



Gender identity and pronouns among trans and nonbinary students entering college

Genny Beemyn & Abbie Goldberg

To cite this article: Genny Beemyn & Abbie Goldberg (23 Oct 2024): Gender identity and pronouns among trans and nonbinary students entering college, International Journal of LGBTQ+ Youth Studies, DOI: [10.1080/19361653.2024.2414339](https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2024.2414339)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2024.2414339>



Published online: 23 Oct 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Gender identity and pronouns among trans and nonbinary students entering college

Genny Beemyn^a and Abbie Goldberg^b

^aStonewall Center, University of Massachusetts-Amherst, Amherst, MA, USA; ^bDepartment of Psychology, Clark University, Worcester, MA, USA

ABSTRACT

Surveys indicate that a growing number of young people in the United States identify as trans and especially as nonbinary. Further, there is evidence that an increasing number of young adults use nongendered or nonbinary pronouns for themselves (e.g. 'they/them'). However, research to date has not captured the full range of ways that young adults label their gender identities, the specific pronouns they go by, and the intersections between their gender identities and pronoun choices. This study examines the gender identities and pronouns of the more than 2.4 million students who applied to college in Fall 2022 or Fall 2023 using the Common Application, the admissions platform utilized by more than 1,000 U.S. colleges and universities. We consider how students identified their gender in general and by legal sex, race, and citizenship status, and what pronouns they used by these same demographic factors. Our research finds major differences in students' gender identities and pronoun use by legal sex and citizenship status and fewer significant differences by race. We conclude by making recommendations for college administrators, faculty, and staff on how they can better understand gender diversity and support trans and nonbinary students.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 January

2024

Revised 10 August 2024

Accepted 3 October 2024

KEYWORDS

college students;
Common App; gender
identity; pronouns; trans
students

Introduction

Surveys indicate that a growing number of people in the United States, especially adolescents and young adults, identify as trans or nonbinary (Beemyn, 2022a; Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017). A recent Pew Research Center survey found that about 1.6% of U.S. adults are trans or nonbinary, but among adults under 30, the percentage increased to 5.1% (Brown, 2022). Similarly, the U.S. Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey in 2021-22 reported that 5.6% of members of Gen Z identified as trans or nonbinary, compared to 2.4% of Millennials, 1.5% of Gen Xers, and 1% of Baby Boomers (Twenge, 2023). Further, adolescents and young adults are much

more likely to use a nonbinary gender identity label for themselves (e.g. genderfluid, genderqueer, agender) than to identify solely as trans women or men (Beemyn, 2022a; James et al., 2016) and to go by nongendered or nonbinary pronouns (e.g. 'they/them,' 'xe/xem,' 'ze/zem') than to refer to themselves solely by gendered pronouns (i.e., 'he/him,' 'she/her'; Beemyn, 2022a). For example, the 2015 United States Transgender Survey (USTS), the largest study to date of trans people in the U.S., with close to 28,000 participants, found that nearly two-thirds (61%) of the respondents who indicated that they were nonbinary were 18-24 years old, whereas less than half (43%) of the trans men respondents and less than a quarter (24%) of the trans women respondents belonged to this age cohort (James et al., 2016). Among college students, greater than 6% of respondents to a 2023 national survey indicated that they were trans women, trans men, or nonbinary individuals, with nearly 89% of these students identifying as nonbinary (American College Health Association, 2023).

Not only are increasing numbers of young adults identifying as nonbinary, but a growing number of this age cohort (i.e., members of Gen Z) also report knowing others who go by nonbinary or nongendered pronouns. In a 2018 Pew Research Center survey, 32% of 18-29-year-olds indicated personally knowing someone who uses nongendered pronouns (Geiger & Graf, 2019). By 2021, this figure had increased to 46%, according to a more recent Pew Research Center survey (Minkin & Brown, 2021). By comparison, 29% of 30-49-year-olds, 18% of 50-64-year-olds, and 11% of individuals older than 64 years reported in the same survey that they personally know someone who goes by nongendered pronouns (Minkin & Brown, 2021).

But while studies have found that young adults in the U.S. are increasingly identifying as nonbinary and wanting to be known by nonbinary or nongendered pronouns, research has not sought to determine the extent to which young adults nationwide use different gender identity labels and pronouns for themselves, and how gender labels and pronouns may vary based on other aspects of their identities. Of particular interest are the gender identities and pronouns of individuals who are transitioning from high school to college, as knowledge of their identities and pronouns can help college administrators, faculty, and support staff better anticipate and respond to the needs of incoming first-year students. Seeking to fill this gap in the literature, we address the following research questions in our study:

1. What are the most common gender identities among trans and nonbinary young people across the U.S.?
2. How might the gender identities of trans and nonbinary young people differ by other aspects of their identities, particularly by legal sex

(which the Common App defines as the current sex designation on a person's birth certificate, driver's license, and/or U.S. state identification), race, and citizenship status?

3. What are the most common pronouns used by trans and nonbinary young people across the U.S.?
4. How might the pronouns used by trans and nonbinary young people differ by other aspects of their identities, particularly by legal sex, race, and citizenship status?

To answer these questions, we examine two years of data from the Common App, a unified college admissions platform utilized by more than 1,000 colleges and universities in the U.S. It is the largest instrument that asks young people to indicate their gender identities and pronouns. More than 1.22 million students filled out the application for Fall 2022 college admission—the first year that the Common App gave students the ability to indicate their gender and pronouns—and more than 1.17 million did so for Fall 2023 admission.¹

Gender identities of young adults: intersections with sex, race, and citizenship

Research indicates that the majority of adolescents and young adults who identify as nonbinary were assigned female at birth (AFAB; Goldberg et al., 2019; James et al., 2016; Twenge, 2023). For example, in a study involving nearly 3,500 trans people in the U.S. co-conducted by the first author, 87% of nonbinary participants were AFAB (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Another study by the first author that included only nonbinary college students likewise found that 87% had been assigned female (Beemyn, 2019). Moreover, this disparity is largely limited to young adults. Whereas the percentages of nonbinary individuals who were assigned female and male at birth are equal or nearly equal among Baby Boomers (0.9% for both), Gen Xers (1.2% for both), and Millennials (1.7% vs. 1.6%), nearly twice the percentage of nonbinary Gen Zers were assigned female as male (4.2% vs. 2.4%; Twenge, 2023).

Regarding race, state-level studies of U.S. adults have found that people of color are more likely than white people to identify as trans (Conron et al., 2012; Flores et al., 2016). Other state-level surveys have documented that trans and nonbinary adolescents and young adults are more likely to report being Latinx and less likely to report being white, compared to people in the U.S. overall (Herman et al., 2022), a trend that is consistent with prior work (Feldman et al., 2021; Meyer et al., 2017). Yet, because of the limited options offered for gender identity in most surveys, as well as the small number of individuals who indicate that they are trans in

many large-scale studies, there is little data available about how specific trans and nonbinary gender identities intersect with race (Flores et al., 2016). Scholarship on such intersections is critical, given that trans people of color experience additional societal stressors, including on college campuses, because of their multiple marginalized identities (James et al., 2016). Some research, for example, has found that trans and nonbinary students of color are more likely to feel excluded from LGBTQ+ student groups than white trans and nonbinary students (Day et al., 2022). Trans women of color may especially feel excluded from campus LGBTQ+ organizations, given that they report experiencing high levels of marginalization and victimization in the larger society (Forestiere, 2020; Jefferson et al., 2013).

Regarding citizenship, the USTS found in their sample of nearly 28,000 trans adults (of which 11% were current students) that 6% of respondents were not U.S. citizens by birth, compared to 16% in the general U.S. population (James et al., 2016). Among these participants, about 3% were naturalized citizens, 2% were documented residents (e.g. permanent residents, visa holders), and less than 1% were undocumented residents (James et al., 2016). In the context of college students, citizenship status is most relevant in the distinction between domestic and international students. LGBTQ+ international students, and trans and nonbinary international students specifically, may face unique challenges on U.S. college campuses, such as isolation and cultural barriers (e.g. language, cultural stigmas), that limit their support and inclusion in both international and LGBTQ+ communities (Valosik, 2015). No research has systematically examined the role of citizenship status among trans and nonbinary U.S. college students (i.e., international vs. domestic students) and how citizenship may intersect with specific trans and nonbinary identities or the likelihood of identifying as trans or nonbinary. The need for such studies is demonstrated by the reality that some international students face greater difficulties identifying as trans or nonbinary prior to entering a U.S. college, compared to domestic students, because they hail from a country or cultural context that has harsher anti-trans attitudes than some parts of the U.S. (Dicklitch-Nelson & Rahman, 2022; Williamson, 2023).

Pronoun use among trans young adults

An increasing number of people, especially young people, are using pronouns different from the ones they were assigned at birth (Baron, 2020; Marcus, 2021); yet, research has not examined how the use of these pronouns corresponds with different gender identities and other demographic characteristics. On the USTS, 84% of respondents reported that they had changed their pronouns from those stereotypically associated with their assigned sex (James et al., 2016). The most widely used pronouns were ‘she/her’ (37%), ‘he/him’

(36%), and 'they/them' (29%). Six percent used neopronouns (i.e., pronouns other than 'he,' 'she,' and 'they') and 4% percent used 'no pronouns' (i.e., they ask people to refer to them only by their names). However, the study did not consider pronouns by gender identity or other aspects of identity.

Research is increasingly exploring pronoun use among trans and non-binary adolescents and young adults, including among college students (Beemyn, 2022a; Brown et al., 2020; Flint et al., 2023). This work has revealed the critical role of the internet, specifically social media, in enabling trans and nonbinary adolescents and young adults to become part of supportive communities, learn about the plethora of pronoun options, and decide on which of these pronouns they want to use for themselves or coin their own (Goldberg & Kivalanka, 2018; Selkie et al., 2020). Not surprisingly, research also finds that many nonbinary young adults choose to go by nonbinary or nongendered pronouns (e.g. 'they/them'; Beemyn, 2019; Wentling, 2015). Our work breaks new ground by being the first large-scale quantitative study to consider pronoun use among trans and nonbinary young people.

Sample

The data used for this study come from the last two admissions cycles of the Common App. The application for Fall 2022 college admission (hereafter referred to as the 2022 Common App) was used by 978 colleges and universities and completed by 1,222,469 students. Given the choice of only female or male for their legal sex, 56% indicated female and 44% male. For race, 46% reported that they were white, 41% people of color, 10% international students (i.e., citizens of a non-U.S. country), and 3% did not provide a response. Among students of color, 16% were Latinx, 11% Black or African American, 9% Asian, 5% biracial or multiracial, 0.2% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander.

The application for Fall 2023 college admission (hereafter referred to as the 2023 Common App) was used by 1,029 colleges and universities and completed by 1,178,651 students residing in the U.S. As in 2022, legal sex broke down as 56% female and 44% male. Because the 2023 data that we used included only students in the U.S., the percentage of international students was significantly lower than in 2022 (1% vs. 10%), which meant that the percentages were slightly higher for other racial groups (the Common App includes international students as a racial/ethnic category). The sample was 49% white, 18% Latinx, 13% Black or African American, 10% Asian, 5% biracial or multiracial, 0.3% American Indian or Alaska Native, and 0.1% Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander. As in 2022, about 3% did not answer the question.

Limiting the 2023 data to students currently living in the U.S. gave us a more defined sample for considering how citizenship status intersected with students' gender identities and pronouns. Overall, 93% of the students were U.S. citizens. Much smaller percentages were U.S. dual citizens (3%), U.S. permanent residents (2%), and nonpermanent residents (0.7%).

Positionality and method

Both authors have been researching and writing about the lives of trans and nonbinary youth for decades. The first author has been the director of LGBTQ+ campus centers for more than twenty years and was one of the first college administrators to come out as nonbinary. Recognizing their ignorance of race and racism as a white person, they focused much of their academic training around learning about the experiences of people of color. The second author has been teaching about and doing research on LGBTQ+ families and communities for over twenty years. Her research with trans undergraduate and graduate students first began as a partnership with several trans students in the context of a participatory action research project. As a cis woman, she has sought collaborative relationships with gender-diverse research partners and sought to ensure that research endeavor with trans communities has an applied component.

The first author had advocated for the Common App to add optional questions asking gender identity and sexual orientation for more than a decade, including organizing an open letter to the Common App in 2015 along with Campus Pride that was supported by 25 national LGBTQ+, education, and youth advocacy organizations (Campus Pride, 2015), and working with a then competitor to the Common App to have them add a question asking gender in 2016 (Universal College Application, 2016). In response, the Common App added a text box to its question on sex in 2016 so that students could explain their gender, but it did not add a specific gender question. However, in 2020, the organization launched a data warehouse that helped them analyze up-to-date application activity and amplify trends as they emerged. The data warehouse, combined with new initiatives, led them to add a question asking gender, as well as questions on chosen name and pronouns, and they included the first author among those it consulted on the wording for the questions. Having established a good working relationship with the Common App, the first author approached them about analyzing their data on gender identity and pronouns across different demographic variables for the first admissions cycle in which these questions were included. The first author contracted with the Common App to review the data for one year; after a positive outcome, the agreement was extended for three more years.

Data analysis

For students who applied to college for Fall 2022, the first author received de-identified information from the Common App on the students' gender identity, pronouns, legal sex, race, and first-generation status. The information on the students who applied to college for Fall 2023 also included their citizenship status, U.S. armed forces status, state of residence, parents' marital status, whether they have any children of their own, cumulative GPA, and type of high school attended (data analyses for all of the variables can be found on the first author's website: <https://www.gennyb.com/research>). The Common App's question on gender identity gives students the options of identifying as female, male, nonbinary, or adding another gender, with a fill-in box provided. For pronouns, students could select from 'he/him,' 'she/her,' 'they/them,' or indicate another pronoun set in the fill-in box provided. Students were able to choose more than one response by making multiple selections, but the questions did not explicitly state that this was an option, so, in the case of pronouns, thousands of students wrote-in a response(s) that was among the choices offered (e.g. a student marking their pronouns as 'she/her' and writing-in 'they/them,' instead of marking both 'she/her' and 'they/them'). Such responses were recoded accordingly (e.g. 'she/they'). Because of the wide variety of write-in answers and differences in spelling (including typos), coding was done by hand.

In coding the write-in and multiple responses to the gender identity question, we chose not to follow the common research practice of dividing non-cis students into binary (i.e., trans women and men) and nonbinary students. As scholars who have written extensively on the experiences of nonbinary college students and the need to dismantle gender binaries (Beemyn, 2019, 2023; Goldberg et al., 2019; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018), we did not want to create a false binary between trans women/men and nonbinary students by classifying all individuals who used a nonbinary identity label as 'nonbinary,' even if they also identified as women/men. This seemed to us to be erasing part of these students' responses, if not their lives. Instead, we have placed students who indicated one or more nonbinary identities and a female/woman or male/man gender identity into a separate category, 'nonbinary women/men students.'

Because the Common App does not ask a question on whether students identify as trans, we could only estimate the number of trans women and men, as well as the number of cis women and men, by comparing students' gender responses to their reported legal sex (unless they used the write-in option to indicate that they were trans women or trans men). Trans women were coded as students who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender identity as female, and trans men were coded as

the reverse. But this method cannot account for students who have changed their legal sex to reflect their gender identity by changing the gender marker on their legal documents or who simply stated that their legal sex reflects their gender identity, even if their legal records indicate otherwise. Thus, our research undoubtedly underestimates the number of trans women and men, and overestimates the number of cis women and men, even without considering that some students likely indicated that their gender identity was the same as their legal sex because they did not feel comfortable or safe identifying as trans on a college admissions form.

For our data analysis, we created seven categories: trans women, trans men, nonbinary individuals, nonbinary women, nonbinary men, cis women, and cis men by coding and removing nonresponses, unclear and inappropriate responses, and nonspecific trans responses (e.g. individuals who identified just as trans or transgender). We then used these categories to do cross-analyses of legal sex, race, citizenship status, and pronouns.

Findings

Part I: gender identity

Students' overall gender responses

On the 2023 Common App, 2.7% (more than 31,600 students) identified as trans or nonbinary (Table 1), and 82.5% of these students indicated using at least one nonbinary identity label to describe their gender (Figure 1). On the 2022 Common App, 2.2% (more than 26,300 students) identified as trans or nonbinary, and 83.3% of these students reported using a nonbinary label.

Table 1. Self-identified trans and nonbinary students on the Common App.

	<i>n</i> , 2023	%, 2023	%, 2022
Trans men students*	3,806	0.32%	0.23%
Trans women students**	1,703	0.14%	0.13%
Nonbinary students [#]	19,677	1.67%	1.77%
Nonbinary women students ^{##}	4,484	0.38%	@@
Nonbinary men students ^{##}	1,798	0.15%	@@
Nonspecific trans students [@]	169	0.01%	0.02%
Total	31,637	2.68%	2.15%

*Trans men students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as female and their gender identity as male or who wrote in that they were trans male/men.

**Trans women students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender identity as female or who wrote in that they were trans female/women.

[#]Nonbinary students were individuals who indicated one or more nonbinary identities (e.g. genderfluid, genderqueer, agender, bigender, pangender, demigirl, demiboy, transmasculine, transfeminine, gender nonconforming).

^{##}Nonbinary women students were individuals who indicated one or more nonbinary identities and a female/woman identity (e.g. genderfluid female, genderqueer woman) and nonbinary men students were individuals who indicated one or more nonbinary identities and a male/man identity (e.g. genderqueer trans male, nonbinary male).

[@]Nonspecific trans students were individuals who indicated that they are trans, transgender, or another non-cis identity that could not be categorized as trans women, trans men, nonbinary, or nonbinary women/men.

^{@@}All students who indicated at least one nonbinary identity were classified as nonbinary individuals in 2022.

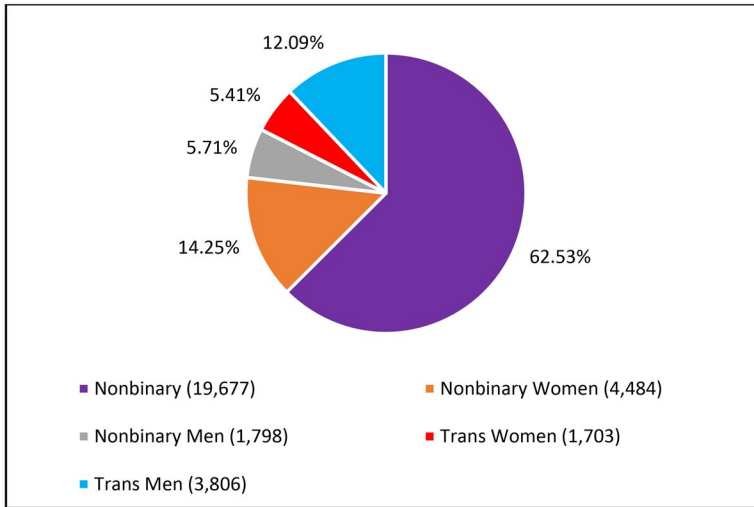


Figure 1. Self-identified trans men, trans women, nonbinary, nonbinary women, and nonbinary men students on the 2023 Common App ($n=31,468^*$).

*This figure does not include students who did not specify how they identified as trans.

Table 2. The most common trans and nonbinary identities written in on the Common App, 2023 and 2022.

2023 ($n=3,775$)	2022 ($n=3,521$)
Genderfluid (1,671): 44.26%	Genderfluid (1,462): 41.52%
Genderqueer (430): 11.39%	Genderqueer (344): 9.77%
Agender (384): 10.17%	Trans man/male (315): 8.95%
Trans man/male (217): 5.75%	Agender (296): 8.41%
Demigirl (168): 4.45%	Demigirl (180): 5.11%
Questioning (115): 3.05%	Questioning (124): 3.52%
Demiboy (80): 2.12%	Trans woman/female (89): 2.53%
Trans masculine (80): 2.12%	Gender nonconforming (72): 2.04%
Gender nonconforming (80): 2.12%	Trans masculine (71): 2.02%
Bigender (79): 2.09%	Demiboy (49): 1.39%
Trans woman/female (72): 1.91%	Unlabeled (39): 1.11%
Unlabeled (65): 1.72%	Bigender (38): 1.08%

On the 2023 Common App, 3,775 students wrote in a trans or nonbinary gender by using the ‘add another gender’ option by itself or in combination with one or more of the gender choices provided. These students offered more than 100 different genders; the most frequent responses were genderfluid (44.3%), genderqueer (11.4%), agender (10.2%), trans man (5.8%), and demigirl (4.5%). On the 2022 Common App, the top two responses were likewise genderfluid and genderqueer, and the next 10 responses were also the same as in 2023, but in a somewhat different order (Table 2).

Despite the many different gender labels that the nonbinary students used for themselves, some did not have a ready name for their gender identity. Instead, they combined various terms to describe how they view their gender, such as a person who referred to themselves as a ‘genderqueer

trans woman,’ and another person whose gender ‘fluctuates between female and agender.’ A few students just provided what was seemingly their first names—an indication that they did not have a good label or did not want to label their gender identities. They were simply themselves.

Gender identity by legal sex, race, and citizenship status

Most of the students who indicated being trans or nonbinary on the Common App identified as nonbinary or nonbinary women/men. Additionally, most of these students were assigned female at birth. Overall, about 56% of the students on both the 2022 and 2023 Common App reported that their legal sex was female, but, among the students who indicated using a nonbinary gender identity label, it was 80% and 79%, respectively.²

In considering the race/international status of the students who completed the 2023 Common App, the international students (i.e., citizens of non-U.S. countries residing in the U.S., whom the Common App includes under race/ethnicity) identified as cis to a greater degree than did students from different racial groups (Table 3). Among domestic U.S. students, the trans women and men were more likely to be white and less likely to be Asian or Black/African American in comparison to the presumably cis women and men and the individuals who indicated a nonbinary gender identifier.

Given that comparatively fewer trans and nonbinary students were Asian or Black/African American, students from these races were less likely than students overall to state that they were trans or nonbinary (2.0% and 1.9%, respectively, vs. 2.7%; Table 4). At the same time, the students who identified as two or more races (4.1%), American Indian or Alaska Native (2.9%), Latinx (2.8%), or white (3.0%) were more likely than students overall to describe themselves as trans or nonbinary.

Table 3. Race and international status indicated on the Common App by gender identity, 2023 ($n = 1,141,780^*$).

	Presum. Cis Women	Presum. Cis Men	Trans Women	Trans Men	NB Indiv.	NB Women	NB Men
Asian	9.86%	11.33%	5.65%	5.71%	7.55%	8.80%	8.58%
Black or African American	14.39%	12.67%	9.35%	7.68%	9.59%	11.35%	8.75%
International [#]	0.88%	1.11%	0.42%	0.37%	0.46%	0.41%	0.40%
Latinx	19.97%	17.46%	15.48%	17.47%	20.08%	19.77%	20.01%
Two or More Races	5.24%	4.95%	6.07%	7.44%	7.44%	9.57%	8.70%
White	49.22%	52.06%	62.62%	60.96%	54.53%	49.61%	53.10%

^{*}This figure excludes students who did not indicate a gender and/or a race, students who did not specify how they identified as trans, and students who provided unclear or inappropriate responses to the gender question. Data about American Indian/Alaska Native students and Hawaiʻian or Other Pacific Islander students are not displayed here because of very small sample sizes.

[#]The Common App includes international students (i.e., citizens of non-U.S. countries residing in the U.S.) as a separate race/ethnicity, even though these students may identify as other races/ethnicities.

Students of color, in general, were slightly less likely than white students to identify as trans or nonbinary on the Common App in 2022 (2.2% vs. 2.4%) and 2023 (2.5% vs. 3.0%), but were about as likely as students overall because, as stated above, far fewer international students indicated being trans or nonbinary (1.0% in 2022 and 1.3% in 2023) than domestic U.S. students. Looking at the 2023 Common App data by the citizenship status of the students currently residing in the U.S. shows that legally permanent U.S. resident and nonpermanent resident students were also less likely to identify as trans women and men, nonbinary individuals, and nonbinary women/men than as presumably cis women and men in comparison to U.S. citizen and U.S. dual citizen students (Table 5).

Part II: pronouns

Students' overall pronoun responses

Beginning with the 2021-2022 college admission cycle, students have been able to share their pronouns on the Common App, indicating if they go by 'he/him,' 'she/her,' 'they/them,' and/or another pronoun set, which they could specify through a fill-in box. In 2022, 3.2% of the students (36,841 individuals) who disclosed their pronouns reported that they used 'they/

Table 4. Percent of U.S. students from different racial groups and international students identifying as trans or nonbinary on the Common App, 2023 and 2022.

	2023	2022
Overall	2.68%	2.15%
Two or more races	4.08%	3.25%
American Indian or Alaska Native	2.87%	3.00%
Latinx	2.81%	2.53%
Asian	1.95%	1.56%
Black or African American	1.92%	1.76%
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	1.65%	2.15%
All people of color	2.51%	2.18%
White	2.96%	2.42%
International	1.25%	1.04%

Table 5. Citizenship status indicated on the Common App by gender identity, 2023 ($n = 1,164,321^*$).

	Presum. Cis Women	Presum. Cis Men	Trans Women	Trans Men	NB Indiv.	NB Women	NB Men
U.S. Citizen	93.17%	92.76%	93.66%	95.35%	94.38%	94.18%	92.83%
U.S. Dual Citizen	3.09%	3.44%	3.88%	2.81%	3.86%	3.81%	5.12%
U.S. Permanent Res.	2.15%	2.10%	1.56%	1.05%	0.98%	1.36%	1.39%
DACA/Undoc. & U.S. Refugee/ Asylee	0.72%	0.61%	0.46%	0.42%	0.32%	0.25%	0.28%
Non-U.S. Citizen	0.86%	1.09%	0.41%	0.37%	0.45%	0.40%	0.39%

*This figure excludes students who provided unclear or inappropriate responses or who did not specify their gender or how they identified as trans.

them' pronouns, another pronoun set, or multiple sets of pronouns—in other words, they referred to themselves using pronouns apart from just 'she/her' or 'he/him.' In 2023, this figure was 3.8% (42,731 individuals), a nearly 19% increase from the previous year.

Pronouns by legal sex and gender identity

With 3.8% of the students on the 2023 application indicating that they used pronouns beyond or other than 'she/her' and 'he/him,' but only 2.2% identifying as nonbinary or nonbinary women/men, this means that approximately 1.6% of students, or about 18,000 individuals, identified as female or male but did not or did not only go by 'she/her' or 'he/him,' respectively. The presumably cis women students (i.e., the individuals who were legally female and identified as female) were more than twice as likely to use pronouns beyond or other than 'she/her' as the presumably cis men students (i.e., the individuals who were legally male and identified as male) were to use pronouns beyond or other than 'he/him' (2.1% vs. 0.8%).

While some presumably cis students indicated using nonbinary or non-gendered pronouns for themselves, some of the trans women and men students reported using the gendered pronouns typically associated with their legal sex, rather than their gender identity. Among the trans women (i.e., individuals who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender as female), 8.3% went only by 'he/him' pronouns, and among the trans men (i.e., individuals who indicated their legal sex as female and their gender as male), 4.2% went only by 'she/her' pronouns (in 2022, these figures were 21.7% and 6.2%, respectively). It could be that these students are not out publicly, are seeking to challenge assumptions around pronouns and gender, or do not want to change their pronouns or try to get others to do so.

Along with some trans women and men students continuing to use the pronouns assigned to them at birth, a sizable percentage of both groups (15.6% of trans women and 14.8% of trans men) referred to themselves with pronouns besides 'she/her' and 'he/him,' respectively. The most common additional set of pronouns for both groups was 'they/them,' which was used by more than 13% of each. This finding demonstrates that there is not a strict dichotomy between individuals who identify as trans women/men and individuals who identify as nonbinary and suggests that trans female and male identities should not be referred to as 'binary genders.'

Examining the pronouns of the students who chose a nonbinary identity label for themselves further shows that creating a binary-nonbinary label overlooks the complexity of how young trans and nonbinary people describe their gender. On the 2023 Common App, 1.7% of students reported using only nonbinary gender identifiers for themselves and 0.5%

indicated using both nonbinary and women/men identifiers. While there were no major differences between nonbinary and nonbinary women/men students in terms of legal sex (more than three-fourths of each group indicated being legally female), race, and citizenship status, there were significant differences by pronoun use. The students who used only nonbinary gender identity labels for themselves were far more likely than the students who identified as both nonbinary and women/men to exclusively go by 'they/them' pronouns (45.2% vs. 3.7%). At the same time, a majority (55.7%) of the nonbinary women/men students went by 'she/they' (i.e., both 'she/her' and 'they/them'), compared to 16% for the nonbinary students (see Figure 2 for a complete pronoun breakdown for these groups). Many of the nonbinary women students used 'she/her' as one of their pronoun sets, seemingly because they continued to identify at different times and/or in different settings as partly female.

Pronouns by race and citizenship status

As with all students who referred to themselves with a nonbinary gender identity label on the Common App, the nonbinary students in each racial group most commonly went only by 'they/them' and a majority of the nonbinary women/men students in each racial group went by 'she/they' (Tables 6 and 7). Where a critical difference did arise was with international students. Nonbinary international students were less likely to use 'they/them,' and nonbinary women/men international students were less

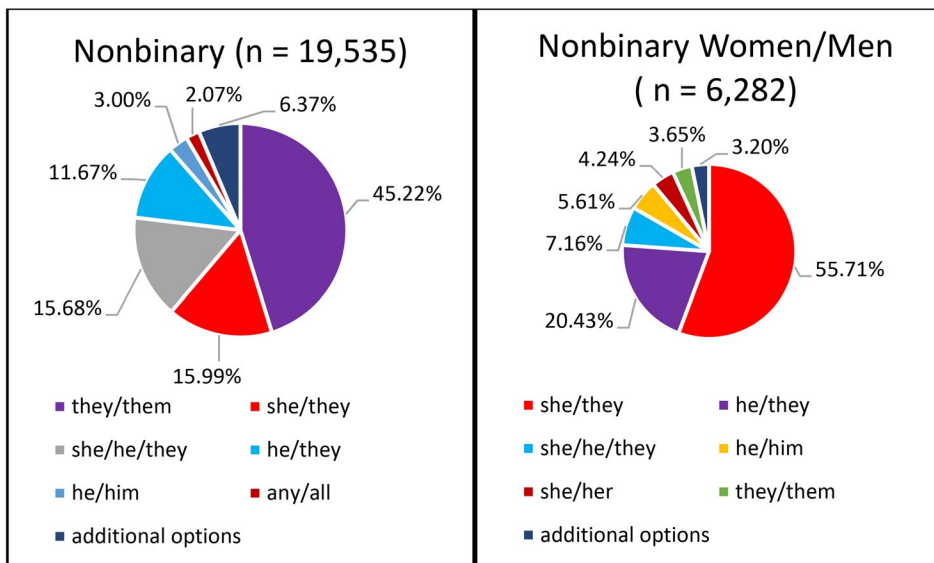


Figure 2. Pronoun responses among nonbinary and nonbinary women/men students on the Common App, 2023*.

*These figure were adjusted to remove inappropriate responses and nonresponses.

Table 6. Pronouns indicated by nonbinary students of different races and by nonbinary international students on the Common App, 2023 ($n=19,249^*$).

	All	Asian	Black	Latinx	Two + Races	White	Inter.
They/them	45.25%	40.76%	39.13%	42.17%	40.95%	48.80%	34.09%
She/he/they	15.72%	18.69%	15.18%	18.13%	19.36%	14.03%	15.91%
She/they	16.03%	15.99%	18.59%	17.20%	15.51%	15.21%	15.91%
He/they	11.60%	10.73%	11.00%	11.05%	12.65%	11.89%	14.77%
Any or all	2.05%	3.25%	1.68%	2.25%	1.89%	1.91%	1.14%
He/him	2.97%	3.39%	4.72%	2.89%	2.66%	2.58%	10.23%
She/her	1.89%	2.08%	4.99%	2.07%	1.33%	1.31%	4.55%
He/she	1.83%	2.56%	2.11%	2.07%	2.38%	1.52%	2.27%
Other pronouns	2.46%	2.42%	2.17%	1.97%	3.07%	2.62%	1.14%

*This figure includes American Indian/Alaska Native students and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students (these categories are not displayed here because of small sample sizes). It excludes nonbinary students who did not indicate their race, pronouns, or both.

Table 7. Pronouns indicated by nonbinary women/men students of different races and by nonbinary women/men international students on the Common App, 2023 ($n=6,162^*$).

	All	Asian	Black	Latinx	Two + Races	White	Inter.
She/they	55.89%	52.41%	56.90%	55.36%	56.70%	56.37%	41.67%
He/they	20.33%	17.96%	14.72%	21.54%	17.74%	21.99%	12.50%
She/he/they	7.16%	8.15%	9.05%	7.37%	9.04%	6.21%	4.17%
He/him	5.53%	7.59%	5.67%	4.42%	6.43%	5.38%	4.17%
She/her	4.24%	6.67%	6.60%	3.52%	2.96%	3.55%	29.17%
They/them	3.62%	3.70%	3.53%	4.91%	3.30%	3.20%	4.17%
Other pronouns	3.29%	3.53%	3.52%	2.87%	3.83%	3.29%	4.17%

*This figure includes American Indian/Alaska Native students and Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students (these categories are not displayed here because of small sample sizes). It excludes nonbinary women/men students who did not indicate their race, pronouns, or both.

likely to use ‘she/they,’ than domestic U.S. students of all racial groups. Instead, they were more likely to go only by ‘he/him’ and ‘she/her,’ respectively (Tables 6 and 7).

Among the trans women and men students, the most pronounced difference related to pronouns and race was that the Black trans women were less likely to go by ‘she/her’ and more likely to go by ‘he/him’ than trans women of other races (Table 8), which could indicate that fewer were out publicly and had begun to transition. The Black trans men students were also more likely to continue to use the pronouns assigned to them at birth than trans men of other racial groups, but to a lesser degree than the Black trans women students (Table 9).

Just as international students and legally permanent U.S. resident and nonpermanent resident students were less likely to identify as trans and nonbinary than as presumably cis women and men in comparison to U.S. citizen and U.S. dual citizen students, these groups were also less likely to use nonbinary or nongendered pronouns for themselves, even when they identified as nonbinary (Table 10). It is noteworthy that, of the 20 students who went only by neopronouns, all were U.S. citizens (18) or dual citizens (2). Likewise, the 9 students who went only by ‘it/its’ and all but one of the 8 students who did not use pronouns at all for themselves were U.S. citizens.

Table 8. Pronouns indicated by trans women students of different races on the Common App, 2023 ($n = 1,662^*$).

	All	Asian	Black	Latinx	Two + Races	White
She/her	75.63%	77.17%	64.29%	74.22%	72.28%	77.72%
She/they	13.72%	10.87%	9.74%	13.28%	23.76%	13.86%
He/him	8.12%	8.70%	24.03%	9.38%	3.96%	5.74%
Other pronouns	2.52%	3.27%	1.95%	3.12%	–	2.67%

*This figure includes American Indian/Alaska Native students, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students, and international students (these categories are not displayed here because of small sample sizes). It excludes trans women students who did not indicate their race, pronouns, or both.

Table 9. Pronouns indicated by trans men students of different races on the Common App, 2023 ($n = 3,725^*$).

	All	Asian	Black	Latinx	Two + Races	White
He/him	80.51%	77.83%	72.89%	80.25%	78.85%	81.97%
He/they	13.48%	10.85%	12.32%	11.27%	15.77%	14.29%
She/her	4.24%	8.02%	13.03%	5.56%	3.23%	2.51%
Other pronouns	1.78%	3.29%	1.76%	2.93%	2.15%	1.22%

*This figure includes American Indian/Alaska Native students, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander students, and international students (these categories are not displayed here because of small sample sizes). It excludes trans men students who did not indicate their race, pronouns, or both.

Table 10. Pronouns of nonbinary students by citizenship status on the Common App, 2023 ($n = 18,347^*$).

	U.S. Citizen	U.S. Dual Citizen	U.S. Perm. Resident	Citizen of Non-U.S. Country	Other Groups**
They/them	45.31%	46.56%	40.10%	34.09%	33.33%
She/they	16.01%	16.14%	13.54%	15.91%	17.46%
She/he/they	15.69%	14.95%	16.67%	15.91%	20.63%
He/they	11.67%	11.64%	9.90%	14.77%	12.70%
He/him	2.91%	3.44%	6.77%	10.23%	3.17%
Any or all	2.09%	2.25%	3.13%	1.14%	1.59%
She/her	1.84%	1.19%	5.21%	4.55%	4.76%
He/she	1.78%	2.12%	2.60%	2.27%	6.35%
Other pronouns	2.71%	1.72%	2.08%	1.14%	–

*These figure were adjusted to remove inappropriate responses and nonresponses.

**This category includes students who are undocumented, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), Deferred Enforced Departure (DED) or Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients, U.S. refugees, and U.S. asylees.

Discussion

Gender identity

Using data from the Common App, this study is the first to quantify the extent to which young people in the U.S. are using different gender labels to describe themselves and, in particular, to document the high percentage of students identifying as genderfluid today (indicated by 44% of trans and nonbinary students on the 2023 Common App). The rise of ‘genderfluid’ is a shift from the 2000s and early 2010s, when ‘genderqueer’ was by far the most common identity used by nonbinary people (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Factor & Rothblum, 2008; Harrison et al., 2012; Kuper et al., 2012). Like ‘genderqueer,’ ‘genderfluid’ provides a way for nonbinary

individuals to attach a name to their gender without having to feel that they are pinned down to a fixed label or forced into a narrowly defined gender box. But unlike ‘genderqueer,’ ‘genderfluid’ emphasizes the centrality of change in gender identity—that individuals may see themselves differently at different times and in different contexts (Galupo et al., 2017)—and, as a result, the term better captures how many young people today see their gender.

At the same time, the tremendous number of gender identities given by students on the Common App is reflective of how the vocabulary to describe gender has grown substantially in the 2010s and 2020s, as young people develop new terms to express the nuances of their gender and are able to share these identities widely through social media, gaming platforms, and other online communities. For example, several students identified as genderfae (i.e., individuals whose gender is fluid between female and nonbinary genders) or as genderfaun (i.e., individuals whose gender is fluid between male and nonbinary genders). Although gender labels like genderfae and genderfaun were used by only a few of the students, the terms are nevertheless extremely valuable, as having a name for one’s gender offers validation for that identity and provides a sense of community, enabling a person to feel a sense of gender euphoria (as opposed to gender dysphoria) and recognize that they are not alone in their gender experience (Austin et al., 2022; Beischel et al., 2022). Awareness of such terms is important for researchers, as it enables them to better ask about and comprehend the varied gender identities of their study participants.

Our finding that most students who use a nonbinary gender identity label for themselves have ‘female’ as their legal sex (79% on the 2023 Common App) is in keeping with previous research involving nonbinary people (Beemyn, 2019; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Budge et al., 2020). For example, in a study of 380 nonbinary college students, 83% were AFAB and presumably legally female (Budge et al., 2020). In the U.S. Transgender Survey (James et al., 2016), 35% of the sample described themselves as nonbinary, 80% of whom were assigned female at birth and presumably legally female.

The fact that far fewer legally male than legally female individuals identified as nonbinary or nonbinary women/men on the Common App is consistent with many prior studies (e.g. Beemyn, 2019; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Budge et al., 2020; James et al., 2016) and likely reflects the narrower gender roles available to assigned male at birth (AMAB) and legally male individuals in the dominant society because of ‘hegemonic masculinity,’ the legitimizing of men being inherently different from and superior to women (Connell, 1987). Someone who is expected to be male often encounters harassment and violence, particularly from men, if they act or present in any way that can be read as feminine, whereas AFAB

individuals have some cultural space growing up to be gender nonconforming. AFAB individuals can be considered ‘tomboys,’ even if they do not embrace that label for themselves, and receive affirmation from the patriarchal society for behaving in a manner that is perceived as emulating men (Craig & LaCroix, 2011). Although AFAB individuals are often pressured to act more feminine during adolescence, there remains greater latitude for them to present in more traditionally masculine ways than for AMAB individuals to express themselves in more traditionally feminine ways (Pascoe, 2011).

The oppression experienced by individuals assigned male at birth who violate masculine gender norms and relinquish male privilege, along with transmisogyny (that is, the intersections of trans hatred and misogyny; Serano, 2007), also keep many trans women in the closet. The risks of experiencing marginalization, discrimination, and violence have been found to be greater for out trans women than for other members of the trans community (Jackson et al., 2022). The additional effects of racism, which has given rise to the term ‘transmisogynoir,’ results in Black trans women often experiencing even higher rates of oppression than other trans women (Preston, 2020). Thus, many trans women, especially Black trans women, may be less open about their gender identities; in our research, the trans women students were seemingly half as likely to be out as the trans men students, and Black trans women were seemingly even less likely to be out. Similarly, other studies (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Tatum et al., 2020) have found that trans women, on average, begin transitioning later than trans men.

In terms of race, the greater percentage of out biracial/multiracial and Latinx individuals on the 2023 Common App (4.1% and 2.8%, respectively) compared to Asian and Black/African American individuals (2.0% and 1.9%, respectively) was also reflected on the USTS (James et al., 2016), where biracial/multiracial and Latinx/Hispanic individuals constituted a significantly higher percentage of the trans people who took the survey than Asian and Black/African American individuals (5.5% and 5.3% vs. 2.6% and 2.9%, respectively). Similarly, biracial/multiracial young people were highly overrepresented (23%) and Black young people were highly underrepresented (5%) among the more than 28,000 LGBTQ 13-24-year-olds (more than half of whom were trans or nonbinary) who completed a 2022 U.S. mental health survey (Trevor Project, 2023). In contrast, using data from a 2014 adult health survey, the Williams Institute (Flores et al., 2016) estimated that Black/African American people, as well as Latinx/Hispanic people and other people of color, were more likely to identify as ‘transgender’ (‘nonbinary’ was not an option) nationally than white people.

Our work is the first study of college students to examine the intersections of gender identity and pronouns by citizenship status, which is

especially important given the unique challenges that trans international students face on college campuses (Valosik, 2015). We found that international students residing in the U.S. and nonpermanent U.S. resident students were less likely than U.S. citizen, dual citizen, and permanent resident students to identify as trans, nonbinary, or nonbinary women/men. Several factors may account for the significantly lower percentage of out trans and nonbinary international students. Because of language and cultural differences, some international students may have found that the gender identity question did not make sense, and international students not completely fluent in English would presumably fill out the Common App with a family member and would not come out on the application if they were not out to their families. Trans and nonbinary international students who did complete the form by themselves may still not indicate their gender identity if they are not out to their families because they may not fully understand the application process and be concerned that their response would get back to them. Such challenges are likely even greater for trans and nonbinary international students who reside outside of the U.S.

The differences we found by citizenship status have implications for how future studies involving gender identity should address the inclusion of trans and nonbinary international students. To gain more accurate and meaningful results, researchers must take steps to ensure that all participants can understand the questions being asked of them, as well as clearly explain privacy protections to participants before they complete a survey or consent to an interview that will include material related to their gender identity.

Pronouns

One of the main takeaways from the Common App pronoun data is the ubiquitous use of ‘they/them’ among the students who used a nonbinary gender identity label for themselves. Adding together the nonbinary and nonbinary women/men students who went by ‘they/them’ only and those who used ‘they/them’ as one of their pronoun sets, nearly 92% of the students who went by more than just ‘she/her’ or ‘he/him’ on the Common App in 2023 asked to be referred to by ‘they/them’ at least some of the time (it was nearly 97% in 2022). The widespread usage of ‘they/them’ may be because many nonbinary students recognize the difficulty of getting the dominant society to use pronouns that may not be well-known even in trans communities. Indeed, just 22 students in 2023 and 19 in 2022 reported going only by neopronouns or new pronouns,³ like ‘xe/xem,’ ‘ey/em,’ and ‘ze/zir.’

Another main takeaway—somewhat contrary to the first—is the extent to which the students who went by a nonbinary gender identity label

indicated using many different pronouns. Even though few went just by neopronouns, 58% used multiple sets of pronouns for themselves, some of which included neopronouns. The nonbinary and nonbinary women/men students provided about 50 different neopronouns. About a third of these neopronouns were nounself pronouns—that is, pronouns created from the name of an object, figure, animal, or concept which reflects something about the person or their gender. Unlike many other neopronouns, nounself pronouns are often playful and their use is mostly limited to social media, fandom websites, anime, and gaming platforms (Marcus, 2021). The most popular nounself pronouns reported by the students by far were ‘fae/faer’ (from ‘fairy’), with 29 nonbinary and nonbinary women/men students using them. The other nounself pronouns that were indicated by more than one student were ‘moon/moonself,’ ‘star/star’s,’ ‘rain/rainself,’ and ‘bun/buns’ (from ‘bunny’). Again, awareness of such terms will aid researchers in anticipating and recognizing the full diversity of pronoun possibilities among adolescents and young adults.

A small but not insignificant percentage (1.6%) of the presumably cis students also used nonbinary or nongendered pronouns for themselves. Some of these students may be exploring their gender identity and trying out new pronouns before identifying as trans or nonbinary. Others may be cis but use nonbinary pronouns, along with the pronouns assigned to them at birth, in solidarity with trans people or to challenge the gender binary. Another possibility is that some of the presumably cis women and men students may actually be trans women and men, respectively, who use both binary and nonbinary pronouns for themselves. These various possible explanations point to the complexities and difficulties of asking questions about ‘sex’ and ‘gender’ on forms and surveys (Garvey et al., 2019; Suen et al., 2020; Woodford et al., 2019). To better address these issues, future research should not only ask what pronouns students use, but also why they chose their particular pronouns and what these pronouns mean to them.

In terms of pronouns and race, our finding that the Black trans women students were less likely to go by ‘she/her’ and much more likely to go by ‘he/him’ than trans women students of other races was not surprising, given the horrific levels of violence, harassment, and discrimination against Black trans women (Forestiere, 2020; Preston, 2020). It was also not unexpected that the Black trans men students were more likely to continue to use the pronouns assigned to them at birth than trans men of other racial groups, as Black individuals assigned female at birth gain relatively little male privilege when they transition compared to trans men of other races. Moreover, like the Black trans women students, they experience the intersecting oppressions of racism, anti-Blackness, and genderism (Dear, 2006; White et al., 2020).

Just as the international students were less likely than the U.S. citizen students to identify as trans and nonbinary on the Common App, they, along with other non-U.S. citizen students, were also less likely to go by nonbinary or nongendered pronouns, even if they described themselves as nonbinary. Whereas many nonbinary domestic U.S. students used neopronouns for themselves, either exclusively or in combination with other pronouns, none of the nonbinary international students went by neopronouns. Some of this disparity may be cultural and linguistical, as many neopronouns were developed in the U.S. (Baron, 2020) and may not be easily translatable into non-English languages. In addition, a greater number of international students may continue to use the pronouns assigned to them at birth for the same reason that fewer may have identified as trans or nonbinary: they may be out to their families and in their communities to a lesser degree.

Recommendations for college administrators

The fact that the Common App has added questions asking gender identity and pronouns has significant implications for the colleges and universities that use the form. These institutions now have information about how their incoming students identify their gender and pronouns, as well as the first names they go by. For colleges that do not give students the ability to easily change their names and gender markers on their campus records and to have their pronouns on course rosters and in other administrative systems, the data from the Common App is the first time that they are gaining this information about any of their students. Other colleges have information about the chosen names, gender identities, and pronouns of some of their returning and incoming students (Beemyn, 2024), but not to the extent enabled by the Common App.

Regardless of the degree to which colleges currently recognize the identities of their trans and nonbinary students, institutions need to use the data from the Common App to populate students' campus records. For some colleges, this will mean having to create chosen name, gender, and pronoun fields in their student information systems. For colleges that already provide these options, this may mean having to expand the number of records on which chosen names and pronouns appear. The goal for all colleges should be that no student is misnamed or misgendered by the institution in areas within its control, including mail, email, and in-person communications; course rosters and advisee lists; housing assignments; online directories; ID cards; and diplomas. Where students' legal names are required, such as for campus employment and financial aid paperwork, colleges should explain this to students and still use students' chosen names where they can, such as in hiring and financial aid award letters.

For a variety of reasons, trans and nonbinary students do not always indicate the names and pronouns that they go by and their gender identities on the Common App. Moreover, some students do not recognize their gender identities or come out until after they enter college, or they change how they identify themselves as trans or nonbinary. Colleges therefore need to have a simple process for students to add or change their names, pronouns, and gender markers on campus records.

This article has focused on the Common App, which is used by slightly more than 1,000 colleges. Most other institutions use their own admissions application. If they do, they should, like the Common App, be asking optional questions on the names and pronouns that students go by and their gender identities and then incorporating this information into students' campus records.

Recommendations for faculty and staff

It should go without saying that staff and faculty should treat students with respect, which includes respecting the pronouns that students use for themselves. But, with some conservative states enacting laws to allow K-12 and college personnel to misgender students (Pendharkar & Stanford, 2023) and with some courts ruling that instructors and other school staff have a religious and free-speech right to do so (Beemyn, 2022b; Eckes, 2020), the importance of supporting trans and nonbinary students cannot be emphasized enough. Research has consistently shown that using the pronouns and first names that trans and nonbinary youth go by leads them to feel affirmed in their gender identities and have a sense that they are valued and cared about, resulting in less emotional stress, lower depressive symptoms, and decreased suicidality (Brown et al., 2020; Flint et al., 2023; Russell et al., 2018; Trevor Project, 2023). For example, one of the nonbinary students interviewed by Maureen Flint et al. (2023) stated: 'my advisor ... used the correct name and pronouns even though I hadn't specifically talked with her about it. That felt really good. She feels like a very supportive person. It felt, just like, hearing a new name feels really validating' (p. 478).

But Flint et al. (2023) found that the nonbinary students they interviewed were more often misgendered by staff and faculty, even when their pronouns were included in their campus records. Expressing their frustration about being regularly misgendered, despite having their pronouns on course rosters and in their email signature, one student stated, 'I don't know what else I could do to make this clear ... I just wish it were better' (p. 481).

Faculty and staff have a responsibility to make it better. Research shows that many faculty members need and want to become more competent in

respecting students' pronouns (McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022), so colleges should require faculty to be trained on how they can do so. If campuses cannot offer such training sessions because of state anti-DEI laws or policies, colleges, departments, and individual faculty members can circulate articles (e.g. Finch, 2014), videos (e.g. Matacin, 2021; *Seventeen*, 2017), and websites (e.g. <https://pronouns.org>) that provide information on how to support students' gender identities.

If pronouns are available on course rosters and in other administrative systems, faculty members should be encouraged to learn the pronouns of students, particularly the students who use pronouns beyond 'she/her' and 'he/him' and those whose pronouns differ from the ones traditionally associated with their gender presentation. If pronouns are not part of students' records, faculty and staff need to advocate for this change, and in the absence of such a policy, be asking students for their pronouns. Faculty members should do a go-around in smaller classes to give students the opportunity to share the name they go by and their pronouns or find other ways for students to communicate their names and pronouns (e.g. *via* the use of paper 'tents' or placards). In larger classes, faculty should ask students to say their name and pronouns when they speak, with students being given the opportunity to pass on providing this information if they wish.

Staff members should likewise be learning students' pronouns. One way to do so is for the staff person to introduce themselves with their pronouns, which will encourage the student to share theirs. If the staff person fails to ask a student for their pronouns initially, they need to do so if they are talking with the student and someone else—when they would have to use a third-person pronoun for the student. Making these changes to practice is relatively simple, but doing so can significantly improve the experiences of trans and nonbinary students by creating an inclusive environment at the outset of interactions with staff and faculty members. The worsening legal landscape for trans and nonbinary youth in many U.S. states (Movement Advancement Project, 2023) makes having a supportive campus climate even more critical.

Limitations

Because we analyze data from the Common App, our study is limited by the limits of this or any form. Not being able to talk with students about what their gender means to them, we had to categorize their gender based only on the information they provided. Moreover, as we mentioned previously, the Common App does not specifically ask if students identify as trans, so we made assumptions about students' gender identities based on the legal sex and gender they indicated. Because people can change their legal sex, some of the students we classified as cis might actually be trans.

Our study also presumably undercounts the number of trans and nonbinary students because the Common App is a college admissions form that is filled out primarily by 17- and 18-year-olds. Some students may see filling out a college application as just a task to complete and not care about coming out or not see the value in doing so. Other students may be reluctant to indicate that they are trans or nonbinary, feeling that this is personal information that colleges should not have or fearing that their response could be used against them, such as to deny them admission or financial aid, or be disclosed to their families. Because students often complete their college applications with their parent(s), they are also unlikely to state that they are trans or nonbinary on the Common App if they are not out to their families. One student who presumably completed the application by themselves was a Black demiflux individual who indicated that their pronouns were ‘he/him’ and ‘they/them’ but wrote in that their pronouns were ‘she/her for parents.’

In addition, some students do not understand themselves to be nonbinary until they reach college and meet nonbinary students, so would not have indicated that they are trans or nonbinary on the Common App. In a national study of nonbinary college students conducted by the first author (Beemyn, 2019), the average age at which the nonbinary gender participants began to use their current gender identity label was 19 years old—in other words, about a year after they had started college. Some had identified as nonbinary before then and used a different term for their gender identity, but most had previously not considered themselves to be nonbinary.

With more than 1.1 million U.S. respondents, the Common App data represent the largest data set in the country that includes information on the gender identities and pronouns of young people. But the form is used by only about one-fourth of degree-granting postsecondary institutions, and these schools are more likely to be historically white, four-year campuses. Based on available data from the Common App, only 29 of the 107 Historically Black Colleges and Universities, only 76 of the more than 500 Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and none of the 32 Tribal Colleges and Universities were member institutions in 2022-23. In addition, only one current member is a community college, even though more than one-third of college students attend a community college (Community College Research Center, 2019n.d.). However, it is worth noting that the Common App is more representative than many national college surveys, such as the CIRP (Cooperative Institutional Research Program) Freshman Survey, the American College Health Association’s National College Health Assessment, and the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, which include even fewer Minority-Serving Institutions.

Future directions

Given the extent to which young adults today identify as both women/men and nonbinary, scholarship should not divide trans and nonbinary individuals into a binary/nonbinary dichotomy for data analyses. Researchers should also allow study participants to self-describe their gender on surveys, either through using an open-ended question or having an ‘another gender’ response with a fill-in option provided. Furthermore, researchers should be asking participants, including seemingly cis participants, for their pronouns and give them the ability to indicate multiple pronoun sets in order to better understand the frequency of various pronoun choices among students of different gender identities.

Future qualitative work should explore the reasons and meaning-making behind the use of various pronouns. For example, for students who go by multiple sets of pronouns, to what degree is their pronoun choice in a particular context shaped by external factors (e.g. family, friends), institutional factors (e.g. type of college attended, the extent of campus trans-inclusive resources), and internal factors (e.g. how they are feeling at that time)?

In addition, future work should examine whether young adults who identify as both nonbinary and trans women/men have different experiences and outcomes than individuals who identify as nonbinary only or trans men/women only, such as in their level of outness, extent of encountering individual and institutional discrimination, and sense of community and self-efficacy. This research should also analyze whether these differences vary by legal sex, race, citizenship status, and other demographic factors.

Future practice to support trans and nonbinary students should recognize that how they name their gender identities and pronouns are expanding and ever-changing. For example, forms and documents need to allow for multiple pronoun sets, offer nonbinary/nongendered pronoun options beyond ‘they/them,’ and have a process for students to modify their pronouns. Faculty, staff, and administrators also need to realize that some students they teach or work with will change their pronouns and that they may need to practice using the new pronouns in private to help ensure that they make the switch. In addition, college officials need to become more accustomed to nonbinary/nongendered pronouns beyond ‘they/them,’ so that students feel comfortable sharing whatever pronouns they use.

Conclusion

The vocabulary to describe gender has grown substantially in the last decade. Our findings reveal that trans and nonbinary young adults are embracing a range of gender identities and using various pronouns for themselves. It is important that college administrators, staff, and faculty maintain an up-to-date understanding of college students; relying on data

from even a few years ago is inadequate for enabling colleges and universities to meet the needs of today's trans and nonbinary students. Further, it is essential that researchers who study trans and nonbinary college students use terms that resonate with and have meaning for contemporary young adults, as well as provide an opportunity for students to describe themselves. Trans and nonbinary young adults today are defining themselves in ways that may not have been conceivable 10 years ago. Undoubtedly, language and identities will continue to shift in the next 5-10 years, as the next generation of trans and nonbinary young people enters college.

Notes

1. The number for Fall 2023 admission is lower because the data we used included just applicants residing in the United States (even if they were citizens of another country), whereas the 2022 admission data included all applicants. We tremendously thank the leadership of the Common App for allowing us to analyze their data.
2. "Legal sex" can be different from "sex assigned at birth," given that individuals can change the gender marker on legal documents like birth certificates and driver's licenses. But this is unlikely to be the case for most of the nonbinary students here because, until recently, most states only allowed legal documents to be changed within a gender binary (i.e., M to F, or F to M). A nonbinary person would seemingly not change their legal sex from one binary option to the other.
3. However, the term "neopronouns" is a misnomer because some of these pronouns were first proposed a century or more ago (Baron, 2020).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

Genny Beemyn (they/them) is the director of the UMass Amherst Stonewall Center and the leading researcher and tracker of trans-inclusive campus policies. They have published and spoken extensively on the experiences and needs of trans and nonbinary college students, including writing some of the first articles on the topic in the 2000s. Among the more than dozen books and journal issues that Dr. Beemyn has written/edited are *The Lives of Transgender People* (with Sue Rankin, 2011), which, at the time, was the largest study of trans and nonbinary people by U.S. researchers; *A Queer Capital: A History of Gay Life in Washington, D.C.* (2014); and the anthology *Trans People in Higher Education* (2019). With Abbie Goldberg, they edited *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies* (2021) and *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ Studies* (2024). More about Dr. Beemyn can be found on their website: <https://www.gennyb.com>.

Abbie Goldberg (she/her) is a professor in the Department of Psychology at Clark University in Worcester, Massachusetts, where she also currently serves as the director of Women's & Gender Studies and the director of Clinical Training. Dr. Goldberg is the author of over 160 peer-reviewed articles, over 25 book chapters, and four books: *LGBTQ Family Building: A Guide for Prospective Parents* (2022), *Open Adoption & Diverse Families*

(2020), *Gay Dads* (2012), and *Lesbian and Gay Parents and their Children* (2010). She is the co-editor of five books: *The Misrepresentations of Queer Lives in True Crime* (2023), *LGBTQ-Parent Families: Innovations in Research and Implications for Practice* (2013, 2020), *LGBTQ Divorce and Relationship Dissolution* (2019), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies* (2021), and *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ+ Studies* (2016, 2024). More about Dr. Goldberg can be found on her website: <https://wordpress.clarku.edu/agoldberg>.

References

- American College Health Association. (2023). *National College Health Assessment, NCHA III, undergraduate student reference group, data report, Spring 2023*. https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-III_SPRING_2023_UNDERGRAD_REFERENCE_GROUP_DATA_REPORT.pdf
- Austin, A., Papciak, R., & Lovins, L. (2022). Gender euphoria: A grounded theory exploration of experiencing gender affirmation. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 5(13), 1406–1426. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2022.2049632>
- Baron, D. (2020). *What's your pronoun? Beyond he and she*. W. W. Norton.
- Beemyn, G. (2019). Get over the binary: The experiences of nonbinary trans college students. In G. Beemyn (Ed.), *Trans people in higher education* (pp. 159–183). SUNY Press.
- Beemyn, G. (2022a). *The changing nature of gender in the 21st century: How trans and nonbinary students applying to college today self-identify*. Campus Pride. https://www.campuspride.org/wp-content/uploads/CampusPride_ChangingNatureofGender21stCentury.pdf
- Beemyn, G. (2022b). Legal fights persist over policies that require teachers to refer to trans students by their chosen pronouns. *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/legal-fights-persist-over-policies-that-require-teachers-to-refer-to-trans-students-by-their-chosen-pronouns-183053>
- Beemyn, G. (2024). *Trans-supportive campus policies*. <https://www.gennyb.com/research/trans-supportive-campus-policies>
- Beemyn, G., & Rankin, S. (2011). *The lives of transgender people*. Columbia University Press.
- Beischel, W. J., Gauvin, S. E. M., & van Anders, S. M. (2022). “A little shiny gender breakthrough”: Community understandings of gender euphoria. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 23(3), 274–294. <https://doi.org/10.1080/26895269.2021.1915223>
- Brown, A. (2022, June 7). *About 5% of young adults in the U.S. say their gender is different from their sex assigned at birth*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/06/07/about-5-of-young-adults-in-the-u-s-say-their-gender-is-different-from-their-sex-assigned-at-birth>
- Brown, C., Frohard-Dourlent, H., Wood, B. A., Saewyc, E., Eisenberg, M. E., & Porta, C. M. (2020). “It makes such a difference”: An examination of how LGBTQ youth talk about personal gender pronouns. *Journal of the American Association of Nurse Practitioners*, 32(1), 70–80. <https://doi.org/10.1097/JXX.0000000000000217>
- Budge, S. L., Domínguez, S., Jr., & Goldberg, A. E. (2020). Minority stress in nonbinary students in higher education: The role of campus climate and belongingness. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 7(2), 222–229. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000360>
- Campus Pride. (2015, August 3). *Campus Pride joins 24 national organizations on letter asking Common Application to include questions on gender identity and sexual orientation on college admission standard form* [Press release]. <https://www.campuspride.org/campus-pride-joins-letter-asking-common-application-to-include-gender-identity-and-sexual-orientation-questions-on-college-admission-standard-form/>

- Community College Research Center. (n.d). How many students are enrolled in community colleges? *Community College FAQs*. <https://ccrc.tc.columbia.edu/community-college-faqs.html>
- Connell, R. W. (1987). *Gender and power: Society, the person, and sexual politics*. Stanford University Press.
- Conron, K. J., Scott, G., Stowell, G. S., & Landers, S. J. (2012). Transgender health in Massachusetts: Results from a household probability sample of adults. *American Journal of Public Health, 102*(1), 118–122. <https://ajph.aphapublications.org/doi/pdf/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300315> <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2011.300315>
- Craig, T., & LaCroix, J. (2011). Tomboy as protective identity. *Journal of Lesbian Studies, 15*(4), 450–465. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2011.532030>
- Day, J. K., Goldberg, A. E., Toomey, R. B., & Beemyn, G. (2022). Associations between trans-inclusive resources and feelings of inclusion in campus LGBTQ+ groups: Differences for trans students of color. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*. Advance online publication. *11*(3), 458–470. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000616>
- Dear, B. G. (2006). *African American transgender men and their experiences with racism in the United States pre and post transition: A project based upon an independent investigation* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. Smith College School for Social Work.
- Dicklitch-Nelson, S., & Rahman, I. (2022). Transgender rights are human rights: A cross-national comparison of transgender rights in 204 countries. *Journal of Human Rights, 21*(5), 525–541. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14754835.2022.2100985>
- Eckes, S. E. (2020). Pronouns and preferred names: When public school teachers' religious beliefs conflict with school directives. *Educational Researcher, 50*(1), 65–68. <https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X20943198>
- Factor, R., & Rothblum, E. (2008). Exploring gender identity and community among three groups of transgender individuals in the United States: MTFs, FTMs, and genderqueers. *Health Sociology Review, 17*(3), 235–253. <https://doi.org/10.5172/hesr.451.17.3.235>
- Feldman, J. L., Luhur, W. E., Herman, J. L., Poteat, T., & Meyer, I. H. (2021). Health and health care access in the U.S. transgender population health (TransPop) survey. *Andrology, 9*(6), 1707–1718. <https://doi.org/10.1111/andr.13052>
- Finch, S. D. (2014, September 15). *What you're actually saying when you ignore someone's gender pronouns. Let's Queer Things Up!* <https://letsqueerthingsup.com/2014/09/15/what-youre-actually-saying-when-you-ignore-someones-preferred-gender-pronouns>
- Flint, M. A., Kilgo, C. A., Emslie, K., & Bennett, L. A. (2023). The nexus of trans collegians' pronouns and name practices navigating campus space(s): Beyond the binary. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 16*(4), 471–485. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000349>
- Flores, A. R., Brown, T. N. T., & Herman, J. L. (2016, October). *Race and ethnicity of adults who identify as transgender in the United States*. Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Race-Ethnicity-Trans-Adults-US-Oct-2016.pdf>
- Forestiere, A. (2020, September 23). America's war on Black trans women. *Harvard Civil Rights-Civil Liberties Law Review*. <https://harvardcrcl.org/americas-war-on-black-trans-women>
- Galupo, M. P., Pulice-Farrow, L., & Ramirez, J. L. (2017). “Like a constantly flowing river”: Gender identity flexibility among nonbinary transgender individuals. In J. D. Sinnott (Ed.), *Identity flexibility during adulthood: Perspectives in adult development* (pp. 163–177). Springer.
- Garvey, G., C., Hart, J., Scott Metcalfe, A., & Fellabaum-Toston, J. (2019). Methodological troubles with gender and sex in higher education survey research. *The Review of Higher Education, 43*(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2019.0088>
- Geiger, A. W., & Graf, N. (2019, September 5). *About one-in-five U.S. adults know someone who goes by a gender-neutral pronoun*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/09/05/gender-neutral-pronouns>

- Goldberg, A. E., & Kuvalanka, K. A. (2018). Navigating identity development and community belonging when “there are only two boxes to check”: An exploratory study of nonbinary trans college students. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 15(2), 106–131. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2018.1429979>
- Goldberg, A. E., Beemyn, G., & Smith, J. Z. (2019). What is needed, what is valued: Trans students’ perspectives on trans-inclusive policies and practices in higher education. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 29(1), 27–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2018.1480376>
- Harrison, J., Grant, J., & Herman, J. L. (2012). A gender not listed here: Genderqueers, gender rebels, and otherwise in the National Transgender Discrimination Survey. *LGBTQ Policy Journal at the Harvard Kennedy School*, 2, 13–24. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2zj46213>
- Herman, J. L., Flores, A. R., & O’Neill, K. K. (2022, June). *How many adults and youth identify as transgender in the United States?* Williams Institute. <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/Trans-Pop-Update-Jun-2022.pdf>
- Jackson, A., Hernandez, C., Scheer, S., Sicro, S., Trujillo, D., Arayasirikul, S., McFarland, W., & Wilson, E. C. (2022). Prevalence and correlates of violence experienced by trans women. *Journal of Women’s Health* (2002), 31(5), 648–655. <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2021.0559>
- James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016). *The report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey*. National Center for Transgender Equality. <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf>
- Jefferson, K., Neilands, T. B., & Sevelius, J. (2013). Transgender women of color: Discrimination and depression symptoms. *Ethnicity and Inequalities in Health and Social Care*, 6(4), 121–136. <https://doi.org/10.1108/EIHSC-08-2013-0013>
- Kuper, L. E., Nussbaum, R., & Mustanski, B. (2012). Exploring the diversity of gender and sexual orientation identities in an online sample of transgender individuals. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 49(2-3), 244–254. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2011.596954>
- Marcus, E. (2021, April 8). A guide to neopronouns. *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/04/08/style/neopronouns-nonbinary-explainer.html>
- Matacin, M. (2021). Why gender pronouns matter. TEDx Talks. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsHXyGiCk6g>
- McEntarfer, H. K., & Iovannone, J. (2022). Faculty perceptions of chosen name policies and non-binary pronouns. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 27(5), 632–647. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2020.1729722>
- Meerwijk, E. L., & Sevelius, J. M. (2017). Transgender population size in the United States: A meta-regression of population-based probability samples. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(2), e1–e8. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303578>
- Meyer, I. H., Brown, T. N. T., Herman, J. L., Reisner, S. L., & Bockting, W. O. (2017). Demographic characteristics and health status of transgender adults in select U.S. Regions: Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System, 2014. *American Journal of Public Health*, 107(4), 582–589. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2016.303648>
- Minkin, R., & Brown, A. (2021, July 27). *Rising shares of U.S. adults know someone who is transgender or goes by gender-neutral pronouns*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/07/27/rising-shares-of-u-s-adults-know-someone-who-is-transgender-or-goes-by-gender-neutral-pronouns>
- Movement Advancement Project. (2023). *Snapshot: LGBTQ equality by state*. Retrieved September 20, 2023, from <https://www.lgbtmap.org/equality-maps>
- Pascoe, C. J. (2011). *Dude, you’re a fag: Masculinity and sexuality in high school*. University of California Press.

- Pendharkar, E., & Stanford, L. (2023, May 30). Laws on trans, nonbinary student pronouns put teachers in a bind. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/laws-on-trans-nonbinary-student-pronouns-put-teachers-in-a-bind/2023/05>
- Preston, A. M. (2020, September 9). The anatomy of transmisogynoir. *Harper's Bazaar*. <https://www.harpersbazaar.com/culture/features/a33614214/ashlee-marie-preston-transmisogynoir-essay>
- Russell, S. T., Pollitt, A. M., Li, G., & Grossman, A. H. (2018). Chosen name use is linked to reduced depressive symptoms, suicidal ideation, and suicidal behavior among transgender youth. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 63(4), 503–505. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2018.02.003>
- Selkie, E., Adkins, V., Masters, E., Bajpai, A., & Shumer, D. (2020). Transgender adolescents' uses of social media for social support. *The Journal of Adolescent Health: Official Publication of the Society for Adolescent Medicine*, 66(3), 275–280. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2019.08.011>
- Serano, J. (2007). *Whipping girl: A transsexual woman on sexism and the scapegoating of femininity*. Seal Press.
- Seventeen. (2017). *Why gender pronouns matter*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9iKHJl5xAaA>
- Suen, L. W., Lunn, M. R., Katuzny, K., Finn, S., Duncan, L., Sevelius, J., Flentje, A., Capriotti, M. R., Lubensky, M. E., Hunt, C., Weber, S., Bibbins-Domingo, K., & Obedin-Maliver, J. (2020). What sexual and gender minority people want researchers to know about sexual orientation and gender identity questions: A qualitative study. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 49(7), 2301–2318. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01810-y>
- Tatum, A. K., Catalpa, J., Bradford, N. J., Kovic, A., & Berg, D. R. (2020). Examining identity development and transition differences among binary transgender and gender-queer nonbinary (GQNB) individuals. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity*, 7(4), 379–385. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000377>
- Trevor Project. (2023). *2023 U.S. national survey on the mental health of LGBTQ young people*. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-2023>
- Twenge, J. M. (2023, May 1). How Gen Z changed its views on gender. *Time*. <https://time.com/6275663/generation-z-gender-identity>
- Universal College Application. (2016, April 26). *Gender identity question now asked on the Universal College Application (UCA)* [Press release]. <https://www.universalcollegeapp.com>
- Valosik, V. (2015). Supporting LGBT international students. *International Educator*. https://www.nafsa.org/sites/default/files/ektron/files/underscore/ie_marapr15_fsa.pdf
- Wentling, T. (2015). Trans* disruptions: Pedagogical practices and pronoun recognition. *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 2(3), 469–476. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2926437>
- White, M. E., Cartwright, A. D., Reyes, A. G., Morris, H., Lindo, N. A., Singh, A. A., & McKinzie Bennett, C. (2020). “A whole other layer of complexity”: Black transgender men's experiences. *Journal of LGBT Issues in Counseling*, 14(3), 248–267. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15538605.2020.1790468>
- Williamson, M. (2023). A global analysis of transgender rights: Introducing the Trans Rights Indicator Project (TRIP). *Perspectives on Politics*, 22(3), 799–818. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592723002827>
- Woodford, M. R., Joslin, J., & Marshall, Z. (2019). Starting with LGB(T): Methodological considerations in quantitative gender and sexual identity research in higher education. In E. F. Henderson & Z. Nicolazzo (Eds.), *Starting with gender: Concept and methodology in international higher education research* (pp. 98–125). Routledge.