TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN IPA STUDY OF EXPERIENCES AND ACCESS OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Current statistics on the number of openly transgender students attending two-year and four-year institutions of higher education are unknown, but research and surveys support that the number of transgender identified and gender non-conforming students is growing. College is often the first opportunity many gender variant students have to question their ascribed gender and explore different facets of their identities. However, these transgender students can be more vulnerable to harassment, oppression, and discrimination due to their transgender identity or expression. Transgender students form an underrepresented population who experience significant obstacles in educational and employment fields due to their transgender identities. Some examples of these obstacles, and consequently, places where universities can implement policies and procedures to support transgender students, include housing, access to health care and mental health services, legal name to chosen name and, in some cases, expulsion from school due to the transgender identity. In order to understand how transgender students make sense of their experiences, an interpretive phenomenological study of five self-identified transgender students at an urban university in the northeastern United States was conducted. The primary question guiding this study is: How do transgender students, in the context of being a marginalized group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development? Critical theory was selected as the framework to examine the problem under investigation due to its ability to critique the applications of principles or values to make judgments for the purpose of creating positive change.

Keywords: transgender, student support services, gender, identity development, gay, lesbian, bisexual, gender non-conforming, cisgender, university, institution, privilege
Chapter I

Introduction

Transgender people are an underserved, at-risk population (Beemyn, 2010; Rankin, 2003). Transgender people exist with limited healthcare coverage and mental health services related to their transgender identity. Transgender people are at risk for homelessness, unemployment, physical assault, mental illness, and sexually transmitted diseases related to being on the periphery of society (Conron, 2012 & Mass.gov, 2011). It can be argued that this peripheral status, and the subsequent negative implications, are related to the gender binary construct.

American society views gender as fixed and directly connected to one’s sex. As defined by the American Psychological Association (APA) (2014), sex is assigned at birth, refers to one’s biological status as either male or female, and is associated primarily with physical attributes such as chromosomes, hormone prevalence, and external and internal anatomy (APA, 2014, para. 1).

Gender, on the other hand, refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for boys and men or girls and women. These expectations influence the ways that people act, interact, and feel about themselves. Cisgendered people fall into binary categories of male sex and masculine gender identity, and female sex and feminine gender identity. While aspects of biological sex are similar across different cultures, aspects of gender may differ (APA, 2014). Gender expression is the outward expression of gender roles to society or the performance of gender. People who identify as transgender may internally sense a disconnect between their core gender identity and the assigned sex at birth or in which they were raised (MacDonald, 1998). Therefore, some transgender people may choose to express or perform the gender that most closely aligns with
the gender identity or variation of the gender identity they experience internally. This self-discovered alignment of the assigned sex and identified gender identity may provide a sense of inner peace for the transgender person; however, it does not inoculate the individual from hardships faced in the larger American society. Participation in American society requires membership to one of the two gender groups, men and women, and membership requires proper documentation. Transgender people face challenges around legalizing a chosen name, legally changing to the identified gender identity, and acquiring proper documentation such as diplomas, driver’s licenses, and social security identification. Likewise, access to many necessary services such as healthcare, behavioral healthcare, and housing require proper documentation as well as a specialized understanding of the transgender experience. These challenges to access place transgender people at greater risk for harassment and discrimination. Numerous statistics support the level of need transgender students require as a result of bullying, harassment, assault, and threats due in part to a lack of understanding surrounding their transgender identity (Kosciw, 2010). This risk for harassment and discrimination combined with the stage of identity development that occurs in college make transgender students in higher education a particularly high-risk population.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into how transgender students, in the context of being a marginalized group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development.

**Topic**

Transgender students attending institutions of higher education have become a more visible population. A gap in the research exists on how transgender students, as part of a minority
group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development.

**Research Problem**

Many colleges are not fully prepared to support transgender students. As a result, transgender students are at risk to become vulnerable to harassment and discrimination. Few colleges offer support services to transgender students in a comprehensive manner (Beemyn, 2010; Rankin, 2003; Lees, 1998), which perpetuates difficulty in dealing with discrimination and harassment. This study aims to explore how transgender students, as a minority group in a gender normative society, at a four-year institution make sense of the college experience.

**Justification**

Two out of three gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students reported feeling unsafe in their educational institutions (Kosciw et al., 2010). Transgender students are more vulnerable to harassment as the social constructs of ideal masculinity and femininity are at the root of bullying behavior and harassment (Meyer, 2009). Few institutional supports, including college counseling center staff, have the experience or training to best support transgender or gender non-conforming students (Scott, 2011; Ivory, 2005; Bolton, 2009). Additionally, empirical research on student support services for transgender students is limited (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012).

**Deficiencies in Evidence**

Protective policies and educational programs exist at some institutions to improve the college experience for transgender students (Beemyn, 2010; Rankin, 2003; Lees, 1998). However, little research has been conducted to explore how transgender students make sense of the college experience. A gap also exists in the research and literature in the evaluation of the
effectiveness of programs implemented at institutions of higher education to support transgender students.

**Audience**

Every person has a gender identity. For many individuals, one’s gender identity correlates with the individual’s sexual anatomy. However, for a transgender person, this alignment does not occur. Much of American society is based on the two-gender binary present through restroom access, group memberships, and healthcare. A task as simple as filling out a job application, which requires the checking of a gender-related box “male” or “female,” places transgender people at a disadvantage. Research has found that this disconnect places transgender students at greater risk for harassment, oppression, and assault (Whitley, 2001; Beemyn, 2010). This study takes an in-depth approach to understanding how transgender students experience college and aims to contribute to the body of research in a meaningful way. Through this study, members of institutions will understand what needs are not met and will gain an understanding of the effect of unmet needs. As a result, administration may adjust its policies, procedures, and resources to better serve the population. This research will illuminate the institution's responsibility to transgender students by demonstrating the need for student support services in areas the institution may not have previously considered and will provide a conceptual framework for how to consider and address the issue.

**Problem Statement**

**Research Question**

How do transgender students, in the context of being a marginalized group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development?
Sub-Questions

- How do transgender students make sense of their experience of accessing student support services?
- How do transgender students make sense of their role in the college campus community with regard to the changes that will help their identity be more recognized?

Theoretical Framework

Critical Theory

The most commonly used theoretical frameworks found in empirical studies on transgender issues include critical theory, queer theory, and feminist theory (Butler, 1993; Creed, 1995; Feinberg, 1998; Halberstam, 1998; Nagoshi, Brzuzy, & Terrell, 2012; Wilchins, 2002). Critical theory is a type of social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole whereas traditional theory is oriented only to understanding or explaining society (Johnson, 1995). Since the early 1930s, critical theory has been used to illustrate “that the specific economic, political, cultural and ideological configurations of socio-historical contexts have a direct bearing on the form, content, practice, and normative orientation of both social life and social sciences” (Dahms, 2008). The overall commitment of critical theory is to illuminate how exactly concrete socio-historical conditions shape and influence social life (Dahms, 2008). Critical theory presents as an appropriate theoretical framework for this specific study as it aims to illuminate the external societal structures, institutions, and binaries that influence the experiences of transgender students within a higher education setting. More specifically, critical theory highlights the external structures that I believe will be most influential in the college experience of a transgender student. These structures include those that are most closely aligned
with the traditional gender binary such as regulations around residential housing and training for medical and behavioral healthcare staff.

Using critical theory as the lens through which to understand the experiences of transgender students, I hope to explore the participants’ individual realities within the gender normative higher education setting. By using critical theory to reveal and explore the experience of transgender students, I hope this study will provide a view beneath the surface of what gender conforming observers may see and believe about the experience of transgender students and uncover the assumptions that challenge or support their experiences. Critical theorists regard the secondary purpose of social sciences as tracking changes in society as they develop and become more permanent within the social context where a potentially problematic nature required focused attention. Critical theory places emphasis on the lived experience of the population as necessary in understanding the experience of real people in context. The use of critical theory provides a framework for which a societal problem can be identified and more closely understood from the perspective of those affected, but also a framework for action and steps to address the problem, which empowers the marginalized population (Littlejohn, 1992; Wickens & Sandlin, 2010; Dispenza, Watson, Chung & Brack, 2012).

With this study, in particular, I aim specifically to improve the understanding of the experiences of transgender students in higher education. Critical theory allows this research to be an act of understanding as well as an action toward facilitating change and progress. In using the lens of critical theory to identify and explore a societal problem affecting a marginalized population, both the researcher and study participants can use critical theory as an action framework to inform the next steps in creating social change. The active role critical theory plays in social research makes this theory an ideal framework to use in conjunction with an interpretive
phenomenological analysis of the experiences of transgender students. Critical theorists favor and rely on dialectical approaches and tools because those are most suitable for studying processes and dimensions of the inherently dynamic qualities of modern societal reality. Thus, semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions about how transgender students make sense of the college experience as part of a marginalized population in a gender normative society result in an appropriate methodological choice.

Critical theory supports a critique of the applications of principles or values to make judgments for the purpose of creating positive change. Using this theory, I organized an analysis of the systems and policies that influence the transgender participants’ experiences. Judgments gained from this critical view can be used to positively alter the environment. Crotty, in Creswell (2013), defines critical inquiry as focusing on the societal power dynamics that affect marginalized groups and explores how injustices are experienced and endured by these marginalized groups. Critical inquiry and the critical tradition have been used in a number of studies to better understand the experiences of transgender persons (Bilodeau and Renn, 2005). Fay considers critical theory perspectives as placing focus on empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender (as cited in Creswell, 2013). Seilor (2005) states that critical theorists fuse theory with action in order to understand the experience of oppressed minorities and how the oppressed can take action. I believe that it is this fusion of theory and action that makes critical theory the ideal theoretical framework to explore how transgender students make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development, but also in providing a framework in which to empower transgender students to take action.
Chapter II

Literature Review

Students are identifying as transgender at increasingly younger ages (Kosciw, 2010). Chickering’s (1969 & 1993) research pinpoints college as a critical time in students’ identity development. Recognizing this stage in identity development, colleges provide a number of support services to aid students through this developmental period. While traditionally gendered students struggle with identity, transgender students experience even greater challenges (Beemyn, 2010). Colleges strive to provide safe and supportive campus environments; however, the college campus is a microcosm of the society around it, and with that, come many of the same traditional gendered expectations and stereotypes that exist in society. Many of the services available on college campuses such as restroom access, dormitory living, group memberships, and healthcare are based on the two-gender binary. Through participating in the two-gender binary, basic needs, such as housing on a college campus, force transgender students to either conform or to be at a disadvantage. Research has found that this disconnect places transgender students at greater risk for harassment, oppression, and assault (Whitley, 2001; Beemyn, 2010). Therefore, transgender students in higher education require a greater level of support than their gender normative peers, and administration on college campuses requires a greater level of awareness to improve inclusivity and support for their transgender students. Through supporting students at the college level, the challenges and risks associated with being transgender will decrease.

College presents a unique opportunity for many students to begin to explore their identity and their place in the world apart from their parents and their home communities. This is a time when students on the social periphery can begin to express their identity and find like-minded
communities. For transgender and gender non-conforming people, college is often the first opportunity for them to question their ascribed gender and explore different facets of their identities. With this environment comes a freedom to experiment with one’s gender expression (i.e. style of dress, mannerisms, hairstyles) and one’s preferred pronouns and names (e.g. requesting to be called “Al” rather than “Alison”). While this period of exploration and identity development provides many opportunities for students to grow and mature, transgender students can be most vulnerable to harassment, oppression, and discrimination due to their transgender identity or expression (Beemyn, 2010) during this time.

To address the vulnerabilities of transgender students and the various forms of oppression and discrimination that they face, colleges and universities have implemented protective policies and procedures and made their campus climates and general student support services (e.g. health services, counseling services, housing, clubs, and activities) more trans-inclusive. However, despite these efforts, transgender students continue to be at risk for challenges related to their transgender identity and gender non-conforming expression (Butler, 2004; Beemyn, 2010; Renn, 2010). The literature that exists around the experiences of transgender students in higher education is limited to addressing issues related to the transgender identity, discrimination and harassment, protective policies, recommendations for housing, healthcare and counseling services, and general outcomes of transgender students. A significant gap in the literature is an evaluation of the accessibility and availability of support services for transgender students and the understanding of the transgender student experience from the perspective of transgender students. This study looks to gain insight into how transgender students, in the context of being a marginalized group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development.
The following literature review analyzes published sources that illustrate the research and literature regarding transgender students and the documented experiences of discrimination and harassment. I present existing literature on transgender identity and identity formation, and I review literature on the harassment and discrimination faced by transgender people and existing policies, procedures, and laws regarding transgender people and transgender students. I also review literature on the experiences of transgender students within educational settings and provide recommendations to improve access to student support services. The fourth chapter offers an in-depth look into the data collected through the interview process. Finally, the conclusion of the research presents the reader with recommendations and next steps as articulated by the research participants.

**Transgender Identity and Identity Formation.** In order to best understand the experiences of transgender college students and the role of governance in establishing a safe and inclusive campus climate, defining and describing the components of the transgender identity and some of the complexities of identity formation is important. For the purposes of this study, I will be using the definition of transgender as defined in the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (APA) (2010) as well as other sources. According to *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2010), transgender persons present as members of the gender opposite to the sex to which they were assigned at birth (p.74). Transgender persons may identify as one or more of a number of identifiers, including drag kings (female-to-male persons), drag queens (male-to-female persons), or cross-dressers (persons of either birth sex).

*Transgender* is an umbrella term for individuals whose self-identification transgresses the socially established gender categories of male and female. To better understand the complexities
of the transgender identity, it is necessary to realize that while gender and sex are two terms that are often used interchangeably, they have two very different meanings. The American Psychological Association (2010) defines sex as assigned at birth, a reference to one’s biological status as either male or female, and as associated primarily with physical attributes such as chromosomes, hormone prevalence, and external and internal anatomy. Gender refers to the socially constructed roles, behaviors, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for males and females. These expectations influence the ways that people act, interact, and feel about themselves. Traditionally gendered people fall into binary categories of male sex and masculine gender identity and female sex and feminine gender identity. While aspects of biological sex are similar across different cultures, aspects of gender may differ.

Gender expression is the outward expression of gender roles to society or the performance of gender. An example would be a woman with female sex traits and a feminine gender identity who wears traditionally gendered clothing, such as skirts and blouses, and carries herself in a feminine by crossing her legs while sitting.

Many different categories and types of people identify with the transgender and gender non-conforming community. Transgender and trans- are terms used to categorize individuals who “transcend the conventional boundaries of gender, irrespective of physical status of sexual orientation” (Kidd & Witten, 2008, p. 35-36). This all-encompassing term can be used to refer to transsexuals, intersex persons, cross-dressers, gender non-conforming individuals, drag queens, drag kings, and gender queers (Kidd & Witten, 2008). The expression of one’s transgender identity varies greatly from person to person. Transgender identified people may or may not pursue medical or hormone treatment to alter their physical appearance to match their internal identity. A transgender person, such as a drag king or drag queen, may dress as the opposite
gender for the purpose of entertainment. Someone who identifies as gender queer or gender non-conforming may not self-identify as transgender, but may experience similar discrimination and oppression as someone who is transgender identified.

With the diversity of identities within the term “transgender,” developing a singular definition and prescription for all transgender individuals is impossible. The research and literature that does exist surrounding transgender individuals and their experiences attempts to better understand the greater influencing factors. Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughy (1997) explored the social pressures that influence transgender identity formation through exploration of the coming-out experiences for transgender individuals. The empirical extension of this study (1998) explored the social context in which transgender individuals resist the normative expectations of sex and gender. The purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which transgender people challenge the assumption of the two-gender binary and the association between gender and sex. The researchers used semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 65 masculine-to-feminine individuals of various identities within the transgender spectrum. The sample included 27 pre-operative individuals, 10 post-operative individuals, 4 non-operative individuals, and 24 cross-dressers, and the study was conducted over a one-year period.

The findings of this study indicated that social pressures to conform to the gender binary were experienced as desires for relationship maintenance and self-preservation. The study identified the paradox that in coming out as the opposite gender, transgender individuals reinforce and reify the very two gender binary system they are trying to escape and change. This conceptualization of the struggle experienced by transgender individuals is helpful in understanding the power dynamics of gender and challenging the traditional notions of sex and gender (Gagne et al., 1997; Gagne & Tewksbury, 1998). Transgender people experience a
dualistic challenge in expressing the transgender identity. One challenge is to find language and expression to represent their individual identities in a society where that individual identity may not exist or be recognized by the dominant social narrative. The second challenge is to not be confined by the gender binary and the dominant social narrative in authentically expressing the individual gender identity.

**Transgender Discrimination and Harassment.** Despite the research and literature that exists regarding the development of the transgender identity and the many ways in which a person may or may not identify as transgender, colleges and universities have sought out more black and white ways to categorize their transgender students. Hollins University, a women’s college in Virginia, sought to clarify the definition of transgender for the purposes of admission and conferring of degrees. Troop (2011) interviewed both students and staff in response to the creation of a policy on transgender students. This policy, ratified by the Board of Trustees, states that any degree-seeking students that initiate female to male sex reassignment surgery will not be permitted to continue their education at the institution. The university’s policy defines the initiation of a sex reassignment surgery to include taking male hormones, legally changing to a male name, or undergoing any surgical procedure related to the male identity. Troop identifies that while other women’s colleges have been challenged by students who have transitioned from female to male, few colleges have taken such a strong position. The implications of the establishment of a policy such as the one at Hollins may be considered a form of discrimination and lead to harassment. The transgender policy, found in the *Hollins University Student Handbook 2012-2013*, states:

If a degree-seeking undergraduate student initiates sex reassignment from female to male (as defined by the university below) at any point during her time at Hollins,
she will not be permitted to continue attending Hollins beyond the conclusion of the term in which sex reassignment is initiated, and under no circumstances will such student be allowed to graduate from Hollins.

The university considers sex reassignment to have occurred when an undergraduate student “self identifies” as a male and initiates any of the following processes: 1) begins hormone therapy with the intent to transform from female to male, 2) undergoes any surgical process (procedure) to transform from female to male, or 3) changes her name legally with the intent of identifying herself as a man.

If a residential undergraduate student chooses to begin sex reassignment as defined above during an academic term, the administration reserves the right, based on the best interest of the student and the university community, to decide if the student will be permitted to continue living in university housing for the remainder of that term.

Applicants to the undergraduate program, who have completed the physical sex reassignment surgery and legal transformation from male to female and who fulfill our academic requirements for admissions, may be accepted. Males in the process of changing to female will not be admitted to the undergraduate program” (p.9).

Multiple lenses may exist in which to interpret the potential for claims of discrimination and/or harassment resulting from this policy. As a private institution, Hollins University may not be compelled to abide by state definitions of “sex” or by non-discrimination policies that protect transgender people and may seek an exemption from elements of Title IX.

In 2010, the National Center for Lesbian Rights found that ten states (California, Colorado, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Minnesota, New Jersey, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington)
and the District of Columbia had non-discrimination laws protecting transgender and gender non-conforming individuals. States with these laws note that school officials may not harass, or allow others to harass, a student based on the student’s gender identity. States such as Maryland and North Carolina require that school districts have a policy against harassment and bullying based on a list of characteristics that includes gender identity. Schools, school districts, and both public and private higher education institutions have developed policies that protect transgender students from discrimination, allowing students’ use of gender specific activities and rooms, such as restrooms and locker rooms, in accordance with their gender identity (NCLR, 2010). These laws protect students from gender identity discrimination in public schools and some private schools that receive state funding.

**Interpretations of Anti-Discrimination and Protective Laws.** While protective policies and laws vary by state, best-practice approaches to supporting transgender students should be applied universally. In *Ways that U.S. Colleges and Universities Meet the Day-to-Day Needs of Transgender Students*, Beemyn, of the Transgender Law & Policy Institute, identifies six key support areas in which institutions of higher education should focus attention on to best support transgender students (Beemyn, 2010). Beemyn identifies healthcare, residence halls, bathrooms, locker rooms, forms and records, and documents as key areas of struggle for transgender students, and, therefore, areas that administrators and staff need to be aware present challenges unique to transgender students (Beemyn, 2010). By viewing the identity as an oppressed minority, the changes needed to support and engage transgender and gender non-conforming students can begin to occur. This new view reduces the pathology of the identity and broadens the understanding of the ways in which transgender students are challenged on a daily basis within the microcosm of the college campus.
Regardless of funding sources or protective policies, the language around protective laws such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Title VII) continues to be left to interpretation of lower level courts. When Title VII was written into law it was noted that the protection against discrimination based on sex was added as a last minute addition (Twing & Williams, 2010). The understanding of the perimeters used to define the word “sex” were not defined, and when Congress enacted Title VII, it was understood that “sex” referred to male and female, primarily referring to biological women who were to be discriminated against in the workforce. In the case of Ulane v. E. Airlines, Inc. (1984), the Seventh Circuit stated that the definition of sex, in the case of Title VII claims, should be interpreted using its “common and traditional interpretation.” This limited interpretation has led to the specific exclusion of transgender people as a protected class by the Seventh, Eighth, and Tenth Circuits. The courts, however, have stated that this limited definition of “sex” does not prohibit transgender people from filing Title VII claims; however, they must be based on discrimination due to the biological sex at birth and not the transgender identity.

Likewise, the courts have declined to hear cases of discrimination based on sexual orientation as part of Title VII claims. In the case of Medina v. Income Support Division (2005), the Third Circuit Court attempted to clarify the court’s standing on cases in which a person is being discriminated against because the person fails to conform to traditional gender stereotypes. In Prowel v. Wise Bus. Forms, Inc. (2009), Brian Prowel, under Title VII, sued his employer for harassment and retaliation because of his non-conforming gender identity. Prowel’s argument was that his suit fell under Title VII because of the connection between biological sex and the associated and expected gender expression. In this case, the district court granted summary judgment for the employer stating that Title VII does not protect against discrimination on basis
of sexual orientation. On appeal, the Third Circuit Court questioned the appropriateness of the
granting of summary judgment in favor of the employer. While “sex” under Title VII does not
include sexual orientation, the category of “sex” has presented a legal gray area. The Third
Circuit, in this situation, found that the case was ambiguous as to whether the claim was an issue
of discrimination based on sexual orientation or sex and failure to conform to the expected

Courts continue to explore the understanding of “sex” in sex discrimination laws. In
Barnes v. City of Cincinnati (2005), Barnes sued the City of Cincinnati for discrimination due to
sex stereotyping (Barnes v. City of Cincinnati, 2005). The majority of cases of discrimination
against transgender people have been against cities or businesses around issues of employment
discrimination. Discrimination cases brought against educational institutions have presented
unique challenges. However, in the case of Doe v. Brockton School Committee (2000), the court
found in favor of the transgender eighth-grade student who sought to wear clothing that best
suited her gender identity and expression. Because of the student’s biological male designation,
the school sought to ban the student from dressing in clothing deemed feminine (Doe v.
Brockton School Committee, 2000). The Massachusetts Declaration of Rights guarantees the
right to free expression as found in Article 16 (as amended by Article 77) and does not limit that
right as it applies to students. In similar cases, such as Pyle v. School Committee of South
Hadley (1996), the courts affirmed that the Tinker standard applies to students in Massachusetts.
The Tinker standard seeks to find balance between a student’s right to free speech, and school
officials need to maintain an educational environment conducive to learning. The court’s ruling,
in the case of Doe, found that the student’s expression is a core component of a student’s, or any
person’s, identity and how one views oneself.
However challenged governing boards and administration may be gaining a greater understanding of their transgender students an emergence of model policies and procedures exist to provide a framework. In 2011, the Assistant Secretary for Civil Rights for the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights issued a “Dear Colleague” letter to U.S. colleges and universities clearly defining the policies and procedures of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Ali, 2011). Title IX protects people from discrimination based on sex. This policy provides protection against sexual harassment, sexual violence, and sex discrimination. While interpretations of Title IX may vary, many institutions also consider Title IX to protect students against gender harassment. Title IX emphasizes the effect the campus climate has in preventing, or increasing, acts of harassment and discrimination. The “Dear Colleague” letter issued by the Office of Civil Rights provides guidance for educational institutions on Title IX for prevention of sexual harassment and discrimination and step-by-step procedures for reporting, investigating, and responding to potential Title IX violations. The recommendations include protective policies, adequate investigation and responses to reports of harassment, and educational trainings for students, staff, and administration.

Prior to the 2011 letter from the Office of Civil Rights, the University of Michigan began its own investigation into the experiences of transgender students and the implications of governance on campus climate (University of Michigan Office of the Provost, 2004). The University of Michigan Task Force on the Campus Climate for Transgender, Bisexual, Lesbian, and Gay faculty, staff, and students conducted campus-wide and community-wide surveys of GLBT faculty, students, and staff; interviews and town hall meetings; reviews of GLBT policies; consultations with experts on GLBT issues; discussions with UM administrators regarding available resources for GLBT people; and identification and review of books and journal articles
on the GLBT issues. In 2004, the Office of the Provost issued a final report of the data collected by the Task Force. The report highlights existing anti-discrimination policies that exist at university and state levels and identifies the gaps in protection due to exclusions of GLBT people under certain anti-discrimination policies and laws. The report emphasizes the unique challenges faced by transgender people and makes recommendations for improvements in support services, accommodations, and amendments to protective policies and educational trainings.

However, single-sex institutions face sensitive challenges in regard to transgender students. In the case of Hollins University, and the university’s transgender policy, Hollins University is an institution that enrolls only biologically female students. A student who identifies as transgender does fall under the DSM-IV-TR diagnosis of Gender Identity Disorder, specifically Gender Dysphoria in Adolescents or Adults (First, Frances, & Pincus, 2002). In a review of legal issues facing transgender people, GLAD identified three forms of discrimination that are covered by legal protection. However, the discrimination faced by transgender people does not fall neatly into the three categories of discrimination based on sex, disability, or sexual orientation. While the legal definition of disability refers to a wide range of serious health conditions (GLAD, 2011), the stigma associated with the term disability dissuades many people from pursuing protection under the Federal Rehabilitation Act (FRA) or the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Along with the stigma and concerns associated with connecting a transgender identity to a disability, many courts have explicitly excluded transgender people from coverage for “gender identity disorders not resulting from physical impairments” (GLAD, 2011).

**Experiences of Transgender Students.** Much of the research that exists of transgender identities and experiences has been conducted through qualitative case studies of individuals
Ettner (1999) explored the similarities between experiences of identity formation among transgender individuals. Using the case study of a male-to-female transsexual (male sex, feminine gender expression and identity) as an example, she identified common struggles that most transgender individuals face in their development. Ettner identified three themes of hiding, guilt, and shame. Hiding describes transgender individuals’ rejection of their true feelings of gender difference because of their need to be accepted and appear “normal.” Due to this rejection, many transgender people may deny their feelings of difference, and they often assume traditional gender roles to hide their feelings. Guilt comes from the fear of hurting others by being different, and the same is the affective manifestation of that guilt (Ettner, 1999).

In a 2009 National School Climate Survey, the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) surveyed 7,261 middle and high school students, between the ages of 13 and 21, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Of the students surveyed in the School Climate Survey by GLSEN (Kosciw et al., 2010), 72.4% reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” frequently at school, nearly two-thirds of these students reported that they felt unsafe because of their sexual orientation, and more than a third of students felt unsafe at school because of their gender expression. Meyer (2006) reported that it is the social construction of opposing binaries (i.e. male/female or gay/straight) combined with the dominance of hegemonic (heterosexual) masculinity that is at the root of gendered harassment. For example, a common stereotype, regardless of age or sexual orientation, may be an artistic man who is considered to be gender non-conforming and then called a “faggot,” or a short-haired, athletic woman who is targeted as a “dyke” due to a perceived level of masculinity. Many scholars of masculinity have argued that
the terms “queer and faggot” are used to harass boys because they are seen as the most offensive terms as they call into question both masculinity and sexuality.

The effects that school climate and the perceived level of safety have on education and learning are profound. Of the LGBT students surveyed, 29.1% reported missing a class at least once, and 30% missed at least one day of school in the past month because of safety (Kosciw et al., 2010). When compared to the national average, established by a national sample of secondary school students, the rate of missed classes and absenteeism is 21% and 23% higher, respectively, for LGBT youth (Kosciw et al., 2010).

Hall (2006) reported that in a culture where heterosexuality is considered the norm, the “hidden minority” of GLBT people are marginalized and often struggle to find safe spaces of acceptance. The negative perceptions placed upon this minority by society produce internalized feelings of low self-esteem, self-pity, and self-hatred. The emotional distress endured by GLBT youth has been well documented as leading to high-risk factors such as school failure, drop-out, substance abuse, homelessness, prostitution, HIV infection, and suicide. A survey by Zack, Mannheim, and Alfano (2010) identified studies that confirm that GLBT youth are subject to harassment from peers, are more likely to engage in illicit activities such as drug and alcohol abuse, and suffer from a negative self-image and attempt suicide more so that heterosexual youth (Zack et al., 2010).

Interpretations of Title VII and ADA law in cases of discrimination of transgender people continue to be explored and challenged. GLAD Director Jennifer Levi’s 2011 letter noted that the current trend in interpreting sex discrimination protections, at both the state and federal court levels, is that they prohibit discrimination against transgender individuals. With the passing of H.
3810 “An Act Relative to Transgender Equal Rights” in November 2011, Massachusetts became the 15th state in the country to explicitly prohibit discrimination against transgender people. This piece of legislation added “gender identity or expression” to the Massachusetts hate crimes laws, Chapter 22, as well as to the Massachusetts general anti-discrimination protections in employment, housing, credit, and lending, Chapter 151B; the Massachusetts education laws Chapters 71 and 76; and the Massachusetts public accommodation laws, Chapter 272 (Levi, 2011). By adding “gender identity or expression,” transgender people are provided a protection that allows them access to services and use of resources free from fear of discrimination due to a transgender identity. Federal and state legislation as well as policies and procedures aim to create and enforce protective and supportive policies for people who are marginalized and face harassment and discrimination.

Likewise, institutions and associations such as the New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission of Institutions of Higher Education Standards and Policies aim to ensure the equality and integrity of the educational experience for all students. Standard Three of the Standards and Policies states:

The institution has a system of governance that facilitates the accomplishment of its mission and purposes and supports institutional effectiveness and integrity. Through its organizational design and governance structure, the institution creates and sustains an environment that encourages teaching, learning, service, scholarship, and where appropriate research and creative activity. It assures provision of support adequate for the appropriate functioning of each organizational component. The institution has sufficient independence from any sponsoring entity to be held accountable for meeting the Commission's Standards for Accreditation. (NEAS&C, 2011)
The goals outlined in Standard Three, when applied to transgender students as a marginalized population, could be used by institutions to guide policies and procedures to provide a safe and inclusive learning and living environment for transgender students.

**Academic and Non-Academic Supports.** Based on the literature reviewed, transgender students clearly experience significant difficulties when trying to navigate the education system. Other institutional systems contribute to the experiences of oppression and discrimination faced by transgender students. A basic, yet overlooked, way universities can support their transgender population is with the existence of a recognized and university supported GLBT group or trans-awareness group on campus. However, many campuses do not provide institution-supported groups. The importance of a college in funding, promoting, staffing, and supporting GLBT offices is critical to its their success and to the support of the students these offices serve. In Ritchie and Banning’s (2001) study of university-based GLBT offices, the authors explored the themes associated with the development of successfully-established, campus-supported, and professionally-staffed GLBT offices, and they investigated these developmental or establishment themes in the context of institutional change literature. The authors used a criterion-based strategy, associated with purposeful sampling to find campus-supported GLBT programs. Whether the GLBT office was established, if it occupied a physical location (office) on campus, and if it was staffed by at least one institutional professional staff member were the criteria used to determine if the program was campus-supported.

The findings of this study were reported in major theme categories. In the category of origin, common elements appeared and were captured by four themes: age, inception approaches, politics of opening, and support. In the category of age, most of the offices had been open for at least five years, and two had been open for more than ten years. In the category of
inception approaches, the creation of a task force to assess the campus climate was the most common method associated with the creation of the office. A few campuses reported that their office was created in response to incidents of violence, harassment, or discrimination of GLBT students.

In a study conducted by Conron, Scott, Stowell, and Landers (2012), the researchers aimed to identify health differences between transgender and non-transgender residents in Massachusetts. The study also identified the significant gaps in transgender health research and the high rates of unemployment and poverty among transgender people. The authors of this study harnessed data collected between 2007 and 2009 using the Massachusetts Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (MA-BRFSS).

The results of the data analysis conducted found the transgender respondents were somewhat younger and more likely to be Hispanic than the non-transgender respondents. Transgender adults were more likely to be unemployed and living at less than or equal to 100% poverty than non-transgender adults. This study highlighted the outcomes of discrimination and oppression of transgender people. The majority of published research on transgender health in the United States has relied on convenience samples, assembled for urban HIV needs assessments, because the majority of health surveillance surveys have not included measures that permit identification of transgender respondents (Conron, Scott, Stowell, & Landers, 2012). Transgender people in these studies reported elevated rates of unemployment and poverty, violence victimization, HIV infection, mental health problems, and barriers to health care. Additionally, the study by Conron et al. notes that transgender adults in the study and others were disproportionately unemployed and living in poverty despite average or better educational achievement.
As a result of the difficulties facing transgender students when they leave college, researchers at Clemson University sought to improve the professional practice of their career services staff (Scott, Belke, & Barfield, 2011). The authors proposed a professional development design to assist career professionals in working with transgender clients in college career centers and community mental health agencies. Identified were the unique challenges that face transgender students when seeking employment, such as employment history or physical appearance, and the professional practice challenges faced by career and employment counselors when working with transgender students. Scott et al. emphasized the need for counselors to address their own biases and stereotypes and to recognize the implication of these biases on their professional practice. An intersectionality of oppression was identified as an experience that may affect transgender students who also possess multicultural identities.

Professional development opportunities for staff and administration are critical in establishing a safe and inclusive campus climate. Likewise, an awareness of governing anti-discrimination and anti-harassment laws and policies aid in maintaining a safe and inclusive climate. Buzuvis (2011) documents examples of transgender athletes and the evolution of state and federal laws and policies that are used to govern athletic participation. This article provides administrators, staff, and governing boards of higher education institutions with insight into laws that govern sex-segregated athletic participation. The author addresses the relevance of the Constitution, sex discrimination statutes, and gender-identity discrimination statutes and policies addressing transgender athletes’ participation in sex-segregated sports. Presented in this article are judicial interpretations of the Constitution and anti-discrimination statues, the role of science in substantiating the relationship between competitive advantage and physical features associated with biological sex and hormones, and the importance and role of educational values in
informing transgender athletic participation policies. Buzuvis provides a critical lens through which policy makers and administrators can view the experience of transgender students and existing laws and guidelines. The development of both athletic and educational policies for transgender students will aid in providing the climate necessary to allow students equal access to the expected college experience.

**Health Services.** Most colleges and universities fail to meet the basic health-care needs of transgender students (Beemyn, 2010). Typical campus health and counseling center staff do not have the training or experience to adequately work with transgender students and lack awareness of specific trans-related health needs. Basic sensitivity training would include the use of proper pronouns for students and empower the staff to ask the students for their preferred pronoun and preferred name rather than assuming based on physical presentation or medical records. Along with the need for staff training, many college health plans and health centers do not cover the medical procedures or hormone replacement therapies required for some transgender students to physically transition to better align their physical body with their internal gender identity.

Suggestions made by the Transgender Law and Policy Institute includes the development of private changing rooms, gender-neutral bathrooms, women’s health exams offered outside of women’s health services, and allowance for students to use preferred names on school medical records and when making appointments. Beemyn cites a limited number of colleges and universities that have made gains to include hormone replacement therapies in their student insurance plans. In 2004, the University of California system established an important precedent by changing its insurance plans to cover hormones, psychotherapy, and gender confirmation surgeries for its transsexual staff members and their spouses/domestic partners and children (Beemyn, 2010).
Counseling Service. Few college counseling center staff members have the experience or training to best support transgender or gender non-conforming students (Scott, 2011; Ivory, 2005; Bolton, 2009). As with medical health center staff, the best practices for transgender students includes use of preferred name and pronouns. The recognition of the challenges associated with being transgender and gender non-conforming, as identified by Ettner (1999) as themes of hiding, guilt and shame, is critical to best supporting transgender students in a counseling setting.

In Bolton’s (2009) dissertation *An Examination of Transgender Youth: Support Networks and Mental Health Concerns*, the author reviews the psychological literature which addresses transgender and gender-nonconforming youth, surveys transgender and gender-nonconforming youth, and presents the clinical implications. The author asserts that transgender populations and their experiences have largely been ignored by the psychological community. Bolton suggests that the lack of research perpetuates a cycle of vulnerability for transgender youth.

The focus of the dissertation study was to gather information to provide a better understanding of transgender and gender-nonconforming youth and their experiences of gender, social supports, and mental health status. The data collected suggest that categorizing gender-nonconforming youth as transgender and categorizing gender-nonconforming individuals as FTM are possibly common practices in psychological research that lack gender sensitivity. A lack of consensus appears to exist with regard to whether these youths experience their gender identity as constant or as changing over time.

The clinical implications of these findings suggest that mental health professionals should be cautioned from assuming their client’s gender identification based on birth sex and external expression of gender. The best practice to inquire how the client identifies gender and which, if
any, pronoun is preferred. Results of the other survey tools identify that transgender youth are more likely to have experienced more loss, including familial and peer rejection, which is consistent with the literature. Also, the youth were found to experience a higher level of psychological distress than the general population. This finding is in agreement with the literature regarding the mental health of targets of harassment. The author notes that this may overwhelm the youths’ intrapsychic resources and lead to higher levels of anxiety and depression along with poorer behavioral and emotional control. Results of one measure, however, also note that these youth have the capacity to maintain a positive outlook and develop meaningful support systems. This literature illustrates that the mental health risks to transgender students are not rooted in the transgender identity, but rather in the experiences of oppression and harassment related to the transgender expression.

**Advocacy Argument**

Based on the literature available, transgender students encounter a number of challenges when accessing the educational system (Beemyn, 2010; Bolton, 2009; Boucher, 2011; Kosciw, 2010). These challenges are deeply intertwined with society’s two-gender binary. The two-gender binary system dictates the designation of membership, accessibility, and, sometimes, opportunities. The dominant gender normative structure of institutions of higher education can pose significant challenges for transgender students. College is a microcosm of the surrounding society. Gender, either directly or indirectly, influences a student’s access to services such as on-campus housing, campus counseling and health services, and other academic and non-academic supports. This highly gendered structure, along with the developmental point at which students enter the university, means that transgender students are at greater risk to experience harassment, oppression, and discrimination from peers and university staff.
Despite the best efforts of universities and colleges to support their most at-risk students, not all efforts are perceived as helpful, supportive, or available. This literature review explored the experiences of transgender students in educational settings and the structures and support services available to all students: academic and non-academic supports, health services, counseling services, and protective and discriminatory policies and procedures. While this literature review provides a comprehensive look at what colleges have done to support their diverse student body, little literature exists exploring if transgender students find these services accessible and how transgender students perceive the campus climate. This study aims to explore how transgender students, as part of a marginalized group within a gender normative population, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development.

**Summation**

Current statistics on the number of openly transgender students attending two-year and four-year institutions of higher education are unknown, but research and surveys support that the number of transgender identified and gender non-conforming students is growing (Beemyn, 2010; Butler, 2004; Kosciw, 2010). College students are at a developmental stage in their lives during which they may begin to question and explore their identity and their ascribed gender. During this time, students with non-traditional gender expression and identities may be vulnerable to oppression and discrimination (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Beemyn, 2010). Even in the supposed safety of a college campus, transgender individuals are at an elevated risk for discrimination in accessing housing, medical care, employment, and education. As a result of discrimination and harassment, transgender students experience higher rates of absenteeism, bullying, and physical and sexual assault (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010).
The literature addressing the experiences and needs of transgender college students is limited. While there is a fairly comprehensive look at the needs of transgender students in higher education and what colleges have done to support their diverse student body (Beemyn, 2010; Rankin, 2003) what has been neglected is any exploration of whether transgender students find these services accessible. Furthermore, no studies, to date, have explored how transgender students make sense of the college experience as it relates to their identity development. This unexamined aspect of the research on supporting transgender students in higher education is significant. Without knowing the extent to which students find these support services accessible and useful, colleges and universities are unable to properly support this vulnerable population.

Chapter III

Methodology

Overview of Methodology

The goal of this research was to explore the lived experiences of transgender students. This study sought to understand how transgender students make sense of the college experience while existing as part of a marginalized group within a larger gender normative society.

In order to best access this information, a methodological approach that allows for interpretation was necessary. The general inductive approach required interpretations of the data through the use of an approach that used detailed readings of raw data by the evaluator or researcher. The general inductive approach provided an easily used and systematic set of procedures for analyzing qualitative data that produced reliable and valid findings. The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow dominant or significant themes to emerge from the raw data (Thomas, 2006). In the use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the researcher investigates how the participant makes sense of the phenomenon that the study is
exploring. In this study, the IPA approach was used to explore how transgender students, as part of a minority group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience. This study was inductive as it assumed agency and required the individuals participating in the study to interpret their own experience.

**Research Question**

How do transgender students, in the context of being a marginalized group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development?

**Sub-Questions**

- How do transgender students make sense of their experience of accessing student support services?
- How do transgender students make sense of the experience of social power dynamics when accessing student support services?

**Paradigm**

I operate under the assumptions inherent in an interpretivist paradigm. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest the interpretive paradigm is concerned with understanding what people make of the world around them, how people interpret what they encounter, and how they assign meanings and values to events or objects. This paradigm, at its core, is an assumption that social actors generate meaningful constructs of the social world in which they operate. The rationale of my selection of interpretivism as a paradigm was to understand the subjective experiences of transgender students, how they think and feel, how they act/re-act in the college setting as a marginalized population within a gender normative population, and how they make sense of the college experience. To explore the subjective experiences, I used open-ended interview questions to gain insight into the experiences of transgender students. Although the research questions
were an effective starting point for the dialogue, the direction of the initial discussion did change course, on occasion, based on the discovery of perception from the interviewee. The dialogues and findings revealed deep meanings of perceptions and sense-making of each individual interviewee.

**Role of the Researcher**

When employing qualitative inquiry as a method for research exploration, the researcher is a key instrument (Creswell, 2012). As a key instrument in the research process and as a participant in a hermeneutic relationship, attempting to build open and trusting relationships with the potential participants was critical. Initial contact was made by the participant via email. The participants received my email address through the IRB approved flyer and subsequent word of mouth. Through the initial email communication, a relationship of trust was established. In order to encourage a trusting relationship between the participant and me, participants were asked to identify a safe and convenient location at which to be interviewed, as well as a convenient time and day. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, opportunities emerged for the dialogue between the study participants and me to interact in order to collaboratively construct a meaningful reality. Once the data was transcribed, I organized the data inductively into abstract units of information and established a comprehensive set of themes. I continued the trusting relationship through sharing the transcribed interviews and the themes that emerged from the individual interview with the individual participants.

**Research Design**

Based on a review of existing research on transgender students, qualitative research is the most appropriate method to further the research on this topic. The use of in-depth interviews using open-ended questions was selected as the most effective way to access the information that
informed this study. Along with these guiding questions and the questions in the interviews, the use of an interpretive paradigm helped me, as the researcher, to focus on the realities and experiences of the study's participants. As the interpretive paradigm focuses on understanding the world of the participants (transgender students), my role as the researcher was to act as a vehicle to make sure the voices of a minority population are heard (Smith and Osborn, 2003). Through the use of the interpretive paradigm, the researcher, playing the role of a medium, provides a connection between the marginalized group and the larger society.

**Research Tradition**

The rise of IPA began in the mid-nineties and has significantly increased in recent years. Historically, IPA had been used as a method within the health sciences. Examples of health science areas include genetics, chronic illness, palliative care, personal and cultural identity, sexual identity, and sexual health. Smith and Osborn (1999) are frequent contributors to the use of IPA as a research method. The origins of IPA are phenomenology and hermeneutics. Husserl, Hedigger, Merleau-Ponty, and Sartre (Smith, 2004) are significant contributors to the philosophical development of the ideas behind IPA. The founder of the phenomenological approach, Husserl, highlighted the importance of understanding the human experience in relation to psychological processes. Heidegger’s interest and experience in existentialism contributed to IPA in that his interest fostered the growth of examining activities and relationships forged and the individual’s worldview. Merleau-Ponty recognized the importance of subjectivity and embodiment as key elements of the personal human experience. Sartre’s significant contribution to IPA was highlighting that individuals are constantly trying to understand their experience (Smith, 2004).
Participants

For the purpose of this study, five participants were recruited. In IPA, sampling is often purposive and homogeneous; the participants share the experience to be investigated, but do not vary much across demographic characteristics (Langdridge, 2007). Sampling was purposive as participants must have the experience of being openly transgender or gender non-conforming identified, have participated in campus housing, and maintaining enrollment, as a student at or graduate of this urban university, located in the Northeast to be considered for this study.

Recruitment and Access

I began the recruitment process by connecting with the director of the on-campus GLBT center at this urban university in the Northeast. I called the director at the center and shared the details of my study, including the participant profile, and asked if the director would be willing to support my study and assist in the recruitment process. With the director’s permission, I emailed him the study’s flyer, approved by the university’s IRB. The director, on his own, hung the flyer in several locations within the center and posted the flyer on the center’s Facebook page. The director, on his own, personally contacted several graduates of the university whom he knew would be interested in participating in the study.

While the initial inspiration for this study was to explore the experiences of undergraduate transgender students, no undergraduate students chose to participate in this study. The individuals who chose to participate learned of the study through the director of the GLBT center and by word-of-mouth from other participants. The individuals who volunteered to participate were college graduates and current graduate students.

In a non-university setting, an online environment could be considered a sufficient way to recruit participants. Internet communities provide places where people who are transgender can
safely discuss issues relating to their gender identities and the experiences of being transgender without fear of repercussion and “outing.” However, in the case of this study, this urban university in the northeastern United States was selected as the site for three reasons: I am currently a doctoral student at the university; I sought approval from only one Internal Review Board (IRB); and this urban university has programs and policies in place to support transgender students.

**Ethical Considerations**

Transgender people represent a marginalized population of individuals who have experienced discrimination and harassment. Recognizing the discrimination and harassment, and the potential challenges associated with being a transgender on a college campus is important. Informing the participants of the purpose of this study and the goal to improve the services provided to transgender students on college campuses was crucial.

To be most respectful of the experiences of transgender people, I asked the participants for their preferred pronoun (he, she, ze, they, etc.) and I informed the participants that personal, background questions would be asked during the interview session, and the participant is free to choose not to answer or terminate the interview at any time, without prejudice. I also informed the participants that all identifying information would be kept in a locked and secure location and would be destroyed at the end of the study. I informed the participants that they would be provided a transcript of their interviews and the coding to review for accuracy, feedback, and input.
Protection of Human Subjects

This qualitative study collected data derived from interviews with five transgender college students and college graduates. The data were in the form of interview transcripts that were coded, and themes were abstracted to use to inform practice and gain insight into the experience of transgender students when accessing student support services. No psychic, legal, or physical harm was anticipated in this proposed study. The risk of social and emotional harm was minimal. The risk of social harm existed only in the event of an unanticipated breach of anonymity, and the risk of emotional harm existed only in the event that a question or topic addressed in the interview triggered a negative experience. In the event of this situation, I am a trained psychologist and was able to provide the necessary supports and was prepared with a list of local professional support available, if needed. Participants were made aware, throughout the study, that participation was voluntary and that they could terminate at any time without prejudice. No issues presented themselves during or after the interviews were conducted.

Confidentiality

After the collection of personal information (chosen name and ascribed gender identity), the participant was then referred to as a participant number used throughout the analysis of the data. Additional attention was given to the privacy of the participants in Chapter 4 of this dissertation. Due to the sensitive nature of this study and the small number of participants, all of the study’s participants could be easily identified by members of the university community. Therefore, descriptors of individual participants have not been used within the body of this dissertation. The participants’ gender identities and adjectives used to describe their gender identities are presented in a list format rather than assigned to individually numbered
participants. Individual quotations are assigned to “a participant” or “a student” to protect the participants’ anonymity.

**Informed Consent**

First and foremost, participation in this research study was voluntary. Voluntary participation was based on being informed, and, therefore, a detailed written informed consent form was provided. Participants were provided with a copy of the Informed Consent Letter upon making their participation interest known to the researcher (Appendix A). Participation signatures of informed consent were required prior to the collection of any data. In addition to this written consent form, I worked actively to ensure the participants’ safety and comfort level throughout the study. The consent form indicated who the researcher was, what the researcher proposed to do, and the purpose of the research. The consent form informed the participants of any risks they may be taking by participating in this research. It informed the participants of their rights, including the right to withdraw from part or all of the study at any time, and indicated a position on the right to review material. The written consent form also informed the participants about how names would be used: participants’ names (both legal and chosen) were not used; participants were assigned a number to identify them throughout the study; and participants were informed of additional steps that were taken to protect their individual identities. The consent form also informed participants on how the results would be disseminated and a statement that was reasonable on projected benefits. Additionally, it indicated that participants were free to participate or not, without prejudice, and addressed any other issues of concern specific to the research project.
**IRB Approval**

The Institutional Review Board (IRB) facilitates and promotes the ethical conduct of research with human subjects. IRB approval was sought at the four-year public institution where the research participants were gathered, and which also serves as the institution where the research was presented.

Approval for the study from the aforementioned institution may be found in Appendix B.

**Data Collection**

For the purpose of gaining insight into the experiences of transgender students, I chose to construct in-depth, semi-structured interview questions prior to beginning the interviews (see Appendix C). The interviews were conducted as face-to-face interviews in the location of the participant’s choosing and lasted about one hour. Participants were provided with the choice of being interview individually or with another transgender participant. The interview questions were designed to elicit information about the participant’s gender identity, prior experience as related to the participant’s gender identity, information regarding time at the university and residential status, and the participant’s experiences when accessing student support services at the university. The questions were open-ended and as neutral as possible, both to encourage the participant to go beyond yes/no answers and also to avoid gendered language which may offend or constrict the participants. Seidman (1998) suggests in-depth interviews assist researchers in understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of the experience. The semi-structured interview allowed time for the participants to articulate as much about their experience as possible (Langdridge, 2007). These interviews were conducted in-person at a location near the university (for convenience of the participant) and deemed safe and comfortable by the participant. These spaces were appropriate for a recorded interview. The
participants were informed of the recording prior to participating and again immediately prior to the interview. The participants were asked to review a copy of the transcription of the interview after the audio recording had been transcribed to review for accuracy. Each interview and participant was assigned a number to be used throughout the study.

Data Storage

The interviews were recorded using Voice Memo, a recording application, on the Apple iPhone. The interview recording was then downloaded to a password-protected, researcher-owned computer and converted to an MP3 file using Apple’s Garage Band program. The MP3 file was saved under an unidentifiable file name and sent to a transcription company for transcribing. Both the MP3 files and the transcriptions were saved on the password-protected computer as well as in a file located within my personal, password-protected Google Drive. The data was available only to the researcher, the study’s participants, and the researcher’s doctoral advisor. The recordings were destroyed after the completion of each transcription, and the overall data were destroyed after the researcher’s dissertation defense.

Data Analysis

After the individual interviews were conducted, they were transcribed by a transcription company. Once the transcriptions were received, I began the analysis process. The focus of the analysis process within IPA is towards the participants’ attempts to make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Before the interview data were organized and analyzed, they were coded. For this study, I chose to code by meaningful units. In Saldana (2013), “meaningful units” are considered parts of Elaborative Coding (Saldana, 2013, p. 229). Each transcribed interview was read three times: once for a first reading; a second time to identify poignant quotations; and a third time to assign meaningful units to the identified
quotations (Saldana, 2013). This close, line-by-line analysis was an iterative and inductive cycle (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Through this organizational format, the analyzed data were traced through the process from initial comment within the transcript through the initial clustering and theme emergence.

After the data from each interview were organized in a Microsoft Word document and coded by meaningful units, themes could be extracted. Themes were identified based on the similarities among the respondents that evoked the meaningful units identified. A dialogue with the coded data and my psychological knowledge about the potential meanings of the participants’ responses and concerns emerged and developed into a more interpretative account of the data. Likewise, the process of data analysis used within IPA allows the researcher to reflect on one’s own perceptions, conceptions, and processes (Smith, 2007). This heuristic framework for analysis provides room for a personal, intuitive, creative, and complex analysis (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). After the first round of coding and theme development was completed, participants were provided with copies of their transcripts for member-checking purposes. Individual transcripts with coding were uploaded into a Google document and saved in my personal Google Drive. Each participant was then invited to view and edit the individual transcription. All participants agreed with the results of the transcripts and the coding.

The end result of the data analysis process described was a joint product between the participant and the researcher. While the primary focus of IPA is the lived experience of the participant and the meaning that the participant makes of that lived experience, the final product yielded through the IPA process is a double hermeneutic understanding of the participant’s understanding of the lived experience.
Trustworthiness

Triangulation & Member Checking

According to Creswell (2013), triangulation is a method of ensuring validity of information obtained by using multiple sources, methods and theories to provide corroborating findings (p. 251). To ensure triangulation, Yin’s (2009) guidelines of data collection, which include audio-taping and transcribing interviews, were followed. Each interview obtained from the five participants conducted was audio recorded, transcribed, and coded to ensure triangulation. To ensure accuracy and credibility of interpretation and to provide a transgender lens when coding and analyzing interview data, participants were provided access to their individual transcribed interviews. Along with the transcriptions, participants were provided access to the analysis, interpretation, and concluding data obtained through the interview and analysis processes (Creswell, 2013).

Potential Threats

Throughout this study, I ensured that specific measures were used to account for trustworthiness, quality, and verification for this study. Complete anonymity for the participants was provided throughout the data collection process as transgender students fall into the high-risk category for discrimination and harassment. Likewise, to provide additional protective supports, a list of local and university support resources for participants was offered should the interviews trigger discomfort or a past traumatic experience. The resource list was not requested. Researcher bias and participant honesty have been identified as the potential threats to validity for this study. However, to prepare for, and prevent, potential threats to the validity of the data collected for this study, the relationship developed between the GLBT center’s director and
me put the participants at ease and provided evidence that this study was conducted in good faith. The researcher bias was also addressed through the review of the transcribed interviews by the individual participants.

Chapter IV

Findings

The experiences of transgender people are unique when compared to the experiences of cisgendered individuals in that the societal structure of the United States is dominantly gender normative. Similarly, institutions of higher education continue to be defined by gender normative assumptions and practices. Moreover, through this investigation, it has become clearer that an underlying assumption in higher education is that all students who attend institutions of higher education have access to the available opportunities and will walk away with similar experiences. The results from this investigation suggest that is not the case, particularly for transgendered students.

While the existing literature on the topic of transgender students in higher education is limited, both anecdotal information and research reveal the unique experiences of transgender students and need for further study. In order to best understand the challenges and barriers to the access of experience for transgender students, this study aims to gain insight into how a small group of transgender students makes sense of their experiences in the dominant gender normative environment of higher education. Because capturing the similarities and differences among these participants’ experiences was the primary objective, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was the best method for the investigation for two reasons in particular. First, IPA is primarily concerned with how participants make sense of, or make meaning of, their experience with a specific phenomenon. For this study, the phenomenon I wanted to explore was the
experience of being transgender in a dominantly gender normative higher education institution.

To do that, I needed an approach that explicitly honored experiences. This has not always been
the case with transgender research, as articulated by one of this study’s participants:

There’s a lot of historical issues with it in that it’s historically managed by cis-
gendered people. Our opinions are filtered through the lens of cisgendered
applicants and our lives are made to reflect their theories. Coe did it, Butler did it,
everybody does it. People like to use us to make their ridiculous little points about
gender instead of actually magnifying our voices.

IPA provides the opportunity, and requires the researcher to seek out and detail the experiences
of marginalized individuals and how individuals make meaning of what is happening to them.

Second, IPA recognizes that meaning-making is a shared experience and assumes that the
interview process allows for the co-construction of meaning. The role of the researcher within
an IPA study is also one of a participant. Through the use of IPA and the double hermeneutic
experience, I was afforded the opportunity to reflect on my own experiences and learning that
came from my role as the researcher of this study. Despite the years of professional and personal
experience, and the years of education about transgender issues that I brought with me to this
study, I found that my own perceptions and assumptions were significantly challenged and
shifted, and thus, permanently altered.

The selection and use of IPA informed several key decisions that I made as a researcher
and writer in the analysis and presentation of the data. First, despite the traditional use of
vignettes or in-depth character descriptions of each participant, in this case the participants’
safety depended on their anonymity. The study’s sample was made up of five individuals who
identified as transgender or gender non-conforming who have attended or are currently attending
an urban institution of higher education in the Northeast. These five students are highly visible within the institution’s gender normative community due to their transgender and gender non-conforming identities and expression; they are also at risk for retaliation and violence in response to their identities. Therefore, the primary focus of the experiences of these five individuals is on the collective experience of being transgender in a dominantly gender normative environment, and the differences among these participants are not specified at the individual participant level. That being said, the experiences of one transgender individual should not be generalized to all transgender people. As the researcher, I needed to strike a delicate balance between providing safety and anonymity and capturing each individual’s experience. Within the analysis of the data collected through this study, the varied experiences of the participants will be illustrated through the use of direct quotations without being attached to individual descriptors or names.

Another unique decision that I needed to make in order to provide the most authentic and accurate portrayal of their experiences and meaning-making was the use of gender pronouns. A priority of IPA is that the experience being studied can be expressed in its own terms, rather than predefined category systems. This aspect of IPA is critical in my decision to use the preferred gender pronouns of the study’s participants despite whatever grammatical challenges they presented. Throughout this study, I use the preferred pronouns identified during the interview: he/his, she/her, they/their. To be specific, one participant identifies as a woman and uses the pronouns she/her. One individual uses the pronouns they/them and the term Androgene to describe their gender identity. Another individual identifies as a *transman and uses masculine pronouns of he/his. The asterisk attached to the word transman is intentional and was specific to this particular participant. Two individuals identified as gender queer and chose to use the pronouns they/them. It is important note that while these gender pronouns were the preferred
pronouns presented by the participants, the experience and thought that goes into the selection and use of gendered pronouns is far more complex than the over-simplification presented in this study.

In academic writing, and in the English language, the use of they/them to represent a single individual is incorrect. An inherent irony exists in the awkwardness that comes with both writing and reading them/their as representing an individual. In my youth, I used the pronouns they/them to talk about an individual whose gender and sex I did not wish to reveal. At that time, I was being gender-evasive in order to protect my own sexual identity. Fast-forward twenty-some years, I am using they/them to discuss individuals who have chosen that same gender evasion for themselves. The problem continues in that use of they/them as an individual’s pronoun makes writing and reading more complicated and laborious for both the writer and reader. Using broad sweeping gender pronoun generalizations and refer to all of the participants as he or she would have been easier. However, to do this would have erased each individual’s experience and unique gender identity. In one simple stroke of the key, I would have done to each of them what they experience on a daily bases, an altering of their identities to make my cisgendered experience, and the experiences of my (most likely) cisgendered readers, easier.

The final nuanced decision that I made was a result of the use of IPA and in response to the historical malfeasance of gender theorists and researchers that has afflicted the transgender community. While I have chosen to forego the use of descriptive vignettes or character development in order to protect the participants’ safety, I have chosen to increase the opportunities to magnify their voices. Despite traditional analysis formatting, I have chosen to introduce each theme that emerged from the semi-structured interviews conducted with a
quotation from one of the study’s participants. As the researcher, I found it a priority to infuse their voices at every turn and to truly make this research a co-construction of our work.

**Central Research Question**

“I mean you’re in the process of going from realizing that Trans is a thing you can be to Trans is a thing that you actually are.”

Several themes emerged when answering the question of how transgender students make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development, in the context of being a marginalized group in a dominant normative society. The most salient, overarching takeaway, however, was the irony of this study. As a cisgendered woman who has spent years in the transgender community as an advocate and years in the cisgendered community as a transgender educator, I came to this study, unconsciously and unintentionally, with arrogance and ignorance. In formulating my research question about how transgender students make sense of their experience in higher education, I neglected to define experience. I made an assumption that “experience in higher education” was the same for me as for the transgender participants I was to interview. Within the first five minutes of my first interview, my world was forever altered.

The complexities of the experiences of transgender students in higher education are many, and both outward and nuanced, imbedded in every interaction, exchange, thought, action and aspiration. As a cisgendered person, I will never be able to truly understand the life experiences of transgender individuals, nor will I ever be able to accurately capture and represent how they experience the world. What I have learned through this study is that the experience of transgender students in higher education is one of survival and struggle. Transgender students lives are made up of complex experiences of strategizing to gain access to the basic life experiences that cisgendered people can so easily take for granted.
When I embarked on this study, I thought that I would encounter stories of issues with bathroom use and housing challenges. And while I did find those stories, they were entangled in far greater stories of isolation, loss, and fear as well as independence and strength. At the conclusion of her memoir, *Redefining Realness*, transgender activist Janet Mock (2014) quoted Audre Lorde by writing, “That visibility which makes us most vulnerable is that which also is the source of our greatest strength” (p. 255). The experiences shared by the students in this study sadden me, but also inspire me and issue a call to action to the cisgendered world.

The following analysis of the data collected from semi-structured interviews is organized into themes and supported with direct quotations from the study’s participants. As part of this analysis, I needed to honor, and respond to, the challenge issued by my first interviewee to not use this study to make my own points about gender, but to actually magnify the voices of transgender people. To do this, I shared with each participant their individual transcription of the interview, the coding of the interview, and the themes that emerged from the interview. This was a critical step in the analysis process if I was to stay true to providing a transgender lens to the data. The analysis that follows has been approved and supported by the study’s participants.

**Theme 1: Life in Gray**

“I feel like I was leading up to realizing that I wasn’t what I was assigned at birth and that trans is a thing that I could be.”

The process of identity evolution for the transgender students interviewed in this study was not one of “self-discovery.” I specifically chose the phrasing of Life in the Gray, because I learned, through the course of the interviews, that transgender students aren’t “discovering” themselves. They know who they are; it’s finding words and a world that will let them be their most honest and authentic selves. Often times, the English language does not provide words that
accurately portray the identity experienced by transgender people. The experience of trial and error to find a label or word(s) to encompass all that is an individual’s transgender identity is complex and trying. One participant explained that during their freshman year of college, they used a number of different non-binary and binary gender identities until they found an identity/phrase/title that best fit their true identity:

I identified as a trans guy for like four days but identifying as a man makes about as much sense as identifying as a woman to me so I was just like – I was uncomfortable… I identified as genderqueer for about two years and then came out as genderqueer my sophomore year of college, and then I think my senior year of college I really settled on Androgene as a great way of describing my identity and my sex identity.

All of the participants spoke about the process of finding the right words to explain their transgender identity to others, in both the GLBT community and gender-normative, heteronormative community. Limited by lack of role models, lack of language, and lack of social acceptance, the participants spoke about the need for stages to their transgender identity evolution:

Going into high school I watched a documentary called *Gender Tango* and I knew that was exactly how I felt. And that was the first time I'd ever seen it represented in a way that felt -- that I had a connection to. So from that point on I really identified as gender queer, but still identifying within the lesbian community through high school and college.

Another participant described her identity evolution as a long journey that isn’t over just because she is now “out” about her transgender identity: “I spent 25 years of my life passing as a boy and 25 years is a long time to spend passing especially when you’re actively engaging with that
social stratification along which you are passing.” The process of identity evolution, for many participants, started long before college and continues beyond college:

I guess that's something that's obviously developed over years. I think my own understanding of it didn't come into play until maybe the past -- actually I don’t even want to say that because I don't think that's true -- I guess I always knew that there's something a little different about me even from kindergarten when I felt myself being drawn to male roles; I felt myself being attracted to women that were in my life and not understanding what all of that meant at the time.

Life in the Gray is gathered around how each transgender person came to understand their individual gender identity and convey the gender identity to others within the confines of the dominant gender normative society. How the participants make sense of their individual gender identities and the concept of gender identity lends itself to how transgender students navigate the dominant gender normative society of higher education. The ways in which the participants shared their conceptualizations of their own individual gender identities were through the use of metaphors and everyday life examples. One participate compared the gender binary to that of an animal binary to illustrate its restrictions and lack of functionality for people who do not identify as male or female: “Right, but just setting it up as binary makes as much as setting up as the dog-cat binary. My gender identity is that of a hamster. I’m not a cat, I’m not a dog.” Another participant said:

I want a different word to describe genders that are not men or women because you have to deal with a whole bunch of other different things. I could never be stuck as my chosen – or my actual gender identity because that’s not a thing that – that’s not a thing.
The limitation of the existing gender dichotomy of male and female appeared in each of the interviews conducted for this study. The struggle to develop and define oneself within a context where that unique identity does not exist can hamper development and place additional strain and stress on an individual when they are most vulnerable. In a black and white world, living in the gray provides challenges but also opportunities to color outside the gender lines.

**Theme 2: Access to Experience**

I talked to people for two hours and they refused (to use my preferred name) so my name had to be my legal name on my diploma, and I had to cry to get them to pronounce it correctly at graduation, but it worked.

The transgender students who participated in this study shared both positive and negative experiences related to their complex experiences while in college. The quotation above illustrates the frustration and effort that are part of the experience of being a transgender student in a dominant gender normative higher education institution. At such a critically important juncture in a college student’s life – graduation - this specific student experienced a denial of validation in both their hard work and their identity by the administration’s refusal to put a preferred name on a diploma and refusing to call that person by their preferred name at such a big event. The refusal to acknowledge a student’s identity was common among all of the participants’ experiences. Similarly common was the feeling that the refusal signaled a choice, on the part of those in power, to invalidate the existence of the transgender students.

Many participants spoke about how college played a critical role in their identity development as it was the time when most students began to actively, or passively, explore their transgender identities. Safety was a significant concern expressed by the participants as well as finding accepting and welcoming friend groups. Participants spoke about concerns regarding
shared bathrooms and strategic ways in which they worked around having to use the shared bathrooms:

    Like an economy triple where it's all bunk beds in a triple room, and then we had one
    shared private bathroom, which I was extremely thankful for. I was terrified of the
    idea of floor restrooms. I didn't want to even consider what that experience would
    have been like for me. It would have been traumatic.

When asked to further explain the concerns regarding shared bathrooms, one participant stated:

    Going in and out of a space where I don't feel like my gender identity or
    how I present is welcome there and feeling like anytime I go into a space with
    people that don't know me, that they question my presence being there.

This quotation describes an experience when both social relationships and physical safety are at risk while trying to accomplish a basic, daily living task. Despite the numerous examples of challenges encountered, the participants were able to specifically identify supportive experiences that positively influenced their college experience.

    Participants spoke about getting involved in trans-related activities as both transgender-identified students and as trans-allies. This time in their lives signified one of the first opportunities for exploring their transgender identities with other gender non-conforming individuals. The experiences of these participants varied in how accepting or progressive the college environment was at the time of their attendance. One student shared that no other resources were available to her when she became involved in trans-related activities. Another participant shared that there were a few key administrators, such as the Dean of Students and the
Registrar, who recognized the importance in the trans-related resources or the importance of supporting the development and implementation of trans-related work.

Most of the participants were responsible for spearheading the development of trans-related programming and were responsible for creating their own individual access to positive trans-related activities. Students spoke about the benefits of specific groups and organizations that provided the support needed to help navigate the challenges associated with a transgender identity:

And even before my name was legally changed, I was awarded the Matthew Shepard Scholarship, and I remember at the ceremony, I was almost a little nervous that I wasn't sure what name was going to be on that certificate. And people in charge of the committee made sure it was going to say my name on it. I talked to them afterwards and I told them that I was so appreciative of it because they didn't have to do that.

Friendships were also made through on-campus student organizations such as the gay-straight alliances and the law school’s queer caucus. When speaking about on-campus living experiences, students spoke about finding the right roommates and the right housing situations:

So I went in to living with all female-bodied people again. But it was comfortable because except for the RA everyone knew me; and it was easy to make friends with the RA, so it wasn’t a point of contention, and I didn’t feel unsafe in the space at all.

Students used residential themed floors, such as the multi-cultural floor, to be part of a diverse experience. One participant shared the positive experience of living in an inclusive and supportive environment, “We regularly went to drag shows so we'd host get-togethers
beforehand in the apartment, and we'd all get ready. I really remember good things from that, living in that space. A lot of funny photos of folks dressing up.”

Participants also spoke about the importance relationships with professors and administrators played in their access to experiences in higher education. The examples shared by the participants illustrate both positive and negative relationships and the impact both types of relationships can have on educational and developmental outcomes:

I’ve had a bunch of health concerns my senior year and the Dean of Students was doing some advocacy with my professors on my behalf explaining why I wasn’t in class and she accidentally outed me to my boss. I had a whole semester left with him, and he never used a pronoun for me, never again– but we lost-we had a pretty good back and forth, a very friendly relationship. We’d get coffee and talk about slime molds ‘cause that’s what we worked on, but that was gone. As soon as I was outed to him, it was gone.

Students acknowledged that even when their interactions with cisgendered people did not include a complete understanding of the transgender identity, people could still be supportive. When a student requested a professor change the pronouns used in a letter of reference, the professor obliged and said, "I don't really understand. You've always been like different and unique.” Regardless of the way the professor understood this student or the ways in which he expressed his understanding, the student experienced a feeling of mutual respect. This respect was experienced as validation for this student’s identity.

Many significant challenges impede the access to experiences and color the experiences of transgender students in the dominant gender normative higher education environment. While this study specifically aimed at exploring how transgender students make sense of their experiences in the dominant gender normative culture, I am struck by how the transgender
identity influences every experience; any line of questioning or type of interview would reveal the significant impact of the transgender identity on access and experience. It is not the transgender identity per se that impacts access and experience so much as it is the cisgendered person’s response to the transgender identity. Much akin to a white person claiming racial blindness, cisgendered people’s claims to not perceiving, questioning, judging or dismissing a gender non-conforming identity and expression ring false.

Theme 3: Strategizing the Social Stratification

A third theme that emerged aligned with how transgender students navigate the dominant gender normative environment of a college institution. I call this theme Strategizing the Social Stratification as I found that the students interviewed spoke about strategies used to present themselves as transgender in the college environment, strategies to maintain safety within the college and strategies needed to meet their basic developmental needs while in college. A student shared a specific strategy in protecting herself and her social relationships during her transition:

I already tailored my friend group to be mostly – to be almost exclusively people who would be supporting, so the response when I came out was overwhelmingly supporting; but that’s only because there’d been a three year long process of excluding everyone else from my life.

A very common theme among all of the participants was the amount of mental and emotional energy that went into strategically identifying as transgender. From narrowing down friend groups to developing an “elevator pitch” using the most basic language for cisgendered people, transgender students are constantly trying to adapt to their environment for safety reasons and to
educate the population at large. One participant spoke about the strategic choice made in selecting an institution in a city with a reputation for being accepting:

I didn’t know what climate was going to be necessarily like. I understood (this city) was this Mecca of LGBT, and that's what it was in my head; so I assumed everything was going to be better, but I didn't really know, so I wanted to make sure I was still in a safe place within the college setting.

Participants spoke about the challenge of being open about their transgender identities and how they were strategic in deciding when and with whom they would be open: “Being out as Trans might mean being completely stealth; I mean people not knowing you’re Trans at all because Trans signifies a social position more than an identity.” Participants also spoke about their efforts to simplify how they identified for the benefit of cisgendered people, even when the simplified definition didn’t adequately represent who they were:

I identify as an Androgene which an easy way I – I used – I described it as being somewhat in between the identity of a man or a woman. If man was 0 and woman was 10 I’d be like a 4. That’s an easy way to describe it, and it has a lot of utility, but it’s not exactly how I identify; I identify more as a normal thing. I’m not a man or a woman; I’m an Androgene. The numbers has a lot of utility, especially when I’m talking to doctors and professors or something.

This example of how transgender students have altered their explanations of their identities to make their individual identities more easily understood by cisgender people in order to access basic experiences.

One participant spoke about her choice to identify as a woman, despite the fact that her gender identity is more complicated and non-binary:
Trans women are so particularly vilified that in my opinion it’s in a lot of ways a more revolutionary and in your face thing to do to simply identify as a woman and not give people the cognitive wiggle room to form their little biases and opinions around your identity.

Word choices were also a strategic part of these participants’ lives as transgender students in a dominant gender-normative environment. A participant articulated the strategy of word choices, “I use the words non-binary to describe my gender identity. Especially when I’m talking to people who don’t have the thought background to conceptualize identities outside of typically man or a woman.” The participants also spoke about the limitations that exist in defining and describing their individual gender identities in respect to the gender binary:

- It implies a little bit that I’m floating above like a magical gender fairy that’s different from – my gender identity is inherently different from being a man or a woman when really it’s just another gender identity it’s not – it also, non-binary, implies that there is a binary and that being a man is the opposite of being woman. So I’ve been trying to move away from non-binary for the most part. But it’s still a useful term to describe the collective of identities that aren’t man or a woman.

The participants also spoke about more politically motivated, intentional choices in the words that they use to describe their gender identities and sexual orientations. One participant stated, “Queer has become as warm and fuzzy word for a lot of people, and dyke actually accomplishes some of the goals that Queer originally did.” Participants also spoke about their strategic choices to ensure their own personal safety, even at the cost of their true identities. Similar to the strategic choice to use politically motivated words, one participant spoke about the strategic choice to avoid the more polarizing labels for the purpose of safety. In this case, the
participant found safety in being known as a trans-ally rather than publically identifying as transgender. She shared, “There’s a certain schizoid character to pretending to be a very active ally instead of a member. But I mean it’s also safer to a certain extent, so it was weird.”

One participant shares that they had to come out to their Resident Assistant, while an undergraduate student, in order to avoid having their legal name on their dorm room door. The students shared that there is a vulnerability to being outed as transgender by another person or by a system, rather than having it be a controlled choice by the transgender person. Another common thread throughout the experiences of the participants involved their strategic choices to disarm potential threats due to their transgender identities, including personal policies of coming out in order to pre-empt the conversation about their gender identities:

You come armed into – you come to every conversation armed with the knowledge that you’re presenting in a non-binary way or what is going to be perceived as a non-binary, extra binary, whatever you want to call it. To me it’s like my identity is binary, but that doesn’t matter to the people I interact with.

The participants admit that often times the need for safety and the need to protect the relationships that they value during college parallels the importance of proactive actions to pre-empt conversations or altercations about their gender identities:

I had a bunch of strong relationships with several professors that I didn’t want to change, and I knew it would regardless of – like my relationship with most people changed when I came out: with my family, with some of my – some of my friends are not. It was a little bit selfish because I was keeping this part of my identity from people who are otherwise really great and some close – I had close relationships with a number of my professors.
They were friendly; we would talk about life in addition to chemistry, but I never told them because…

The theme of Strategizing the Social Stratification encompasses more than just the students’ continuous use of energy seeking to be validated and maintaining safety. When asked about the mental and emotional toll of this effort, one student replied:

Yeah, I guess -- I don't really think about how much mental space it does take up, but now you say it and thinking about it more yeah it does because there are a lot of interactions that I have with even people at work who are not like - I would love being openly trans, but I'm not like super verbal about it. Like I am with some people but I'm not with everyone, so I wonder how many people understand where I'm coming from and like how many people get it.

The implication and impact of the efforts of this strategizing the social stratification come at a price. One of the reasons these students were selected for participating in this study was because they either are currently students or are college graduates. A student’s responsibility when enrolled in school is to be a student and to take full advantage of all learning opportunities:

If I had come into this and there had been an option of; preferred name, legal name and system to already manage that, that’s a thing that I don’t have to focus my energy on instead of school. It wouldn’t – I’m like – (the university) is losing money on not supporting me. They’re paying my way through graduate school, they’re paying my tuition. If I do shitty in school because they’re not providing this, its like the pennies on the dollar system that would support me, that’s their money that they’re throwing away.
The experience of constantly trying to navigate the social systems and stratifications dominates the experiences of the transgender students interviewed in this study. Despite the amounts of effort and time that go into the strategizing and navigating, the students discussed, in depth, the experience of seeing their reflections in the eyes of others.

**Theme 4: Reflection as Reality**

A third theme that emerged in answering the central research question was a theme of Reflection as Reality or how transgender students experienced interactions with the dominant gender normative environment, from individuals to systems. Students spoke about the general limits to most cisgendered people’s understanding of what it means to be transgender, but also the significant impact that limited knowledge and understanding has on the perceptions and stereotyping of transgender people:

Right, rather than some kind of horrible/funny/violent clowns out in society. That’s what I mean – everyone – any child is aware of trans people to a certain extent, but for the most part in society, we’re simply aware of them as cartoon characters.

The students interviewed shared that their experiences are mostly colored by how they believe people perceive them, and in turn, treat them. A participant shared that she introduced herself to her college professor by her chosen female name and requested that the professor use female pronouns. The professor’s reply was that she would try. The student further commented that:

I’m sure she thinks she’s being extraordinarily liberal and open-minded when she says those words, but actually the meaning is “Okay I will try and maintain this farce or pretense.” All it tells me when someone says “I’ll try” is “I think of you as a man, and
I’m unwilling to change that part; but I will change my external reactions to you in order to appear liberal.”

The participants of this study shared that a lack of acknowledgment of the validity of their transgender identities was a frequent occurrence.

The students’ stories of many of their interactions with cisgendered administrators and professors gives insight into how transgender people are seen by the dominant gender normative society. The attitudes and perceptions of the administration and faculty discussed in this study reflects the belief that the transgender identity is not a valid identity. One student summed it up as, “Some people are going to think you’re trying to be a special snowflake or whatever…”

The participants spoke openly about their experiences and treatment by people within the university community. Students shared their beliefs that the treatment experience held a mirror to how the community viewed them as individuals and their gender identities. One student stated that “My gender identity is by and large not seen as legitimate.”

The origin of the mistreatment or mis-gendering of the students interviewed for this study was often times apparent to the transgender students. One student shared an interaction with a nurse in health services. The student told the nurse that he was transgender and told her his preferred name. The nurse referred to him by that name throughout their interactions; however when discussing the student with the doctor, the nurse consistently mis-gendered the student by using female pronouns. When asked, in the interview, if the student believed that the mis-gendering was malicious or due to a lack of education, the student said:

I think it might be the education part. She was so nice to me otherwise but it just – you know, I think that was just the part where it was like it digs down because you're trying to be seen.
The student shared that he wanted to be validated. When another participant was asked about the experience of being mis-gendered and the origin of the mis-gendering, the student said, “It’s not just all passive regurgitation of social systems. I mean a lot of it is just really active revulsion at the idea of being trans.” Even when interactions with people on-campus did not include mis-gendering, the students still experienced a lack of validation: “They [educational institution] really wants to act like this super accepting great bubble of happiness, but it also – it doesn’t want to change its ideas about gender.”

The reflections of the transgender identity in the eyes and actions of the cisgendered people discussed in this study reveal both the reasons why transgender students exert so much effort to maintain the status quo. Even with their daily efforts, transgender students experience daily discrimination.

**Theme 5: The Wall**

“I’ve never been a less effective student than this year, and it’s really killing me and – I’m gonna fail.”

This last quotation also introduces a theme that provides insight into how transgender students make sense of their experience of accessing student support services and make sense of the experience of social power dynamics when accessing those services. The theme of The Wall is an overarching theme that emerged from the analysis of the interview data provided answers to both of the study’s sub-questions. The phrase “hitting the wall” is commonly known within the running community as the time in a race when, despite all of a runner’s best training and effort, the race begins to overcome the runner. A runner does not know when “the wall” will occur in a race, but the runner knows that it will stop them dead in their tracks and, what was already an uphill battle, will get even harder.
**Bathrooms.** The students interviewed for this study were very consistent when citing specific areas of challenge for transgender students in higher education settings. Public bathrooms in academic building and residential bathrooms were identified as tangible examples of the challenges facing transgender students. Students spoke about their personal efforts to make gender neutral bathrooms available in academic buildings:

I did a lot of work there. I got a grant funded for gender neutral bathrooms in a few buildings but people were very resistant to putting gender neutral bathrooms – to changing multi stall bathrooms to a gender neutral bathroom so we could only put them in a few buildings.

Students cited that gender neutral bathrooms have become available in several academic buildings on campus. However, the locations of the bathrooms are not widely know, nor are the locations accessible. A participant shared:

I’ve had a lot of fun running up and down flights of stairs to find the gender neutral bathrooms in this place. I only know where they are in the -- school which is part of the reason I never leave that building.

Students also highlighted the importance of bathrooms within the residence halls:

There was one shared private bathroom, which I was extremely thankful for. I was terrified of the idea of floor restrooms. I didn't want to even consider what that experience would have been like for me. It would have been traumatic.

When asked about why the experience would have been traumatic, the student replied that in addition to the risks associated with presenting someone who is differently gendered from the majority of people using that bathroom, the physical structures of shared bathrooms were
concerning. The lack of a solid door and the use of curtains for privacy in the showers present one participant with a safety concern when using shared bathrooms.

**Health Insurance/Healthcare.** Bathroom access is a common challenge for transgender people and is commonly discussed in existing literature. Health insurance and access to healthcare, however, emerged as a significant topic of concern for the students interviewed in this study. Existing literature identifies medical care and healthcare coverage as areas in which transgender people are excluded:

What I've realized after graduating from (this university) and I've been looking for my own health insurance is also that you can't -- as an individual you can't get a health insurance plan that covers anything trans related because they're only offered to large group or commercial groups. So university has power to do that, large companies, corporations, etc.; they all have the power to, like as an individual who's trans and wants to get coverage for my needs, I do not have access to that.

The students all shared that they are actively participating in a movement to improve the healthcare policy for transgender students at this urban university in the Northeast. The students stated that an exclusionary clause exists prohibiting transgender students from receiving medical support related to their transgender identities:

Also a more fundamental issue, a very fundamental issue, is that this university student health insurance specifically excludes transitional care. All transitional care. It’s excluded; it’s totally excluded. I can’t – explicitly and specifically exclude me in the student health insurance policy.
The exclusion of transitional care within the healthcare policy places transgender students at-risk. Some students expressed that they have chosen to not sign up for the university health insurance and are currently without any healthcare coverage at all:

But I didn't say how I didn’t sign up for health insurance because it wasn't trans inclusive, and it cost way too much. So it didn't cover my needs, and it would have been too expensive. It doesn’t cover any type of surgery, doesn't cover any type of hormones, and it could. It absolutely could.

The participants all identified local universities, however, that did include trans inclusive healthcare as part of the student healthcare plan. Several of the participants stated that they are working as part of a student group to improve the university healthcare plan for transgender students.

Another risk category associated with lack of proper healthcare coverage is one associated with how students have gone about receiving health coverage for their transitional care:

That’s actually the school’s official position right now, is that there’s no problem with hormone coverage because if you just get your doctor to code it right that will be okay. That puts both people at potential liability for fraud, so the fact that that would be the school’s official position, that you should pretend that you have some other diagnosis than that you’re trans in order to get care and that they don’t need to change their policy as a result, it’s very concerning.

The students spoke about the many different ways they, and their other transgender friends, have needed to work outside of the healthcare system to receive medical care and hormones. While the urban city at the center of this study has several non-profit healthcare programs geared
towards GLBT people, the internet continues to serve as an unregulated, yet easily accessible means for hormones.

In response to the challenges related to healthcare coverage, the students have established a transgender student task force in an effort to work with the administration to review and amend the healthcare policy as it relates to transitional care.

**Identification-Name/Gender.** A third challenge identified by the students interviewed for this study was related to identification. One student stated, “There’s still this big idea that you can’t put your preferred name on your IDs.”

Identification, within this study, fell into two categories: chosen name and pronouns, and chosen name and pronouns within the university’s computerized systems. One participant shared:

You’d have to personally talk to a whole bunch of people. There’s no institutional process and it all depended on how – if and when they decided to help you. Their official justification for having no institutionalized process and no official policy of not letting people use their preferred names was that people would abuse it and pick funny names.

The assumption that transgender students who seek out the support and use of a system that would aid them in correcting the name that accompanies all of the university documents would be, in reality, using the system as a joke reveals the true lack of understanding of the needs of transgender students. A student went on to say, “It was like do you realize the incredibly unbalanced importance of some asshole who wants to be Squiggs McGee and someone who is in physical danger every day of their lives?”

Students shared that the lack of process for having their preferred names and pronouns entered into the university’s computerized systems is frustrating. Correcting the errors consumes
a fair amount of their time and is time away from their studies. The students also shared that beyond the challenges associated with the computerized systems are the challenges associated with humans:

For me to bring up to professors that I go by they and them and to get them not to refer to me by like Mr. Last Name because in a lot of classes they use formal titles for all of the students and tend not to do any. They don’t ask people; they go by what’s on their rolls. So it’s hard to bring up in the first place, and when I do, I don’t; professors have not generally be willing to actually use the right pronouns. They might either avoid pronouns or use the wrong one, then apologize. [Laughs] Not the same thing as using the right one.

The walls experienced by the students in this study also highlighted a glaring omission in both existing literature and my own knowledge base of the transgender experience. A unique perspective was provided to this research through the experience of a transwoman graduate student. The participation of a transwoman provided an additional lens through which to understand how transgender students make sense of their experiences. This student shared that trans misogyny has in coloring her every interaction with other by saying, “Trans misogyny is a constant specter in my life; it’s every interaction I have.” She noted that on a recent trip to a local health clinic, specializing in trans health, she observed that there were notices for seven ongoing research projects and studies and support groups for trans men and none for trans women. A parallel can be draw between the experiences of trans women and biological women in regard to health care and medical research:

Being trans is obviously a constant spectrum of social interactions, but being a woman is just as much, so if not more so, in that it actually opens me up to a majority of the
violence and discrimination that affects trans people as an aggregate as against trans women. Yeah misogyny and trans misogyny are constantly circling around my head. The voice of a transwoman provides insight into the experiences of a marginalized population within a marginalized group.

As a researcher dedicated to protecting the anonymity of this study’s participants, as well as honoring their voices, I struggled with the decision to incorporate the voice of the single transwoman participant. By specifically honoring her voice and the issues experienced by transwoman, I have put her at risk through increasing the ease of her identification. However, to not include her unique experience because she is a single voice, I could be seen as doing exactly what the university has done to transgender students through saying that one voice is not as valuable as multiple voices. The decision to honor her voice over her anonymity is not a decision I have made lightly, but I believe it is a choice that she would agree with. In our discussion about trans-focused research, she said:

That’s obviously the extreme violent end of it where they basically advocate for violence against us, but there’s also this passive fuzzy end of the research that pretends to serve our needs but without the analytical lens of a person who has the experience of being Trans. It can provide, but it doesn’t preserve, the right information.

IPA is about respecting the individual and their unique experiences. IPA as a methodology aims to authentically represent each specific experience and magnify the voices of the participants whose experiences it aims to explore. Within the vein of magnifying the voices of the participants, I asked the participants for a list of recommendations for transgender supportive changes. Several students cited the need for a clear process for having one’s preferred name entered into the system:
Yeah so institutional issues at this institution, a list: one, there’s no robust institutional support for anything. I asked a law professor who directed me to a Dean who directed me to a Dean, the Dean of Admissions, in order to get my name changed on stuff. In the process got aggressively misgendered by the student working at the desk of the admissions office which was fun.

The students participating in this study shared that they believed that the university maintains no shortage of reasons, rationale, and/or excuses for why trans-accessible supports and systems have not been implemented at the university at the center of this study.

The students interviewed as part of this study stated a lack of transgender students as the most commonly presented reason for not changing exclusionary policies or implementing transgender inclusive policies: “I’ve also heard there’s just not enough trans students to justify this. Yeah to justify a tiny coding change. Why don’t you think there’s enough trans students at your institution?” To highlight the point they were making, a student commented, “Didn’t Mahmoud Ahmadinejad say that? “There’s no gay people in Iran.” A student shared a personal exchange they had with the administration:

When I was trying to get bathrooms changed and a couple things, one of the staff was just like “There’s not enough Trans students to justify you changing our single stall gendered bathroom into a single stall gender neutral bathroom and I was just “How – have you interviewed all 3000 of university’s student population?”

Each of the students could share an experience when the existence and needs of transgender students were met with a dismissive response.

The students shared that an indication of the lack of transgender support is the message that is sent to the transgender student population in that the institution is not concerned enough
about them and will be concerned only when there are more of them. One student stated, “They realize that it negatively impacts people, but until there’s enough of them, it doesn’t matter.”

Another participant stated:

It’s just a ridiculous thing to say that you have an institutionalized form of forced segregation and exclusion and then say oh yeah we don’t have enough Trans students to do this. Yeah exactly, you keep them out, actively keep them out.

However, each of the students who participated in this study have chosen to act rather than wait for changes to happen at the larger university level. Each study participant lived the dual role of transgender student and transgender activist. One student shared, “It's difficult to deal with, like to be a student and to go through all those things, to not feel validated, and it does back away from what you could be focusing on.”

Based on the data collected from this study, one role did not appear to be able to exist without the other role. One student shared, “There’s a lot of institutional issues, there’s no institutional support, what support there is I’ve conjured up myself or other Transgender students have conjured up for themselves.” A student shared the frustration encountered during basic, daily interactions:

My first year of grad school is really important, but also I gotta do it so these institutional changes are not – they’re not value neutral for the university, they’re not window dressing, they’re actually – have an impact on what their students accomplish.

The students interviewed for this study recognize the dual roles and the amount of effort that is shouldered by the transgender student community. A student shared their frustration, “We’re supposed to be able to move mountains and creating institutions that support us at the same time that we…we’re also not being human.” Examples of the work achieved by the transgender
student community includes gender identity recognized in this university's non-discrimination policy, Equal Opportunity Policy; work with the Office of Affirmative Action on non-discrimination policies; and work on creating gender neutral bathrooms at the university. One study participant shared that he created a bathroom map of all of the single stall gender neutral bathrooms on campus and wrote another campaign proposal for how to actively resist and run a campaign to get more bathrooms on campus.

Despite many of the proactive efforts of the transgender student community, many challenges continue to exist:

They were willing to listen to me and willing to make a change; that's how we started with the whole preferred name/pronoun thing, like addressing it just at first and saying, "If you don't have something for me you don’t have something or other people.” I'm the only person stepping forward to say this but I know that there are others. Just because no one's saying anything doesn't mean we don't exist.

The participants of this study have experience this apparent lack of transgender students on campus as a consistently used rationale for lack of change.

Student have expressed that they have decided to exist with some of the institutional challenges. Some of the remaining challenges may be viewed an improvements from the institution’s perspective:

I finally did that and after months got it changed again, and now I have a health insurance card that has my legal first name and last name, but my preferred middle initial, which I just have decided not to fuck with. It’s dumb. In fact it’s a really good example of how if you don’t actually deal with the institutions to make it work, it won’t work. Even with charitable kind liberal people.
The students interviewed for this study each shared that they will continue to do what is needed to improve the experiences of future transgender students. The students shared that while the improvements may not be implemented during their time at the university, they recognize the importance of the work, regardless of whether they benefit from it:

And so in every sort of, area, that has been the institutional response for years. It’s when we present them information about why it’s a problem and we recommend changes and offer to help them through it, they say, “That’s a lot of resources to commit to just a couple students.” It’s the type of response they’ll give, and so the people continue having these same experiences even though they’ve been hearing for years, a very well articulated message of what needs to change.

Despite the constant barrage of challenges, the participants of this study each expressed that they will continue to work to make institutional changes for transgender students.

Beyond the amount of effort that each of the students need to exert in their daily lives, each of these students have chosen to work, for the benefit of others, within and outside of a system that has both power and entitlement. It is here that the irony of the choice of critical theory as a theoretical framework is most glaring. Critical theory acts as a framework for action steps to address problems that can then empower the population being marginalized. The choice for the use of this theory was made by a cisgender person and approved by other cisgender people. As a cisgender researcher and educator, I made an arrogant assumption that I was going to be helping to empower the transgender student community with the results of this study. However, the outcome of this study yields results that will help empower the cisgender community to move beyond their ignorance and lack of awareness to then help improve the lives and experiences of the transgender student community.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings

The Problem of Practice

Transgender students attending institutions of higher education have become a more visible population. A gap in the research exists on how transgender students, as part of a minority group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development. Many colleges are not fully prepared to support transgender students. As a result, transgender students are at risk to become vulnerable to harassment and discrimination. Few colleges offer support services to transgender students in a comprehensive manner (Beemyn, 2010; Rankin, 2003; Lees, 1998), which perpetuates difficulty in dealing with discrimination and harassment. This study aims to explore how transgender students, as a minority group in a gender normative society, at a four-year institution make sense of the college experience.

Research Purpose

The motivation behind this study was two-fold: to grow the body of literature on transgender students and to gain insight into the actual experiences of transgender students through the use of an IPA approach and the use of a transgender lens through which to analyze the data. The practical goal of this research is to develop direct implications for institutions to improve the experiences of transgender students.

Research Questions

Primary Research Question

How do transgender students, in the context of being a marginalized group in a dominant gender normative society, make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development?
Sub-Questions

How do transgender students make sense of their experience of accessing student support services?

How do transgender students make sense of their role in the college campus community with regard to the changes that will help their identity be more recognized?

Revisiting the Research Methodology

For this study, the phenomenon I wanted to explore was the experience of being transgender in a dominantly gender normative higher education institution. To do that, I needed an approach that explicitly honored the unique aspects of the individuals’ experiences. Because capturing the similarities and differences among these participants’ experiences was the primary objective, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis was the best method for the investigation for two reasons in particular. First, IPA is primarily concerned with how participants make sense of, or make meaning of, their experiences with a specific phenomenon. Second, IPA recognizes that meaning-making is a shared experience and assumes that the interview process allows for the co-construction of meaning. The role of the researcher within an IPA study is also one of a participant. Through the use of IPA and the double hermeneutic experience, I was afforded the opportunity to reflect on my own experiences and learning that came from my role as the researcher of this study.

The study’s sample was made up of five individuals who identified as transgender or gender non-conforming who have attended or are currently attending an urban institution of higher education in the Northeast. The students were interviewed using open-ended questions. The students were provided copies of their transcripts and access to their individual analyzed data to provide feedback and input in the analysis process.
Discussion of the Findings

The following paragraphs show how the findings relate to the literature review, theoretical framework, and the problem of practice. The findings were developed by using both the analyzed data and the explicit requests and recommendations of the student participants. The findings are also influenced by the themes that emerged as part of this study. Themes developed include Life in Gray, Access to Experience, Strategizing the Social Stratification, Reflection as Reality, and The Wall.

Finding One

While basic human rights are necessary, the influence of the dominant social narrative of the gender binary most significantly affects the experiences of transgender students in higher education. One of the study’s participants noted:

You asked about the experience of bathrooms and health insurance and those things are important, but also going day-to- day and seeing a complete invisibility of your population while you’re aware of how deeply it’s suffering.

The influence of the dominant social narrative of the gender binary is profound and further reaching that we may be aware of. This influence impacts both the daily experiences of transgender students, but also the research, literature, and actions about and for transgender students in higher education. A significant gap in the literature on transgender students in higher education, identified in the literature review, is the evaluation of the accessibility and availability of support services for transgender students and the understanding of the transgender student experience from the perspective of transgender students. While literature on transgender students is, in itself, limited, the existing literature focuses predominately on issues of basic
human rights (e.g. bathroom access, housing, etc.) and is framed within the dominant gender normative binary (Bolton, 2009; Buzuvis, 2011; Faust, 2007; Ivory, 2005). Furthermore, a large portion of the research devoted to issues of campus climate and diversity are inclusive of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students, rather than specific to transgender students. Ivory (2005) writes about the invisibility of sexual minority students. Transgender students experience a far more complex experience. Transgender students are both highly visible, due to their physical presence and non-binary gender expression, but also invisible due to a lack of validation from the cisgender power holders. It is this complex experience that is missed by much of the literature on campus climate and diversity. Likewise, Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, and Tubbs (2005) found that even many outcomes from these inclusive studies, such as support organizations and academic programs for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students rarely address the challenges experienced by transgender students. Research on transgender student experience needs to be conducted outside of research on sexual minority students, not within. The implications of such studies serve to further water down the experiences specific to transgender students.

Another critical piece missing from the literature on transgender students is also due to the dominant social narrative and influence of the gender binary. The preponderance of the literature is authored by cisgender individuals and framed through the cisgender lens and produces findings that exist within the limits of the normative gender binary. The use of critical theory, in this study, provides a framework for which societal problems affecting transgender students can be identified and more closely understood from the perspective of those affected. Similarly, in using critical theory, researchers commit to illuminate how exactly concrete socio-historical conditions shape and influence social life (Dahms, 2008). Within this study, the concrete social-historical conditions are the normative gender binary and the dominant social
narrative of society in which higher education resides that shape and influence the experiences of transgender students. Through the lens of critical theory, the absence of literature examining how the normative gender binary and dominant social narrative influences the experiences of transgender students in higher education is in need of examination.

The role of cisgender privilege is visible in the existing body of literature on transgender students. By trying to understand the transgender experience through a cisgender lens, we reify the barriers facing transgender students. Future research needs to move beyond studies of transgender students where the focus is on tangible structures and functions of the gender binary. Future research should seek to evaluate the impact of cisgender privilege, including the perceptions and attitudes of cisgender people towards transgender individuals and an exploration of the roadblocks to changing dominant gender normative systems. As the dominant social narrative was found to significantly influence the experiences of transgender students in this study, greater implications for practice may be found in studies exploring the dominant social narrative.

**Finding Two**

“Not being an asshole goes a long way.” This direct quotation from a study participant illustrates the low level of expectations transgender students have when navigating the dominant gender normative structures that make up institutions of higher education. Case, Kanenberg, Erich, and Tittsworth (2012) state the privileges of cisgender individuals have a direct impact on transgender people in the forms of interpersonal discrimination, but also institutional discrimination that is largely invisible and unacknowledged. Similarly, Butler (2004) discusses the continued pathologizing of transgender people, medically, psychologically, and socially, as
contributing to the oppression and discrimination of transgender people. The existing literature on transgender students highlights access; however, while bathrooms and housing are critical, they are not the issues that most impede the experiences of transgender students.

The finding generated from this study is that the system and structures of higher education possess a dominant gender normative power that extends beyond the best efforts of the trans-supportive individuals employed by institutions of higher education. The students in this study noted specific employees, faculty, and staff, who offered support and assistance to create makeshift alternatives to institutional change. Despite these efforts, the power to create the change needed to support transgender students appears to be held at a higher, institutional level. The message from that higher, institutional level is that there are not enough transgender students to justify change.

Butler presents an alternative theory to the response that the lack of change is an issue of numbers. Butler presents the question of who and what is considered real and true as a question of knowledge, but she also presents Foucault’s notion that realness is a question of power (Butler, 2004). Together, knowledge and power “establish a set of subtle and explicit criteria for the thinking world” (p. 215). The realness, or validity, of gender is rooted in the power of the gender binary. Boucher (2011) argues that this lack of realness is the reason why few administrators in higher education work to enact true change to support transgender students. Similar to Boucher’s and Butler’s assertions that realness, or validity, is tied to power, the validity of gender is found rooted in the realness of the gender binary. With the gender binary acting as the model of truth and realness for gender, transgender students, whose identities and expression challenge the binary, are not seen as legitimate, nor are their daily life challenges found to be valid or worthy of action.
Similar to Butler and Boucher, this study’s participants also identified the lack of perceived validity of the transgender identity as a critical linchpin in implementing institutional change. The lens of critical theory reveals the significance of the barriers at the institutional level. While Fay, as cited in Crewell (2013), considers critical theory perspectives as placing focus on empowering human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender, this finding emphasizes the significance of the institution and power of the institution which is rooted within the traditional gender binary and social narrative.

Seilor (2005) states that critical theorists fuse theory with action in order to understand the experience of oppressed minorities and how the oppressed can take action. It is here that the action needs to be taken up by the cisgender power holders and not the marginalized population. Change to benefit transgender students comes through challenging the dominant social narrative and changing the structure and educating the power holders. By revealing the power of cisgender privilege and the layers of oppression experienced by transgender students, change can begin.

In the time since the interviews for this study were conducted, the institutions of higher education in United States have seen a significant enforcement of Title IX and a broadening of Title IX’s coverage. In spring 2014, the Office of Civil Rights issued a “Questions and Answers on Title IX and Sexual Violence.” This letter was the first of its kind to clearly state that gender discrimination and transgender students are protected under Title IX. The policy, in its current form, states that Title IX’s “sex discrimination prohibition extends to discrimination based on gender identity failure to conform to stereotypical notions of masculinity or femininity” (Lhamon, 2014).
Prior to spring 2014, Title IX, a protective policy, did not specifically recognize gender discrimination and transgender issues. These changes to Title IX, in conjunction with issues of access and discrimination of transgender students, should be closely monitored for changes in, and implementation of, more trans-inclusive policies and systems in higher education and a shift in action and response at the institutional level.

Case et. al. (2012) discussed ways in which a student-faculty advocacy group worked to cross historical boundaries of disdain and distrust to forge associations and create space for discourse. A fusion of the action of critical theory and the education with the power of protective of policies, such as Title IX, is necessary to cross the aisles of distrust and questioned validity and credibility. Case et al. stated that through “Co-opting the privilege and power owned by different partners and using it as a tool for activism was a manifestation of authentic practice and co-intentional education” (p. 157). Case et. al. found that shifting the culture could be accomplished through connecting faculty, students and administrators in power, and by extending across the traditional frame of oppressed versus oppressor. It may be here, between imposed acknowledgement of the transgender identity through Title IX and cooperative work of administration, faculty, and transgender students, that the transgender identity can become real in the eyes of cisgender power holders.

**Finding Three**

The energy and efforts of transgender students to gain access to basic human rights (e.g. bathrooms, housing, and accurate documentation) and to educate the cisgender-dominated institution on transgender issues becomes essential to the transgender student’s ability to access the expected experiences of students in higher education. The energy spent on academic studies
comes second to the daily efforts to exist as a transgender student, rather than the extracurricular activity in which it may be viewed by administration.

Chickering’s (1969 & 1993) research pinpoints college as a critical time in students’ identity development. The students in this study spoke about how their time in college was when many of them began to openly identify as transgender or gender non-conforming. Similar to Chickering’s identification of college as a critical time in all student’s identity development, this study revealed that college is an even more crucial and critical point in the identity development for transgender students. The participants in this study identified the relationships, community, and language garnered from their time in higher education. College presented the students in this study with the opportunity to find like-minded and similarly identifying people. However, the relationships and community established during the students’ time in higher education were not easy to maintain. Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughy (1997) explored the social pressures that influence transgender identity formation through exploration of the coming-out experiences for transgender individuals and found that social pressures to conform to the gender binary were experienced as desires for relationship maintenance and self-preservation. The students in this study stated that the relationships that they developed with many faculty were challenged by attitudes and perceptions of their transgender identity. In order to maintain many of those relationships, the students altered their presentation, language, and level of comfort and exposure regarding their transgender identity.

Beyond the energy spent on sensitive identity development and relationship maintenance, transgender students exert energy in meeting their basic day-to-day needs. Boucher identifies that the “architectural setting of schools passively affirm normative gender role expectations” (Boucher, 2011, p. 70). While Boucher was speaking specifically to bathrooms and locker
rooms, in an institution such as higher education, the architecture of a school and the responsibilities of the institution possess an even greater power in affirming the gender binary. Many full-time students in higher education look to the institution to provide not only education and peer and faculty relationships, but room and board, medical care, and mental health care, to and act in “loco parentis.” We know from the existing literature that these access points present transgender students with significant challenges. However, a total vacuum exists in the literature when it comes to understanding the effort and energy output of transgender students who try to access these higher education services.

What the existing body literature does not address is the amount of effort to access daily basic human needs, such as establishing and maintaining relationships, and the impact of the energy expenditure on transgender students and their academic studies. What scholar-practitioners can learn from this study is that the impact of the energy expenditure is detrimental to the academic success of transgender students. This study revealed that the energy and effort of transgender students is shared between efforts to access the system and institution as it currently exists and efforts spent on trying to change the system and institution accessible for transgender students. The use of critical theory in analyzing this finding provides the opportunity to critique the applications of principles or values to make judgments for the purpose of creating positive change. Through an analysis of the systems and policies that influence the transgender participants’ experiences, the lack of systems and policies for transgender students is directly and negatively affecting their educational and social experiences. The energy and effort required to navigate, and challenge, systems developed for people who reside within the traditional gender binary alters the transgender student’s experience from that of a student experience to that of an activist experience.
Practical Implications

Numerous statistics show that transgender students need a high level of support as a result of bullying, harassment, assault, and threats due in part to a lack of understanding surrounding their transgender identity (Kosciw, 2010). Providing support as a response to issues related to climate is reactive and does not address the root of the issue. The practical implications, identified through this study, for institutions of higher education include: (1) incorporation of transgender issues within curriculum and teachings on marginalized and oppressed populations; (2) opportunities for transgender political action work supported by the institution; (3) coding changes in campus-wide data systems; and (4) trans-inclusive healthcare.

Two of the participants of this study identified that college is an opportune time to blend teachings about marginalized populations with action about social change. Transgender people should be included in any curriculum or discussion where marginalized populations are addressed. Through including transgender people and the experiences of their marginalization, institutions can bring awareness to the struggles of transgender people and to the privilege of cisgender people.

In addition to embedding the experiences of transgender people into the curriculum, the participants of this study also identified the opportunity for political action that exists on college campuses as experiences in college can serve as a training ground for becoming advocates, community organizers, and leaders. One student shared:

I would also ask explicitly about political organization and activism and advocacy of trans students on campus. One of my underdgrad institutions formed a University President’s Commission on LGBT issues that focused on a trans student issues project,
and that was a systematic effort that included students, staff, and faculty, to identify issues, address them, a sustained effort.

This practice of transgender political action could be both academic and extracurricular.

Another practical implication for universities includes the implementation of trans-inclusive coding changes to campus-wide data systems. While the institution at the center of this study has identified an individual person who should be called if a transgender student would like to have a name changed in the data system, the participants of this study suggest that the availability of a “preferred name” option within the online systems would be less stressful and easier. They identified the option of a preferred name within a campus-wide data system as a change that would eliminate a significant challenge and emotional stress.

An additional implication for universities is the provision of trans-inclusive healthcare as part of the university healthcare coverage. At the time of this study, transitional healthcare (i.e. hormones and corrective surgery) are not included as part of the university healthcare package for any university student. The inclusion of transitional healthcare can help improve the quality of life for transgender students and allow the students to focus on their energies on their responsibilities as students.

A final implication of this study emerged from both the themes and findings, and from the acknowledgment of the far larger problem of practice revealed by this study. This study sought to explore two components of the transgender student’s experience in higher education: the experience of accessing student support services and the experience of being part of a marginalized group within a dominant gender normative institution. What this study reveals is that without addressing the experiences of marginalized groups within a dominant society,
simply providing support services is an inadequate response. To address the marginalized experiences of transgender students within the dominant gender normative structure of higher education, the power of the dominant social narrative needs to be challenged. This challenge can begin to make space for authentic change and the development of comprehensive and effective student support services for transgender students. However, scholar-practitioners need an activist-change framework to begin addressing the inequities associated with transgender student experiences embedded in institutions of higher education.

The final implication of this study is the development of an activist-change framework for scholar-practitioners, on the ground, to begin a discourse on the challenges transgender students experience as a result of the institutionalization of the gender binary in higher education. Through reflexive conversations and bi-directional work, a deeper sense of understanding of the problem can develop along with the beginnings of a more authentic response. This activist-change framework is based on the findings and themes that emerged from this study and is informed by critical race theory, feminist theory, change theory and intersectionality as a social justice framework. The activist-change framework can be used as a conceptual tool to analyze the effectiveness of student support services, to develop interventions and strategies, and to create climate change in the area of transgender inclusion:

1. **Transformative climate change.** Challenging a construct such as the gender binary, especially in an institution in which the binary is reinforced by the very architecture of the institution, calls for transformative change. This transformative change is both personal and institutional and will reveal itself as inclusive climate change. To begin a transformative change, Eckel and Kezar (2003) state that transformative change needs senior administrative support, collaborative leadership, flexible vision, faculty and staff development, and visible action.
Holley (2009) writes that transformative change alters the way an institution operates and the way its members view the organization. Both Holley’s and Eckel and Kezar’s work demonstrate the need for the participation of community members from all levels of power. The data generated from this study reveal that, currently, the level of discourse and work to benefit transgender students is occurring at a power level where buy-in of the greater power holders can not be achieved and, therefore, more pervasive and permanent changes can not occur. Boucher (2011) writes about “co-opting” the power through reaching across the aisle to connect with administrators with power, faculty, and students. The findings of this current study reveal that the transgender students are the primary change agents within the institution of higher education to address the challenges facing transgender students. In thinking about power and power holders, within this study, marginalized students are seen to have relatively little power and effectiveness in instituting permanent, system-wide change. Without discourse involving all levels of the institution, decisions affecting transgender students will continue to be made in a vacuum, and long lasting change will not take place. Therefore, by involving members of all levels of power, the discourse and work generated will “affect those underlying assumptions that tell an institution what is important” (Eckel & Kezar, 2009, p. 33).

The final principle is the embodiment of the reflexive conversation and bi-directional work that is the activist-change framework. This study highlights the need for research and action to magnify the voices of the marginalized. To do this within an activist-change framework, input from the marginalized group is critical to the development, implementation, and effectiveness of transformative change. Given opportunities to be heard, through focus groups, access surveys, campus climate surveys and face-to-face conversations, the “Other” as
defined by Duncan (2001) can become a power holder in the institutional change process (p. 139).

2. **Access to discourse.** To create an environment in which discourse and bi-directional work can begin, entry points into the conversation need to be found for each participant. Discourse, within this framework, is the dialogue among higher level administrators, faculty members, student supports personnel, and transgender students. Bi-directional work, within this framework, includes collaborative work to benefit transgender students and shift the campus climate. Bi-directional work also acts as a vehicle for input, feedback and evaluation of programs, policies, and procedures. There are critical parts to establishing a climate where discourse and bi-directional work can occur. One critical part involves providing access to discourse. The assumption that every person can access and be engaged in a discourse on issues facing transgender students assumes that each individual agrees that there are issues. What is more, it assumes that each participant agrees that the transgender identity is a valid identity and that transgender students form a marginalized group within a dominant gender normative society. In order to begin a dialogue about a problem where not everyone believes there is a problem, entry points in the discourse need to be established. Anti-racist frameworks (Maiter, 2009) tell us that a person’s understanding of another culture is shaped by both the way it is understood, but also the person’s own culture. Lending this notion to discourse on issues facing transgender students, an entry point can be in discussions of individuals’ experience with their own gender identity.

Frameworks for discourse on race and racial difference help to further establish entry points and access to discourse on issues facing transgender students. Duncan (2001) presents the example of racism as an ideology and the construct of the “Self” and the “Other” in creating
discourse around race and racial difference (p.139). The dominant group represents the “Self” as fairly homogenous and fundamentally superior to the non-dominant group members, or the “Other.” In this example, the binary of “Self” and “Other” fulfills the dominant group’s need to maintain dominance and to undermine the Other’s attempts at positive self-image. Unlike this example, the current study reveals an understanding that the lack of action and change is a result of a lack of awareness of, and education on, issues facing transgender students in higher education. The take-away from the use of “Self” and “Other,” however, is an entry point into the recognition of one’s own relationship to the dominant group and awareness of the privilege and power associated with dominant group membership (Duncan, 2001, p. 139). Likewise, this opportunity lets dominant group members understand their role in institutionalized oppression.

In addition to access to the work, another critical component to establishing a climate for discourse and bi-directional work is the creation of a safe space in which transgender students can share their experiences and input free from risk of harm and retribution. While the student-participants of this current study were openly transgender in their higher education community, not all transgender students are open about their identity. Therefore, the activist-change framework provides a venue for the inclusion of voices who need to be heard without requiring a student to disclose their transgender identity prematurely. This can be accomplished through several methods including the identification of a person who can act as a proxy for transgender students, the use of IPA and case studies to provide insight into the experiences of transgender students, and the use of anonymous surveys on campus climate. Flexibility exists in the vehicle used for gathering and presenting the experiences of transgender students as long as the students’ voices are adequately and authentically represented.
3. **Revealing the power.** Transforming climate, using the activist-change framework, requires a challenging of assumptions that perpetuate oppression. To address oppression, we need to build on the previous practice of exploring dominant group membership. Within the context of higher education, discourse to challenge assumptions of oppression can begin with conversations about institutional creation, institutional change, and decision-making power. Through reviewing how the institution has evolved, both structurally and socially, and auditing who has participated in the decisions that have led the evolution, voices that have been left out will emerge (Tronya, 1993; Van Dijk, 1993). Reflecting upon the absent voices can begin the conversation of access and oppression.

As scholar practitioners, conducting a document analysis using a gender binary awareness lens, or transgender lens, will help to explore and reveal the ways in which the binary is reinforced within the institution. Use of a case study approach, as described in Yin (2009), provides a methodological framework for scholar-practitioners to engage in this type of inquiry. In addition to gathering participant voices and voices from the margins, Yin also describes strategies like a review of institutional documents. Within the activist-change framework, the review of institutional documents would specifically look at the ways in which decisions are made, how policies are developed and implemented, and the ways these perpetuate the power of gender binary. Analyses, such as these, provide a deeper understanding of the belief systems that have shaped the institution and help scholar-practitioners identify and understand the institution’s underlying value system.

4. **Intersectionality.** Considering multiple groups’ experiences of marginalization might provide greater momentum in addressing issues of access and oppression through transformative change in this activist-change framework. Warner and Shields (2013) use the intersectionality
framework to highlight the need to change policies and activist practices. By acknowledging the interplay of multiple systems of inequality, attention is called to the social justice issues that may have been overlooked or unthinkingly construed (Warner & Shields, 2013). Through identifying multiple groups whose experience and access has been impeded by their marginalized status, greater buy-in for change may be achieved. An example of the use of intersectionality and buy-in for change can be found in the issue of safety on campus.

The current study identified that transgender students are at high risk for physical assault and experience significant stress associated with physical and emotional safety. Research on violence against women finds women to be at risk for physical and sexual violence on college campuses (Ali, 2011). Through the use of intersectionality, multiple groups who are at greater risk for violence on campus can be identified. Therefore, changes made to improve conditions, using this approach, can have a broader impact for a greater numbers of students. By identifying multiple student groups that overlap and would benefit from change, buy-in from power holders may be easier to achieve.

5. Non-coercive change. A fifth principal to this activist-change framework ensures that the transformative change is a non-coercive process and that all members have an equal voice in developing and implementing change. The non-coercive process used in the activist-change framework is influenced by Appreciative Inquiry as described in Dickerson & Helm-Stevens (2011). This process looks for participants to discover what is currently working in the organization undergoing change. Participants are then afforded the opportunity to develop an idealized version of the organization for the future. The third phase in this process calls for participants to construct positive “possibility” statements (Dickerson & Helm-Stevens, 2011, p. 68). The participants of this current study provided multiple suggestions for a better experience
as a transgender student. While the suggestions were largely related to the architecture of the institution, this study found that the most significant challenges were related to institutional climate. The final step is for participants to develop a detailed action plan to address the components identified in the previous phases of the process.

The value of the non-coercive process in shifting institutional climate is the level of buy-in and ownership that comes from non-coercive change. Wagner (2000) identifies that change, within schools, is largely compliance driven and bureaucratic in nature. Similar to the benefits of non-coercive change outlined by Dickerson & Helm-Stevens, Wagner presents that change is most sustainable when built on commitment rather than on compliance. This current study presents several areas within the institution, involving both the architecture and climate, that may be addressed under Title IX (Lhamon, 2014). However, as presented in Wagner (2000), compliance and mandate-driven change is less sustainable than non-coercive change. The activist-change framework presents an avenue for change to be both complaint and built on shared values and goals.

In conclusion, the activist-framework serves as a structure in which scholar-practitioners can reverse the invisibility and marginalization of transgender students. The activist-change framework brings together members from every level of the institution, creates a safe and accessible space for discourse and bi-directional work to challenge assumptions, and creates a more inclusive climate for transgender students built on non-coercive, authentic change. Through the use of the activist-framework, scholar-practitioners will be able to address more than the rudimentary architectural challenges facings transgender students, but shift the climate of the institution to recognize and validate transgender students and their experiences.
Limitations

Several limitations exist within this study. Limitations include: (1) the small sample size; (2) the lack of undergraduate participants; and (3) use of critical theory as a theoretical framework. The use of a five-person sample size is appropriate for the use of IPA in a study seeking to gain insight into how a marginalized group makes sense of their experiences within a dominant society. Using small sample sizes can provide a challenge for generalizing the results to a larger population. In the case of this specific study and with transgender students as the target population, I do believe that the findings generated from this study could be and should be applied to the majority of transgender students in higher education. Lack of numbers has frequently been the argument for not implementing changes such as policies and procedures to benefit transgender students. I do not believe that the same argument should be applied to the results of this study. However, I do believe that the inclusion of participation from undergraduate students would greatly enrich the results of a study such as this.

While this study was opened up to all transgender students at this urban university in the Northeast, undergraduates represented the originally targeted participation group. Despite numerous attempts, undergraduate students did not choose to participate in this study. This is an important element for future exploration around the experiences of transgender students in higher education. Multiple reasons could account for the lack of participation from undergraduate students. A few possible reasons for the lack of undergraduate participation may include: (1) undergraduate students may not be at a developmental point in their transgender identity where they feel safe participating in transgender-focused research; (2) undergraduate students may not have time in their academic and extracurricular schedules to participate in research studies; or (3) undergraduate students may not have interest in participating in research studies. Future studies
should seek to conduct transgender undergraduate focus groups to identify reasons for lack of participation and to identify ways in which to improve the participation of undergraduate students.

A final limitation of this study is the theoretical framework used to guide the analysis of the data collected. In using the lens of critical theory to identify and explore a societal problem affecting a marginalized population, both the researcher and study participants can use critical theory as an action framework to inform the next steps in creating social change. The active role critical theory plays in social research makes this theory an ideal framework to use in conjunction with an interpretive phenomenological analysis of the experiences of transgender students. However, it was through the interview process that I observed an oversight in the selection of critical theory. When asked to identify a time when the student’s transgender identity influenced an experience or interaction, every participant provided the same answer: Every experience and interaction is influenced by their transgender identities. There is no way to separate the transgender identity from the experiences or interactions of transgender people. The experiences of transgender students, as reported in this study, are greatly influenced by their interactions with cisgender people and the attitudes and beliefs held by cisgender people. With this in mind, future research should explore the experiences of transgender people using critical race theory as a theoretical framework.

Secondly, there is an inherent irony in choosing critical theory as the theoretical framework for this study. With critical theory comes a framework for action steps to address problems that can then empower the population being marginalized. The results of this study find that the marginalized population (transgender students) are the ones taking action to improve their experiences and in some cases, they are the only ones. One student stated:
I think it would be great if all of these institutions had been there- speaking from my experience if I could have just- if everything was in place for me… but otherwise if you have a trans person saying “This is a thing that needs to happen,” it shouldn’t be on the shoulders of the trans people to work so hard for change. It should always be on the – it always is and it should always be on the shoulders of the people who have power and are the institutions.

As this study was limited to graduate students and college graduates, it is unclear if the majority of transgender students, both graduate and undergraduates, are empowered or if this empowerment and advocacy work is unique to these participants. Whether the participants’ ages, education levels, and experiences act as precursors to empowerment and advocacy work is also unclear. It is important to note, however, that all of this study’s participants participated in transgender related advocacy and change work while enrolled as undergraduate students.

Conclusion: A Call to Action

As an individual, the most significant lesson learned from the process of conducting this study and analyzing the results was my new awareness of privilege. It was not that I was unaware of my privilege as a white person, or as an educated individual, or as a person of means with ample opportunities to advance in life. I knew how privileged I was, but it was my layers of privilege that let me think that I understood the experiences of transgender students.

My privilege as a member of the queer community, which I never connected with privilege, was challenged this spring while I was attending a conference on trans issues sponsored by the Greater Boston Chapter of the Massachusetts Coalition for Suicide Prevention. During this conference, a transwoman, speaking as a panelist, said that being gay or lesbian is
more socially accepted than being transgender. She went on to say that, in order for the transgender community to achieve the rights and recognition that they deserve, they need to stop being associated with the queer (gay, lesbian, and bisexual) community. She stated that transgender people need to have their own fight for civil rights and that the association with the queer community prevents the transgender community from moving forward. In a sense, we (queer community) were watering down the fight for civil fights that needed to happen for transgender people. My privilege had always led me to believe that we (non-binary people) were all fighting the same fight and had the same needs. What I came to realize through this work, is that I have the privilege of not being judged based on how I present to the world, how I look, and how I express my gender identity. Physically, I do not challenge the dominant gender normative society’s idea of what a female-bodied person is supposed to look like. My physical presentation does not call attention to my gender identity because I am privileged to have a gender and sex that are aligned. The levels of judgment and discrimination that transgender people experience are issues that I will never experience. My fight for civil rights, as a lesbian, is not their fight for civil rights. But I can fight on their behalf.

At this conference, I was introduced to an online article that further addressed the differences between fighting on behalf of marginalized group and fighting with a marginalize group. The role of ally has become a capitalist venture and one that does not directly benefit the oppressed population the ally claims to be supporting (Accomplices Not Allies, 2014). “Direct action is really the best and may be the only way to learn what it is to be an accomplice. We’re in a fight, so be ready for confrontation and consequence” (Accomplices Not Allies, 2014). Academics and intellectuals must, “seek ways to leverage resources and material support and/or
betray their institution to further liberation struggles. An intellectual accomplice would strategize with, not for and not be afraid to pick up a hammer” (Accomplices Not Allies, 2014).

I have recommended this article to several of my academic/intellectual colleagues, specifically for the use of the concepts as part of a training for psychologists on the issue of diversity. The call to action that I had hoped to issue to the psychologists was one of being an agent of change. I had hoped to use the concept of accomplice, not an ally, to argue that the best way to support a marginalized population is to be willing and ready to act when it is unpopular and a political or social risk. During the planning meeting for this training, I asked a colleague who had read the accomplice article how he wanted to incorporate the material. His response was that he felt the article was too charged and too radical for use. His response was one of privilege for he could choose to take or leave the call to action that was issued.

This dissertation study has issued its own call to action. Several months ago, I approached the president of a local chapter of a psychology organization and requested conference time to hold a training on the issues facing young transgender students and the recommendations for supporting them. My plan for the training was to include the recommendations on supporting transgender youth issued by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, the changes in Title IX, the unique risks and challenges facing transgender youth, and the way psychologists can be change agents to improve climate and culture. At the time of my initial request, I was told that there would not be enough interest in the topic, and that the best conference dates were to be used on topics with a broader appeal and interest. While I was disheartened by this response, it mirrored the responses heard by so many of my study’s participants. The issues and challenges experienced by transgender people
are not important enough to the dominant gender normative society, even when they are educators.

I continued to pursue my desire to hold this training and was finally provided a three-day conference slot in the summer. I spent the following weeks lining up speakers and organizing the training. As the date was quickly approaching, I received an email stating that only three people had registered for the conference, and if registration did not increase, the conference would be cancelled. The conference was cancelled several days later. Several reasons could account for the low registration number: the dates (mid-summer during popular vacation time); the location (two hours away from the majority of the organization’s membership); or the topic. Unfortunately, I am confident that the topic will be used as the scapegoat for the low registration and subsequent cancellation. Privilege is a blind eye.

As a scholar-practitioner, now armed with the knowledge gained from this study, I know that I have more work to do. The most significant finding that I will take away from this study is the power of cisgender privilege and the role privilege plays in impeding progress and necessary change. Therefore, my action steps include work with cisgender people within institutional structures, both for-profits and not-for-profits, to begin to understand their own cisgender privilege and explore their attitudes and beliefs towards transgender people. I believe in grassroots efforts; however, this study has shown that without buy-in from the power holders, change is a slow and challenging battle.

Another action step that I will take will be to conduct the training for school psychologists on supporting transgender youth. I will collaborate with the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education to bring my training and expertise to individual schools
districts. I will also provide individual or small group training opportunities through the Massachusetts School Psychology Association.

When I first heard a study participant say, “Not being an asshole goes a long way,” I laughed and said that I would use it somewhere in the write-up of the results. However, the more that I think about these words, the more I realize the power of the hurt and marginalization behind them. The call to action that I wish to issue to all who read this study is to not settle with not being an asshole. It should be reasonably easy to not be an asshole to transgender people and about the issues facing transgender people. Go beyond not being an asshole, and go beyond being an ally. There is a cycle of learning, caring, and acting. However, part of this cycle can entrap well-intentioned people. Learning about an issue leads to caring about the issue, which can bring one back to wanting to learn more and care more. However, without action, there is little value in the learning or caring. Go beyond not being an asshole; go beyond being an ally, and be an accomplice and take action.
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Appendix C:

Consent Form

Signed Informed Consent Document

Northeastern University, Department: College of Professional Studies
Name of Investigator(s): Dr. Jane Lohmann, Principal Investigator, and Noelle Patrise Roop, Student Researcher
Title of Project: TRANSGENDER STUDENTS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN IPA STUDY OF EXPERIENCES AND ACCESS OF TRANSGENDER STUDENTS TO STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study
We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell me if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?
You have expressed an interest in participating in this study based on viewing the study’s informational flyer. Participants of this study are required to be a current or past resident at Northeastern University, have a current student status at Northeastern University and self-identify as transgender or non-conforming.

Why is this research being done?
The purpose of this research is to gain insight into how transgender or gender non-conforming students make sense of the college experience as it relates to identity development. This study will also look at how transgender or gender non-conforming students perceive access to student support services.

What will I be asked to do?
If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview that will last between one and two hours. The interview will include questions about your ascribed gender identity; your experiences as a resident at NEU; your experiences accessing student support services; your interpretation of the campus climate; and suggestions for improvement of the college experience. If you chose to participate, you may still terminate the interview and your participation in the study at any point without any negative repercussions.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?
You will be interviewed at a time and place that is convenient and comfortable for you. The interview will take between one and two hours. If you chose to participate in this study, you will be asked to create a pseudonym under which your interview will be stored.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?
There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study, but participants will provide a list of local resources in case any part of the interview is found to be stressful. Participants will also be free to only answer those questions that are comfortable for you to answer. A list of local mental health
resources will be provided to study participants.

If a participant is observed to be a risk to self or others, proper supports will be notified.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

There will be no direct benefits from participating in this research study.

**Who will see information about me?**

No identifiable information related to the participants will be used in any of the publically available forms of the study. Identifiable information will be available to only the primary investigator and the investigator’s dissertation advisor. Identifiable information will be destroyed at the completion of the study. All identifiable information will be secured on a password protected, personally owned computer.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

Participation can be terminated at any time without negative repercussions.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study, but participants will provide a list of local resources in case any part of the interview is found to be stressful. Participants will also be free to only answer those questions that are comfortable for you to answer. A list of local mental health resources will be provided to study participants. No special arrangements will be made for compensation or for payment for treatment solely because of my participation in this research. If a participant is considered a risk to self or others, proper supports will be contacted.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

All questions and concerns can be directed to investigator, Noelle P. Roop. Phone: 267-346-4309. Email: roop.n@husky.neu.edu or primary investigator, Jane Lohmann, j.lohmann@neu.edu

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

There are no financial incentives for participation.

**Will it cost me anything to participate?**

There are no costs associated with participation in this study.

If you have any questions about your rights in this research, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University, Boston, MA 02115. Tel: 617.373.4588, Email: n.regina@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

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**Signature of person agreeing to take part**

**Date**

**Printed name of person above**

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**Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent**

**Date**

**Printed name of person above**

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**APPROVED**

NU IRB 
VALID THROUGH
Appendix B - Northeastern IRB Approval

NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION

Date: December 16, 2013
IRB #: CPS13-12-01

Principal Investigator(s): Jane Lohman
Noelle Patrice Roop

Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address: 20 Belvidere
Northeastern University

Title of Project: Transgender Students in Higher Education: An IPA Study of Experiences and Access of Transgender Students

Participating Sites: Permission letters on file; Director LGBTQA
Director Residential Life

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7

Informed Consents: One (1) signed consent form

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: DECEMBER 15, 2014

Investigator’s Responsibilities:

1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.

2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.

3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.

4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.

5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.

6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
Appendix C - Interview Questions

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me your age, where you have lived prior to now, and how you came to choose this university.

2. Please tell me about your gender identity and how you came to understand your gender identity, i.e. tell me your gender coming out story.

3. Please tell me about how you define your gender identity. What words, pronouns, labels, adjectives or descriptors best represent your gender identity?

4. How many years have you attended this university? If you attended a college prior to this institution, did your transfer have anything to do with your experience as a transgender person? If so, please elaborate. What was your experience, as a transgender person, at your previous institution?

5. When you’re on campus, describe a time when you felt like your identity as a transgender student influenced an interaction or experience.

6. Tell me what it’s like to live on campus as an openly transgender student, i.e. room assignments, roommates, etc. If you have chosen to move off campus, what were your reasons?

7. Tell me about your experiences as an openly transgender student navigating the basics such as access to bathrooms, health services, the registrars office, sports teams, health insurance, etc.
8. If you have sought out support on campus as it relates to being transgender, where have you found support? What (or who) made this a positive or supportive experience?

9. What are your thoughts and opinions on participating in trans-focused research?

10. What question(s) did I not ask you that I should have? What changes would you like to see to improve/change the experiences of transgender students at this university?
Appendix A:

Informational Recruitment Flier

Seeking Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming Students!

Northeastern University Doctor of Education student seeking openly transgender and gender non-conforming Northeastern students who may be interested in participating in dissertation research. Students must be between the ages of 18 to 25 and live on, or have lived on, Northeastern's campus.

This study involves one hour-long interview to discuss the experiences of being a transgender student at college and discuss how students perceive access to student support services and campus climate as it relates to being transgender. Interviews will take place in the preferred location of the study participant (i.e. on campus, off campus). Follow up phone calls or emails may be necessary.

If you are in participating, please email Noelle Roop at 267-346-4309 or roop.n@husky.neu.edu. Additional information can be provided by Doctoral Advisor, Dr. Jane Lohmann at j.lohmann@neu.edu.

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