an organizational change process is likely to be. Why

is it then that change processes driven by changing sociopolitical trends (e.g. changes in how sexism, racism, homophobia, and most recently transphobia are tolerated in the workplace) are not more frequently considered within organizational change and leadership literatures? Literature about managing organizational change in general within higher education environments is also sparse; one recent volume represents a particularly useful exception (Manning, 2012). In this publication the author applies eight different organizational theories to eight separate cases representing a variety of college and university settings. The cases presented, when read closely, reveal some attention to changing sociopolitical forces on organizational and leadership processes, and the author addresses associated complexities within the analyses presented, but this volume too excludes considerations associated specifically with either sexual orientation or gender identity diversity.

Higher education practitioners looking for guidance about trans student-related organizational changes will find useful insights in the literature cited above about: highly political and complex decision-making environments within higher education; general social and cultural resistance to organizational change; the complex workings of organizations and leadership, and even insight specific to the impact of socially accepted stigmatization of certain diverse identities. Interestingly, none of the literature above is sufficient to explain the experiences encountered at my university as my colleagues and I have worked on consistently and effectively addressing trans students' first name and pronoun needs.

## Critical Literature

### Confounding 'Gender' Politics within the Academy

In order to understand the issues associated with names and pronouns on college campuses, it is necessary to fully comprehend gender identity diversity beyond traditional binary notions. A particularly surprising source of resistance to the exploration of gender diversity is sometimes encountered within feminist and women's studies, one of the places trans students often turn for support. Within the academy the term 'gender' has long been used interchangeably with 'sex,' as a signifier for patterns of discrimination that privilege 'men' over 'women.' Examples are easily found in course titles like 'Gender and the Law,' and 'Gender and the Economy.' What is meant by these titles is not a full examination of gender in all of its diversity as it plays out in terms of law or economics. What is meant rather is how women are disadvantaged relative to men by laws and economics. In order to parse the meaning of these course titles, it is necessary to start from the assumption of gender as a man/woman binary.

An essay that appeared in *Gender, Work and Organization* over a decade ago seemed to presage the current situation (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004). In it the authors question "whether binary thinking is a fundamental obstacle to gender equity," citing Derrida's contention that binaries are inevitably hierarchical. Despite raising this provocative question they ultimately "question the possibility and even the desirability of complete dissolution" of the gender binary and for the remainder of the article search for other (linguistic) means to "undermine the hierarchy with which it is associated" (2004, p. 431). Classrooms of women's and gender studies courses today are often places where



continuation of the gender binary is hotly contested, with students calling for its end and faculty asserting its inevitability and/or necessity. This is understandable since “feminist discourse has often relied upon the category of woman as a universal presupposition” (Butler, 1988, p. 523). This situation may explain why so much of critical theory research literature has yet to take up critical questions about binary notions of gender identity.

### **Critical Literature That Reinforces Heteronormative, Binary Gender**

*“A critical gender literacy that works to make transgender and gender-nonconforming people equal, places at its center the deconstruction of binary gender as it is simultaneously tied to other axes of power such as Whiteness, ability, class, and heteronormativity” (Woolley, 2015, p. 391).*

A significant portion of literature that does address transgender experience appears only in queer journals; while more widely read, mainstream journals remain silent on topics and perspectives beyond hegemonic binary gender assumptions. Critical attention to gender in mainstream literature continues to focus mainly on deconstructing assumptions about the inferiority of *one* gender (female/feminine) in relation *the other* (male/masculine), a formulation that reifies notions of gender as a discrete, binary human characteristic. Feminist and critical race theorists routinely critique patterns of marginalization in higher education settings. *Dangerous counterstories in the corporate academy: Narrating for understanding, solidarity, resistance, and community in the age of neoliberalism* (Daniels & Porfilio, 2013) provides a recent example. This compilation uses critical analyses to reveal problematic assumptions and stereotypes about sex, race,

national origin, ability, age, and class, and the way these are routinely used to justify practices that marginalize students, scholars, and pedagogies in higher education settings. Notably missing from this and other similar volumes however are perspectives on queerness and gender variance in the academy.

### **Literature that is Critical *and* Queer**

*“That culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated” (Butler, 1988, p. 528).*

For almost forty years, critical theorists have been raising questions about how the dichotomous constructions central to structuralist thinking shape ideas about how things work. Derrida is widely credited with being the first to reject the dichotomies and absolute certainties inherent in structuralist thinking (Wilchins, 2004). Derrida, along with Foucault, Butler and others have used similar poststructural arguments to call for the deconstruction of false binaries and other traditional logics, the reversal of presumptions about superiority and inferiority, and the intentional centering of perspectives that have been routinely marginalized. Queer theory is just one of many critical theories to have developed from this poststructuralist foundation (Biesta, 1998).

Queer theorists have pointed out that educational systems and facilities are literally built upon binary gendered assumptions (Jourian, Simmons, & Devaney, 2015; Malatino, 2015; Woolley, 2015). Nearly 30 years ago Judith Butler (1988) declared

“there is nothing about a binary gender system that is given” (p. 531). Although Butler’s essay on gender as a performative act has been cited in thousands of scholarly critiques, structuralist certainty about gender as a binary construct still permeates American society and educational settings today. Everyday processes and practices in educational settings that reify binary gender, assign transgender people to the margins. As a result, “anyone who is neither *he* nor *she* is impossible” (Wentling, 2015, p. 470). What Wentling calls ‘impossibility’ and marginality, I have come to think of as misalignments between the needs of trans students and the binary-gendered workings of higher education.

Addressing these misalignments effectively requires a solid understanding of how notions of gender are constructed and how those notions continuously operate in the background.

Critical research based in queer theory raises questions that challenge typical or ‘normal’ presumptions and resulting productions, including those about gender and names. For example, how many different reasons might exist for university students to use a first name other than their legal/birth name on campus (e.g., international students, or students who have always been known by a nickname)? How often is sex/gender included on forms whether or not there is a planned use for the information? When it is needed, which information is really being asked for: the biological sex of the person’s reproductive organs (e.g., for reproductive cancer screenings and other hormonally related health issues); the gender of roommate a person would be comfortable living with; the bathroom and shower facilities a person would be comfortable using?

**Binary gender hegemony.** Historically hegemonic binary gender assumptions have influenced how buildings are built, roommates assigned, and notions about what

constitutes a respectful way to address someone using binary gendered honorifics (Mr. Ms. Mrs.) and pronouns (she/her/hers or he/him/his). Careful analysis of everyday practices involving forms, surveys, restroom signage, and more reveals many examples where binary gender assumptions constrain the options available. Posing critical questions about the assumptions underlying present practices leads to useful insights that can help practitioners working to answer these and other questions that arise in their work to support the needs of trans students. Three separate areas of critical research were included in this literature review: queer and critical theories to examine assumptions hidden within a hegemonic gender binary (Wilchins, 2004); socio-linguistic research to explain the importance of names as a signifier of fundamental social acceptance and personhood, for people in general and transgender people in particular (Emmelhainz, 2012; Hagström, 2012), and institutional ethnography frameworks to uncover the ways existing policies and practices reinforce binary gender and undermine higher education practitioners' efforts to support trans students' name and pronoun needs.

**Queer theory and binary gender hegemony.** Queer theory has been used to contest compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and the stigmatizing of queerness and queer bodies, through the active critique of binary notions about gender and of traditional notions about the nature of gender and sex (Heyes, 2007; McLaren, 2012; Wilchins, 2004). Post-structuralism reveals notions of gender to be nothing more than social 'systems,' invented by humans. All social systems can be seen as tenuous compromises, held together through social learning, and the imposition of influence and negotiated agreements, not fixed realities to which humans should be asked to conform

unconditionally (Davies, 1997). When viewed in this way ‘systems’ are readily recognized as being mutable, and subject to change in the event of significant changes in circumstances. Yet despite decades of critical literature and scholarship, binary notions of gender remain so ubiquitous within the world of education as to blend into the very fabric of the everyday (Woolley, 2015). Binary gender segregation continues to shape students’ experiences in athletics, seating charts, activities, dorms, and restrooms. Gender segregated structures and processes in turn, affect the way educators and students see themselves and each other.

**Significance of first names to identity.** Practitioners on some campuses encounter resistance to name change processes, questioning the need or appropriateness of enabling students to change the first name used on campus to identify them. In qualitative interviews transgender people emphasize the importance of names and pronouns to their feelings of safety, respect, acceptance, and wellbeing (Seelman, 2014; Singh et al., 2013; VanderSchans, 2016). Similarly literature about trans college students consistently highlights the importance of trans students’ ability to use a self-identified first name on-campus (G. Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Seelman, 2014).

The significance of names to self and identity is a theme that runs throughout the literature about names in general. One study that looked at the significance of names and naming found that, “Being addressed by your name means that you are seen and recognized,” and conversely, “To have your own name questioned is to be questioned as a person” (Hagström, 2012, p. 82). Another study examined the sociological significance of name changes for ethnic or religious purposes, looking for indications of both

“*narrative*” and “*identity elasticity*” and found both saying, “When asking whether names are markers for individual humans, a symbol of social relations, or a representation of something meaningful about the person, the obvious answer is, yes” (Emmelhainz, 2012, p. 158). Emmelhainz found that name changes were used, “to deliberately cut off the past self” (p. 163), a description that echoed the name change experiences shared by trans people in another study (VanderSchans, 2016). The transgender people interviewed by VanderSchans shared instances when their self-identified names and pronouns were not consistently used in institutional settings, describing this as a kind of, “social erasure” (p. 2). VanderSchans concluded that, “a fundamental aspect of the transition process for transgender individuals lies in choosing and embodying their new name because of the ways in which names and gender are both considered to be essential aspects of social identities” (VanderSchans, 2016, p. 4).

**Practitioners Lacking Knowledge about Diverse Gender Identities.** Queer and critical theories are necessary to render diverse gender identities legible and the systems by which we define and describe them as constructions that are continuously evolving (Johnson, 2014). Two studies using critical theory found instances where, like experiences at my university, well-intentioned practitioners failed in their efforts to support students with diverse gender identities. In 2014 Rosiek and Heffernan sought to understand the failure of middle school educators to act on behalf of a student whose gender performance fell outside of binary gender expectations. This study found that while these educators clearly possessed “earnest good intentions,” they lacked the “discursive resources to recognize and discuss gender difference,” (p. 732). Using a queer

theoretical framework, the authors raised questions that help explain how the student's 'deviant' gender performance rendered her 'illegible' to those around her. Because the student became essentially invisible in the setting, those around her, including her teachers, spent little to no time noticing or imagining what she was experiencing. As a result, teachers failed to appropriately shield this non-binary student from the gendered harassment of another student they had assigned to sit next to her.

A separate study by Woolley (2015) documented how a public high school educator's attempt to engage her class in deconstructing gendered stereotypes resulted in the unintended reification of the gender binary. Several students in this teacher's classroom spoke out during discussion, arguing for drawing a distinction between gender and sex, and for a non-binary understanding of gender. The teacher expressed a supportive attitude for these students' views, but in her handling of the discussion she allowed male voices to dominate, and failed to respond to behaviors and remarks that reinforced heteronormative, binary gender expressed by other students and even by her. The author concluded that the teacher's failure to accomplish what she set out to stemmed from her lack of critical conceptual tools for understanding gender as a social construction. As Woolley stated, "Challenging such reproduction cannot be done without critical reflection" (p. 391). In both of these instances, practitioners' capacities to serve evolving student needs effectively were limited not by their attitudes, but by their lack of comprehension about gender as a social construction, about diverse gender identities, and about how those identities impact an individual's life experience.

## **Research Literature on Transgender Students in Higher Education**

### **Transgender Students Throughout the United States**

As stated earlier, practitioners need to familiarize themselves with the body of research about patterns of marginalization and victimization trans students experience within most higher education environments (Dugan et al., 2012; Effrig et al., 2011; Grossman et al., 2009; Herman, 2013; McKinney, 2005a). This research contains highly consistent recommendations for improving transgender students' experiences in housing, classrooms, and accessing restrooms and showers, including consistent emphasis on the importance of honoring trans students' self-identified first names and pronouns (B. Beemyn, 2003; B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; Case et al., 2012; McKinney, 2005a). Seelman (2014) for example, reported on the recommendations of 30 transgender students, staff and faculty members about the need to address persistent problems with name and pronoun use on campuses stating that, "by integrating greater flexibility into recordkeeping related to names and gender markers, campuses can more effectively serve the needs of this population and honour (sic) their privacy during gender transition" (2014, p. 19). More recent research has benefitted from larger numbers of transgender participants, and has provided important confirmation of conclusions presented in earlier literature (Seelman, 2014; Singh et al., 2013).

These recommendations offer practitioners significant guidance about *what* needs to be changed and *why*. Where these studies and others like them fall short, however, is *how* to parse social, logistical, legal, and regulatory complexities associated with achieving the desired flexibility described above. One notable exception is a study that



used critical analysis to reveal how patterns of ‘genderism’ on college campuses negate gender fluidity and render transgender and gender non-conforming students invisible, (Bilodeau, 2009). Bilodeau’s study begins to reveal how hegemonic binary gender assumptions produce *genderist* institutional processes and practices. This study too however, stops short of describing how to use these insights to transform a college or university, created and sustained within the confines of society’s existing binary gender hegemony, into one where non-binary identities are legible. Studies on the transgender population in general and within higher education settings in particular, remain scant. Further research is needed into promising practices and processes that are underway at schools working to constitute higher education environments capable of supporting trans students’ in the full measure of their identities, including consistent use of their self-identified names and pronouns. This study examined how work to address trans students’ first name and pronoun needs proceeded at one university.

### **Transgender Students at UVM**

In 2009 the University of Vermont (UVM) became the first university in the nation to modify their student information database system to provide real time, web-based access that allows students to self-identify the first name *and* pronouns used for them in on-campus communications (Tilsley, 2010). This systems change, along with extensive efforts at campus education and a positive overall campus climate for trans people have earned UVM a place among the top colleges and universities for trans students (G. Beemyn & Windmeyer, 2012). A *New York Times* feature article about UVM’s inclusion of gender neutral pronouns in their name and pronoun system, (Scelfo,

2015), led to further attention from national and international media (Barrett, 2016; Booker, 2016; Chak, 2015; Collard, 2015; Lu, 2015; Schoenherr, 2015; Williams, 2015). UVM's positive reputation is a fitting tribute and a point of pride celebrated throughout the university by students, staff, faculty, and administrators. But the story does not end there.

After seven years of utilization and review, my colleagues and I continue to encounter instances where personnel on campus have not made appropriate use of transgender students' self-identified first names and pronouns. This study considers instances where staff and faculty members access and use students' 'legal' first name, instead of the first name students have identified as the one that should be used in on-campus communications, and instances where systems conflate gender and sex, and force students with non-binary gender identities into one or the other binary gender category. Highly competent higher education professionals—seemingly reasonably—expect that they understand what first names and pronouns are, and how they 'work' within systems. Even those with basic awareness of trans issues, often remain unaware of the uncritical ways they are incorporating dichotomous, binary gender=sex thinking into their daily work practices. These practices, along with anachronistic notions regarding the benign 'necessity' of legal first names, lead to misnaming and misgendering (through the use of incorrect names, pronouns, and/or honorifics) of transgender and non-binary students. That these mistakes persist, despite substantial effort invested into preventing them, suggests the existence of some underlying problem. Our investigations have convinced us

that individuals involved are not acting intentionally to misname or misgender trans students, leaving the question of where the problem lies unanswered.

### **Institutional Ethnography Literature**

#### **Institutional Ethnography as Methodology and Framework**

Institutional ethnography (IE) serves as both a research methodology and a framework for analysis. Like other forms of ethnography, IE follows the data, allowing findings to direct the researcher's attention (Berg, Lune, & Lune, 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). IE differs from other forms of ethnography in its specific focus on examining processes within an organization. IE is not concerned with the subjective feelings of people, or with criticizing an organization or the attitudes of people involved in policymaking or service delivery. IE focuses on "how the interface between the organization and the people it serves gets organized as a matter of the everyday encounters between individuals" (G. W. Smith, Mykhalovskiy, & Weatherbee, 2006, p. 168). IE seeks to understand how the "work associated with organizational processes flows and migrates as people interact with those processes" (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 172).

In this case, institutional ethnography invites everyone involved in managing student identification in campus communications to participate in a process of knowledge documentation and analysis through which texts and relations that lead to disjuncture can be discovered. The focus of institutional ethnography:

is not confined to what can be directly observed, or to what informants have directly observed. Rather, it seeks to reveal the extended

bureaucratic, professional, legislative, and economic, as well as other social relations involved in the production of local events and activities (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 172).

IE is specifically designed to examine the processes within an organization that mediate people's access to the services provided by that organization. In 2009 the Economic and Social Research Council National Centre for Research Methods at University of Surrey issued a report titled "Innovations in Social Science Research Methods" (Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2009). Institutional ethnography was included as an effective method for "getting beyond the conceptual frameworks of administration...to the actual circumstances of the diverse lives people live in contemporary societies"(2009, p. 33). Institutional ethnography's focus on intended organizational purposes and the possibility of unintended outcomes, makes it well suited to the questions raised in this inquiry.

Stone's (2002) analysis of the limitations of the policy process points out the political nature of organizations' use of policy to drive practice:

Each type of policy instrument is a kind of sports arena, each with its peculiar ground rules, within which political conflicts are continued. Each mode of social regulation draws lines around what people may and may not do and how they may or may not treat each other. But these boundaries are constantly contested [and subject to individual interpretation], either because they are ambiguous and do not settle conflicts, or because they allocate

benefits and burdens to the people on either side, or both (2002, p. 15).

Smith calls instances where every day practices fall short of the intended goals of policy 'disjunctures' (D. E. Smith, 2005). IE is well designed for the careful study of local events and activities like the conflation of sex and gender, and the binary gender limitations common on institutional forms, norms, facilities and structures.

## **CHAPTER 4: METHODOLOGY**

### **Purpose Statement**

Colleges and universities need to meet the name and pronoun needs of transgender and gender non-conforming students; no guidance currently exists on how to go about the needed changes to existing systems, and how best to help campus stakeholders understand their role in bringing about these changes. The purpose of this research is to address that gap in the literature by analyzing the work processes at the University of Vermont that have been put in place to support trans students' use of chosen names and pronouns.

### **About Institutional Ethnography**

Ethnographic studies follow the data, allowing findings to direct the researcher's attention (Berg et al., 2004; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Institutional ethnography (IE) in particular is interested in examining the processes within an organization that mediate people's access to the services provided by that organization, and understanding how the work associated with those processes flows and migrates as people interact with them. Institutional ethnography's focus on intended organizational purposes and the possibility of unintended outcomes, makes it well suited to the questions raised by this study.

Institutional ethnography "takes as its problematic the complex relations in which this local world is embedded" (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 172). The focus of the ethnography:

is not confined to what can be directly observed, or to what informants have directly observed. Rather, it seeks to reveal the

extended bureaucratic, professional, legislative, and economic, as well as other social relations involved in the production of local events and activities (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 172).

In this study ‘other social relations’ included among other things, traditional notions of gender, and binary gendered institutional forms, norms, facilities and structures.

Institutional ethnographies have been found especially effective for examining work processes and studying how those processes are coordinated, typically through texts and discourses (Campbell, 1998; D. E. Smith, 2006; Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2009). In 2009 the Economic and Social Research Council National Centre for Research Methods at University of Surrey issued a report titled “Innovations in Social Science Research Methods” (Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2009). Institutional ethnography was included as an effective method for “getting beyond the conceptual frameworks of administration, . . . to the actual circumstances of the diverse lives people live in contemporary societies” (2009, p. 33). Chan used narrative analysis, and institutional ethnography to examine, “disjunctures between the goals of policy and the actualities of experience” in a study of diversity-related policy and organizational practice in higher education settings in Canada (2005, p. 131). Similarly Nichols and Griffith (2009) used institutional ethnography in a study of educational policy and practice in K-12 settings to reveal where “experiential knowledge bumps up against textual realities meant to manage it” (p. 244).

## **How Institutional Ethnography ‘Works’**

IE is grounded in the assumption that institutional practice is always inherently political. Institutions function by assigning roles that provide privileged access to forms of knowing and action. Within the framework of IE, the separation of roles and activities inherent to institutions makes disjunctures an expected aspect of the everyday. In other words, IE expects that under the best of circumstances, enactment of policy by ruling relations inevitably results in everyday practices destined to fall short of the intended goal of the policy. These disjunctures, as Smith (2005, 2006) called them, are best understood from the standpoint of those outside the ruling relations.

IE in general and this study in particular are not concerned with the subjective feelings of people, or with criticizing an organization or the attitudes of people involved in policy making or service delivery. IE focuses on “how the interface between the two gets organized as a matter of the everyday encounters between individuals” (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 168)

## **Specialized Terms Used in Institutional Ethnography**

Because IE is a significant departure from ordinary research practice it is helpful to become familiar with the specialized meanings and terms Smith (2005) developed to describe institutional ethnography practice. Smith uses the term, ‘social relations’ to describe complex combinations of circumstances, actions, and everyday practices which are arranged around the enactment of institutional character and intention (Campbell & Gregor, 2002; D. E. Smith, 2005). The term disjunctures is used to capture inevitable instances where, from the standpoint of those enacting policies (what Smith (2005) calls



the *ruling relations*), everyday practices appear to function as intended, while the experience of that same everyday practices from the perspective of those outside those ruling relations ‘chafes.’ In Smith’s (2005) terms a *problematic* is when someone notices a possible relationship between everyday social relations and the inevitable disjunctures that exist within them.

### **Applying IE Terms to This Study**

The problematic in this study arose out of the everyday experiences of people at UVM as they worked to meet transgender students’ name and pronoun needs in an institutional setting where the existence of transgender people had not been previously accounted for. From my preliminary inquiries, it appeared that an organizational disjuncture existed between the everyday, commonsense arrangement of the work of people charged with managing students’ identifying information in campus communications, and the binary, cisgender assumptions that underpin educational organizations’ institutional forms and structures. Using institutional ethnography I hoped to invite others involved in managing student identification in campus communications to participate in a process of knowledge documentation and analysis through which texts and relations that lead to disjuncture would be discovered. By studying what is visible in terms of local and extra-local forms of social relations I hoped to discover relations that were previously out of view, but that have been constituting the everyday in a way that may be disrupting or undoing the efforts of people attempting to meet trans students’ name and pronoun needs.

***Social relations.*** In this study, the *social relations* of interest are those constituting the everyday of practitioners engaged in student identification in on campus communication. The *knowers* in the study includes trans people themselves, administrators involved in setting policy and managing practice, and staff and faculty members involved in enacting policy associated with on campus communications.

***Standpoint.*** As Smith (2005) points out policies and their enactment will always be perceived differently from different standpoints. For example, in my role as an advocate for trans student needs, I see a trans students' ability to be referred to using a self-identified name and pronoun as a priority. I possess deep background in the testimony of the transgender people I know personally and those whose experiences have been recorded in the research. That background and my own genderqueer<sup>2</sup> identity inform the theoretical logic I apply to my understanding of what needs to take place. My standpoint does not include a cisgender<sup>3</sup> perspective, or direct responsibility for regulations and other complications that arise in the daily practices of other specialized roles and locations that mediate students' identity information, like the admissions or registrar's office to name just two.

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<sup>2</sup> Genderqueer is an evolving term currently in popular use. This author uses the term consistent with the adjective denoting: "a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders" ("genderqueer definition - Google Search," n.d.).

<sup>3</sup> Cisgender is a recently invented adjective "denoting or relating to a person whose self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex; not transgender." ("cisgender definition - Google Search," n.d.).

A trans student's standpoint differs from mine, or that of my colleagues in admissions and the registrar's office. The trans student is primarily concerned with avoiding being outed in class, and cannot, nor should that student have to, know about complexities of existing system architecture that limit our ability to 'fix' the way their name shows up throughout campus. Faculty members represent yet another standpoint, one likely to be focused on managing course content, getting to know students, the classroom pedagogy they are familiar and comfortable with, and representing their disciplinary expertise. Still another standpoint consists of the host of staff members throughout campus who are responsible for various forms of communications that include the names of students.

*Disjunctures.* IE is grounded in the assumption that institutional practice is inherently political. Institutions function by assigning roles that provide privileged access to forms of knowing and action. Within the framework of IE, the separation of roles and activities inherent in institutions makes misalignments between people's needs and an organization's practices, like those discussed here, an expected aspect of the everyday. In other words, IE posits that under the best of circumstances, enactment of policy by ruling relations (i.e. administrators with expertise in the needs and operations of the organization, but not necessarily in the needs and operations of front line employees) inevitably results in everyday practices destined to fall short of the intended goal of any given 'policy.' The *disjunctures* I studied were instances where a transgender student was misidentified by the use of an inappropriate name or pronoun despite steps taken to prevent that from happening.

***Problematic.*** In Smith's (D. E. Smith, 2005) terms a *problematic* is when someone notices a possible relationship between everyday social relations and the inevitable disjunctures that exist within them. The problematic under discussion here arises out of the everyday experiences of people at UVM as they strive to meet transgender students' name and pronoun needs in an institutional setting where the existence of transgender people has not been previously accounted for. In other words, the problematic being considered here are the instances where despite good intentions and considerable work to prevent it from happening, trans students at my university have continued to be misnamed and misgendered.<sup>4</sup>

Institutional ethnography requires "unlearning some common assumptions about research and accepted practices of knowing" (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 11). Dorothy Smith's (2005) title, *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for the people*, is perhaps best understood literally. In developing the practice of IE, Smith worked intentionally to replace the traditional practice of elevating the researcher a *subject* role as *the knower*. While the researcher's work within traditional frameworks is to observe an *object* of study, and apply (impose) externally produced theories to (on) those observations, the institutional ethnographer remains 'in the discourse,' as only one of the 'knowers' situated among all of the other knowers within the setting.

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, one of the challenges in addressing the unintended errors as they occur is that most students have chosen not to inform the LGBTQA Center. When I have asked why, they have explained that they assume the experience is an 'honest mistake' and consider it a minor concern in a larger context that feels highly and genuinely supportive.

***Ruling Relations.*** Smith's (2005) institutional ethnography framework sheds light on what can appear to be resistance to change, and other confounding organizational circumstances by focusing inquiry on such disjunctures. It is through the careful inquiry into unintended outcomes, or disjunctures, and what led to them, that *ruling relations* are revealed. Ruling relations, within Smith's vernacular, can be understood as the assumptions, expectations, norms, and notions that exist within the fabric of all social and organizational contexts, but that operate out of view. Smith's concept of ruling relations should not be confused with formalized procedures or guidelines. Ruling relations are more like the molecules of gases in the atmosphere; they are as unavoidable as they are ubiquitous. They are everywhere and ever present, operating out of sight and mind, *hidden in plain sight*. Through an IE framework, the central focus of this inquiry, namely binary gender hegemony and the unexamined assumptions that derive from uncritical acceptance of a dichotomous, gender = sex regime can be understood as ruling relations. As such, binary gender ruling relations can operate out of view in ways that complicate and frustrate practitioners' efforts to support trans students' use of self-identified first names and pronouns on campus.

Like incident analysis, institutional ethnography extends beyond written rules, protocols, standards, and procedures, and pays careful attention to what actually takes place within the everyday (Snook, 2002; United States, 2003). Incident analysis and institutional ethnography differ in terms of time, and in precipitating event. Incident analysis studies conditions, actions, and decisions that took place in the past, and which ultimately led to an organization's catastrophic failure. IE looks at actions and

interactions as they take place in the present, looking for ruling relations. Because ruling relations (norms and assumptions that are built into the fabric of the organization's every day) follow the social and cultural perspectives of the majority, they frequently lead organizations to underserve people whose perspectives and experiences differ from the majority. Therefore, as Smith (2005, 2006) notes, disjunctures are best understood from the standpoint of those outside the ruling relations, or people within the organization who possess marginal identities or backgrounds.

### **IE Research Design**

The research design proposed for this inquiry relied heavily on the model set forth by Smith, et.al., (2006). In an institutional ethnography the data collection methodologies chosen depend on “the social organizational properties of the phenomena under investigation” (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 172). Methodologies used in this study included auto ethnography, archival research, textual analysis, and 1:1 and group discussions about work practices (in place of the typical ethnographic interview). The focus of the research was the forms of social organization that coordinate relations between people striving to meet the name and pronoun needs of transgender students, and institutional, cultural, and bureaucratic texts that coordinate relations in the higher education environment. Texts were expected to include, cultural notions of a gender binary, student data regulations, technologies, and data translation regimes (Johnson, 2014).

## **Starting from the Standpoint of People Doing the Work**

As stated earlier, this study started from the standpoint of people involved in managing student identification in on-campus communications. What this means was that conceptually this study was designed to take up the problems higher education staff and faculty members encounter when striving to support transgender students' name and pronoun needs. It is their experiences that defined the starting point, not legislative, bureaucratic, or technological limitations governing student information. The study was not an exploration of attitudes, but rather a study of social organization from the various points where trans students provide personal information; through the work involved in cataloging that information; retrieving and using that information, and the work of identifying and resolving inaccuracies that occur. In this context, the problems encountered with the representation of transgender students' names on campus is taken up in terms of the ways in which bureaucratic, cultural, and technological everyday practices connect, or fail to connect, with the work of supporting trans students' name and pronoun needs.

## **Reflexive Bases of Institutional Ethnographic Analysis**

The research was carried out in a reflexive manner from inside the social organization of my own world as a researcher and an active participant in the work of supporting trans students' name and pronoun needs, and from the inside of the social worlds I investigated. The purpose of interviews, archival and textual reviews was to extend the everyday, commonsense understandings I have of my own world to a larger understanding of other people's lives and standpoints—in this case the everyday work

processes of people across the many separate areas of my university. Reflexive processes were used in this study in four ways.

**Informants treated as experts.** Informants' understanding of the social organization of the local settings in which they conduct their affairs is treated as expert knowledge. In IE research informants are taken to be competent practitioners within the context of their everyday world. The purpose of interviews was to have them share competencies, and knowledge, thereby extending and solidifying my own understanding.

**Consideration of broader context.** The social world under investigation was not taken to be bounded at the location of the setting, but was assumed to "extend in a contiguous fashion beyond the purview of the everyday" (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 174). Everyday activities and relations in a local setting were understood as part of extended courses of action.

**Exploration of reflexive social relations.** Extended courses of action were explored as social relations that were "organized as a series of moments that are dependent upon one another and articulated to one another not functionally, but reflexively" (Smith et al., 2006, p. 174). Smith et al. describes this reflexivity as "temporal sequences in which the foregoing intends the subsequent and in which the subsequent 'realizes' or accomplishes the social character of the preceding" (Smith et al., 2006, p. 174). In other words, in the same vein as explained earlier in the section on definitions of IE terms, it is expected that failures arise, not from intention, but from a series of understandable, but previously unobserved influences. Recognizing this reflexivity that is beyond conscious intention was a key focus of my analysis.



**Texts as social relations.** Texts and documents were investigated as active constituents of social relations. In my analysis I sought to understand how they operated as “extra-local determinants coordinating and concerting the organization of local settings” (Smith et al., 2006, p. 172). These everyday texts included not only policies and regulations, but everyday habits of greeting and addressing in both written and verbal form and representations and understandings of gender as they are expressed not only about a specific person, but in general.

### **Site selection**

I chose the University of Vermont (UVM) as the site for this study for several reasons. As the researcher, I have also held role responsibility for and been directly involved in the work of supporting transgender students’ use of their chosen names and pronouns from the point at which that work was first taken up by UVM in 2002. As a practitioner at UVM I exercised and expressed the particular cultural organizational and institutional texts and existed within the social relations I intended to study. My own ‘everyday’ constituted part of the larger ‘extended courses of action.’ I was interested in understanding my own standpoint and the limitations of my own purview provided a useful place to begin a reflexive analysis.

It is also significant that at the time of my investigation my university had held a position of leadership in this study’s area of interest for a number of years. UVM was the first in the nation to provide students with real time, web-based access to specifying the first name and pronoun (including gender neutral options) that should be used to refer to them in on-campus communications (Scelfo, 2015; Tilsley, 2010).

## **Constructing the Basis for the Project**

All institutional ‘work’ is done from separate standpoints, each of which continually evolves within separate local settings, which are in turn each organized by a distinct and separate set of everyday social relations. For this study, I started from an auto ethnographic lens in the form of brief narratives of my recollections to capture my own direct experience and historic understanding of how the work progressed, and my current understandings of what is involved in meeting trans students’ name and pronoun needs. These narratives served as a record of my pre-existing ‘local’ understanding and as a basis from which to begin my inquiry. Throughout the study I reflected on how my own understandings evolved as I was exposed to the understandings and social organizations that made up the everyday of others. I looked not only for facts I was able to gather, but for a greater understanding of the way existing relations organized the everyday in a way that held a disjuncture in place, just out of view.

Organizational work generates everyday work products in the form of meeting minutes, notes, memos, and email threads. Such documentation associated with the efforts of my office and others to support trans students’ use of self-identified first names and pronouns on campus served as material which I could draw upon to expand my understandings beyond my singular standpoint in the present context. Documentation included email correspondence and notes from conversations with individuals from other colleges working on trans names and pronouns; notes and email correspondence related to the work of the task force that built my university’s ‘preferred name’ system, and data that has been collected periodically about the numbers of students using the ‘preferred

name' system at various times. As I analyzed these materials I looked for details I may have 'forgotten' as possible indicators of how my own standpoint is constituted by the social organization of the everyday I am immersed in.

### **Interviews**

The work activities involved in this study constitute a microcosm of most practitioners' work activities. As a researcher, I started from significant pre-existing familiarity that provided a foundation of knowledge from which I sought clarifications and extended understandings. In keeping with institutional ethnography practice, the interviews I conducted for this study were along the lines of collegial discussions, with ample opportunity for immediate clarification and fact-checking. The interview procedure included a mix of structured and open-ended questions with practitioners who are directly involved with data management and retrieval, with practitioners who advocate for trans students, and with trans students. Audio recordings were made only in instances where time constraints or extent of technical detail made written notations impractical. While recording and transcribing interviews is not uncommon in IE research (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 174), because of the researcher's prior familiarity with processes being studied, recordings and transcriptions were made only of selected segments that helped delineate key components of previously identified courses of action. While it was not possible to conduct an exhaustive inventory of my university's communications practices, the review that was conducted did provide an overall sense of the interplay between the social relations of the organization and how those do and do not connect with the presence of trans students on campus.

## **Textual Mediation of Social Organizations**

Texts organize general forms of social action by coordinating and structuring people's activities over time. Organizations and events in our society are textually mediated, in that documentary forms of organization shape and determine events in local and extra-local settings in the present and across time. Legislation and other forms of policy function in this way, as do signage and formal practices of structuring the social environment, through mediating forms like identification cards, class rosters, and databases. Choices made in the design of each of these structures in turn mediates our understanding of individuals as they interact in the everyday. The purpose of textual analysis in this study along with interviews was to help capture this iterative, recursive process of mediation.

In IE instances of recursion surface when organized local experiences of people in one setting are discovered to have the same social configuration as experiences of people in other locations. For example, in this study, traditional uses of honorifics (Mr., Mrs., Ms.) constituted text that coordinated and structured activities in different locations and over time. Another example was the routine collection of sex/gender data, often without clear intention as to whether or how such data was likely to be used. In the case of this study, investigation focused on textually mediated processes involved in managing student identification in on campus communications related to the identified cases. These processes included organizational texts produced in local settings like small local databases and survey forms; texts produced centrally by organizational leadership like policies, central database systems and reports, and texts that are produced externally that

govern activity within the organization like federal regulations and national reports and surveys. Again, I did not attempt to conduct an exhaustive inventory of all documents related to student communications, but looked for relevant documents within in each of the above stated categories to identify and collect. My interest was in providing an account of organizational process, not in evaluation, as it is traditionally understood.

### **Data Analysis**

The central construct for analysis in institutional ethnography is the notion of “social relations.” Social relations serve as a lens through which to locate and describe the social form of people’s activities over time. Social relations direct attention not to *what* I was looking for, but *how* I was looking. This method required me as the researcher to examine how people’s activities, including my own were “reflexively/recursively knitted together into particular forms of social organization” (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 177).

IE assumes that people working in an organization do not work in a social vacuum. When people in one part of an organization take on a task, their work is part of a larger course of actions, over much of which they have little or no control. This larger course of action organizes them in relation to trans students and colleagues (e.g., in terms of their effectiveness or commitment as an advocate to trans people), to the organization (in terms of the quality of their overall performance), and to the government (in terms of providing equal access for students). My aim as researcher was to use the analytic lens of social relations to arrive at a fuller understanding of how an institutional course of action shapes and determines relevant aspects of the lives of the people involved. I used the

notion of social relations to help me determine where to look and how to see the coordination of social organization at work.

The notion of “social relations” helped me talk about and investigate the actual practices of individuals as they were articulated to one another, not functionally, but reflexively. I sought to understand how these individual practices taken together constituted work processes that are parts of a larger course of action in which specific events are dependent on one another at different points in time. I sought to reveal how these courses of action are coordinated over time, but are neither initiated nor completed by a single individual.

### **Data Review Process**

My four-step data review process included: 1.) Composing auto-ethnographic narratives; 2.) Revisiting archived communications and notes; 3.) Reviewing related institutional texts, and 4.) Engaging stakeholders in follow-up discussions about the original processes and my understandings.

### **Composing Auto-ethnographic Narratives**

My analysis included using a reflexive process for composing the auto-ethnographic narratives. I began by sketching out what I recollected about each of three time periods, before, during, and after my university established the automated system students now routinely access on-line to specify a first name and pronoun to be used on campus to refer to them. Once I had sketched out my recollections, I then referred back to email communications and meeting notes, carefully considering how my and others’

understandings of issues evolved over time and reflecting on the accuracy of my recollections. I noted differences and forgotten details and considered the impacts of changes in evolving institutional texts that occurred during the time period. Finally, I engaged stakeholders in discussions about my impressions and their understandings about how our university's system 'works.' A series of three brief narratives, each followed by a brief summary of reflexive insights can be found in chapter four of this dissertation.

### **Revisiting Archived Communications and Notes**

Efforts to support students' use of personally specified first names and pronouns at my university have been documented through email exchanges, meeting notes, and articles that have been published in local, national, and international news media. Some meetings were recorded (with permission of everyone present) for the purpose of capturing complex details involved in planning efforts. These various forms of work products provided a historical basis for reviewing discussions and considerations that took place over time related to my university's efforts to support students' ability to specify first names and pronouns used to refer to them on campus.

### **Reviewing Related Institutional Texts**

My university limits official policies to matters of state, local, and federal law. Day to day work practices and processes are established and communicated through agreements reached in face to face meetings and documented in the form of guidelines and/or recommendations published through follow-up emails, memos, and official departmental web pages. Related institutional texts reviewed for this study included the original and current web portal used by students to specify first name and pronoun;

university policies, facilities, and services that reference gender, including policies on harassment, discrimination, and assault; practices associated with bathroom, shower, housing, and athletic facilities, and varsity athletics and recreational programs. Relevant texts extending beyond the local, included contrasting events related to first names and pronouns on other campuses (Jaschik, 2015) and in other states (Talbot, 2016). As this dissertation was being written, federal agencies produced new policy guidance relevant to this study (C. E. Lhamon & Gupta, 2016), proving the timeliness and relevance of the topic. The review conducted for this study was selective rather than exhaustive, due to the pervasive and extensive presence of ‘gender’ as a construct constituting institutional structure and practice.

### **Engaging Stakeholders in Follow-up Discussions**

Since first learning of the need, people at my university have worked repeatedly over time, revisiting the practices that are intended to support students’ ability to specify the first name and pronoun used to refer to them in on campus communications. As mentioned earlier, these deliberations and decisions have been documented in various forms. In addition to reviewing those forms of documentation, however, it was also necessary to engage in present day discussions with these same stakeholders. My role as a participant-observer in these discussions was to investigate respondents’ own working knowledge of the relevant organizational processes they are involved in. I made a point of seeking out respondents involved at different points of the communications process in order to map relevant organizational sequences as actual courses of action. My focus was on informants’ practical knowledge of “how things work.” In the discussions, I tried to



uncover what respondents could tell me about how documents, regulations, and technologies enter into the routine ordering of their work. My focus was on observing and recording representations of gender in the local setting where the work was taking place. In these discussions stakeholders were able to revisit their participation in work processes and reflect on how their own understanding of ‘problems,’ and their ideas about how best to resolve them evolved over time. It was through observing how people’s understanding of the nature of the problem at hand evolved over time that pervasive, and typically unexamined binary gender assumptions were revealed. Examples of this are discussed in chapters 5 – 7.

### **Limitations of Data Analysis**

#### **Selected Cases Included in Findings**

Universities are large, complex organizations with many sub organizations that each function somewhat autonomously. An exhaustive study of all of the communications this study is interested in was beyond the resource capacity available for this study. Part of the information available prior to the start of this study was a collection of instances where an inappropriate first name or an inappropriate pronoun was used to identify a transgender student. These cases provided relevant starting points for investigations into selected work processes involved in collecting, storing, retrieving, and publishing student identification information in these cases. A case in this sense did not concentrate on the lived experience of individual trans students or employees, but on tracing everyday work processes and social relations starting in the locations where an

error was first detected and working back to where students' information was first recorded.

## **CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS**

### **Results and their Dissemination**

Results of this study include explications of the social organization of the work involved in managing the name and pronoun information of transgender students, in on-campus communications with particular attention to explanations of disjunctures that are found. This dissertation reports recommendations that have arisen for reorganizing the work involved in managing transgender students' name and pronoun information with the understanding that these recommendations do not limit other initiatives that others might devise.

This study offers further illumination of the complexity involved in addressing trans students' presence on our campuses, an issue that has relevance for practices in higher education and other social institutions that seek to serve all of their members equitably and respectfully. This study also completes this researcher's dissertation, which includes manuscripts for two journal articles, one co-authored with a colleague from another university and based on understandings reached prior to the study, the other based on understandings at the end of the study. Manuscripts of each of the two articles follow summary information of specific details not covered in the manuscripts.

### **Auto-ethnographic Narratives**

As mentioned earlier, part of the data collection, review and analysis process for this study involved producing auto-ethnographic narratives that I then subjected to

reflexive review and analysis. I include here three brief summaries of the auto-ethnographic portion of the study, each followed by a summary of reflexive IE insights concerning the content of each narrative.

### **Experience leading up to changes in student information system**

*Narrative: I first encountered trans students' challenges with first names in 2002. Initially I imagined it would be easy to make the necessary changes to the student information database. After all, a university is a highly technological environment, and we are living in a time where marketing firms can track our browsing history and place ads about products most likely to interest us on whatever web pages we visit.*

*In 2008 I participated in a task force that built a 'preferred name' option into our student information database at the University of Vermont (UVM). I witnessed firsthand the careful thought, technical expertise and competence of the group of colleagues who worked on the new system for four months surfacing and resolving a host of complicated questions and problems I had no idea existed.*

Reflexive insights: In my role at the time I attended to the details for which I was responsible. As a researcher, I had the opportunity to broaden my understanding beyond what I had been able to glean from my own standpoint in the past. Applying a reflexive analysis, I looked for the social relations that constituted work activities. This reflexive analysis considered details like practitioners' institutional roles and other aspects of their particular standpoints; questions and problems that have arisen, and the process by which they were answered and resolved. Analysis included mapping the flow of communication

and decision processes, and noting theoretical logics that were considered and applied. The final versions of these mapping processes can be found in chapter 7.

### **Launching New System for Specifying First Names and Pronouns**

*Narrative: Once the project was completed in 2009, we held a celebration as several hundred students eagerly signed on to the new web portal to change their names within the first three days. The number of students who chose to specify their pronouns was much smaller than the number of students choosing to specify a different first name.*

Reflexive insights: I had communicated through the years with students, staff and faculty about UVM's 'preferred name' system, but it had been beyond my purview to assemble a more comprehensive body of data about system usage, or about how the system's existence and instructions for usage had been communicated to students and practitioners. As I traced how the process 'works' today from the point where students access the system to the point where practitioners were or were not able to respond consistently or effectively to a name change or a non-binary pronoun in written or in-person communication, I was able to see how binary gender hegemony functioned recursively. Smith (2006) described this process, saying, "active constituents of social relations can iterate the particular configuration of their organization in different places and at different times, thereby conceptually coordinating the temporally concerting a gender form of social action" (p. 178.) In other words, I was able to look for instances where intentions and outcomes diverged as the predictable course of forms of social organization that are at work outside of conscious awareness, in concert or in conflict with, and with or without the assistance of the preferred name system.

## **Experience with First Name and Pronoun System Over Time**

*Narrative: Once the new system was in place, the staff of the LGBTQA Center heard of no problems for several semesters. Because UVM designed its system to give students' real time, independent control of the name and pronoun that appear on class rosters and advising lists, students no longer requested our assistance for these interactions with faculty. Eventually we started to hear about locations beyond class rosters and advisee lists where trans students' names were showing up incorrectly. I became interested in pursuing this study because of repeated instances, where after meeting with a colleague I know and trust to be competent and supportive, and thinking we had reached an understanding about what the problem was, the same or a similar mistake occurred again the following year, and again a year after that.*

Reflexive insights: Although I had worked to understand these situations to the extent that the immediate circumstance was satisfactorily resolved, problems had persisted, despite extensive educational and communication efforts. The most recent instance, the inadvertent misgendering of a trans student receiving an award for trans advocacy work, and others occurred throughout this study. By tracing the everyday of practitioners involved in collecting student contact information, building and using small decentralized databases, and producing campus communications that contain student identification information, I hoped to discover social relations that organized the everyday in ways that failed to connect with transgender people's experiences and existence within our communities.

**CHAPTER 6: MANUSCRIPT PUBLISHED IN THEORY TO PRACTICE:  
FOSTERING DIVERSE AND INCLUSIVE CAMPUS ENVIRONMENTS**

**Gender-Inclusive Information Systems: Meeting the Needs  
of an Increasingly Diverse Student Population**

**Abstract**

As increasing numbers of transgender (trans\*)<sup>5</sup> students have come out on our nation's campuses, they have faced numerous barriers to safe and equitable access to a college education. Previous scholarship has outlined the full range of transgender student needs for safe access to housing, bathrooms, showers, and campus environments free of harassment and discrimination. This chapter provides a brief history of the emergence of transgender visibility in higher education, and then focuses on the challenges transgender students face regarding the representation of their names throughout their lives on campus (class rosters, identification cards, housing records, etc.) The limits of functionality within most campus' student information systems are explained and critical details of the work being undertaken at colleges and universities across the country to address preferred name access are explored.

**Introduction**

Many colleges and universities today find themselves with trans\* students who are open about their gender identities. In our work as trans advocates, we are frequently contacted by schools that are looking for help in addressing the needs of their trans students, including schools that would not be expected to have openly trans undergraduates, such as small, rural colleges, religiously affiliated institutions, community colleges in conservative states, and military academies. Knowing these

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<sup>5</sup> Within transgender communities the term trans\* is used to refer to the tremendous variety of gender nonconforming and non-cisgender identities, with the asterisk signifying all of the different gender possibilities.

colleges and universities have trans students, it is hard to imagine a school with no trans students, even if these students are closeted because they do not feel comfortable or safe being open about their gender identity.

Not only are trans\* college students becoming more visible on campuses across the country, they are also adopting a wide array of gender identities when they come out. Twenty-five years ago, trans\* people, particularly trans women, were expected to fit one of two social scripts—to identify as a transsexual or a crossdresser, with plans for gender-affirming surgery being the line of demarcation (Bolin, 1988). While this rigid dichotomy began to be less enforced in trans\* communities in the 1990s, it continued to persist into the 2000s, especially among older trans\* people (B. G. Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bolin, 1994). Today, many younger trans\* people are challenging traditional gender expectations in both the larger society and the trans\* community through greatly expanding what it means to identify and to express oneself as transgender. Genny Beemyn and Sue Rankin (2011), for example, found that the nearly 3,500 participants in their study used more than a hundred different descriptors for their gender identity, and most of the nearly 300 participants in Laura Kuper, Robin Nussbaum, and Brian Mustanski's (2012) study described their gender in non-binary ways. Reflecting this growing gender diversity, Facebook gave its members 56 different gender identities beyond male and female to choose from in 2014 (Oremus, 2014).

Colleges and universities, though, largely remain entrenched in a gender binary and, as a result, fail to provide equitable access and create an uncomfortable if not a hostile environment for students who identify as gender nonconforming. Trans\* students



face discrimination in campus housing, bathrooms, locker rooms, and athletics, which are commonly divided by “female” and “male”; they are invisible in most college curricula; and often lack access to supportive health care and counseling services (B. Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; Bilodeau, 2009; Goodrich, 2012; McKinney, 2005b). A growing body of literature (B. G. Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, & Smith, 2005; Hobson, 2014; Singh et al., 2013) offers recommendations and best practices for addressing the needs of and improving the campus climate for trans\* students, but relatively few colleges and universities have implemented any of these policies (G. Beemyn, 2014).

In this chapter, we focus on one area where most colleges and universities fail to meet the needs of trans\* students: the ability to use a name and gender other than the name and gender assigned to them at birth, and to indicate their personal pronouns on campus records and documents. These changes are lawful in all states and have been made easier to implement at most colleges, as a result of the pioneering work of the University of Vermont, the University of Michigan, and other schools that have modified the most commonly used student information software. By not offering this option when it is readily available, colleges and universities violate the privacy of trans\* students; publicly out them, thereby exposing them to possible violence and harassment; and create a situation where the institution will inadvertently discriminate against them in gender-segregated environments like housing, bathrooms and locker rooms, and athletic settings (Brown, Clarke, Gortmaker, & Robinson-Keilig, 2004; Grossman et al., 2009). By explaining why name, gender, and pronoun processes are needed and how these changes

can be accomplished, we hope to encourage more colleges and universities to develop such policies.

### **Importance of a Trans\*-Supportive Records Process**

While more trans\* students are coming out before or when they enter college, many who want to change their first names legally are not in a position to do so. They may be financially dependent on a parent(s) who is opposed to the change, or they may be financially independent and cannot afford the cost of the legal process, which can run as much as a couple hundred dollars. Newly out students may not be ready to take the major step of a legal name change, even if they are publicly presenting as a gender other than their gender assigned at birth. Thus, from a practical standpoint, it is a valuable service for colleges and universities to offer trans\* students the ability to use a name other than their legal name on campus records and documents, including course and grade rosters, advisee lists, directory listings, email addresses, unofficial transcripts, and, where permitted by state law, identification cards and diplomas. Such an option also helps students who are known by a nickname, or international students who wish to anglicize their first names.

Giving students the ability to change the gender on campus records is similarly an important accommodation. In many states, trans\* people cannot change their legal documents, most notably birth certificates and driver's licenses, without evidence of gender-affirming surgery. However, physicians in the United States generally do not perform such surgeries on individuals under eighteen years of age, making it impossible for traditionally aged college students to change their gender marker before entering

college. Moreover, as most schools do not cover the surgeries under student health insurance, few students will be able to do so during college without parental financial support. Furthermore, many students who present as a gender different from their assigned gender have no interest in surgery; they do not feel that they have to change their bodies in prescribed ways to identify and present as their true selves. Others are not ready to make such a life-changing decision in their late teens or early twenties (Rankin & Beemyn, 2012). It is thus inappropriate for colleges and universities to insist that students undertake major, expensive surgeries that they may not want or be ready for in order to make a relatively simple, bureaucratic change on their campus records.

While changing the name and gender marker on students' records, or giving students the ability to indicate the pronouns they use for themselves, may seem like small matters from the perspective of the institution, the value to students can be immeasurable. Having a mismatch between one's birth and chosen name or between assigned pronouns and the ones a person actually uses can lead to a student being outed, for example, when their instructors call roll in class, when they apply for a job and have to submit a transcript, whenever they have to present their campus identification, and every time someone looks them up in the institution's online directory. In short, trans\* people are at constant risk of having their identity disclosed, which makes them targets for discrimination. Given the high rates of harassment and violence against gender-nonconforming people (Grant et al., 2011; Lombardi, Wilchins, Priesing, & Malouf, 2002), colleges and universities should not ignore the perilous positions in which they place their trans\* students.

Having a student's gender marker match how they present is likewise important for preventing harassment and discrimination, as well for avoiding possible legal action. Because college officials use gender in assigning campus housing, determining which bathrooms and locker rooms students are supposed to use, and deciding on which sports team students can compete, a gender marker that does not correspond to how a student identifies means placing them in unfair, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous situations. Moreover, denying a student access to facilities consistent with their gender identity is considered a violation of Titles IV and IX by the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education and such complaints of discrimination are subject to investigation by the government's Office of Civil Rights (C. Lhamon, 2014; "RESOLUTION AGREEMENT Between the Arcadia Unified School District, the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, and the U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division," 2013). While litigation involving the rights of trans\* students has been limited to date, colleges and universities that fail to address the needs of their trans\* students today are increasingly likely to find themselves facing potential lawsuits in the future.

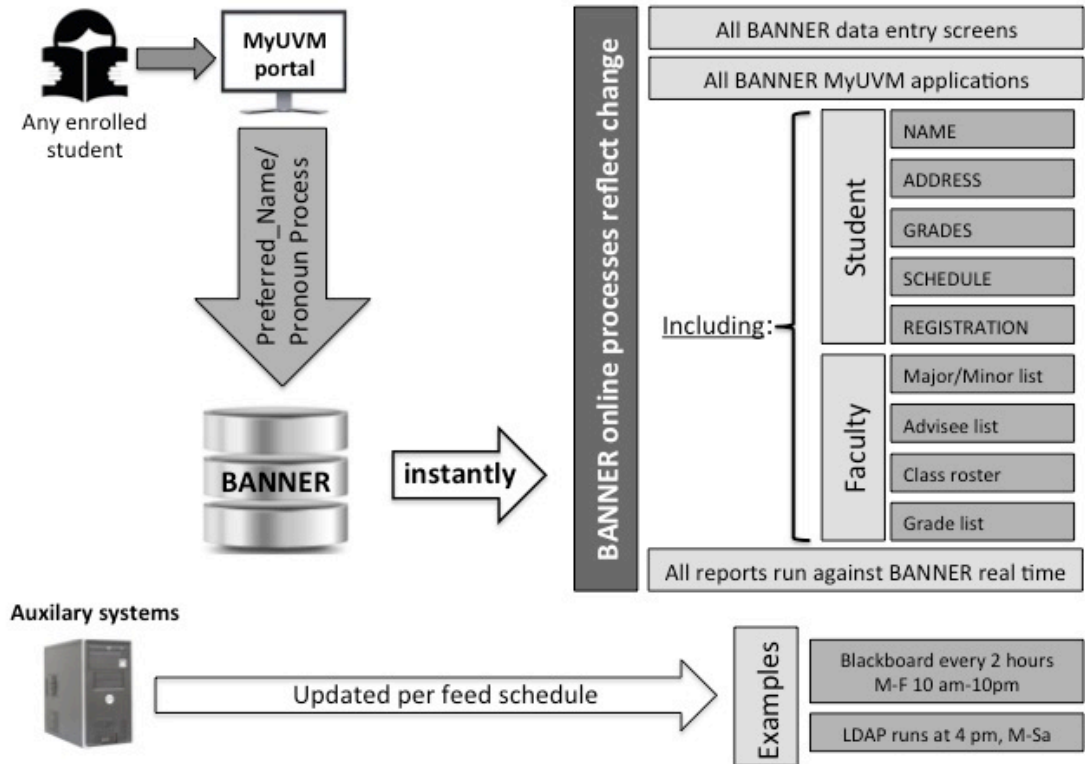
### **Student Information Systems**

College information systems that communicate with federal and state agencies, such as with the Internal Revenue Service and the Social Security Administration, are required to use a student's legal name to prevent record mismatches. However, no such restriction exists for systems that are internal to a given campus, so colleges and universities are free to let a student be known by a different first name. But changing student information systems to allow for a chosen name is not simple. The assumptions

that gender is a binary and that an individual's personal pronouns correspond to their assigned gender are woven into the fabric of existing information systems, which means not only having to make wholesale changes to software, but also having to educate the software managers and programmers about the need for these changes.

Complicating matters, colleges and universities rely on multiple information systems for data collection, management, and communication within and between individual offices and departments. These systems often do not collect, code, or share information in the same way. The diagram below illustrates the Banner "preferred-name" interface at the University of Vermont (UVM). Although the UVM's information system is less complex than systems at some larger campuses, changing its software still required significant planning and coding in order to ensure compliance with Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations and to avoid disruptions in data transfer between existing systems (See Figure 1 UVM Banner System).

## University of Vermont Pronoun and Preferred\_Name Field Process Flow



**Figure 1: UVM Banner System**

The intricacy of campus information systems makes modifying software complicated, because even a seemingly small change to the main database requires adjustments to virtually all other systems. While providing chosen name and pronoun options throughout a college’s information systems is very achievable, doing so requires an investment of time upfront, followed by periodic checking and testing, and orientation of new administrative staff.

### **Note on the Inappropriateness of the Term “Preferred Name”**

The term “preferred name” became associated with creating a trans\*-inclusive name option on records in part because it is the designation of a field within the Banner Student Information database. The “preferred-name” field was used at the University of Vermont to give students the option to specify a first name other than their legal name (see the section on Banner below). Since then, “preferred” has been widely adopted among trans\* advocates in higher education to describe the chosen first name of students, as well as the pronouns that students use to refer to themselves.

While the word “preferred” can be accurate for students who seek to change their name in information system because they go by a nickname, this usage when applied to trans\* students often feels trivializing. It is the name and pronouns that they go by, not their “preferred” ones; using any other name or pronouns is inappropriate, just as it would be for non-trans\* students. While it is understandable how the term “preferred” took hold, the higher education community needs to replace it with other language, like “chosen” first name. Pronouns require no modifier; they are simply the pronouns someone uses for themselves.

### **Two Case Studies**

The experiences of the two universities that pioneered the name change process in different software systems are shared to illustrate how institutions have undertaken this critical work.

## **Case Study 1: PeopleSoft at the University of Michigan**

The University of Michigan is credited with being the first college to enable students to use a chosen name on all non-official campus records and documents. The issue arose in 2003 at a Trans Town Hall meeting sponsored by the Task Force on the Campus Climate for Transgender, Bisexual, Lesbian, and Gay (TBLG) Faculty, Staff, and Students, a group formed by the Provost to examine the environment for LGBTQ people at the University of Michigan. Trans\* students and staff told the task force that “changing one’s name at the University is very hard,” and is especially a hindrance for individuals who are not openly trans\*, who constantly face being outed because their “old names” often remain on records and documents, even when they have legally changed them. In response, the task force included a recommendation in its final report in April 2004 that a Subcommittee for Name Changes be created to identify the scope of the problem and how it might be addressed (*Task Force on the Campus Climate*, 2004). The subcommittee was subsequently formed, and its report, submitted in September 2005, recommended that Wolverine Access, the University’s online administrative system, be upgraded to allow students and staff to input a “preferred name” that would appear in the University of Michigan Online Directory (Transgender, Bisexual, Lesbian, and Gay (TBLG) Subcommittee for Name Changes, 2005). This recommendation was accepted, and the change went into effect in April 2007. The following year, the University broadened the use of an individual’s chosen name to all records, except where a legal name was required, such as on payroll records, license certifications for faculty and staff, and student transcripts (Frank, 2007).



## **Case Study 2: The Banner System at the University of Vermont**

In 2003, a graduate student who documented the difficulties experienced by trans\* students prompted UVM to establish a manual workaround to allow trans\* students to have their chosen first names appear on their campus ID cards and class rosters. In 2005, UVM updated its nondiscrimination policy to include “gender identity and expression,” created trans\*-inclusive policies in housing and campus health care, and began a trans\* awareness training program that resulted in more than sixty presentations being given to students, staff, and faculty. In addition, since 2003, a student-led group has organized an annual daylong conference on trans\* topics for members of the campus community and other area colleges. All of these steps helped prepare the University community to support the records change project, which was undertaken in the fall of 2008.

The version of the Banner system used by the University of Vermont includes a field for an “alternate first name.” However, the field, which Banner calls a “preferred name,” is essentially a non-functional placeholder; it is not included among the data elements readily available to be used within any of the vendor’s template reports or within the user-built custom reports. At UVM, the goal was to make the existing “preferred-name” field functional and accessible by any of the University’s various systems in order to give students the ability to self-manage, via a Web interface, the way their first name is represented within all campus records.

The Registrar assembled a task force for the project that included himself, a trans\* student leader, a faculty member who is a strong trans\* ally, the director of the

campus LGBTQA center, system programmers, and a Web designer. To enable chosen names to appear on any documentation within UVM, programmers wrote a database procedure that says, “if preferred name exists, use it, else, use first name.” Students’ chosen first names automatically appear on all reports generated directly from Banner, including their ID card and their entry in the University’s online directory, unless a student chooses not to be listed. Students are also given the option, through the same web portal, of generating a new campus email address based on the first name they have entered.

The task force decided late in the project to modify an additional field in order to give students the ability to choose which pronoun they want to appear, along with their name, on class rosters and advisee lists. Impetus for the inclusion of pronouns came initially from the trans student and LGBTQA Center members of the task force, but was ultimately identified by the registrar as key to the overall success of the project.

Programmers and staff from the registrar’s office worked steadily over a period of four months, the pronoun portion consuming most of the final month, to get the front end ready to go live in January 2009. Prior to implementation, a series of trainings on the changes were provided to the managers of each of the various systems that interact with Banner.

Since UVM’s “preferred-name” option became available, it has been popular with both trans\* and non-trans\* students. In the first year, 527 of the University’s approximately ten thousand students opted for a first name other than their legal name (in many cases, they entered a nickname or a shortened form of their name). About five

hundred students now choose this option each year. About 30,000 UVM students and applicants have used the option since it went live in 2009, with 2,822, or a little over 28 percent of those being currently enrolled students. The University has been praised in the national press for its pioneering work on a trans\*-supportive name change process. All of the code associated with UVM's "preferred-name" solution, including the field used for pronouns is available in Ellucian's Banner code repository

Despite the success of the project, and the pride and goodwill it generated across campus, the work to make all of UVM's information systems represent students' names accurately and consistently is ongoing. While student's chosen first names, along with pronouns are available throughout UVM's various systems, the programmer writing the report has to understand when, how, and why to use the procedure that accesses the preferred name and pronoun fields. In the past year alone, three separate offices at UVM have identified instances where students' legal names were being displayed, either instead of or in addition to students' "preferred names," potentially outing trans\* students. These ongoing challenges demonstrate the complexity of making changes to information systems and the need for diligence and commitment.

### **Pronouns on Campus Records**

The Banner system changes implemented by the University of Vermont in 2009 also gave students the ability to designate the pronouns they use for themselves ("she," "he," "ze," "name only," and "none") via the same Web portal they use to specify their first name, becoming the first college in the country to offer students this opportunity. In

response to student feedback, UVM recently added “they/them” as an additional pronoun option. These pronouns, like chosen first names, are available for use by any campus subsystem. At a minimum, they appear automatically on course rosters, major and minor lists, and advisee lists. The appearance of pronouns, including less familiar gender-inclusive ones, has prompted surprisingly little controversy among UVM faculty. New faculty are alerted during their campus orientation to expect the appearance of pronouns on their class rosters, and in the five years since the change, there have been only a handful of reports of pushback by a faculty member. While UVM’s pronoun options fall short of the 56 choices available to Facebook users, the presence of options beyond she/he is a critical component of the full inclusion of students who identify outside of a gender binary.

### **Implications for Higher Education**

Most colleges have a great deal of work to do to address the needs of trans\* students on their campuses. Particularly critical among these needs is enabling trans\* students to have agency over how their first name and gender identity are represented throughout the institution. Campuses that have developed more inclusive student information systems have found that these changes are popular among a significant number of students, and are appreciated by a majority of staff and faculty members. Providing real time, web-based access to students to specify their first names and pronouns should be understood not just as a best practice, but as critical to trans\* students’ safety and full engagement in campus life. Colleges and universities that have made these systems changes have learned that:

- Giving students' this access is both legal and practical. For example, because student ID cards are largely limited to campus use, they typically do not fit under the regulations that apply to legal forms of identification.
- The opportunity to specify a name will be used by many international students and by students who prefer to be called by a nickname, as well as by trans\* students.
- Including pronoun alternatives beyond she/her and he/him provides greater campus safety for the growing number of students who identify beyond traditional, binary notions of gender, and a utility for an even larger group of students with gender ambiguous names and their faculty.
- Implementing these changes requires a cooperative and thorough planning process, a commitment of the necessary programming resources, and periodic follow-up trainings.
- Because these topics and concepts are unfamiliar to the majority of people, campuses engaging in this work will benefit from ample learning opportunities for staff and faculty about gender identity and gender nonconformity.

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### **Author Biographical Information**

**Genny Beemyn**, Ph.D., is the director of the Stonewall Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and the Trans Policy Clearinghouse coordinator for Campus Pride. Their many books include *The Lives of Transgender People* (2011) and *A Queer Capital: A History of Gay Life in Washington, D.C.* (2014).

**Dot Brauer** has served as the director of the LGBTQA Center at the University of Vermont since 2001. She has a Master's degree in Psychology from Antioch New England and is currently ABD at UVM in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies.



**CHAPTER 7: MANUSCRIPT SUBMITTED TO AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF  
COLLEGIATE REGISTRARS AND ADMISSIONS OFFICERS**

**COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY JOURNAL**

**Understanding and Supporting Transgender Students' Use of Self-Identified Names  
and Pronouns in Higher Education Settings: A Critical Analysis**

**Abstract**

Existing literature about the needs of transgender college students calls upon higher education organizations to support trans students' use of self-identified first names (in place of legal names, given at birth) and self-identified pronouns (in place of assumed pronouns based on sex assigned at birth, or other's perceptions of physical appearance), but provides no guidance on how to go about it. This article addresses a gap in the literature in two ways. First by using critical theory to explore how hegemonic, binary notions of gender shape intellectual, social, and regulatory dimensions of higher education settings in ways that complicate practitioners' efforts to provide trans students with the support they need. Second, by exploring the use of institutional ethnography (IE) as a critical framework and methodology to uncover what IE refers to as *texts* and *relations* that may be operating in unintended ways to undo practitioners' efforts at providing the desired support. I will use examples from my experience as a higher education LGBTQ resource professional at the University of Vermont (UVM) to add depth to my analysis.

## **Introduction: Background for this Article**

This article focuses on instances where transgender students are asked to provide personal information through forms and processes that lack sufficient choices regarding name, sex, and gender, and when they are outed and/or misgendered in classrooms and throughout campus through the use of inappropriate names and pronouns (B. G. Beemyn, 2005b; Brown et al., 2004; Seelman, 2014).

The author seeks to reveal how processes and practices operating within higher education organizations today render people who identify with genders beyond male and female invisible, or even ‘impossible’ (Wentling, 2015). To do so, the author draws upon insights from critical analyses and frameworks to examine the intersection of identity information management practices, students with fluid and non-binary gender identities, and the heteronormative and binary gendered environment of higher education. This article contains arguments and illustrations, that are based in critical theoretical frameworks. These frameworks are used to inquire into common expectations about how names and gender function as seemingly reliable identity classifiers, and how they are grounded in hegemonic binary gender assumptions that are built into the very DNA of higher education. These arguments are used to explain how practices and systems built upon these expectations remain out of view, but operate within systems to limit the way individuals’ identities are knowable and manageable within a higher education institutional environment, and complicate efforts to support transgender students’ use of self-identified names and pronouns in on-campus communications.

## **Existing Research Literature**

Existing research literature lacks the guidance higher education professionals need to understand how binary gender hegemony complicates their efforts to address name and pronoun needs of transgender students. Higher education practitioners today have access to a growing body of qualitative research that provides clear documentation of the unmet needs of transgender students, along with concrete recommendations for changes in policies and practices to meet those needs. This literature, however, stops short of addressing complexities involved in bringing about these changes. There is a substantial organizational change literature that aims to help organizations deal with the complex change processes (Bolman & Deal, 2003; Burke, 2010; Cooperrider & Sekerka, 2006; Manning, 2012). Unfortunately, for higher education practitioners looking for guidance about trans student-related changes, this literature too is silent, not only on trans specific changes, but on any organizational changes that are being driven by social change.

Research on trans college students in higher education has made modest gains during the past two decades. Qualitative research that is available now provides substantial documentation about transgender students' experiences of marginalization and victimization (Dugan et al., 2012; Effrig et al., 2011; Grossman et al., 2009; Herman, 2013; McKinney, 2005a), as well as clear and consistent recommendations for meeting the needs of transgender students (B. Beemyn, 2003; B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; Case et al., 2012). The most recent studies have benefitted from larger numbers of transgender

participants, and provided important confirmation of conclusions presented in earlier literature (Seelman, 2014; Singh et al., 2013).

Almost all of the research available today emphasizes the critical importance of names and pronouns. Seelman (2014), for example, who reported on the recommendations of 30 transgender students staff and faculty members about how best to address problems with name and pronoun use on campus stated that, “by integrating greater flexibility into recordkeeping related to names and gender markers, campuses can more effectively serve the needs of this population and honour [sic] their privacy during gender transition” (p. 19). These studies and others like them from the social work and student affairs literature fall short, however, of tackling the question of how to go about addressing these issues. One study used critical analysis to reveal how patterns of ‘genderism’ on college campuses negate gender fluidity and render transgender and gender non-conforming students invisible (Bilodeau, 2009). Bilodeau describes hegemonic binary gender assumptions, that produce *genderist* institutional processes and practices, but stops short of suggesting how to engage in organizational change within the confines of this existing binary gender hegemony, or how to otherwise transform educational environments into spaces where non-binary identities are legible.

Research on the transgender population in general and within higher education settings in particular, remains scant and lacks the guidance most higher education administrators require to better understand complications they are likely to encounter when they undertake the work of addressing trans students’ needs. Further research is needed to increase understanding about how to constitute higher education environments

capable of supporting trans students' in the full measure of their identities, including consistent use of their self-identified names and pronouns.

### **Terms and Language**

The language used to describe gender today is contested and evolving. Until recently gender was almost universally accepted as a dichotomous characteristic, interchangeable with sex, and unchanging through the lifespan. Understood in this way, gender appears ubiquitous, a taken for granted demographic appearing routinely on forms—sex/gender: M or F (circle one)—along with name, address, and date of birth. Outside the world of American education an extensive discussion has been underway for more than a decade about how to express aspects of gender previously rendered invisible by the lack of words to describe them. New words that are coming into use through crowdsourced, internet-based 'discussions' on sites like Wikipedia and Urban Dictionary, as well as countless social media sites and blogs, have been largely ignored by the academy. However, today more than ever, people and the language they use no longer wait for the approval of educators and educational institutions to certify their existence. Newly used terms like transgender, cisgender, genderqueer, neutrois, androgyne, and others show up on campuses whether or not universities are prepared for them.

Discussions about the still evolving nature of these terms can be found throughout much of the literature on transgender students in higher education settings (Bilodeau, 2009; Johnson, 2014; Seelman, 2014). Issues associated with regional differences in language, identity intersections, and liberatory philosophy are presented by Wentling (2015), and Seelman (2014). For simplicity, the terms transgender and trans are used

interchangeably throughout this article, to refer to both students who transition genders while at college and for students who occupy non-binary gender identities. Use of trans and transgender here is not intended as an endorsement of either term as better or more correct than other terms. The definition below, taken from GLAAD's (Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders) online Media Reference Guide provides a common understanding of the term:

Transgender (adj.)

An umbrella term for people whose gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth. People under the transgender umbrella may describe themselves using one or more of a wide variety of terms - including *transgender*. [Some of those terms are defined below. Use the descriptive term preferred by the individual.] Many transgender people are prescribed hormones by their doctors to change their bodies. Some undergo surgery as well. But not all transgender people can or will take those steps, and a transgender identity is not dependent upon medical procedures ("GLAAD Media Reference Guide - Transgender Issues," 2011).

### **University of Vermont Context: From 2001 to the Present**

When I began working as LGBTQA Services Coordinator at the University of Vermont in the fall of 2001, transgender students and the practitioners supporting them were pioneers. The literature available to guide my efforts was limited: two chapters, one by Lees (1998) and another by Nakamura (1998), in a handbook edited by Sanlo (1998); one chapter in *Toward Acceptance* (Wall & Evans, 2000), and a first person account that appeared in another collection (Rogers, 2000). A problematic practice in much research at the time was assuming that trans issues are the same as or similar to LGB (Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual) issues. There was almost no research then that focused exclusively on transgender experience.

In 2009 the University of Vermont (UVM) became the first university in the nation to modify their student information database system to provide real time, web-based access that allows students to self-identify the first name *and* pronouns used for them in on-campus communications (Tilsley, 2010). This systems change, along with extensive efforts at campus education and a positive overall campus climate for trans people have earned UVM a place among the top colleges and universities for trans students (G. Beemyn & Windmeyer, 2012). A *New York Times* feature article about UVM's inclusion of gender neutral pronouns in their name and pronoun system, (Scelfo, 2015), led to further attention from national and international media (Barrett, 2016; Booker, 2016; Chak, 2015; Collard, 2015; Lu, 2015; Schoenherr, 2015; Williams, 2015). UVM's positive reputation is a fitting tribute and a point of pride celebrated throughout the university by students, staff, faculty, and administrators. But the story does not end there.

After seven years of utilization and review, my colleagues and I continue to uncover inconsistencies in the use of transgender students' self-identified first names and pronouns in campus communications. Dichotomous, male/female notions of gender and an anachronistic reliance on legal first names for on campus communications lead to the frequent misnaming and misgendering (through the use of incorrect pronouns and/or honorifics) of transgender and non-binary students, even on a campus that has invested substantial efforts into preventing these mistakes from occurring. Our investigation into what we find to be unintended errors has led us through twists and turns and surprises—

more like the complicated plot of a good mystery novel than the expected functioning of an efficient bureaucracy.

### **National Context**

At the time of this writing, the United States' Office of Civil Rights and Department of Education have recently issued a joint memorandum of understanding (MOU) on the obligation educational organizations have to take proactive steps to address transgender students' safety and inclusion (C. E. Lhamon & Gupta, 2016). The first item covered in the MOU is a school's obligation to provide a safe and nondiscriminatory environment. The second item pertains to a school's representation of a student's name and pronoun. The MOU instructs schools that they must:

treat students consistent with their gender identity even if their education records or identification documents indicate a different sex. The Departments have resolved Title IX investigations with agreements committing that school staff and contractors will use pronouns and names consistent with a transgender student's gender identity" (2016, p. 3).

The appropriate use of transgender students' names and pronouns has been consistently identified as critical to their safety and wellbeing (B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; Bilodeau, 2009; Seelman, 2014). A growing number of colleges and universities are taking steps to meet this need, but most schools have yet to act. Meanwhile trans students have a real and pressing need to be able to specify the first name and pronoun used to refer to them on campus. Being misnamed and/or misgendered by the use of an inappropriate name or pronoun causes a trans student significant distress, and possible threat of physical harm (B. Beemyn, 2003). Members of the staff, faculty, and senior leadership have key roles to play in supporting trans students' safety and wellbeing.



## Critical Theory, Gender, and Education

A number of queer theorists have pointed out that educational systems and facilities are literally built upon binary gendered assumptions (Jourian et al., 2015; Malatino, 2015; Woolley, 2015). Nearly 30 years ago Judith Butler (1988) declared “there is nothing about a binary gender system that is given” (p. 531). Although Butler’s essay on gender as a performative act has been cited in thousands of scholarly critiques, structuralist certainty about gender as a binary construct still permeates American educational settings today. As a result everyday processes and practices in educational settings not only assign transgender people to the margins, but “anyone who is neither *he* nor *she* is impossible” (Wentling, 2015, p. 470).

### **Gender and *the Academy italics intentional?***

A significant portion of literature that addresses transgender experience appears only in queer journals; while more widely read mainstream journals remain largely silent on topics and perspectives beyond hegemonic binary gender assumptions. Feminist and critical race theorists routinely critique patterns of marginalization in higher education settings. *Dangerous Counterstories in the Corporate Academy: Narrating for understanding, solidarity, resistance, and community in the age of neoliberalism* (Daniels & Porfilio, 2013) provides a recent example. This compilation uses critical analyses to reveal problematic assumptions and stereotypes about sex, race, national origin, ability, age, and class, and the way these are routinely used to justify practices that marginalize students, scholars, and pedagogies in higher education settings. Notably missing from this

and other similar volumes however are perspectives on queerness and gender variance in the academy.

In order to understand issues associated with names and pronouns on college campuses, it is necessary to fully comprehend gender identity diversity beyond traditional binary notions. However, resistance to exploration of gender diversity sometimes comes from unexpected places. The term ‘gender’ has long been used interchangeably with ‘sex’ throughout the academy as a signifier for patterns of discrimination that privilege ‘men’ over ‘women.’ Examples are easily found in course titles like ‘Gender and the Law,’ and ‘Gender and the Economy.’ What is meant by each of these titles is not a full examination of gender in all of its diversity as it plays out in terms of law or economics. What is meant, rather, is how women are disadvantaged relative to men by laws and economics. In order to parse the meaning of these course titles, it is necessary to start from the assumption of gender as a man/woman binary.

An essay that appeared in *Gender, Work and Organization* over a decade ago seemed to presage the current situation (Knights & Kerfoot, 2004). In it the authors question “whether binary thinking is a fundamental obstacle to gender equity,” citing Derrida’s contention that binaries are inevitably hierarchical. Despite raising this provocative question they ultimately “question the possibility and even the desirability of complete dissolution” of the gender binary and for the remainder of the article search for other (linguistic) means to “undermine the hierarchy with which it is associated” (p. 431). Classrooms of women’s and gender studies courses today are often places where continuation of the gender binary is hotly contested, with students calling for its end and

faculty asserting its inevitability and/or necessity. This is understandable since “feminist discourse has often relied upon the category of woman as a universal presupposition” (Butler, 1988, p. 523). This situation may explain why so much of critical theory research literature has yet to take up critical questions about binary notions of gender identity. Critical attention to gender continues to focus mainly on deconstructing assumptions about the inferiority of *one* gender (female/feminine) in relation *the other* (male/masculine), a formulation that reifies notions of gender as a discrete, binary human characteristic.

### **Hegemonic Notions: Resistance to Change**

It has been almost a quarter century since Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993) first pointed out that sex is not a dichotomous human characteristic and that it should not be confused with gender. In a 2016 interview Fausto-Sterling shared that biologists see sex as a dimorphic characteristic, explaining that dimorphism means both an egg and sperm (and bodies capable of producing these two separate components) are needed for reproduction (Fausto-Sterling, 2016). She added that because they study nature (in which diversity, not sameness is the norm) biologists understand that dimorphism precludes neither the existence of intersex people nor the enormous variation (not dichotomy) that is easily observed in the physiological sexing of human bodies. For the benefit of non-biologists, she added that variations in hormone levels, body hair, vocal range, genital presentation and other primary and secondary sex characteristics are all understood within biology as more continuous than dichotomous. When asked about her thoughts on gender Fausto-Sterling added that gender is a social, rather than a biological human

characteristic and that inquiries into the nature and meaning of gender, reveal it to be even less dichotomous and absolute than physical sex.

Despite Fausto-Sterling's (Fausto-Sterling, 1993) biologically based contention, and student activism challenging the gender binary on many campuses throughout the country, hegemonic 'belief' in a gender binary persists. A clear example is the universal practice of assigning one of two discrete genders to infants at birth based solely on the appearance of the infant's genitals—in fact the alternative (not declaring an infant either a boy or a girl) is unimaginable to most people. This practice, along with many others which 'hide in plain sight,' are grounded in persistent assumptions about what gender is and how it is constituted. In American society at least, people expect everyone around them to be either a man or a woman and they expect to be able to tell which based on a person's appearance—not being able to tell raises questions about the validity of the other person's gender. Very few people are aware that the gender someone claims today might not remain the same throughout that person's lifetime. Based upon all of these notions, intersex<sup>6</sup> people don't exist, policing the sex segregation of bathrooms is straightforward, as is asking people to circle one of two options to represent their gender/sex as a routine demographic, and a college student would have no pressing need to be known by other than their legal first name.

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<sup>6</sup> ['Intersex,' "is a general term used for a variety of conditions in which a person is born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that doesn't seem to fit the typical definitions of female or male" ("What is intersex? | Intersex Society of North America," n.d.)].

## **Queer Theory: Contesting Hegemonic Notions of ‘Gender’ in the Academy**

For almost forty years, critical theory and literature has critiqued the dichotomous constructions central to structuralist thinking. Derrida is widely credited with being the first to reject the absolute certainties inherent in structuralist thinking (Wilchins, 2004). Derrida, along with Foucault, Butler and others have used post-structural arguments to call for the deconstruction of false binaries and other traditional logics, the reversal of presumptions about superiority and inferiority, and the intentional centering of perspectives that have been routinely marginalized. Queer theory is just one of many critical theories to have developed from this post-structuralist foundation (Biesta, 1998).

Organizational change literature is similarly silent on the subject of managing organizational change processes that are driven by social justice concerns. A recent volume by Manning (2012) that applies organizational change theory to problems in higher education settings provides a valuable update to the field. Manning adds some newer theoretical frames to well-established ones, and applies each frame to realistic, higher education situated cases that are based on recent historic events and issues. Once again, however, while Manning’s cases cover impressive cultural, political, economic, and organizational ground, they neglect the area of gender identity diversity and the specific complexities of associated organizational change processes. A careful review of literature uncovered no research that combined a focus on the needs of transgender college students with an analysis of American society’s deep-seated binary gender paradigm, and the complexities of navigating organizational change within higher education settings.

## **Queer Theory: Critical Gender Literacy**

*“A critical gender literacy that works to make transgender and gender-nonconforming people equal, places at its center the deconstruction of binary gender as it is simultaneously tied to other axes of power such as Whiteness, ability, class, and heteronormativity” (Woolley, 2015, p. 391).*

In a study about gender identity in a middle school setting Rosiek and Heffernan (2014) sought to understand how educators with “earnest good intentions,” but who lacked the “discursive resources to recognize and discuss gender difference,” (p. 732) were unable to respond effectively to the needs of a student with a gender identity they did not recognize or understand. In another study Woolley (2015) documented how a public high school educator’s attempt to deconstruct gendered stereotypes resulted in unintended reification of the gender binary. In spite of the presence of students attempting to articulate a distinction between gender and sex, and arguing for a non-binary understanding of gender, the teacher lacked the conceptual tools to manage her own class exercise and student interactions. The result was statements by the teacher and students that reinforced heteronormative binary gender and went unchallenged by the teacher. As Woolley stated, “Challenging such reproduction cannot be done without critical reflection,” and engaging in such critical reflection is only possible when a person possesses the necessary understanding of how binary gender hegemony and heteronormativity operate in the background (p. 391).

## **Critical Sociolinguistic Research: Names Matter**

All of the literature about transgender people emphasizes the importance of names and pronouns to their feelings of safety, respect, acceptance, and wellbeing. Similarly literature about trans college students consistently highlights the importance for trans students to be able to use a self-identified first name on-campus. Some campuses may encounter one or more administrators in a gate-keeping field, like a registrar or information technologist, who is skeptical about the relative importance of this particular priority. Socio-linguistic literature can be used to support arguments for the importance of proactively addressing trans students' need to use a first name on campus that is consistent with their identity, whether or not they have been able to change their first name legally.

The significance of names to self and identity is a theme that runs throughout the literature about names in general. One study that looked at the significance of names and naming found that, "Being addressed by your name means that you are seen and recognized," and conversely, "To have your own name questioned is to be questioned as a person" (Hagström, 2012, p. 82). Another study examined the sociological significance of name changes for ethnic or religious purposes, looking for indications of both "*narrative*" and "*identity elasticity*" and found both saying, "When asking whether names are markers for individual humans, a symbol of social relations, or a representation of something meaningful about the person, the obvious answer is, yes" (Emmelhainz, 2012, p. 158). Emmelhainz found that name changes were used, "to deliberately cut off the past self" (p. 163), a description that echoed the name change

experiences shared by trans people in another study (VanderSchans, 2016). The transgender people interviewed by VanderSchans shared instances when their self-identified names and pronouns were not consistently used in institutional settings, describing this as a kind of, “social erasure” (p. 2). VanderSchans concluded that, “a fundamental aspect of the transition process for transgender individuals lies in choosing and embodying their new name because of the ways in which names and gender are both considered to be essential aspects of social identities” (VanderSchans, 2016, p. 4).

### **Queer Theory: Pronouns and Gender Diversity**

*“That culture so readily punishes or marginalizes those who fail to perform the illusion of gender essentialism should be sign enough that on some level there is social knowledge that the truth or falsity of gender is only socially compelled and in no sense ontologically necessitated”*  
*(Butler, 1988, p. 528).*

From preschool through doctoral studies binary notions of gender remain so ubiquitous within the world of education as to blend into the very fabric of the everyday (Woolley, 2015). Post-structuralism can be used to reveal notions of gender to be nothing more than social ‘systems,’ invented by humans. All social systems are tenuous compromises, held together through social learning, and the imposition of influence and negotiated agreements, not fixed realities to which humans should be asked to conform unconditionally (Davies, 1997). When viewed in this way ‘systems’ can be understood as mutable, subject to change in the event of significant changes in circumstances. Queer and critical theories render diverse gender identities more legible and systems by which



we define and describe them as continuously evolving (Johnson, 2014). Queer theory is used to contest compulsory heterosexuality, heteronormativity, the stigmatizing of queerness and queer bodies, and holds promise for exposing and critiquing binary notions about gender and traditional notions about the nature of gender and sex (Heyes, 2007; McLaren, 2012; Wilchins, 2004).

### **Institutional Ethnography Framework: Binary Gender ‘Ruling Relations’**

Institutional ethnography (IE) differs from other forms of ethnography in its specific focus on examining the processes within an organization. IE is not concerned with the subjective feelings of people, or with criticizing an organization or the attitudes of people involved in policymaking or service delivery. IE focuses on “how the interface between the organization and the people it serves gets organized as a matter of the everyday encounters between individuals” (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 168).

IE is specifically designed to examine the processes within an organization that mediate people’s access to the services provided by that organization. Institutional ethnography’s focus on intended organizational purposes and the possibility of unintended outcomes, makes it well suited to the questions raised in this article. In 2009 the Economic and Social Research Council National Centre for Research Methods at University of Surrey issued a report titled “Innovations in Social Science Research Methods” (Xenitidou & Gilbert, 2009). Institutional ethnography was included as an effective method for “getting beyond the conceptual frameworks of administration...to the actual circumstances of the diverse lives people live in contemporary societies”(2009, p. 33).

## IE's Specialized Terminology

The term *disjunctures* is used to capture inevitable instances where, from the standpoint of those enacting policies, everyday practices appear to function as intended, while the experience of those same everyday practices from the perspective of those outside the ruling relations 'chafes.' In Smith's terms a *problematic* is identified when someone notices a possible relationship between everyday *relations* and the inevitable disjunctures that exist within them. In this article, the problematic consists of instances where despite good intentions and considerable work, trans students at UVM have continued to be mis-named and mis-gendered, at least some of the time.<sup>7</sup>

Smith's institutional ethnography framework sheds light on what can appear to be resistance to change, and other confounding organizational circumstances by focusing inquiry on such disjunctures. It is through the careful inquiry into unintended outcomes, or disjunctures, and what led to them, that *ruling relations* are revealed. Ruling relations, within Smith's vernacular, can be understood as the assumptions, expectations, norms, and notions that exist within the fabric of all social and organizational contexts, but that operate out of view. Smith's concept of ruling relations should not be confused with formalized procedures or guidelines. Ruling relations are more like the molecules of gases in the atmosphere; they are as unavoidable as they are ubiquitous. They are

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<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, one of the challenges in addressing the unintended errors as they occur is that most students have chosen not to inform the LGBTQA Center. When I have asked why, they have explained that they assume the experience is an 'honest mistake' and consider it a minor concern in a larger context that feels highly and genuinely supportive.

everywhere and ever present, operating out of sight and mind, hidden in plain sight. The central focus of this article, binary gender hegemony and the unexamined assumptions that derive from a binary, gender=sex framework can be understood through an IE framework, as ruling relations, operating out of view in ways that complicate and frustrate practitioners' efforts to support trans students' use of self-identified first names and pronouns on campus.

Like incident analysis (Snook, 2002), institutional ethnography extends beyond written rules, protocols, standards, and procedures, and pays careful attention to what actually takes place within the every day. Incident analysis and institutional ethnography differ in terms of time, and in precipitating event. Incident analysis studies conditions, actions, and decisions that took place in the past, and which ultimately led to an organization's catastrophic failure. IE looks at actions and interactions as they take place in the present, looking for ruling relations. Because ruling relations (norms and assumptions that are built into the fabric of the organization's every day) follow the social and cultural perspectives of the majority, they frequently lead organizations to underserve people whose perspectives and experiences differ from the majority. Therefore, as Smith (2005, 2006) notes, disjunctures are best understood from the standpoint of those outside the ruling relations, or people within the organization who possess marginal identities or backgrounds.

Within the framework of IE, the separation of roles and activities inherent to institutions makes disjunctures an expected aspect of the everyday. In other words, IE expects that under the best of circumstances, enactment of policy by administrators with

expertise in the needs and operations of the organization, but not necessarily in the needs and operations of front line employees inevitably results in everyday practices destined to fall short of the intended goal of any given ‘policy.’ In the case of this article, Smith’s concept of ruling relations correlates with binary gender hegemony. One of the key constructs within the IE framework is the understanding of how social constructs, although they are human inventions, can and do become so entrenched as social expectations, that they take on a hegemonic ‘life’ of their own.

Within IE it is expected that policies and their enactment will be perceived differently from different *standpoints*. For example, in my role as an advocate for trans student needs, I see a trans students’ ability to be referred to using a self-identified name and pronoun as a priority. I possess deep background in the testimony of transgender people I know personally, and those whose experiences have been recorded in the research. That background and my own genderqueer<sup>8</sup> identity inform the theoretical logic I apply to my understanding of what needs to take place. My standpoint does not include a cisgender<sup>9</sup> perspective, or direct responsibility for regulations and other complications

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<sup>8</sup> Genderqueer is an evolving term currently in popular use. This author uses the term consistent with the adjective denoting: “a person who does not subscribe to conventional gender distinctions but identifies with neither, both, or a combination of male and female genders” (“genderqueer definition - Google Search,” n.d.).

<sup>9</sup> Cisgender is a recently invented adjective “denoting or relating to a person whose self-identity conforms with the gender that corresponds to their biological sex; not transgender.” (“cisgender definition - Google Search,” n.d.).

that arise in the daily practices of other specialized roles and locations that mediate students' identity information, like the admissions or registrar's office to name just two.

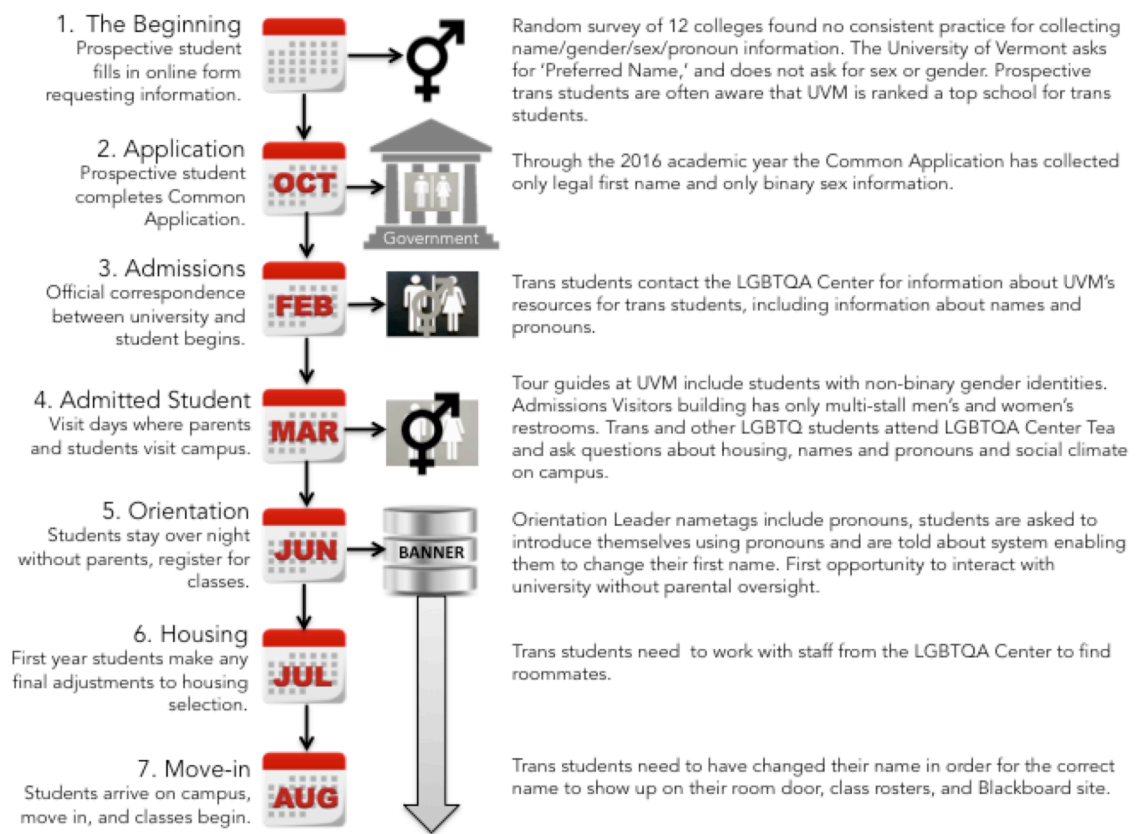
A trans student's standpoint differs from mine, or that of my colleagues in admissions and the registrar's office. The trans student is primarily concerned with avoiding being outed in class, and cannot, nor should that student have to, know about complexities of existing system architecture that limit our ability to 'fix' the way their name shows up throughout campus. Faculty members represent yet another standpoint, one likely to be focused on managing course content, getting to know students, the classroom pedagogy they are familiar and comfortable with, and representing their disciplinary expertise. Still another standpoint consists of the host of staff members throughout campus who are responsible for various forms of communications that include the names of students.

IE is used to consider how "extended bureaucratic, professional, legislative, and economic, as well as other social relations" might be involved in producing local relations (G. W. Smith et al., 2006, p. 172). IE is well suited for the careful study of local events and activities like the conflation of sex and gender, and the binary gender limitations common on institutional forms, norms, facilities and structures.

### **IE Analysis: Mapping Construction of Students' Gender**

In my search for points of disjuncture between my university's intended outcomes for trans students and those students' actual experiences I turned to mapping, one of the tools frequently used by IE researchers to make visible how institutional mechanisms are operating. In a study of local zoning processes, Susan Turner (2001) used IE and

mapping to illustrate “the text-based organization of the extended relations in which the institutional modes of governing and its politics are put together” (p. 299). I similarly used mapping (see Figure 2 above) to illustrate the various processes through which the nature of students’ identities are constructed, in terms of their name and gender, from their first contact with the university, through moving in to start their first semester as new students.



**Fig. 2: Mapping Construction of Gender Identity as Students Enter UVM**

In the figure above I attempt to illustrate the inconsistencies in name and gender representation encountered by prospective students on their way into the university. A

prospective student's initial encounter with UVM follows better practice recommendations endorsed by the Consortium of LGBTQ Higher Education Professionals ("Consortium Suggested Trans Policy Recommendations," n.d.), which recommends not asking for gender or sex when neither are needed. The next step in the process, however, filling out the Common Application, has historically locked applicants into identifying themselves by legal name and sex<sup>10</sup>. In step 3, prospective trans students visiting the university encounter Admissions staff that have been trained in, and are comfortable with, trans and non-binary name and pronoun issues. In step 4, visitors may even encounter a student tour guide with a non-binary gender identity on their campus tour. They will also enter an Admissions visitor's building that is obviously of recent construction, but lacks a non-gender-segregated restroom.

For the past three years, prospective students and family members at UVM's Admitted Student Visit Day (ASVD) programs have been able to attend a LGBTQA Center Tea (a mini reception held in our student lounge space). The act of listing our tea each year in the ASVD printed program as one of several options offered to students and families in that time slot, effectively confers visible institutional support for LGBTQ-inclusive practices. In the spring of 2015 UVM's LGBTQA Center hosted 107 prospective students and family members during nine ASVDs and through individual

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<sup>10</sup> As of the 2017 application year, the vendor of the Common Application is adjusting the demographic data entry process to include language specifying sex as "sex assigned at birth," and adding a optional gender identity write-in field. Similarly, the vendor of the Banner system is making adjustments to their name fields so that schools will no longer need to invest in programmer time in order to utilize an alternate first name field.

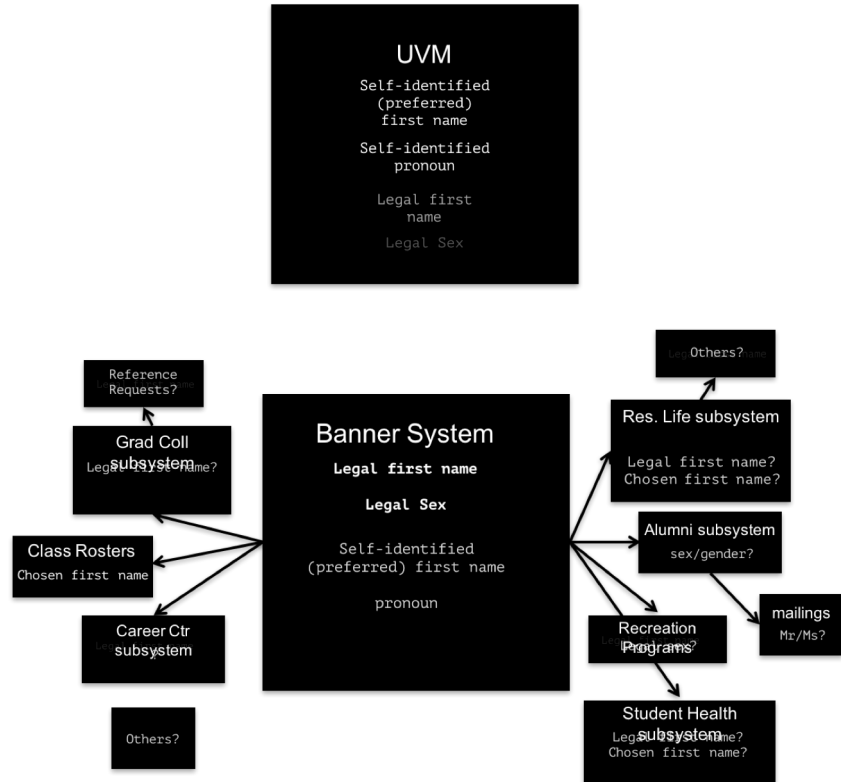
visits. At least half the students that met with us identified as either trans or non-binary and many shared that they applied to UVM because they heard about the university's positive reputation for supporting trans students.

In June (step 5 in Figure 2) when new students attend orientation they are greeted by well-trained student Orientation Leaders (OLs) wearing nametags with pronouns, and lapel pins bearing the UVM tower logo with a rainbow background and the text UVM Pride. The OLs tell all students about UVM's system for changing first names and specifying pronouns, and explain the reasons for the different options. The new students have the opportunity to enter a self-identified first name and/or pronoun into the Banner system as they register for their fall courses. They are also informed that they have the ability to change their first name and pronoun information at any time after that as long as they are a registered student.

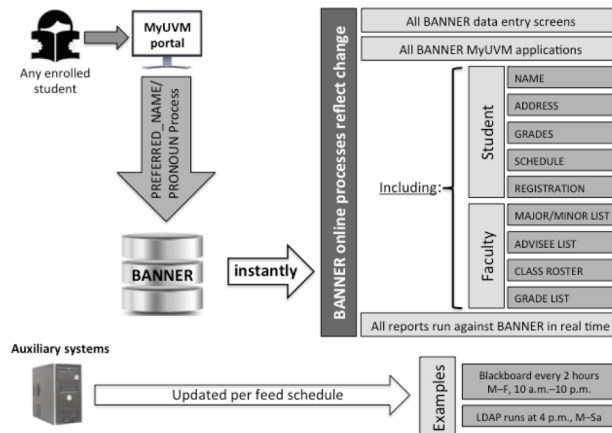
When students use the system to inform my university of their self-identified first name and pronoun, that information enters the 'black box' of the university's data systems. Students have no way of knowing where, when, and how their information does and doesn't go, or why. Students, and many staff and faculty members assume students' information is held and managed within one central database. Meanwhile certain staff members throughout the university who work directly with student data, are involved in downloading students' information from the central database (the one students access to manage their first name and pronoun), into specialized sub systems which students have no awareness of or access to. Each subsystem is used by a particular department to track and interact with students. Each of the dozens of subsystems used throughout the campus



operate independently of one another, and separately from the central database. Only the IT professionals within a particular department are fully aware of how and when they access students' information, and what they do with it. The staff of the LGBTQA Center have been investigating instances where a student's legal first name or incorrect pronoun has been used, for several years, and a more complicated (but still black box) visualization of the path student data takes through my university's data systems has begun to emerge. On the following page three diagrams (see Figure 3) illustrate the contrasts between the general black box understanding of how student information exists; a visualization that is emerging as LGBTQA Center staff have investigated problems trans students encounter with names and pronouns, and a diagram that was produced in consultation with the university registrar to illustrate how UVM's 'preferred name' program 'works.'



**University of Vermont PRONOUN and PREFERRED\_NAME Fields Process Flow**



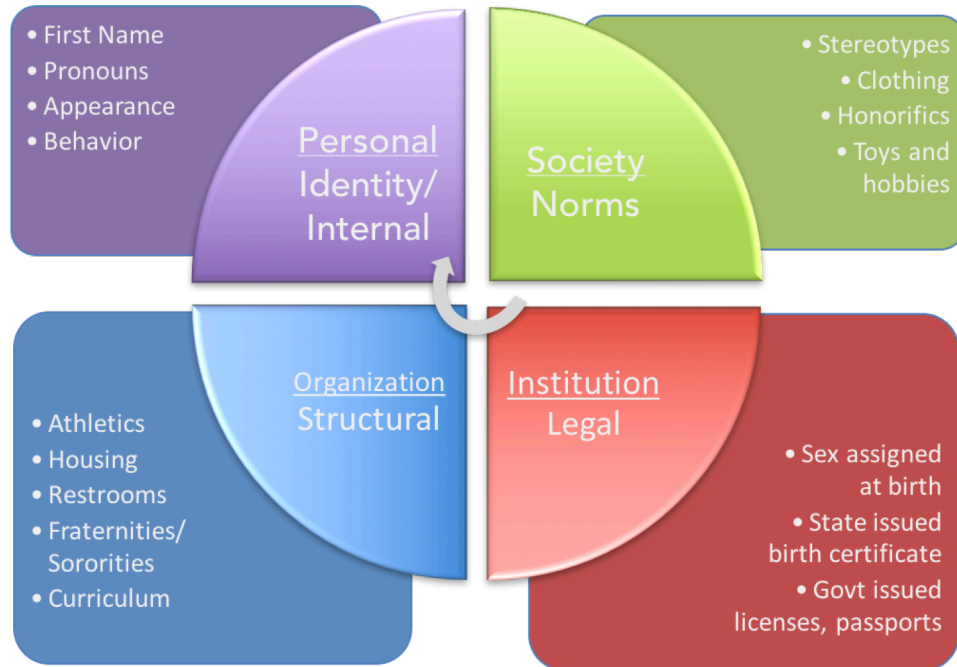
**Figure 3: Students’ (and Others’) Imagined Centralized ‘Control’ of First Name and Pronoun Information (top), versus More Complex Data Interactions Revealed through LGBTQA Center Staff Investigations (middle) versus Sophisticated, Orderly Process Flow Envisioned by University Registrar (bottom).**

The diagrams are my attempt to show the contrasts between what a student knows about how student information is managed at UVM, what my colleagues and I have slowly been piecing together as we trace unintended uses of a student's legal name and/or sex, and how technology professionals in the Registrar's office visualize the process they refer to as the Preferred Name and Pronoun process. As staff members have worked on tracing unintended errors, what has begun to emerge resonates with the findings described by Rosiek and Heffernan (2014). The unintentional misgendering and misnaming of students seems to occur not out of deliberate acts or negligence; they seem to occur as a result of seemingly logical decisions that haven't accounted for trans and non-binary students' existence.

What this reveals is the literal lifetime of work and practice that go into constructing binary gender, starting from conception (is it a boy or a girl?) and continuing through college years and beyond (see Figure 3). All members of American society are enlisted into active participation in this work and practice, and only a small minority of people experience personal discomfort and conflict with it. A considerable amount of this work and practice takes place through and within public institutions (birth certificates, marriage licenses, school records, athletic teams, restrooms, and dormitories). There is of course another realm of work and practice that takes place through family, social, and religious rituals.

By the time individuals complete a formal education, they have been highly trained in institutionalized representations that 'prove' sex=gender=M or F (circle one). It

is no wonder that people who have yet to be introduced more thoroughly to the concept of gender diversity are, as Rosiek and Heffernan (2014) found, “unable to imagine or discuss [or account for] what they have no words or concepts to think about” (p. 732 bracketed text added by this author).



**Figure 4: Binary Gender as Institutionalized Practice**

When I began supporting my university’s transgender students in 2001, I conceptualized the work required to support the desired organizational changes to consist primarily of capacity *building* (i.e., providing trainings to affiliates throughout the university to increase their awareness and understanding of gender diversity). After mapping binary gender practice I have recognized that a concrete portion of the work ahead must also include actively *dismantling* practices and processes that are currently

maintaining the binary sex/gender regime. I also realized that the work at my university has turned to this direction in recent years. For example, through the partnership between the LGBTQA Center and the development office, we have arranged for solicitation mailings directed to alums coded as LGBTQ to use degendered language. We intentionally use the term ‘alums’ instead of the masculine ‘alumni,’ and avoid the use of gendered honorifics Mr., Ms., and Mrs.<sup>11</sup>.

### **IE Analysis: Discussion**

Untangling the layers of institutional binary gender practice is complicated by the interwoven practices of multiple institutions. For example, states mandate binary sex assignment of newborn infants, which is in turn documented on a person’s birth certificate, the primary form of legal identification; states also determine individuals’ choices and conditions associated with changing birth sex; the federal government counts the population by binary sex categories every ten years; the federal government also issues passports that record a binary sex marker; all of these practices impact school registration processes, driver’s licenses, marriage licenses, and higher education recruitment and acceptance strategies and practices. These layers have been so perfectly aligned and so tightly coordinated, that they functioned as a single, monolithic, seemingly unproblematic binary gender practice.

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<sup>11</sup> Our preference was to exclude only male and female and leave in non-gendered honorifics like Dr., Rev. and Hon., but this was not possible within the third-party software used by our development office. Limitations on what appears (and where and how it appears) on ‘reports’ that are built into third party software makes up a large portion of the problems we have run into in our efforts to improve the reliability of UVM’s name and pronoun use for trans students.

This monolithic alignment of institutional binary gender practice, which has evolved over several centuries, has succeeded in making binary sex and gender appear ‘natural,’ logical, and immutable. Systems that appear to the majority to work seamlessly in smooth coordination, establish a sense of perfect alignment between those systems and the needs of the people who rely on them. Disjuncture, or misalignment, between a system and a particular person’s needs leads logically to the conclusion that the problem originates from the deviance of the individual, not from the inadequacy of the system. The logical solution to the misalignment of a single person and a system that seems to be serving everyone else, is for that individual to change themselves to align with the system, not the other way around. Monolithic institutional alignment of binary gender practices, which has prevailed in most, if not all, Western societies has demanded that supposedly deviant individuals conform, to change themselves. Changing one’s self, in order to ‘fit’ within neatly aligned institutional processes, has come at great pain and cost throughout the centuries, to people whose inner sensibilities have extended beyond binary gender norms. Only in recent years have trans people and trans activism begun to weaken previously impenetrable binary gender boundaries in at least some organizations and institutions.

As some organizations and institutions have begun to adjust their policies and practices in response to the needs of trans individuals, the various layers of institutional binary gender practice are slowly becoming less aligned, and as a result, more visible and legible as distinct processes, each established based on a constructed logic, not immutable facts of nature. As the human thought and choice (logic) behind these processes becomes

more visible, the institutional processes and practices are more readily identifiable as the sources of complications and problems for the trans individual, not the other way around. An example of this shift in perceptions surfaced in a recent meeting that was convened to sort out why an admitted graduate student had been misnamed in letter of reference requests sent out by the graduate college. This particular student had just completed an undergraduate degree at UVM and had been known since sophomore year by the self-identified first name that reliably and consistently appeared on every class roster and advising list. However, when faculty members received reference requests showing the student's legal first name, those faculty members did not recognize a name they had never seen.

The question IT colleagues were trying to answer in the meeting was, why a name and social security number cross check failed to catch the disagreement between the two different pairings of name and social security number, and kick the student's record out, which would have alerted the graduate college, and allowed them to prevent the erroneous forms from being sent. After checking I learned that the student had applied to the graduate college in the fall, and completed a legal name change the following January, including paperwork hand-delivered to the Registrar. The meeting was coming to an end without the tech professionals managing to sort out why the disagreement in first name and social security number pairings didn't result in the student's record being flagged.

Before everyone left the room, discussion turned to changes that are coming soon to the Common Application and Banner systems. I took the opportunity to emphasize

how important it is for systems professionals to have a good grasp of the distinction between sex assigned at birth and gender identity. I explained the need for people who manage data to think more critically about when and whether they need one or the other or neither. Our conversation led all of us to contemplate the complexity of challenges still ahead as we considered the scenario of a student from one of several states that do not permit a legal change of the birth sex marker that appears on their birth certificate<sup>12</sup>. The challenge to the university data manager will be, what to do with information that is coded to show up in untold places, and which will be highly problematic when it completely disagrees with the gender identity and presenting sex of particular students. At the end of our conversation about this hypothetical student, everyone present agreed that the difficulties they face are the result of data system complexities and disagreement among the regulations of various states, not the existence of the transgender individual.

### **Conclusions**

A critical lens must be used to raise questions about typical or ‘normal’ presumptions about gender and names. For example, how many different reasons are there for university students to use a first name other than their legal/birth name on campus (e.g., international students, or students who have always been known by a nickname)? How often is sex/gender included on forms whether or not there is a planned

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<sup>12</sup> As of February 2015, information published on the Lambda Legal website indicated that Idaho, Kansas, Ohio, and Tennessee, “will not issue a birth certificate indicating the proper sex” (“Changing Birth Certificate Sex Designations,” 2015).



for use for the information? When it is needed, which information is really being asked for: the biological sex of the person's reproductive organs (e.g., for reproductive cancer screenings and other hormonally related health issues); the gender of roommate a person would be comfortable living with; the bathroom and shower facilities a person would be comfortable using? Historically, unexamined, hegemonic binary gender assumptions have determined how databases and forms (not to mention buildings) are built, roommates are assigned, and decisions are made about how to address someone respectfully. It is necessary to first recognize and understand trans people and their existence, in order to see the problem of relying on binary gendered honorifics (Mr. Ms. Mrs.) and pronouns (she/her/hers and he/him/his).

Insights from three areas of critical theory and research have been used in this article to provide practitioners with tools for examining prevailing assumptions, practices, and policies on their own campuses. Critical socio-linguistic research has documented the importance of names as a signifier of fundamental social acceptance and personhood, for people in general and transgender people in particular (Emmelhainz, 2012; Hagström, 2012). Queer theory has revealed faulty assumptions hidden within hegemonic gender binary constructs (Butler, 1988; Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014; Wentling, 2015; Wilchins, 2004; Woolley, 2015). Institutional ethnography frameworks have uncovered the ways existing policies and practices can unknowingly and unintentionally reinforce binary gender, and effectively undermine higher education practitioners' efforts to support trans students' name and pronoun needs.

Higher education practitioners should take advantage of the significant guidance about *what* needs to be changed and why (B. G. Beemyn, 2005a; McKinney, 2005b; Singh et al., 2013). In addition, new research is needed that looks at what I have come to call the *misalignment* between the needs of trans students and the gendered workings of higher education. Such research must start from existing findings by Beemyn (2005a), Seelman (2014), Bilodeau (2009), and others that document the status of transgender students in higher education, and use select queer and critical theory frameworks to shed light on the ways binary gender notions are woven through the fabric of higher education. The aim of this article has been to use this approach to begin addressing the gap that exists in the literature. By doing so my hope has been to articulate concepts higher education practitioners can use to help them advance the organizational and cultural changes that are needed to provide effective, consistent support for transgender students' use of self-identified first names and pronouns in higher education settings

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## CHAPTER 8: DISCUSSION

### **Binary Gender Assumptions Hidden in Plain Sight**

This study revealed insights gleaned from three areas of critical theory and research to provide practitioners with tools for examining prevailing assumptions, practices, and policies on their own campuses. Critical socio-linguistic research has documented the importance of names as a signifier of fundamental social acceptance and personhood, for people in general and transgender people in particular (Emmelhainz, 2012; Hagström, 2012). Queer theory has revealed faulty assumptions hidden within hegemonic gender binary constructs (Butler, 1988; Rosiek & Heffernan, 2014; Wentling, 2015; Wilchins, 2004; Woolley, 2015). Institutional ethnography frameworks have uncovered the ways existing policies and practices can unknowingly and unintentionally reinforce binary gender, and effectively undermine higher education practitioners' efforts to support trans students' name and pronoun needs.

Untangling the layers of institutional binary gender practice is complicated by the interwoven practices of multiple institutions. For example, states mandate binary sex assignment of newborn infants, which is in turn documented on a person's birth certificate, the primary form of legal identification; states also determine individuals' choices and conditions associated with changing birth sex; the federal government counts the population by binary sex categories every ten years; the federal government also issues passports that record a binary sex marker; all of these practices impact school registration processes, driver's licenses, marriage licenses, and higher education

recruitment and acceptance strategies and practices. These layers have been so perfectly aligned and so tightly coordinated, that they functioned as a single, monolithic, seemingly unproblematic binary gender practice.

This monolithic alignment of institutional binary gender practice, which has evolved over centuries, has succeeded in making binary sex and gender appear ‘natural,’ logical, and immutable. Systems that appear to the majority to work seamlessly in smooth coordination, establish a sense of perfect alignment between those systems and the needs of the people who rely on them. Disjuncture, or misalignment, between a system and a particular person’s needs leads logically to the conclusion that the problem originates from the deviance of the individual, not from the inadequacy of the system. The logical solution to the misalignment of a single person and a system that seems to be serving everyone else, is for that individual to change themselves to align with the system, not the other way around. Monolithic institutional alignment of binary gender practices, which has prevailed in most, if not all, Western societies has demanded that supposedly deviant individuals conform, to change themselves. Changing one’s self, in order to ‘fit’ within neatly aligned institutional processes, has come at great pain and cost throughout the centuries, to people whose inner sensibilities have extended beyond binary gender norms. Only in recent years have trans people and trans activism begun to weaken previously impenetrable binary gender boundaries in at least some organizations and institutions.

As some organizations and institutions have begun to adjust their policies and practices in response to the needs of trans individuals, the various layers of institutional binary gender practice are slowly becoming less aligned, and as a result, more visible and

legible as distinct processes, each established based on a constructed logic, not immutable facts of nature. As the human thought and choice (logic) behind these processes becomes more visible, the institutional processes and practices are more readily identifiable as the sources of complications and problems for the trans individual.

The central finding of this study is that binary gender assumptions *hide in plain sight* in higher education environments, complicating practitioner's efforts to support transgender students' use of self-identified names and pronouns in on-campus communications. Because assumptions and expectations concerning binary gender remain out of view, they operate freely in undetected and confounding ways within the logic of systems, structures, policies, and practices. Higher education practitioners need a working understanding of how diverse gender identities affect students' lives and circumstances, in order for them to recognize how processes and practices, from feminist studies' definition of 'gender' to the routine use of "sex/gender: M or F (circle one)" on forms, render people with genders beyond male and female 'impossible.'

Most professionals currently do not comprehend how expectations grounded in hegemonic binary gender assumptions are built into the DNA of higher education. People who remain unaware of binary gender hegemony and how it operates, are unable to detect how processes they rely on every day limit the way individuals' identities are knowable and understandable. Practitioners that lack more nuanced understanding of gender are likely to assume that first names and pronouns are straightforward identity classifiers. The fact that names and pronouns do not operate in the same ways for everyone will remain outside their awareness. Key professionals lacking this basic

understanding are unable to fulfill the responsibilities associated with their roles, because of their inability to see or respond to the disjunctures revealed in this study. Their lack of capacity threatens to leave established practices in place, and leaves trans students to navigate complications that arise at the precarious intersection of identity information management practices, name and pronoun needs of students with fluid and non-binary gender identities, and heteronormative and binary gendered hegemony in higher education.

A critical lens must be used to raise questions about typical or ‘normal’ presumptions about gender and names. For example, how many different reasons are there for university students to use a first name other than their legal/birth name on campus (e.g., international students, or students who have always been known by a nickname)? How often is sex/gender included on forms whether or not there is a planned for use for the information? When it is needed, which information is really being asked for: the biological sex of the person’s reproductive organs (e.g., for reproductive cancer screenings and other hormonally related health issues); the gender of roommate a person would be comfortable living with; the bathroom and shower facilities a person would be comfortable using? Historically, unexamined, hegemonic binary gender assumptions have determined how databases and forms (not to mention buildings) are built, roommates are assigned, and decisions are made about how to address someone respectfully. It is necessary to first recognize and understand trans people and their existence, in order to see the problem of relying on binary gendered honorifics (Mr. Ms. Mrs.) and pronouns (she/her/hers and he/him/his).

My initial goal for this study was to complete a thorough analysis of the known instances where trans students were misidentified at my university through the use of a first name or pronoun other than the one the student specified for use on campus. This goal became impossible as new instances, resulting from a novel set of factors continued to emerge over time. When I began, the number of instances I knew of was small enough that I expected I would be able to conduct a thorough review of related documentation and email communications, to trace work processes, and arrive at clear recommendations for avoiding such instances. I also expected I would be able to establish useful metrics about the evolving workflow associated with first names and pronouns at my university and relevant to other higher education organizations. A subtopic I hoped to explore was how decisions were arrived at about the language used on my university's web interface to explain the system where students can specify the first name and pronoun used on campus. The language currently in use by my university developed as the result of extended discussion and has continued to evolve over time in the effort to make it increasingly clear and accurate. This language and extended process alone, as well as other unexplored details like the evolving trends in the population of students accessing the name change feature and the number and type of pronoun choices made are all worthy of study and could result in additional useful insights, but as the complexity of the issues considered within my study grew, this and other questions initially under consideration became relegated to a later investigation.

Higher education practitioners should take advantage of the significant guidance that already exists about *what* needs to be changed and why (B. G. Beemyn, 2005a;

McKinney, 2005b; Singh et al., 2013). In addition, additional research is needed that looks at what I have come to call the *misalignment* between the needs of trans students and the gendered workings of higher education. Such research must start from existing findings by Beemyn (2005a), Seelman (2014), Bilodeau (2009), and others that document the status of transgender students in higher education, and use select queer and critical theory frameworks to shed more light on the ways binary gender notions are woven through the fabric of higher education. The aim of this study has been to use this approach to begin addressing the gap that exists in the literature. By doing so my hope has been to articulate concepts higher education practitioners can use to help them advance the organizational and cultural changes that are needed to provide effective, consistent support for transgender students' use of self-identified first names and pronouns in higher education settings

This research has occurred at a time when binary notions of gender are more contested than ever, and battles are being waged in state legislatures and campuses around the country over safe access to public bathrooms for transgender people. At the time of this writing, the state of Vermont and my university are among the most welcoming of environments trans people experience. Successful leadership requires vision and innovation, as well as the successful management of risk. In the case of leading efforts to provide trans students with support for the use of self-identified first names and pronouns on campus, my university embarked on a project for which no manual existed. It is only recently that transgender people and particularly people claiming identities beyond the gender binary have emerged socially and culturally.

Responding effectively to their presence within our communities and institutions continues to be an experiment that is in progress, and as such, continues to provide an excellent topic for further study.

### **A Research Agenda to Guide Organizations Responding to Social Change**

Liberatory insights are needed to guide organizational changes brought about by social changes. The critical gaze relocates the notion of ‘problem’ from the ‘deviant’ individual, to assumptions and constructions that fail to take that individual’s difference into account. This same shift of focus, away from individuals’ deviance from a supposed norm, is needed to guide organizations that want to become better places for people with diverse identities to thrive. A critical ‘liberatory’ investigation is one that extends beyond reporting what is, by relocating the ‘problem’ focus from individuals’ experience of victimization, to the oppressive practices associated with their suffering. Critical research does this by changing what is held constant. Traditional research has held the conditions affecting people’s lives constant and compared differences in outcomes for people with different identities. There is a slight of hand embedded in this model; an assumption that the conditions impacting people’s lives are what is immutable, and people’s identities are what is variable. While ethics concerns prevent purposefully subjecting people to oppressive conditions, that fact alone does not preclude meaningful research into the differential impacts of more and less oppressive practices.

Research can and must move beyond seeking to understand and reveal victims’ pain (and brokenness), to understanding and identifying how oppressive practices

produce negative outcomes in people who are victimized by oppression. In order to arrive at such liberatory insights, researchers must go beyond simply comparing outcomes for individuals from marginalized backgrounds and identities to those from dominant backgrounds and identities. Critical insights can be found by measuring variations in outcomes for individuals from the same (traditionally marginalized) backgrounds, subjected to more or less oppressive practices. The first research design merely ‘proves’ that people from marginalized backgrounds have more negative outcomes. The second design can show that people from traditionally marginalized backgrounds can have more typical outcomes in the absence of oppressive conditions. Such critical liberatory insights can be revealed, by starting from the results of traditional research, combining these with qualitative research, and conceptual tools found in methodologies like IE and critical theory. By switching around what gets held constant and what is compared, the experimental  $x$  can be reframed and the effects of oppression can be studied ‘in vitro’.

A study on levels of anxiety and depression in trans children provides a straightforward example of such a critical research approach (Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016). In the case of this study, previous traditional research had identified high levels of anxiety and depression among trans children. As usual, this negative outcome data left open the question of whether higher levels of depression and anxiety are somehow intrinsic to trans children’s identities, or to some external factor that was not subjected to measurement. While identifying that trans children are suffering anxiety and depression has value, it is obviously even more helpful to understand factors that contribute to their suffering. As in the case of the Olson et. al. study, critical research



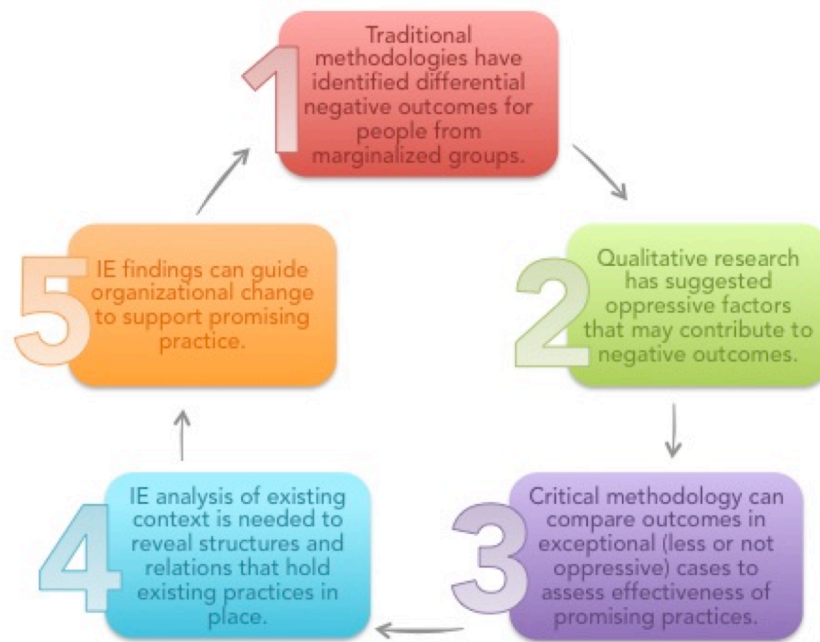
can start from quantitative data that has documented negative outcomes for marginalized groups. Qualitative research on the marginalized can reveal insights that suggest conditions that might account for negative outcomes. Through selective sampling, and appropriate statistical measure these insights can provide the basis for testing whether less or non-oppressive conditions might produce measurably better outcomes.

Olson et al., used the approach described above to look specifically at depression and anxiety levels of transgender children who were supported in their social transitions, including use of gender appropriate self-identified names and pronouns (Olson et al., 2016). Unlike prior studies that had not sought out these conditions, the children in Olson et.al.'s study showed levels of depression and anxiety that were close to those found in non-trans children. This critical research methodology provides compelling evidence that trans children raised in supportive environments can show significantly healthier levels of mood and anxiety, and provides potential guidance that can inform better parenting practices.

The culmination of my work for this dissertation has led me to considering a research framework to guide institutional and organizational changes resulting from social change. I am proposing the use what I am calling a Critical-Liberatory Research Framework (see Figure 5 below) a multi-step approach to analysis that I believe could be used to identify promising practices for organizations wishing to become better places for people with diverse identities and backgrounds. The assessment strategy I have outlined could play a vitally important role in guiding organizational and institutional changes in response to increased social diversity and resulting changes in social understandings. The

social sciences have produced ample data documenting differential negative outcomes for traditionally marginalized populations. Similarly, qualitative research has been widely used to discover experiences of oppression that may contribute to the negative outcomes. More studies like the one by Olson, et. al. (step 3 in the diagram below) are needed to assess whether conditions that are less oppressive produce better outcomes. Producing such evidence provides organizations with the documentation they need to lead through data driven decision-making.

Despite data that supports organizational changes, change processes will continue to be challenging, especially in the case of social and cultural changes. The next step in the framework described below addresses this challenge. Leaders and practitioners can uncover impediments to desired changes using analytical tools like IE and critical theory to reveal structures and relations that can operate in ways that obstruct or disrupt potential promising practices. Finally, the insights gained from such careful study can provide guidance about organizational and institutional changes that are needed to support, for example in the case of the transgender children in Olson's study, the families, schools, and other contexts involved in 'governing,' trans children's use of names, pronouns, clothing and hairstyles of their choosing.



**Figure 5: Five Steps to Identifying and Assessing Promising Practices for Organizational Change in response to Social Change**

In other words, Olson’s study was predated by decades of risk and outcome data that documented negative outcomes for trans youth (step 1.). Recommendations for better practices came out of qualitative interviews with trans students (step 2.) (Carter, 2000; Dugan et al., 2012; Effrig et al., 2011; McKinney, 2005b). Where Olson’s study (step 3 in the diagram) left off, and the next (step 4 in the diagram) begins is uncovering *how* less oppressive conditions can be constituted and supported. Arriving at answers to this last set of questions requires the careful study of existing structures to better understand the ruling relations operating in the background to hold the existing context in place, and by inference, to complicate efforts to change the context to make it less oppressive. IE and critical frameworks can provide foundational insights that are necessary, so that

institutional and organizational contexts can successfully be reconceived and restructured to support more positive outcomes for more people.

Research following the model used in Olson's study is still needed to assess outcomes for trans students who experience more supportive higher education environments. My study left that inquiry to other researchers and sought instead to gain insight into the operational and relational intricacies of providing support for trans students' name and pronoun needs within the existing hegemonic binary and cisgender higher education context (step 4 in the diagram). My hope is that other researchers will take up the research still to be done; by conducting a systematic comparison of outcomes for trans students within trans-supportive higher education environments at places like UVM, to those of trans students in more typical environments. Such research in the future can provide even more compelling evidence of the value of the work underway at universities to meet the stated needs of transgender individuals.

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