

# “It’s about Being Wanted”: Creating a “Gender-Inclusive” Campus at U.S. Women’s Colleges

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## Introduction

In the United States, an increasing number of higher education institutions have been placing diversity at the core of their educational missions. On many campuses, diversity is now discussed at the institutional level—in terms of mission statements, strategic-planning documents, and the attempt to build diversity in leadership.<sup>1</sup> Women’s colleges are no exception. The majority of existing women’s colleges in the U.S. also assert the importance of fostering campus diversity in their visions and mission statements today.<sup>2</sup> In particular, their commitment to diversity has been highlighted in recent years through the debate surrounding the admittance of transgender women, which has been an important part of a national conversation about equity and inclusion in the U.S. In recognition of evolving understanding of gender identities, over twenty women’s colleges since 2014 have revisited the meaning of “women” and included a wider range of gender diversity in their new admissions policies by being trans-inclusive. Opening doors to historically underrepresented gender minorities, these women’s colleges have indeed made big institutional changes to foster diversity and inclusion.

However, as numerous studies have shown, ensuring access to higher education and increasing enrollment of students from historically marginalized backgrounds are not alone sufficient to foster campus diversity and inclusion. Erin Armstrong, a trans woman student at Mills College, describes the major

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1 Daryl G. Smith, *Diversity’s Promise for Higher Education: Making It Work*, 3rd ed. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2020), 68.

2 Based on the data obtained through Women’s College Coalition (<https://www.womenscolleges.org/colleges>) as well as the website of each college, there are twenty-nine remaining women’s colleges in the U.S. as of April 2022.

challenge women's colleges face in fostering diversity and inclusion:

When I arrived on campus, no place existed where I could be myself. Everywhere I went, people were discussing whether or not Trans\* women belonged here . . . And yet, in all of that, the voices of Trans\* women were missing. That space simply didn't exist, and that made all the difference . . . Sure, the school had announced a policy saying that I *COULD* be here, that I was *allowed*, but no one was saying that I *SHOULD* be here, that I was *wanted*. And without that sense of belonging, I was afraid. This is why I think creating space is so important. It's about creating a place of belonging . . . It's more than just *being allowed*; it's about *being wanted*. [emphasis added]<sup>3</sup>

As Armstrong's remark demonstrates, officially "allowing" people to be part of the community alone does not automatically lead to creating a safe, comfortable space, nor does it suddenly make them feel "wanted." In other words, fostering diversity and inclusion on campus requires much more than changing admissions policies. It requires campus-wide efforts in truly welcoming a diverse student body, and in making those students feel "wanted."

Armstrong is not the only student who has pushed this issue forward. In fact, since 2014 a large number of students have been actively pushing their institutions to think further about how to be truly "inclusive" of diverse gender groups. In various campus spaces beyond the classroom, such as student newspapers and campus activism, students with diverse gender identities (e.g., cisgender women, trans women, trans men, non-binary people) have been sharing concerns and discontent, and suggesting improvements to their colleges' efforts in addressing the issues of "inclusion." Their activism and dialogue center on the question of what "inclusion" means in a single-sex institution for "women," mainly focusing on the issues concerning how to "welcome" and "support" diverse gender groups.

Their efforts have particularly focused on ways of improving recruitment and support. They have, for instance, criticized a lack of advertising that made clear

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3 Erin Armstrong, "Creating Space Means...", *The Campanil*, May 1, 2015, <http://www.thecampanil.com/creating-space-means/>

new admissions policies that welcome a wide range of gender identities. They have complained that colleges are doing too little to actively seek out trans students, and for continuing to call themselves a “women’s college.” There has also been significant concern about the lack of support for enrolled trans and/or gender non-conforming students, and about the widespread use of gendered language on campus, both at institutional and interpersonal levels. These issues highlight remaining issues that go beyond simply ensuring access for gender non-conforming students at women’s colleges. As Daryl G. Smith, a scholar focusing on fostering diversity in higher education, argues, “While the changing ‘face’ of a campus might be inspirational, diversity ‘by looking’ says nothing about student success, campus climate, institutional effectiveness, or graduate-student or faculty profiles.”<sup>4</sup> Creating an “inclusive” space for diverse gender groups, therefore, requires much more than ensuring access. This is precisely the issue that students have been debating and urging their institutions to think further today.

The issues at stake are not unique to women’s colleges. They are in fact connected to larger, fundamental issues about inclusion and democracy, issues that a number of scholars have investigated. One of the most important and influential models has been labeled “deliberative democracy,” which attempts to create a model of democratic decision-making that emphasizes inclusion and deliberation, rather than a simple model of majority democratic rule that often in fact favors certain interest groups.<sup>5</sup> A number of scholars have been debating how this model of democracy could include diverse perspectives of all citizens in a democratic discussion. The prominent political theorist Iris Marion Young, for example, criticizes some exclusionary implications of this model, and

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4 Smith, *Diversity’s Promise*, 91.

5 For some important works in theories of deliberative democracy, see Jürgen Habermas, *The Theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society, Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984); Joshua Cohen, “Deliberation and Democratic Legitimacy,” in *The Good Polity: Normative Analysis of the State*, ed. Alan Hamlin and Philip Pettit (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), 17-34; Jane J. Mansbridge, “A Deliberative Theory of Interest Representation,” in *The Politics of Interests: Interest Groups Transformed*, ed. Mark P. Petracca (New York: Routledge, 1992), 32-57. Helpful overviews of the field include, Simone Chambers, “Deliberative Democracy Theory,” *Annual Review of Political Science* 6 (June 2003): 307-26; Frank Cunningham, *Theories of Democracy: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2002), 163-83.

proposes instead revisions that highlight the importance of employing multiple forms of communication and acknowledging differences and disagreement in public discussion to promote greater inclusion.<sup>6</sup> These theoretical works on deliberative democracy have greatly contributed to facilitating critical debates on how “inclusion” can be promoted in a culturally diverse democratic society.<sup>7</sup>

The implications of these works are also at the center of public debates on college and university campuses. As research on higher education has revealed, college and university students have engaged in forms of deliberative democracy that are challenging institutional norms around the issues of “inclusion.” Their efforts include various student organizations calling attention to discriminatory practices and protesting for campus reforms, particularly beginning in the late 1960s and 1970s,<sup>8</sup> students’ quest for promoting inclusion and diversity across racial, ethnic and national lines in the 1990s,<sup>9</sup> and some nation-wide student activism addressing inclusion issues utilizing technology in

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- 6 In particular, Young criticized the premise of argument in political communication and the assumption of unity in deliberative democracy, and made some revisions to this model. Her revised theory called “communicative democracy” proposes the use of greeting, rhetoric and narrative, in addition to argument, to ensure that the voices of diverse citizens are heard in democratic discussions. For more, see Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Iris Marion Young, “Communication and the Other: Beyond Deliberative Democracy,” in *Intersecting Voices: Dilemmas of Gender, Political Philosophy, and Policy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 60-74.
- 7 Other theoretical works developing the conceptions of democracy include, Paul Healy, “Situated Cosmopolitanism, and the Conditions of Its Possibility: Transformative Dialogue as a Response to the Challenge of Difference,” *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (2011): 157-78; John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).
- 8 See Robert A. Rhoads, “Student Activism, Diversity, and the Struggle for a Just Society,” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* 9, no. 3 (2016): 190-93; Robert A. Rhoads, *Freedom’s Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 28-60; Christopher J. Broadhurst and Angel L. Velez, “Historical and Contemporary Contexts of Student Activism in U.S. Higher Education,” in *Student Activism, Politics, and Campus Climate in Higher Education*, ed. Demetri L. Morgan and Charles H.F. Davis III (New York: Routledge, 2019), 5-12.
- 9 An increasing number of students in the 1990s took part in various activism, particularly concerning issues of multiculturalism, group identity, and promoting diversity. Some prominent student protests of the 1990s, including students’ protest at Mills College and UCLA students’ protest for the elevation of Chicano Studies, reflect what Robert A. Rhoads calls “collective consciousness,” as various student groups were willing to organize movements collectively and support each other across racial, ethnic and national lines. See Broadhurst and Velez, 15-6; Rhoads, *Freedom’s Web*, 219-44.

the more recent years.<sup>10</sup> The “inclusion” issue that students at women’s colleges have been pushing forward in recent years, therefore, is situated within this larger debate on inclusion and democracy, and has emerged as part of the decades-long history of college and university students fighting for “inclusion” that have profoundly shaped the meaning of higher education.

This paper, therefore, explores the issue of “gender inclusivity” within this broader deliberative democracy context by focusing on student activism in women’s colleges. In particular it investigates how contemporary students are pushing women’s colleges to think further about the meaning of “inclusion” beyond the issue of enrollment. Examining how students have created new avenues of discussion and deliberation through student newspapers and student-led activism, this paper reveals that while adopting trans-inclusive admissions policies was indeed a step forward in creating an “inclusive” space at women’s colleges, it in fact opened up a range of additional issues that students have pushed forward through activism aimed at making women’s colleges more “inclusive.” As deliberative democracy advocates have suggested, this activism has in fact led to a larger dialogue about the meaning of “inclusion.” While some students center their definition on the needs of gender non-conforming students to foster “inclusion” on campus, others fear that such an emphasis could in fact lead to oppressing or marginalizing other groups of students and counteracting efforts at “inclusion.” In short, student activism has opened campuses to new perspectives and new voices that demonstrate a conundrum deliberative democracy seeks to mediate. While centering the needs of trans and/or gender non-conforming students is vital for fostering “inclusion,” campus activism has revealed that these attempts at fostering “inclusion” have the ironic potential of reproducing the “oppression” and “marginalization” that students themselves have been so actively trying to avoid.

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10 Some recent, notable student activism utilizing technology include, “I, Too, Am, Harvard (ITA)” movement and the activism led by “Smith Q&A.” For the role of visual and social media in student organizing ITA movement, see Richard S. L. Blissett and Dominique J. Baker, “Seeing is More than Believing: Visual Media, Social Media, and Anti-Racism on College Campuses,” *PUBLIC: Arts, Design, Humanities* 4, no. 1 (2018): <https://public.imaginingamerica.org/blog/article/seeing-is-more-than-believing-visual-media-social-media-and-anti-racism-on-college-campuses/>; As for “Smith Q&A” activism, see Colt Keo-Meier and Lance Hicks, “Youth,” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community*, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 471.

As Young has written in her study on inclusion and democracy, when there are diverse groups with “very different values, perspectives, and assumptions they bring to the issue,” deep disagreement could arise.<sup>11</sup> Under such circumstances, it becomes critical that all participants understand “the sources and terms of disagreement . . . if they are to do justice.”<sup>12</sup> The complex, somewhat paradoxical reality students are facing over deep disagreements about what specifically defines “inclusion,” therefore, represents a significant challenge to creating “inclusive” spaces in women’s colleges today where students are not just enrolled, but are “wanted.” Putting this conundrum at the center, this paper contributes to expanding our understanding of the larger debates about how student activism helps reshape and redefine the role of women’s colleges in the twenty-first century through the issues of “inclusion.”

### Lack of “Inclusion” : Problems Students Have Confronted

“Trans Women Belong at Smith.” This is the sentiment used in a social media photo campaign launched by Smith Q&A, the student activists at Smith College, in 2013.<sup>13</sup> In support of the admission of Calliope Wong, a trans woman applicant, a large number of Smith students and their allies across the country joined this campaign, posting their photos with this sentiment on social media. Along with the stories Wong shared on her Tumblr blog, this activism spread widely, leading to a nationwide debate and eventually resulting in many women’s colleges changing their admissions policies to be trans-inclusive since 2014. And as of 2022, over twenty women’s colleges (including Smith) have announced admissions policies that officially allow trans and other gender non-conforming students to enroll at women’s colleges. These new policies led many gender non-conforming students and their allies to expect that women’s colleges would make their spaces “inclusive” of diverse gender identities and foster a sense of “belonging.”

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11 Young, *Inclusion and Democracy*, 44.

12 Young, 44.

13 “Smith Q&A” is an official student organization founded in 2013 at Smith College, advocating for the adoption of trans-inclusive admissions policies at women’s colleges. It helped educate the campus community about transgender women by holding an online photo campaign and organizing an online trans-national petition with change.org. See Keo-Meier and Hicks, “Youth,” 471.

## Admission Policies

However, for the past eight years (2014-2022), it seems that such expectations have not been sufficiently met as students confront a lack of “inclusion” in various places. First and foremost, since the announcement of the new admissions policies, students have claimed that women’s colleges have not been active enough to advertise their new policies or to recruit trans students. Having witnessed a lack of active recruitment at the Office of Admissions, for instance, a Mount Holyoke student named Emily Jetmore (’18) who worked as a tour guide, urged the Office to “actively seek out trans students and market Mount Holyoke for what it is.”<sup>14</sup> Students also point out as problematic the term “women’s college” since they believe that the term “women” tends to only refer to cisgender women. They claim that it sends the message “that [their] cisgender female students are the primary focus of [the] institution”<sup>15</sup> and “[erases] or [diminishes] the existence of trans students, nonbinary students and anyone else who does not solely identify as a cis women.”<sup>16</sup> Student activists have therefore suggested calling their institutions an “historically women’s college,” a “gender-diverse women’s college,” or a “women-centered college.” However, as one Bryn Mawr College student said, tour guides were not allowed to call Bryn Mawr a “historically women’s college,” which often led to “[omitting] key parts of their experiences at Bryn Mawr” and giving “a less authentic picture of the school” to prospective students.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, according to one student at Mount Holyoke, until around 2017 guides at Mount Holyoke were told to use the term “women’s college” and to mention the school’s trans-

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14 Emily Jetmore, “Admissions Needs to Acknowledge and Respect Transgender Students,” *Mount Holyoke News*, March 31, 2017, <https://www.mountholyokenews.com/opinion/2017/3/31/admissions-needs-to-acknowledge-and-respect-transgender-students>

15 Philosophy Students, “Letter to the President from Philosophy Students Regarding ‘Women’s College’ Title,” *The Simmons Voice*, April 14, 2017, <https://simmonsvoice.com/8312/2016-2017/letter-to-the-president-from-philosophy-students-regarding-womens-college-title/>

16 Declan Langton, “Administration Grapples with Diversity Recognition: What Is a ‘Women’s College?’” *Mount Holyoke News*, October 27, 2019, <http://www.mountholyokenews.com/campus-life/2019/10/27/administration-grapples-with-diversity-recognition-what-is-a-womens-college>

17 Leo Baudhuin, “Women’s College on Paper, Not in Practice: Trans and Nonbinary Students Reflect on Life at Bryn Mawr,” *The Bi-College News*, March 6, 2020, <https://bicollegenews.com/2020/03/06/womens-college-on-paper-not-in-practice-trans-and-nonbinary-students-reflect-on-life-at-bryn-mawr/>

inclusive admissions policy only when asked.<sup>18</sup>

As students' experiences show, women's colleges, while officially stating that they welcome trans and/or gender non-conforming students, have not marketed these changes openly to prospective students. A number of students in fact had not even known about the new policies prior to entry. Kai Chuckas ('20), who came out as trans in high school, checked the "female" box in his application because he was not aware that womanhood was not required at Mount Holyoke College.<sup>19</sup> Another Mount Holyoke student, David Nejezchleba ('22), also thought "it was a women's college" when applying.<sup>20</sup> In addition, public records indicated that few trans women have enrolled since 2014. One of them, Genevieve Love ('22), said that while she was not expecting to meet "a ton of trans women students" at Bryn Mawr, she was surprised instead to "not find any at all."<sup>21</sup> There is also a significant absence of trans women of color. Ninotska Love ('20), one of the first out trans women of color at Wellesley College, hoped that she would not be "the only trans woman of color in [her] class" and believed that "[t]here has to be one for others to follow."<sup>22</sup> Yet trans women of color suffer barriers not just from their gender identity, but from socioeconomic factors that make it hard to finance their education. This led two trans women at Mills College, Erin Armstrong and Mia Satya, to call for extending scholarships to trans women of color to actively recruit them to Mills.<sup>23</sup> As these students claimed, if women's colleges continued to resist marketing their new policies or actively recruiting diverse gender groups, it would be very difficult to make a gender-diverse and inclusive space that their colleges had opened in their new admissions policies.

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18 Nora Caplan-Bricker, "Who Is a Women's College For? As Transgender Students Claim Their Space, Traditionalists See an Identity Crisis," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, January 20, 2019, [https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-is-a-womens-college-for/?cid2=gen\\_login\\_refresh&cid=gen\\_sign\\_in](https://www.chronicle.com/article/who-is-a-womens-college-for/?cid2=gen_login_refresh&cid=gen_sign_in)

19 Caplan-Bricker, "A Women's College."

20 Langton, "Administration Grapples."

21 Baudhuin, "Women's College on Paper."

22 Hugh Ryan, "Themstory: What It's Like to Be Trans at a Women's College," *Hugh Ryan*, February 27, 2018, <http://www.hughryan.org/recent-work/2018/2/27/themstory-what-its-like-to-be-trans-at-a-womens-college>

23 Ari Nussbaum, "'I Belong Here': Transgender Women Discuss Experiences on Campus," *The Campanil*, April 4, 2015, <http://eic.opalstacked.com/i-belong-here-transgender-women-discuss-experiences-on-campus/>

## Gendered Language

Lack of “inclusion” is not only present at the time of entry. Students have also faced it on campus, particularly in the widespread use of gendered language, both at institutional and interpersonal levels. At the institutional level, many women’s college communications continue to use terms such as “women,” “ladies,” “she” or “her.” Hearing and seeing such terms in Convocation, Commencement, college websites and official documents, many trans and/or gender non-conforming students have felt excluded, ignored, or devalued in what it supposed to be a “gender-inclusive” campus environment. Caedyn Busche (’17), a trans student at Mount Holyoke, strongly criticized gendered language used to “maintain that every single person at this school is a woman.”<sup>24</sup> Since many trans and/or gender non-conforming students find “women,” “ladies,” and “she” pronouns gender exclusive language, they are troubled by college administrators continually using these terms for institutional communication.

The use of gendered language has also complicated everyday interpersonal relations. Students at many colleges, including Simmons University, revealed that trans and non-binary students have faced exclusion on a daily basis by the ways in which faculty assumed their pronouns to be she/her/hers. One trans student at Simmons, for instance, has been misgendered in their classes, which often made them “dread going to class” and led to “a negative impact on [their] performance in those classes.”<sup>25</sup> The use of gendered language has also been a sensitive issue in interactions with alums. The struggle Sarah/Sal Cosmedy (’20) experienced is a good example. As a member of the V8s, an a cappella group at Mount Holyoke, Cosmedy, who then identified as a genderfluid transmasculine person, often performed at alum events where alums always welcomed the group with “an overtly feminine category,” greeting with, for example,

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24 Caedyn Busche, “The Administration Cannot Continue to Ignore Trans Students,” *Mount Holyoke News*, September 29, 2016, <http://www.mountholyokenews.com/opinion/2016/9/29/the-administration-cannot-continue-to-ignore-trans-students>

25 Lennox Orion, “Misgendering and Microaggressions: Students’ Call for Identity Awareness,” *The Simmons Voice*, March 23, 2017, <https://simmonsvoice.com/8039/features/misgendering-and-microaggressions-students-call-for-identity-awareness/>

“Welcomes, ladies!”<sup>26</sup> On the one hand, Cosmedy, who at that time also used he/him pronouns, understood that alums were trying to be kind, using such gendered language “to extend hospitality and make [them] feel welcome,” which they were grateful for.<sup>27</sup> However, at the same time, Cosmedy was hurt because they were misgendered over and over again. Cosmedy stated, “It’s hard to understand how especially isolating it is to be excluded from language that is intended to be kind . . . I know in my heart that they care so much, but still I’m wounded because I feel excluded by their attempt at inclusion.”<sup>28</sup> Cosmedy clearly straddled between alum’s intentions of being inclusive of the V8s members and the feeling of exclusion they received as a result. And while Cosmedy wished to correct them for misgendering them, they found it scary to do so considering that alums are important donors to the College. Assuming all students identify as “women” and use she/her/hers for pronouns is indeed harmful for trans and/or gender non-conforming students as it implies only two genders exist, erasing the presence of those who identify outside of the gender binary. Thus, as one Barnard College student claimed, such assumption “questions the identity that non-binary and transgender people have developed over the years.”<sup>29</sup> Yet Cosmedy’s struggle also reveals how complex and sensitive the issue surrounding gendered language is, particularly in interaction with alums. Those alums seem to use gendered language as a way to be more “inclusive” while the very same language makes trans and/or gender non-conforming students feel “excluded.”

### Institutional Memory

In addition to the use of gendered language, another “inclusion” issue students have faced is the absence of official documentations about the experiences of trans and/or gender non-conforming students. While working on

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26 Sarah/Sal Cosmedy, “As Mount Holyoke Evolves, Alums Must Too,” *Mount Holyoke News*, May 1, 2018, <http://www.mountholyokenews.com/visibility/2018/5/1/as-mount-holyoke-evolves-alums-must-too>

27 Cosmedy, “Mount Holyoke Evolves.” As several articles subsequently published on *Mount Holyoke News* suggest Cosmedy’s changing preference for they/them pronouns, the present paper uses they/them to refer to Cosmedy.

28 Cosmedy.

29 Angela Tran, “Perfecting the Pronouns,” *The Barnard Bulletin*, December 2018/January 2019, 32, [https://issuu.com/barnardbulletin/docs/december\\_18\\_issu/1](https://issuu.com/barnardbulletin/docs/december_18_issu/1)

his thesis at Smith College, Sam Davis ('17) noticed the lack of information about the history of trans students in the Sophia Smith archives, which made him question why the trans student body, “a present force” of the college, is excluded from the college archives.<sup>30</sup> Likewise, students at Wellesley pointed out the lack of accessible data on the experiences of trans students in *The Wellesley News* (the independent student newspaper of Wellesley College), as well as the alumnae magazine and Wellesley’s official data on student body demographics. They argue that since “the selection of which datasets are collected and published is not without bias,” the lack of accessible data or “archival silence” on trans students at Wellesley is “either a deliberate administrative choice or a form of neglect on their part.”<sup>31</sup> They consider their absence from the archival record and the colleges’ official documentations another form of exclusion.

In short, although women’s colleges officially began welcoming trans and/or gender non-conforming students, there are still many barriers to the creation of a “gender-inclusive” campus. Without making efforts to market the new admissions policies, to use gender affirming language both at institutional and interpersonal levels, and to officially acknowledge their presence in the campus community, women’s colleges give the impression that trans and/or gender non-conforming students are left behind, excluded and less “wanted.”

## Pursuing “Inclusion” : Student-Led Activism and Dialogue

Recognizing the lack of “inclusion” for trans and/or gender non-conforming students, students at women’s colleges have been actively pursuing “inclusion” by raising awareness of the problems they have faced and taking action to establish gender-inclusive practices and policies to make trans and/or gender non-conforming students feel “wanted” and “included.” Various student-led efforts have demonstrated the importance of centering the needs of trans and/

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30 Patience Kayira, “Sam Davis Presents ‘In Our Own Words’ in His Powerful Senior Thesis,” *The Sophian*, April 27, 2017, <https://thesophian.com/sam-davis-presents-in-our-own-words-in-his-powerful-senior-thesis/>

31 The Wellesley News Staff, “We’re Not All ‘Wellesley Women’ Anymore. What’s Taking the College So Long to See That?,” *The Wellesley News*, May 13, 2021, <https://thewellesleynews.com/2021/05/13/were-not-all-wellesley-women-anymore-whats-taking-the-college-so-long-to-see-that/>

or gender non-conforming students and called for more actions to be taken by both college administrations and student body to make actual changes on campus.

### College Administration

First, students' efforts have focused on the role of college administrations. Using various approaches, students have urged administrators to raise awareness of the harmful effects of using gendered language, the lack of accessible data on trans experiences, as well as the necessity to support trans women of color. Students majoring and minoring in philosophy at Simmons University, for example, collectively wrote a letter to the then President Helen G. Drinan to make a request that she reconsider calling Simmons a "women's college." As the term "women's college" used in Drinan's email to the Simmons community "ignores and delegitimizes the experiences and needs of trans and gender nonconforming students," they called attention to "the lack of understanding of diversity [they] see in [their] university's administration" and urged Drinan to "bridge this gap of knowledge and support" and take action to understand the students' needs.<sup>32</sup>

A number of students also published opinion articles in colleges' student newspapers regarding the use of she/her/hers pronouns in institutional communication. One of the articles published in *Mount Holyoke News* in 2016, for instance, was a student's harsh criticism of the use of she/her/hers on the university Diploma,<sup>33</sup> which later helped push the registrar's office to investigate and to eventually change the language on the Diploma. The Diploma now describes a Diploma holder in a genderless way.<sup>34</sup>

Also, some student called for more administrative attention to trans lives on campus by making a film and an archive specifically centering on the experiences of trans and non-binary students. A senior thesis project by Sam Davis ('17) communicated a strong message to the administration that trans students are present in the campus community and that they deserve more

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32 Philosophy Students, "Letter to the President."

33 Busche, "The Administration Cannot Continue."

34 Eileen O'grady, "Diplomas to Display Gender-Neutral Language This Year," *Mount Holyoke News*, April 13, 2017, <http://www.mountholyokenews.com/news/2017/4/13/diplomas-to-display-gender-neutral-language-this-year>

visibility. Davis, noticing the lack of documentations of trans lives in Sophia Smith archives, conducted interviews with Smith students and alumni who identified as trans and/or non-binary for his documentary project entitled “In Our Own Words: On Being Trans at Smith,” and created the first trans archive at Smith.<sup>35</sup> He explored how trans and/or non-binary students would fit into Smith’s vision of “women for the world” and the kinds of support or discouragement they received from the administration and their peers.<sup>36</sup> His work has been a significant addition to the Smith College Archives, further raising awareness of trans experiences to the administration and Smith community as a whole.

Furthermore, student-led efforts even pushed the administration to acknowledge the need to address the intersection of race and gender identity at Mills, which resulted in creating the Miss Major Scholarship, a scholarship specifically for trans women of color. Seeing the administration failing to take the lead on addressing the lack of representation of trans women of color, Erin Armstrong, a president of Gender Splendor (a campus club specifically made for the discussion of gender identity at Mills), said that the club felt urged to push this issue forward by themselves and met with dean of students to create this scholarship. Armstrong believes that this scholarship not only “[sends] a message that [trans women of color] are wanted” but also “seeks to address the socioeconomic barriers that stand in their way.”<sup>37</sup>

Using different strategies, students have organized and taken action urging their administrations to acknowledge the problems that hinder the creation of “inclusion” on campus. And by showing how the problems can be overcome, they have pushed college administrators to make real changes to help trans and/or gender non-conforming students feel “wanted” and “included.”

## Student Body

Student-led efforts have also demonstrated that creating an “inclusive” space

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35 Kayira, “Sam Davis.” Also see Trans Archive Oral History Project by Sam Davis, 2016-2017, CA-MS-01201, Smith College Archives Repository, Neilson Library, Northampton, MA, U.S.A.

36 Davis, Trans Archive Oral History.

37 Abbey Flentje, “Gender Splendor Spearheads Efforts to Make Mills More Inclusive,” *The Campanil*, December 2, 2015, <http://eic.opalstacked.com/gender-splendor-spearheads-efforts-to-make-mills-more-inclusive/>

requires active involvement of the entire student body, not just specific individuals. Campus-wide student involvement, in short, is critical to raising awareness of the “inclusion” issues and to creating a space where trans and/or gender non-conforming students can feel “wanted.” At Bryn Mawr, for example, students’ preferred names are now everywhere and there is a common, campus-wide practice for students to introduce themselves with their names and preferred pronouns. One non-binary student said that since this campus-wide habit was “already [in school] before [they] got to school,” it was reassuring and helped them “feel instantly comfortable upon stepping onto campus.”<sup>38</sup> Students’ collective efforts to make this campus-wide habit played an important role in creating such “comfortable” spaces for gender non-conforming students.

At Mills, the campus club Gender Splendor also asserted the importance of student involvement in Trans Week of Visibility (TWV), “a week of activities at Mills aimed at creating space for transgender, gender variant and gender non-conforming people on campus,”<sup>39</sup> which they began hosting in 2015 in conjunction with Transgender Day of Visibility.<sup>40</sup> Acknowledging a lack of spaces for trans students, the club, as part of TWV activities, put up signs in various places on campus that said, “Trans\* people (blank) here,” and asked students to fill in the blank to describe who trans people are and/or what trans people do.<sup>41</sup> A sign posted to the entrance pillar, for example, read “Trans\* people go to school here.”<sup>42</sup> Others included, “Trans\* people are welcome here” and “Trans\* people belong here.”<sup>43</sup> This activity, involving and encouraging students’ active participation across campus, highlighted the idea that each student matters in acknowledging the presence of trans people and creating an “inclusive” space for them. The activity was so appealing to the student body

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38 Baudhuin, “Women’s College on Paper.”

39 Britt Hart, “Trans Week of Visibility Celebrates Transgender Lives at Mills,” *The Campanil*, March 31, 2016, <http://eic.opalstacked.com/trans-week-of-visibility/>

40 Transgender Day of Visibility is an event that annually occurs on March 31 to celebrate transgender people and raise awareness of discrimination they have faced.

41 Hart, “Trans Week of Visibility.” Also see Samantha Lachman, “Women’s Colleges Are Admitting Trans and Gender-Fluid Applicants. Now What?,” *HuffPost*, Published May 5, 2015; Last modified December 6, 2017, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trans-policies-womens-colleges\\_n\\_7183892](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/trans-policies-womens-colleges_n_7183892)

42 Hart, “Trans Week of Visibility.”

43 Hart.

that students asked that the signs stay up even after TWV was over.<sup>44</sup>

These student-led efforts demonstrate that creating an “inclusive” space does not just mean making a specific area or group on campus, but means creating a widespread “inclusive” practice and a welcoming atmosphere all across campus so that no matter where on campus they go, trans and/or gender non-conforming students can feel safe for being who they are and feel a sense of belonging. And to make it happen, campus-wide student involvement is necessary.

## Struggles among Gender Groups

To address the problems faced by trans and/or gender non-conforming students, students have taken action to pursue “inclusion” and proposed a wide range of ways to improve the campus environment. However, in an effort to pursue “inclusion,” some groups of students whose gender identities are perceived as “privileged” on campus have deeply straddled between their expected “role” to support other gender minorities and the college’s women-centered traditions.

### Cisgender Students

One such student group is cisgender women. As some student-led efforts have highlighted, within the entire student body, there is a specific role that cisgender women are expected to serve. That is, cisgender women are expected to acknowledge their “privilege” and take the lead in supporting trans and/or gender non-conforming students on campus. As Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning claim, “Any individual person can be classified in terms of multiple socially meaningful categories” such as “black or white, male or female, gay or straight, Christian or Muslim.”<sup>45</sup> Since having memberships in not only some more advantaged categories but also some more disadvantaged ones is common for many people, they argue that “not even members of marginalized groups are safe from accusations of being privileged and insensitive to the suffering of

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44 Lachman, “Women’s Colleges Are Admitting.”

45 Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Rise of Victimhood Culture: Microaggressions, Safe Spaces, and the New Culture Wars* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 167.

the less fortunate.”<sup>46</sup> In women’s colleges today, some groups of students believe that cisgender women are in more advantaged categories, or have more “privilege,” than other gender groups. For example, one trans student at Mount Holyoke described that there exists a hierarchy in Mount Holyoke, which starts with “white, cis, heterosexual women” at the top.<sup>47</sup> He claimed that while women still struggle against men in a larger society, it is important to understand that because there is “a different positioning in this insulated four years,” cisgender students need to “acknowledge their power and privilege.”<sup>48</sup> Students holding similar views, therefore, believe that it is cisgender women who should take the initiative in working on “inclusion” issues and actively fighting for their trans peers.

Since the adoption of trans-inclusive admissions policies, students with such views have been pushing their cisgender peers to acknowledge and use their “privilege” to support trans and/or gender non-conforming students. In particular, these students have actively published opinion articles in student-led newspapers, which mainly explain what cisgender women should do to be good allies to their trans peers. For example, an article by a cisgender woman Chloe Jensen (’20) demonstrates that while correcting misgendering can often be unsafe for trans students, it never is for cisgender students, including herself.<sup>49</sup> In supporting trans and non-binary students, therefore, she tells her cisgender peers to not only introduce themselves with pronouns and use trans and non-binary students’ correct pronouns even when they are not in the room, but also actively correct each other when they misgender trans or non-binary students. Doing so, she argues, would lead not only to respecting trans and non-binary identities, but also to telling other cisgender students to continue respecting them.<sup>50</sup> Jensen, acknowledging that she is “not only perceived as a woman” at Mount Holyoke but also “as a woman in a place that specifically caters to [her] and other cis women,” highlights the importance of cisgender women educating each other so that they can normalize the practice of respecting trans and/or

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46 Campbell and Manning, *Victimhood Culture*, 168.

47 Caplan-Bricker, “A Women’s College.”

48 Caplan-Bricker.

49 Chloe Jensen, “Discussing Gender at a Historically Women’s College,” *Mount Holyoke News*, October 27, 2016, <https://www.mountholyokenews.com/opinion/2016/10/27/discussing-gender-at-a-historically-womens-college?rq=privilege>

50 Jensen, “Discussing Gender.”

non-binary identities on campus.<sup>51</sup>

Many trans and other gender and sexual minority students expect such support from cisgender women for the same reason. In an article titled “An Open Letter to Cis Women,” Hayley Van Allen (’21) at Scripps College maintained that in supporting trans peers on campus “[w]hite cis women especially cannot remain silent when given the privilege and ability to fight against transphobia with few repercussions,” further claiming that they should “amplify the voices of trans folks,” using “their cis privilege on behalf of their trans siblings” and “organizing and showing up for protests that center trans folks.”<sup>52</sup>

As these students reveal, cisgender women are now expected to fully use their “privilege” to help create a better place for trans and/or gender non-conforming students. The perceived “hierarchy” in women’s colleges seems to have created a new expected role and/or duty for cisgender women in making an “inclusive” space for trans and/or gender non-conforming students.

However, some cisgender women find this perceived “privilege” or expectation problematic. One cisgender woman at Mount Holyoke feels that because there is a perception that “the one who isn’t privileged is the one who isn’t a woman here,” cisgender women who are perceived as more “privileged” in women’s colleges are expected to prioritize the needs of the most marginalized students to care about social justice.<sup>53</sup> And yet, as another cisgender woman suggests, cisgender women are still fighting against sexism in society. She thinks it is important for the College to acknowledge that “educating women is still radical in and of itself.”<sup>54</sup> She thus demonstrates that while she believes trans and gender non-conforming students also belong at Mount Holyoke, the College is still “a place that is for women, that recognizes there are people who have had experiences similar to women who don’t identify as women.”<sup>55</sup> As Campbell and Manning argued that people “who combine many victim identities will claim and be accorded greater moral status

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51 Jensen.

52 Hayley Van Allen, “An Open Letter to Cis Women,” *The Scripps Voice*, February 28, 2019, <http://scrippsvoice.com/an-open-letter-to-cis-women/>

53 Caplan-Bricker, “A Women’s College.”

54 Caplan-Bricker.

55 Caplan-Bricker.

than those with only a few,”<sup>56</sup> cisgender women, who are considered having fewer so-called “victim identities” in women’s colleges, seem to straddle between the college’s women-centered traditions and their new expected role to center the needs of the less “privileged.”

### Trans Men Students

Another student group who has similarly struggled with their perceived “privilege” is trans men. As one trans student describes himself as having “the juxtaposition of a body that can contain both an oppressed group and an oppressive one—a transgender person and the perception of a white man,”<sup>57</sup> trans men are often perceived to be in both privileged and less privileged groups. In women’s colleges, because of their identification as male, they are often perceived to be more “privileged” than other gender groups. For instance, Leo Rachman (’20) noticed that after his medical transition to male, people’s reactions have changed in class. Knowing that some trans men could “[embody] toxic masculine traits” when they start taking hormones, he claimed in an article he wrote before the transition that when he goes on hormones he would hope to “remain kind and giving” and try his best to “stay true to [himself].”<sup>58</sup> As his article suggests, he believes he has not changed his way of contributing to class discussion since transition. However, he feels that when he speaks up people now react to his “male” voice differently, making him feel “not welcome, or that [he’s] taking up too much space in the department.”<sup>59</sup> Trans men, while being perceived as another “oppressed” gender minority for being transgender, are also considered having certain “power” or “privilege” since they now pass as “men.” Thus, in women’s colleges where education has been traditionally centered on women to rival that of male-only institutions, they tend to encounter moments where they feel unwelcome or feel pressured to police their behaviors.

While acknowledging the importance of centering the needs of trans and/or gender non-conforming students, some student groups have struggled with the

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56 Campbell and Manning, *Victimhood Culture*, 167-8.

57 Hunter R. Myers, “Smith’s Trans Problem,” *The Sophian*, December 8, 2017, <https://thesophian.com/2017-12-8-smiths-trans-problem-564te/>

58 Leo Rachman, “Navigating Personal Masculinities for Trans Men,” *Mount Holyoke News*, April 15, 2018, <http://www.mountholyokenews.com/visibility/2018/4/15/navigating-personal-masculinities-for-trans-men>

59 Caplan-Bricker, “A Women’s College.”

feeling of oppression. Perceived as having more “privilege” than other gender groups on campus, both cisgender women and trans men feel somewhat pressured to police their own language and behaviors for the purpose of celebrating “inclusion” for their peers with other gender identities. It is as if policing their behavior or silencing their voice became a responsibility that ensures that the voices of the more “marginalized” can be heard.

## Conclusion

With the rise of coeducational colleges across the country, women are allowed to attend not just women’s colleges but any college or university in the U.S. today, including the ones that once only admitted men. In such an era, students who intentionally “choose” to attend a women’s college do not just go there to get an education. They actively participate in debating the role of women’s colleges, asking why women’s colleges matter today, and through activism they push their institutions to make meaningful changes. As their recent activism focusing on creating trans-inclusive admissions policies demonstrates, students are not passive recipients of a college education. Rather, they are the central driving force for actively defining and shaping the meaning of women’s colleges.

Our analysis of students’ recent activism on “gender inclusivity” further highlights their continued efforts. While officially admitting trans and/or gender non-conforming students was a significant step forward in making women’s colleges “inclusive,” students have shown that this is not enough. Recognizing a range of existing “inclusion” issues (e.g., the widespread use of gendered language) that make trans and/or gender non-conforming students feel unwelcome or less “wanted,” students have not only called attention to those issues but engaged in various activism and dialogue to solve them. As an individual, a group or an organization, a large number of students took action to establish gender-inclusive practices and policies using different approaches, including publishing opinion articles, organizing gender awareness events and creating a trans archive. By so doing, they have pushed both their administrations and the student body to acknowledge existing issues and to proactively make a difference for trans and/or gender non-conforming students.

And yet, for all the student activism that has pushed forward many crucial changes around the issue of “inclusion,” students deeply struggle with the

meaning of “inclusion.” As various student-led efforts we examined demonstrate, most students agree that fostering “inclusion” must center on the needs of trans and/or gender non-conforming students. However, some fear that fostering “inclusion” this way could “oppress” and “marginalize” others, precisely the sorts of exclusion students are trying to overcome. Perceived as having more “privilege” in women’s colleges, some cisgender women and trans men in fact have felt pressured to police their behavior or to silence their voice for the purpose of embracing “inclusion” for their less “privileged” peers. A sense of discomfort, in short, was generated in an effort to create an “inclusive” atmosphere for them. Given the obvious fact that cisgender women and trans men are also part of a campus community, their struggles urge the community to question whether a space created based on such pressures and a sense of discomfort could truly be an “inclusive” environment for all. Their struggles suggest that centering the needs of trans and/or gender non-conforming students to the point where other students are pressured to feel the need to silence their voices may not lead to the creation of an “inclusive” space in a true sense.

As studies on inclusion and democracy suggest, differences, disagreement or struggle frequently emerge and are highlighted in public discussion, particularly when there are differing values, interests or perspectives among participants. The students’ active pursuit of “inclusion” in contemporary women’s colleges also highlights this point, revealing their struggles over what specifically defines “inclusion” and demonstrating the complexity of achieving “inclusion” for diverse gender identities. These debates also show that, as some deliberative democracy theorists have suggested, any conclusion must rely on forms of communication that do not favor or oppress any member of that conversation. By sharing their struggles and addressing the complexity of this issue, therefore, these students contribute to further involving the campus community to think about what “inclusion” truly means and how it can be better promoted in contemporary, gender-diverse women’s colleges.

Various student-led efforts that we examined, then, further demonstrate the critical role of students in shaping and even democratizing contemporary women’s colleges. From admissions policies to the creation of an “inclusive” space on campus, it is students, rather than administrators, that actively pushed forward the issue of “gender inclusivity” and further illuminated the complexity

of what it means to be “inclusive” of diverse gender identities. Our investigation in this paper thus contributes to expanding our understanding of how student activism confronts fundamental challenges of democratic decision-making, inclusion, and the continued challenge to institutional norms that are reshaping the role of contemporary women’s colleges.

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**Abstract**

# “It’s about Being Wanted”: Creating a “Gender-Inclusive” Campus at U.S. Women’s Colleges

Maki IKOMA

Since 2014, many women’s colleges in the United States have made big institutional changes to foster diversity and inclusion by adopting trans-inclusive admissions policies. However, as various student-led efforts have demonstrated, changing admissions policies alone does not automatically lead to creating an “inclusive” campus for diverse gender identities. This paper explores this issue regarding “gender inclusivity” within the larger democratic context by focusing on student activism in contemporary women’s colleges. In particular, it looks at how students are pushing women’s colleges to think further about the meaning of “inclusion” beyond the issue of enrollment and how to create a “gender-inclusive” campus.

Examining various student-led efforts at women’s colleges mainly through student newspapers and student-led campus activism between 2014 and 2022, this paper reveals the critical role of students in pushing forward the issue of “gender inclusivity” as well as their struggles over the meaning of “inclusion.” Recognizing a range of existing “inclusion” issues that make transgender and/or gender non-conforming students feel unwelcome or less “wanted,” a large number of students have taken action to establish gender-inclusive practices and policies across campus, pushing both their administrations and the student body to proactively make meaningful changes.

Yet as studies on inclusion and democracy suggest, students’ attempts at fostering “inclusion” also reveal their struggles over what specifically defines “inclusion.” While most agree that fostering “inclusion” must center on the needs of transgender and/or gender non-conforming students, some fear that such an emphasis could in fact lead to “oppressing” or “marginalizing” other groups of students and counteracting efforts at “inclusion.” Attempts at fostering “inclusion,” in short, have the ironic potential of reproducing the “oppression” and “marginalization” that students have been trying hard to

overcome. This complex, somewhat paradoxical reality students have been facing over the meaning of “inclusion,” therefore, represents a significant challenge to creating a “gender-inclusive” campus.

Various student-led efforts, in short, demonstrate the critical role of students in reshaping the meaning of women’s colleges. Through various forms of activism, students have not only raised awareness of the existing “inclusion” issues, but further illuminated the complexity of promoting “inclusion” in contemporary, gender-diverse women’s colleges. This paper, by illustrating this complexity, contributes to expanding our understanding of how student activism continues to challenge institutional norms around the issue of “inclusion” and to reshape the role of contemporary women’s colleges.

