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Trans Students Who Leave College: An Exploratory Study of Their Experiences of Gender Minority Stress

Abbie E. Goldberg Katherine A. Kuvalanka Kaitlin Black

This article reports findings from an exploratory study of 14 trans college students who had taken leave, dropped out, and/or transferred institutions. Participants shared complex reasons for leaving college, including institutional and interpersonal experiences of gender-related stress, namely unwelcoming or insensitive campus and classroom climates, as well as a lack of trans-affirming supports and services, which made gender transitions difficult and stressful. Lack of family support and financial and academic concerns, were often intertwined with gender minority stress and contributed to some participants' leaving.

In Fall 2016, almost 70% of 2016 high school graduates were enrolled in college, with about 10.8 million (64%) attending 4-year institutions, and 6.1 million (36%) attending 2-year institutions (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). Enrollment does not necessarily lead to graduation; only about 60% of students who initially enroll in 4-year institutions complete a degree within 6 years from their initial institution (Kena et al., 2016). For a variety of reasons—some personal, some academic—many students drop out or transfer colleges. Although institutions of higher education serve learners who are diverse in terms of race, class, ability status, sexual orientation, and gender identity, they may face particular challenges in meeting the needs of—and retaining as students—individuals who identify as transgender (or trans; Beemyn, 2016).

Trans students may be at risk for leaving college for various reasons. The 2015 US Transgender Survey found that 24% of respondents who were out as or perceived as trans in college reported being verbally, physically, or sexually harassed at that time; 16% of those who experienced harassment left college because of the harassment (James et al., 2016). A 2011 report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey revealed that individuals attending college, graduate school, or professional school reported high rates of negative treatment by students, faculty, and staff, with more than one third reporting harassment and bullying. Participants experienced a variety of barriers to attendance in school (i.e., K–12 or higher education), including harassment and financial challenges, which in some cases forced them to leave (Grant et al., 2011).

This exploratory study builds on the limited research on trans college students and the larger literature on college student success and retention. Drawing from theories of student retention and success and gender minority stress theory, we analyzed the experiences of 14 trans individuals who had taken leave, dropped out, or transferred colleges or universities. Our key research question was: What institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal experiences result in trans college students leaving college? In what ways do these

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processes reflect stress related to trans students' gender minority status (i.e., gender minority stress; Hendricks & Testa, 2012)?

TRADITIONAL THEORIES OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS AND RETENTION IN COLLEGE STUDENTS

Tinto (1993) and others have conceptualized college student attrition through a psychosocial lens that emphasizes the student–institution interaction, social and academic integration, and personal and background factors as contributors to college completion. Tinto's model specified how students' departure can be seen as "arising out of a longitudinal process of interactions between an individual with given attributes, skills, financial resources, prior educational experiences, and dispositions (intentions and commitments) and other members of the academic and social systems of the institution" (p. 114). Individuals' experiences in these interconnected systems, as indicated by their academic and social integration, continually modify their intentions and commitments (e.g., to the institution, to their education). Positive experiences reinforce persistence and negative experiences undermine it, thus reducing or enhancing the likelihood of leaving college. Factors external to college, such as family and employment, can also reinforce or undermine students' intentions and commitments. In addition, Tinto noted the importance of student–institution fit, such that dismissal or withdrawal may result when academic demands are greater than students can handle or not challenging enough to keep them engaged.

Many studies provide support for Tinto's model. Research has found that poor student–institution fit represents a key reason for leaving college (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, & Hayek, 2007) including transferring to another institution (Radunzel, 2016). Research also indicates that students who feel their college does not meet their preferences or needs (e.g., in terms of major or student population size) are more likely to drop out or transfer to another institution (Radunzel, 2016). A low sense of belonging at, or social integration within, the university, which is more likely among students with stigmatized statuses (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997), may reduce academic intentions and increase risk for withdrawal (Allen, Robbins, Casillas, & Oh, 2008), including transferring (Okun, Karoly, Martin, & Benshoff, 2009).

Economic factors can play a role in whether college students persist. Financial stress (Britt, Ammerman, Barrett, & Jones, 2017) and being employed more than part time (Hovdhaugen, 2015) can contribute to declines in academic performance and increased risk of withdrawing. Lower-income students are more likely to have nonacademic obligations—such as the need to work while in school or family responsibilities—which impact time availability for school work and decrease chances of persisting (Kopp & Shaw, 2016). Regarding personal factors, mental health is a predictor of retention, in that poor well-being leads to lower GPA, which can lead to dropping out (Boyraz, Horne, Owens, & Armstrong, 2013).

Withdrawal from a college or university does not necessarily imply dropout; some students transfer institutions. Using longitudinal data from high school graduates who enrolled in college at 2-year and 4-year institutions, Radunzel (2016) identified differences in predictors of dropout versus transfer. At both types of institutions, students who showed less academic preparedness for college were more likely than well-prepared students to drop out. Academic preparedness was negatively related to transferring from 4-year institutions but positively related

to transferring from 2-year institutions, consistent with prior work showing that it is higher-achieving students who are more likely to transfer from 2-year to 4-year institutions (Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010). Intending to work more hours at college, being a first-generation student, and being economically disadvantaged were related to dropout, whereas attending a university far from home was related to transferring—consistent with some prior work (Kopp & Shaw, 2016).

Beyond Traditional Theories: Considering the Role of Minority Stress in Academic Success

Scholars have questioned the applicability of Tinto's model to students from diverse backgrounds in that the model does not acknowledge the role of minority stress, and, in turn, environmental factors (e.g., perceptions of campus climate) are not emphasized as central constructs in the persistence process (Castillo et al., 2006; Wei, Ku, & Liao, 2011). Research on racial/ethnic minorities points to the stresses they experience in the college environment related to their minority status. Students of Color encounter pressure to speak on behalf of their group and to excel amid a White academic culture, and endure stress related to invisibility and racial tensions (Solórzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Wei et al., 2011). Being one of the only Students of Color in classes or residence halls, students can feel isolated (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997; Solórzano et al., 2000) and lack a sense of belonging (Wei et al., 2011), increasing the likelihood of leaving college (Brown & Robinson Kurpius, 1997). Among Students of Color, minority stress has been linked to lower academic persistence (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006). Many students do not have access to race/ethnicity–specific supports on campus, although some find or create their own counterspaces (e.g., Black student groups) as a survival strategy (Solórzano et al., 2000). Connecting with others of similar statuses may enhance social and academic integration and thereby increase retention (Rigali-Oiler & Robinson-Kurpius, 2013).

Gender minority stress is a specific form of minority stress that may have unique effects on student success and retention. According to gender minority stress theory (Hendricks & Testa, 2012), trans individuals are exposed to distal and proximal forms of stress related to their gender minority status. In the college context, trans students typically navigate an institutional culture characterized by *genderism* (the rigid adherence to the gender binary in practices, policies, and norms) and *cisnormativity* (the perpetuation of the false belief that there are only two genders, gender is immutable, and bodies define gender; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016a). Distal experiences of marginalization, exclusion, and prejudice affect trans individuals directly by creating stress and also indirectly via their effect on proximal stressors, such as concealment of one's gender identity, anxiety about the possibility of stigma, and internalized transphobia. Chronic exposure to structural and internalized forms of stigma has been linked to poor mental health and elevated stress in trans youth (Perez-Brumer, Day, Russell, & Hatzenbuehler, 2017) and may impact academic engagement, success, and retention among trans college students.

College as a Source of Stress for Trans Students

Genderism and cisnormativity are embedded in institutions of higher education, which in turn can serve as sources of stress for trans students (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018; Pitcher, Camacho, Renn, & Woodford, 2018; Woodford, Joslin, Pitcher, & Renn, 2017).

Sex-segregated restrooms expose trans students to harassment, and sex-segregated housing contributes to exclusion, invisibility, and discomfort (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018; Woodford et al., 2017). Often university forms include only male and female as gender options, do not differentiate between sex and gender, and provide no means for students to change their gender marker without legally changing their sex (Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Linley & Kilgo, 2018), leaving some students with a sense of alienation from their institution (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Institutions' health insurance policies often do not cover counseling, hormone therapy, or surgery for trans students, resulting in economic and social costs (e.g., students are forced to stop hormone treatment or must go off campus; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013). Cisnormativity and genderism are also evident in the classroom, where trans students encounter avoidance or antagonism from faculty and classmates, leading them to feel anxious and threatened (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016a; Pryor, 2015). In the absence of formal and informal sources of affirmation (e.g., trans-affirming faculty or student groups) that may buffer against the effects of broader institutional nonsupport, trans students may experience a lessened sense of belonging on campus (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012), rendering them vulnerable to social and academic disengagement (Pitcher et al., 2018) and persuading them to leave college.

Trans students may navigate social and physical gender transition at college, presenting unique social, medical, and financial challenges. Focus groups with trans students have indicated that the timing of their gender identity exploration, social gender transition (e.g., names, pronouns, dress), and biomedical transition (e.g., hormones) were salient in shaping their ability to focus on and remain engaged in school (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Other research findings also suggest that trans college students' stage of gender identity exploration and transition may intersect with their academic experience, affecting their sense of belonging and academic engagement (Nicolazzo, 2016a). Existing research has mainly focused on trans students with binary gender identities (i.e., trans man, trans woman); yet, an increasing number of young adults hold nonbinary identities (James et al., 2016), including those with no gender, a gender other than man or woman, or more than one gender (e.g., agender, genderqueer, genderfluid; Beemyn, 2016). Such identities challenge assumptions that there are only two gender options and that these are opposites; however, amidst societal invisibility, nonbinary students may face resistance on campus when they assert their identities (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016a).

Research on college retention points to relevant institutional and personal characteristics that may impact whether students withdraw or transfer, and research on trans students highlights the potential impact of gender minority stress on the college experience. Of interest is how and in what ways such stress manifests in multiple relevant domains and contexts, within and outside of the college or university, and ultimately contributes to trans students' leaving.

METHOD

We recruited our sample of participants by contacting 506 participants in a survey of trans students' experiences in higher education in Summer and Fall 2016 who identified as trans (e.g., trans woman, trans man, genderqueer) and were enrolled at a university or college in the previous 2 years. In Spring 2017, these participants were sent an e-mail about an interview opportunity that involved speaking about experiences related to taking leave,

transferring, or dropping out of college with 14 agreeing to participate.

Sample

Among the 14 participants (*M*age = 22.57 years, *SD* = 2.47, range 18–26), 6 identified as trans men, 3 as trans women, and 5 as gender nonbinary or genderqueer; of these 10 had been assigned female at birth (AFAB), 1 was intersex and AFAB, and 3 were assigned male at birth. All participants had withdrawn, taken leave, or transferred during college (see Table 1 for details).

Procedure

The first author conducted the semistructured interviews (about 1 hour in length), which were recorded and transcribed. Among the questions asked were:

1. Tell me about your college experience: the highs and the lows. What worked for you, and what didn't work? Did you leave at any point? Why? If you came back, why? If you transferred, why? What factors contributed to these decisions?
2. Were you transitioning during college? Exploring your gender identity? To what extent did this process affect your experiences and decisions related to taking a leave, transferring, or leaving college?
3. To what extent did this process affect your academics? Relationships with peers, partner, family, faculty, staff?
4. Were there resources to support your transition (or gender identity exploration) on or off campus?
5. Did you seek counseling during this time? Access hormones and other transition-related medical expenses?

Participants also completed a demographics (e.g., age, gender identity, race, institution type) survey via Qualtrics.

Data Analysis

We utilized thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), a standard means for considering responses to open-ended questions by identifying and categorizing the primary patterns in the data. Thematic analysis emphasizes examining and recording themes with the goal of creating a coding system to organize the data. The first author initiated the coding process with open coding, which involves examining responses and highlighting relevant passages. The third author independently read through the data; then, both authors discussed salient points they noted in the responses, leading to the refinement of emerging codes. For example, we noted that participants named gender-specific considerations (e.g., faculty insensitivity) and general considerations (e.g., academic concerns) in explaining why they left college. Next, focused coding was used to sort the data. For example, we determined that both campus climate (which encompassed harassment) and classroom climate (which encompassed treatment by faculty and peers) constituted features of the broader institutional culture. We also determined that in some cases financial and academic issues were stand-alone issues that impacted leaving, but in others, they were intertwined with gender concerns. In turn, a distinction was drawn between academic challenges that were perceived as arising from the stress of managing one's gender in an unsupportive environment and academic challenges that were viewed as unrelated to gender. Such focused coding is more conceptual than open coding; the categories that emerge best synthesize the data. We then applied the coding scheme to the data, enabling the identification of more descriptive coding categories and the

TABLE 1. Description of Participants

Name	Age (Yrs)	Race/ Ethnicity	Sex Assigned at Birth	Sexual Orientation	Gender[a]/Transition	Institution Details[b]	Leave Details
Adelyn	19	White	Male	Lesbian	Identifies with trans, genderqueer, feminine of center, trans woman, & woman.	Student at a small 2-year public institution in the South.	Transferred from a 2-year institution to another 2-year institution. Enrolled as a student but planning to take time off.
August	23	of Color	Female	Asexual-demisexual	Identifies with trans, nonbinary, fluid, agender, & bigender. Has used hormones.	Not in school; may reapply to medium-sized 4-year private institution in the Midwest.	Took a medical leave in 3rd year that ended up being 3 semesters; had to withdraw. Not in school.
Bennett	22	White	Female	Queer	Identifies with trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, & trans man. Has used testosterone.	Recent graduate of a very large 4-year public institution on the West Coast.	After 1.5 semesters, took a leave, then withdrew for 1 year from 4-year institution. Reenrolled and graduated.
Corey	21	White	Female	Queer	Identifies with trans, trans man, & man. Has used testosterone; had top surgery.	Recent graduate of medium-sized 4-year private institution on the East Coast.	Transferred from one 4-year institution to another 4-year institution. Graduated from that institution.
Derby	25	White	Female	Pansexual	Identifies with trans, nonbinary, gender fluid, & agender. Has used testosterone.	Recent graduate of a medium-sized 4-year public institution on the West Coast.	Withdrew from 4-year institution after 2 years; took 3 years off. Reenrolled and graduated.
Ella	22	White	Male	“Sexually fluid”	Identifies with woman. Has used hormones. Had facial feminization surgery.	Student at a small 4-year private institution in the Midwest.	Completed 1 year at 2-year institution; withdrew. Took a leave; completed another semester; transferred to a 4-year institution.
Milo	21	White	Female	Asexual	Identifies with trans, masculine of center, & trans man. Has used testosterone; had top surgery.	Student at a medium-sized 4-year private institution on the East Coast.	Transferred from a 2-year institution prior to receiving a degree, to a 4-year institution.

table continues

TABLE 1. *continued*

Name	Age (Yrs)	Race/ Ethnicity	Sex Assigned at Birth	Sexual Orientation	Gender[a]/Transition	Institution Details[b]	Leave Details
MJ	23	White	Female	Lesbian	Identifies with trans, masculine of center, & trans man. Has used testosterone.	Recent graduate of a medium-sized 4-year public institution on the West Coast.	Withdrew for 1 year from a 4-year institution, after transferring from a 2-year institution. Reenrolled; graduated.
Moira	28	White	Male	Pansexual	Identifies with trans & trans woman. Has used hormones.	Recent graduate of a medium-sized 4-year public institution in the South.	Was academically suspended after 1 year at a 4-year institution. Took 2 years off. Reenrolled and graduated.
Noa	23	White	Female	Asexual	Identifies with trans, nonbinary, agender, & questioning. Has used testosterone.	Student at a medium-sized 4-year public institution on the West Coast.	Took a leave of absence from a 2-year institution, and eventually withdrew. Transferred to a 4-year institution.
Reed	23	White	Female	Pansexual	Identifies with trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, & trans man. Has used testosterone.	Recent graduate of a medium-sized 4-year private institution on the East Coast.	Took a leave of absence from a 4-year private institution; returned and graduated.
Rosario	24	of Color	Female	Bisexual	Identifies with trans, nonbinary, fluid, & androgynous labels. Has used testosterone.	Recent graduate of a small 4-year private institution in the Midwest.	Attended school for 2 years; withdrew and was not in school for 1 year. Returned and graduated.
Tate	22	White	Female	Bisexual	Identifies with trans & trans man.	Student at a medium-sized 4-year private institution in the Midwest.	Completed 2 years at a 4-year religious institution. Transferred to a nonreligiously affiliated 4-year institution.
Tobias	24	White	Female	Gay	Identifies with trans man, genderqueer, & masculine of center. Has used testosterone.	Recent graduate of a very large 4-year public institution on the West Coast.	Took a leave of absence from a 4-year institution before returning and graduating.

[a] Participants were asked to choose just one gender label within the larger umbrella of trans.

[b] Institution size: small = < 5000 students; medium = 5,000–15,000; large = 15,000–30,000; very large = > 30,000.

generation of themes for which there was the most substantiation.

Intercoder agreement was calculated at two points to verify the usefulness and soundness of the scheme (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013). Intercoder agreement was initially 88% (reliability = number of agreements divided by the number of agreements plus the number of disagreements); after discussion of emerging codes, agreement increased to 98%, providing evidence of the scheme's utility for describing the data.

Limitations

Participants were diverse with respect to gender identity but homogenous in race/ethnicity: most were White. Trans college Students of Color face unique "limitations, difficulties, and erasures . . . at the threshold of race and gender identity," which inevitably impact the utility of on-campus identity-based supports (e.g., LGBTQ groups; groups for Students of Color) and thus their resilience amidst institutional oppression (Nicolazzo, 2016b, p. 1182). In turn, our study does not address in depth the unique factors that may shape the reasons that trans Students of Color give for leaving college or their experiences of returning. Also, our recruitment strategy inevitably impacted our findings. Our participants volunteered for a study of trans students who left college. Thus, we were unable to capture the experiences of trans students who dropped out or transferred who might never participate in a study like this, especially those who never returned to school.

FINDINGS

Participants—who are identified by pseudonyms, and referenced using the pronouns that they used for themselves—named a variety of interrelated issues in describing why they left college, whether they took a leave, withdrew, or transferred. Most emphasized their gender identity as a central feature in their leaving college—for example, citing the discrimination they faced as a trans person and the lack of gender-affirming resources to support their transition. For a few, gender-related stress was less centrally implicated: they emphasized emotional or financial stress or "academic fit" as primary contributors. Each of these themes is expounded upon below.

The Buildup of Gender-Related Stress: Institutional and Interpersonal

Many participants articulated how social and/or physical transitioning at college involved a daily process of navigating potentially alienating and unsupportive situations and people. It took considerable time and energy to navigate the cisnormative, highly gendered, and sometimes explicitly transphobic nature of campus interactions. Participants faced stigma and exclusion at the broader institutional level and in the classroom, which impacted their gender exploration, well-being, and academic engagement—in part via the impact of stigma on their social and academic integration. A lack of trans-affirming supports and services, which could have buffered the stress of the broader institutional climate, meant that they faced practical and symbolic obstacles to gender transition. No participant emphasized just one factor in their decision to leave, highlighting the significance of "accumulated stressors" for trans students who leave college.

Institutional Climate: Questioned, Rejected, and Ignored. Some participants described how the institutional features of college, including policies and procedures, created a climate in which they were repeatedly reminded that they were not welcome and did not belong. A lack of gender-inclusive restrooms was consistently cited as a pervasive problem that created an unwelcoming atmosphere. Difficulties related to changing their name and gender

on university forms and records were also common. Adelyn, a White trans woman, who had left one 2-year college to attend another, shared how numerous institutional features characterized by genderism and cisnormativity created stress over time. Adelyn relayed how at her prior college she was reported to campus police by another student multiple times for using the "wrong bathroom." She also described how, despite adding her affirmed name to the system, "it did not show up on the roster" which listed here by her legal name, so "to every new professor, I had to say 'Hey, this is my actual name.'" This caused her to be marked absent and influenced her grades.

A similar set of frustrations was described by Rosario, a nonbinary Student of Color who left school after two years and returned after a year off. Rosario shared how prior to their departure, they tried to go to the registrar to change their name in the system, "but she said, 'That's not a nickname, that's not related to your real name, I can't do that.'" Upon completing the official documents that were required to change one's name, Rosario found that the name change went through in the computer system, "but it didn't change in the e-mail. . . . I never succeeded in getting that changed because they kept telling me to go to someone else." Tobias, a White trans man who withdrew for a semester, shared how despite trying to change his name on campus records, there were still "some places on campus where they have the wrong name. . . . I need to have all of my legal documentation, my Social Security card, and my birth certificate, or else I'm not seen as being really a person. [Staff/faculty] treat me like I'm trying to induce some kind of scam. It gets old."

Transphobic encounters with various individuals on campus contributed to a negative sense of the general institutional climate, which contributed to stress over time. Tobias shared how he was beginning to explore his gender and transition at college but found that the overall campus climate was quite hostile: "I was sexually harassed and people jokingly catcalled all the time—because I have long hair." Tobias explicitly pointed to this hostility as a primary reason for his decision to take a leave of absence. Reed, a White trans man who took a leave of absence from his 4-year institution and recently graduated, described how he received threatening messages on his door: "The death threats were not super great for me. . . . That really threw me off for a while."

Some participants emphasized the general institutional climate as contributing to the stress that they experienced in college, which over time influenced their decisions to leave. But ultimately, specific settings within the institution, such as classrooms, were even more salient in contributing to proximal stress, as when these students developed chronic anxiety about interacting with faculty.

Classroom Climate: On "High Alert" or Constantly "Teaching the Teacher." Most participants described faculty and classrooms as sources of stress. MJ, a White trans man who withdrew for a year from a 4-year institution, lived in fear: "The thing that has always scared me the most is the potential for either negligence or outright transphobia in the classroom. Unless there's work from a professor to make sure that's not there, the worry is always there for me." MJ left because of "frustration over academics," as well as "classroom experiences that shook me up. . . . [One] professor would make a transphobic joke and everyone in the room would laugh, and I [felt] very deeply unsafe." Bennett, a White nonbinary student who withdrew for a year, took classes with "blatant racism [and] transphobia perpetuated by professors. It was not a safe environment."

A major source of stress for participants was trying to manage their gender presentation

so that they could be their authentic selves without facing undue burden or harassment in class. MJ noted how coming out to others about his gender identity had inadvertently made him the "trans expert" in class, a role he did not want: "When trans stuff comes up, everybody turns and looks at you. The more I felt I had to educate my peers, the more visible I was. That wound up contributing a lot of stress—this need to always [be] an educator when I was there to be educated." Milo, a White trans man who transferred from a 2-year college predegree to attend a 4-year institution, described how while at community college, soon after he began hormone treatment, he was asked by a professor to give a "Trans 101" presentation to a class. Milo's physical changes had apparently cued the professor to believe that such a request was acceptable. Delivering the talk invited unwelcome queries such as "questions about my junk, and who I had sex with."

Misgendering by faculty was common. Milo shared how, especially prior to medically transitioning (i.e., hormones, top surgery), there were "countless times" when faculty would "mess up pronouns or show my previous legal name on the board." Even when participants tried talking to faculty privately about their gender identity and affirmed name and pronouns, they faced misgendering in the context of faculty ignorance. August, a nonbinary Person of Color who withdrew from college and was not a student, shared: "I stepped out of my comfort zone and introduced myself with pronouns even though no one else was [doing that]. The professor . . . didn't exactly understand how names and pronouns work, and she wasn't explicitly rude about it or anything, but she misgendered me pretty frequently." August also described how they had a one-on-one talk with a professor about their name and pronouns. After this, "she slipped up constantly. And she would realize afterwards, sometimes, and she'd [apologize]. . . . I feel like she meant it, but it was also irritating that she was making it about herself, . . . instead of just being like, 'Oh, I'm sorry'."

The experience of explaining one's name and pronouns to faculty, who might try to use them but then give up or complain, was common. Noa, a White nonbinary student who took a medical leave due to mental health challenges—which they in part attributed to the nonsupport and harassment they faced at college—eventually withdrew, then transferred:

> Some professors dealt better than others. . . . I had one that misgendered me in front of the class repeatedly despite me and a couple others correcting her. One of my foreign language professors just didn't know how to do it. . . . I don't push as much; I understand there's a learning process. . . . I've gotten a lot of, like, "Do you know how hard this is for me?" and [I'm] like, "Well, do you know how hard this is for *me*?"

As Noa alluded to, there was great variability across faculty in terms of awareness and sensitivity. Participants often had to rely on the knowledge they garnered from other LGBTQ students, especially trans students, regarding the trans-affirmingness of different academic departments and professors, as Bennett said: "You have to speak to other trans people, other queer people, to know who's safe." MJ described how he managed this variability:

> It's hugely variable depending on the professor. . . . There's just almost no official overhead that forces trans competence. . . . It seems very much on individuals to learn and do better, [so] my experience of college has become a lot about . . . navigating through, like, "Who do my friends know is a good professor?" and being very selective about the classes I take.

These narratives reveal the significant extra

burden on trans students to determine the learning environments (i.e., professors, classes, disciplines) that would be the least stigmatizing and most amenable to learning. Adelyn shared a story that illustrates how the constant cycle of self-advocacy and invalidation creates stress over time: "I wrote a speech for this class about . . . transitioning or about bathroom policies—but [the professor] said that it was not an appropriate topic. . . . He was like, 'It's too emotionally involved. . . . People can have too many reactions to it,' and he docked my grade. This type of [thing] amplifies [my] stress."

Navigating Gender Transition Amid Negative Institutional and Classroom Climates. Timing of participants' gender identity exploration, their social gender transition, and their biomedical transition were salient in shaping their ability to remain engaged with school. For some, the all-encompassing nature of gender exploration and transition played a role in their decision to leave, especially amid a negative institutional or classroom climate. As Rosario said: "School was really intense. I didn't really have the space to figure out gender stuff, and it was getting more and more pressing as time went on, and there were some really transphobic classroom encounters, so . . . I decided to leave." For Reed the physical effects of hormone therapy and the stress of managing others' reactions to his changing gender presentation affected his academics:

> It was very difficult starting hormones and trying to focus. . . . You suddenly become very self-conscious, because your body smells different. . . . Trying to navigate going to school having a deep voice and having the resemblance of an almost-beard . . . and explain that my name on the roster is not the name that I use . . . is so hard.

Likewise, other students, such as Rosario and MJ, delayed medical transition until they were away from the watchful gaze of faculty, staff, and students. Half of participants explicitly commented on the "fishbowl nature" of college, wherein they felt hypervisible to others on campus as they socially—and in some cases—medically transitioned. MJ began to socially transition at college, but waited to pursue the biomedical and legal aspects of transition until he was not attending school: "I actually changed my name legally when I decided to reapply, because they told me that I couldn't go by any other name in their database until I changed it legally. I started testosterone a couple months before I went back and got top surgery."

Lack of Trans-Affirming Supports and Services: *"The Void."* Some participants emphasized the (un)availability of trans-affirming resources (e.g., trans-inclusive health care coverage; trans support groups) in explaining their decision to leave college. A deficit of resources, on and off campus, made it difficult to stay in school while navigating their gender transition. Participants, like Reed, often expended time and effort to locate resources with little success:

> A lot of those took a lot of footwork to find. On campus there were . . . little to none. There was an LGBT mentoring network, but that had zero trans people. There was no one there that was also trans who could help me out . . . [with] all the resources for finding an endocrinologist or a therapist or a surgeon who does top surgery or bottom surgery.

Rosario shared: "There was a . . . Multicultural Resource Center that included LGBT identities, but I don't know that there were that many actual resources. When I started hormones, I took a bus to [the city] and went to a clinic. I sort of figured it out on my own.'" MJ encountered confusion and misguidance when seeking out trans-related medical care:

> I asked whether the university health care plan covered trans stuff. . . . And they were so confused by me. They were like,

> "I don't know. What?" Like, sending me to three different offices, all of them were like, "I don't know"—and then they finally sent me to the counseling center. I think I was like, "Uhhh, I have a therapist. I don't need a therapist."

In addition to facing a lack of guidance related to trans-specific resources, some participants described invalidating and harmful interactions with campus staff (e.g., resource officers, therapists) during their quest for help. Ella, a White trans woman who took a leave and then transferred, noted that in addition to a lack of "resources on how to get physician-related health care kind of stuff . . . [at school], the psychiatrists were terrible and not great with gender." Reed shared how their campus therapist was "awful. . . . He refused to use my name and pronouns and tried to pathologize my being trans as being neglected at home [and an] abandonment issue." Derby, a White nonbinary student who took 3 years off from school, recalled how they were "repressing all of my identity and spiraling into depression," prompting them to see a campus counselor, who was "awful." The therapist invalidated Derby's gender and sexual identities, which reinforced Derby's repression of these identities, causing further mental health problems.

Insurance challenges related to medical transition were salient and caused participants stress. Noa was under their father's insurance, which "would send any billing I got to my father," who was not supportive of Noa's gender identity. In turn, Noa searched for off-campus services they could pay for out-of-pocket on a sliding scale: "Even though I was over 18, they put me at the youth scale, so they helped me out there [with the cost of] hormones." Others were not so lucky. Bennett, who withdrew for a year, "paid out of pocket for all labs and hormones" at college, which was "a huge financial stress."

Beyond explicit resources to support gender transition, a general lack of community and support for LGBTQ students, or trans students specifically, was noted by some. In the absence of formal support groups or informal support networks for LGBTQ or trans students, participants experienced a sense of alienation, particularly in religious or politically conservative college settings. As "only the second person on campus to come out as nonbinary, using nonbinary pronouns," Noa had "no one to talk to" about their experiences. For those with other minority identities related to race or disability, it was even harder to gain support and connection. August recalled: "I was in a close group, but I was the only person who identified as not cis and not straight and also a Person of Color. My friends were all White cis straight people. . . . It was hard to talk about any of those things with them." Tate, a White trans man, attended a religious college with "not a single out trans person." In the absence of visible resources to support him in navigating his gender exploration, he became increasingly lonely and eventually transferred. In a few cases, LGBTQ groups on campus existed but were seen as not trans-inclusive specifically, or as poorly run and disorganized, resulting in a lack of affiliation with such groups.

Family Nonsupport for Gender Exploration or Transition: "I'm Dead to Them"

For some, a lack of family support for—and sometimes explicit rejection of—their gender identity created additional stress at college. Adelyn shared that her family had challenged her efforts to socially and medically transition, telling her that "everything I was claiming was an oxymoron, and all of this stuff. It was difficult. And I broke down crying and went straight to a counselor instead of to class." Adelyn's parents had agreed to provide "about

half of the cost of tuition," but only if she didn't pursue transition. Adelyn had recently decided to take time off from school, in part because of the emotional and financial stress such threats had created.

Family nonsupport undermined not only emotional but physical well-being. Several participants experienced homelessness while in college which was in part related to their families' lack of support for their gender identities. Ella, who took a leave and then transferred, said: "My parents were not happy at all. I was sort of nicely kicked out of the house with them saying, 'We're not going to allow you to dress or act that way in the house.'" Noa was also kicked out of the family home for being trans. In the absence of emotional or financial support and a place to live, Noa relied on the support of friends to get by:

> There was one semester where, due to my father kicking me out for being trans, I didn't have the tax info in order to issue my financial aid, and they were going to kick me out of school, but a friend of mine covered the first, like, 10% deposit, so I could not be kicked out. I spent several months homeless, because I couldn't afford anywhere to live.

Milo said: "If someone asks me where I live, I'll say I'm homeless. With my current university, I get a dorm included in my financial aid. So during university time I'm not actually homeless, but when it comes to breaks, I'm staying with friends and on couches."

Fear of losing valued support prevented several participants from sharing their gender identity with family—at least for a while. Bennett shared that their fear of retaliation led them to delay sharing their gender with family members for several years. Upon disclosing that they were trans—in part because they planned to pursue hormone therapy—Bennett found that their family responded "as expected": "Their reaction was not positive and led to a fairly large rift in our relationship. . . . I've had family members tell me that I was dead to them, because of my 'choice' to be this way." With limited emotional or financial support during college, Bennett took more than a year off and ultimately took 5 years to graduate due to the need to work while in school. August wanted top surgery, but their mother, the primary support person in their life, did not approve. This, and the cost of surgery, led them to conclude, "I don't think [surgery] is going to be happening any time soon."

Financial Concerns: "Too Many Expenses"

Another external source that impacted participants was financial stress, an established risk factor for withdrawal from school (Britt et al., 2017). A few participants described financial stress unrelated to transitioning as the central reason they left school. Yet participants often spoke to how the combined costs of transitioning, going to school, and housing created stress and impacted their decision to leave. Moira, a White trans woman who took several years off in college after being academically suspended, recalled: "Between a car, school, living situation, and transitioning, those were a lot of expenses to manage." Financial stress was often intertwined with emotional and academic stress, which collectively led to their decision to leave. Reed shared:

> I had a full load of classes, and I was working full time to try to compensate to afford my textbooks and food and my tuition. . . . I knew I had about a year left . . . and I was looking at my own debt and how much stress and time it was taking away from my schoolwork to be able to stay in school by working. . . . My last semester there, I was working pretty much all night and then working all day

> for school. And my GPA plummeted. . . . And I knew that if I wanted to get into grad school [eventually] that I couldn't have another semester like that.

Thus, Reed's decision to leave was calculated and related in part to having educational aspirations that extended beyond undergraduate school. Far from "giving up," he took time off from school to gain financial footing with the goal of returning when he was financially stable and equipped to succeed.

Academic Concerns: Poor Grades, Poor Fit

Most participants invoked academics, interwoven with transition-related, mental health, and financial concerns, to explain why they left college. Because of such concerns, they did not have the ability to devote as much time to academics as they felt they should—and this was often reflected in their grades. For MJ, navigating gender-related confusion amid a less-than-trans-friendly university climate combined with slipping grades and a dislike of their major "pushed [things] to a head. So I was like, 'I hate all my classes, I don't want to be here, I'm kind of flipping out." MJ took a year off before returning. Rosario said: "I failed a bunch of classes. I wasn't officially suspended, but it was recommended that I take a leave. And I had to sort some financial stuff out and general mental health stuff, partially related to the gender stuff." Indeed, academic difficulties do not operate in a vacuum; they are impacted by mental health and financial stress (Boyraz et al., 2013) as well as, for trans students, the toll of navigating gender exploration and transition amid a nonaffirming institutional climate.

In a few cases, the decision to leave, and specifically, to transfer, was not related to poor academic performance but to a sense of not being academically challenged—consistent with Tinto's suggestion that voluntary withdrawal is sometimes a result of perceptions of insufficient academic rigor. Stated Corey, a White trans man who transferred from one 4-year institution to another: "I wasn't really happy there, and I didn't feel super challenged, and [the town] was really small." Milo, who transferred from a 2-year institution to a 4-year-institution, said: "It wasn't fun for me because I wasn't learning anything." Milo saw himself as "really academic; I knew from the get-go that I wasn't really in community college for the long-haul, and that was solidified by . . . the transphobic experiences I had and the rather weak educational system." Thus, the urgency of Milo's desire to transfer was not only informed by the perceived weak academics of community college, but the trans-exclusionary institutional climate.

Returning to School: Less "Swimming Upstream"

Participants sometimes described the experience of returning to school—either transferring to a new school or enrolling to the same school. In some cases, participants had a chance to undergo hormone replacement therapy or other medical procedures while away from campus. They felt that they were further along in their social and medical transition when they returned, and thus were more confident in asserting their gender and more likely to be read as the gender they were. They were also, in some cases, more academically focused—either more certain of the academic path they wanted to pursue or more energized about classes and studying. MJ left in part to pursue gender transition but also because he was unhappy with his major: "I had been transitioning for a year when I reapplied and got back in. I started taking classes again and jumped into my independent study degree." MJ went on to explain how time away resulted in less misgendering when he returned: "I had a much better senior year than any other

time, because I got to a point where I pretty much pass as a dude all the time and don't come out unless I feel like it, . . . as opposed to before, when I had to come out just to not get misgendered constantly."

Corey had top surgery before he went to his second university. Being further along in his social transition, he had more energy to engage with his academics. Whereas his first year at his first university "was consumed with my transition—that's all that I thought about." When he transferred he "wasn't dealing with that as much anymore, so I sort of took a step back from having that be a big part of my life." Derby, who returned to the same college after several years off, shared that the time away, which enabled them the freedom to explore their gender more fully, benefited their personal and academic well-being:

> Those first two years was just kind of swimming upstream and trying to make it work, but not thriving. And . . . it was also swimming upstream to choose to leave school, because people don't like that. . . . [But] for the past two years I've done great, and everyone who thought I shouldn't leave school is now like, "Wow, that was a really good decision!"

Participants who returned to the same school sometimes came back with a fresh approach. They sought out more trans and queer friends, which improved their social and academic experience. Upon returning to campus, Derby formed a club of trans students that met weekly: "That support has been one of the biggest reasons why I can feel so comfortable in my gender."

DISCUSSION

This exploratory study builds on a robust literature on student retention (Kopp & Shaw, 2016) and limited work on trans college students (Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b) by our investigating the institutional, interpersonal, and intrapersonal experiences that impact trans students' decision to leave college with attention to the role of gender minority stress (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Considering our findings in the context of Tinto's model, and critiques of the model (Wei et al., 2011), it is clear that established reasons for leaving college are relevant for these students, including poor student–institution fit (Kuh et al., 2007; Radunzel, 2016) and a lack of a sense of belonging (Okun et al., 2009). External factors (e.g., financial stress; Britt et al., 2017) and personal factors (e.g., mental health; Boyraz et al., 2013) were also invoked as impacting the decision to take a leave, withdraw, or transfer. Yet student–institutional fit, financial stress, and other dynamics that Tinto and others have hypothesized as central to students' leaving college are nuanced and intensified by gender minority stress. Trans students do not simply face classrooms and faculty that are academically or interpersonally intense, boring, or unchallenging; they face environments where their right to exist is questioned, and they may fear for their safety (Beemyn, 2016; Pryor, 2015).

Our findings suggest that trans students in college routinely encounter numerous institutional features (e.g., lack of gender-inclusive restrooms) that create chronic stress over time, especially amid constant vigilance about the possibility of discrimination, and (frequent, unsuccessful) efforts at self-advocacy. Such stress is layered on top of routine stresses, such as academic fit or financial worries. Yet many of the supports that might buffer stress and promote resilience for cisgender students struggling with academic or financial issues, such as peer and family support, may not be available to trans students. Further, trans students who are actively navigating gender transition while in school need access to specialized services and supports that are

frequently unavailable or invisible. Services facilitated by trans-incompetent providers or the lack of services altogether, has the potential to increase trans students' isolation and may contribute to a sense of despair. Thus, understanding trans students' academic success and retention must include attention to the distal and proximal sources of stress that permeate every aspect of institutional and campus culture, and which not only reflect and perpetuate societal genderism and cisnormativity, but intersect with other sources of stress (e.g., financial) and other aspects of trans students' identities (e.g., race, disabilities).

The participants in our study shared interrelated, complex reasons for leaving college. They described how the larger institutional culture was inhospitable to them as gender minorities, and how structural manifestations of societal genderism and cisnormativity trickled down into daily experiences, like faculty insensitivity. Negative interpersonal experiences contributed to anticipatory anxiety, whereby some participants grew increasingly uncomfortable within certain disciplines and classrooms, chronically worrying about managing their presentation—a proximal form of stress (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Facing a lack of campus resources to support trans students, they sometimes sought out support off campus, resulting in time and financial costs (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018). The absence of such resources, and a general lack of community on campus, led to feelings of increased isolation—a source of stress associated with gender minority status (Hendricks & Testa, 2012).

In addition to the stressors on campus, participants also faced unsupportive family members, in some instances leading to severed relationships and homelessness, as well as exacerbating emotional instability. Research has established the importance of family affirmation and support to the well-being of trans youth (Olson, Durwood, DeMeules, & McLaughlin, 2016). Support is especially important, it seems, when youth are actively negotiating their trans identity in college—a time of independence but also vulnerability, in that students are often dependent on their parents for emotional and financial resources. Financial challenges, related and unrelated to gender transition, sometimes contributed to participants' leaving college, highlighting how financial stress undermines students' ability to stay in school (Britt et al., 2017)—but also pointing to the added financial burdens faced by trans students who are in need of medical treatments and lack trans-inclusive health insurance or health care on their campuses.

Participants who left school often cited the intense scrutiny that they felt or anticipated in classrooms or elsewhere on campus, as well as the institutional challenges (e.g., name change) during their social and/or medical transitions, as implicated in their decisions to take time off. In turn, some of them spoke of returning to college or starting at a different institution with greater confidence and ease surrounding their gender identity. This finding parallels research illustrating how trans children sometimes switch schools as a means of starting anew (Kuvalanka, Weiner, & Mahan, 2014), and research on trans people in the workplace, who may take time off from work to transition to avoid scrutiny by supervisors and coworkers (Pepper & Lorah, 2008)—major life changes that hold promise, but may also be fairly costly and challenging to maneuver.

Returning to school after a leave of absence, particularly after transitioning, typically resulted in a more positive experience than the initial college experience. Participants felt more comfortable with who they were, faced fewer institutional barriers if they had legally changed their name, and were better able to find informal supportive communities. Several participants described

taking matters into their own hands with respect to cultivating communities of support, whereby they found new friends and started trans student groups, echoing prior work showing how Students of Color sometimes create their own counterspaces to promote community and serve as a buffer to the large institutional climate (Solórzano et al., 2000). Some participants noted that they were further along in their gender transition, and in some cases more easily read by others as the gender they identified with, highlighting how one significant source of intrapersonal stress was reduced and therefore not as salient. Notably, nonbinary students, who may present and identify in ways that are neither male nor female, may not necessarily experience the same increased sense of gender legibility—although, they may be further along in terms of their social transition and more confident in asserting their names, pronouns, and identities to faculty, staff, and peers.

Implications for Practice

In order for colleges to effectively support and retain trans students, change must be initiated at every level of the institution. Change begins with a commitment by the institution to create a truly inclusive campus culture, which in turn holds the promise of enhancing trans students' academic success and retention. Institutional nondiscrimination policies must be updated to be inclusive of gender identity and expression—a change that may be more likely if administrators can be convinced that the lack of this inclusiveness is at odds with the institution's espoused values of diversity and inclusion (Linley & Kilgo, 2018). Campus leaders must deeply interrogate and interrupt the systemic genderism within and across campus communities (e.g., residence halls, health services). In addition to reshaping these communities to be more trans-affirming (e.g., expanding housing options to include more single-room options; hiring therapists and health providers with training in trans-inclusive care), institutions must also facilitate the creation of identity-based resources (e.g., LGBTQ and trans student support groups) that can support students who are exploring their gender, socially transitioning, and medically transitioning—and provide them with space to meet and funds to bring desired speakers to campus and to purchase books and other materials. Notably, some participants did not find people running their campus LGBTQ or multicultural resource centers to be knowledgeable about gender and trans issues, suggesting that all resource center staff should receive ongoing trans-specific training and gain knowledge about campus and community transition-related resources (e.g., health care, support groups).

Our participants expended notable energy and time navigating campus spaces where they were explicitly or implicitly told that they did not belong—where they had to fight for their right to exist. Student records and restrooms represent two institutional features that significantly contribute to the overall climate for trans students, and which should be the target for reform. Student records should be modified to include options for gender (in addition to sex), and a place to indicate the name and pronouns that students use for themselves (in addition to legal name; see Linley & Kilgo, 2018). Information about name and gender change procedures should be easily accessible via the institution's website. Restrooms should be reconfigured or expanded to ensure that gender-inclusive restrooms (e.g., with a single stall) are present in prominent locations, including all major campus buildings, preferably on main floors.

Our participants described numerous ways that faculty and staff invalidated, dismissed, or rejected their identities. Institutions of higher education must engage faculty and

staff in up-to-date training on trans-inclusive classroom practices, possibly through bringing in outside speakers, consultants, and workshop facilitators (see Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018). Faculty should review their curricula to determine the extent to which the entire student population is represented and how LGBTQ and specifically trans issues are included. Faculty should be cognizant of the experiences of trans students, especially during their physical transitioning, and should consider adjusting expectations for deadlines if faced with a student who is taking time off for surgery or undergoing physical changes that may impact academic functioning (e.g., via effects on attention or comfort). To ensure that faculty abide by these recommendations, institutional policies (e.g., regarding student medical conditions) may need to be rewritten to explicitly include gender transition procedures.

Conclusion

Our findings provide evidence that trans students may experience a range of stressors, which are nuanced by gender minority stress, that both accumulate and interact in complex ways to shape experiences in college and the decision to leave or transfer. Many trans students do not drop out or transfer—and yet may also experience high levels of stress in college (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016a). Future researchers should aim to tease apart what institutional features, experiences, and personal and background characteristics differentiate these two types of students. More work is also needed to explore the challenges and survival strategies of trans students attending (a) religious colleges, given their unique emphasis on "God-ordained" genders, and (b) community and vocational colleges, where they are especially vulnerable to a lack of campus resources (e.g., trans-inclusive health care and support groups) to support their gender exploration and transition. Our study also raises many provocative questions for future work related to students' gender identity development journeys: namely, how such journeys unfold over time and in the college context, how they intersect with other types of identity development, and how each stage in students' social and physical transitions impacts their educational experience. Of particular interest are the unique educational experiences of nonbinary students, who may be less likely than those who identify with binary genders to be seen as the gender they are because of society's assumptions of a gender binary (i.e., all people, including trans people, must identify as male or female) and the resulting invisibility of nonbinary genders. Research in these areas can build on this study and advance what should be the goal of all administrators and faculty: namely, for all students to thrive in higher education.

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