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What About the “T’s”?: Addressing the Needs of a Transgender Student at a CCCU Member Institution

By Scott Barrett, Philip Byers, David Downey & Eric Gingerich

Abstract

As the discussion of the LGBT community continues to evolve and inform decisions at higher education institutions, evidence suggests the “T”-transgender-discussion at CCCU institutions has remained stagnant and largely unrecognized. In June 2011 ACSD’s New Professionals Collaborative asked professionals to present a case study on how a CCCU institution would house a transgender student who had already been admitted into the institution. The authors found the literature on the subject to be sparse, and within the Christian context it is nearly nonexistent. The few precedents and best practices on housing a transgender student do not appear to align with the values of a CCCU institution. There are, however, a few viable housing options to explore, and while an exhaustive list was not created, several of the most likely are examined and discussed. Understanding that a transgender student’s situation is unique and recognizing a lack of knowledge, precedent, and expertise on the subject, the recommendation is to have a conversation with the student about institutional fit. If an agreement to live by the institution’s values is reached, the authors assert housing the student with his/her biological sex most aligns with the institution’s values. Ultimately, the most compelling conclusion and discussion is that CCCU institutions must urgently lay a philosophical and theological foundation on the transgender issue.

What About the “T’s”?: Addressing the Needs of a Transgender Student at a CCCU Member Institution

In June 2011 at the annual ACSD conference, members who qualified as “new professionals” were invited to participate in a case study challenge addressing current issues in higher education as identified by New Professionals’ Collaborative leadership. The following study emerged from that competition and examines approaches toward housing a transgendered student at a CCCU member institution.

Institutional Description

For our purposes, the university will be referred to as Mid-States University (MSU). MSU is meant to be a median of the 111 member institutions that make up the Council of Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). Mid-States has a total enrollment of approximately 2,800 students both graduate and undergraduate. It is located in the Midwest and has a residential campus with an on-campus housing rate of approximately 85 percent. Although not affiliated with any particular denomination, Mid-States is a conservative school with core curriculum requirements in Bible and expected weekly chapel attendance.

Problem Statement

The student in question was accepted to Mid-States as Stephanie but has since informed the housing department of *hir* (gender-neutral pronoun used by the transgender community) situation (O’Neil, McWhirter & Cerezo, 2008). Stephanie is

currently in transition from hir birth gender and biological sex, a male legally named Steve. According to MSU's policy, first-semester students are required to live on-campus. The housing department is tasked with deciding how to house the student.

Literature Review

Public and Non-Sectarian Private Institutions

One of the foremost scholars exploring this issue in non-sectarian institutions is Brett Geny Beemyn. At the front end of the housing process, Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, and Tubbs (2005) recommend amending institutional intake forms and clarifying admissions and marketing language. In their view, intake forms that force students into a "binary" gender paradigm of male or female should be replaced by those with blanks for self-identification. Additionally, clearly publicizing and clarifying policies online can help students understand the context into which they are entering before they apply or matriculate.

Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, and Tubbs (2005) offer general housing principles. According to these researchers, co-educational facilities (whether designated by floor, suite, or room) are preferable to single-gender spaces where students may not "pass" as easily (p. 53). They recommend that these areas be comprised largely of upperclassmen who are often more developmentally mature. However, these practitioners recommend an approach that is equally as varied as the experiences of transgendered students, one informed by a written policy but implemented on a "case by case" basis (p. 52).

Elsewhere, Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, and Smith (2005) recommend that institutions have "advocates" in any "single-gendered" locations (like residence halls) in which students are more likely to face obstacles (p. 21). Beemyn et al. (2005) caution against LGBT "themed" housing as a solution, as these facilities often focus on sexual identity to the exclusion of heterosexual transgendered students.

Beemyn, Domingue, Pettitt, and Smith (2005) recommend steps at "beginning," "intermediate," and "advanced" levels for residence halls. These steps include publicizing names of residence life practitioners with knowledge of and sympathy for transgendered issues ("beginning"), conducting mandatory training for all residence life staff and developing "inclusive" policies ("intermediate"), and establishing gender-neutral bathrooms and private showers ("advanced"). They would also allow students to be housed by their "gender identity/expression" or to apply for single rooms (p. 90).

Catholic and Evangelical Institutions

Literature examining the policies of Christian institutions is less common. In his examination of approaches toward LGBTQ students at an all-men's Catholic institution, Yoakam (2006) commits no direct attention to transgendered students, and very little attention is given to housing issues. Besides mentioning self-selection of other LGBTQ roommates, the only housing approach Yoakam identifies is the existence at select Catholic institutions (like Loyola College of Maryland) of "Stonewall" houses, institution-sponsored residential units where LGBTQ students and their "allies" live together.

There is almost no extant literature examining best practice at Evangelical institutions. Wolff and Hines (2010) recently published research describing experiences of what they refer to as "sexual minority youth (SMY)" at 20 randomly selected CCCU member and affiliate institutions. Wolff and Hines (2010) explicitly address the challenge in ascertaining best practice at Evangelical institutions when they claim,

Transgendered students—the T in GLBT—are not included in some of this paper as many schools do not even acknowledge that transgendered students are on their campuses. Thus, many of the policies that bar GLB students do not currently bar transgendered students, though the campus climate may be equally condemnatory for them. (p. 441)

Wolff and Hines criticize policies that would bar SMY from admission, and they condemn policies that would target sexual minorities separately from other sexual behavior occurring outside of marriage.

Connections Between Homosexuality and Transgenderism

Since the literature regarding transgender issues at Christian colleges was so sparse, this case study also investigated how Christian institutions dealt with homosexual students on campus, a distinct but similar phenomenon. One prominent Christian researcher on the issue makes an important distinction between temptation and behavior (Yarhouse, 2010). Similarly, many Christian colleges focus their policies on “behavior” and “promotion” rather than struggling or being tempted by same-sex attraction (Hoover, 2006, p. 1). Finally, some Christian institutions tackle the issue by emphasizing the importance of shared values and raising the question of institutional fit.

In the spring of 2001, a CCCU ad hoc task force on human sexuality compiled a resource document to inform CCCU colleges of the growing need to address homosexuality in constructive ways. Because the transgender community is often associated with the gay community in policy issues, this resource helped inform the specific response in this case study.

The CCCU (2001) task force agreed that “the historic stance of the Church, grounded in the unambiguous teaching of Scripture, cannot be explained away,” thus positioning the CCCU with the viewpoint that homosexual behavior is not biblical (p. 6). Additionally, the CCCU task force (2001) explained that dealing with sexual minorities on Christian campuses is extremely nuanced and “there is no ‘one size fits all’ formula for dealing with this difficult issue on our campuses” (p. 2). The task force did encourage each CCCU institution to determine its own stance “explicitly and deliberately” because the identity of Christian institutions will be tested (p. 8). The encouragement for each faith-based institution to be specific in its stance, while not assuming their positioning is correct for everyone, is a concept that can be applied to the transgender issue, and it greatly informed this response. Although the task force found Scripture to be clear on the issue of homosexuality, it also recognized that experiences of students and institutions are varied.

Examining the Options

There is a wide variety of options to consider in housing a transgender student; however, each of these solutions comes with both strengths and weaknesses. The following section will identify strengths and weaknesses within each response and who is affected by these options.

Encourage Student to Find Off-Campus Housing

One short-term response to the issue of housing a transgender student is to encourage the student to find housing off-campus. Certainly there are times for exceptions to rules, and this issue seems like a very reasonable instance to make such an exception. However, encouraging the student to find off-campus housing fails to connect the student to the greater university community. MSU does not house students

on-campus to make a profit or to increase accessibility to classrooms. Rather, MSU sees the added benefit of living in community with peers as a means of promoting holistic learning. In this case, Stephanie would miss out on an experience central to student growth at a CCCU institution. However, this option is the least disruptive to the rest of the student body.

Discuss Whether MSU is a Good Institutional Fit

The idea of being part of a community while not having a desire to comply with community standards raises the important question of fit. Is the typical faith-based institution the best fit for a student who is acting on, and placing their identity in, transgenderism? There must be an important discussion with the admitted student about whether or not this particular institution is the best fit. As seen through the experiences at University of the Columbians, behavior and promotion of issues that go against university values are different than temptation and struggles (Hoover, 2006). If Stephanie acts or promotes behavior different from MSU's values, perhaps this particular institution is not the best fit. Stephanie is free to pursue her academic growth somewhere else. This option once again has a minimal impact on the student body at MSU, but it also raises a question of equality. Is it fair to have this conversation with some students but not all? What are the criteria for having this type of conversation? This type of conversation also has the potential to alienate those involved and insult the LGBTQ community.

House the Student with Her Preferred Gender

Housing the student on campus raises additional issues and concerns, most importantly with which gender to house the student. The first option is to house Stephanie with her preferred gender. This would be difficult to justify according to MSU's values given that the institution would be identifying Stephanie opposite her biological gender. In addition, this approach would be difficult on several fronts for the students who lived with Stephanie. An outcry from other constituents, particularly parents of current students and conservative alumni, would be likely. This option, however, would possibly resonate with the LGBTQ community as an allied response to Stephanie.

House the Student with Her Biological Gender

The second option for gendered housing is to place Stephanie on a male residence floor. This option would align more with the CCCU (2001) stance that, as creations, human beings are sacred (including their sex), and therefore, their biological sex should be respected as a foundational component of God's design. However, one must also recognize the extreme difficulty this option could cause for Stephanie. Stephanie could be subject to ridicule, embarrassment, and other hurtful abuses. Also, depending on Stephanie's choices, housing her on a male residence floor could have a large impact on those housed with Stephanie. This would once again raise many concerns with other constituents, including the parents of those housed with Stephanie.

Create a Gender-Neutral Space for the Student

Lastly, MSU has the option to create a gender-neutral, or LGBTQ allied, floor or apartment. This is a path that most public and some select private schools have chosen. To the LGBTQ community, this option would be an allied response and show great care toward Stephanie's needs. However, there is no precedent for this option within the CCCU, and this tactic does not seem to align with CCCU member institutions' or MSU's values. Thus, this is an unviable option.

Additional Details to Consider

Other very important housing issues include the following: (a) placing Stephanie in

housing that has communal bathrooms or private bathrooms (suite-style bathrooms reserved for four or fewer students), (b) placing a roommate with Stephanie, (c) allowing hir to have hir own room, or (d) placing hir in a single room if available. Lastly, if the university owns apartments either on- or off-campus, Stephanie could be afforded the option to live in an apartment by himself or with upperclassmen students who desire to live in community with Stephanie. Each of these options once again has the potential to either alienate or include Stephanie in the MSU community and also to either expose or insulate the student body from Stephanie and the issue of transgenderism.

Recommendation

The Dean of Students should first consider the values and mission of the school, then the viability for Stephanie’s holistic success on-campus, and finally ensure proper reasoning and response to impacted constituencies including current students, faculty and staff, parents, alumni and donor bases, and the LGBTQ community.

Upon review of these factors, we recommend that Mid-States hold tightly to the values of the Christian community which are the foundation of the institution. First and foremost, this requires MSU to work with Stephanie to determine hir degree of willingness or desire to uphold the shared values of the university community. This conversation would clarify that behavior and promotion of lifestyles in conflict with a traditional Christian sexual ethic are not included in those shared values. If Stephanie could not agree to this, the recommended decision is to release Stephanie to pursue another academic institution that is more aligned with hir values.

If, however, Stephanie willingly embraced MSU’s community expectations, our recommendation would include housing Stephanie on a male residence floor where the bathrooms are suite style and private to only the two rooms they adjoin (meaning the bathroom is shared by no more than four students). According to our sense of the spirit of established CCCU policy (per the 2001 statement on sexuality) and our overall estimation of the pros and cons to the various options, we assert that this decision would be most beneficial for Stephanie and the various constituencies. In addition, we would suggest that Stephanie live in one of these rooms as a single resident.

Conclusion

The case study detailed approaches to the issue of transgenderism at CCCU member institutions from a practical and logistical angle. However, it is the conviction of these researchers that the matter which institutions must address first is more philosophical and theological in nature: what, exactly, do Christian colleges and universities think about transgenderism?

As the literature and best practice reveal, historically, many Christian institutions have dealt with issues of sexuality by distinguishing between “behavior” and “promotion.” Similarly, Yarhouse (2010) challenges his readers to differentiate between orientation and identity. In his approach, one may be oriented to same-sex attraction but not necessarily assume the homosexual identity.

While the behavior / promotion approach may be helpful concerning sexual minorities, it offers little guidance for Christian institutions seeking to care for transgendered students. The distinction between orientation and identity which some have adopted to make sense of same-sex attraction breaks down with transgendered students because transgenderism seems to concern identity inherently. Whereas one can imagine how students experiencing same-sex attraction could learn to reframe their language about sexuality from statements of identity (“I am gay”) to statements

of orientation (“I feel attracted”), the basic assertion of the transgendered person is one of identity (“Despite my biological gender, I am...”). There seems to be a clear difference in kind between questions about homosexuality and questions about transgenderism.

The authors of this study do not presume to have the theological or scientific expertise to make a pronouncement on this broader question. What we do assert, however, is that the entire Christian community is in desperate need of honest conversation regarding transgenderism. No longer can Christians ignore the “T” in LGBTQ. Pragmatically, such a head-in-the-sand approach exposes Christian institutions to the danger of being caught off-guard by an issue like the housing question detailed above. Yet worse still, disregarding this important question neglects the needs of a real segment of the population. Sustained and sophisticated theological reflection on this question is an absolute necessity if the Christian community is to be what it purports to be.

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