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*Focusing on emerging literature on trans\* and gender-nonconforming students and their leadership, this chapter outlines the ways trans\* students are engaged in leadership in educational institutions and outside of them and discusses implications for staff and faculty regarding how to support and engage these students and their leadership.*

## Trans\* Leadership

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With the presence and fervent advocacy of individuals such as Janet Mock, Laverne Cox, and Geena Rocero in popular culture and media, the world is finally beginning to realize the power and leadership of trans\* people, particularly young transwomen of color. However, trans\* people, especially young transwomen of color, have a long history of leadership that is often unwanted, marginalized, erased, or acceptable only when packaged in a way that does not trouble conventional understandings of identity and leadership. Individuals like Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Miss Major Griffin-Gacy, and a multitude of unnamed others who led the birth of a queer and trans\* revolution in the United States often resisted from the margins of even the queer or gay and lesbian communities (St. James, 2015).

Even when trans\* student leadership is examined, educators often miss how inextricably tied community-based activism is to what occurs on campus. For example, Rivera, Johnson, and the Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR) were involved in the organizing of students at New York University in 1970, demonstrating after the administration's refusal to allow queer dance parties on campus (Gossett, 2012). Trans\* leadership on and off campuses has often been disruptive, thus existing outside of the normative conceptions of leadership and therefore unrecognized and unacknowledged.

Honoring this legacy of resistance including its modern day manifestations (e.g., Gutiérrez, 2015), this chapter seeks to disrupt what leadership means, how trans\* leadership has been narrowly understood and minimally explored, and break through boundaries of gender, institution, and involvement. We begin by presenting language we use throughout and demonstrating the significance of language in unveiling unnamed

assumptions in leadership. A brief review of the literature precedes a re-framing of what trans\* student leadership might mean and look like including reconnecting it to trans\* leadership beyond the university. We conclude with implications for practice and research for educators and students.

## Language

Conceptualizations of identities and associated language continually evolve. Therefore, instead of fixed definitions, it is important for us to provide descriptions of some of the language we use to describe identities and experiences as well as some of the systems that influence these identities in people's lives. In this section, we unpack the terms trans\*, gender nonconforming, cisgender, and gender conforming. We also explore how genderism/cissexism (which we use here interchangeably) infiltrate our gendered lives. Terms and definitions have complicated and sometimes long histories, often marred by intersecting systems of oppression both within and outside of trans\* communities, such as colonialism, racism, misogyny, and many others (binaohan, 2014). This short section cannot possibly do these terms justice and for that we implore readers to explore further.

Gendered language is an extension of genderism/cissexism that maintains the binary gender system (Bilodeau, 2009; Wilchins, 2004). The binary gender system asserts that men and women are the only two valid genders, essentially tied to their sex assigned at birth—male and female respectively. Individuals for whom this is true—meaning women who were assigned female at birth and men who were assigned male at birth—are *cisgender* (Aultman, 2014). Cisgender or cis (Latin for “on the side of”) replaces terms such as biologically/normatively/traditionally gendered, which imply that non-cisgender people are outside of biology, are not normal, and did not exist historically. This makes *transgender*, *trans\**, and *gender-nonconforming* individuals and their identities invisible and pathological.

Moreover, genderism/cissexism assigns expectations, rules, and roles to people based on gender. Men are expected to be masculine and take on masculine roles, whereas women are expected to be feminine and take on feminine roles—with each set dependent on cultural, regional, class-based, and other contexts. Those who align their personal presentations with these expectations are considered to be *gender conforming*, whereas those who do not are considered *gender nonconforming*. It is important to clarify that some cisgender people are also gender nonconforming, whereas some trans\* people are gender conforming, thus even a strict trans\* and cis binary can be limiting in our understanding of students' identities and realities.

A multitude of terms, both historical and contemporary, exist to describe people who we are subsuming under the *trans\** moniker. Trans is Latin for “on the other side.” The addition of the asterisk is a visible expansion of the word *trans*—shortened from *transgender* and/or *transsexual*—to include a range of identities beyond only transwomen (women who were

assigned male at birth) and transmen (men assigned female at birth; Tompkins, 2014) who are also included in how we use trans\*. This includes terms that communities of color use, such as Two Spirit, stud, masculine of center, mahu, paksu mudang, and many others. Furthermore, we acknowledge there are also individuals and communities who do not identify with the trans\* identifier who may use some of the aforementioned terms. For the purposes of this chapter, though, we use trans\* most often to refer to a range of identities, while mirroring language of authors when describing their research and writing. We implore educators to similarly mirror how students name themselves. We use the term trans\* to mean people who move across genders, who challenge or deviate from the traditional binary in some way, and/or transcend gendered expectations (binaohan, 2014; Stryker, 2008; Wilchins, 2004).

### Troubling Leadership

How we talk about and conceptualize gender affects how leadership is understood and enacted. Youth leadership does not operate in a vacuum and takes on and is influenced by the systems of privilege and oppression it is engulfed by, and genderism and cissexism are no exception. Binary constructions of gender privilege the identities and self-expressions of cisgender and gender-conforming students as the ones who are assumed to be “real” and authentic, while pathologizing and invalidating the identities and self-expressions of trans\* and gender-nonconforming students (Bilodeau, 2009). In other words, in a world where we are taught that little boys grow up to be masculine men and little girls grow up to be feminine women, trans\* and gender-nonconforming people are unexpected or deviants. This also makes trans\* leadership unexpected and thus underresearched. Even as we explore evolving leadership ideas, invisible yet ubiquitous binarist beliefs and structures, when left unchallenged, seep into models that are meant to be transformative, such as authentic leadership.

Authentic leadership places importance on leaders’ abilities to be self-aware and model authenticity in followers, who in turn validate the former’s leadership (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Avolio, Walumba, & Weber, 2009). However, key components of authentic leadership privilege cisgender and gender-conforming leaders—namely authentic expression of self and relational transparency, which are to be validated by leaders as well as followers. If cissexism and genderism invalidate trans\* and gender-nonconforming leaders’ authentic-to-them identities and self-expressions of those identities, how authentically would their leadership be endorsed (Jourian, 2014)? Additionally, trans\* and gender-nonconforming students are building their sense of selves within institutions and systems that do not recognize them (Spade, 2011), thus affecting their path toward self-awareness. We are not suggesting here that trans\* and gender-nonconforming students are not self-aware or that they are never recognized as leaders. What we

are positing is that without an understanding that our notions of leadership operate within greater systems of oppression and how those systems show up within particular contexts, we make it that much harder for trans\* and gender-nonconforming students to emerge as leaders or be seen as leaders among their peers. Trans\* and gender-nonconforming students must navigate a treacherous and invalidating terrain with which cisgender and gender-conforming students are not contending.

Even as some trans\* students practice leadership, it is those among them who more closely resemble dominant leadership narratives that are most readily accepted as leaders. In Jourian's (2016) dissertation study, some trans\*masculine college students talked about how their masculinity—and for some, their Whiteness as well—led others to see them as credible advocates and leaders on campus. This is tied to “the perception that men’s roles are more congruent with the leadership role than are those of women” (Ayman & Korabik, 2010, p. 159), which disadvantages trans\*feminine students. In a study investigating trans\* students’ leadership perceptions, experiences, and outcomes, trans\*feminine students reported lower leadership capacity, efficacy, and positional role attainment on college campuses than did trans\*masculine students (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012). When trans\* students are treated as a monolith, meaning without regard to the vast diversity (by gender identity, gender expression, race, class, ability status, class, and so on) present within the population, and only (White, gender-conforming, able-bodied) trans\*masculine students are positioned as leaders, the concept of trans\* leadership is limited. The prioritizing of trans\*masculine leadership positions trans\*masculine students’ needs and achievements above those of trans\*feminine students, particularly working class trans\*feminine students of color who may not conform to normative conceptions of femininity. We thus call for readers, leadership scholars, and practitioners, to question what trans\* visibility and thus leadership means and looks like.

## Review of Literature

In this section, we review and critique the limited literature on trans\* leadership in higher education. This review is relatively brief because the vast majority of studies focus on students’ experience and/or identity development as well as on institutional support or lack thereof (e.g., Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, & Tubbs, 2005; Goodrich, 2012; Negrete, 2007; Sausa, 2002), with little attention if any to leadership and involvement. These studies paint a grim image of invisibility, isolation, hostile campuses, harassment and discrimination, and a lower sense of belonging to campus. Institutional and individual challenges and barriers, from limited/inaccurate gender boxes across forms to gender-segregated spaces all over campus, and the lack of real and perceived social support contributed to an array of negative outcomes for trans\* students. It can be reasonably assumed that within this type

of environment, there are real impediments to trans\* students' willingness and/or ability to be involved and participate in leadership on campus. Often these studies make cursory, if any, mention of the institutionalized system of genderism in higher education that creates these realities for trans\* students (Bilodeau, 2009). Thus, in addition to limited attention to leadership and involvement, these studies focused on deficit perspectives of trans\* students' experiences. Moreover, a search for scholarly work on trans\* youth leadership prior to or outside of college did not yield any results, with media being the only source of such narratives (e.g., Balingit, 2016; Block, 2015).

What is written about trans\* student leadership is pulled from lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans\*, and queer (LGBTQ) studies (Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005) and broader student populations (Dugan et al., 2012), where the number of cisgender students overwhelmingly eclipses the number of trans\* students. Two of the studies explore the connection between LGBT identity and leadership identity development (Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005), whereas the other focuses on perceptions, engagement, and educational outcomes for trans\* students (Dugan et al., 2012). The former (with only one transgender student) indicated that outness on campus informed involvement in LGBT organizations, which in turn further facilitated their identity development as well as involvement in other organizations (Renn, 2007; Renn & Bilodeau, 2005). This demonstrates the importance of the campus environment and students' perceived ability to be "out" on campus as it relates to campus leadership and involvement. Dugan et al. (2012) explored within-group differences among trans\* identified students, using the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership survey. The study showed that male to female (MtF) students reported lower leadership capacity and efficacy and had less experience with positional leadership and less mentoring compared to female to male (FtM) students. None of these studies involved trans\* identified researchers, who might have provided additional insight into or alternate understandings of the findings.

### Importance of Framing

We hope that readers are beginning to recognize the importance of framing when exploring what trans\* student leadership looks like and means. The use of deficit frames in studies involving trans\* students in general—in turn shaping how trans\* leadership is viewed—condemn trans\* students as failing within an otherwise seemingly fair system. Rather, by acknowledging how systems fail students and using resiliency as a frame, trans\* students' hardships can be named as products of hostile and limiting campuses without sacrificing and acknowledging these same students' strategies and abilities to counter the oppression they face (Nicolazzo, 2016).

In fact, there are many examples within and outside of institutions of how empowered approaches to leadership enacted by trans\* students have

enabled them to shift institutional gender paradigms and challenge oppression. Three of these examples are the Trans Buddy Program at Vanderbilt University (2016), Gender Affirming Procedure Advocates at the University of Illinois at Chicago (2015), and a participatory action research project (Case, Kanenberg, Erich, & Tittsworth, 2012). Kale Edmiston, one of the students who launched Vanderbilt's Trans Buddy Program, used his and other trans\* people's horrific and life-affecting experiences when seeking health care to create a 24-hour hotline for trans\* people seeking to navigate the university's medical system (Vasilogambros, 2015). The program trains trans\* volunteers to use the knowledge they have gained from their own experiences, what Yosso (2005) would term *navigational capital*, to help others. Similarly, the Gender Affirming Procedures (GAP) Advocates program at the University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) fills the GAP of a system that has been difficult and problematic to navigate, supporting students accessing gender-affirming care at UIC. For example, advocates may accompany a student to a medical visit for moral support and/or help them get their questions answered. A national study found that 28% of trans\* people postponed medical care due to discrimination, whereas those who did attempt to access health care were either refused (19%), harassed (28%), subject to violence in doctor's offices (2%), or had to teach their providers about competent care (50%; Grant, Mottet, & Tanis, 2011). Considering these realities, programs like Trans Buddy and GAP Advocates are examples of what resilient trans\* leadership as a survival strategy looks like.

It is important to understand that trans\* leadership in higher education may often present more as activism and resistance against oppressive and exclusionary structures and practices than as positional leadership. In fact, that is how leadership by marginalized student populations in higher education has historically shown up (Rhoads, 1998; Rojas, 2012), such as activism by students of color resulting in the institutionalization of ethnic studies (Ferguson, 2012). This is exemplified by Monica Jones, who as a student at Arizona State University challenged the ASU School of Social Work's complicity in police stings against sex workers (Strangio, 2014). Jones herself was arrested for "manifesting" prostitution, also known as "walking while trans," due to the law's overly vague description and the profiling of transwomen of color that it elicits.

In addition to the examples mentioned, trans\* leadership can also look like participatory action research that challenges cisgender privilege (Case et al., 2012). When so much of the research and scholarship on trans\* students is driven by cisgender people, the leadership of trans\* students in driving research efforts is in itself an activist tool, centering trans\* students' voices in their own advocacy. Additionally, such efforts are opportunities for university faculty and staff to interact and engage with trans\* students as proactive supporters and promoters of socially responsible leadership. This in turn can go a long way toward boosting trans\* students' leadership efficacy.

However, these examples, and many like them, have us questioning yet again what is meant by “trans\* leadership.” It is our suspicion, based on our own work in higher education and many conversations with colleagues and peers, that by virtue of being trans\* and the persistent need to educate peers and authority, one also does trans\* leadership—which in these cases means focusing on trans\* issues and advocacy. Scholars and practitioners also need to recognize that because of the moment of increased visibility and continued resistance to trans\* identities and issues, for many trans\* students the choice to enact leadership while trans\* rather than doing trans\* leadership, or to even distinguish between them, may still be a privilege.

## Outside the Ivory Tower

Although this chapter focuses on trans\* leadership on college campuses, we would be remiss if we did not include at least a cursory look at and homage to trans\* leadership outside of institutional walls. After all, Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, and many trans\* movement initiators were never expected to attend college and were excluded from higher education institutions. Additionally, many trans\* college students may be developing and enacting their leadership outside of higher education, when campus offerings and opportunities are either inadequate or outright hostile and therefore push them out or they choose to leave. Some of the participants in Jourian’s (2016) dissertation study, for example, talked about their severe disengagement from their campuses due to cissexist (and often racist, as these all came from trans\* students of color) experiences. Some participants were alumni of the Brown Boi Project (BBP), a community of masculine of center people of color across gender identities organizing for gender and racial justice (BBP, n.d.). Although BBP is not an explicitly trans\* organization, its membership and mission include trans\*masculine people and it is driven by a nonbinary conception of gender. For many trans\*masculine youth of color, BBP serves as a life- and identity-affirming space that cultivates and is inspired by trans\* leadership.

Named to honor the legacy of one of the trans\* leaders with whom we started this chapter, the Sylvia Rivera Law Project (SRLP, 2016) uses collectivist leadership approaches to elevate the political voice of trans\*, intersex, and gender-nonconforming people of color and low-income people. Responding to the lack of recognition of trans\* leadership, two transwomen, Jen Richards and Antonia D’Orsay, created The Trans 100 (Morgan, 2013), celebrating hundreds of trans\* individuals in the United States across disciplines and professions for doing work that improves trans\* people’s lives (Nichols, 2015). As each year’s Trans 100, which ran for 3 years, was selected by a diverse committee of trans\* people, trans\* leadership was situated as something first and foremost recognized by trans\* people, rather than what cisgender people would be willing to name as leadership. Many within the trans\* community use technology to create change. For

example, tired of her and others' experiences with joblessness and transphobic workplaces, Angelica Ross launched TransTech Social Enterprises (TTSE; 2016) to provide technical education so trans\* people are able to be self-employed and self-sustaining. Kortney Ryan Ziegler's endeavor, Trans\*H4CK (n.d.; pronounced "trans hack") focuses on creating technology that improves trans\* people's lives through hackathons that bring together developers, designers, and coders to find technology-based solutions to problems affecting trans\* people. These examples and many others push us to think about trans\* leadership more broadly and in many different ways.

### Implications for Staff and Students

We conclude with implications for staff, faculty, and students based on the reviewed literature and the stories and experiences shared. First, more studies specifically exploring trans\* leadership are needed, including involvement off campus. There also needs to be an expanded perception and understanding of trans\* leadership (beyond positions in formal campus organizations) and what leadership looks like on and off campus, and across the on-off binary. Such a broader understanding of leadership that focuses on process and practice rather than position is in line with the aims of this sourcebook, as extrapolated in Chapter 1. An important area of future research is to assess the impact of changes to the environment that aim to support trans\* identified students, including whether and how these changes contribute to trans\* students' willingness and capacities to enact leadership. Additionally, since self-esteem and efficacy are significant to enacting leadership, and genderism can impact these for trans\* students, educators also need to involve and center trans\* students' voices in advocacy and research efforts pertaining to leadership as one important way to support students' development of leadership efficacy. The deployment of intersectional lenses and attention to trans\* students' multiple identities are also necessary so as to end the uncritical aggregation of all trans\* students into a singular monolith. Additionally, student leadership studies broadly ought to examine whether and how trans\* students are included, beginning with the study's outreach efforts and how gender is asked within study protocols and discussed.

In addition to research, specific interventions in practice also need to address multiple identities and intersectionality, such as providing trans\* student of color leadership retreats. Leadership related initiatives on campus ought to be evaluated for their capacity and outreach to include trans\* students, as well as how the models and language used may impede, encourage, or recognize trans\* student involvement on campus (such as gendered awards and titles, e.g., homecoming king and queen). In these efforts, attention should be paid to whether trans\* students are able to make their own decisions about disclosing their identities or if "visibility" is mandated. At



all levels of the university, intentionality in hiring personnel who represent a spectrum of gender identities and experiences to serve as models and support is recommended so that trans\* students and educators on campus can mirror and witness each other (Devor, 2004). Highlighting and using the contributions of trans\* leaders “outside” of higher education can supplement on campus mirrors. For example, hosting a Trans\*H4CK on campus or commissioning TTSE would both financially support these community-based endeavors and bring Ziegler and Ross to students’ attention, particularly in science, technology, engineering, mathematics and related fields.

Beyond programming, policies need to be written in ways that recognize the complexities of identity and benefit students without harming them; policies (such as affirming gender and name change processes and access to safe all-gender bathrooms) that support trans\* leaders so they do not have to deal with bureaucratic, systemic barriers. Moreover, courses and programs that focus on and incorporate trans\* people (and leadership) and bring in the experiences of multiple identities and challenge heteronormative, binary expectations are essential. Institutions and educators have a responsibility to provide spaces with social support for trans\* student leaders to persist and matriculate in the college environment, both individually and in community. Last, campus departments need to work together to address intersections and be inclusive in their programming across populations they serve collectively. All in all, trans\* leadership in higher education is happening, even if it has not been captured, and institutions can do more to enable trans\* leaders on campus.

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