



Transgender Graduate Students: Considerations, Tensions, and Decisions in Choosing a Graduate Program

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ABSTRACT

This study explored how 30 trans graduate students made decisions regarding graduate school. Specifically, it examined how the students chose their graduate program and, secondarily, how they chose their field, what led them to apply to graduate school, and their outness during the application process. In selecting a program, participants considered contextual and personal factors that encompassed commonly cited academic and pragmatic circumstances (e.g., reputation; cost) and factors salient to their gender identity, including state and university climate. Participants identified a number of tensions in choosing a program (e.g., whether to prioritize academic factors over program climate)—although some could not prioritize program climate because their field (e.g., STEM) was not LGBTQ savvy. In applying to graduate school, participants weighed the benefits of being out as trans (e.g., authenticity; finding a "good fit") and risks (e.g., discrimination). Findings have implications for higher education administrators, career counselors, clinicians, and researchers.

KEYWORDS

Graduate school; graduate student; higher education; transgender; trans; nonbinary; decision-making

Research on the experiences of trans¹ students has proliferated over the past decade, focusing largely on trans youth in high school (Russell, Ryan, Toomey, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2011) and college (Beemyn, 2019; Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Nicolazzo, 2017; Seelman, 2016). This work suggests that students are vulnerable to microaggressions (e.g., being referred to as the wrong pronoun/name) and explicit discrimination (e.g., being verbally abused or harassed), both of which impact well-being. Few studies have examined the experiences of trans graduate students (Goldberg, Kivalanka, & Dickey, 2018; McKinney, 2005). Existing work suggests that trans graduate students are uniquely dependent on their mentors and advisors for professional and personal guidance and support (Goldberg et al., 2018). In the absence of such support, trans individuals' mental health and career trajectories may be compromised (Goldberg et al., 2018).

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We know next to nothing about how trans students choose a graduate program, despite the implications of this decision for their personal and professional well-being: indeed, program climate, faculty and peer support, and quality of program training and job preparation all impact graduate students' mental health and career trajectories (Hyun, Quinn, Madon, & Lustig, 2006; Levecque, Anseel, De Beuckelaer, Van der Heyden, & Gisle, 2017). Awareness of the potential for negative treatment and discrimination may affect trans students' choice of program, leading them to prioritize factors such as the presence of supportive faculty and students (Goldberg et al., 2018). At a more basic level, trans students' gender identity may also affect their choice of discipline or field, given that disciplines vary considerably in their inclusiveness and norms related to sexual and gender diversity (Barnes & Randall, 2012; Goldberg et al., 2018). Understanding trans students' decision-making in relation to graduate programs has implications for higher education administrators, career counselors, advisors, and other professionals who support trans students.

The current qualitative study focused on 30 trans individuals who were current or recent graduate students, exploring their accounts of their decision-making in choosing a graduate program. We were especially interested in how and to what extent students' gender identity (e.g., nonbinary, trans man, trans woman) and discipline/field (e.g., humanities, STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics], social sciences) intersected with their decision-making processes. At a secondary level, we were interested in (a) how they chose their field, (b) contexts or people that led students to apply to graduate school, and (c) outness in the application process.

Graduate program choice and decision-making

Post-graduate education is important in many fields, and may be required to pursue certain careers. Some scholars have argued that advanced study is especially important for students with marginalized identities, who may be disadvantaged in the employment sphere (e.g., due to stigma; Brooks & Waters, 2011). In turn, higher education gives them a "leg up" in distinguishing themselves from other quality job candidates (Brooks & Waters, 2011). Individuals who apply to graduate school often expect a number of benefits, including enhanced lifetime earnings and occupational status (Stiber, 2000). Yet in deciding whether to attend graduate school, individuals also typically consider the costs (e.g., money, time; Stiber, 2000).

In choosing a graduate program, individuals consider some of the same factors as when choosing a college, but, because post-graduate education differs from undergraduate education in a variety of ways (e.g., working closely with an advisor), their decision-making process differs somewhat. College decision-making typically reflects consideration of university type

(e.g., size) and infrastructure (e.g., libraries), academic factors (e.g., courses), personal preferences (e.g., distance from family), and structural factors (e.g., cost) (Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999; Soutar & Turner, 2002). Prospective graduate students similarly prioritize academic factors (e.g., coursework, program prestige, training quality, mentor match), personal preferences (e.g., location), and structural factors (e.g., funding) but place less emphasis on university type or infrastructure (Bernal et al., 1999; Mbawuni & Nimako, 2015; Poock & Love, 2001). In choosing a program, graduate students are influenced by program faculty and students, their family/partners, and informational data sources such as campus visits (Poock & Love, 2001). Mentors also play a role in the selection process, by helping students take stock of their experiences and empowering them to think about what they want to achieve going forward (Brown, 2004), and guiding students to inquire about and evaluate various programmatic features, such as funding (Meza, Rodriguez, Trujillo, & Ladd-Viti, 2018)—a significant consideration for many prospective students (Engberg & Allen, 2011).

There is evidence that racial, ethnic, sexual, and gender minority students consider both general factors and minority-specific factors in selecting a graduate program (Bernal et al., 1999). Students who are BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color), for example, place more importance on multicultural awareness and training opportunities than White students (Bernal et al., 1999; Toia, Herron, Primavera, & Javier, 1997). They may also consider features of campus climate, including the presence of others who share their race/ethnicity (Ramirez, 2013). Similarly, LGBTQ individuals may consider both LGBTQ-specific factors that seem to signal inclusivity and diversity (e.g., LGBTQ organizations; presence of other LGBTQ students/faculty) and more general factors (e.g., program prestige; financial support; Burleson, 2010).

The ability to prioritize climate (e.g., presence of LGBTQ faculty; coursework on LGBTQ people) may be impeded by discipline-specific constraints, such as if the field is highly competitive, or characterized by little variability in its approach to gender diversity (Yoder & Mattheis, 2016). STEM fields, for instance, have historically been dominated by White heterosexual cis men, and characterized by hostility toward students whose identities, behaviors, or appearance do not align with the stereotype of, say, an engineer (Cech & Waidzunus, 2011). Trans students who wish to study in fields that are unwelcoming to members of non-dominant groups may feel that prioritizing climate is unfeasible or will require making difficult tradeoffs in other areas (Gati, 1993). Finances may also constrain decision-making. A national survey of incoming college students found that 19% of trans students had major concerns about financing their education, compared to 12% of the national sample (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017).

Trans graduate students

Graduate school is typically a more insular experience than college, wherein graduate students' social networks are smaller, more concentrated, and involve interaction with a limited range of individuals. Graduate students depend on faculty, especially mentors, for professional resources and opportunities, and potential support if issues of discrimination arise (Malik & Malik, 2015). Both academic and emotional support may be especially important to the well-being and professional success of students with historically marginalized identities, who are vulnerable to isolation and academic uncertainty (Lechuga, 2011; Patton, 2009). Relationships with faculty, advisors, and peers affect graduate students' program satisfaction, life satisfaction, and academic and career trajectories (Tenenbaum, Crosby, & Gliner, 2001; Tompkins, Brecht, Tucker, Neander, & Swift, 2016).

Only two studies have focused on the experiences of trans graduate students. McKinney (2005) conducted a study of trans students (50 undergraduates, 25 graduate students) and found that none of the graduate students considered faculty or staff to be particularly trans supportive. Graduate students who tried to educate faculty and staff about trans identities generally felt that these efforts were useless. Goldberg et al. (2018) studied 91 trans graduate students and found that misgendering by peers, faculty, and advisors was a common stressor that impacted students' sense of belonging within their program as well as their well-being. Relationships with advisors in particular were key sources of affirmation versus invalidation of their gender identities. Students who identified as nonbinary encountered especially high levels of invalidation and misgendering, echoing research findings on nonbinary undergraduate students (Beemyn, 2019).

Theoretical framework

Our theoretical framework integrates educational decision-making theories and gender minority stress theory (GMST). We apply Gati, Krausz, and Osipow's (1996) model of career decision-making to educational decision-making. According to the model, career decisions involve a person deciding among various alternatives by comparing and evaluating different possibilities. Career decisions are shaped by the fact that the number of alternatives (e.g., graduate programs) is large, significant information is available about each alternative, and a large number of aspects (e.g., academic focus, trans-friendliness) are required to characterize each alternative (e.g., program) in a meaningful way (Gati et al., 1996). Each aspect is assigned some relative value or importance; in turn, each alternative is viewed as a set of aspects. Difficulties in educational decision-making can arise for many reasons, including inadequate information about oneself or the alternatives, and/or uncertainty about how to obtain

additional information. Ultimately, tradeoffs and compromises may be inevitable in career and educational decisions (Gati, 1993).

GMST (Testa, Habarth, Peta, Balsam, & Bockting, 2015) is useful for considering how trans students' graduate school selection process might be impacted by gender identity-related considerations. According to GMST, trans people experience a variety of stressors, including discrimination and rejection, which can negatively impact well-being. Negative gender identity-related experiences can also result in trans people having greater expectations of these events occurring, which can negatively impact mental health (Rood et al., 2016). Amidst a history of experiencing (and expecting) invisibility, mistreatment, or lack of belonging in various settings, such as college (Dugan et al., 2017), trans individuals' approach to graduate program selection may reflect consideration of climate, anticipated minority stressors, and access to supports related to gender identity.

The current study

This study's central focus is on how trans graduate students reflect on their process of

choosing a graduate program. We explore several secondary questions, as they provide valuable context for participants' reflections on choosing a program. Our research questions are:

- (1) How do trans graduate students narrate their choice of a field or discipline?
- (2) Why do trans graduate students decide to apply to graduate school? What are salient sources of influence (people, contexts)?
- (3) How do trans graduate students choose a graduate program? What factors are salient in their consideration process, and what tensions and tradeoffs do they face?
- (4) How and why are they "out" or not out about their gender in applying to graduate school?

Method

We recruited the current sample of 30 participants by contacting individuals ($n = 506$) who completed a survey of trans students' experiences in higher education in Summer and Fall of 2016. Participants in this survey identified under the trans umbrella (e.g., trans woman, trans man, nonbinary) and were enrolled at an undergraduate or graduate institution in the past year. In Spring 2017, the first author sent an e-mail to the survey participants who had provided an e-mail address about an interview opportunity involving their experiences in graduate school and their professional development. All 30

individuals who contacted the first author to participate were current graduate students (24) or had graduated from a master's or doctoral program within the past year (six). They completed a 1–1.5 hour interview and a brief online demographics survey.

Participants

Table 1 contains demographic details about the sample. The 30 participants could select multiple gender identity labels. Nineteen identified as trans, 12 as nonbinary, 10 as genderqueer, eight as a trans man, seven as gender non-conforming, five as gender fluid, five as a man, four as androgynous, three as a woman, three as a trans woman, two as masculine-of-center, two as feminine-of-center, two as agender, one as bigender, and one as demigender. Five identified in a way that was not listed. In total, 19 identified as at least one nonbinary identity (e.g., nonbinary, gender fluid) and 11 identified as either trans men or trans women.

Regarding race, 26 students identified themselves as White, one as Latinx and White, one as Native American, and two as "another race." In both cases, these individuals indicated that they identified as Jewish, suggesting that they did not feel that the existing racial classification system allowed them to meaningfully express their identity. Nine said that they had disabilities. Namely, one participant had a mobility-related disability, two suffered from chronic headaches, and the remainder described mental health issues. All but three had health insurance.

Twenty-one of the 30 had adopted a name that better represented their gender than their birth name. All but one said they wore clothing that matched their gender identity in social situations, and all but two did this when going to class. To better reflect their gender identity, 17 had taken or were taking hormones, 10 had top surgery (e.g., breast removal, implants), and three had bottom or genital surgery. Regarding non-medical body modifications, 18 engaged in binding, 11 engaged in packing, and three engaged in tucking. Nine used "he/him/his" pronouns, five said "she/her/hers", five said "they/them/their", one said it did not matter, five said that it depended on the context, and five said they were okay with multiple pronouns.

Nineteen attended public universities; 11 were at private universities. Eight attended school on the East Coast, eight in the South, eight in the Midwest, and six on the West Coast. Six were enrolled in programs in the humanities (e.g., English), six in counseling/social work, five the social sciences (e.g., sociology), five in education, three in the medical/health sciences (e.g., physical therapy), and five in STEM (e.g., physical sciences, math, and computer science).

Table 1. Demographics for transgender graduate students (N = 30).

Name	Race	Age	Gender Identities	Sexual Orientation	Discipline
1 Krys	White	25	Trans, gender fluid, feminine-of-center	Queer	Social Sciences
2 Skye	Native American	25	Trans, nonbinary, gender fluid	Queer	Education
3 Wren	White	29	Trans, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, demigender	Bisexual/ Queer	Education
4 Bryn	White	29	Trans, genderqueer, agender, androgynous, woman	Queer	Counseling/Social Work
5 Lennon	White	23	Trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, masculine-of-center	Queer	Medical/Health Sciences
6 Toby	White	22	Trans, trans man, man, masculine-of-center	Queer	Education
7 Emerson	Latinx/White	35	Trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming	Queer	Humanities
8 Addie	White	22	Trans, nonbinary, agender	Pansexual	Humanities
9 River	White	26	Nonbinary, gender nonconforming	Queer	Humanities
10 Darren	White	22	Trans man, man	Bisexual	Humanities
11 Max	White	31	Genderqueer, gender nonconforming	Queer	Counseling/Social Work
12 Ezra	White	26	Trans, genderqueer, nonbinary	Queer	Social Sciences
13 Ty	White	23	Trans, genderqueer, nonbinary, gender nonconforming, feminine-of-center, androgynous	Bisexual/ Queer/ Pansexual	Humanities
14 Andie	Jewish	23	Genderqueer, gender fluid	Queer	Counseling/Social Work
15 Colin	White	29	Trans, trans man	Gay	Medical/Health Sciences
16 Logan	White	28	Trans man, man	Queer	Social Sciences
17 Jordan	Jewish	31	Trans, genderqueer, trans man, non-normative male	Queer	STEM
18 Jonas	White	32	Trans, trans man, man	Bisexual	STEM
19 Darcy	White	65	Trans, trans woman, woman	Lesbian	Counseling/Social Work
20 Sam	White	24	Genderqueer, nonbinary, androgynous	Queer	STEM
21 Grey	White	27	Trans, nonbinary, gender fluid	Bisexual	STEM
22 Lou	White	29	Trans, trans man, transmasculine	Queer	Counseling/Social Work
23 Dre	White	26	Nonbinary, butch	Lesbian	Counseling/Social Work
24 Devon	White	34	Nonbinary, gender fluid, bigender	Pansexual	Social Sciences
25 Sage	White	47	Genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender non-specific	Bisexual	Education
26 Blake	White	24	Gender nonconforming, androgynous, woman	Gay	Medical/Health Sciences
27 Elliot	White	25	Trans, trans man	Pansexual	Education
28 Layla	White	23	Trans woman	Heterosexual	Social Sciences
29 Myra	White	28	Trans, trans woman	Queer	STEM
30 Bobbie	White	28	Trans, woman	Bisexual	Humanities

Procedure

The first author and an advanced doctoral student conducted the semi-structured interviews (1–1.5 hours). Among the questions asked were: 1) How did you originally get interested in [discipline]? Who supported your interest(s)? 2) How did you select your program? 3) How did your identity as a trans person figure into that? 4) Would you say that [discipline] is generally hospitable or inhospitable to trans students? How? 5) Were you transitioning during college [and/or graduate school]? How did it affect your academic/career trajectory?

Reflexivity statement

The authors represent a diverse group in terms of gender (nonbinary, cis women), career stage (advanced mid-career; early-career; graduate students), and discipline (counseling psychology; clinical psychology; education). Our diverse professional roles meant that we were attentive to different aspects of participants' narratives about graduate school and decision-making, enabling us to conduct a deeper analysis of the data and consider a variety of applications of the findings. With regard to race, the authors identify as White or White-adjacent. In turn, particular themes and interpretations of those themes reflect our own racialized identities. We recognize that the salience and meaning of particular patterns or data points might be quite different through the lens of a more diverse set of authors and/or authors of color.

Data analysis

We utilized thematic analysis, a flexible but standard means for considering responses to open-ended questions by identifying and categorizing the primary patterns in the data (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). Thematic analysis emphasizes examining and recording themes with the goal of creating a coding system to organize the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Guided by principles of constructivism, we do not view the themes as arising from the data, but as emerging as a result of our interaction with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first author initiated coding by immersing herself in the data, reading each transcript multiple times and highlighting passages within them. Her analytic interest in graduate program decision-making meant that she attended in particular to data that referenced this domain. She wrote a memo for each participant that summarized their experiences choosing a program while attending to social locations that varied across the sample (e.g., gender identity, discipline, region).

Initially, a wide range of preliminary codes were documented. Using the preliminary scheme that the first author constructed as a basic guide,

the second and fourth author read and coded all transcripts. The three authors discussed salient patterns they noted in the responses, addressing commonalities and differences in their coding, which led to the refinement of emerging codes. The use of multiple coders, as well as our descriptions of data that are thick, meaningful, and context-rich (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014), represent efforts to enhance the credibility of our analysis. Next, codes were further refined, organized, and grouped under several key themes: (a) choice of a field; (b) decision to apply to graduate school; (c) outness while applying; and (d) selection of a program. At this more conceptual stage of coding, we sought to create a coherent system of categories and subcategories (Goldberg & Allen, 2015; Miles et al., 2014) and drew on sensitizing concepts (e.g., educational decision-making; gender minority stress) to help us make sense of and organize the data. Such a theoretically-informed analysis meant that we were attentive to ways that themes mapped onto key constructs in theory and literature, yet sought to remain open to participants' stories and interpretations (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We also remained attentive to the ways that themes were experienced differently by different participants, and to how certain accounts differed from the dominant emerging story (Miles et al., 2014).

The authors then applied the coding scheme to the data, which enabled the identification of more descriptive coding categories, and the generation of themes for which there was the most substantiation in the data. At this final stage, the third and fifth authors provided input regarding the scheme, including its coherence and clarity, and relationships among codes. Minor edits were made, and the coding scheme was applied once again. The coding scheme and results were reviewed by a trans-identified peer auditor, not a member of the authorship team, who gave input that informed minor changes to the scheme. See Table 2 for final list of themes.

Findings

Choice of a field/discipline

Participants' narratives regarding how they became interested in or settled on their discipline or field were diverse. The desire to do work that "mattered" and would improve the world and/or underserved communities was a common thread throughout more than one-third ($n = 12$) of participant narratives, including those of both participants of color (i.e., the Native American and Latinx/White participant), and one participant who identified their race as Jewish. Lou,² a White trans man, for example, found that the field of social work meshed with their personal ethics, and felt that it was a good fit because of its "implicit commitment to social justice." Students in the counseling professions and social sciences in particular emphasized their desire to be

Table 2. Major themes and subthemes ($N = 30$).

Major Theme	Subthemes	N (%)
1. How They Chose Their Field/Discipline	<p>Desire to do work that "matters"</p> <p>Love of/fascination with a subject</p> <p>Volunteer and work experiences</p> <p>Field is LGBTQ-friendly</p> <p>Queer professor's influence</p> <p>Influenced by negative or invalidating experiences</p>	<p>12 (40%)</p> <p>9 (30%)</p> <p>9 (30%)</p> <p>9 (30%)</p> <p>4 (13%)</p> <p>2 (7%)</p>
2. Decision to Apply to Graduate School	<p>Encouraged by a mentor/professor/employer</p> <p>Unfulfilling work experiences</p> <p>Love of learning</p> <p>Graduate degree required for their career</p> <p>Graduate degree would give more flexibility and credibility</p> <p>Difficulty finding a job and wanted to improve career prospects</p>	<p>10 (33%)</p> <p>7 (23%)</p> <p>5 (17%)</p> <p>5 (17%)</p> <p>3 (10%)</p> <p>3 (10%)</p>
3. Outness in Applying to Graduate School	<p>Explicitly identified as trans on application</p> <p>Identified as trans but not out on their applications</p> <p>Not out at the time they applied</p> <p>Did not specify</p>	<p>13 (43%)</p> <p>9 (30%)</p> <p>6 (20%)</p> <p>2 (7%)</p>
4. Choosing a Graduate Program	<p>Academic factors</p> <p>Focus</p> <p>Reputation</p> <p>Match</p> <p>Pragmatic factors</p> <p>Program affordability</p> <p>Admitted to only one program</p> <p>Geographic factors</p> <p>Desire to stay near home</p> <p>Liberal/tolerant climate where they felt safe</p> <p>Program climate (i.e., LGBTQ-friendly)</p> <p>Had students/faculty confirm supports for trans people</p> <p>University climate (i.e., accepting and/or liberal)</p> <p>University resources (e.g., LGBTQ-inclusive policies)</p>	<p>12 (40%)</p> <p>12 (40%)</p> <p>7 (23%)</p> <p>5 (17%)</p> <p>9 (30%)</p> <p>8 (27%)</p> <p>9 (30%)</p> <p>9 (30%)</p> <p>12 (40%)</p> <p>5 (17%)</p> <p>7 (23%)</p> <p>3 (10%)</p>

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

Major Theme	Subthemes	N (%)
5. Tensions and Tradeoffs in Choosing a Program	Prioritized academic factors over geographic or program climate	6 (20%)
	Could not prioritize program climate because field not LGBTQ-informed or savvy	6 (20%)
	Prioritized tolerant climate (e.g., over academic rigor or cost)	3 (10%)
	Could not prioritize climate or program specialty due to cost	2 (7%)

advocates for social change. One hopeful social scientist, Devon, who was White, gender fluid, and bigender, wanted to "study the way we interact in groups with the idea of hopefully improving society. The better we can understand the social norms, the better we can change it [such as with] gender inequality." Holding an identity as a person of color may have compounded this desire for some. Skye, a Native American nonbinary and gender fluid student shared their desire to **do work in diversity and inclusion** within the education field because "I think I bring really important ideas to the table. Just because I'm native, I'm queer, I'm genderfluid. I have so many different stories that people don't typically hear."

Almost one-third ($n = 9$) emphasized a long-standing love of or fascination with a subject (e.g., anatomy; religion), often since childhood. As Darren, a White trans man in the humanities, shared: "I was really depressed when I was [a teenager] and I spent a lot of time not really talking to people and reading a lot. I found I really liked poetry . . . people like T.S. Eliot, Virginia Wolfe, especially . . . so that was my introduction to classical literature in general." Others' interests emerged or were cemented in college: Almost one-third ($n = 9$) invoked college classes or classroom experiences as impacting their choice of a discipline. Jordan, a Jewish genderqueer trans man in STEM, "fell in love with experiments [and] asking scientific questions." For Andie, a Jewish genderqueer, gender fluid student in social work, specific college courses and readings helped them to develop "a more critical understanding . . . of the world around me . . . I've found that my academic life relates intimately with my personal life and also with my organizing life."

Volunteer and work experiences also impacted participants' disciplinary interests ($n = 9$). Lennon, a White genderqueer masculine-of-center student in the health sciences, traced their interest in medicine to childhood, when they **had a teacher who** volunteered at a rehabilitation facility, thus planting a seed for Lennon, who began volunteering at such a facility as a teen: "I fell in love with it, and found something I could justify to myself every day . . . So I decided I wanted to be a [doctor], and I've stuck with that ever since." Bryn, a White genderqueer agender participant in social work, realized that "social work would give me a lot of opportunities [to be] a skilled advocate and educator" while working at a social services nonprofit.

Almost one-third of participants ($n = 9$) described their impression of their chosen field (e.g., humanities; social work; higher education) as LGBTQ-friendly, which informed their decision to enter that field. Elliot, a White trans man in education, shared his impression that "higher education is very committed to diversity . . . so that was a very big reason why I went into this field." Some ($n = 4$) participants spoke to how a single queer professor in their field had made it seem possible to enter it. Grey, a White gender fluid student in STEM, had taken a chemistry class with an "openly gay professor. And so it was kind of a big deal like, 'Oh! Queer scientists exist!'" Two participants said

that negative or invalidating experiences (e.g., in therapy or in college as a trans person) impacted their choice of discipline (e.g., social work; education). Elliot, a White trans man, sought to study education and be a "champion for diversity," noting, "A big reason why I'm in the field that I'm in is that I didn't have [that] when I was a student."

Decision to apply to graduate school

Individuals may, during or after college, develop ideas of what they would like to study in graduate school—but ultimately may not apply, for a range of reasons. Of interest are the factors, contexts, and people that prompted participants to apply to graduate school—a major life decision characterized by potential professional payoffs, but also costs (time, money). One-third of participants ($n = 10$) shared that they were inspired to consider graduate school because of the encouragement or advice of a professor, mentor, or employer. Logan, a White trans man in the social sciences, recalled how "a professor I ended up taking a required statistics class with, I guess, recognized some intellectual potential in me that I didn't know I had." Blake, a White androgynous student in health sciences, said, "I have a mentor/boss/friend that showed me the way . . . she was the one that kind of told me [to apply] and taught me how." Several of these participants were frank that it had not occurred to them to apply to graduate school, and they were grateful for the push to do so. As Wren, a White demigender student in education, said: "I got into it because my supervisor at my campus job sort of, not pushed, but encouraged me to start thinking about it . . . I was not planning on graduate school, actually."

Some participants ($n = 7$) recalled that it was unfulfilling and low-pay work experiences, such as temping and retail, that prompted them to apply to graduate school. In some cases, these negative work experiences were also transphobic or invalidating of their gender identity. A typical response came from Jordan, a Jewish genderqueer trans man in STEM, who explained, "I worked retail for a while, and it got to a point where I was just miserable, so I decided to go back to school." Jordan noted that a manager had tried to get them fired due to their gender identity. In contrast, for some ($n = 5$), it was not a desire to escape or avoid unsatisfying work experiences but rather a love of learning and being in school that pushed them to pursue graduate education.

Future career prospects figured prominently in some participants' decision-making. Some respondents ($n = 5$) asserted that going to graduate school was necessary to obtain their desired job, and thus was a part of their intended career trajectory. Those who wanted to teach at the college level, for example, were aware that they needed graduate training to achieve their career goals. Several other students ($n = 3$) mentioned that, while not essential, a graduate degree would give them a "leg up" in the professional world, enabling them

more "flexibility and credibility" (Toby, a White trans man in education). A few ($n = 3$) shared that they were unable to find a job after college, prompting them to consider graduate school to improve their career prospects.

Outness in applying to graduate school

Once they decided to apply, participants had to consider how "out" to be in the application process, if they identified as trans at the time. Nearly half ($n = 13$; five nonbinary, five trans men, three trans women) said that their applications explicitly identified them as trans. Most mentioned their trans identity in their essays or cover letters, whereas a few noted that their trans identity was apparent based on discrepancies in their names across different documents and letter writers' use of pronouns. Bobbie, a White trans woman in the humanities, said:

I made sure I dropped a reference to [being trans] in my personal statement, just because I thought I might get (*laughs*)—you know, like academia, they like to have diverse cohorts, so I'm diverse. And I love being out and I don't go around all day telling people I'm trans, but I don't mind when it comes out because I just really like being trans.

Similarly, it was important for Toby, a White trans man in education, to come out as trans as a way of assessing whether the program would be affirming of him as a trans student: "I came into my interview and I was like, 'Hey, I'm trans and I want you to know that about me.' And they were like, 'Great, let's get to the interview.' Like, it was such a non-issue."

The stress of coming out as trans was alleviated when there was an opportunity to do so. For Addie, a White agender student in the humanities, the ease of indicating their gender and pronouns in the application for the program they attended served to signal the program's comfort with trans students and made it easier for Addie to share their identity markers:

The application had a spot for pronouns, which was really good. Also, I have them in my email signature, and I'd emailed the program coordinator for the degree program, and she [said], 'That's a great idea, putting them in your email signature! I'm gonna start doing that.' Calling attention to and then immediately showing support for it put me at ease.

This example highlights how outness in the application process was, for some, inextricably linked to their decision-making about what program to attend: Addie saw an option to be out, chose to be out, and met a positive response, which impacted their choice to attend that program.

Several of these participants said they were outed as trans during the application process. Jonas, a White trans man in STEM, said, "Because of the circumstances of my application, the administration knew . . . I changed my name right before I came, when I was still in [state], and the [graduate

secretary] got all that up to date for me. So my paperwork was basically all male at that point but it hadn't been when I applied." Elliot, a White trans man in education, had his gender marker and name changed before applying—but then realized these were discrepant with his "undergraduate transcript . . . so there was a little bit of a hiccup there."

Some participants ($n = 9$; six nonbinary, two trans men, one trans woman) identified as trans but were not out in their applications. These individuals, which included both participants of color, had considered the implications of being out in the application process but concluded that the risks outweighed the benefits. Lennon, a White genderqueer masculine-of-center student in health sciences, shared that their former boss had used Lennon's name throughout her letter of recommendation to avoid the use of pronouns. Lennon was concerned not only about transphobia on the part of the admissions committee, but also the possibility that the "person reading this is like, 'Oh, they just really messed up on the grammar in this letter [by using they/them pronouns]; we're not going to take this seriously.'" Lennon said, "I definitely didn't mention any of that in any interviews because I didn't want that to be a factor." Skye, a Native American nonbinary gender fluid student, acknowledged that they were "very nervous" about sharing their trans identity and pronouns on their application, given the "high stakes" nature of applying to graduate school and their general uncertainty in navigating the application process.

Six participants, all of whom identified with at least one nonbinary identity, were not out in their applications because they did not identify as trans at the time.³ Some were in the very early stages of exploring their gender identity, and others shared that it was in graduate school that they first began to discover their gender identity. Two of these six students noted that their graduate institution's climate and resources facilitated their gender identity development. Sage, a White genderqueer student in education, reflected, "It wasn't until I was actually in my PhD program that I found the word to explain to other people who I was, [in part] because of the positive spaces that the university has." Grey, a White gender fluid student in STEM, shared, "My program helped me find a place where I could discover my identity. We have a really great LGBT center, [and] one of the staff is nonbinary. Meeting them was very influential."

Choosing a graduate program

In describing how they chose their graduate program, participants narrated a variety of considerations, including both contextual and personal factors. At times, tensions emerged between various considerations, and these were resolved through compromise and trade-offs.

Academic factors were often recalled as a top consideration in choosing a program. Many participants ($n = 12$) identified the academic focus or teaching approach as a key factor in their decision: for example, focus on a particular time period in a Classics department; a social justice concentration in a social work program. Some ($n = 7$) emphasized program reputation. Dre, a White nonbinary student in the humanities, said, "I have a mentor friend telling me, 'You need to go to a school like [university], since that is . . . the best place in the country to study [religion] academically . . . then I got in and I got a scholarship.'" A final key academic consideration for some students ($n = 5$) was the match (i.e., interest- or research-wise) with a faculty member. Sam, a White genderqueer student in STEM, shared, "I applied to the top programs. I was accepted to all of them, and then I narrowed down based mostly on who I wanted to work with."

Pragmatic factors had also played a role in participants' selection. Indeed, finances represented a key pragmatic factor that not only influenced where participants had decided to attend graduate school, but also where they applied. Nine participants, including both students of color, emphasized program affordability in their decision-making, including tuition cost, availability of stipends, waivers, and other supports, and financial aid. Darren, a White trans man in the humanities, shared, "I'm financially independent. I knew at that time I couldn't afford a grad program that wasn't going to be supportive and sponsor me [financially]." Similarly, Layla, a White trans woman in the social sciences, said, "A lot of factors were there. One was definitely affordability. I'm a resident of [Southern state] so in-state tuition was definitely more affordable than going to other areas such as Washington D.C. or Chicago." Eight participants said that they attended the only program that had accepted them, highlighting the reality that limited options necessarily constrains choices (Ramirez, 2013). In such cases, the decision-making process did not involve choosing among an array of options, but, rather, the decision was made for them.

Geographical factors had figured prominently in many participants' decisions, although in diverse ways. Some asserted that they had wished to stay near their home ($n = 9$), thus prioritizing established community (and sometimes family) ties. Krya, a White gender fluid, feminine-of-center participant in the social sciences, said, with reluctance, "I chose [Midwestern university] mainly because I wasn't ready to leave the state yet, as much as I desperately wanted to." Some ($n = 9$) emphasized climate: they wanted to live in a state or community that was more liberal and tolerant, and where they felt they would be safe as trans people. In this way, personal preferences were intertwined with safety considerations, and informed by concerns about gender minority stress. Lennon, a White genderqueer masculine-of-center student in the health sciences, chose a school in a state known for its progressive policies, and in a city known for being "liberal and accepting." Addie, a White agender student

in the humanities, applied to institutions in states they viewed as "very liberal," a characterization they hoped would extend to institutional and graduate program climate. Relatedly, a few ($n = 3$) participants said they did not apply to schools in certain regions of the U.S. (e.g., the South), which they viewed as inhospitable to trans people. For Jordan, a Jewish genderqueer trans man in STEM, safety concerns were amplified by their own and their partner's racial and ethnic identities: their partner was Black and queer. The couple moved from a Southern state in which they were targeted for their relationship to a state on the West Coast when Jordan began graduate school, out of consideration of the fact that "we both have seen that people are afraid of things that they don't understand."

In addition to geographic climate, participants named several other LGBTQ-specific factors, including those related to climate and resources. Program climate was noted by some ($n = 12$), including both participants of color, as a key feature that influenced their decision. Elliot, a White trans man in education, described how he had assessed and gleaned program climate during the decision-making stage: "I found that there were professors that had been safe zone trained, and they put that on their profile on the university page . . . I did a little Facebook stalking and could just see that they were not only affirming of those identities, but also did research on them." In some cases, talking with students, and program faculty, provided valuable information about program climate, including the level of support present for trans students ($n = 5$). Max, a White genderqueer social work student, shared: "I ended up choosing [university] after having a lot of conversations with current students, alumni, faculty, about the climate there." Lou, a White trans man in social work, recounted his interview with the director of the program he attended:

We were talking about LGBT issues. I hadn't explicitly told him that I was trans and he, I imagine, figured it out, and [said], "Oh, [city] has this kind of trans community, and this is the kind of work we're doing that applies specifically to trans people." So he didn't call me out, but he made it very clear that it wasn't just LGB research that was going on, which really made me feel like, Okay, I'm being seen; this would be a good space for me.

Some participants ($n = 7$) emphasized university climate in their decision, such that they prioritized and typically chose an institution they viewed as accepting and/or liberal. In some cases, their impressions were based on limited data or inferences. Lou, quoted above, stated: "I associate the presence of a large campus with liberal political views, which makes me feel safer."

Finally, university resources and supports were identified by a few participants ($n = 3$) as factors that influenced their decision. These included the presence of LGBTQ-inclusive policies, an LGBTQ center, and trans-inclusive health insurance. Colin, a White trans man in the health sciences, recalled

considering, "What's this school's policy? Do they have an LGBT center? What kind of insurance do they have?" in his decision about where to attend graduate school.

Tensions and tradeoffs in choosing a program

Participants recalled grappling with a range of tensions and tradeoffs when they decided upon a graduate program. Some described how they ultimately prioritized academic factors over climate ($n = 6$), surmising that while it might be challenging to be a trans person in a given region, community, or university, the career advantages of attending a highly competitive program would make any discomfort they experienced "worth it." Thus, they sacrificed current comfort for future career success. Logan, a White trans man in the social sciences, shared: "When I decided to come to [university], I made the choice that I wanted the best training that I could get . . . and I've been okay with not indulging the activist side of me during my graduate training." For Wren, a White demigender participant in education, attending a high-quality program meant moving to very conservative state. But Wren emphasized that the progressive nature of the program they chose to attend somewhat offset the stress of living in a state with transphobic policies—yet not completely, as the local community was hostile to trans people:

I was nervous about going to an essentially pro-Trump area . . . but on campus it's pretty ok. And in my department I feel very safe, but I don't want to be too far off campus. So, it was a consideration, and it still is on the forefront of my mind a lot, but it's not enough to make me drop out . . . [Whereas] I fostered a very supportive space for myself back home, going to my grad school, I have had people call me names.

Some participants in STEM as well as religious studies ($n = 6$) said that they simply could not prioritize program climate because their field was not LGBTQ-informed or savvy. In this way, they felt they were sacrificing climate by virtue of entering that particular discipline in the first place—a slightly different tradeoff, wherein their field served to constrain the options available to them. Sam, a White genderqueer student, said that STEM was generally not a trans-friendly field. In turn, Sam's main considerations were academic factors—reputation and fit:

I wish I could say that [trans-friendliness] has figured in more, but I think in my field I'm kind of resigned to the fact that people are overwhelmingly not informed, not aware, not sensitive to issues of gender nonconformity or trans issues in general. So it didn't really feel like there was any way that I could pick or consider picking [a program] that would weigh more heavily in that direction.

Sam's decision, then, was made (regrettably) easier in that they did not have to consider climate factors in their decision about where to attend graduate

school. Rather, Sam was free (or constrained) to only consider academic factors, and finances and geography secondarily.

Some participants ($n = 3$) did prioritize an affirming and tolerant climate over other factors, including academic rigor and cost. Lennon, a White genderqueer masculine-of-center student in the health sciences, felt firmly that they wanted to be in a more liberal, progressive environment than the Southern state in which they had come to live and work post-college. Lennon ultimately attended a program on the East Coast for graduate school. Lennon explained:

I didn't apply to my in-state at all, because I knew that I didn't want to live in [Southern state] . . . even though the cost is [much less]. So it was kind of a crazy move not to apply to my in-state, but I knew I couldn't survive living in [city] for four years . . . and I actually did have choices. One school was in the South, and I'm not—nope (laugh) . . . I liked [school on East Coast], but I had concerns about it not being as diverse, and not being quite as accepting . . . [it's] a little bit small-towny. So a lot of complicated factors, large concerns about issues with being trans at these schools, played [into my decision].

Lennon's narrative highlights the fact that for most students, and trans students specifically, there is no "perfect school." Although in a relatively accepting region of the country, Lennon's chosen program was in a community that was not particularly diverse. In this way, they made tradeoffs, and the result was good, but not perfect. Ultimately, the institution that Lennon attended was "not all that diverse, but I haven't had any issues with being trans here."

Participants ($n = 3$) who strongly emphasized location sometimes found that they had to make sacrifices in other areas, including academic rigor and program climate, insomuch as they were limited by virtue of, say, committing themselves to a particular (e.g., local) region. Ezra, a White gender fluid masculine-of-center student in the social sciences, chose to stay in the South, where they had lived all their life—but did consider programs up to a few hours away. Ezra, who considered program climate to the extent possible amidst their restricted options, did not view their program as especially trans-competent, but felt good enough about it to enroll—primarily based on a conversation with a queer faculty member who "basically said . . . they're not going to know much about anything trans-related, but they'll be willing to learn."

Similarly, finances served as a structural constraint for two participants. Colin, a White trans man in the health sciences, shared that he reluctantly sacrificed climate and geographic considerations for financial reasons: "It would have been almost two or three times the tuition cost at [other schools] versus [university]. It was a very hard decision because in my mind, this was kind of the *last* place that I wanted to go. I really wanted to be in a city that was just a little bit more populated, not as rural . . . when you have a city, you get so much diversity."

Discussion

This study provides insights relevant to several major bodies of literature, including educational decision-making (Burleson, 2010) and trans students' experiences (Beemyn, 2019). It highlights how trans students entering highly gendered fields such as STEM may be aware of, and resigned to, the fact that their field is generally ignorant of trans issues—which frames how they approach both their careers and the graduate school application process. At the same time, some participants' choice of field or discipline appeared to be influenced by their perception of that field as LGBTQ- or trans-friendly, similar to prior work on trans people's career considerations (Budge, Tebbe, & Howard, 2010). Whereas some participants' career choices were impacted by LGBTQ or LGBTQ-affirming faculty and mentors, others cited experiences with transphobic therapists or educators as inspiring their career pursuits, highlighting the potential for not only positive, but also negative, experiences to inform career decisions and pathways.

Many participants stated that encouragement from a mentor impacted their decision to apply to graduate school, underscoring the importance of mentorship in recruiting and retaining trans students in higher education (Goldberg et al., 2018), similar to the critical role that mentorship plays in facilitating the academic success of other minority populations such as BIPOC and LGBQ students (Meza et al., 2018). Others made the decision to apply because of negative work experiences, the necessity of a graduate degree, and the desire to continue learning (Stiber, 2000). Such negative work experiences were often not only unsatisfying, but characterized by misgendering or direct discrimination, underscoring how gender minority stress may exacerbate and amplify the discomfort associated with a difficult work environment.

In applying to graduate school, participants balanced awareness of the potential negative consequences of being out with the desire to be authentically themselves. In addition, some used being out as a way to effectively "weed out" potentially invalidating environments (e.g., those that would reject them for being trans). This strategy, while at times risky, alleviated some of the uncertainty associated with the decision-making process (Gati, 1993), such that participants decreased the number of alternatives (programs) and increased the likelihood that they would choose a program with "high marks" on a valued attribute (i.e., trans-inclusiveness; Gati et al., 1996). Others were outed because of the graduate application process (e.g., mismatches in their first name across paperwork) but also did not express a wish to be closeted in their application. Those who were not out despite identifying as trans weighed their concerns about potential rejection and discrimination against the potential benefits associated with being out. Reflecting the general invisibility of nonbinary genders in higher education (Nicolazzo, 2017), nonbinary participants experienced unique challenges in

deciding whether to be out in their application, navigating competing considerations of safety, authenticity, and possible discrimination. Some nonbinary students may stay silent or align themselves with the gender binary to safely navigate a binarily gendered world and achieve their goals (Beemyn, 2019). Likewise, the participants of color were among those who were not out in their applications, suggesting that their multiple marginalized identities may have sensitized them to the unique risks that they would be taking in sharing their gender identity (Garvey, Mobley, Summerville, & Moore, 2019). Finally, some individuals did not recognize themselves as trans when applying, and thus it did not seem appropriate or necessary to be out.

In choosing a program, participants cited many of the same considerations as in prior work on higher education decision-making processes, including academic reputation and focus (Burluson, 2010). Pragmatic factors were also salient for many participants, with almost one-third describing finances as a key structural constraint—one that may be experienced more intensely by trans students than cis students (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017), perhaps because they were rejected by family or face limited support due to their gender identity (Goldberg, Kivalanka, & Black, 2019). And, for almost one-third of participants, their choice was to attend the program that accepted them or none at all, revealing the reality of “circumscribed choices” (Ramirez, 2013).

Location also emerged as an important consideration, impacting participants in nuanced and varied ways. Some had established community networks that they were hesitant to leave. Many participants prioritized state and community climates that were evidently trans-affirming, which is similar to how LGBTQ students are uniquely influenced by climate issues in their career decision-making (Budge et al., 2010). In this way, participants indicated, explicitly or implicitly, concerns about their safety and well-being as trans people—and in at least one case, these intersected with safety concerns related to their visibly queer interracial relationship. Indeed, their concerns about the physical and mental health hazards of living in less trans-affirming regions are born out in research showing that, for example, trans individuals are more likely to encounter health care discrimination in regions with more Republican voters (White Hughto, Murchison, Clark, Pachankis, & Reisner, 2016). Thus, in line with GMST, participants’ decisions were sometimes informed by awareness of the long-term effects of living in discriminatory contexts (Testa et al., 2015).

Beyond their emphasis on climate at the state and local level, many participants also centered university and program climate in their decision-making. Participants gauged program climate through visits, discussions with faculty, and location. Regarding university climate, trans students emphasized LGBTQ-friendliness and the presence of LGBTQ faculty. Thus, unlike BIPOC students, who evaluate racial representation as an index of

climate (Ramirez, 2013), trans students did not use the presence of other trans people as a climate indicator, seemingly because of the unlikelihood that their graduate program would have out trans faculty or students. Only a few cited university resources as influential in their decision; however, trans-inclusive resources may ultimately become more important than anticipated for some students, who may not fully explore their gender identity until graduate school (Goldberg et al., 2019).

Students made a variety of tradeoffs in choosing a program. Some emphasized the "long game," whereby they prioritized reputation over climate, hoping that, by foregoing short-term comfort, they could achieve long-term gain. Others settled on programs in states that were not trans-friendly, but which were trans-inclusive "enough." Those in fields like STEM or religious studies had few choices: their ability to prioritize trans-friendliness was constrained by the fact that their field was generally not trans-friendly (Yoder & Mattheis, 2016).

The participants for whom location (e.g., need or desire to stay rooted in a place) or cost was the most important considerations (or really, constraints) often settled on a program that was "good enough." Tradeoffs and compromises, which are often inevitable in educational and career decision-making (Gati, 1993), are of course more likely when valued aspects are in tension (e.g., rigor and program climate; cost and geographic climate). Ultimately, students who sacrifice climate for other desired aspects of a program (e.g., rigor) may experience increased minority stressors that present other challenges to their career development (e.g., discrimination may undermine career progression by impacting their mental health; Schmidt, Miles, & Welsh, 2011).

Limitations

This study has several key limitations. Participants were mostly White, and, thus, our findings are not generalizable to all trans students, and future work should focus on trans graduate students of color, as they are disproportionately subject to discrimination and may have unique experiences in navigating higher education in regard to their multiple marginalized identities (Duran, 2019), including in relation to negotiating levels of outness in various settings (Garvey et al., 2019). Also, although intended, our study focused only on trans graduate students who successfully entered graduate school. Their experiences likely differ from those who were unsuccessful in their applications.

Implications

College career counseling centers could be strengthened by considering the unique needs of their trans population. Prospective graduate students'

decision-making is impacted by career counselors, advisors, and others who assist prospective students in the application process, and support them in evaluating program features, including rigor and climate (Meza et al., 2018). Counselors and advisors should be aware of the significance of gender minority stress to trans students and the need to center climate issues to the extent possible in the application and decision-making phases. They can help trans students to evaluate universities' climates and consider how the benefits and drawbacks of each program align with their values and goals. Along with considering gender minority stress, it is crucial to keep in mind other marginalized identities that may impact student options and safety in diverse settings (Garvey et al., 2019). There is evidence that LGBTQ students may encounter identity tensions during graduate school, particularly in conservative settings, suggesting that trans students would benefit from guidance (e.g., by career counselors) to reflect on the role of their gender identity and other identities before choosing where to pursue graduate study (Perez, 2016).

It is also important to support trans students in deciding whether they want to be out in their application, either explicitly or in implicit ways through the use of their affirmed name and pronouns. Although there is no "right answer" to how students should approach outness in their applications, helping them reflect on the potential impacts of various decisions can aid them in arriving at a decision that fits with their values. It is important to recognize that not all students feel that they have a "choice" in whether to be out, because they see the risks of outness as too great. Encouraging outness may invalidate some students, especially those with multiple marginalized identities, by not acknowledging the risks they experience (Garvey et al., 2019).

Our findings hold implications for graduate programs in recruiting and supporting trans students. Programs should review their application materials and ensure that they do not rely on binary assumptions of gender, and allow applicants to define their gender in their own terms. Asking for pronouns and affirmed names signals the program's intention to address trans students respectfully. Allowing students to indicate their affirmed name and pronouns during interviews and orientation sessions also demonstrates an awareness of gender diversity and can reduce instances of misgendering (Maroney et al., 2019). It is also important for graduate programs to listen to trans students, and provide safe opportunities for them to share feedback.

Finally, our findings have implications for researchers, as they set the groundwork for many important future research questions. Future work, for example, can explore more explicitly the role of undergraduate mentors and role models in fostering trans students' interest and engagement in particular subjects or disciplines. Studies should also explore the ways in which trans students who hold multiple marginalized identities (e.g., first-generation college students, students of color, students with disabilities) describe the process of applying to and engaging in graduate school.

Conclusion

This is the first study to assess trans students' accounts of deciding on a graduate program. Participants considered general academic and pragmatic factors, as well as factors specific to their gender minority status, including safety and climate concerns—and sometimes faced tensions and tradeoffs. Administrators, educators, mentors, counselors, and others should use these findings to guide them in supporting trans people's graduate school decision-making processes, and to create more affirming higher education environments such that trans and other students can achieve their full potential.

Notes

1. Trans is used as an umbrella term that includes trans men, trans women, nonbinary people, and others with gender diverse identities.
2. Names are pseudonyms. When quoting participants, we describe their gender identities (e.g., agender, genderqueer, trans man). For brevity, we do not typically include the descriptors trans, nonbinary, and gender nonconforming, as these are umbrella categories that are typically rendered redundant by participants' more specific gender identities (e.g., trans man, gender fluid). For a thorough description of each participant's gender identities, see Table 1.
3. Two participants did not discuss their level of outness on their applications.

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