

# Transgender students' experience at college

A vivência de estudantes transgênero na universidade

La vivencia de estudiantes transgênero en la universidad

Carolina Pinto Viana  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4956-0653>

Igor Matheus Delgado  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8398-6909>

Anderson Rosa  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4683-3107>

Vanessa Ribeiro Neves  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2226-4723>

Lucíola D'Emery Siqueira  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5087-9824>

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## Descriptores

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## Corresponding author

Carolina Pinto Viana  
E-mail: [carolinaviana123161@gmail.com](mailto:carolinaviana123161@gmail.com)

## Associate Editor (Peer review process):

Thiago da Silva Domingos  
(<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1421-7468>)  
Escola Paulista de Enfermagem, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, SP, Brazil

## Abstract

**Objective:** To understand transgender students' experience at college.

**Methods:** This is a qualitative study, carried out using the Thematic Oral History method. Interviews were conducted with nine trans students from a public college in the state of São Paulo. The snowball technique was used to select such participants, who answered the semi-structured script questions. The testimonies were recorded, transcribed, transcribed and submitted to content analysis.

**Results:** Three categories emerged: *Being a trans*; *The college experience*; *Support for trans students at college*. Although they perceived themselves as trans people in their childhood, the transsexualization process began concomitantly with their admission to college. This environment, considered heteronormative and transphobic, potentiated feelings of insecurity and non-belonging, which compromised student permanence. The support of other students and institutional actions were pointed out as possibilities to face these difficulties.

**Conclusion:** Ensuring the permanence of trans students at college depends on the creation of specific inclusion policies for this population and that involve the entire academic community. Thus, concrete actions to combat transphobia and promote the well-being of these students can transform the college into a safe and welcoming place.

## Resumo

**Objetivo:** Compreender a vivência de estudantes transgênero na universidade.

**Métodos:** Estudo qualitativo, realizado com método da História Oral Temática. Foram realizadas entrevistas com nove estudantes trans de uma universidade pública do estado de São Paulo. Utilizou-se a técnica de bola de neve para selecionar tais participantes, que responderam às questões do roteiro semiestruturado. Os depoimentos foram gravados, transcritos, transcritos e submetidos à análise de conteúdo.

**Resultados:** Emergiram três categorias: "Ser trans", "A vivência na universidade" e "Apoio ao(a) estudante trans na universidade". Embora tenham-se percebido como pessoas trans ainda na infância, o processo transexualizador teve início concomitante ao ingresso na universidade. Esse ambiente, considerado heteronormativo e transfóbico, potencializou sentimentos de insegurança e não pertencimento, o que comprometeu a permanência estudantil. O apoio de outros estudantes e ações institucionais foram apontados como possibilidades de enfrentamento dessas dificuldades.

**Conclusão:** Garantir a permanência de estudantes trans na universidade depende da criação de políticas de inclusão específicas para essa população e que envolvam toda a comunidade acadêmica. Assim, ações concretas de combate à transfobia e promoção do bem-estar desses estudantes poderão transformar a universidade num local seguro e acolhedor.

<sup>1</sup>Escola Paulista de Enfermagem, Universidade Federal de São Paulo, São Paulo, SP, Brazil.

Conflicts of interest: nothing to declare.

## Resumen

**Objetivo:** Comprender la vivencia de estudiantes transgénero en la universidad.

**Métodos:** Estudio cualitativo, realizado con el método de la historia oral temática. Se encuestó a nueve estudiantes trans de una universidad pública del estado de São Paulo. Se utilizó la técnica de bola de nieve para seleccionar a los participantes, que respondieron las preguntas del guion semiestructurado. Los relatos fueron grabados, transcritos, transcreados y sometidos a análisis de contenido.

**Resultados:** Surgieron tres categorías: "Ser trans", "La vivencia en la universidad" y "Apoyo al(a) estudiante trans en la universidad". A pesar de haberse percibido como personas trans en la infancia, el proceso de transexualización comenzó simultáneamente al ingreso a la universidad. Este ambiente, considerado heteronormativo y transfóbico, potencializó sentimientos de inseguridad y no pertenencia, lo que comprometió la permanencia estudiantil. El apoyo de otros estudiantes y acciones institucionales fueron señaladas como posibilidades de afrontamiento a estas dificultades.

**Conclusión:** Garantizar la permanencia de estudiantes trans en la universidad depende de la creación de políticas de inclusión específicas para esta población y que incluyan a toda la comunidad académica. De esta forma, acciones concretas de combate a la transfobia y de promoción del bienestar de estos estudiantes podrán transformar la universidad en un lugar seguro y acogedor.

## Introduction

Transgender, popularly known as a trans person, is the name given to a diverse group of people whose gender identities differ, to varying degrees, from the sex with which they were assigned at birth. Cisgender, on the other hand, are people who have a correspondence between their social designation at birth and their performed gender identity. The limits of these definitions are imprecise, dynamic and are influenced by historical, ideological, political, cultural and religious issues.<sup>(1)</sup>

The imprecision of the concept and the set of these influences, which sometimes act in a discriminatory way, may be related to the scarcity of sociodemographic information about the trans population in the countries' demographic censuses. An American study estimates a ratio of 390 trans adults per 100,000, making nearly one million trans people in the United States. It also suggests that the largest contingent of trans people is in the younger population.<sup>(2)</sup>

From the health point of view, Resolution 2,265 of the Federal Council of Medicine provides for specific care for transgender people, as comprehensive care for their health throughout the life cycle.<sup>(3)</sup> This resolution advances towards depathologizing trans identities, at the same time that is from the medical diagnosis that health insurance in some countries and even the Brazilian Unified Health System ensure the access of the trans population to specific health care and to the processes of gender affirmation.

A survey with American trans undergraduate students pointed to varied experiences, but all re-

ports showed incidents of marginalization by professors and colleagues.<sup>(4)</sup> As in Brazil, in the United States there are no specific laws that explicitly protect transgender people from discrimination in education.<sup>(5)</sup> About 80% of transgender people who dropped out of high school in the world are in Brazil, which is why the presence of transgender students in Brazilian higher education is scarce, who represent only 0.02% of undergraduate students.<sup>(6)</sup>

Recent studies indicate that the perception of inclusion and socialization of trans students at college is a key factor for their permanence.<sup>(7)</sup> In this sense, campus climate is a widely researched component for understanding the environmental aspects that can influence this perception. Campus climate is understood as attitudes, behaviors and practices related to access, inclusion and the level of respect for individual and group needs,<sup>(8)</sup> understood in this study as the process of inclusion and socialization.

Due to the social and historical construction of what is a man and what is a woman, determined from the feminine/masculine biological matrix and moral and religious conceptions that stigmatize gender identities that do not correspond to the imposed norm, transsexuals and transvestites can suffer transphobia and be excluded from social environments because they are associated with sin, marginality and pathology.<sup>(9)</sup>

The absence of official data and the scarcity of studies in Brazil on transgender people in the college environment<sup>(9)</sup> makes it necessary to produce knowledge on this topic, which can provide data for the formulation and remodeling of inclusion and

permanence of students in higher education, including their gender identity as a relevant factor in the process. The present study aimed to understand the experience of transgender students at college.

## Methods

This is a qualitative descriptive-exploratory study, carried out through Thematic Oral History, a method in which the central theme of the phenomenon to be studied is established and interviews are conducted with participants who report their experiences.<sup>(10)</sup>

As the study site, a public college located in the state of São Paulo was chosen, which has approximately 13,000 students and has affirmative actions aimed at transgender people. Participated in the research trans students whose enrollment had been made in undergraduate courses for at least one year, considering the need for a period of permanence in the college environment so that they could describe their experiences. The snowball technique was used to select such participants, so that, at each interview, indications were made, and, from them, new invitations were made. The first student invited to participate in the research was a member of the college's Trans Nucleus, where research, extension activities and assistance to trans people are carried out. From there, invitation was sent to the other people. Among the 16 invitations, made by phone or social network, nine were accepted and these people made up the population.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by an author of this study, using a script with questions about participant characteristics and the guiding question: How would you describe your experiences on campus, being a transgender student? There was the addition of other questions, relevant to the object of study, according to the development of each narrative. The interviews took place between June and September 2019, in reserved places and convenient times for the researcher and participants. Three of them were in person and six via Skype, according to each student's availability and preference, lasting an average of 15 minutes and were recorded with a digital device.

The statements were transcribed by the researcher, reviewed by another author and validated by the study participants. Narrative transcription was then carried out, in order to bring together the excerpts that referred to the same theme and transform the oral language into writing. A third author validated the transcribed content, comparing it, to the transcript to ensure text reliability<sup>(11)</sup>. After this process, the material was submitted to content analysis.<sup>(12)</sup>

142 Registration Units were identified, corresponding to 27 codes, which gave rise to 24 subcategories grouped into three categories, as shown in Chart 1.

**Chart 1.** Coding and grouping of subcategories for the elaboration of the categories of this study

Number of RU	Code	Subcategory	Category
14	A1	When the transsexualization process took place	Being a trans
7	A2	Perceiving oneself as trans	
2	A4	Fear of being judged	
3	A11		
4	A13	Difficulty asserting oneself	
5	A15	Coming out trans: in a new life	
7	A18	Passability	
3	A19	Mental health	
2	A20	Invisibility	
2	A5	On-campus experience	
1	A3	Isolation	
5	A6		
7	A7	Implicit transphobia	
5	A8	Social name	
14	A9	Participating in academic/sports groups	
8	A10	Interaction with staff/professors	
3	A14	Lack of trans students at college	
6	A16	Bathroom use	
8	A17	Difficulty with academic systems	
1	A21	Harassment	Support for trans students at college
10	A26	Explicit transphobia	
13	A12	Support group	
2	A27		
1	A22	Problem solving: feeling of helplessness	
7	A23	Problem solving: recognition	
1	A24	Problem solving: bathroom use	
1	A25	Problem solving: mental health	

The research project was approved by the Opinion 3,439,516 and CAAE (*Certificado de Apresentação para Apreciação Ética* - Certificate of Presentation for Ethical Consideration) 12443919.9.0000.5505. All participants signed the Informed Consent Form, which guarantees, among other rights, anonymity.

## Results

Seven trans men, a non-binary and a trans woman, who were between 20 and 26 years old and graduated in the exact (three), human (one) and health (five) areas participated in this study. Five students declared themselves white, and four, black. The monthly family income was, on average, six minimum wages.

The categories *Being a trans*, *The college experience* and *Support for trans students at college* are presented below.

### Being a trans

Perceiving oneself as a trans person was a process that began during childhood, but came to fruition years later:

*“Since I was a child I didn’t understand why only boys peed standing up, I wanted to do it too. When I realized we had different organs, I was hoping that there had been some mistake in motherhood and something was going to grow in me. I didn’t know the name of it, but I understood a little.”* [S5]

The college entrance coincided, mostly, with the process of assuming their gender identity, through body changes and performativity. Nevertheless, there were reports in which the entry to the study site occurred after the end of this process, leading to another way of experiencing this experience.

*“I started the transition in January 2018, shortly after discovering that I had passed the entrance exam. [...] It was a strategic way to move to Guarulhos, where people did not know my previous identity, and start this process, because I thought it would be easier than to make the transition in my city, where everyone knew me.”* [S2]

Regardless of the moment in which the transition process occurred, the reports pointed out difficulties in self-affirmation in the college environment, given the fear of judgment and the concern with passability:

*“My friends and colleagues have not realized that I am a trans person and I also do not comment, because I do not want to cause some kind of problem and someone say that is victimization.”* [S3]

Mental health issues were also pointed out as part of trans students' lives, compromising their experiences at college:

*“I always felt uncomfortable, but I had no idea what it could be, so I had a relationship and the breakup was like an outburst... I went through an agonizing phase and almost committed suicide. I didn’t know what was going on, but I knew something was wrong.”* [T6]

*“I have some psychological problems, such as depression and anxiety, that end up preventing me from going to class and compromise my learning.”* [T4]

It is noteworthy that mental health issues and suicidal ideation are complex and multifactorial phenomena and the study did not claim to create direct relationships of causes and effects.

### The college experience

Transgender students' experience at college was marked by difficulties in living together in the various academic spaces. The college presented itself as an environment permeated by heteronormativity and transphobia, which generated feelings of insecurity and non-belonging:

*“It was hard because I had to pause my course enrollment twice due to mental health issues. It was a vexating situation, because as much as I thought, “Oh, I’m going to go back and get the class content with them”, meeting some of the people in the class left a weird vibe.”* [S9]

Moreover, situations of veiled violence were mentioned in the statements, which hinders their confirmation and the development of direct actions to combat it.

*“There have been cases of transphobia within the college. I’ve been insulted, but it’s always a very*

*veiled prejudice. People are prejudiced, but they pretend they're not. [S7]*

Such prejudice also compromises trans students' participation in academic and sports activities as well as their insertion in the college environment.

*"When I was on the field, the [sports] commission called me and said that I could not participate because I had not presented a hormonal blood test." [S3]*

Bathroom use emerged in the discourses as a situation that generates stress, insecurity and fear in trans students. The lack of an explicit policy of diversity in bathroom use causes students to be afraid of being tried and suffer some kind of violence.

*"Using the men's room was difficult, at first I did not use it. I went to the lady's room, which after a while began to get uncomfortable too. I stopped using the bathroom at college, [...] but then I started using the men's room." [S2]*

The regulation of social name use by members of the academic community is a legislation that recognizes the rights of trans people at college and, in the midst of a scenario of insecurity and fear, brings an opportunity for students to exercise their citizenship.

*"I liked the fact that I could use my social name at college. It was pretty simple and I think that's a good thing." [S2]*

### Support for trans students at college

Trans students seek strategies to cope with the situations experienced in the college environment, even those legal and already recognized as law in decrees.

*"When I still had no social name, I went to the feminist collective and did not give me any assistance. In addition, few professors have made themselves available to change my name in the attendance list." [S9]*

A feeling of powerlessness was reported in the face of lack of knowledge of professors and staff to

deal with situations of transphobia, resistance to using the social name, feeling of invisibility and other problems faced by the transgender population. These factors hinder the quality of college stay and compromise the insertion of trans students in some academic spaces and activities.

*"[...] promoting this subject within the college would already be good, because people would know that we exist and, from there, respect or at least understand who we are." [S7]*

## Discussion

Perceiving oneself as a trans person can happen at any time of the life cycle and boost the desire to modify the body.<sup>(13)</sup> In this study, the reports pointed to childhood as the period of this awakening and the coincidence of entering college with the beginning of the process of assuming their gender identity. This process, characterized by the use of hormones and/or the performance of surgical procedures, covers not only physical changes, but also psychological and social transformations.<sup>(13,14)</sup>

The results of this study pointed to college as an environment that brings the beginning of a new life cycle. Attending graduation coincided, for most, with the beginning of adulthood, with greater freedom of expression, autonomy and some distance from family restrictions. It is emphasized that many trans people experience prejudice and manifestations of violence within their own family.<sup>(15)</sup>

Participants made the most of the moment of entering the academy to be known early by social name and promote body changes for gender affirmation. Using the social name was pointed out by students as a possibility of recognizing their gender identity and exercising citizenship. Establishing a social name policy at college is, in addition to ensuring a fundamental right to combat body control, the inferiorization and invisibility of trans people in the academic environment.<sup>(16)</sup>

In Brazil, the mandatory use of a social name in educational institutions in 2015 was established.<sup>(17)</sup> However, the statements showed

non-compliance with this legislation, and studies indicate that standardizing social name alone is not a sufficient measure for this student to feel embraced in their peculiarities.<sup>(18)</sup>

This situation is more complex in Brazil, considering the laws that are being processed in legislative houses in order to prohibit the supposed “gender ideology” in schools/education. These are setbacks in guaranteeing human rights, education, gender equality and the eradication of discrimination and violence motivated by gender, sexual orientation and gender identity. They are based on fallacious arguments for an alleged destruction of the “traditional” family, the legalization of pedophilia, the end of the “natural order” and gender relations, in addition to denying all violence against women and LGBTQIA+ people.<sup>(19)</sup>

Self-affirming as a trans student at college is a process related to passability, defined as a concept attributed by trans people themselves regarding the gender identity with which they identify and which is fundamental for emotional comfort.<sup>(18)</sup> In this sense, Butler highlighted the confrontation between non-passable trans people and society, a situation that can give rise to feelings that fluctuate between anger and hope and exacerbate manifestations of discrimination and violence.<sup>(20)</sup>

The findings of this study pointed to college as a transphobic environment, catalyst of insecurity and feeling of non-belonging, which hinders living and leads to social isolation. People who are considered different in a given social group suffer this isolation when the habit of human beings to be added to those who consider their commonones prevails.<sup>(21)</sup>

This scenario can compromise trans students' mental health. Anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation were evidenced in the statements, corroborating the findings of several studies that, in addition to these, identified self-aggression, alcohol dependence and suicide attempts as problems that affect this population.<sup>(22-24)</sup> Withdrawal, social self-isolation and discrimination by students and professors are considered causes of mental disorders.<sup>(25)</sup> Therefore, the importance of mental health professionals' work with trans students at college, such as identification of risks, promotion of inclusion and

the fight against violence, to monitoring and referral to the Health Care Network, when necessary.<sup>(26)</sup>

Bathroom use is among the situations that generate stress, insecurity and fear by trans students. The organization of a physical space based on binarism hurts fundamental rights of trans people, such as respect for dignity, freedom, privacy and equality.<sup>(21)</sup> In addition to guaranteeing these rights to trans students, fundamental to their stay in college, promoting bathroom use according to gender identity fosters a necessary debate to the academic community, through which information is shared and college presents itself as a democratic space, a stage for diversity and a driver of social transformation, especially with regard to the fight against transphobia.<sup>(27)</sup>

The performance of sports activities at college was also pointed out as an obstacle to inclusion and socialization. This finding converges with the results of a U.S. study that analyzed the perception of LGBT student athletes regarding their acceptance at college and identified that the difficulty is greater when it comes to trans students.<sup>(28)</sup> Furthermore, research conducted with high school students in New Zealand has shown that LGBT people are more prone to unhealthy weight control attempts, have poor eating habits, tend to sedentary lifestyle, and do little to participate in the sports activities offered at school.<sup>(29)</sup>

The statements evidenced the search for strategies to cope with the difficulties experienced at college, such as professors' and other professionals' unpreparedness to deal with issues inherent to transgender students. In this sense, a study conducted in a North American nursing school emphasized the importance of college role in creating embracing spaces that facilitate the affirmation of gender by trans students, especially considering the high prevalence of discrimination and violence against these people in the academic environment. Among the ideas presented by the authors, and supported by other studies,<sup>(9,30)</sup> is the training of all professionals working on campus so that they not only understand and respect trans people, but also offer support for gender affirmation and cultivate a supportive, compassion and care environment.<sup>(31)</sup>

## Conclusion

The results of this study point to the need for inclusion policies for the trans population in the college. The college environment, despite the cutting edge of science and innovation in society, has discriminatory and uninclusive characteristics with transgender students. Academic community members should raise awareness as to trans population's demands, which can be achieved through training of professors and other employees, creating opportunities for discussion and reflection on the subject at college and standards for defending against harassment and violence, in addition to the establishment of a support network for monitoring trans students by mental health professionals, when necessary. All these issues should be continuously assessed for the better insertion of transgender students at college. Despite the democratization of access to higher education in Brazil, which occurred in the last decade, specifically in public education, barriers remain related to the acceptance of gender diversity in the college environment.

## Collaborations

Viana CP, Delgado IM, Rosa A, Neves VR, Siqueira LD'E collaborated with study design, data analysis and interpretation, article writing, relevant critical review of intellectual content and approval of the final version to be published.

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