

# The Use of Language in Gender-Inclusive Housing Practices and Research

*Steven Feldman*

Recent scholarship indicates a growing emergence in research on the experiences of transgender<sup>1</sup> and gender non-conforming (TGNC) college students and on the ways in which colleges and universities do or do not address the specific needs of TGNC students (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn, 2012; Goldberg et al., 2018; Nicolazzo, 2015). As visibility increases for TGNC individuals, the higher education industry, specifically student affairs (HESA), is tasked with keeping up with the movement to provide adequate services for its students (Nicolazzo, 2017). In this article, I will delve into examples of gender-inclusive housing practices, examine policies and institutional environments, and will discuss the implications of using and misusing language on gender-inclusive housing practices and, by extension, the students that utilize them.

## **The Structural Oppression of TGNC College Students**

Although they are often viewed as progressive spaces compared to the corporate sector, most colleges and universities are still ill-equipped to serve the needs of TGNC students (Goldberg et al., 2018). Even schools that have already expanded their nondiscrimination policies to protect students based on gender identity or expression often have given little thought to how their own physical and social structures uphold binary conceptions of gender (Gardner, 2017; Seelman, 2014). These structures reinforce heteronormative conceptions of relationship-building and put TGNC students at further risk of harassment and discrimination. Additionally, most higher education institutions do not meet the comprehensive healthcare needs of transgender students either in terms of student health insurance plans or the specific healthcare services offered by the institutions (Beemyn, 2005; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019). The current literature on transgender healthcare shows that healthcare providers often misgender, exoticize, or even refuse treatment for transgender individuals (McKinney, 2005; Santos et al., 2021). The medicalization of gender identity ensures that in order to be prescribed hormones, transgender individuals are required to undergo psychological evaluations and therapy appointments. However, since college and university counseling staff typically lack

<sup>1</sup>Throughout this paper, when referring to the language used by various scholars, I will use the terminology they used to highlight the intricacies of language. For example, some scholars use the phrase “trans\*,” where the asterisk refers to computer search engine functions in which one could search for any words beginning with the prefix “trans-”. While some trans\* scholars embrace the term for its textual ability to highlight the variety of ways people come to identify within the trans community, other trans scholars reject the term, claiming it puts a spotlight on divisions and differences within members of the trans community. Those scholars argue that while “trans\*” was meant to be a more inclusive term, the word “trans” was already inclusive to begin with. While there is validity to both positions, I personally choose to use “transgender” or “trans.”

training or education on supporting transgender students, they often are unable to adequately support TGNC students (Beemyn, 2005; Lawrence & Mckendry, 2019).

It is essential for colleges and universities to provide sufficient healthcare support for all their students given the epidemic rise in mental health cases across the country (Turetsky & Sanderson, 2018). Often, students who can find healthcare staff who respect their gender identity and provide informed treatment nonetheless are unable to receive medical treatment, as “most college insurance plans specifically exclude coverage for gender reassignment surgeries and related conditions, including hormone replacement therapy” (Beemyn, 2005, p. 79). As of December 2021, more than half of the states in the United States do not provide LGBTQ-inclusive insurance protections, with one state explicitly allowing insurers to refuse coverage for gender-affirming care (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2021). Additionally, 20 states do not include transgender and transition-related healthcare in their state employee health benefits, with an additional 12 states explicitly excluding those services in their state employee health benefits (MAP, 2021). With many colleges and universities taking their lead from state or federal guidelines, exclusionary and transphobic practices remain the norm at far too many institutions. These institutional forms of discrimination exist across functional areas outside of healthcare. They are pervasive in academic affairs, athletics, admissions, and perhaps most visibly in housing and residence life.

### **Current Definitions and Implementations of Gender-Inclusive Housing**

First introduced in the early 1960s, coeducational housing quickly expanded its prevalence across American colleges and universities with over 90% of students living in coeducational college housing by 2009 (Taub et al., 2016). More recently, gender-inclusive housing has begun to gain major traction semi-nationally across the United States with an emphasis in the Northeast, Midwest, and West Coast (Taub et al., 2016; Willoughby et al., 2012). Research within HESA has consequently invested more time into documenting gender-inclusive housing initiatives as well as the experiences of students residing in gender-inclusive housing (Nicolazzo, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2017; Taub et al., 2016; Willoughby et al., 2012).

As more colleges and universities have begun to adopt gender-inclusive housing practices, the language around gender-inclusive housing policies have also changed to reflect shifting ideologies. For example, many scholars and practitioners alike have used terms like gender-neutral housing, gender-blind housing, and all-gender housing (Krum et al., 2013). For the purposes of this article, I have chosen to use the term gender-inclusive housing because gender itself is not neutral; gender is political. While many individuals identify outside of the gender binary (such as gender non-binary and gender non-conforming), the greater college

culture still forces those people into gendered spaces such as locker rooms, bathrooms, athletic teams, and residence halls. In addition, even so-called gender-neutral housing initiatives that claim to be inclusive of all genders are riddled with gendered politics and gendered administrative decisions (Krum et al., 2013; Nicolazzo & Marine 2015; Nicolazzo et al., 2018). Although each college administration operates differently, at many institutions, cisgender administrators often create policies and enact change from a top-down approach, rather than gaining insight from the communities of students who are likely to utilize gender-inclusive housing.

Even the definitions of gender-inclusive housing vary between institutions as well as between scholars. For example, Ratliff (2014) defined gender neutral housing as “housing options tailored for transgender students, non-gender-conforming students or students looking to room with members of the opposite sex” (p. 29). Krum et al. (2013) wrote that “[gender-inclusive housing] allows students of different legal sexes to live together in the same residence hall room, suite, or apartment” (p. 65). Similarly, Taub et al. (2016) defined gender-neutral housing as “the practice of allowing students of different biological sexes to share college housing, such as the same apartment, suite, or room” (p. 77). These definitions, which notably were all published in scholarly journals within the last decade, define gender-inclusive housing based on *sex*, or *sex assigned at birth*, as it is more commonly referred to nowadays. Even though scholars across disciplines (especially in the fields of gender studies, queer studies, and trans studies) have written extensively that sex and gender are two separate phenomena, much of the language around definitions of gender-inclusive housing remains rooted in the conflation of sex and gender (Butler, 1990; de Beauvoir, 2010; Stryker, 2008). Unfortunately, ignorance and a lack of intentionality often cause this conflation to occur in higher education spaces, especially ones where gender is not at the forefront of someone’s daily responsibilities.

The sex/gender binary debate permeates student affairs. In the realm of residence life, the idea that sex is a biological concept whereas gender is a cultural construct has drastic implications for students living in housing on campus. Furthermore, the conflation of female/woman and male/man allows cisgender administrators in power the ability to grant or deny access to students seeking gender-inclusive housing. Nicolazzo and Marine (2015) wrote of a case study at Miami University in Ohio, where a trans student named Kaeden Kass had applied to be a Resident Assistant (RA). Kass, who openly identified as transmasculine, was told that if he were to be accepted, he would be placed according to his gender identity. However, when Kass was offered the RA position, he was placed in a female suite and would have been required to live with female roommates. This assignment erased Kass’ identity as

transmasculine, forcing him into a living situation based on his sex as opposed to his gender identity. When asked about gender-inclusive housing options at Miami University, Kass responded by saying that

[gender-inclusive housing is] only available for second-year students and up... It's very small, secretive, and hard to get into. You have to be interviewed and basically out yourself to do it...And even if that was presented as an option for me, it's the principle of the thing. Why should I have to be slotted into the 'miscellaneous' category instead of being put in the same pool of job candidates as the gender that I am? (Kingkade, 2012, para. 11)

Since gender is embedded in the very fabric of college campuses and gender non-conforming people make up a small number of college students, it becomes our imperative, as student affairs scholar-practitioners, to consider the ways in which gender-inclusive housing impacts the larger campus climate. The eradication of binary concepts of gender will create an equitable and socially just world for individuals of all gender identities, gender expressions, and sexualities.

Hobson (2014) wrote that “GNH [gender-neutral housing] forces questions about gender normative acculturation, gender construction, and gender identity and expression” (p. 34) into the dialogues we have regarding the merit of gender-inclusive housing. Gender-inclusive housing initiatives do far more in practice than simply demonstrating a first step towards a commitment to diversity and inclusion. When administrators create gender-inclusive housing as a means of checking off a box on a list of diversity initiatives, they fall short of creating effective, long-lasting change that makes a meaningful impact on the students. Ahmed (2012) describes this as “tick box diversity,” where diversity becomes a means to an end rather than an end in and of itself. This approach to diversity places the institution as the priority, rather than the students at the institution.

An important note to make about gender-inclusive housing practices is that there is no consistency among colleges and universities. Krum et al. (2013) stated that most forms of gender-inclusive housing fall into one of five different categories of housing styles. These include:

- **same room/different sex pairings:** allows students to live in the same room with one or more roommates of any assigned sex or gender identity.
- **apartment style:** students of any assigned sex or gender identity live in an apartment space and share the living room, kitchen, and one or more bathrooms.

- **gender identity assignment:** allows students to request to be housed based on their gender identity as opposed to their assigned sex.
- **evenly split groups:** students apply for an apartment-style housing as groups that are evenly divided by assigned sex.
- **self-contained single rooms:** students live in single rooms as necessary.

The authors of the study found that participants of gender-inclusive housing are “significantly more likely to attend an institution with apartment-style housing and self-contained single units over the three other options” (p. 75). However, at many institutions, apartment-style housing and self-contained single units are only available for returning and transferring students, and sometimes at a higher cost as well (Krum et al., 2013).

Due to the high costs associated with construction and maintenance, many schools continue to use cheaper housing options such as dormitories or residence halls, which often take the form of double-occupancy rooms lining a hallway with a common bathroom. Although these options are less preferential for many students, they do keep costs down for both the institution as well as for students. With that said, these options typically remain segregated based on gender. In creating gender-inclusive housing on campuses, administrators would be wise to hear from current students regarding their housing preferences. However, research has found that in most situations, students are often left out of conversations around implementing gender-inclusive housing (Krum et al., 2013; Nicolazzo et al., 2018; Willoughby et al., 2012).

### **Suggestions for Future Practice and Research**

As gender-inclusive housing continues to pave its way on college campuses across the United States, I offer several points for consideration for implementation. First, I would like to reiterate the argument made by Nicolazzo et al. (2018) that we need to move from implementing gender-inclusive housing as a *best practice* towards implementing gender-inclusive housing as an *intentional practice*. As they pointed out, “although there is a growing sentiment that [gender-inclusive housing] is necessary for forwarding equity and justice alongside trans\* collegians, there is a lack of institutional support for the intentional implementation of this practice” (p. 226). While standardizing gender-inclusive housing as a practice at residential colleges and universities is a positive indication of support for TGNC individuals, administrators should be wary of simply placing gender-inclusive housing on the list for tick box diversity. To avoid this, institutions should move toward the creation of gender-inclusive housing as an intentional practice, one that is specific to the institution, meets the needs of all students at the institution

(while paying close attention to the needs of TGNC individuals), and has support from administrators in senior leadership positions. The standardization of gender-inclusive housing is a positive step in the right direction, but only if institutions are implementing it in ways that support their TGNC student population.

Since many TGNC individuals have emphasized that educating other students on gender diversity would be beneficial for creating a more trans-inclusive campus culture (Goldberg et al., 2018), one solution could be to incorporate gender-inclusive housing into living-learning communities. Future research should look at institutions that have considered and implemented this approach to better assess the benefits and consequences of such a practice. Additionally, it could be useful to have more research surrounding the transition of TGNC individuals from high school to college. College students are largely socialized based on their lived experiences and the world in which they grew up. Their understanding of college and university life often depends on the exposure they had to it growing up. Research has begun to explore the impact of school environments on shaping one's decision to apply to and attend college, but to better understand the needs of TGNC first-year students, we should take a more active approach in understanding TGNC youth before they arrive at college (Aragon et al., 2014; Feldman et al., 2020).

Finally, research must explore the trends in language development within the fields of gender studies, queer studies, and trans studies. As I sifted through research, too often I found literature that used outdated language. Though they once served an important purpose in the history of the transgender movement, terms such as "transsexual," "MTF," "FTM," "biological sex," "legal sex," etc., are now relatively frowned upon by TGNC individuals (youth in particular) as well, as by scholars of gender studies. Without research on the ever-evolving nature of language around LGBTQ topics, we are doomed to use language without consideration to its meaning and purpose.

If we are to encourage administrators around the country to consider implementing gender-inclusive housing not only as a best practice, but as an intentional practice, then we must first implore them to become familiar with the appropriate terminology and, more importantly, the meaning behind it. It is far more important for an administrator to understand why TGNC individuals use the language they do than for them to understand what TGNC means. For example, I have seen countless examples of staff and faculty who attend LGBTQ trainings where they learn what they/them pronouns mean but they still do not understand their relationship with their own pronouns, let alone the implications of using gender-inclusive language in their policies and practices. Terminology and language may help start the

conversation, but it cannot be the end of the conversation.

In academia, we have the ability to shape discourse and inform practice. In HESA, we hold a tremendous amount of power and responsibility. If we are to be truly inclusive scholar-practitioners, we owe it to the students we serve to stay up-to-date on the terminology and concepts that have been explored in depth in our sibling fields of gender studies, queer studies, and trans studies. For too long, these three fields of study have been ignored by academia and equally as much by the field of higher education and student affairs.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

For all the progress that we have made, we have a long way to go. Despite the increase in transgender visibility, there has also been an increase in transgender violence, with transgender people of color facing the bulk of it (Strangio, 2018). With social media making activism easier to partake in from the comfort of one's own home, it is easy to engage in performative allyship rather than sustainable advocacy. Although gender studies, queer studies, and trans studies have gained significant headway in paving a path for themselves within the stubborn world of academia, we cannot read scholarship in isolation disengaged from the realities of our time. We must continue to reflect on the ways that our field of study impacts the lived realities of students on college and university campuses.

There are more TGNC students entering college than ever before (American College Health Association, 2000, 2019; Duran & Sopelsa, 2018). We have more colleges and universities engaging in conversations around gender-inclusive housing. We have sessions on LGBTQ identities at NASPA and ACPA conferences. We have more institutions rewriting their nondiscrimination policies to be more inclusive of gender identities and gender expressions. We put gender-inclusive restrooms in several popular buildings on campus. We put our pronouns in our email signatures. And still, we have yet to see the momentous, necessary, and long-overdue changes that will truly spark a societal shift towards transgender acceptance, understanding, and safety. HESA has been playing catch-up for far too long and must make the shift to become the bold leaders for gender equity that we claim to be.

## References

Ahmed, S. (2012). *On being included: Racism and diversity in institutional life*. Duke University Press.

American College Health Association. (2000). *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment: Reference Group Executive Summary Spring 2000*. American College Health Association. Retrieved February 12, 2022 from [https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/ACHA-NCHA\\_Reference\\_Group\\_ExecutiveSummary\\_Spring2000.pdf](https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/ACHA-NCHA_Reference_Group_ExecutiveSummary_Spring2000.pdf)

American College Health Association. (2019). *American College Health Association-National College Health Assessment II: Reference Group Executive Summary, Spring 2019*. American College Health Association. Retrieved February 12, 2022 from [https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II\\_SPRING\\_2019\\_US\\_REFERENCE\\_GROUP\\_EXECUTIVE\\_SUMMARY.pdf](https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_SPRING_2019_US_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf)

Aragon, S. R., Poteat, V. P., Espelage, D. L., & Koenig, B. W. (2014). The influence of peer victimization on educational outcomes for LGBTQ and non-LGBTQ high school students. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 11(1), 1–19. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2014.840761>

Beemyn, G. (2005). Making campuses more inclusive of transgender students. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 3(1), 77–87. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01\\_08](https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01_08)

Beemyn, G. (2012). The experiences and needs of transgender community college students. *Community College Journal of Research and Practice*, 36(7), 504–510. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10668926.2012.664089>

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble*. Routledge.

de Beauvoir, S. (2010). *The second sex*. (Borde, C. and Malovany-Chevallier, S., Trans.). Vintage Books. (Original work published 1949).

Duran, E., & Sopelsa, B. (2018). More Harvard, Yale freshmen identify as LGBTQ than as conservative, surveys find. *NBC News*. Retrieved February 12, 2022 from <https://www.nbcnews.com/feature/nbc-out/more-harvard-yale-freshmen-identify-lgbtq-conservative-surveys-find-n909781>

Feldman, S., Watson, R. J., & Gallik, C. (2020). College aspirations, gender sexuality alliances, and teacher support among diverse LGBTQ youth. *Educational Review*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131911.2020.1816907>

Gardner, L. (2017, February 23). Why trans\* students matter. *The Chronicle of Higher*

*Education*. Retrieved February 12, 2022 from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Why-Trans-Students-Matter/239305>

Goldberg, A. E., Beemyn, G., & Smith, J. Z. (2019). What is needed, what is valued: Trans students' perspectives on trans-inclusive policies and practices in higher education. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 29(1), 27-67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2018.1480376>

Hobson, A. (2014). Designing and implementing a successful gender-neutral housing community. *Journal of College and Character*, 15(1), 33–38. <https://doi.org/10.1515/jcc-2014-0005>

Kingkade, T. (2012, March 23). Kaeden Kass, transgender student, alleges housing discrimination at Miami University of Ohio. *Huffington Post*. Retrieved February 12, 2022 from [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/21/kaedan-kass-transgender-housing-discrimination\\_n\\_1370431.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/03/21/kaedan-kass-transgender-housing-discrimination_n_1370431.html)

Krum, T., Davis, K., & Galupo, M. (2013). Gender-inclusive housing preferences: A survey of college-aged transgender students. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 10(1), 64–82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2012.718523>

Lawrence, M., & Mckendry, S. (2019). *Supporting transgender and non-binary students and staff in further and higher education*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

McKinney, J. S. (2005) On the margins: A study of the experiences of transgender college Students, *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Issues in Education*, 3(1), 63-76. [https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01\\_07](https://doi.org/10.1300/J367v03n01_07)

Movement Advancement Project. (2021). Equality maps: Healthcare laws and policies. Retrieved December 14, 2021 from [https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/healthcare\\_laws\\_and\\_policies](https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/healthcare_laws_and_policies).

Nicolazzo, Z., & Marine, S. (2015). “It will change if people keep talking”: Trans\* students in college and university housing. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 42(1), 160–177.

Nicolazzo, Z. (2017). Introduction: what’s transgressive about trans\* studies in education now? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 30(3), 211–216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2016.1274063>

Nicolazzo, Z., Marine, S., & Wagner, R. (2018). From best to intentional practices: Reimagining implementation of gender-inclusive housing. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 55(2), 225–236. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19496591.2018.1399896>

- Ratliff, M. (2014). Breaking down walls: Gender inclusive housing gains momentum on campuses nationwide. *Multi-Housing News*. Retrieved from <https://www.multihousingnews.com/breaking-down-walls/>
- Santos, T. C., Mann, E. S., & Pfeffer, C. A. (2021) Are university health services meeting the needs of transgender college students? A qualitative assessment of a public university. *Journal of American College Health*, 69(1), 59-66. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2019.1652181>
- Seelman, K. (2014). Transgender individuals' access to college housing and bathrooms: Findings from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 26(2), 186–206. [https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2014.891091\\_](https://doi.org/10.1080/10538720.2014.891091_)
- Strangio, C. (2018). Deadly violence against transgender people is on the rise. The government isn't helping. *ACLU*. Retrieved December 14, 2021 from [https://www.aclu.org/blog/lgbt-rights/criminal-justice-reform-lgbt-people/deadly-violence-against-transgender-people-rise\\_](https://www.aclu.org/blog/lgbt-rights/criminal-justice-reform-lgbt-people/deadly-violence-against-transgender-people-rise_)
- Stryker, S. (2008). *Transgender history*. Seal Press.
- Taub, D., Johnson, R., & Reynolds, T. (2016). The implementation of gender-neutral housing: A mixed-methods study across ACUHO-I member institutions. *Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 42(2), 76–93.
- Turetsky, K. M., & Sanderson, C. A. (2018). Comparing educational interventions: Correcting misperceived norms improves college students' mental health attitudes. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 48(1), 46–55. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jasp.12489>
- Willoughby, B., Larsen, J., & Carroll, J. (2012). The emergence of gender-neutral housing on American university campuses. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 27(6), 732–750. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558412447852>