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Transgender Viewpoints: Experiences in Higher Education A View from Both Student and Staff Perspectives

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Gender identity and gender expression are two of the most noteworthy conversations had in the field of higher education in recent years. They are hot-button issues in both national politics, and in the way that we relate to our students and staff. Few faculty and staff members in higher education had cause to question their own gender identity or the way that they express that identity, but for thousands of people in this country, that question, and the answer to it, is something that occupies their thoughts on a daily basis. In addition, the question carries with it many consequences that few of us in the realm of Registration and Admissions must contemplate on a daily basis. In 2017, 1.6% of reported hate crimes in the United States were directed at individuals because of bias against gender identity¹. Of these reported hate crimes, 90.1% were motivated specifically by anti-transgender bias, and 9.8% were motivated by gender non-conforming bias.

Demographics for transgender populations are hard to come by, but some estimates put the transgender population of the United States around 0.6%, or about 1.4 million people². In Oregon, that number estimated to be higher, with approximately 0.65% of the population identifying as transgender. Oregon's SB 473 helps solidify those numbers even more, with its requirement of allowing individuals to self-identify their sexual orientation and gender identity. Until data is reported, we only have estimates. However, even with those estimates, it appears there are nearly 20,000 people in Oregon alone who are potential students and who live a life that few of us can even contemplate. Relating to these people will increasingly become a priority in higher education, and providing each and every student with a quality experience within our universities, be they in Oregon or elsewhere, is increasingly important.

Three of Oregon's universities have consistently scored high on the PRIDE index each year, making these universities prime candidates for LGBT+ populations to consider when trying to find their school of choice³. Southern Oregon University has consistently scored in the top 30 LGBT+ friendly campuses in the nation, and it shows with the high percentage of students on campus who with the LGBT+ community, and more specifically with transgender students.

I am one of these students, but I share a unique perspective, as I am also the Academic Records Coordinator for Southern Oregon University. This is about some of my

¹ Federal Bureau of Investigation: Uniform Crime Reporting. "Hate Crime Statistics: Victims." <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2017>.

² Flores, Herman, Gates and Brown. "How Many Adults Identify as Transgender in the United States?" The Williams Institute, June 2016

³ Hammond. "Oregon's Three Big Public Universities Among Nation's Most Gay-Friendly." The Oregonian, Aug. 15, 2014.

experiences in both roles, in order to further the understanding of the issues, problems, failures and triumphs that transgender individuals face within the halls of our institutions.

My History

I was assigned a male gender at my birth in July of 1979, meaning that my body conformed to the medical understanding of what it means to be male. Normal, healthy, and perfectly typical, my parents set out to raise a son in the best way they knew how. They were nominally religious people who wanted to be more devout in their ways, and I can remember throughout my life many times when we would have spurts of going to church every Sunday interspersed with times when Sunday was for football, or for lounging around the house, or for getting things done in the yard. But church was only a small part of my parents' religion. Even when they weren't in the habit of going to church, they never lost the belief, repeated often enough that I remember it from my childhood, that "those gay people are freaks," along with some other more derogatory language when it came to transgender folks. The words "sick" and "disgusting" come to mind quite readily.

My childhood involved a great deal of hewing to gender stereotypes. No dolls, no "girly" toys or school accessories. Boys liked blue, sometimes black, and so that's what I got. Boys liked war toys, like toy guns, and GI Joe, not ponies or castles (unless it was Castle Greyskull from He-Man, that castle was just fine). School was very similar. You were expected to stay within your gender and not step out of the predetermined role and path for who you were perceived to be. To boys, girls were icky, they weren't people with whom you were friends. In fact, if you spent more time with the girls on the playground than the boys, you'd start to be called a girl, which was, of course, one of the most egregious insults to a boy.

I grew up with all of this in a time where there wasn't a term for someone like me, who knew that something didn't feel right, and that the person in the mirror wasn't who I was. There was little concept of what it meant to be transgender when I was growing up, only laughable stereotypes, put out here to be ridiculed and derided. I didn't know what I was, but I sure didn't want to be that.

It took me a tour in the Marine Corps and nearly 15 years of male-dominated career choices, and a whole lot of soul searching to finally come to the realization that the reason the person in the mirror looked so foreign to me was that it wasn't me. I wasn't the hulking, bald, bearded man that looked back at me from behind that glass. I was someone very, very different. Hence, my transition began.

My Experiences in the University

I was lucky to be hired by Southern Oregon University in the spring of 2016, and for a while, I was not forthcoming about my gender identity. I still did not know how anything was going to shake out when I finally took the steps that I knew I must take to express myself.

At the point that I was hired, I'd been an off-and-on student for nearly 20 years, studying everything from Computer Science to Nursing, to Arabic Language and Culture. Looking back at it, I am convinced that my lack of direction in education had to do with not knowing my identity well enough to choose a path in life. If you can't relate to yourself when you look in the mirror, and you can't figure out who you are, how are you supposed to figure out what you really want to be doing with the rest of your life?

My career path at that time was similar. Years and years of jobs that varied as much from one another as my majors did in college. From fingerprint analyst and fugitive services intern to linguist, to security guard to taxi driver and then to emergency medicine. I drifted from one job to another, seeking something with every single one. All of them, though, bore something in common: they were all something that would be considered “manly.” They were jobs that reaffirmed my masculinity, masculinity that needed to be reaffirmed because I felt so little of it within myself, but I knew that was what other people expected from me.

Here I was now, on the brink of self-discovery, a new job, almost a new life. It wasn't until six months into my work at the University that I told my supervisor that I was transgender. What I had feared, that I would be rejected, or that they would find some way to shuffle me off, never came to pass, and at that point, I knew the team and the staff at the University well enough that I didn't have any expectation that it would. My team and the university as a whole were some of the most supportive and welcoming people I could ever have asked for.

On August 28th, 2017, Mathew Cable became Katherine Cable, and I came out to the campus at large. There was no one with whom I had a professional relationship who even batted an eye.

But even though I've had one of the most privileged transitions that it's possible to have, there were still rocky spots. I was still a student, working on finishing my long-overdue bachelor's degree, and so that meant that I interacted with a number of different faculty and students on a daily basis, and in those relationships came a bit of strain.

By far the most common issue was with pronouns. I've said in talks that I've given for PACRAO and other organizations that to call someone by something other than their preferred pronouns is the easiest and most thoughtless way to make a transgender person feel devalued and unseen. An acquaintance of mine told me how it feels in these words: “When someone is corrected after misgendering someone else's dog, they don't usually make the same mistake again. The dog becomes fixed in their mind as a certain gender. But when someone is corrected on someone else's gender, it takes so much more effort to get them to stop misgendering them. I feel like when someone constantly misgenders me that I'm not even worthy of the respect of a dog.”

When I heard those words, I understood exactly what they were talking about. By far, the most common way that my identity is ignored, both in a staff role and in a student role is being referred to as “him” or “sir.” I've come to hate those words, and every time that they come up it means that whomever is saying them doesn't see what I see. They see the stranger that looked out at me from the mirror for so very long. They see the person that I've tried so hard to be rid of, and when they continue to use those terms to describe me, it means to me that I am not worthy enough of respect for them to correct themselves.

It is the easiest way to devalue another person, and yet it is the simplest way to affirm them as well. It takes effort, but the effort can produce the best return on investment you will ever make in relating to a transgender person. Just hearing the right pronouns sometimes can lift me up from an average day to one that is going better than expected.

I think that most of the issues that arise in my life as a transgender person are common to both students and staff. The question of which restroom to use is fraught sometimes with too many variables. How many other people are going to be in there? Are they going to see me as I see myself, or as the person who just called me “sir” sees me? Is there going to be a confrontation? The gender neutral bathroom has been occupied every time I’ve tried for the last 2 hours, do I take my chances with the other bathroom, or with a bladder infection? These are challenges that transgender people experience on a daily basis. As a student, I was concerned about how I was relating to other students and with the course instructors. In many Universities, the climate is welcoming among the other students, though some of the course instructors were obstinate in their misgendering, and it’s an experience that’s shared with many, many students, especially (at least in our institution) in the sciences, Business, and Criminology. I was lucky enough to be pursuing a degree in the arts, which tended to be more accepting.

As a staff member, I’m concerned with how I am relating and presenting to the world both within and outside the institution. Curiously, I have found that relating to the faculty and staff within the institution has given me few problems in a staff role but interacting with that same faculty in a student role was a much different experience. Outside the institution, though, the results are more mixed. Misgendering happens more often when dealing with people outside the institution, even when my pronouns are included in email correspondence and I have chosen a traditionally female-identified name.

Conclusions

These are just a few of my experiences in my many different interactions on our campus, and I’m sharing them in hopes that being able to see both roles through the eyes of a transgender person might help others in our educational institutions relate to the transgender students and staff at their school. There is a great deal of noise out there about the experiences of transgender people, and I believe that the more stories we can tell, from our own mouths and with our own words, the easier it will be to look at the transgender people at your institution and be able to see, at least dimly, through their eyes.

As always, I aim to be a resource for the higher education community, and I am willing to answer whatever questions might be asked so that I can help our community grow in its understanding of gender identity, expression, and the issues surrounding transgender staff and students at our university.



"Katherine Cable spends her working hours as the Academic Records Coordinator at Southern Oregon University, which means she's equal parts archivist and doer of things that defy categorization. She comes to higher education from what could easily be called a variety of career choices in her past, including Emergency Medicine, Search and Rescue, a term in the Marines as a linguist, and a number of other odds and ends. She received her bachelor's degree in Emerging Media and Digital Art from Southern Oregon University.

Katherine serves on SOU's Diversity and Inclusion Oversight Committee, Veteran's and Military Connected Student Task Force, Bias Response Team and Equity Grievance Panels. Throughout her three years in Higher Education, she has given talks at OrACRAO and PACRAO on the topic of transgender staff, self-care, and Clearinghouse Enrollment Reporting.

She spends her off hours as an independent filmmaker, transgender activist and community volunteer, helping students with matters surrounding gender transition and LGBTQ+ support."

The Registrar History Project: Context, Continuity, and Institutional Memory Part 2: Recording History

Tom Watts

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Introduction

As stated in the conclusion to Part 1, the segue from collecting topics and the initial, cursory research that went with the accumulation of topics to organizing and writing was a fluid process. With a long, relatively comprehensive list of topics as a starting point, the next steps were to research topics, organize the presentation, and draft a complete explanation for each topic. By the time that this project reached the composition phase, I wondered whether it had been realistic to predict an end date.

However, as the additional research and then the organizing and writing proceeded, a semblance of coherence emerged. Researching the topics was the most difficult task, as sources for some of the topics were hard to locate or (as far as I could tell) no longer available. Organizing was the most perplexing task, with no clear pattern coming to mind to lay out the material. Drafting was, surprisingly to me, the most useful step. It was never possible to craft an explanation that was exactly as brilliant as I wanted it to be, but drafting gave me a sense of which topics were clear and complete and which required additional background or detail.

This article will present what the process was, where gaps surfaced, and what my strategy was to complete this history.

Getting a Full Picture

The first step after determining (for the time being at least) that the list of topics was “complete” was to decide whether the information I had was sufficient to complete an entry in the document. In most cases, I needed additional details, and for some topics—grading system, repeats, academic residency, withdrawal periods, for example—I really wanted to know what earlier discussion had included.

As there were several categories of topics, and it is helpful to explain my process for approaching each one. In every instance, the topics required investigation and citation of sources, but the type of topic had an impact on the research.

Catalog and/or Academic Regulation Issues

Some of the issues in this category included transfer credits, the grading system, academic residency, academic standing, and graduation requirements. These issues generated constant and numerous questions from students, advisors, and faculty. Frequently, if not in every instance, part of the question was: why does the university

handle it this way. The Registrar's history explanations, to be helpful, included not only the current processing guidelines, but also the discussion over time. That was usually not easy to find, but incredibly helpful when available.

More Recent Issues

Some of the issues were easier to research, because they were more additions that are recent or modifications to Academic Regulations (ARs), such as the OSU Academic Forgiveness Policy and the Planned Educational Leave Policy (PELP), both implemented after I joined the Office of the Registrar (OtR). Hybrid courses were another area that came into prominence recently, plus our office had played a role in those recent discussions. I had notes, internal information on the discussion of the policies, Faculty Senate committee discussions, and copies of emails that dealt with these more recent issues. It was a benefit to capture the information on these topics while the issues were still fresh in everyone's memory.

University Initiatives

Another area of importance was the increasing number of university initiatives that the OtR played a part in. These included the long-standing special programs that the OtR helped facilitate, for example, partnerships with other universities, study abroad and international programs. It also included more recent initiatives, such as the Student Success Collaborative, course forecasting and access courses, electronic student evaluations of teachers, and R25/S25 scheduling issues. These initiatives were evidence of the importance of the OtR data, expertise, and collaboration, and it was vital to capture the background and development of these issues.

Where to Look

The sources of the information were varied, and included:

- OtR memory
- Enrollment Management/Administrative Department colleagues memory
- University colleagues memory
- Faculty Senate minutes
- Faculty Senate Committee annual reports
- OSU College and Departmental websites

OtR Memory

The most easily available information, and invariably the starting point, was the collective OtR memory. Discovering and organizing what we currently knew provided valuable and extensive information. It was also very reassuring to know that a systematic effort was in place to document that information while at least some of the sources were still available.

The OtR departments—Records and Registration, Scheduling, Certification, and Information Technology (IT)—provided the details for our processes, including: term set-up, registration, start-of-term details, start and end of drop/add and withdrawal periods,

and end-of-term processes. Some of the most valuable information dealt not just with the details and steps of the processes and tasks, but also the questions that inevitably arose from students, advisors, and sometimes faculty related to the processes. The questions were as important as the details of the process, as those questions illustrated what was misunderstood or unknown by the persons most impacted by the processes. It was vital to try to include in the explanations what answers were given to the questions from those impacted by the processes and why those answers were given.

Enrollment Management and Administrative Departments Colleagues Memory

While I could acquire a great amount of useful information internally, for a large number of the topics, it was imperative and useful to ask colleagues in Enrollment Management (EM), or other administrative departments, to review with me the process, or to answer questions about their practices in these areas. Information from Admissions, regarding the processes for handling non-degree students, transfer credits, and admission timelines, etc., and from Financial Aid, regarding the processes for handling adds, drops, payments for repeats, etc., was very helpful. Information from Business Affairs, regarding the processes for billing, refunds, and fee waivers, was also vital. These discussions with colleagues were invaluable and illustrative in every instance of how interdependent our departments and processes are.

Faculty Senate and Faculty Senate Committee Information

Researching ARs and Catalog issues quickly demonstrated that, in most cases, there was not enough information to establish what the initial policy had been, or what the rationale had been for updates and changes.

Some information was available through documents, questions, notes, research of Faculty Senate minutes, committee meeting minutes, and end-of-year reports from some of the committees most central to the work of our office. The following Faculty Senate committees connected most frequently to the work of the OtR.

- Academic Standing Committee
 - which dealt with suspended students and the various processes for those students to resume their studies at OSU;
- Academic Requirements Committee
 - which dealt with student petitions for exceptions to the academic regulations;
- Academic Regulations Committee
 - which met to discuss and sometimes amend the academic regulations;
- Curriculum Committee

- which dealt with approval of requests for new curriculum requests (majors, minors, and options), amendments to, or requests for dropping a curriculum, and curriculum reviews;
- Classroom Committee, and a sub-committee, the Space Usage Committee
 - which dealt with building requests, classroom designations (general purpose and departments classrooms), and requests for any variations from standard classroom usage.

OtR colleagues sat as *ex officio* member on each of the committees, and some of our best and most useful interactions and input came directly because of the office's work with those Faculty Senate committees.

The availability of Faculty Senate documents and minutes going back farther than a few years was very inconsistent. While not always easy to find, that information, including discussions and summaries of the issues, were very useful. In some instances, they illustrated exactly why a change had been made (for example, catalog year determination, adoption of S/U grading, limits on transfer of credits by non-degree students). In other instances, the discussion surrounding a policy (repeated courses, +/- grades, rejection of A+ grade, etc.) provided the different viewpoints in the discussions. The historical information was extremely useful, as the discussion shed light on the way faculty and committees viewed the issues and provided a variety of viewpoints that helped make sense of the development of a policy or regulation.

OSU Web Sites and University Colleagues

Some of my research was done via OSU web sites, some via hard-copy information, available either internally or from colleagues in other departments, and some from interviews with colleagues. Each time I found a useful site, I could be heard rejoicing throughout the office. The discussions with colleagues often completed the investigation, either via the tremendous university collective memory, or via a reference to some other source.

Organizing, Writing, and Revising

I am unsure how long the writing took. I wish that I had been more attuned to the process, so that I could provide a more precise timeline for the research, drafting, and revision. My estimate is that I began the draft approximately six months after the project began, which meant that writing and revising lasted about six months.

As I drafted, I also thought of a useful organization plan for the information. My first attempt was to organize the topics by the four major areas of the OtR, which would

be a very close approximation of office functions. Those areas were Records and Registration, Scheduling, Compliance (including VA certification, NCAA certification, and graduation and degree clearance), and IT.

Almost immediately, a complicating factor to organizing by office area and/or function emerged. I could organize by department or function, but our work was an intricate over-lapping and complementary set of processes that could not be effectively separated. The connections between the functions in Records were inextricably intertwined with the Scheduling processes, which were all integrated with each compliance section. In addition, IT was part of every office activity. Added to that were battalions of deadlines and competing pressures. I might have been able to find a way to effectively organize the topics by departments or functions, but that would have meant I could not retire. Seriously.

Ultimately, because of the connections, I settled on a far simpler and ultimately more pragmatic and useful organizing principle: an alphabetical list of topics.

The alphabetical list of the topics included in the Registrar History also includes a cross-reference of related topics. This was at first an unsatisfying strategy, but it yielded some benefits. The first was that it was easy to find the topics. Because there was no index, the alphabetical list became the table of contents, which was also a fast method of finding the topics of interest for a reader. Second, the cross-reference points were effectively dealt with. Even within our office, there is some difference in terminology, and the same topic is not always referred to by the same terms. That becomes even more prevalent across the university. The easiest thing to do was to try to use as many cross-references as possible, in the hopes that confusion over terms and terminology could be minimized.

As I noted, the writing and revision took six months. The amount of information I had amassed was both reassuring and daunting.

Because the draft invariably and predictably included some areas where I found that I needed to add or clarify information, the revisions seemed to go on a long time, with the end always within sight but not attainable. The end point seemed to move with purpose farther and farther away. That, I decided, was partly because of the nature of the beast, with new topics seeming to crop up as quickly as I crossed one off the list. The revisions, though, helped to ensure that the document was coherent and thorough.

There was so much information and writing was a matter of ensuring that the information was logically, simply, and fully set forth. It was not perfect, by any means, but with much help, I think the finished product is very helpful.

Final (?) Draft

At the end of my involvement on the project, we had amassed a Table of Contents that was 21 pages long and included what we thought was an excellent and relatively comprehensive list of topics. The list would undoubtedly expand, as would the discussion for the topics, but the original document included the following general topic areas.

Academic Regulations

All 31 ARs were covered. As noted earlier, one AR, the OSU academic forgiveness policy, Academic Fresh Start, had been added since I began with the office; however, there had been numerous changes to other regulations. The Planned Educational Leave Policy (PELP) was also a completely new policy, added to the existing AR on Withdrawal from the Term. The AR information is almost reason by itself for the document, as the regulations are the framework for the office. Documenting as extensively as possible the information for each AR was helpful, and capturing the ideas, viewpoints, and discussion relevant to the newest AR and new policies was useful to anyone looking at the rationale for its adoption or reasons for updates.

Catalog Policies

Catalog policies also were a vital part of the history, including catalog year policy, major changes, course fees, curriculum changes, and degree completion. These were not easy to research, but every piece of information was helpful to understanding policies and their evolution.

Initiatives and Special Programs

Special programs that the office facilitates (exchanges, dual programs with other Oregon universities, OSU Cascades campus, study abroad, etc.) and other initiatives, such as course forecasting, innovative and hybrid course implementation and scheduling, use of holds and registration efficiencies, etc. are all included.

Committees and Other Collaborations

The OtR worked with the following committees and the policies relevant to our work with these committees are all included:

- Academic Requirements Committee,
- Academic Standing Committee,
- Academic Regulations Committee,
- Curriculum Committee,
- Space and Classroom Committees.

Collaboration with other departments and offices are also described, including ECampus (OSU distance education office), student success initiatives (with the Vice-Provost for Student Success), student evaluation, INTO and international education, Office of Student Conduct, and many others.

OtR Functions

In addition to the ongoing and vital functions (scheduling, term setup, registration, grade collection, transcripts, certification, etc.), other, more specialized and sometimes overlooked functions were included, such as apostilles, and the relatively recent function of athletic NCAA certification. In addition, calendaring of OtR operations and everyone's favorite, FERPA, are a part of the history.

OtR IT

The IT topics quickly increased, as our own IT section is involved in every facet of OtR work. In addition, our IT section, sometimes on its own and sometimes in conjunction with university computer services support, manages the complementary software that with Banner (the primary software for the office) is used in OtR operations. That complementary software includes College Scheduler, MyDegrees, Data Warehouse, eSET, and several others. The information of IT proved, if proof was necessary, how vital that intelligent and thoughtful support is to the basic functioning of the office.

Value

The Registrar History is a repository of information on topics and issues central to the OtR and by extension to the entire university. The history is approximately 150 pages and has a Table of Contents that adds 21 pages. Since I first worked on the history, the office has implemented a process for updating and adding to it.

It becomes, with updates and additions, closer to a comprehensive document, both in terms of the topics it covers, and in the depth with which those topics are discussed.

Selfishly, I count some part of the value of the project as the joy I felt working on it. It was an unexpected opportunity to contribute to the office in a way that I had not thought of before the OSU registrar's suggestion of the project. It was interesting, challenging, and a very satisfying way to complete my time at the university.

As I worked on the project, but particularly as I neared its completion, I also thought in broader terms of the value of the project. Too many of the policies that the office administers and/or is regulated by have changed, and the reasons why have never been written down. There are always good reasons for the changes, but documenting the development and evolution of the policies is important. It supplies a context for the changes. Looking at the policies in some detail also reiterated the care that was taken in crafting the policies and regulations, shows the detail and consideration that went into the policies, and illustrates how important the university considered each amendment, update, and change.

It is a project that most colleagues would consider a luxury. The ongoing work of any registrar's office precludes an easy commitment of resources to a project of this type. It was possible at OSU because of interest in the project, recognition of its value, leadership decisions to allow it to happen, and, frankly, fortunate circumstances. I was retiring, and my experience in the office covered a fairly broad range. An interim associate registrar had been appointed to succeed me, and my work with her was a perfect complement to this project. Had my replacement not been so well planned, I doubt I would have been able to work on this project. That certainly does not mean that it would not have happened, but not, I think, as easily. Moreover, perhaps not with the level of detail that our office was able to provide. Virtually every topic was useful to my successor as an orientation to the office, and discussing policies, regulations, and procedures was an incredible help when I drafted my explanations in written form for the registrar history.

As I believed from the start, the history is helpful because it provides a backdrop and a context for the answers we give to students regarding why processes and policies exist in their current form, or the answers we give to faculty about the why scheduling protocols and grade deadlines are necessary and helpful. Knowing how and why a policy exists is paramount. Knowing how that policy evolved and why is sometimes just as important. Further, when a discussion begins on a policy or procedure, the historical information is especially useful and will often be requested.

Though I am convinced that the project has great value, I realize that the pace and amount of work in every registrar's office makes planning and assigning resources for a project of this type difficult. Our office (and I suspect other offices) is not funded for this type of project. Nevertheless, after the initial effort of such a project, the resource when viewed as an ongoing work in progress provides great value.



Tom Watts worked in the Office of the Registrar at Oregon State University from 2001 to 2016. He began as Special Programs Manager, and worked also as Assistant and Associate Registrar, before his retirement in 2016. He lives in Seattle, where he cheers for his wife's bagpiping endeavors, roots for the Mariners, and takes instructions cheerfully from his granddaughters.