



2025–2026 FELLOWS RESEARCH

The Limits of Existence

Trans Students and Higher Education

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Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Description of the Project.....	4
Situating this Research in the Literature	4
Sense of Belonging.....	5
Project Design.....	6
Site Contexts	6
Participants.....	7
Campus as a Site of (Not) Belonging.....	7
Gender Identity & Expression Experiences	8
Discussion.....	10
Implications and Conclusion	11
References.....	13

Introduction

Of the approximately 277 Executive Orders (EOs) issued by the President of the United States between 2025 to September of 2026, two are most relevant to this research project about the experiences of trans students in higher education: EO 14151: Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] Programs and Preferencing, and EO 14168: Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government (Executive Orders, n.d.). Taken together, these two EOs made the U.S. President and his administration's priorities clear: trans¹ existence is in peril. Those EOs were interpreted by college and university leadership as demands to repeal all campus inclusion efforts aimed to increase enrollment, access, and persistence (GLAD Law, 2025; The White House, n.d.). Colleges and universities attempted to perform significant institutional changes based on fear and/or interpretation of the EOs (Gretzinger et al., 2025; Murphy, 2025) to avoid federal investigations by the Department of Justice and the Department of Education (see Sottile, 2026).

The initial EOs, as well as the legislation that preceded and followed, are manifestations of trans oppression (Catalano et al., 2007) as they reduce human sex to a binary and limit those categories to reproductive capabilities, assert that trans identity does not exist, prohibit transgender people from the military and collegiate athletics, ban medical support for trans youth under the age of 19, and remove protections for trans youth in schools (GLAD Law, 2025). In short, the force and impact of the EOs, and related state-based legislation, aim to enact systemic and institutional restrictions on how institutions of higher education can recognize, support, and provide curricular offerings for trans people (Murphy, 2025).

The combined consequences of state-based legislation that banned DEI (Alonso, 2024) and institutional interpretation of EOs 14151 and 14168 led to the closure of numerous programs and services aimed to support many minoritized campus populations, including LGBTQ+ students (Mangan, 2025; Stripling, 2025). These edicts had a significant impact on higher education, including the closure of LGBTQ+ centers at many colleges and universities (Duran et al., 2026; Kannan et al., 2025; Weissman, 2025). Institutional leadership responded to these EOs by questioning the necessity or existence of courses and majors that center LGBTQ+ content or theories (Escott, 2025; Whitford, 2025). As these dynamics continue to evolve, it is unclear the full extent of queer and trans erasure in higher education. These legislative, policy, and rhetorical sociopolitical efforts are not new; in fact, they are part of a prolonged, global anti-trans movement (Butler, 2024). The current wave of U.S.-based legislation coupled with Presidential authority, seeks to rectify any claims about the absence of conservative viewpoints in higher education by making any other perspectives unlawful and to reject the recognition and

¹ I use trans in the most capacious of understandings that respects the self-determination of an individual to claim any gender identity that is not cisgender.

existence of trans identities; what might have begun as claims for the desire for conservative inclusion became actions for trans exclusion (Deutchman, 2026).

Description of the Project

In the fall of 2025, I began a research project to examine the impact of these changes to higher education for trans student at two public universities in different regions of the United States. My goal was to understand how these contemporary manifestations of trans oppression impacted trans students, and I was curious to see if there were any notable distinctions based on institutional responses to the EOs. This report provides a snapshot of the 18 trans student participants at these two institutions (nine at each) and elucidates my findings of how contemporary trans oppression efforts influenced trans student campus experiences, willingness to be open about their gender identity and expression, and reactions to campus (in)actions to support trans inclusion. As a measure of protection, I refer to each institution and all 18 participants by pseudonyms. The University of Caution was the name I assigned to the institution that shuttered all LGBTQ+ institutionalized supports (e.g., offices, programs, services); I chose this name to reflect my interpretation of how the institution responded to state and federal dynamics with an abundance of caution and acquiescence to federal statements. The institution that retained, as of this writing, all its DEI programs, including its LGBTQ+ center and queer academic offerings, I named Engagement University to reflect its broader campus dynamic where students had institutionally sponsored trans-related opportunities to connect or engage.

Situating this Research in the Literature

The experiences of trans students in U.S. higher education can be found across a myriad of texts with empirical research appearing within the last 25 years (e.g., Lange et al., 2022; Nicolazzo, 2017; Pusch, 2005). Researchers have explored trans student experiences in areas such as, but not limited to, classroom (e.g., Gutzwa & Marx, 2025; Pryor, 2015), identity development (e.g., Dolan, 2023; Lange, 2022; Lange & Linley, 2025), perceptions of campus climate (Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Garvey et al., 2019), gender expression (e.g., Catalano, 2015b; Jourian, 2019) and intersections with racial identity (e.g., Gutzwa, 2024; Jourian & McCloud, 2020; Simms et al., 2023). The progression of trans identity into research agendas about collegiate experiences and institutions had been on a slow rise since the late 1990s, reflecting campus transformations in terms of including gender identity and expression into campus non-discrimination policies (e.g., Beemyn, 2005; Goldberg et al., 2019), policies to allow for trans inclusion in collegiate athletics (e.g., Harry & Graves, 2024), and gender inclusive housing (e.g., Nicolazzo et al., 2018). The constellation of such efforts addressed many of the material needs of trans students and inspired educational interventions for faculty, staff, and

students to support more trans-inclusive institutions (e.g., Buggs et al., 2022; Catalano, 2015a; Catalano et al., 2024; Catalano & Wagner, 2024; Seelman, 2014).

Admittedly, the progress was far from complete with many imperfections (Goldberg et al., 2019; Lange et al., 2019), and still it is important to recognize how such efforts aimed to ensure trans students, faculty, and staff would feel less marginalized on campuses across the U.S. Yet, the existence of policies does not always mean correlating practices exist that foster inclusion, as trans student reported inconsistent experiences with faculty and staff who failed to use student's correct pronouns and names (Flint et al., 2023). Instead of reacting to the existence of trans students, institutions began to anticipate the arrival of trans students and their needs (e.g., Day et al., 2024; Marine, 2017). Trans student developed different practices of resilience to persist in higher education (Lange et al., 2025; Nicolazzo, 2017), even if they continued to articulate low expectations for inclusion on campus (Catalano, 2015a; Flint et al., 2023).

The challenge with higher education institutions varied responses to the EOs is further exasperated by the unpredictable higher education landscape that keeps shifting, making it difficult to capture real-time experiences of students. The purpose of this research project was to try to capture trans student experiences in relatively close proximity to the EOs and institutional response(s) to them. Thus, this research aimed to understand the extent to which, if any, the sociopolitical dynamics had on trans student's sense of belonging (Museus, 2014; Strayhorn, 2012). My research questions were:

1. How do trans students describe their sense of belonging at their institution in the wake of anti-trans and anti-DEI sociopolitical realities?
2. How do sociopolitical (local and beyond) dynamics influence trans students' self-expression and/or willingness to share about their transness?

Sense of Belonging

As this project is about both trans students and their campus environments, I framed my approach through a conceptual framework informed by Strayhorn's (2012) sense of belonging and Museus' (2014) culturally engaging campus environments model (CECE). By putting the concept of college student belonging in conversation with CECE, I gave attention to trans student's individual experiences within the context of their specific campus. Through interviews that lasted between 30-90 minutes via Zoom, these trans students described how their transness influenced, if at all, their campus experiences and their perceptions of their institution through access or availability of resources, including perception of campus. Belonging, as a concept, influenced interview protocol through the construction of questions about when, how, and where trans students could (or not) fully express themselves—their gender and other salient identities.

Opportunities to connect with others, express oneself, and other elements influence student experiences with sense of belonging reflected through a campus environment that is culturally engaging (Museus, 2014). CECE hypothesizes that various factors influence student success including external influences (e.g., family, finances), individual influences (e.g., sense of belonging), and pre-college inputs (e.g., academic preparation; Museus, 2014). I asked participants to reflect on trans-related resources available at or through their institution, places and spaces where they could share, express, or discuss their gender identities, and perceptions of how the institution has demonstrated support, if at all, for trans students. One of the indicators of an institution with an investment in CECE is the existence of opportunities for students to engage with their cultural communities through “activities aimed at spreading awareness about issues in their respective communities, engaging in community activism, participating in community service and service-learning opportunities, or engaging in problem-based research projects that aim to solve problems within their cultural communities” (Museus, 2014, p. 211). When students are denied such opportunities through omission or removal of programs/services, then that enhances negative associations between the student and the institution.

Project Design

I traveled to each campus to explore the physical campus environments, doing what I called environmental scans, which allowed me to notice my own perceptions of places and spaces that students might describe. I also informally met with staff and faculty who were available to gather their perspective on how trans students might experience the institution. I posted paper fliers across both campuses to recruit participants, which seemed to be effective as there were 35 potential participants who filled out the interest form. The paper fliers were especially effective at the University of Caution because the individuals I spoke with had concerns of professional consequences if they circulated an electronic version of my call for participants through institutional networks.

Site Contexts

Engagement University and the University of Caution are both public universities in different regions of the United States. For this report, and any publications, I am intentional to be vague about additional institutional details to protect the anonymity of the participants. University of Caution’s state legislature has passed bills that restrict youth (under 18) from accessing gender-affirming care and responded to the EOs by closing most DEI and all LGBTQ+ institutionalized programs and services. In contrast, Engagement University, at the time this report goes live, remains in a U.S. state where legislators have not mounted any serious threats to trans lives and existence, and neither the state nor the institution have taken any steps to defund or dismantle DEI programs, offices, or initiatives. Using two universities with different state dynamics provides a measure of comparative opportunity between participants’ experiences.

Participants

As previously mentioned, there were nine participants from each institution who had a range of trans and nonbinary identities, majors, and years as a student (all undergraduate). I used a semi-structured interview protocol that explored participant expectations of trans inclusivity at their institution, current collegiate experiences, trans supportive people and resources, and trans identity disclosure influences. Interviews ranged in length with the shortest lasting about 30 minutes and the longest going the full 90 minutes. I also collected historical materials about trans-related events and programs on campus from each institution. I will not address those materials in this report as I have yet to determine how (or if) they can be integrated into this research. The participants across both institutions were predominately white with only three participants from Engagement University identifying as People of Color.

Campus as a Site of (Not) Belonging

No participant would describe their institution as a place of perfection, yet Engagement University participants were far more apt to describe their institution as a place where they felt they belonged. For example, Chip (Engagement University, she/her) shared, “I’d absolutely say this: I belong.” Similarly, Ezra (Engagement University, he/they) put it this way, “I am like most other students here. Being trans doesn’t make me feel singled out or I’m having a significantly different experience because in my classes, I’m just another student.” Participants at Engagement University, in general, felt a sense of belonging on their campus.

In contrast, participants from the University of Caution were less apt to describe their institution as a place they belonged. Emelie (University of Caution, she/her) shared her limited comfort of campus this way:

I guess depending on your visibility obviously, but you're going to mostly be just another person on campus. But you're also 20% pariah ...[if] people recognize you, some of them. And that sort of recognizement [sic] or recognition, even if no one mentions it, is still felt. And you also don't or never know what they're actually thinking. Even when there's someone walking past you and they glance at you or you're talking with someone or you're in a group with someone, that kind of thing. Or even teachers sometimes.

The uncertainty that plagued her movements and interactions on campus was a weight she carried. Adding to the weight was that University of Caution participants could point to few resources where they could find support. Instead, University of Caution participants lamented about what no longer existed (e.g., the ability to access hormones at the student health center) or admitted incertitude about what resources still existed (e.g., name changes in the learning management system).

A general sense from University of Caution participants was that the institution, and its leadership, lacked respect for trans students' humanity. As C (University of Caution, she/her) aptly put it:

It's very much like they - I don't want to say they don't want us here, but they kind of don't, right? It's really like if they could just sweep all of this under the rug, never acknowledge it, never have to deal with it, that it would be great. It would be so good for 'em and that's very frustrating.

These feelings of erasure were significant assertions as they are counter to any form of recognition; instead, the belief was the institution would prefer they remained silent to avoid conflict or demands of inclusion. Curtis (University of Caution, he/him) simply said, "I definitely feel I do not belong at all." He went on to describe the culture of the campus as tending to "lean Republican, which is not necessarily a bad thing. That it's overwhelmingly cis het [cisgender and heterosexual], ... does contribute to feeling like I'm kind of on the fringe of the culture." The purpose of this report is not to confirm participant perceptions of the political dynamics or demographics on campus. The key finding here is that trans participants at the University of Caution felt they were outsiders who had limited resources to support their existence on campus.

Gender Identity & Expression Experiences

Participants at both institutions were reluctant to be too open about their trans identities. For many, they were still in the process of deciding on their level of openness of their trans identities with their families of origin, which influenced their choices about how out to be on campus. In this way, less identity openness was shared across both sites, although the concerns about safety were more significant at the University of Caution. For example, Cedar (University of Caution, any pronouns) shared:

I think that I have to be careful because if I'm not careful, then I risk people I don't want knowing about my identity and stuff, finding out against my will, and while maybe nothing would happen, maybe it would be fine, but also there's a very real risk, especially at this campus, is that I could be the victim of a fucking hate crime or something. ... I'm not willing to risk that.

Cedar was clear that they did not want to have their choice of disclosing taken from her. Along similar thinking, Curtis (University of Caution, he/him) said:

I choose to be purposefully vague about my identity as much as possible. If I'm around other queer people, I try to drop hints about my identity or I will casually refer to myself

as male, but I only do that once I've read the room. And I still avoid explicitly saying that I'm transgender or even that I use he/him pronouns.

Participants never explicitly said they felt they were unable to share their trans identities due to laws or policies. Instead, they attributed their hesitancy about the negative reactions from other people known or unknown to them.

In contrast, at Engagement University, participants made choices about coming out based on relevance to their person or situation, not about fear of safety or targeted violence. Violet (Engagement University, she/her) offered:

I think it's more of it's my story to share and I don't really need to share it to other people. ... And I don't feel like it's too much of a need to reveal it if it's not relevant to the conversation almost. So, I guess that's a positive in a way where it's like, oh, I'm just existing as a trans person rather than having to explain myself all the time.

Violet revealed how she has the freedom of choice due to the context of her institution and experiences, not that she is at an institution where she must hide her existence because disclosing it would cause tension or risk her safety. Chip (Engagement University, she/her) described herself as making decisions about openness in the moment although she said:

but I think if they're a friend, I'll share it with them. If it's not, I mean, I'm fairly open with it, even if I don't share directly, I wear trans earrings. I have trans pins on my backpack, so anyone who recognizes the flag would be able to tell.

Chip, like Violet, described a campus environment that provided choice about coming out as trans based on context and interpersonal dynamics. Engagement University participants' concerns were located within the interpersonal interaction, possibly because they had institutional policies that supported their existence.

Whereas discomforts about outness for University of Cautious participants were amplified by perceptions that their institution would not be responsive to anti-trans behaviors. Parker (University of Cautious, he/they) described this experience on his campus:

Recently there was an anti-trans group rallied up outside of one of my classes where one of my friends had to come up to me after I had already walked past it and I didn't see anything to warn me not to go near that side of campus at all because they were screaming stuff like, "Men can't be women." ... Unfortunately, I have to have a group chat ... for my campus and stuff like that. But yeah, basically just how conservative my campus is one of the worst parts.

The politically conservative activism that was brought up by all University of Caution participants engendered feelings of intimidation and exclusion. As a result, participants at the University of Caution shared they felt more constricted about their gender expression and/or sharing their gender identity than their peers at Engagement University.

Political activism was a part of campus life at Engagement University, but participants described it as politically progressive, or at least not openly trans antagonistic. The general campus environment (or vibe as the young people would say) was not consistently described in the same fraught terms as it was by students at the University of Caution. For instance, University of Caution participants faced experiences that Engagement University participants did not. For example, Parker shared things said to him as they traversed the campus:

I've heard people tell me, I need to go find Jesus. I need to go back to being normal or I need to kill myself and stuff like that just because I'm trans or because I don't look straight and I'm not straight, but they can tell just by looking at me and whatnot. ... I just let 'em say it. But it's something I have to deal with and I would gladly take it if it means someone else I know doesn't have to.

Although it is difficult to imagine what Parker described and how they endured a constant barrage of ideological baiting, he survived this treatment from other students. It is also important to note their desire to withstand harassment, if it meant other trans students did not have to endure it, was an act of solidarity. In that way, at least there was some semblance of community or desire to protect other trans and nonbinary students from the same experiences.

Discussion

Not all participants did research about their university prior to attending in terms of trans resources, practices, or policies. For many participants at the University of Caution, their choice of university was motivated by their priorities of affordability and proximity, thus this public in-state institution met their needs. That participants did not engage in much trans-related research about their institution was due to a variety of reasons with the most significant being that they did not identify as trans and/or did not prioritize resources because they were closeted when they considered college options. At the same time, participants felt their choice was mostly the correct one for them, even if their experiences of belonging were lackluster. Overall, in the parlance of popular culture, trans student participants at both the University of Caution and Engagement University are alright, at least generally speaking. To be alright in this context is not to say they are thriving or believe their institution is a site of belonging. To be alright in the context of this research is to recognize that all trans students, regardless of institution, must navigate and negotiate how they express and identify their gender with not a small measure of consideration.

The trans students at Engagement University described an institution with trans-specific resource, and the existence of those resources were the comfort since few of them accessed any of those programs or services. These institutionally embedded resources were offered by or within the LGBTQ+ Center on campus, which participants identified as a place for support, programs, and services. Interesting to note was how few participants at Engagement University attended trans-related support groups or events on campus, yet the existence of such opportunities on campus seemed to meet their needs for trans inclusion. Additionally beneficial for Engagement University participants was the politically liberal campus environment where activism was geared toward social justice movements. These realities led participants to articulate a sense of belonging and the ability to exist on campus without an increased sense of fear for their safety.

At the University of Caution, participants moved about their politically conservative campus environment and subsisted through the support of close friends and the opportunities that they anticipated post-graduation would bring. Their small intra-community efforts included such things as texts of places to avoid during conservative anti-trans activism or finding the trans student organization. These same participants struggled to name an office(s), administrator(s), or professor(s) who they could go to for support and saw university leadership in support of conservative political activism. All trans students should have the agency to make choices about when, with whom, and how to disclose their trans—and any other—identity. Yet, trans student participants at the University of Caution often spoke about trying to go unnoticed to not provoke stares, intrusive or impolite questions from others, or physical threats to their safety. The sociopolitical climate of campus, what participants described as conservative Republican, influenced trans participants' comfort levels including an unwillingness to disclose their trans identity to most people. Instead, participants described how they navigated campus as to be unseen is not a ringing endorsement for inclusivity or belonging. Instead, trans students at University of Caution endured an at times hostile climate to persist to graduation.

Implications and Conclusion

At this point in my report, I would typically provide recommendations for actions institutions, campus leaders, and students could make to improve the lives of trans students in higher education. I find myself hesitant and resistant to offer recommendations as this research did not necessarily provide potentials for improvement. In the plainest terms, since January of 2025 and until some future president rescinds EO 14168, the U.S. government denies the existence of trans people. This does not mean that resistance is impossible or that there is no hope; it does mean that I struggled to identify liberatory possibilities in this work.

The implications of these findings are that college and universities that choose to remove or diminish trans-related resources will see the results of those decisions have negative impacts on trans students. Trans participants at Engagement University had access to a bevy of

institutional resources, programs, offices, and policies, including administrators who could support students in their self-advocacy and who may advocate on behalf of students. In stark contrast, University of Caution participants relied on individual interpersonal support, mostly from other students, about where to avoid so they do not get hassled for being trans or who they can come out to because they can hint at their identity. Participants from the University of Caution felt like they were on the fringes of campus life, under constant threat of being too visibly trans, unrecognized by university leadership, and grateful they have not experienced physical violence.

Instead of offering generic implications for practice, I will surface questions for those inside and outside of higher education to consider. I offer these questions to provoke conversations and reflection in the hopes that we can all work together to address how sociopolitical dynamics influence sense of belonging and gender expression, specifically for trans students:

- What does it mean when calls for broader inclusion of conservative perspectives requires the rejection of the existence of trans populations? How do such rhetorical and political actions contradict the principles of free speech and free expression?
- How can we find ways to embrace conflicts in view that do not lead to the erasure of trans lives? What might it look like to embrace disagreement that does not eradicate the potential for everyone to thrive in higher education?
- What do we need to consider, risk, and enact to ensure trans people in higher education feel a sense of belonging?
- How do we engage in discussions and actions that ensure the persistence of, at least for now, the remaining LGBTQ+ centers in higher education?

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