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## **Trans Activism and Advocacy Among Transgender Students in Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study**

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# Trans Activism and Advocacy Among Transgender Students in Higher Education: A Mixed Methods Study

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Trans students face institutional and interpersonal discrimination that renders them vulnerable to minority stress. Some trans students respond to minority stress, and perceptions of injustice on their campuses, via engagement in campus activism or advocacy. The current mixed methods study explores trans undergraduate and graduate students' explanations for engaging or not engaging in activism/advocacy and the types of activities in which they engage. It also examines, using logistic regression, what institutional, student, and trans-specific factors predict whether trans students engage in activism/advocacy. Qualitative analyses indicated that students engaged in a variety of activism and advocacy activities, both formal and informal. Students who engaged in activism/advocacy cited their personal values, sense of personal and community responsibility, desire for community, and opportunities for engagement in explaining their involvement. Students who did not engage emphasized other obligations and identities as taking precedence, visibility concerns, lack of connections to campus trans communities (e.g., as nonbinary students or students of color), burnout, mental health issues, activism not being a priority, and structural barriers. Logistic regression analyses indicated that attending a 4-year (vs. 2-year) institution and being an undergraduate (vs. graduate) student were related to a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy. A negative perception of campus climate was related to greater likelihood of activism/advocacy, but interacted with participants' perceptions of their institution's trans-supportiveness relative to other colleges, such that those who perceived a negative climate but also viewed their institution relatively positively in comparison to other colleges had the highest likelihood of engaging in activism/advocacy. Experiences of discrimination and being more out were also related to a greater likelihood of engagement.

*Keywords:* activism, advocacy, college, transgender

Transgender (trans) students attending college or universities face institutional and interpersonal discrimination that largely goes unacknowledged and unchallenged (Beemyn, 2016; Case, Kanenberg, Erich, & Tittsworth, 2012), in part because of cisgenderism, a systemic ideology that reifies and perpetuates the gender binary and privileges cisgender people (Lennon & Mistler, 2014). Institutional challenges include a lack of trans- or gender-inclusive restrooms, housing, health services, documentation, and policies, and a hostile climate in classrooms, residence halls, and other campus communities (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018; Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2013; Woodford, Joslin, Pitcher, & Renn, 2017). In turn, research shows that trans students report higher levels of harassment and discrimination and a lower sense of belonging

within the campus community than nontrans students (Beemyn, 2016; Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). Trans students who are of color and/or disabled may experience heightened levels of marginalization, exclusion, and invisibility (Garvey, Mobley, Summerville, & Moore, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016a).

Amid unmet safety needs, an unwelcoming environment, and discrimination, trans students are vulnerable to minority stress, which may impact their ability to thrive emotionally, socially, and academically (BrckaLorenz, Garvey, Hurtado, & Latopolski, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2018; Pryor, 2015). Yet trans students may also respond to minority stress, and perceptions of injustice on their campuses, via engagement in activism or advocacy. National data on trans first-year students indicate that they outpace other student in their precollege civic engagement (e.g., volunteering, protesting) and social agency (i.e., valuing social/political engagement), and are more intent on pursuing social change after college (Eagan et al., 2016). Trans students, then, may engage in activism or advocacy as a means of advancing social justice, as well as to enhance their sense of personal agency and self-worth, and to build community connections and pride.

The current mixed methods study explores trans undergraduate and graduate students' reasons for engaging or not engaging in

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activism/advocacy—which represents a potential source of resilience (i.e., the capacity to recover quickly or “bounce back” from difficulties; Singh, 2013) and empowerment—and the types of activities in which they engage. We also aim to predict, in logistic regression, what institutional, student, and trans-specific factors predict whether trans students engage in activism/advocacy. We consider activism and advocacy in combination, as we recognize that the line between activism and advocacy is blurry, with many people using the terms interchangeably and identifying as both activists and advocates. Activism tends to refer to intentional actions aimed to bring about social, political, or institutional change, often via protest and persuasion, such as speeches, protests, and marches (Parsons, 2016). Advocacy often refers to formal or informal efforts to speak, write, or argue on behalf of a group, person, or cause (Parsons, 2016). The meaning of “activism” varies across time and context: Contemporary college students, for example, often include volunteering and participation in campus clubs and programming in their definition of activism (Quaye, 2007; Ruiz et al., 2017), and trans individuals view “educating others” as a form of trans activism (Riggle, Rostosky, McCants, & Pascale-Hague, 2011).

In reviewing the literature, we draw from research that examines trans and LGBTQ activism/advocacy, recognizing that the enactment and effects of activism/advocacy are intertwined historically, within and outside of college settings (Broad, 2002; Stryker, 2017). We center our review on research specific to trans individuals when possible, and trans students specifically. Indeed, trans students are unique in that they may face unique opportunities for engaging in activism/advocacy on their campuses (e.g., via student groups) yet may also experience themselves as highly vulnerable in doing so (e.g., because administrators, faculty, and staff have control over their academic, financial, physical, and emotional well-being).

### **Gender Minority Stress and Activism and Advocacy as Strategies of Resilience**

Meyer (2003) posited that sexual minorities (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer [LGBQ] people) are exposed to minority stress processes at both distal (e.g., prejudice, discrimination) and proximal levels (e.g., internalized homophobia, concealment), thus increasing their risk for mental health difficulties. Yet Meyer (2003) also suggests that sexual minorities often show positive adaptations to minority stress on a variety of levels, from the individual (e.g., meaning-making, resilience) to the community or societal (e.g., community connections, activism), which can buffer the negative effects of minority stress on mental health. In particular, organizing around a minority identity enables LGBQ people to develop group solidarity and support that protect against the negative mental health effects of minority stress. Hendricks and Testa (2012) extended Meyer’s model to trans people, suggesting that gender minority stress may operate similarly: distal experiences of marginalization, harassment, and prejudice affect trans individuals directly and indirectly via their effect on proximal stressors, such as gender identity concealment, vigilance regarding possible stigma, and internalized transphobia. Yet the effects of such stress may also be buffered or offset by resiliency-promoting processes, such as community connectedness and pride.

One way to cope with discrimination is through participating in activism or advocacy to improve conditions for and advance the status of one’s minority group (Breslow et al., 2015; Broad, 2002; DeBlaere et al., 2014). Working for social change can promote personal resilience and interpersonal, intrapersonal, and sociopolitical empowerment, and facilitate a sense of group solidarity (Hagen, Hoover, & Morrow, 2018). Activism and advocacy, especially in a group context, is a valuable way for marginalized people to nurture themselves and other community members, and may increase their sense of agency to shape their situation (Hagen et al., 2018). By anchoring one’s efforts in what Quaye (2007, p. 3) calls “critical hope”—the belief that by challenging unjust practices and policies, one can work to improve one’s own and others’ circumstances—marginalized individuals, such as trans students, can experience various benefits of activism/advocacy, including developing their own voice and a sense of connection to others.

There is a long and rich history of trans activism/advocacy (Broad, 2002; Stryker, 2017) that is increasingly the focus of empirical work, although rarely does this work center on trans youth or college students. Jones et al. (2016) surveyed 14- to 25-year-old trans individuals and found that among those who engaged in activism, more than half felt better about their gender identity, had fun, and felt part of a larger community as a result of their involvement. About one third felt more resilient, and almost one third felt that participation had eased their depression and reduced thoughts of self-harm. Such findings illustrate the potential for activism and advocacy to enhance well-being, personal agency, and community belonging. In a study of trans adults, Singh, Hays, and Watson (2011) found that social and political activism, and being a role model or mentor for others, were viewed as strategies of resilience by participants. Through acting as agents of social change and seeking to inspire others, rather than resigning themselves to the status quo, they reaffirmed their sense of self-worth and cultivated hope for the future.

Other evidence of the potential resiliency-promoting effects of activism comes from research focused primarily on sexual minorities. A study of LGBTQ students attending religiously affiliated colleges and universities found that activism and advocacy were critical to the resilience and survival of some participants (Craig, Austin, Rashidi, & Adams, 2017). They felt empowered by resisting the hostile institutional culture and supporting other students, such as by creating an underground LGBTQ support group. This study suggests that even, and perhaps especially, in the context of high levels of institutional hostility, where there are likely risks associated with engaging in activism/advocacy, such activities are not impossible and may hold powerful benefits. And yet, while engaging in activism is often driven by a desire to make a difference and help others, the benefits of doing so are not always wholly positive (Kulick, Wernick, Woodford, & Renn, 2017; Singh, 2013). Particularly when activists contend with limited social support and poor personal boundaries, they experience burnout, compassion fatigue, depression, and hopelessness, according to one study of queer student activists of color (Vaccaro & Mena, 2011). This finding is consistent with the broader literature on burnout among social justice activists (Gorski & Chen, 2015). Trans students may be vulnerable to similar negative consequences—which may be heightened when they experience hypervisibility related to their gender identities or presentations (Goldberg &

Kuvalanka, 2018; Pryor, 2015) or when they experience high levels of internalized transphobia. In a study of 552 trans adults (ages 18–71), Breslow et al. (2015) found that individuals who reported high levels of internalized transphobia and who also engaged in high levels of collective action were the most distressed, suggesting that activism may not function in the same way for all trans individuals. Moreover, a study of 20 queer women and trans individuals (Hagen et al., 2018) found that participants cited building community and connection as key benefits of activism, but also noted instances of feeling excluded from or invisible in LGBTQ communities (e.g., because of their intersectional identities). In addition, participants spoke to the toll that activism took on their well-being, especially when their efforts had limited impact, and the struggle to prioritize self-care. Thus, their experiences of activism were nuanced and complex.

### Motivations for Activism and Advocacy

The degree to which trans students feel that efforts to make their campus communities more trans-inclusive are worthwhile and appreciated will likely influence whether they participate in activism or advocacy, and how such efforts impact their mental health. Trans students who engage in activism (e.g., regarding the need for gender-inclusive restrooms/housing and name/gender change options) face many barriers. These include entrenched stereotypes and a lack of awareness on the part of faculty and staff; resistance to policy changes by dominant group members; and the invisibility of trans people on campus (Beemyn, 2016; Case et al., 2012). Exposure to, or anticipation of, such barriers may discourage trans students from engaging in activism, particularly actions aimed at transforming climate or policy. They may instead engage in forms of advocacy that are focused less on creating systemic change and more on promoting personal and community resilience, such as establishing support networks with and for other trans students (Craig et al., 2017; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017; Singh et al., 2013).

Although little work has explored why trans students engage in activism, research suggests that among youth activists more generally, main motivators include a desire to bring about social justice, feel safer in society, and have all of one's identities recognized and celebrated (Akiva, Carey, Cross, Delale-O'Connor, & Brown, 2017). Studies have also examined predictors of identity-based activism. Experiences of sexism (Friedman & Ayres, 2013), recognizing injustice (e.g., sexism; Swank & Fahs, 2014), and a commitment to social justice (Swank & Fahs, 2014) are associated with feminist activism. Among college students of color (Hope, Keels, & Durkee, 2016) and with disabilities (Kimball, Moore, Vaccaro, Troiano, & Newman, 2016), experiences with discrimination were related to race- and disability-related activism, respectively. Among LGBTQ people, experiencing (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018; Swank & Fahs, 2013) or observing (Swank, Woodford, & Lim, 2013) heterosexist discrimination has been linked to LGBTQ-related activism, such as signing a petition or voting. A study of 14- to 25-year-old trans people found that perceiving a need for trans rights was a motivator for social and political engagement (Jones et al., 2016), highlighting how activism can function as a coping response to gender minority stress.

In addition to experiencing discrimination and recognizing the need for LGBTQ rights, the extent to which a person is out about

their sexual orientation or gender identity may be related to activism. In a study of LGBTQ students, Swank, Woodford, and Lim (2013) found that outness was associated with higher levels of activism. Other work has found that LGBTQ college students who are more out about their identities are more likely to participate in social/educational activities on campus, including attending LGBTQ events (Gonyea & Moore, 2007; Gortmaker & Brown, 2006). Although these studies did not examine identity-based activism, the findings suggest that outness facilitates engagement in campus activities, which could encompass campus activism.

In terms of demographic characteristics, there is evidence that people with marginalized identities (being a woman, LGBTQ, or of color) are more likely to engage in activism (Friedman & Ayres, 2013; Lombardi, 1999; Perrin, Bhattacharyya, Snipes, Calton, & Heesacker, 2014). However, people's social identities and social context intersect to impact their motivation and willingness to disrupt broader systems of power (Strolovitch, Wong, & Proctor, 2017), and their vulnerability in doing so (Singh, Meng, & Hansen, 2014). For example, in one study, lesbians of color were more likely to protest and vote than White lesbians; among gay men, race was less central to activism (Swank & Fahs, 2013).

### Forms of Activism and Advocacy

Activism and advocacy can take many forms, including volunteering and political engagement—and outness—for LGBTQ people (Fassinger, Shullman, & Stevenson, 2010). Indeed, Broad (2002) and others (Brewster, Velez, Mennicke, & Tebbe, 2014) assert that by disclosing and discussing their gender identities, trans people politicize “everyday identities” and, in turn, engage in a type of activism. Many trans people feel that living openly as a trans person is a form of activism (Brewster et al., 2014; Riggle et al., 2011)—although for trans students of color, trans visibility raises particular concerns about safety that must be considered (Garvey et al., 2018).

At times, campus activism and advocacy are formal (i.e., collaborative, organized), such as resisting a policy or pushing for trans-affirming educational programming—activities that may be facilitated on college campuses in the context of LGBTQ groups, which provide opportunities for political engagement, and support (Case et al., 2012). At other times, activism and advocacy are informal (i.e., self-initiated, spontaneous), such as correcting professors who use the wrong pronoun for oneself or other trans students (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Pryor, 2015). Ultimately, both forms of activism/advocacy may be valuable in promoting social change, and have the potential to benefit trans students' well-being.

### The Current Study

This mixed methods study examines campus activism among trans undergraduate and graduate students. We explore, via qualitative methods, (a) the types of campus activism/advocacy activities that trans students describe engaging in, and (b) students' explanations about why they do or do not engage in activism/advocacy. We assess, via quantitative methods, (c) predictors of campus activism, attending to institutional factors (religiously affiliated vs. not; 2- vs. 4-year; presence vs. lack of trans faculty/staff), perceptions of institutional trans-inclusiveness (campus cli-

mate; trans-supportiveness in relation to other institutions), demographic factors (White vs. of color; undergraduate vs. graduate student; assigned female vs. male at birth; binary vs. nonbinary gender identity), and personal experiences related to gender identity (outness; discrimination).

Regarding institutional predictors, we include whether the student's institution was religiously affiliated or not because conservative religious institutions offer few institutional supports for trans students and may openly discriminate against LGBTQ students (Campus Pride, 2018; Goldberg et al., 2018). Given the risks associated with engaging in activism/advocacy at these colleges, students may be less likely to do so. We include whether the student attended a two- or 4-year institution, as the former tends to offer fewer opportunities for student engagement in general and few institutional supports (such as LGBTQ clubs) for trans students (Beemyn, 2012; Goldberg et al., 2018), resulting in fewer possibilities for activism/advocacy. Students attending 2-year colleges are also more likely to face structural barriers (e.g., living off campus, being employed; Porchea, Allen, Robbins, & Phelps, 2010) that may impede engagement in campus activism/advocacy. We also include the known presence of trans faculty/staff, as this appears to communicate the institution's commitment to diversity (Beemyn, 2016) and may signal the availability of campus mentors who would encourage or facilitate campus activism/advocacy.

Regarding perceptions of the institution, we include perceived campus climate, with the expectation that students who feel their campuses are more hostile will be more likely to engage in activism/advocacy, in that recognizing injustice (Swank & Fahs, 2014) and a perceived need for trans rights (Jones et al., 2016) have been linked to activism. Yet we expect that the effects of perceived climate on activism might be influenced by other factors, such as the extent to which students are open with others about their trans identity, or perceptions of how trans-affirming the institution is viewed relative to other institutions. Thus, we include perceptions of how trans-supportive the institution is seen in comparison to other colleges, hypothesizing that those who view their institutional climate as relatively hostile, but who also view their colleges more favorably than others, may be especially likely to engage in activism, in that they may view their institutions as amenable to change and foresee a greater possibility of success. In other words, dissatisfaction and perceptions of oppression may spur activism/advocacy, but this may be more likely when students see the likelihood of at least some institutional support (i.e., they believe their efforts could actually make a difference in prompting institutional change; Singh, 2013).

Regarding student demographics, we consider a number of ways that identity is constructed and experienced. We include whether students identify as White or of color, as the multiple minoritized identities of LGBTQ students of color create demands for multiple types of identity-based organizing, activism, and potential burnout (Kulick et al., 2017; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011), possibly reducing the likelihood of trans activism. Also, trans students of color may feel excluded from LGBQ and trans communities—which tend to focus on the needs and priorities of dominant (White) group members (Alimahomed, 2010; Singh, 2013)—and may have unique safety concerns that affect their willingness to engage in activism/advocacy (Garvey et al., 2018). While the relationship of race and ethnicity to activism for trans students is far more com-

plex than a simple racial dichotomy can address, its inclusion provides a first step in addressing how being a member of a nondominant racial group may influence activism/advocacy.

We include undergraduate/graduate student status, given graduate students' decentralized status at most universities and their lower engagement with campus groups (Hirt & Muffo, 1998), including LGBTQ groups (Goldberg et al., 2018), thus reducing the likelihood of activism. We include sex assigned at birth, given evidence that trans women (i.e., women assigned male at birth) are less likely than trans men to assume leadership roles on campus (Dugan et al., 2012), possibly for the same reasons as cisgender women, and because of a fear of hypervisibility.

We also include whether students identified exclusively with what are sometimes termed binary (i.e., trans man/woman) identities or with what are termed nonbinary (e.g., genderqueer) identities, while acknowledging that this division is overly simplistic and externally imposed (e.g., some trans women/men identify as nonbinary). We include this given that nonbinary students often face resistance and a lack of understanding of their gender identities from both cis and binary trans people (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Goldberg & Kuvallanka, 2018; Pfeffer, 2014). As a result, they may struggle to be recognized as "legitimate" trans people, which may limit their connection to and comfort with campus trans communities (Catalano, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b). Indeed, a recent study (Day, Goldberg, Toomey, & Beemyn, in press) found that compared with binary identified trans students, nonbinary identified students felt less connected to LGBTQ and trans groups, providing support for our hypothesis that nonbinary students will feel less able or motivated to engage in activism/advocacy with other trans students.

Regarding gender identity-specific predictors, we include openness about one's gender identity, given that outness has been linked to activism on campus among LGBQ students (Swank & Fahs, 2013) and to engagement in campus activities (Gonyea & Moore, 2007)—and, likewise, outness (or identity disclosure; Brewster et al., 2014) may facilitate social justice activism among trans people (Riggle et al., 2011). We include trans-related discrimination as a predictor, given evidence that such experiences are related to an increased likelihood of activism among LGBQ students (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018). Yet we expect that discrimination may interact with campus climate: amid a very hostile climate, high levels of discrimination may predict a lower likelihood of activism/advocacy, inasmuch as the effects of discrimination on mental health are exacerbated in the context of broader community stigma (White Hughto, Reisner, & Pachankis, 2015), and high levels of psychological distress are related to academic disengagement (Boyras, Granda, Baker, Tidwell, & Waits, 2016).

## Method

### Data Collection

The data (collected May–November 2016) were drawn from an online survey of trans students' experiences in higher education, developed by the first author. Focus groups with trans students—led by trained trans-identified members of the research team—helped to inform the development of the survey. It was pilot tested for ease of use and functionality by members of the target population prior to survey launch. Feedback from this group, and from scholars who

study trans populations, led to minor changes in the survey. The survey, which was approved by the Human Subjects Board at Clark University and constructed using *Qualtrics*, was disseminated to colleges and universities in every U.S. state, primarily by sending it to campus LGBTQ groups, clubs, and resource centers. Some colleges did not have LGBTQ groups or resource centers, but, rather, a designated staff member within a larger center, such as multicultural affairs, who provided support or resources to LGBTQ students. In such cases, we sent study information to them directly, with a request to disseminate it to relevant individuals. We also distributed the study information to listservs and social media pages aimed at trans people and/or college students.

The survey included questions on a range of topics, including gender identity, outness, perceptions of campus climate, and experiences with faculty and staff. Participants were told: “You may complete this survey if you (a) identify as trans, gender nonconforming, gender questioning, genderqueer, gender nonbinary, agender, or anywhere on the gender-nonconforming spectrum; and (b) are currently enrolled at least part-time in a college/university (or recently graduated). Graduate students may also participate. *Students with nonbinary gender identities are particularly encouraged to participate.*” We thus explicitly sought the involvement of nonbinary identified students. Participants were told not to put identifying data on the survey, and that upon completion, they would be directed to a link to enter their name/e-mail—which would not be linked to their data—in a drawing for one of 10 \$50.00 gift cards.

A total of 649 students initiated the survey; 491 (75.7%) completed all of the closed-ended items used in the study. Of the 491 complete responses, 320 (65.2%) completed the open-ended (qualitative) questions analyzed in this study.

The median and modal time to completion was 40 min. To enhance validity, respondents’ answers to similar questions were inspected for evidence of inattentive or fraudulent responding; response times and missing data patterns were also assessed (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Respondents who did not answer any open-ended questions or completed the survey in under 15 min were subjected to careful review of their data to ensure logical responding patterns. The final sample for the study was 491 participants.

### Participants

See Table 1 for demographic data for the 491 participants (*M* age = 22.35 years; *SD* = 5.56). Most (75.4%; *n* = 370) were undergraduates and recent graduates; the remainder were graduate students. In terms of race, participants could select as many categories as applied. Most (74.5%; *n* = 366) identified their race as White only; 25.3% (*n* = 124) chose other racial categories and were classified as students of color. Further breaking down the students of color by racial category, 5.3% (*n* = 26) of the sample was Latinx/Chicanx only; 4.7% (*n* = 23) Asian only; 2.4% (*n* = 12) Black/African American only; 0.6% (*n* = 3) Middle Eastern only; 0.4% (*n* = 2) Native American only; and 11.7% (*n* = 57) bi/multiracial. Recognizing the inevitable limitations of asking participants to choose from preset racial categories, we also offered a “something else” response option; however, the majority who chose this category were ultimately classified as White (e.g., Jewish, European), with a handful identifying in other ways (e.g., Chicano, Mexican American).

Table 1  
*Sample Demographics (N = 491)*

Student characteristic	<i>N</i> (%)
<b>Region</b>	
United States: Midwest	135 (27.5%)
South	114 (23.2%)
East Coast	110 (22.4%)
West Coast	109 (22.2%)
Non-U.S.	23 (4.7%)
<b>Student status</b>	
First-year undergraduates	66 (13.5%)
Second-year undergraduates	97 (19.8%)
Third-year undergraduates	71 (14.5%)
Fourth-year undergraduates	67 (13.6%)
Fifth-year and above	31 (6.3%)
Recent graduates (in the past year)	38 (7.7%)
Current graduate students	121 (24.6%)
<b>Race</b>	
White only	366 (74.5%)
Of color	124 (25.3%)
Latino/a/x/Latin American only	26 (5.3%)
Asian only	23 (4.7%)
Black/African American only	12 (2.4%)
Middle Eastern only	3 (.6%)
Native American only	2 (.4%)
Biracial/multiracial (multiple races)	57 (11.6%)
Unknown	1 (.2%)
<b>Gender Assigned at Birth</b>	
Female	387 (78.8%)
Male	99 (20.2%)
Intersex, assigned female	5 (1%)
<b>Gender Identity</b>	
Transgender/trans	203 (41.3%)
Nonbinary	192 (39.1%)
Genderqueer	133 (27.1%)
Trans man	97 (19.7%)
Gender nonconforming	87 (17.7%)
Gender fluid	88 (17.9%)
Agender	82 (16.7%)
Masculine of center	61 (12.4%)
Androgynous	56 (11.4%)
Questioning	47 (9.6%)
Trans woman	36 (7.3%)
Feminine of center	24 (4.9%)
Demigender	23 (4.7%)
Other identities not listed (e.g., bigender transmasculine, neutrois, two spirit, third gender)	20 (4.1%)
<b>Sexual Orientation</b>	
Queer	151 (30.8%)
Pansexual	76 (15.5%)
Bisexual	57 (11.6%)
Asexual	51 (10.4%)
Gay	31 (6.3%)
Lesbian	24 (4.9%)
Heterosexual	17 (3.5%)
Questioning	16 (3.3%)
Demisexual	12 (2.4%)
Something else (e.g., I identify as multiple orientations)	56 (11.4%)

Students selected from a variety of gender identity options and could choose as many as desired. Most identified as at least one of the nonbinary identity options and could thus be classified as nonbinary (75.2%; *n* = 369); the remainder were binary identified (24.8%; *n* = 122). Specifically, we coded as gender nonbinary all those who identified as any of the nonbinary options (nonbinary, genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender fluid, androgynous,

agender, demigender, third gender, transmasculine, masculine/feminine of center, questioning).<sup>1</sup> We coded as gender binary all those who identified as transgender, trans, trans woman, trans man, FTM (female-to-male), MTF (male-to-female), woman, man, and who did not indicate any nonbinary options.

Regarding sex assignment, 78.8% ( $n = 387$ ) were assigned female at birth (AFAB) and 20.2% ( $n = 99$ ) were assigned male at birth (AMAB); 1% ( $n = 5$ ) were intersex and assigned female, and thus were included as such in analyses.<sup>2</sup> Greater participation by AFAB persons is consistent with the demographics of younger trans people in other work (e.g., Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011).

### Open-Ended Questions

1. What types of trans/GNC activism/advocacy efforts have you engaged in? Please list.
2. Why are you active or not active? Please explain.

### Closed-Ended Questions

#### Outcome.

**Trans activism/advocacy.** Participants were asked “How active are you in trans/GNC-related advocacy or activism on your college campus? (e.g., bringing speakers to the university; seeking resources for a club; advocating for trans/GNC resources; advocating for staff/faculty training on trans/gender diversity issues).” They were given four response options: not at all active, not very active, somewhat active, and very active. This variable was recoded to be a binary variable, such that participants who engaged in no activism were coded as 0 ( $n = 228$ ; 46.40%) and those who viewed themselves as not very active, somewhat active, or very active were coded as 1 ( $n = 263$ ; 53.60%). We made this decision primarily because participants had very different interpretations of their activism. A participant who categorized themselves as “not very active” might then describe how they helped to host their university’s Trans Day of Remembrance, attended LGBTQ group meetings, and served on a student panel on gender diverse identities—a similar level of involvement as someone else who categorized themselves as “very active.” In addition, treating the outcome as dichotomous avoided the problem of zero cell counts produced when treating the outcome as ordinal using ordinal logistic regression.

#### Predictors.

**Religious versus nonreligious.** Religiously affiliated institutions were coded as 1 ( $n = 22$ ; 4.5%) and nonreligious institutions as 0 ( $n = 469$ ; 95.5%).

**Two- versus 4-year.** Two-year colleges were coded as 1 ( $n = 51$ ; 10.4%) and 4-year colleges as 0 ( $n = 440$ ; 89.6%).

**Known presence of trans faculty/staff.** Participants were asked “On your campus, do you know any trans/GNC staff or faculty?” and were provided with the response options “yes” (1;  $n = 198$ ; 40.3%) and “no” (0;  $n = 293$ ; 59.7%).

**Campus climate.** Dugan et al.’s (2012) five-item measure of campus climate was used: (a) I have observed discriminatory words, behaviors or gestures directed at people like me, (b) I have encountered discrimination while attending this institution, (c) I feel there is a general atmosphere of prejudice among students, (d) faculty have discriminated against people like me, and (e) staff

members have discriminated against people like me. A 5-point response scale was used (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Items were summed; higher scores denote a more transphobic climate. The mean score was 15.07 ( $SD = 4.75$ ). The alpha was .87.

**Relative supportiveness of the institution.** Participants were asked “How do you think your college/university compares with others in terms of how trans-affirming and inclusive it is?” and given these options: “it is far more trans-affirming and inclusive” ( $n = 68$ ; 13.8%); “it is more trans-affirming and inclusive” ( $n = 271$ ; 55.2%); “it is less trans-affirming and inclusive” ( $n = 109$ ; 22.2%); and “it is far less trans-affirming and inclusive” ( $n = 43$ ; 8.8%). Thus, the higher the score ( $M = 2.74$ ;  $SD = 8.03$ ), the more the institution was perceived positively in relation to others.

**Students of color versus White students.** Students who indicated race(s) besides White were coded as of color (1;  $n = 136$ ; 27.7%); those who solely indicated White were coded as White (0;  $n = 355$ ; 72.3%). We recognize the limitations of grouping students of color together, and conducted follow-up analyses, including specific racial categories as predictors of activism/advocacy. These racial categories are derived from those in the U.S. Census (although we use the more expansive “Latinx” instead of Hispanic). But, as comparisons of the census classifications used by different countries reveal, these categories are socially and historically constructed (Nobles, 2000). Far from detached representations of demographic markers, they reflect dominant ideologies and serve as instruments of power and influence (Nobles, 2000). An “other” category was also provided; however, all but two of the responses were ultimately reclassified into other groups (e.g., Mexican American to Latinx/Chicanx).

**Undergraduate versus graduate student.** Current undergraduates (and students who graduated from undergraduate institutions in the last two years and who were not graduate students) were coded as 1 ( $n = 370$ ; 75.4%) and graduate students were coded as 0 ( $n = 121$ ; 24.6%).

**AMAB versus AFAB.** Students who were assigned male at birth (AMAB) were coded as 1 ( $n = 99$ , 20.2%) and those assigned female at birth (AFAB) were coded as 0 ( $n = 392$ , 79.8%).

**Binary versus nonbinary.** Participants who identified as any of the nonbinary options were coded as gender nonbinary (0;  $n = 369$ , 75.2%); the remainder were binary identified (24.8%;  $n = 122$ ). We recognize the problems inherent in reducing participants’ gender identities to a dichotomous variable, but felt that differ-

<sup>1</sup> We recognize that (a) masculine of center and feminine of center can be conceptualized as gender expressions, not gender identities, and (b) endorsement of the term “questioning” is vague and does not denote a binary or nonbinary identification. Thus, we carefully examined these participants’ endorsement of other identities to best categorize them. Most of these individuals also selected one or more nonbinary identities (e.g., agender, genderqueer, nonbinary), and were categorized as such. One masculine of center participant also identified as a trans man, and was categorized as binary identified. Because the participants could choose multiple gender identities (including a trans man/woman also identifying as “nonbinary”), we feel reasonably confident about our ability to meaningfully categorize these participants in ways that are consistent with their gender identities.

<sup>2</sup> In all analyses that used assigned sex at birth as a predictor, analyses were run both with and without intersex participants. Results did not change when these individuals were dropped from analyses.

ences between binary/nonbinary identities were important to consider, which necessitated combining categories.

In creating this dichotomous variable, we sought to balance the tension between our interest in exploring nuanced differences in experience by binary and nonbinary status with the awareness that this categorization may falsely imply an essential and rigid bifurcation of these participants' identities. Thus, we conducted follow-up analyses of participants' individual gender identities as predictors of activism/advocacy. And, when citing participants, we retain their selected gender identities to ensure that their quoted material is not decontextualized from their own self-definitions and to remind the reader of the richness and diversity of their identities. In this way, we actively seek to honor participants' authentic and complex selves.

**Outness regarding gender identity.** Students were asked to indicate how open/out they were about their gender identity to the following people: (a) parents, (b) siblings, (c) extended family/relatives, (d) peers on campus in general, (e) heterosexual cisgender friends, (f) LGBQ cisgender friends, (g) trans/gender-nonconforming friends, (h) professors, and (i) university staff. For each group, they responded using a 5-point scale (1 = *not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *mostly*, 5 = *completely*), and items were summed to form an index of outness (higher scores = more out). The mean sum for outness was 30.52 ( $SD = 8.28$ ). The alpha for this scale was .88.

**Trans-related discrimination.** We adapted the Daily Heterosexist Experiences Questionnaire (Balsam, Beadnell, & Molina, 2013) to measure gender-related discrimination and other stressful experiences in a nine-item scale. Items were modified to include gender identity and gender expression and to encompass on- and off-campus experiences. For example, "Being harassed in bathrooms because of your gender expression," was modified as: "Being harassed in *campus* bathrooms because of your gender identity/expression" and "Being harassed in *off-campus* bathrooms because of your gender identity/expression." Other items included being harassed on/off campus, and being misunderstood by people on/off campus. Students indicated whether this had happened to them or not. Items were summed and thus could have a value of 0–9. The mean score was 4.66 ( $SD = 2.14$ ). The alpha was .75.

## Researcher Positionality

The authors are diverse with respect to gender identity, sexual orientation, and professional discipline. The first author is a White cisgender woman who has been studying LGBTQ families for almost 20 years and has extensive experience with qualitative analysis. Her experiences as an advocate for LGBTQ students, as well as her experiences teaching a growing number of nonbinary trans students, led her to initiate this project in collaboration with three trans students. The second author is a White gender ambivalent individual with methodological expertise in studying LGBTQ individuals and families. The third author is a White genderqueer individual with more than 20 years of professional and scholarly expertise in the area of trans students and higher education. Throughout the analysis and writing process, we sought to be cognizant of how our personal experiences, socialization, and identities (e.g., with regard to race and gender) impacted our methodological decision-making and data interpretation. We also centered trans students' perspectives and input throughout the

research process: for example, the first author trained three trans students to facilitate focus groups with trans college students (see Data Collection section), which informed the development of the survey. These three students were consulted at various stages in survey development and their input was incorporated into the final version. Gaining their input facilitated researcher reflexivity, and was instrumental in enabling us to identify underlying assumptions and areas of potential bias. Throughout the process of writing this article, we individually and collectively considered how our marginalized and privileged social identities impact our viewpoints, and challenged ourselves to remain open to different ways of interpretation and knowing (Zaytoun, 2006).

## Data Analysis

**Qualitative analysis.** Responses to the open-ended survey portions ranged from one sentence to over one page of text, with most students providing responses of three to five sentences. To analyze the data, we used thematic analysis, which is a standard means for considering responses to open-ended questions and represents a process of identifying and categorizing the primary patterns or themes in the data, with the goal of creating a coding system (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Because of the large amount of qualitative data, we used the qualitative software NVivo to facilitate data management and coding. The first author initiated the coding process with open coding, which involves examining responses and highlighting relevant passages. Initial coding was informed by the relevant literatures and gender minority stress theory (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). The other authors also read data excerpts, and the team discussed salient points they noted in the responses, a process that led to the refinement of the initial codes.

Next, focused coding was used to sort the data. For example, activism/advocacy activities were grouped into key categories, with attention to differentiating experiences in terms of their formality (i.e., formal/informal), content, and desired impact. This process of organizing is more conceptual than initial coding; the categories that emerge are those that best synthesize the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). At this stage, we examined quotes in relation to student characteristics to determine whether they nuanced or helped to make sense of key patterns. This revealed, for example, that commuter and graduate students described unique barriers to activism. We then applied the coding scheme to the data, which allowed for the identification of more descriptive coding categories and the generation of themes for which there was the most substantiation.

**Quantitative analysis.** Logistic regression models were used to assess which of the predictors was related to participation in trans activism/advocacy. We examined institutional factors (religious vs. nonreligious, 2- vs. 4-year, known presence of trans faculty and staff on campus), perceptions of the institution (campus climate, relative trans-supportiveness of the institution), demographics (of color vs. White, undergraduate vs. graduate, assigned male vs. assigned female, binary vs. nonbinary), and gender identity factors (outness, discrimination). In follow-up models, we tested three interactions (Climate  $\times$  Relative Supportiveness, Climate  $\times$  Outness, Climate  $\times$  Discrimination). All continuous variables were centered at their mean, and dichotomous variables were dummy coded (0 and 1). The outcome was reduced to only two categories (i.e., none vs. any; a little/somewhat/very), and logistic



regression was used to avoid the zero cell counts produced when the outcome was examined using ordinal logistic regression. This approach was also used because the qualitative data suggested that students had different approaches to quantifying their level of engagement, making comparative rankings problematic. In addition to the full models, we present more parsimonious, trimmed models, from which nonsignificant predictors were trimmed (individually, starting with the least significant). Only participants with full data on all predictors and the outcome were included ( $n = 491$ ). Follow-up analyses examine the relationship of specific racial categories to activism/advocacy by adding them to the regression analysis, and we use bivariate correlations (due to the large number of categories) to examine the relationship between gender categories and activism/advocacy.

### Findings

First, we describe the types of activism/advocacy that students engaged in and their explanations for engaging in it (or not). We then use logistic regression to examine predictors of activism/advocacy, differentiating between the students who engaged in it and those who did not.

#### What Activism/Advocacy Do Students Engage In?

Many students indicated that they were involved in advocacy/support groups on campus (see Table 2). Some identified themselves as members of a trans-specific advocacy/support group ( $n = 11$ ) and/or a LGBTQ advocacy/support group ( $n = 68$ ). Some were also leaders of these groups. Sixteen students said that they had a current or past leadership role in a trans group, including nine who helped start the group. One of these students, a biracial (Latinx/White) agender femme undergraduate said “I am the VP of our Pride organization and a founding member of our trans group. I’ve put in significant work for the development of trans inclusive bathrooms and housing.” Fifty-five students said they had a past or current leadership role in a general LGBTQ group.

Students reported engaging in a variety of trans activism/advocacy activities on campus, formal and informal, which were sometimes connected to their involvement in trans or LGBTQ groups. Thirty students described having communicated with staff or administrators regarding policy changes aimed at improving life for trans students on campus. In some instances, they spearheaded campus campaigns for trans rights—often, gender-inclusive restrooms and housing. A White agender undergraduate shared “I helped run a campaign to get gender-neutral bathrooms in every building on campus. I have worked less successfully with Residential Life staff to make the dorm application process more inclusive.” A White trans woman who was a graduate student said “I lobbied to a governing body at the university to support the push for changing the state healthcare plan to remove trans-exclusive language, and I codrafted a proposal for gender inclusive housing.”

In five instances—all involving students who attended 4-year, nonreligious institutions—the students’ activism and advocacy led to their membership on a university committee charged with considering trans concerns. One biracial (Latinx/White) genderqueer graduate student explained “I am currently on a trans/gender diversity committee that was formed this year that includes faculty, staff, and students to address the needs of trans and GNC students

Table 2  
*Activism and Advocacy: Types, Facilitators, and Barriers*  
( $n = 320$ )

Theme	<i>n</i>
Group-Based	
Member, trans specific advocacy/support group	11
Member, LGBTQ advocacy/support group	68
Leadership role, trans group	16
Leadership role, LGBTQ group	55
Student-University	
Communicated with staff about policy change	30
Member of formal university (e.g., diversity) committee	5
Protests	
Organized marches, petitions, and protests	11
Individual protests	5
Formal activities	
Participant, diversity panels	21
Leader, campus trainings on trans issues	12
Organized trans educational/awareness events	22
Organized trans social events	16
Informal activities	
Classroom-based: correcting misgendering	14
Classroom-based: suggesting content revisions	13
Academic	
Academic advocacy (through school/work)	20
Reasons for Pursuing Activism/Advocacy (Facilitators)	
Personal values	60
Sense of personal responsibility	45
Community responsibility	46
Desire for community and support	24
Opportunities for engagement	4
Reasons for Not Pursuing Activism/Advocacy (Barriers)	
Other responsibilities take precedence, limit time/energy	60
Structural barriers (e.g., commuter status)	10
Other identity-based activism (e.g., race, disability)	8
(Hyper)visibility concerns	58
Lack of connection to campus trans community	28
Due to binary gender identity	4
Due to race (student of color)	5
Due to uncomfortable social dynamics	7
Due to graduate student status	11
Due to commuter status	3
Burnout/exhaustion	23
Mental health issues	22
Not a priority	12
Lack of knowledge	17
Lack of opportunity	22

campus-wide.” A White undergraduate trans woman said “I’m part of a committee that reports directly to the president and also affects positive change for LGBTQ students.”

Eleven students reported engaging in organized protests, marches, and petitions. One White masculine-of-center undergraduate said “I led protests to raise awareness of a lack of bathroom accessibility for GNC students.” A Black agender and questioning undergraduate stated “I organized a petition for visibility of trans inclusive housing options on the housing website.” Five students had engaged in individual protests. A Black undergraduate trans man said “I protested against the gym front desk gendering every person who enters the gym (they push a male/female button to track usage by gender).” Another participant, a White genderqueer undergraduate, had “labeled toilets as all gender toilets as a protest.”

Some students engaged in formal, organized advocacy. Twenty-one students said they had been part of a panel on trans experience, and 12 students said that they had led campus trainings on trans issues. Twenty-two students described organizing trans educational/awareness events on campus, such as a Trans Week and a Trans Day of Remembrance vigil, and 16 had organized trans social events on campus, such as drag balls, a trans coffee group, and a trans clothing swap.

A total of 27 students described informal, educational advocacy in the classroom. In 14 instances, this took the form of correcting peers/faculty about names and pronoun use. A Latinx genderqueer graduate student said “I make the effort to remind students of my gender pronouns and those of my friends who are okay with me stepping in to correct peers and faculty. I constantly address issues that impact transgender and GNC students [in relation] to content we are studying in class in order to provide a different perspective.” A White genderqueer undergraduate saw their advocacy as being “out in all classes and other social situations, actively asking for pronouns and respect for my identity.” In 13 instances, classroom advocacy took the form of talking to faculty about trans inclusivity and representation in course content. For example, a White trans, masculine-of-center undergraduate was currently “working with biology faculty to understand the language necessary to speak about trans/GNC health and experience.”

Finally, 20 students, half of whom were graduate students, described academic advocacy. They emphasized that their primary advocacy took place in the context of academic work or employment, such as class projects and faculty research opportunities that focused on trans-related topics. A White, genderfluid masculine-of-center graduate student said: “I’m not formally involved [with advocacy], though I do trans-specific research and am focusing on non-binary individuals, which the research overlooks. I consider that to be my advocacy.” A Latinx genderqueer graduate student said: “For a course, my peers and I . . . assessed the campus community knowledge and perceptions of GNC students to demonstrate the need for more education for students and faculty.”

### Why Students Engage in Activism/Advocacy: Facilitators of Involvement

Trans students reported engaging in activism/advocacy for a variety of reasons. These reasons are interconnected, and center on personal values, sense of personal and community responsibility, desire for community, and existing opportunities for engagement.

**Personal values.** Students ( $n = 60$ ) said that they participated in trans activism/advocacy because of their personal values. Trans education, awareness, and visibility were important to them, and they viewed trans rights as a social justice issue in which they were deeply invested. “It’s a human rights issue” and “trans people matter” were common refrains. A Native American undergraduate trans woman said “I am active because I want the world to be educated on gender topics and [to] make sure transgender students have the rights and freedom that everyone else have.” An Asian American genderfluid undergraduate said “I think that everybody should be given the freedom to choose what they really want to be and everybody should be valued equally.”

**Personal responsibility.** Some students ( $n = 45$ ) voiced a sense of personal responsibility to engage in activism/advocacy. “If I don’t do it, who will?” was a common sentiment. These

students felt a strong “sense of obligation to do something,” often noting that they could not rely on others to act—for example, because they were one of only a handful of out trans students. A White genderfluid undergraduate said “If everyone were to sit down and say, ‘Someone else will do it,’ then nothing will get done. If I do something, tell someone, reach out, no matter how small, it will help someone else down the line.” A biracial (Latinx/White) genderqueer undergraduate said “At my university, if I don’t work to create the resources . . . they will not exist.”

For some students, their sense of personal responsibility was not only linked to the fact that the trans community at their institution was small, but also to their perception of an unacceptable level of insensitivity toward and exclusion of trans students on campus. A lack of trans-inclusive services and infrastructure, amid the reality that “no one else is going to push for change” and “I have to survive here,” encouraged them to be activists and advocates. “When I got to this university there was nothing, and I felt it was very needed and important [to fight for] gender inclusive restrooms and basic awareness,” said a White genderqueer undergraduate. In this way, despite—or perhaps because of—little in the way of a trans community on campus, and amid a high potential for an “uphill battle,” these participants felt compelled to push for change.

Some students highlighted their own privilege—as people who had the confidence or support to speak out—as impelling them to participate in activism/advocacy. A White trans masculine-of-center undergraduate said “I have had mostly supportive friends and family members . . . I am at a college where staff and faculty listen to me. Not everyone feels safe or able to speak, but I do. Even though it is difficult at times, I feel it is my responsibility to stand up for myself but more importantly stand up for those who cannot for whatever reason.” A few students also named race, class, and passing privileges as facilitating their ability and responsibility to “speak up.” A White trans undergraduate shared:

I’m active because I can be. Even if my family doesn’t accept my gender identity, I’m safe. I have White, able-bodied, cis-passing, straight-passing, upper-middle class privilege. I’m young and attractive and well socialized . . . and self-confident, so I receive much more leniency for my identity and more of a voice than many of my siblings in the GSM [gender and sexual minority] community. Therefore, I use it for those who cannot.

This student speaks to how being recognized as a particular gender that comports with a gender binary system “relieves” them of some of the stigma and stress that a person whose gender is seen as ambiguous would face (Pfeffer, 2014). Rather than describing this reprieve as “tenuous, context specific, and revocable” (Pfeffer, 2014, p. 11), the student seems to view their gendered status as relatively static, and privileged enough to prompt them into action on behalf of less powerful others. Participants such as this individual showed awareness of their complex, intersecting identities and simultaneous experiences of oppression and privilege (Hagen et al., 2018).

**Community responsibility.** Relatedly, some students ( $n = 46$ ) connected their activism and advocacy to a sense of community responsibility. They felt obligated to “give back” to the community that had “helped [them] survive,” and wanted to provide a sense of connection, support, and hope for others. A White genderfluid trans-masculine undergraduate said “This community

has given me so much. I'm very aware of how lucky I am to be in this kind of a position where I can be out and not fearful for my life. If I can help bring that for others, then I feel that it is my obligation." A White trans man who was an undergraduate said "My community is legitimately the reason I am able to go to this school and be alive. I should give back."

Indeed, some students linked their desire to help others to their own experiences of suffering and alienation when they came out as trans at college (or came to college as trans). They wanted trans students to have the support and resources they had lacked. A White undergraduate trans man shared "I'm active because I don't want anyone to feel like I did coming to school being trans and not feeling welcome or understood." A White undergraduate trans woman wanted future "trans students to not have to go through the same hell I went through. The university doesn't take initiative to do any of these activities and as someone who came out and transitioned while in college and was very stressed out by it, I want to try and make things better for future students."

**Desire for community, connection, and support.** Some students ( $n = 24$ ) shared that their motivation to engage in activism/advocacy was rooted in their desire for trans community connection and affirmation. Their participation in activism/advocacy strengthened their bonds with others and reduced feelings of isolation and helplessness. A White genderfluid undergraduate said "On this campus, it's hard to be trans, and I need a community. I need to not feel alone."

**Opportunities for engagement.** Several students ( $n = 4$ ) said that they engaged in activism/advocacy because someone had asked them to, or because there were a lot of campus opportunities for involvement in activism/advocacy. One White nonbinary undergraduate shared that they were active "because of the availability and easy access to people and activities."

### Why Students Do Not Engage in Activism: Impediments to Involvement

Trans students reported being inactive, less active than they used to be, or less active than they wanted to be for a variety of reasons, including other obligations or priorities, visibility concerns, lack of connections to campus trans communities, experiences or fears of exhaustion/burnout, mental health issues, activism not being a priority, and structural barriers.

**Other responsibilities take precedence.** Some students ( $n = 60$ ) emphasized other commitments and responsibilities—and the time and energy they required—in explaining their lack of involvement. These included classes, work, and family/caretaking responsibilities, the last of which was mentioned particularly by graduate students. A White trans man who was a graduate student said "I would like to participate in on-campus LGBTQ+ groups and to work toward better campus policies, but I honestly don't have enough time. I am taking a full course schedule, doing research, working part-time, and volunteering." Ten respondents named structural constraints (e.g., living off campus, commuting) as also impeding their involvement. Said a White agender undergraduate, "I cannot be here after 5 p.m. because I commute by bus and that is the last bus."

Eight of these 60 students noted that engagement in activism/advocacy surrounding other identities or social locations—typically race and/or (dis)ability—limited their time and energy and

thus precluded their involvement in trans-specific activism/advocacy. As a White genderfluid, feminine-of-center undergraduate said, "I am disabled, and our university is so appalling in its lack of accessibility that I'm more concerned about getting basic rights for disabled students . . . I do not have enough energy to do both all the time, so I've chosen what I think is the more pressing issue." In this way, just as some students named their own privilege as a reason *for* engaging in activism/advocacy, students with multiple marginalized identities spoke to how emotional and structural constraints had limited their involvement, highlighting how interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., classism, ableism, racism) may shape trans students' ability to resist and challenge gender-based oppression—even if they have the desire to do so (Jourian, 2015).

**Visibility concerns.** Concerns related to outness and (hyper)visibility were emphasized by many students ( $n = 58$ ), who said they were not out to everyone and did not want to risk physical, emotional, or academic harm (e.g., graduate students noted risks to professional advancement). Some worried that activism in trans causes would result in them becoming known on campus only for that aspect of their identity. A White undergraduate said "I don't want being nonbinary or trans to be the thing people associate me with. I want to be more than 'that trans person.'" For those who were fairly closeted about their trans identity, fear of visibility and its consequences were heightened. An Asian American undergraduate explained their lack of engagement by stating "At this point in time, I'm afraid to be 'out' as agender to people that I don't know well." Concerns about family members discovering their gender identity were also named, especially by students of color, underscoring their unique experiences with visibility (Garvey et al., 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016a). A South Asian nonbinary graduate student said "I'm too afraid of retribution from my family if they found out. I've mostly watched from the sidelines." A few students noted that they were stealth and did not want to out themselves as trans. An Asian American undergraduate who identified as a man of trans experience said "I've been stealth for a while and have only lately been exploring varying degrees of outness. Even as I've become more comfortable being out to more than just a couple friends, and disclosed my trans status to a couple professors, I want to have the option of that. I don't want to be active in a way that outs me . . . that's pretty vulnerable."

**Lack of connection to/identification with campus trans communities.** For some ( $n = 28$ ), perceived exclusion by or disconnection from other trans students was named as the primary reason for their lack of engagement. These students, most of whom were nonbinary identified ( $n = 23$ ), often noted that they did not fit in with the campus trans community because of its expectation that "real" trans people were trans women and trans men. In turn, they felt they would be deemed not "trans enough" to participate. A White nonbinary transfeminine undergraduate said "I feel like . . . I'm not 'qualified' enough to be super active and involved . . . I sometimes feel I will not be welcomed or wanted." A White nonbinary undergraduate said "I feel that I should not take up as much space in trans spaces due to my AFAB privilege and not physically transitioning."

In a few cases ( $n = 4$ ) it was binary identified individuals who felt isolated from trans spaces on campus. This was mainly because, as they put it, they were not viewed as "radical" or "woke" enough by other campus trans community members, who were

often less “traditional” than they were in terms of gender—which speaks to historical tensions surrounding identity politics within trans communities (Broad, 2002; Stryker, 2017). A White undergraduate trans man shared that he was not involved in campus activism/advocacy because he felt alienated from the campus trans community “I’m a very traditional trans person. I came out and transitioned in a very binary way, and am largely stealth. The queer establishment on campus is much more into fluidity, and I think they think my conformity ties into the patriarchy or something.” A White undergraduate trans woman spoke to the “politics” she perceived within trans spaces on campus, which discouraged her engagement: “I jokingly use words considered offensive in the community, but never aimed remarks toward anyone or attempted to offend people . . . It’s irritating to censor myself . . . I cannot relate to others in a trans group if I feel they are silently judging me.”

Being a student of color was cited by five students in explaining their marginalization from campus trans communities, which impeded their willingness to engage in activism or advocacy. An Asian American nonbinary graduate student noted that queer and trans activist spaces “tend to be mostly White,” and shared that constantly “questioning whether I ‘belonged’ became disruptive to my emotional well-being.” Being a trans woman was cited by three students as a source of alienation, prompting their disengagement. A White undergraduate trans woman felt “too anxious about social situations to be an activist,” stating that “trans women are often marginalized in [trans] spaces, as they are judged to be too male-looking for the comfort of the AFAB-elite.”

In seven of these 28 instances, uncomfortable social dynamics with other trans students on campus were an impediment to activism/advocacy. A White genderqueer undergraduate said “I don’t like the crowd that is active so I don’t like to be a part of the scene.” A White nonbinary undergraduate said “I’m not more active because of conflict with exfriends which evolved into tensions with leadership.” Two students described the trans groups on campus as “clique-y.”

Some graduate students ( $n = 11$ ) explained their lack of engagement in terms of their disconnection from campus trans and LGBQ communities, which were primarily run by and for undergraduates, as were institutional activism/advocacy efforts. “Activism on the campus level is led by traditionally aged undergrads who are in early stages of coming out. As a grad student with 10+ years of transition, my needs are very different,” said a White genderqueer student. A few undergraduates ( $n = 3$ ) noted that their commuter status resulted in feelings of disconnection.

**Exhaustion and burnout.** Some students ( $n = 23$ ) mentioned exhaustion and frustration as a result of activism/advocacy as a reason why they were not currently involved in such activities. A White agender and genderqueer undergraduate said “Our numbers [of trans students] are so low that changing policies and just in general making ourselves visible to the community seems exhausting and draining and sometimes futile.” Some cited failed efforts at enacting change as contributing to burnout. A White genderqueer and questioning graduate student said “I’m not more active because it’s exhausting and it wears on you to be constantly meeting resistance from the people who are supposed to be the ones helping you grow and thrive.” A White agender and genderqueer undergraduate shared how constant resistance from univer-

sity officials, coupled with poor leadership, led them to regard their involvement as futile:

I tried to create policy change protecting trans students and victims of assault on campus, but was shut down repeatedly. Finally I allied myself with the first trans student activism organization, and we’re fighting for gender neutral bathrooms in all buildings. It’s poorly run by a fanatic person with a huge misunderstanding of how change is created and works, and just wants to be seen as a brave activist with a megaphone . . . It’s pointless.

A White genderqueer undergraduate had been very involved in LGBTQ and trans-related activism/advocacy, but found that it negatively impacted them: “I was an officer of the school’s LGBTQ organization but it was short-lived. My grades suffered because I became too involved in the club and trying to spread awareness on campus. Shortly after, I relapsed on my depression.”

**Mental health.** Relatedly, some students ( $n = 22$ ) named mental health issues (e.g., social anxiety, depression) as an impediment to activism/advocacy. A biracial (Asian American/White) undergraduate trans man said “I am often not active due to class work load, time conflicts, anxiety, depression, and having difficulty in social situations due to mental illness and past experiences with trauma.” Two of these students also identified physical health issues as a barrier.

**Not a priority.** For 12 students, trans activism/advocacy was not a priority. Statements like “I have not made the time I need for it,” implied that they felt some expectation or pressure to be involved, but were not. A few noted that they were not the activist “type.”

**Lack of knowledge.** For some students ( $n = 17$ ), many of whom identified themselves as first-year students, a lack of knowledge about who to talk to or where to start was emphasized as a barrier to activism/advocacy work. Responses along these lines included: “I don’t know the right people well enough to become engaged” (White genderqueer undergraduate student), and “I’m not very active because I am unaware of how to be effective and not overstep boundaries” (Black nonbinary and questioning graduate student). Notably, eight of these students said they planned to be more involved in the future, when they had adjusted more to their campuses.

**Lack of opportunity.** For other students ( $n = 22$ ), the lack of opportunities for trans-related campus activism/advocacy was a barrier. This situation was especially common at conservative religiously affiliated institutions, which was explained by a White genderqueer undergraduate student who stated “The college is faith based and won’t permit us to.”

## Quantitative Findings

We were interested in what institutional, demographic, and gender identity-specific factors might be related to students’ self-described activism/advocacy. We conducted a series of logistic regressions (full, untrimmed; full, untrimmed with interactions; and trimmed) to predict whether or not students endorsed engaging in activism/advocacy based on institutional factors (religious vs. nonreligious, 2- vs. 4-year, presence of trans faculty/staff), perceptions of the institution (campus climate, relative trans-supportiveness), demographics (of color vs. White, undergraduate vs. graduate, assigned male vs. assigned female, binary vs. non-

binary), and gender identity factors (outness, discrimination). See Table 3 for descriptive statistics and bivariate correlations among predictors and between predictors and the outcome.

Not surprisingly, the strongest bivariate associations were the moderate correlation between discrimination and campus climate ( $r = .46$ ) and the smaller correlation between climate and perceived trans-supportiveness relative to other institutions ( $r = .34$ ). The presence of trans faculty/staff was less likely at 2-year ( $r = -.13$ ) and religious institutions ( $r = -.10$ ), and was associated with higher reports of trans-supportiveness relative to other institutions ( $r = .22$ ). Students at 2-year institutions reported their institutions as less trans-supportive relative to other institutions ( $r = -.16$ ). Students of color were less open about their trans identity ( $r = .14$ ), while binary students were more likely to be AMAB ( $r = .11$ ), were more open/out about their trans identity ( $r = .26$ ), and reported less discrimination ( $r = -.09$ ).

**Main model.** In our first model ( $n = 491$  participants), we entered the institutional, demographic, and gender identity-related predictors of trans activism/advocacy (none vs. any). In this full model, institution type (2-year vs. 4-year) was statistically significant at the level of a trend ( $p = .073$ ), such that students at 4-year institutions were somewhat more likely to engage in activism/advocacy (see Table 4). The presence of trans faculty/staff was statistically significant at the level of a trend ( $p = .088$ ), such that students who reported knowing of trans faculty/staff were somewhat more likely to engage in activism/advocacy. Campus climate was significant, such that perceptions of a more transphobic climate were related to a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy ( $p < .001$ ). Student status was also significant, such that undergraduates were more likely to engage in activism/advocacy than graduate students ( $p = .021$ ). Outness about gender identity was significant, such that students who were more open about their gender identity were more likely to engage in activism/advocacy ( $p = .042$ ). Finally, trans-related discrimination was significant ( $p = .013$ ): Students reporting more discrimination were more likely to engage in activism/advocacy. Other factors (religious vs. nonreligious, relative trans-supportiveness, of color vs. White, AMAB vs. AFAB, binary vs. nonbinary) were not significant.

**Exploratory interactions.** We considered in separate models whether campus climate interacted with (a) relative trans-supportiveness of the institution, (b) outness, or (c) discrimination. The first of these three interactions was significant, such that a poor climate remained related to increased likelihood of activism/advocacy, but this effect was greater when students viewed their campus as more trans-supportive than others (see Figure 1). The other predictors (including the main effects of the interactions) followed the same pattern as the prior model.

**Trimmed model.** Nonsignificant predictors were then trimmed from least to most significant to create a more parsimonious model. In the final trimmed model, student status, discrimination, outness, and the main effect of climate remained significant, as did the interaction of climate and relative supportiveness. In addition, institution type (2- vs. 4-year) became fully significant, while the presence of trans faculty and staff dropped from significance.

**Follow-up analyses on race.** To further explore the role of race in activism/advocacy, we refit the model replacing the single race variable with specific, nonexclusive racial categories, wherein 84.3% ( $n = 414$ ) were classified as White; 10.0% ( $n = 49$ ) Latinx/Chicanx; 7.5% ( $n = 37$ ) Asian; 4.7% ( $n = 23$ ) Black/

Table 3  
Descriptives and Correlations for Regression Outcome and Predictors ( $n = 491$ )

Variable	Descriptives <i>M (SD)</i> or <i>n (%)</i>	Advocacy	Religious	2-Year	Trans faculty	Race	AMAB	Binary	Undergrad	Discrimination	Outness	Relative support	Campus climate
Advocacy (some vs. none)	263 (53.6%)	—											
Religious	22 (4.5%)	.06	—										
2-year college	51 (10.4%)	-.11*	-.07	—									
Trans faculty	198 (40.3%)	.12**	-.10*	-.13**	—								
Race (of color)	124 (25.3%)	-.01	-.01	.03	.02	—							
AMAB	99 (20.2%)	.04	-.04	.05	.00	-.01	—						
Binary	122 (24.8%)	.02	.01	-.01	-.01	-.04	.11*	—					
Undergrad versus graduate	370 (75.4%)	.07	.03	.07	.07	.04	-.02	-.04	—				
Discrimination	4.66 (2.14)	.19***	-.02	-.02	.04	.05	-.07	-.09*	-.04	—			
Outness	30.52 (8.28)	.09	.01	-.03	.08	-.13*	.14**	.26***	-.07	-.07	—		
Relative trans-supportiveness	2.74 (8.03)	-.01	-.05	-.16**	.22***	-.03	-.01	-.03	.04	-.19***	.12***	—	
Campus climate	15.07 (4.75)	.21***	-.02	-.01	.07	.03	-.02	-.02	-.11*	.46***	-.04	-.34***	—

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

Table 4  
*Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting Trans Advocacy (Some vs. None) (n = 491)*

Predictors	Full Model		Full Model w/Interaction		Trimmed Model w/Interaction	
	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>
<b>Institutional Characteristics</b>						
Religious college	1.04 (.77)	2.83	1.11 (.78)	3.03		
2-year institution	-.63 (.35) <sup>†</sup>	.53	-.62 (.35) <sup>†</sup>	.54	-.73 (.35) <sup>*</sup>	.48
Trans faculty/staff	.46 (.27) <sup>†</sup>	1.58	.45 (.27) <sup>†</sup>	1.57		
<b>Perceptions of Institution</b>						
Negative climate	.11 (.03) <sup>***</sup>	1.12	.12 (.03) <sup>***</sup>	1.12	.12 (.03) <sup>***</sup>	1.12
Relative supportiveness	.13 (.17)	1.13	.17 (.17)	1.18	.19 (.16)	1.21
<b>Student Characteristics</b>						
Of color	-.05 (.28)	.95	-.10 (.28)	.91		
Male sex assigned at birth	.32 (.32)	1.38	.34 (.32)	1.41		
Binary	.04 (.29)	1.04	.05 (.30)	1.05		
Undergraduate student	.63 (.27) <sup>*</sup>	1.89	.67 (.28) <sup>*</sup>	1.95	.72 (.27) <sup>**</sup>	2.06
<b>Gender Minority Specific</b>						
Discrimination	.16 (.06) <sup>*</sup>	1.17	.16 (.06) <sup>*</sup>	1.18	.16 (.06) <sup>*</sup>	1.17
Outness	.032 (.016) <sup>*</sup>	1.03	.031 (.016) <sup>*</sup>	1.03	.04 (.02) <sup>*</sup>	1.04
Climate × Relative Support	—		.07 (.03) <sup>*</sup>	1.07	.06 (.03) <sup>*</sup>	1.06
Constant	.90 (.27) <sup>**</sup>	2.46	.99 (.27) <sup>***</sup>	2.69	1.21 (.23) <sup>***</sup>	3.35

*Note.*  $e^B$  = exponentiated *B* (i.e., odds ratio). Dichotomous predictors coded as 1 for *yes* and 0 for *no*.  
<sup>†</sup>  $p < .10$  \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ . (Trends are only presented in the untrimmed models.)

African American; 3.9% ( $n = 19$ ) Native American; and 1.6% ( $n = 8$ ) Middle Eastern. We also examined biracial/multiracial as a predictor in combination with these categories, as well as with the original race variable (of color/White). We also refit the model using a variable denoting exclusive racial categories wherein which students were only coded as one of the above racial categories (if they only identified with one racial category) or as bi/multiracial (if they identified with multiple racial categories; see Table 1). None of the results were significant (although it must be considered that the tests for Black/African American, Native

American, and Middle Eastern had insufficient power to detect effects at a power level of .80).

**Follow-up analyses on gender identification.** As there were too many gender identities to have adequate power to examine their relation to activism/advocacy in the regression model (see Table 1 for sample breakdown of gender identities), we examined bivariate correlations with the outcome. Only trans was significantly related to the outcome,  $r = .11$ ,  $p = .016$ . Of note is that both demigender and feminine of center had inadequate power for a test at a power level of .80.

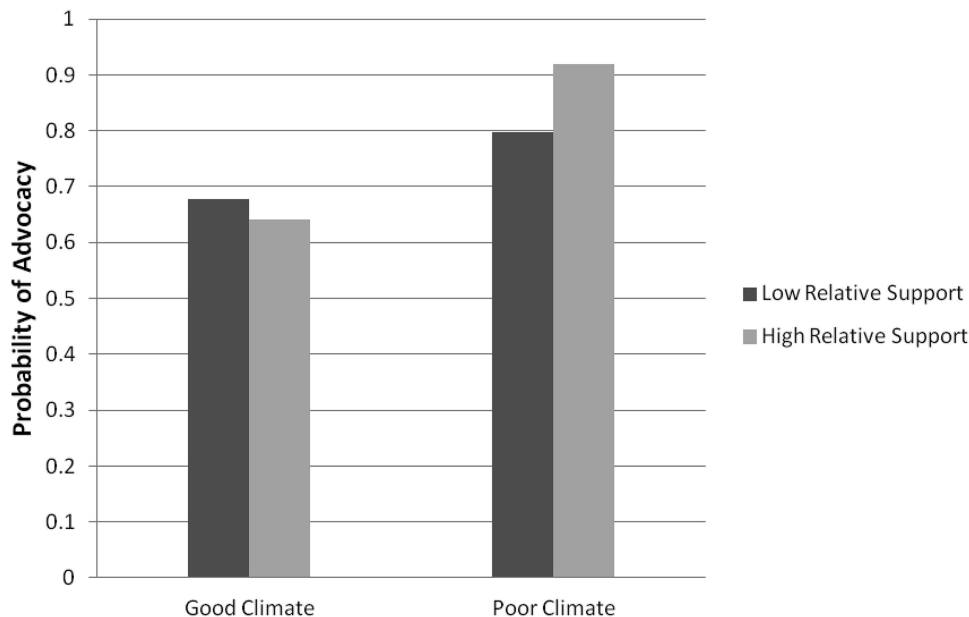


Figure 1. Interaction of climate and relative trans-supportiveness predicting activism/advocacy.

## Discussion

This study contributes to a small but growing literature on the activism and advocacy experiences of LGBTQ students in higher education (Craig et al., 2017; Swank & Fahs, 2013) and trans students specifically (Jones et al., 2016; Singh et al., 2013). It also extends and builds on a more robust scholarship on trans activism/advocacy in general (Broad, 2002; Stryker, 2017). Strengths of the study include its mixed methods approach, a large sample, the inclusion of students from college campuses across the United States, and the representation of the perspectives of students who consider themselves activists and nonactivists.

Our qualitative findings provide nuance to recent survey data showing that trans students may be more likely to value social and political engagement than their cisgender counterparts (Eagan et al., 2016), highlighting the diverse range of activism and advocacy activities in which trans students engage. Activism aimed at bringing about policy change was often centered on housing and restrooms, consistent with prior work showing these to be high priorities for trans students (Goldberg et al., 2018; Singh et al., 2013). Although resistance activism was often organized and collective (e.g., marches), sometimes it was solitary and self-initiated, as with the student who pushed back against the campus gym's practice of gendering students as they entered. Likewise, activism was sometimes formal (e.g., speaking on panels, leading trainings) but more often informal (e.g., speaking up in class). Such actions required, especially in classrooms, a certain degree of personal "risk," in that students were out about their gender identities, and thus visible and vulnerable to attack (Pryor, 2015). Graduate students were especially likely to report advocating for trans inclusion and equality through their academic work, perhaps in part because of restricted access to LGBTQ and trans-specific campus groups (Goldberg et al., 2018).

Just 3% of students ( $n = 16$ ) described leadership roles in LGBTQ or trans groups, and only 1% ( $n = 5$ ) indicated being on college committees. This suggests that most institutions do not regard trans representation as crucial—a notable omission, in that such inclusion would benefit institutions and empower trans students to have a voice in university policy (Case et al., 2012) and encourage their leadership development more broadly (Renn, 2007; Quayle, 2007).

In our quantitative analyses, we found that attending a 4-year college, being an undergraduate, reporting more discrimination, and being more out were all related to a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy. Perceiving one's campus as more transphobic was also related to a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy, but this effect must be interpreted in the context of the interaction between climate and relative supportiveness. Although students who reported a more negative climate were more likely to be involved in activism/advocacy in general, those who also perceived their institutions more positively relative to other institutions were the most likely to be involved, speaking to how perceptions of lower costs (e.g., negative reactions from administrators) may have emboldened students to agitate for change. This finding sharpens our understanding of the conditions that may impact the likelihood of trans students pursuing activism/advocacy—and enjoying its possible benefits (e.g., self-empowerment; Hagen et al., 2018; Singh, 2013).

In considering the lower levels of participation by community college students and graduate students, it is important to note that community colleges offer fewer opportunities for engagement in social activities in general, and are less likely to have LGBTQ centers or clubs specifically (Beemyn, 2012). Community college students are more likely to commute and have outside jobs (Porchea et al., 2010), which likely impedes campus activism/advocacy—similar to graduate students, who often have multiple obligations outside of school (Oswalt & Riddock, 2007) and also contend with the reality that most campus LGBTQ resources are undergraduate-centered (Goldberg et al., 2018). Both trans community college students and graduate students may face unique forms of stress, due to their isolation as trans students on campus and the additional demands and workloads that they often face. As a result, they may have less access to the benefits of personal empowerment and group affiliation that may accompany identity-based activism and advocacy. Faculty and higher education professionals should find ways for these students to pursue activism and advocacy if they are interested—for example, by assigning course projects that allow for such engagement, or building connections with other institutions that might enable them to meet and work together (e.g., planning a joint Trans Day of Remembrance).

Our finding that students who reported greater discrimination were more likely to engage in activism/advocacy is consistent with prior work on LGBQ students (Dunn & Szymanski, 2018; Swank & Fahs, 2013), suggesting that trans students may respond to minority stress by taking action and seeking to transform their social world. This is arguably an adaptive response, but, as our qualitative data suggest, one that can sometimes contribute to burnout—perhaps especially under conditions of internalized homophobia and structural resistance to change. Indeed, Breslow et al. (2015) found that trans adults who reported high levels of transphobia and who also engaged in high levels of collective action were the most distressed; and qualitative work (Hagen et al., 2018; Singh, 2013; Vaccaro & Mena, 2011) indicates that amid perceptions of widespread resistance to one's efforts, activism can have an especially negative toll on well-being.

As in work on LGBQ students (Swank et al., 2013), greater outness was related to a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy. Our qualitative findings help to nuance this association. Some students described how awareness of their own privilege (e.g., race, class, and passing) prompted them to push for change in ways that required visibility and vulnerability surrounding their trans identity, echoing Hagen, Hoover, and Morrow's (2018) finding that queer women and trans people sometimes cited their White privilege and being read as "gender normative" as creating a sense of responsibility to engage in activism. In contrast, concerns about visibility were sometimes cited as a reason for not engaging in activism/advocacy by those who were not fully out to peers or family, and by those who described themselves as having passing privilege and who did not want to out themselves as trans. These differences speak to the diversity within trans communities, from individuals wanting to transition as quietly as possible and fit into existing gender norms to those wanting to be known as trans and challenge the idea of a gender binary. Indeed, trans individuals vary greatly in their desire to engage in activism and their sense of safety in doing so (Riggle et al., 2011). Future work should explore how outness may function differently according to race and cultural background.

In their qualitative responses, many students described their activism and advocacy in terms of a desire to improve the world, and their campus specifically, which speaks to our finding that perceptions of a more transphobic campus climate were related to a greater likelihood of activism/advocacy. These students were driven by a recognition of social injustice (Eagan et al., 2016; Jones et al., 2016) and a desire for safety (Akiva et al., 2017), possibly enhancing their own sense of personal agency (Hagen et al., 2018). Significantly, some students described a personal sense of responsibility as a motivator, sometimes noting that they were one of only a handful of out trans students on their campus, making it unrealistic to rely on others to try to bring about change. Others focused specifically on a sense of solidarity with other trans people in explaining their desire to give back to the trans community or benefit from group-based activism. This highlights how feeling part of a larger community can be both a motivation for (Singh et al., 2011) and an advantage of (Jones et al., 2016) trans-related activism, serving as a powerful example of resilience against gender minority stress (Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Only a few students explain their activism/advocacy in terms of external factors, such as the availability of opportunities—although notably, not knowing other activists (Swank & Fahs, 2014) and uncertainty about “where to begin” (Ruiz et al., 2017) have been linked to a lower likelihood of activism.

Students spoke to structural and personal factors that impeded their involvement in activism/advocacy. Notably, they often pointed to structural barriers (e.g., needing to work due to financial reasons; living off campus) that hinder campus engagement in general as undermining their ability to pursue activism/advocacy. This intersects with our finding that students at 2-year institutions were less likely to engage in activism/advocacy, perhaps reflecting both their living situation—and reduced availability on campus—and a paucity of opportunities. Consistent with Vaccaro and Mena (2011), some students invoked their intersecting marginalized identities in explaining why they were unable to engage in trans activism/advocacy: that is, they used their time and energy to advocate for race- or disability-related change on campus. Further, students of color specifically noted their experiences of marginalization within and disengagement from campus trans and LGBTQ groups, echoing prior work (Singh, 2013) and reflecting broader tensions in LGBTQ communities (Broad, 2002). Our quantitative analyses showed that students of color were not less likely to engage in activism/advocacy (although they were, in our bivariate analyses, less likely to be out), underscoring the insights afforded by our mixed methods design, where our qualitative findings reveal the complex range of identities (e.g., gender identity, race, ability) and conditions (e.g., time/energy) that intersect to affect activism/advocacy.

Some students also described a lack of a sense of affiliation, solidarity, or connections with the campus trans community as a reason for not engaging in trans activism or advocacy—which is notable, given that one of the theorized (Meyer, 2003) benefits of activism is the community identification and support that it brings. Students were remarkably diverse in their explanations for such disconnection. Nonbinary identified students—who were less “out,” according to our bivariate analyses—sometimes felt that they were not viewed as authentically trans because they had not physically transitioned, and experienced a sense of exclusion from their campus trans community as a result (Catalano, 2015; Gold-

berg & Kivalanka, 2018). In other instances, students felt that they were rejected because they were too “traditional,” in that their gender identity and expression fit into a gender binary. Still others felt disconnected because of various other minority identities (e.g., being a student of color, being a graduate student) that undermined a sense of affiliation with the majority of trans students on campus. That experiences of exclusion and marginalization were vocalized by diverse individuals within the larger umbrella of “trans” speaks to how contestations of membership, and when and how exclusions occur, are situationally variable and context dependent—closely tied to whose needs and agenda are being advanced politically in a given moment (Gamson, 1997). Higher education professionals, especially those responsible for facilitating minoritized students’ engagement in identity-based groups, should be sensitive to the diverse experiences of trans students and the possibility of within-group tensions, which are in part related to privilege, power, and diverse systems of oppression (Jourian, 2015; Spencer & Patterson, 2017).

Some students named burnout and mental health difficulties—barriers to, and sometimes consequences of, social justice activism (Gorski & Chen, 2015)—as a reason for their disengagement. When students push for change in contexts that are unresponsive or hostile (e.g., in religiously affiliated or 2-year institutions), a lack of success may impede future efforts. Given theoretical and empirical evidence that engaging in activism may be experienced as beneficial to mental health—including reducing self-harm among trans students (Jones et al., 2016) and serving to enhance self-worth and pride (Riggle et al., 2011)—future work must explore the specific conditions in which it is beneficial or harmful.

Another key finding was that some students were unaware of opportunities for activism and advocacy, resulting in a lack of engagement. This suggests that higher education professionals who wish to support trans students should seek to facilitate and clearly publicize opportunities for engagement (e.g., serving on diversity committees; participating in educational panels). Our finding that some students expressed an interest in activism/advocacy but were unsure of where or how to get involved speaks to the reality that participants interpreted “activism” and “advocacy” in diverse ways. Some conceptualized these terms as inclusive of research projects, correcting professors who misgendered them, and attending group meetings. Others had a more narrow definition that involved formal organizing with campus groups and agitating for structural change, which meant that they sometimes provided apologetic narratives about their limited involvement in these domains. Encouraging students to embrace a broader notion of activism/advocacy might prompt them to recognize opportunities to engage in more informal activities, and to value their contributions to activism and education, which may benefit their well-being (Jones et al., 2016).

### Limitations and Future Directions

In order to begin to understand differences across various identities, we chose to create dichotomous variables (e.g., binary/nonbinary gender; of color/White; undergraduate/graduate student), which is common in large-scale research studies involving trans people (e.g., Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Although this process enabled us to draw conclusions from the data, it also had the effect of flattening some



of the diversity within and across such categories—and ultimately privileged these terms and categories over others (Jourian, 2015), which necessarily had implications for our findings. For example, our simplified graduate student/undergraduate student variable may have obscured the possibility that graduate students in certain fields (e.g., education, social work) have higher levels of activism/advocacy. This is an even greater concern with regard to categories such as race and gender, where binary constructions have historically been used to reinforce the power of dominant groups over nondominant ones. We attempted to move beyond such oversimplifications by highlighting the diversity within and across categories in our qualitative data. We also conducted follow-up analyses with the more specific racial identities and gender identities as predictors. This yielded few new findings, likely in part because of the small percentage of participants endorsing many of these categories. Given the complex ways in which race, ethnicity, and gender intersect, it is important to engage in more fine-grained analysis of trans people of diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds, with larger numbers of participants from individual groups to increase the ability to detect effects. Further, ethnicity and culture, which are related to but distinct from race, may also intersect with gender identity to impact activism, and should be a focus of future work. Certain Native American nations, for example, recognize more than two genders, which has implications for the collective power and activism of group members (Wilson, 2011). Relatedly, we recognize that our perspectives as White European American scholars inevitably shaped our approach to and interpretations of the data.

Regarding our categorization of participants as binary versus nonbinary, we recognize the problems inherent in the reduction of such a complex array of gender identities to a dichotomous variable. Indeed, doing critical quantitative work introduces various tensions that are not easily resolved. Such work requires methodological decisions that are not as relevant in qualitative work with small numbers of participants, where complexity and intersectionality are more easily emphasized and explored (see Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b). We urge our readers to recognize this categorization as an analytical and conceptual tool, and not as an essentialist dictum of duality.

We purposefully sought to oversample nonbinary students, given that they have been historically underrepresented in research on trans people (Beemyn, 2019; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2016b); thus, our sample is likely not representative of trans college students as a whole. Likewise, we had far fewer AMAB participants than AFAB participants in our sample. Yet greater participation of AFAB persons is consistent with the demographics of younger, particularly nonbinary, participants in large-scale studies of trans people (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Future work should specifically aim to explore AMAB trans students' experiences.

Although attending a religiously affiliated institution did not predict activism/advocacy, this may have been due to the low power to detect effects, given the small percent of the sample (4.5%) attending a religious institution. Future research should seek out trans students attending religious institutions. Also, our study only asked about *campus* activism/advocacy; participants may have been engaged in important, resilience-building activism efforts off-campus, because they did not find what they needed or there were few opportunities on-campus, or they felt they could

have a stronger or more meaningful impact off-campus. Future work should inquire about on- and off-campus activism/advocacy. Some students may have rejected the term “activism” or “advocacy” for themselves, because of the meanings it had for them—even if they did engage in activities that could be considered activism/advocacy. Future work might explore how trans students relate to these terms, and how they are used strategically, or rejected, in certain contexts.

More work is needed that examines socioeconomic barriers to activism, and how these interact with other factors (e.g., race, institution type, experiences of discrimination). And, work is needed that takes an explicitly intersectional approach, examining how trans individuals choose domains for activism and negotiate their multiple identities while engaged in activism/advocacy.

### Practical Implications

Researchers should consider our qualitative findings in constructing future protocols for use with trans students in investigations of their activist/advocacy experiences. Researchers can draw from the themes that emerged in creating questionnaires or scales aimed at measuring motivations for and impediments to trans student activism/advocacy. Our qualitative findings, as well as those of other scholars (Singh et al., 2011; Swank et al., 2013), highlight the role of social networks in encouraging trans student activism—that is, studies suggest that (not) knowing activist peers plays a role in participation. Future work should examine friendships with trans peers as a predictor of trans activism/advocacy, as well as the role of activism/advocacy in the development of social networks. Given that students likely interpreted our open-ended question regarding activism/advocacy in a variety of ways, which inevitably affected our findings, future work should inquire about (and examine predictors of) the range of activities that are considered activism/advocacy, including attending protests, participating in campus government, organizing other students, and counteracting microaggressions.

Educators and administrators in higher education should understand the need to engage in advocacy with and on behalf of trans students, which may involve efforts to transform the campus climate and change institutional structures. For example, administrators can partner with trans students to create trans-inclusive policies and practices through committees, forums, panels, and other campus programs, thus communicating to trans students that their voices are valued and their concerns are a priority (Goldberg et al., 2018). Creating and publicizing trans-supportive resources can play a role in demonstrating awareness and acceptance of trans lives—but it must be part of a larger strategic and sustained commitment to long-term systemic change within the college or university. Trans support groups and resource centers can also represent key sources of empowerment for trans students, but they must be funded and supported by the institution and be created by and for trans students, thus reflecting their diverse needs and experiences (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018). Faculty should look to incorporate opportunities for activism/advocacy into their curricula (e.g., in courses about social movements and social justice). Such efforts can have the effect of building community among students and fostering student activism (Quaye, 2007).

## Conclusions

Student activism/advocacy has many benefits for how students view themselves—as citizens of their institution as well as the broader world (Quaye, 2007; Ruiz et al., 2017). In turn, student activism/advocacy has many potential positive consequences for both the campus and larger society, and faculty and administrators should seek to support trans students in their activism and advocacy by ensuring that they have spaces to meet, collaborate, and work with other trans students and allies toward the goal of campus and community improvement. Educators can develop institutional mechanisms for supporting these efforts, such as by providing opportunities within their courses to develop skills in effective communication, exchange ideas, and make informed critiques and recommendations. Trans students who feel supported to push for social change on their campuses and beyond have the potential to empower themselves—and future trans students—to not only imagine, but to create, a higher education learning environment where all students can thrive.

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