

Exploring the Lived Experiences of Transgender Students in Health Professions Programs, A Phenomenological Study

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Introduction / Purpose

The transgender and gender diverse population faces significant institutional discrimination and marginalization in higher education. Within physical therapy and other health professional education programs, transgender and gender non-conforming people are underrepresented and face unique challenges.

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of transgender students in health professions programs in the US to better understand what common experiences the students may have and what unique experiences may be discussed in relation to their respective programs.

Methods

- Qualitative phenomenological research design
- Semi-structured interviews were conducted with each participant via video conference
- Purposive sampling was used in this study, and participants were recruited via email list and social media posting in various LGBTQ+ organizations
- Participants included four transgender students from differing health professions programs in the United States
- Interview process:
 - Data collected consisted of video and audio recordings from each interview
 - Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim using Zoom transcription technology
- Thematic analysis and inductive coding techniques were used to assess the lived experience of participants and identify sub-themes and primary themes

Results

Five primary themes were identified from the data, each with corresponding sub-themes as demonstrated below with quotes from the interviews:

Identities: *Intersectionality*

"I think [having a low socio-economic status and being a first generation student] made navigating higher education much more difficult because not only do I not know the rules because I'm first gen, but I don't know the rules with also being queer."

The Academic Environment: *Non-inclusive curricula*

Students mentioned speaking out about explicit transphobia in their education, saying "...I was like 'Professor, this is terrible and so transphobic', and he was like 'Okay, I'll replace it next year' and I was like great, this has been taught for decades, why do I have to fix the curriculum?"

The Academic Environment: *Lack of academic support*

One student described witnessing a professor make transphobic and racist comments and utilizing a bias report system to report them. They explained "We had to fight to get ours [bias reporting information] on every syllabus so people know how to report professors... I don't think it's going to go anywhere, but..."

Navigating Heteronormative Health Professions:

"I'm aware when I go on the job market I cannot look as gay/trans/queer as I want, I have to dress it up, I have to play whatever- have to lean into it a little bit what they want to get an academic job."

Forming Relationships: *Complicated social interactions*

"Based on people's reactivity to me, or how I feel around them, there's this push away or this desire to draw closer because they feel safe and comfortable, so I definitely think it's shifted my training quite a bit more."

Family/Financial challenges: *Family support*

"They don't think that trans people exist and mental health is not real. So they don't really respect what I do, but they're glad that I'm in a prestigious-ish college, maybe doing a PhD."

Discussion

Current research on transgender students reflects several findings from this study. For example, all students reported:

- No issues with academic success despite negative experiences related to institutional and social bias
- Experiences related to LGBT minority stress theory
- Issues with inclusive curricula due to lack of/underdeveloped LGBTQ+ content
- Negative clinical experiences reflecting research on transphobia in the workplace

Other findings from this study that have not been previously documented include the COVID-19 pandemic creating a positive impact on students by making the graduate environment feel safer for some.

Overall, this study provides insight on the challenges that trans students in health professions face, highlighting:

- Trans exclusion (socially, institutionally)
- Lack of support (academic, family, financial)
- Barriers faced with advocacy work
- Gaps in health professions education for LGBTQ+ content

This knowledge can be used to develop better support for these students, improve efforts for institutional change, and promote more inclusive curricula in programs thereby creating more competent providers.

Conclusions

This study identified various challenges faced by transgender students in health professions programs, highlighting the importance of inclusive health education and fostering a sense of belonging in educational and professional environments. These findings have potential implications for institutional program design within health professions programs including physical therapy education programs.

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