Queering Data Collection: Strategies for Reimagining Survey Instruments in Student Affairs

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Abstract

Despite calls for increasing diversity and inclusion, one area that remains limiting is in survey instruments and how gender and sexuality are measured. When gender is limited to binary, categorical options of male and female, trans* students are erased from existing on the college campus. This essay points to new strategies for measuring gender as a way to reimagine survey instruments in student affairs.

Keywords: Critical quantitative methods, trans* students, gender, student affairs

Student affairs and higher education are purported to be welcoming spaces for every student on campus. Mission and values statements for both institutions, and student affairs more specifically, often include phrases of prioritizing diversity and inclusion. This is evident in mission statements for both ACPA and NASPA, as well (ACPA, n.d.; NASPA, n.d.). For me, when I see mission statements focusing on diversity and inclusion, I first look at the forms and surveys being used in collecting information about the student population on their campus. Inclusion starts with how identity is being counted on that campus, and when gender is reduced to a binary check-box option of male or female (meaning sex-assigned-at-birth is really what is being measured), then that campus is erasing the possibility of trans* students from existing within the institution. Ultimately, when the possibility of trans* students to exist is limited, access to the institution is also limited or erased for trans* students (Marine, 2017).

To really focus on inclusion, one action student affairs can take is to reimagine admissions applications and survey instruments that measure gender and sexuality. Admissions’ applications are often a first point of contact for students, and thus filling out the application can send a message to the student of what identities are seen as real on that campus. Other survey instruments used within higher education that measure important factors such as graduation rates, retention rates, sense of belonging, and other measures of student success fail to capture more nuanced student experiences if trans* students are erased from the data. As Garvey et al. (2019) argue, “Survey instruments are tools to capture data for analyzing the representativeness and operationalization of social identities in higher education research” (p. 2.). Student affairs is at a unique position to
imagine and utilize new strategies for measuring gender on their campuses and thus providing ways for students to exist on their campus.

The use of diversity and inclusion within institutions’ and student affairs’ mission statements means that the institution itself must be critiqued. Genderism, the notion that gender is the same as sex and there are only two real possibilities of gender which are reinforced by society, is institutionalized (Nicolazzo, 2015). To begin to undo how genderism is institutionalized and to allow for possibilities of queer and trans* students on campus, the system must be reimagined. My aim with this essay is to take up a critical and queer quantitative framework to discuss new and developing strategies for using quantitative and survey methodologies to examine and measure the trans* student experience. By examining how gender is measured and counted within student affairs, and more broadly the institution, student affairs professionals can start to understand how gender is enacted within the roles of their functional areas and campuses, and begin to imagine new possibilities for gender within colleges and universities. Within this work, my goal is to shift focus from the trans* student to examine the actual institution in identifying ways that genderism is both constructed and institutionalized.

Positionality

I approach this work as a non-binary, queer scholar. I started my path into this field as student leader in residence life and then assistant hall director. After I completed my master’s in student affairs, I became an academic advisor. Thus, my approach to imagining new methods and strategies for measuring gender and understanding the trans* student experience within higher education is largely driven by my own experiences. I have often been frustrated by the limitations within student data and feeling like I am not represented within the data, or that I could somehow get a question about my gender wrong on a survey. Coupling my frustrations with data alongside working within student affairs, my aim has been to reimagine how gender is measured in key functional areas of student affairs.

A Review of Literature

In order to provide a bit of background intro trans* and LGBTQ+ students in student affairs and higher education, my aim with this literature review is to discuss the use of quantitative methods and gender and sexuality. I will also provide an overview of genderism in higher education, as well as a brief overview of trans* students in higher education and why I shift the gaze from the students towards the institution in examining how to reimagine colleges and universities for more possibilities of queer and trans* students.

Genderism

Genderism limits the possibilities of gender to exist beyond the binary options of
male or female (Biloudeau, 2009). This idea of only a binary system of gender, which is conflated with sex, is reinforced in society through gender roles and expectations, as well as through systemic, cultural, and institutional norms and practices (Beemyn, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2016b). Within higher education and student affairs, the institution reifies genderism both through policies and structures. Housing and residential life is one area of student affairs that only allows for two genders to exist as students often placed into rooms based on their sex-assigned-at-birth (Garvey et al., 2018; Nicolazzo & Marine, 2015; Nicolazzo, Marine, & Wagner, 2018). Similarly, other spaces and practices, such as sex-segregated intramural sports, and bathrooms and locker rooms, that divide students up by gender also reinforce the idea that only two genders exist on the campus (Marine, 2017). Additionally, functional areas of campus that collect data on their students by measuring gender with a binary option also reinforces the idea of genderism on campus and erases trans* and queer students from existing within offices (Garvey et al., 2019). These examples of genderism go unchecked when the institution, specifically data collection practices, itself is not critiqued when mission statements include diversity and inclusion.

Trans* Students in Higher Education

Within the field of student affairs and higher education, there is a growing body of trans* scholarship written by, for, and about trans* students and their experiences on campus (Adair, 2015; Catalano, 2015a, 2015b; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017; Pryor, 2015). This work highlights the ways in which trans* students move about the campus and through their experiences illustrates the nuanced ways trans* students are both made visible while simultaneously erased from campus through harmful policies and practices. Name and gender change policies that do not allow students to change their name, gender, and/or pronouns put trans* students at increased risk for being outed or misgendered in the classroom and other spaces where staff rely on official records to know their students, thus rendering trans* and queer students visible in ways they may not desire (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2017). These same policies and practices tend to only allow certain students to change their name, gender, and/or pronouns if they meet certain requirements such as approval from a doctor or other medical professional, or are changing their gender to another ‘real’ gender (e.g., from man to woman or woman to man) (Beemyn, 2005; Beemyn & Brauer, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2017). Limiting the options for gender on campus through both gender change policies as well as survey methods furthers the erasure of trans* students on campus. While much of the rich scholarship directly highlights the voices of trans* students (Catalano, 2015a, 2015b; Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Garvey & Rankin, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2016a, 2016b, 2017; Pryor, 2015), what is missing from this scholarship is how trans* students are viewed within the institution.
Quantitative Methods and Gender and Sexuality

Quantitative scholarship focused on the experiences of queer and trans* students in higher education has been quite limited (Dugan et al., 2012; Marine & Catalano, 2014; Renn, 2010; Garvey et al. 2019; Rankin & Garvey, 2015). Much of the quantitative scholarship has been focused on campus climate studies for LGBTQ students (Rankin et al., 2010; Garvey & Rankin, 2015). Campus climate studies are often limited due the binary options of gender operationalized in the survey instrument used to gather data (Dockendorff & Geist, Under Review; Garvey & Rankin, 2015). While it is true that quantitative approaches to data collection have limited queer and trans* students from existing within the data, quantitative methodologies can be reimagined through a queer and critical framework to push how data is collected and identity is counted within student affairs and higher education.

A Queer and Critical Framing

I approach this work through a critical quantitative and queer framework. What do I mean by that, you may ask? Researchers and practitioners who take up a critical quantitative approach to their work must acknowledge that traditional and conventional uses of survey measures and other practices have a history of reproducing oppression based on race, class, and gender (Spade, 2015; Stage, 2007). Instead of using methods in ways that have always been done, those using surveys with a critical approach must examine and question traditional assumptions and ask who is being privileged, as well as, who is being excluded by the means in which identity is being measured within a survey instrument. Adding a queer theoretical approach to critical quantitative methods means allowing for more fluidity and possibility within gender and sexuality identity categorizations. Briefly, queer theory questions what is considered normal, and is used to undo binary, categorical representations of gender and sexuality. Thus, in using queer theory alongside critical quantitative approaches to surveys, researchers and practitioners must examine how identity is limited by being reduced to static, binary, or categorical check-boxes. Instead of a binary option of male or female, can new approaches be developed that allow for more nuance and fluidity?

In thinking about survey instruments and the use of quantitative methodologies, identities are being measured, and often categorized into ‘simple and neat’ check boxes. But, oftentimes, surveys are limiting in that they do not allow for the fluidity or complexity when it comes to gender, sexuality, or race and ethnicity. For example, gender is a fluid term, and an individual’s gender identity can evolve over time as well as place. To take up critical quantitative approaches, researchers and practitioners must challenge and examine survey instruments to ask who is being included from our data, and more importantly, who do we exclude from our surveys, and thus, our institution?
I want to take a moment to point out that this essay focuses on gender and sexuality within survey instruments. Gender and sexuality are not the only pieces of survey instruments that need to be critiqued and reimagined. Race and ethnicity, immigration status, ability, and other important student characteristics are areas that student affairs administrators and practitioners need to examine. There is power in how identity is measured, and who is counted, and administrators and practitioners need to acknowledge that power and question how they use the information about their students. For example, Lopez and Marley (2018) and Faircloth, Alcantar, and Stage (2015) make recommendations for exploring postsecondary experiences of American Indian and Alaska Native students within large-scale data sets. Museus et al. (2018) uses the Culturally Engaging Campus Environment (CECE) Model to explore students’ sense of belonging uses critical quantitative approaches. Many more scholars use a critical quantitative approach to their work on survey methodology in higher education. As student affairs practitioners and administrators look to critically examine their surveys and counting of identities, all aspects of measuring identity should be examined, as no student experiences only gender or only race. Identity is complex and intersectional (Crenshaw, 1989), and our survey instruments need to allow for that complexity.

Stage (2007) points to two main objectives in taking up a critical quantitative approach in research in that researchers must:

1. Use data to represent educational processes and outcomes on a large scale to reveal inequities and to identify social or institutional perpetuation of systematic inequities in such processes and outcomes, and
2. Question the models, measures, and analytic practices of quantitative research in order to offer competing models, measures, and analytic practices that better describe experiences of those who have not been adequately represented (p. 10)

In the spirit of these two main objectives for critical quantitative work, I want to provide some examples for use in survey instruments within student affairs.

**Strategies for Queer Survey Methods in Student Affairs**

As mentioned above, I want to illustrate a couple of examples of how new survey instruments can be imagined for student affairs. The first example is a creation of a scale aimed at measuring trans* inclusivity of student affairs staff and aligns with the first objective of critical quantitative approaches articulated by Stage (2007). The second example, which aligns with Stage’s (2007) second objective for critical quantitative methods, provides a strategy for rethinking how gender is measured on survey instruments.
Queering Data Collection

Trans* Inclusivity Scale for Higher Education

My first example is using critical quantitative methods to use a survey to closely examine how the institution functions in ways that may be limiting or exclusive to trans* students on college campuses. In a recent study, I developed a survey instrument aimed at measuring trans* inclusive behaviors, attitudes, and knowledge student affairs staff had of trans* students on their campuses (Dockendorff, 2019). The Trans* Inclusive Scale for Higher Education (TISHE) examined the relationship of student affairs and academic advisors at four-year public institutions with how they viewed and interacted with trans* students. A 30-item survey instrument was developed and validated through exploratory factor analysis and Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) to measure how student affairs staff in functional areas of academic advising, enrollment management, career services, and housing and residence life viewed and interacted with trans* students in their roles on campus (DeVellis, 2017). In order to understand how staff make meaning of gender and what they knew about trans* student experience on campus, I felt that it was important to this create this instrument to shift the gaze away from trans* students directly and examine the institution through these key institutional agents. Since genderism is enacted through policy and practices this instrument provides a way to understand the ways in which genderism is being implemented in certain areas of campus. The data provided by this instrument points to strategies for improving training and education on gender within specific functional areas of campus (Dockendorff, 2019).

Expanded Measures of Gender Identity

Another strategy for queer survey methods is in the spirit of critically examining measures to “better describe the experiences of those who have not been adequately measured” (Stage, 2007, p.10). In often being frustrated by binary measures of gender I aimed to explore new ideas of measuring gender that felt less exclusionary. Magliozzi, Saperstein, and Westbrook (2016) illustrated that gender identity could be measured through the use of scales that measure levels of masculinity and femininity in all participants in a survey. I was intrigued by this idea set forth by Magliozzi et al (2016), but the use of only masculinity and femininity still felt limiting since it was still reproducing a binary version of gender in masculine and feminine levels only. After being inspired by the work of Jourian (2015), my colleague and I decided to test out an adapted version of scaled measures of gender identity and expression by measuring levels of femininity, masculinity, and androgyny in a survey aimed at understanding gendered experiences of students on campus (Dockendorff & Geist, Under Review). Our measure of gender identity and expression (See Figure 1) allowed us to see a more nuanced version of how students identify and make meaning of their gender.
I offer these previous two examples not as best practices of survey methods. As I will discuss later, best practices are not my end goal. My hope is that with these examples, practitioners and scholars, alike, can use these to imagine new and varying methods for what works best on their own campuses. I will use the remainder of this essay to discuss specific implications for student affairs.

**Discussion and Implications for Student Affairs**

In taking up a critical, queer approach to how surveys are conducted on campus, student affairs administrators have the opportunity to rethink what they know about their students on campus. Identities based on gender and sexuality are dynamic in nature and are socially constructed, and reinforced by institutions of postsecondary education, and thus scholars and practitioners must reimagine survey instruments to be culturally responsive to the complexity of gender and sexuality (Garvey et al., 2019).

**Admissions Applications**

Institutional data collection start with admissions applications. As the application process is an early contact point for students with the institution, how gender and sexuality are measured on the application is an indicator for the student of whether or not their gender will be seen as real on the campus. Yes, it is true that there are federally mandated requirements for data to be reported to the Department of Education or the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), and the way those demographic characteristics of students may be more difficult to change. However, admissions offices, and student affairs more broadly, could shape the conversation at their institutions for how different data of the student
population could be collected for use within the campus.

Survey Research

Student affairs research often utilizes survey research to measure and predict student success in areas such as sense of belonging, graduation rates, retention rates, and campus climate studies. Garvey (2019) argued that large, national surveys must include LGBQ students. Additionally, Lange, Duran, & Jackson (2019) also point out that the inclusion of queer and trans* identities within national survey instruments aimed at higher education and student affairs, “is critical because this information is not collected by many admissions offices or federal data sets” (p. 516-517). For administrators and practitioners to truly understand student success on their campus, as well as nationally, these instruments must do a better job of allowing for the fluid gendered possibilities of the students.

Further, survey research also provides a strategy for understanding the institution itself. Little remains known about how key institutional actors meet the needs of queer and trans* students (Lange et al., 2019). Thus, surveys like the TISHE can be utilized to flip the focus to understanding the institutional practices and structures that play a role in the experience of trans* students (Dockendorff, 2019; Lange et al., 2019).

Institution and Policy Implications

In reimagining how gender and sexuality is measured on survey instruments and institutional data, it becomes possible to more closely examine how genderism has been institutionalized. These types of measures can help to provide data for why binary, sex segregated institutional structures such as bathrooms or campus housing do not fit the needs of students. A more complex, scaled measurement of gender identity and expression allows for administrators and practitioners to see why binary categorizations of their students maintained through structures and policies do not work. Using new data collection measures can inform how gender is enacted within functional areas of campus. With a more complex understanding of the nuances of gender identity, areas of campus can reimagine policies within student affairs. Rigid name and gender change policies can be reimagined to allow for students to determine when they make changes to their names or gender, and how staff and faculty should address them. These types of policy and institutional changes start with new strategies for measuring identities of the students.

My Challenge to Student Affairs

My challenge to student affairs is this: if diversity and inclusion are embedded within your mission statements, reimagine how you survey students. Critically evaluate your use of demographic data of your students, and ask who is being
excluded from your campus through how identity is being measured? I have focused this essay on expanding measure of gender and sexuality within survey research in higher education, but this challenge extends beyond gender and sexuality.

Nicolazzo (2017) discusses best practices within student affairs and higher education. In her critique of best practices, she cautions that best practices assume that there may be one correct way of doing things within student affairs (Nicolazzo, 2017). Thus, best practices fail to consider the nuance and evolving nature of students and their identities. Similarly, in the spirit of a trans* critical quantitative approach, whatever strategies for measuring gender and sexuality within survey measures are implemented, scholars and practitioners must constantly reevaluate these measures and not let them become stagnant (Curly, 2020). Identity is dynamic and evolves, just as our students do, and thus it is important through a critical, queer lens to continue pushing our survey methods and strategies to be dynamic and evolve with the students.
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