

ACUHO-I New Professional Scholarship

Submitted by:

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Date:

April 16, 2010

Transgender Students in Housing

The term “transgender” can be used to describe a number of individuals who essentially do not identify with society’s typical binary male/female categorization. Charlie is just one of these many students. With more and more students who are comfortable and willing to disclosing their underrepresented gender status, the needs of transgender students in housing has received more and more attention. Housing is one of the places on a college campus where gender identity can easily be “outed” for a student, with most universities assigning men live together, and women together, separate from one another (either by hall, floor, wing, or bedroom). Few campuses offer options for students who identify with a gender that does not conform to societal expectations. This issue in housing can be exacerbated when many institutions do not provide opportunities for students to identify outside of male or female, making it difficult for administrators to anticipate the needs of students who identify outside of this categorization. Without an option to check a box that matches one’s preferred gender classification, or the ability to fill in one’s gender identity on enrollment forms, those administrators on the front lines (i.e. Resident Directors) can be in a position to respond to a crisis. Housing departments have a unique responsibility and opportunity to provide support and resources to students that allow for more inclusive housing policies for all students. Ideally, a strategic plan could be formulated and implemented on how best to serve students of all gender backgrounds, however a lack of a strategic plan or facilities to accommodate transgender individuals leads to a situation such as this where immediate action needs to be taken in some form to ensure the safety and security of students.

Key Issues

When reading this case study, the key issues that immediately stood out to me are:

- 1) Charlie’s safety, security, and ability to thrive in hir living environment;
- 2) A lack of education and awareness the of the key issues transgender students face for student staff (and perhaps all Residence Life staff), and little training for staff to respond to these issues;
- 3) A lack of an inclusive environment and culture in the residence halls; and
- 4) The absence of a policy or protocol to respond to the needs of transgender students in the housing policy at Northwestern.

A lack of an inclusive atmosphere and culture in the hall is the crux of Charlie’s concerns regarding slurs and epithets written on hir door, and said about hir in passing. The RA’s response of holding floor meeting when Charlie was hesitant to do so showed a lack of

awareness on how to appropriately respond to gender bias in the hall, which significantly deteriorated the situation. This response from the RA was likely due to a lack of training for the entire Residence Life staff about how to respond to gender issues as they arise, and could be indicative of larger issue of appropriate training provided for responding to bias based incidents in the hall. It is this lack of awareness, appropriate training, and the exclusive culture in the hall that have brought Charlie's parents to my door as the Hall Director. Finally, an exclusive housing policy that does not adequately address to gender equity makes the resolutions to the case difficult to indentify. As an educator, my goals in resolving the issue would be to create awareness in the community (both in the hall and on campus) of what the needs of transgender students are, and how these in fact benefit all students; and based on this awareness promote a more inclusive culture on campus. In reaching these goals, there are some action steps to be taken immediately, and others that take much more time and resources to implement.

Immediate Responses

My first response would be to learn more about Charlie's feelings of safety and security in the hall, asking the parents to step into my office – taking the situation out of my home and to a more professional location. My goal for this initial conversation would be to allow the parents to feel heard, and for me to gather all the relevant information I can in regards to Charlie's current state. I believe when Charlie met with the RA ze was not truly being listening to, which is where the issue started to unravel. Providing an opportunity for Charlie's needs and concerns to be heard (via hir parents) can go a long way to diffuse the immediate stress and frustration the parents are experiencing. By giving the parent's time to vent their concerns, and truly listen, I believe at the end of that conversation I would be able to ask the parents to give me some time to confer with my colleagues and supervisor about what potential outcomes could be. It is important that in this conversation I do not promise Charlie's parents any specific outcomes, instead focusing on that we in Residence Life hear their concerns, and will do our best to find an outcome that provides a safe and comfortable living environment for Charlie.

My second immediate response would be to communicate with my supervisor the events that led up to Charlie's parents' arrival, and to provide details of how my conversation went with Charlie's parents. I would then talk to my supervisor about what potential outcomes might be. Given that changing university policy regarding gender-neutral housing options likely requires approval from the top of the organization (i.e. board of regents or trustees, the university president, etc) this is not a feasible resolution to addressing the short-term needs of Charlie and Residence Life. Therefore, I believe providing a single room at a double-rate is the best option available that provides a safe living environment for Charlie. Realistically, this is an option that is of little financial cost to the department, however is worth a great deal in setting a positive tone in the community. In my conversation with my supervisor I would see if this was a potential outcome that resolves some of the immediate concerns of safety in Charlie's room, and possibly only needs the approval of my supervisor (likely the Director of Housing at Northwestern). Providing a single room to Charlie is providing a safe and healthy living environment for Charlie in many ways. Primarily, it allows for Charlie to keep hir gender identity neutral and not "outing" hir as a particular gender by assigning hir to a specifically genderized room. With this resolution, even if Charlie is "out" in the community, that is a choice ze can

make individually, and not one that the department has made for hir. Secondly, providing this type of housing option for Charlie can be an opportunity to send a message to the Northwestern community that Residence Life is making strides toward a more inclusive environment and housing policy. This would be a place to start when looking for more growth opportunities in the future, such as creating either a gender-neutral floor or hall, or providing gender neutral bathroom spaces in the residence hall. By making this one small provision, the Residence Halls could really be taking a stand on the institutional level of what truly inclusive policies look like. And as the introduction stated, Centerville residents look to Northwest as the cultural center. Creating gender inclusive policies at the institution have the potential long-term outcome of creating awareness beyond the borders of Northwest's campus.

After conferring with my supervisor, hopefully Charlie could move into a single room soon, and the immediate safety and security of Charlie would be resolved. At this point, the parents would probably feel comfortable going back home, and supporting Charlie from a distance. My responsibility then would be to begin to cultivate a culture of inclusivity in my hall. This starts with educating student leaders on what the needs are for transgender students.

Intermediate Response

The next appropriate response once the immediate safety and security of Charlie is secured is to start to repair the harm to the community from the slurs spoken in the hall, the comments made about Charlie's relationship, the epitaph on Charlie's door, and the outcome of the hall meeting. Doing this will take time, and education. Throughout this education and awareness campaign, it would be important to frame conversations in a way that they are part of a larger initiative to promoting an inclusive campus for all students. This would mean including transgender students as a part of many different underrepresented students on campus with unique needs. It's important this campaign does not emulate the feel of the floor meeting in which Charlie felt targeted, as if the program was only done for hir benefit. A strong message that this campaign is about inclusivity, which really pertains to the safe and healthy living environment for all, is essential. Through this programming, students of all backgrounds and identities should know Northwestern is focused on building communities of care where all students can thrive.

A critical piece of this campaign would be to work on educating the Residence Life Staff about the needs and unique challenges transgender students face at a college campus. This training should be provided for both student and professional staff so that there is a consistent, and common, language shared and understood by the whole department. Establishing this could include providing similar information as above in "transgender students in housing," and would include definitions of what "transgender" means, and how these needs are different from those of the LGB community. As a part of this awareness and education would be to provide clear steps of how to respond to bias related incidents in the hall. Who to call, documenting the harassment, listening to the student, providing support in ways where the student is in control of the outcome, and knowing resources on campus would all be important points to make sure the staff learn as a part of this training. The student staff are leaders in the community, so it's essential that it is clear their role in creating these inclusive environments is a large one. These

student leaders are really the ones who can make small differences along the way that make a big impact. Until this inclusive attitude is understood and appreciated by students, larger campus wide initiatives may not be able to make the profound impact they are intended to make.

Steps after this education has been provided would include starting to assess what the current climate is like at Northwestern for transgender students, and what challenges and opportunities exist for longer term changes. Potential areas to look at would be admissions documentation (is “transgender” or a gender neutral option for students self-identifying on enrollment forms an option?), restroom facilities (do gender neutral restrooms exist anywhere on campus), and even reaching out to faculty (especially those who specialize in gender studies) for their feedback of what the climate is like at Northwestern.

Long Term Response

The long term responses available to me as a Resident Director may be limited, however in my role I can always advocate for the needs of my students and use allies developed through the intermediate response process. This stage is where longer substantial change could potentially happen. Changes such as providing gender neutral housing options to multiple students as a themed living environment, changing enrollment forms to provide a gender neutral classification system, and providing gender neutral bathroom facilities on campus (in halls, in athletic facilities, in academic buildings) are all roads to consider. These changes on Northwestern’s campus would require support from multiple stakeholders. However, with support, these changes are real possibilities that would help to create an environment where students such as Charlie may not be ever put in a similar situation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I believe it’s important to note that Northwest in many ways mirrors the type of campus I currently work at. Other than Northwest being slightly larger than the University of Puget Sound, several elements of the demographic and location of the fictional institution are similar. This being the case, I carefully considered what my institution would do in response to this case, and even more so what would I do as an actual Resident Director if this situation happened to me. What became paramount was formulating a realistic response. It’s easy to theorize an ideal response in a world where there are not prejudices or discriminatory views on whether or not transgender students really need, or that institutions are responsible to provide, gender neutral housing options. It’s much harder to think about how I as a new professional can make a difference for more than Charlie, in meaningful and long-lasting ways. While difficult to formulate an appropriate resolution that is both realistic and progressive, it is not impossible. Even if my ideas of an appropriate resolution do not rise to the top of this competition, I have valued the experience of thinking out a strategic response because I believe it could be tomorrow that this situation knocks on my door. Through this case study experience, I am much better equipped to respond in proactive rather than reactive way.