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Cultivating a community of resilience for transgender collegians through the practice of

sustainable leadership

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Abstract

Transgender students have always existed in communities of higher education yet are just now beginning to be acknowledged and included within the context of academia. This has primarily led to the development of campus resource centers intended to protect these students and provide safe spaces on campus. While this is a crucial support system for universities to provide, the framework described herein envisions a future where transgender students can practice resilience and feel a sense of belonging *anywhere* within their college community. Through a comprehensive review of the literature, this paper highlights the need for a sustainable and campus-wide approach in order for universities to improve transgender student success rates. This requires educational leaders to take an active and holistic approach to their leadership and engagement with students, which can be supported through the practice of sustainable leadership. An example of how this framework can be applied within higher education programming is included, with a specific implementation plan for the department of Student Activities and Leadership Programs (SALP) at Portland State University (PSU) in Portland, Oregon.

Keywords: transgender, queer, gender, higher education, sustainable leadership, community, student affairs, equity and inclusion

Dedication

To the students who are told they don't belong; that they aren't good enough or smart enough.

To the students who have failed and had no one to encourage them to persist.

To the students who are not represented and/or respected by academia.

To the students I will inevitably leave out of this conversation due to my own power, privilege, and limited comprehension of communities I am not a part of.

To the students who do not yet see themselves as students.

To my trans* colleagues who, like me, are trying to write ourselves into existence.

To my younger self, Beau. We are resilient.

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Preamble

My Guiding Principles and Values

Sustainable leadership is a term I could not define when I began my journey in the Leadership for Sustainability Education (LSE) program. As I have now reviewed my initial reflections from my first quarter here, I realize I had a limited view of the term "leadership", too. Early on I might have said this program changed me, but really I think it just opened up parts of me I had been taught to hide. Without the **holistic sense of self** and community that I developed in this program, I do not think I would have publicly accepted myself as a transgender nonbinary individual. I would not have the confidence or courage to stand up for myself and other students like me; to challenge the boxes those in power created for us to remain within. The traditional forms of education I received in my upbringing made me compartmentalize pieces of myself, making it nearly impossible for me to acknowledge this beautiful and unique piece of who I am. It made me see myself as an "other." The LSE program led me to be vulnerable and embrace all of myself; to recognize the **interconnectedness** of my whole being. This program rid my thoughts of being an "other" and instead gave me **empowerment** to appreciate my difference and see how my holistic and true self contributes to the greater system of this Earth that connects us all.

One statement I have said a lot in the past two years is that I am not the type of person who belongs in higher education. College never came easy to me, but for some reason I felt called to join this program. Looking back, all I have is sincere love and gratitude for myself that I was able to take this step. Maybe it was a small piece of me inside that was tired of being hidden, and that piece of me felt ignited by the idea of this program. Sometimes I still am in disbelief that I made it here. I am in disbelief that I became part of a generous and **inclusive** community, facilitated classes, mentored college students, helped create and host

the first annual fundraiser dinner for the Learning Gardens Laboratory (LGL), and now aspire to make a career within student affairs in higher education.

My entire education before this program led me to believe I did not belong; that I was not smart enough or disciplined enough to be here. The LSE program gave me the acceptance and liberation I needed to realize I do belong, even though the educational systems we have set in place want me to believe otherwise. This program not only helped me understand leadership and its connection to sustainability, but it allowed me to form my own definition of who I am – who I have always had the potential to be – as a leader in sustainability education. I feel deeply in my whole being that every individual who wants to have an education should be encouraged and supported to do so, and my leadership values and beliefs are heavily dependent on this concept.

My Educational Leadership Philosophy

Student learning and development. The American College Personnel Association (ACPA) identifies student learning and development as an ethical principle for student affairs professionals to follow, and I personally believe this to be important for my own practice within educational leadership (Statement of Ethical Principles & Standards, n.d.). Student learning and development is incredibly complex and includes a variety of dimensions such as multicultural competence and sensitivity to the whole student. This concept goes far beyond helping a student maintain their grades and graduate. It involves an awareness and consideration of their diverse needs such as the physical, social, emotional, spiritual, and personal. If we as leaders in higher education cannot acknowledge the student as a whole being, we will discover barriers and limitations in our efforts to support their learning and development. This guiding belief is crucial for my professional practice because I am interested in the success of my students and I recognize that this involves much more than just getting them to graduation. Being in a position of leadership with students should involve

checking in with them, caring about their life outside the classroom or office space, learning about what is important to them, and helping them connect all those pieces of who they are to their education.

        Responsibility to society and social justice. Another guiding principle I consider to be significant for my leadership in education involves my personal responsibility to society and promoting social justice for my students and our collective communities. This principle is listed in both the ACPA and the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) shared principles for student affairs professionals, yet I feel they could both be improved (Statement of Ethical Principles & Standards, n.d.; Statement of Shared Ethical Principles, 2006). The CAS statement on justice encourages equality and fairness, but I personally believe in taking this further to equity and inclusion (Statement of Shared Ethical Principles, 2006). As educational leaders, we must acknowledge the differences that our students face for reasons outside of their control, such as the financial situation of their family, the color of their skin, their gender or sexuality, where they were born, etc. It is important for us to not just strive for equality, but to make our spaces within the institution respectful and understanding of oppressive systems existing for any student that may walk through the door. I personally consider equality to be reactionary, and equity to be proactive. As a leader in education, it is crucial that I recognize the impact my language, background, and environment have on students that share a space with me, and it is my responsibility to make sure that space is equitable.

        Shared and sustainable leadership. The final guiding principle that I consider to be important for my career in student affairs is shared and sustainable leadership. This concept takes leadership to a new and dynamic level that I feel incorporates the diversity that exists throughout society and the students that enter higher education. Burns, Vaught, and Bauman (2015) explain how the traditional, linear-thinking and hierarchical structure of leadership

assumes that leaders have the correct answer and can provide direction to that answer to those below them. It is an authoritative style of leadership that was designed for efficiency and specialization, which leads to most people assuming they are unable to be leaders because they do not have a particular skill-set that they see in typical leaders.

In contrast, sustainable leadership assumes that everyone has the capacity for leadership. A leader's role in sustainable leadership is not to lead over others, but to share the responsibility and lead with them (Burns, Vaught, & Bauman, 2015). This principle acknowledges the complexities that make up our world and the interconnections that exist between each and every one of us. Instead of providing answers and solutions, I find benefit in creating opportunities for students to come together as a group and create their own answers to the problems. This aligns with my other guiding principles in that it encourages the acceptance and celebration of our differences. It requires going into a place of uncertainty and chaos, but with that comes the potential for creative emergence of new solutions that are inclusive and rooted in the values of everyone involved in the process (Burns, Vaught, & Bauman, 2015). As the leader in this form of shared and sustainable leadership, it is important for me to be reflective and grounded in my own understanding of who I am, my worldview, and what skills and values I bring to the community. From there, I can share leadership with my students in a transparent and vulnerable way that shows them their role is important and valued.

Through this process of shared leadership, I find that students see more value in themselves, consider themselves leaders, and strive for more than the minimum expectations that I set for them. When students are allowed to incorporate their uniqueness and individual skills and values into the community, they learn to rely on one another, stand up for one another, and collaborate for the greater society as a whole. Shared and sustainable leadership

is an important guiding principle for me as a student affairs educator because it fosters cycles of growth and change in myself as the leader, the students, and our collective community.

LSE Key Areas of Learning

The LSE program is interdisciplinary in nature, and therefore I found the key learning areas to be present throughout several experiences I encountered in this program. My reflection on this learning also came from reading groups outside of class, community-based learning (CBL) opportunities, and my professional roles at Portland State University (PSU) with both the LGL and the Student Sustainability Center (SSC).

Self understanding and commitment. The classes I participated in that most connected my understanding of self and commitment to sustainability are Advanced Leadership for Sustainability, Sense of Place, Developmental Perspectives on Adult Learning, and Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning. These classes had us reflect on our individual values, identities, and leadership. They also fully immersed us into a "coheart" community that shared many perspectives on sustainability, yet also provided an invaluable source for understanding the differences and diversity that connects us all. Sense of Place made me realize a missing piece of my self-understanding; that I could live in Portland my entire life and never truly feel rooted here. Through this, I learned how to develop a sense of place in my community, and that continues to be a space of learning for me as I commit to better understand the interconnected system of place that I call home.

Systemic view of the world. Developing a systemic view of the world was best supported by my classes on Global Political Ecology and Permaculture. Through these courses, I was introduced to systems that are generally invisible and uphold structures of power and privilege. I learned how to examine and critique the processes of the world through a whole-systems design, which helped me develop a strong value in holistic and interconnected systems. I found that I could connect principles from permaculture to just

about anything in my life, from the obvious gardening design to the less-obvious organization of my multi-family kitchen or the leadership structure of the department I work in. Through my professional role with the SSC, I was able to make connections between my classes and this position to understand more about institutional systems that occur within higher education. Some of these are clear, while others I found are obscured yet highly systemic. It was in this position with the SSC that I first experienced the systemic, institutional oppression that exists against transgender students, which became a driving force for the development of this paper. Many of the barriers that exist for students in higher education could be addressed by first breaking down the oppressive systems that our institutions are rooted in and transforming them into holistic systems intended to view students in a more sustainable and affirming way.

   Bio-cultural relationships. My learning of bio-cultural relationships is tied to most experiences I have had in this program, including CBL projects and my roles with the LGL and SSC. The CBL project from Advanced Leadership for Sustainability was a group effort in which my entire cohort collaborated to create a cohesive proposal for a program. This was a challenging project that involved incorporating the values and perspectives from a dynamic group of leaders. Some were interested in passionately exploring one possibility, while others did not see its significance. I learned a lot about privilege and injustices by listening and learning from the experiences of my colleagues. This process also helped me to form a sustainable network within my cohort so that we could support each other in developing our own understandings of effective leadership.

   Tools for sustainable change. My role with the SSC was instrumental in developing my personal toolkit for enacting sustainable change. Many of the classes I participated in gave me the foundation needed to understand my role in sustainable leadership, and my position with the SSC allowed me to practice and apply those foundations. I have the utmost

gratitude to my mentor, Heather Spalding, for graciously allowing me to co-facilitate a student leadership course with her that focused on sustainability. Through this experience, I was able to implement interdisciplinary, transformational, place-based, and culturally-relevant pedagogies from the LSE program into lesson plans and activities for a new cohort of students. The facilitation opportunities I received in my Educational Leadership and Policy (ELP) and LSE classes also helped prepare me for effectively facilitating this student leadership course, including Social Foundations of Education, Principles of Educational Research, and Ecological and Cultural Foundations of Learning. These classes also gave me the confidence to present my leadership as a sustainability educator at a conference earlier this year. This personal toolkit is ultimately the reason this paper is able to exist. Without it, I would not have recognized the interconnected systems between the barriers I face as a transgender student and the higher education professionals I have come to interact with on a regular basis during my time in college.

Academic Synthesis

Introduction

Sustainability has become a buzz word in recent years, making it important to define within the context of this paper. Most individuals and organizations have their own personal definitions of what sustainability means to them, but there are generally a few key components that are agreed upon around the world. Sustainability, at its core, is designed to meet the needs of the present while also preserving systems for future generations, meaning that system needs to last a long time. There are three interconnected dimensions of sustainability, known as The Three Pillars of Sustainability, which includes ecology, society, and economics (U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, 2019). In the context of this paper, a sustainable university would have the three pillars incorporated into their primary systems and activities, ensuring that ecological integrity, social harmony, and economic well-being

exists for current and future generations enrolled at the university (Clugston & Calder, 1999). Without factoring in the needs of their diverse student body, the university system cannot be considered sustainable. When sustainability is not designed for all, marginalized groups tend to suffer most of the consequences. Several examples of this have been identified over the years, from environmental racism like the water crisis in Flint, Michigan to ridding the world of plastic straws and leaving disabled people without a necessary survival tool in the process (Archie & Paul, 2018; Benz, 2019). Sustainability requires equity in order to work, and it cannot be equitable unless all voices, identities, and perspectives have a seat at the table. Within a university, that means considering the needs of every student that could potentially enroll, because it would need to incorporate the needs of all the students in order to be sustainable.

As higher education professionals, it is important to focus educational efforts on the most vulnerable student populations on campus. Supportive environments created with marginalized student populations in mind will also inevitably work for students with more privileges, therefore contributing to the success of all students rather than just the dominant majority. Awareness of transgender students is beginning to gain traction in higher education, primarily resulting in campus resource centers intended to protect these students and provide safe spaces on campus. While this is a necessary support system for universities to provide, the solution described herein imagines a future where transgender students do not have to confine themselves to a resource center in order to feel safe or a sense of belonging on campus. A more sustainable and campus-wide approach is needed in order for universities to improve transgender student success rates. This requires educational leaders to take a more active and holistic approach to their leadership and engagement with students, which can be supported through the practice of sustainable leadership. Since transgender students are often left without a community and sense of belonging in college, higher education professionals

need to foster a sustainable learning environment that empowers transgender students to be

engaged in campus communities and supports their resilience to graduation and beyond.

Literature Review

   Barriers to success for transgender students. *Oppression.* A common risk factor

that exists for transgender collegians is oppression, which is manifested within higher

education in many different ways. Hardiman and Jackson (2007) describe oppression as a

multileveled system consisting of three levels: individual, institutional, and social/cultural.

Nicolazzo (2017) provides examples of institutional oppression against transgender students,

such as intercollegiate athletics that are gender-segregated with only binary gender

representations and institutional forms with only two checkboxes for gender. Transgender

students, or rather their gender, are typically not included on institutional forms as a

demographic to quantify or report on, and only 18% of transgender student records include

their correct gender identity (James et al., 2016; Rankin & Garvey, 2015). Goldberg and

Kuvalanka (2018) also list institutional forms as a contributor to transgender oppression,

specifically regarding the invalidation many transgender students face when their university

refuses to change their name on forms and classroom rosters from their legal, birth, or dead

name to their chosen name. This level of institutional and structural oppression against

transgender students is highly problematic, as it excludes transgender identities from

quantitative research and further restricts institutional advocacy, policy reform, and resource

allocation that could improve the college environment for these students. Specific

environmental changes to the institution that could benefit from this type of data includes

current concerns over gender-exclusive policies and practices around residence halls, health

care, and bathrooms on campus (Dugan, Kusel, & Simounet, 2012; Effrig, Bieschke, &

Locke, 2011; James et al., 2016; Seelman, 2016; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). For

example, having data on the number of transgender students at a university and the forms of

oppression they face could provide details as to why so many transgender students refuse to live on campus (Nicolazzo, 2017). While literature suggests this is likely due to the fact that they are required to live in gender-segregated dormitories and specifically with the gender they were assigned at birth rather than the gender they actually identify with, more empirical data highlighting this gap of inclusion would remove any doubt and provide reason to make equitable changes to residence halls – such as single-occupancy and gender-inclusive housing options – on behalf of transgender students (Seelman, 2016).

Transgender students also face a significant level of individual and social oppression from their peers and college staff. The literature states that discrimination can increase transgender students' risk for negative outcomes, including lower self-esteem and higher levels of stress, anxiety, and suicidality (Seelman, 2016; Seelman, Woodford, & Nicolazzo, 2017). A study by James et al. (2016) explains that 24% of transgender collegians who are publicly out as transgender have experienced forms of mistreatment such as verbal, physical or sexual harassment. American Indian, Black, and Middle Eastern transgender students were more likely to experience these forms of harassment than white, Latinx, and Asian transgender students (James et al., 2016). While the empirical research that exists on this matter has stated transgender students perceive campus climate as hostile and report more discrimination than their cisgender peers, the impact this has on transgender collegians' psychological health is largely unknown due to the lack of research in this area (Effrig, Bieschke, & Locke, 2011; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Effrig, Bieschke, and Locke (2011) examined levels of distress transgender students face and reported that they are twice as likely to engage in self-injurious behavior and three times as likely to have attempted suicide than their cisgender peers. These numbers have increased in recent years, with attempted suicide rates of transgender people being nearly nine times the rate of the U.S. population as of 2015 (James et al., 2016).

These forms of oppression can have such a severe impact on transgender students that they will hide their identity if possible, and even avoid potential support systems like resource centers or faculty out of fear that it may lead to negative consequences (Garvey, Taylor, & Rankin, 2015; Nicolazzo, 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). In order for transgender students to fully integrate themselves into their college community, they must be able to safely and confidently access their peers and support groups in spaces like resource centers designed for queer students without fear of consequences based on their transgender identity.

    Accommodations and accessibility. Creating spaces on college campuses that are accommodating to transgender students is a potential avenue for helping them persist and thrive throughout their collegiate experience. Swanbrow Becker and colleagues (2017) identify a barrier to these accommodations being a lack of understanding of transgender students' multiple identities, experiences and ways of coping with stress, and their perceived access to support within the institution. Campus queer resource centers are commonly noted as helpful sources to make accommodations and resources more accessible for transgender students, but the literature suggests more institution-wide support is needed in collaboration with these centers, especially when studies have shown transgender students to struggle with reaching out for help even within those resource centers that are designed for them (Nicolazzo, 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). For students holding multiple marginalized identities, like identifying as both Black and transgender, the literature suggests that resource centers are even more problematic because there is a significant lack of acceptance and a general understanding of the intersectionality between these multiple identities (Nicolazzo, 2017). Black transgender students participating in Nicolazzo's (2017) study explained they would have to leave one of their identities at the door, as both would not generally be understood in either space in a positive way. In situations where transgender students cannot

turn to their family for support, and also fear the consequences or potential rejection that may come from reaching out to university professionals, the lack of access to these vital resources could force them to leave the university early and possibly suffer from further mental health symptoms mentioned earlier within the literature review.

   Kinship networks. A sense of belonging within a college community is most frequently associated with connecting with peers. The literature suggests that transgender students are less likely to have a social support network than their cisgender peers, which may be derived from a lack of friends, colleagues, or family who are connected to and can empathize with being a transgender student (James et al., 2016; Nicolazzo, 2017; Swanbrow Becker et al., 2017). Dugan, Kusel, and Simounet (2012) similarly discuss this and suggest that it is incredibly difficult to understand the transgender experience without experiencing it directly. This inability of transgender students to create crucial college relationships is shown to not only leave them socially disadvantaged, but it impacts them academically as well (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). When students are less involved with social relationships in college, they are also less likely to engage in campus life.

   Leaders in higher education consider building community for their students a goal of their profession, but the literature suggests colleges tend to fail in fostering community for members of the Queer community (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017). Even within queer spaces on campus, transgender students in particular face discrimination and must advocate for their needs to be holistically accepted into the community (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). Transgender students are constantly having to navigate informing and educating others on their gender identity, in many cases being considered an educational tool to their cisgender peers, which takes a severe emotional and mental toll (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018).

Researchers recently identified that these challenges transgender students have in establishing a community within college have essentially forced these students into developing kinship networks (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn & Woodford, 2017). Nicolazzo (2017) refers to kinship networks as "the relationships between and among trans* students, faculty, and staff on college campuses" (p. 25). A kinship network involves a close group of peers who recognize and honor the groups' gender identities and provide shelter from the cultural realities of transgender oppression on their college campus (Nicolazzo, 2017). The literature suggests that transgender students connected through kinship networks consider these spaces to be important for creating and maintaining community, whether these networks developed in physical or virtual spaces (Goldberg & Kuvalanka, 2018; Nicolazzo, 2017; Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017). Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, and Woodford (2017) also depict transgender kinship networks to function as a bridge, serving as a crucial connection that can support transgender student persistence and success. These scholars further explain the need for more research into transgender kinship networks and how they foster resilience and community-building (Nicolazzo, Pitcher, Renn, & Woodford, 2017). While the overall literature on the transgender student experience is empirically limited, the recent literature reviewed here shows potential for improving transgender collegians resilience with the development of a framework around kinship networks.

Impact of leadership on student success. Ensuring student success is an increasingly important component of what higher education institutions offer to students. However, what student success entails is not easily identifiable through a sentence in the dictionary. The way universities have evaluated student success varies throughout institutions and continues to be reshaped today. This may have to do with changes in leadership and how different leadership

styles and people in positions of power influence an institution's definition and evaluation of student success.

　　Traditional leadership. Student success is traditionally measured as a university-wide learning outcome more than an outcome of individual students (Fornaciari & Arbaugh, 2017; Mullin, 2012). This might include data on graduation rates, second-year retention, level of academic attainment, and the number of degrees a university awards each year. Emerging measures of student success also include student learning and career outcomes (Mullin, 2012). These traditional measures of success are primarily oriented around academic affairs, likely due to the notion that getting good grades leads to graduation and graduation leads to a career. This strongly aligns with traditional leadership, which involves a linear-thinking model where the primary goal is based on maintaining sales and high profitability (Burns, Vaught, & Bauman, 2015; Han, You, & Son, 2006). In traditional leadership, there are assumptions that leaders have all the necessary answers, people do what leaders tell them to, and high risk needs powerful leaders who know how to handle the situation (Wheatley & Frieze, 2010). Golonka and Mojsa-Kaja (2013) explain that effectiveness and efficiency in an organization is the foundational way to achieving organizational goals in this traditional mindset. Viewing a university as the organization in this scenario implies high-achieving and low-risk students would be ideal for maintaining the university goal of student success. Prioritizing high-achieving students in environments where traditional leadership is in place makes sense when the ultimate goal is retention and handing out as many degrees as possible. As long as leaders at the university are able to get students to graduation, they are fulfilling their responsibility of enacting student success. Unfortunately, this traditional form of teaching and learning is not based around ecological principles that would sustain the planet but rather the unsustainable cultural systems students are sent into after graduating, therefore continuing the cycle of these linear and unsustainable systems (Burns, 2011).

When considering the characteristics of traditional leadership, it is understandable that student success has historically been defined as an outlook of the university rather than an outlook of the students. The hierarchical nature of traditional leadership leads to those at the top getting the acknowledgment and recognition from positive yearly outcomes, which is similar to positive rankings in student success reflecting well on the university as a whole. In the same way, the data traditionally measured for student success is quantitative and shows the big picture of how the university is performing (Mullin, 2012). The data measured does not incorporate the opinions or issues of individual students, even though this qualitative data could be helpful for understanding weak points in programs and learning outcomes centered around student success. Since in most cases transgender students are not included in quantitative data for their university, this untapped qualitative data would serve as a way to give them a voice and help educational leaders at the institution reshape programs in an inclusive and sustainable way that is supportive of all their students.

Sustainable leadership. Schreiner (2018) suggests that instead of just reaching for student success, leaders in higher education should encourage students to thrive. In this context, thriving means students are engaged in the college experience socially, intellectually, and psychologically (Schreiner, 2018). This idea of success still leads to persistence, but views students holistically and reaches farther into their lives than just graduating from the university. Schreiner (2018) lists several pathways for students to thrive in college, such as campus involvement, interactions with faculty, spirituality, institutional integrity, and sense of community on campus. This suggests a need for institutional support from educational leaders in both student affairs and academic affairs. Many of these pathways are also incorporated into practices of sustainable leadership and are crucial to overcoming barriers for transgender students.

Sustainable leadership as a practice in higher education is an interdisciplinary approach that engages students in critical reflection, creative problem solving, active citizenship, and personal, spiritual, and intellectual awareness (Burns, 2011; Burns, Vaught, & Bauman, 2015). This form of leadership incorporates theories and models centered around sustainability, diverse perspectives, and the ecological interconnectedness of the earth. Leadership for sustainability challenges the traditional notions of leadership with three main assumptions: 1) anyone can be a leader if they choose to be, 2) the role of a leader is to lead alongside others instead of over others, and 3) leaders cannot be effective without embracing the holistic interconnections existing between people and ecological systems (Ferdig, 2007). Ferdig (2007) describes sustainable leadership as a way to lead that takes into consideration the impact that people and organizations have on the earth, society, and the health of economies locally and globally. Wheatley and Frieze (2010) encourage those practicing sustainable leadership to provide people with the time and conditions necessary for collaboration, experiential learning, reflection, and the development of group measurements of progress and achievement. Sustainable leaders should also be supportive in a way that people know their leader is there for them, which can include defending this practice of shared leadership from others who are critical and wish to take back control of the freedom offered to people (Wheatley & Frieze, 2010). The literature on sustainable leadership suggests that in a university setting, student success would be centered holistically around students in a way that incorporates concerns of social inequities at the university and within the systems of learning that students are expected to participate in. Therefore, through the lens of sustainable leadership, marginalized student populations like transgender collegians would be highly influential to how the university measures and evaluates student success.

Summary of the literature. Most literature on transgender students focuses on a deficit-based approach that places transgender students as victims of violence, harassment,

and oppression (Nicolazzo, 2017). This is an important component of the literature to understand the transgender student experience, but it does not tell the whole story. There is a lack of empirical research to holistically understand and support transgender students through affirmative, resilience-based approaches. This narrative that views transgender students solely through the lens of victimization limits transgender students from seeing themselves as resilient and restricts the ability of higher education professionals to explore how to create supportive communities in college for this student population. Instead of centering on the goal of student success as it traditionally reflects on the university, leaders in higher education should focus on creating sustainable and holistic environments that provide the space for all of their students to thrive. It is crucial for educational leaders to help establish affirmative community support systems that address the issues discussed in the literature through sustainable leadership practices to improve transgender student resilience in higher education.

Intervention

As educational and sustainable leaders in higher education, we must move past relying on our transgender and marginalized students to tell us when we are acting in harmful or ignorant ways. Instead, we should be able to see the oppressive systems we continue to uphold, willingly or unwillingly, and actively fight to remove them from the environments of our students. We need to do this because we are holistic and transformative leaders, not because the one openly transgender student in the room had the courage to bring attention to an issue. In order to address the lack of community for transgender students on campus, we must look at the root of the problem, which actually has very little to do with transgender students at all. The issue stems from the campus environment and culture they are forced to participate within based on the promise of a degree at the end. Therefore, the issue of an inadequate campus environment for transgender students could be better addressed by

focusing on higher education professionals, the higher education system, and the campus environment that they collectively provide for these students.

The resilience-based community (RBC) framework. The intervention proposed in this paper is a holistic framework for university programming. The RBC framework has four main components to support educational leaders in cultivating a resilience-based community for their transgender students: affirmation, resilience, relationship, and advocacy. These components incorporate practices, models, and theories from educational leaders such as bell hooks, Z Nicolazzo, Heather Burns, Barbara Love, Parker Palmer, Paulo Freire, and Dilafruz Williams. Additionally, the RBC framework has pedagogical foundations in popular education, critical race theory, social change model, resilience theory, systems thinking, and Queer theory. The primary intended result of this framework is more transgender students having a sense of belonging through community in college environments, giving them the tools needed to persist to graduation and create positive changes in society post-college. While the RBC framework is designed specifically for supporting transgender collegians, it can be adapted to support other marginalized populations as well. Similarly, my approach is through the lens of student affairs, but I do believe it can be supportive of academic affairs programming as well. This framework is broadly designed so that it may be utilized by any educational leaders looking to center their programming around the marginalized student populations at their institution.

Affirmation. The majority of literature that exists on the topic of transgender students is from a deficit perspective, with the missing piece being their lived, everyday experiences simply engaging in campus activities. This results in higher education professionals seeking to fix the deficit, rather than engage students in a holistic, all-encompassing way. One significant deficit in the literature is the high suicide rates that exist for transgender students. This results in educational leaders providing resources like suicide hotlines or readings about

self-care. While this might be better than nothing, this "fix-it" mentality is a reactionary approach to concerns of mental health. When students are only perceived through this lens of a deficit, it continues the assumption that they are different or an "other" in the college environment. Leaders in higher education should instead center their efforts on a proactive, affirmation-based approach. This requires affirming their differences in a positive way through a variety of practices. In a classroom, this might look like using and asking for pronouns and chosen names of students on the first day of class. When forming a group, an affirming practice might be developing community agreements, so they can collectively voice their needs and values in order to collaborate as a group (Burns, Vaught, & Bauman, 2015). Both of these practices still incorporate the needs of transgender students as identified in the literature, but they do so without bringing unnecessary negative attention to transgender students that may be in the room. These affirming practices do not single-out students; they provide the opportunity and space for students to engage in the community in whatever way feels most appropriate for them as an individual.

For example, I started going by a different name halfway through the school year. It was a long and constant battle inside my head of how to "come out" yet again, by introducing my community to a new name. I ultimately decided to let it happen casually in a one-on-one setting. I started by telling close friends in my LSE cohort, then my supervisor and colleagues at SSC. Then, when I tired of seeing my deadname in the university's online system, I changed it there too. After that point, I figured I would have to tell my professors, although we were in the middle of the term and that would be confusing and burdensome for everyone. So I decided not to tell my professors that term; I would just start fresh with my new name in classes next term. To my surprise, in class the following day, my professor greeted me with my new name. He noticed the change online for my profile and took it upon himself to refer to me with my chosen name, without me bringing attention to it or requesting it. I had no idea

how affirming that would feel to have my professor, an authority figure and mentor, affirm my identity without me requesting it. He realized that the way I needed to change my name was by not bringing attention to it, and he respected that by following my lead. This ultimately gave me the courage to tell everyone in my network on campus, and from then on I was referred to as Beau. Affirmation is a crucial first step to supporting transgender students, but it is not enough on its own. Affirmation shows a basic acknowledgment and understanding, which can give students the support and courage they need to remain resilient in an inadequate college environment.

      Resilience. I was not surprised to learn that the grounding element for my intervention originated from ecology (Brand & Jax, 2007). In its original context of ecological resilience, it most simply represents the ability of natural ecosystems to bounce back from significant adversity. Resilience is now a multidisciplinary term that has taken on a variety of definitions (Brand & Jax, 2007). In the context of higher education, Nicolazzo (2017) explains this term is typically tied to retention, but it has more to offer than that. For transgender students, resilience is not just a noun that describes where they come from, it is also a verb; a continual practice of strength and courage to overcome significantly harmful everyday experiences (Nicolazzo, 2017). Therefore, even when a student may not think of themselves as resilient, they can practice resilience as a coping strategy to overcome oppressive structures that affect them individually. Practicing resilience can look different for each student, and as educational leaders, we need to be aware of that. For some students, this may include seeking out gender-neutral bathrooms on campus. For others that do not have easy access to a gender-neutral bathroom, practicing resilience might mean not using a bathroom on campus at all and instead waiting until they get to the safety of their home. There are several resilience practices that transgender students might incorporate into their daily routine to help them make it through a day in college with reduced levels of oppression, harassment, and harm

(see Appendix A). Although in most cases, the existing barriers that restrict transgender

collegians from thriving in the university environment can limit a student's ability to practice

resilience at all. Therefore, as educational leaders, we need to transform the campus

environment for our students so that it is not restrictive and creates the space for practicing

resilience in all its forms through a whole systems approach. This requires a deep

understanding and connection to the lives of our transgender students. Educational leaders

must be aware of the systemic and cultural oppression that impacts their transgender students,

and how those systems inherently influence their own departments and work environments on

campus. As leaders in higher education, we must remain informed on current issues and

events that impact the ability of transgender collegians to be present and engaged, so that the

community environment we share incorporates their needs to stay resilient.

For example, the Queer community earlier this year suffered from random and violent

attacks on the streets of Portland, Oregon - the city where I attend college (Stenvick, 2019).

While these attacks were not directly affiliated with the college campus, they were directly

affiliated with my identity as a transgender person. The same month these attacks occurred, I

had to present at a local conference on behalf of the SSC. The location of this conference was

outside of my comfort zone to the point where I was not sure I could be resilient. To my

disappointment, upon bringing this concern to my supervisor and colleagues, they were

unaware of the violent attacks on my community at all. It was at that moment I realized this

issue was not appearing in mainstream media, and therefore not on the radar of my cisgender

supervisor and colleagues. In this scenario, there are several ways my college community

could help me practice resilience. First, having knowledge of local current events related to

the Queer and transgender community can be affirming, because it shows a basic level of

awareness and concern for my marginalized identity. This can then lead to coming up with

proactive solutions that could be provided to students, which shows care for their well-being

and place in the community. After explaining the events happening within Portland, my supervisor shared information on bus routes with me and one of my colleagues asked if I would want to carpool with them instead of traveling alone. Practicing resilience is in many ways more of a communal process than it is individualistic (Nicolazzo, 2017). In this case, my supervisor and colleagues were aware that I needed to practice resilience by not traveling to the conference alone in order to successfully attend and present at the conference, and they helped me in that practice. This awareness comes from having built a community within our collective work environment. I knew I could share my fears about traveling to the conference with them because we have relationships with one another that extend further than just being colleagues.

Relationship. There is an unfortunate divide that currently exists between students and higher education professionals. The unwritten rule of professionalism that suggests educational leaders should omit their personal lives and values from the work environment with students is detrimental to both educational leaders and their students. This can create an unnecessary barrier to building relationships and communities that inspire growth and appreciate differences. It is crucial for leaders of these spaces to allow themselves to be a part of the community on campus, rather than a professional that hovers above it. This requires leaders that are willing to be vulnerable and open their environment up to the possibility of becoming a community of truth (Palmer, 2017). Palmer (2017) introduces a community of truth as one that encourages the leader to step away from authoritative impulses that suggest they must share all the answers with students, and instead open the space to new possibilities, diverse directions, and creative chaos. The educational leader in a community of truth needs to listen attentively, but allow the majority of discussions to come from students themselves. This gives students the ability to claim the discovery of truth as their own experience, which allows them to be full participants and leaders in the community (Palmer, 2017). Students are

intimately aware of the power dynamics that separate them from being at a relational level to educational leaders, and that can result in students - transgender students especially - also limiting what they share and bring to the campus community. Palmer (2017) reminds us that people generally do not wish to be fixed, but more simply just want the validation of being seen and heard. Higher education professionals need to be receptive and empathetic by offering space for individuals to bring their own truth to the surface in their own time, rather than presuming to know what is best for another individual. Therefore, educational leaders must be the example by sharing their own vulnerabilities, joy, and experiences with their students. From this grows a community of truth where students can build relationships with their peers and leaders, and openly share their own vulnerabilities without fear of judgment or consequences.

A simple yet intentional way that the educational leaders in my life have fostered this community of truth is through opening circles. This is a general check-in time that is provided at the start of every class and meeting that opens the space up for venting, storytelling, sharing, empathetic listening, mindfulness, and anything else that individuals in the group need at the time. Sometimes this can be quick, while other times an educator might provide up to an hour for sharing. These are crucial moments for the community to come together and build deeply connected relationships with one another. The leader also contributes to the check-in after all the students have shared, which is a vital piece in breaking down the barrier between students and their educational leaders. It is also important for the leader to bring awareness to the various moods existing in the room and to set intentions for the community's time together with those energies in mind, reframing our collective stories into the context of our class topic. For students with marginalized identities like being transgender, having the space to share freely in the community can be an incredibly affirming practice of resilience. There have been several times while in the LSE

program that I wished to not attend class, but I chose to go specifically so that I could share during the check-in and be supported by my community. Sharing openly in check-ins has led to several wonderful relationships for me where another colleague in the room has reached out to continue the discussion over food and drinks, and our relationship with one another expanded beyond the classroom into one that is more meaningful and intentional within the community that we share.

      Advocacy. Most higher education professionals and sustainability leaders are interested in social justice and reducing inequities that exist, but still act in ways that uphold the current oppressive and hierarchical systems (Love, 2013). Understandably so, because higher education systems reward those that preserve the power and dominant paradigms that exist there. It is imperative that leaders in higher education recognize their power in changing the system, because systems of power do not remain there on their own. They are maintained by the actions of individuals and groups who act on the foundation of the dominant paradigm they were socialized in. Educational leaders can dismantle this learned and internalized behavior by developing a liberatory consciousness, which has been discussed by several educators including Paulo Freire and bell hooks (Love, 2013). Liberatory consciousness has four elements: awareness, analysis, acting, and accountability. All of these elements are crucial for advocacy, with accountability being the most challenging element. This part requires that leaders accept accountability, on behalf of themselves and their community, for whatever consequences arise from action or inaction in the face of inequity (Love, 2013). Developing a liberatory consciousness can help educational leaders advocate for transgender students in transformative ways.

      For example, earlier this year while working on campus, I had a frightening encounter in a gender-neutral bathroom. I was harassed, invalidated, and made to feel unsafe. The encounter was so traumatic that I refused to use that bathroom again, even though it was the

only gender-neutral bathroom on that floor. Immediately after this encounter, I sought support from my supervisor and a colleague. They allowed me to vent and cry about what occurred. Through this, they went through the stages of liberatory consciousness, including awareness of the issue and analysis of possibilities for action. Together, we came up with ideas of what we could do, from reporting it to the police to meeting with a professional in the Queer Resource Center (QRC). My supervisor performed the third stage of liberatory consciousness by reporting the incident to the police, while I discussed it with a professional in the QRC. Finally, accountability came into play. My supervisor and colleague apologized for the inaction that led up to this incident, as this was not the first time I voiced my fear in using that particular bathroom. They asked me what, if anything, would make the situation better. I proposed a solution that would make me feel safe using that bathroom again, which involved installing a student identification (ID) card scanner onto the door. This was costly, but they advocated on my behalf, and a few months later that scanner was on the door. Advocacy should not be taken lightly, because it significantly impacted my ability to stay resilient and continue my education at Portland State University. Transgender students leave college for reasons such as this, and I may have added to those statistics if it was not for the support and advocacy I received from my campus community.

The RBC framework in practice. My ultimate aspiration for the RBC framework is to see it implemented at PSU. I believe in small and slow solutions, and therefore plan to share this framework with PSU's Student Activities and Leadership Programs (SALP) and Queer Resource Center (QRC). I spent the past year as a student employee of SALP, and firmly believe the student affairs professionals in that department have the passion for student engagement and development needed to incorporate this framework in a way that will enhance the programming and culture they already have in place for students. As I have grown in my connections to the QRC this year as well, I know the professionals and students

thriving within that space would be thrilled at the opportunity to collaborate on implementing this framework with SALP. My dream for this collaboration is that it would become sustainable and foster community within itself; not just for the students, but for the student affairs professionals connected through SALP as well. I envision a training series collaboratively designed with the RBC framework being a guide for the program outcomes. This would serve as a form of professional development through peer exchange, incorporating training modules from the expressed needs of students on campus and designed by professionals working at the campus resource centers on behalf of these students (see Appendix B).

Logistically, it makes sense for this training program to occur over the summer while academic programs are not in session. For PSU, the month of August would be ideal, because student employees can begin training for their leadership positions and student affairs professionals are preparing for a new year of programming. The training program will be divided into multiple 90-minute sections throughout the month, with one student population as the focus for each. My vision for this includes a main 30-minute presentation facilitated by the appropriate resource center, with 60-minute breakout sessions to follow. The main presentation will include necessary information about the student population and the current issues they are facing on campus, which emphasizes the affirmation and resilience elements of the RBC framework. The breakout sessions are designed to provide more focused strategies to support the student population based on the attendees of the training program. In the context of PSU, different groups interested in breakout sessions could include student affairs professionals, academic affairs professionals, and student leaders. Within the breakout sessions, group discussion, resources, and learning objectives will be provided that offer tangible action steps for participants to take back to their work environment on campus. The

breakout sessions will emphasize the relationship and advocacy elements of the RBC framework. See Appendix C for an example agenda of this training program.

Challenges. Financial support for the level of systemic change this framework is asking for is not easily granted within a higher education institution. My vision for this training workshop series nested within the SALP department at PSU is designed so that the student affairs professionals interacting with students regularly can collaborate and create community for their students together in a holistic and intersectional way that addresses the needs of all of their students immediately without additional funding. It is unlikely that funding would be provided for a program such as this without empirical evidence that it would be successful. That being said, PSU has been recognized among the Nation's Most Innovative Schools for four years in a row, perhaps making this university one of the most ideal environments for the implementation of this training program (U.S. News & World Report, 2019).

Organizational support. In order for this training program and framework to be successful without additional funding, it requires the contribution of all resource centers. This will create a sustainable feedback system of professional development through peer exchange, where each resource center both contributes to and receives information from the collectively designed training program. Not only will this encourage collaboration within the department, but it will also strengthen the intersectionality, connections, and networks that exist between their various programs.

Due to the experimental nature of this training program, assessment will also be a crucial component to be implemented. Learning outcomes of the training program to be evaluated through assessment should address both higher education professionals' awareness and understanding of the training materials, and student perception of positive campus climate changes as a result. By addressing learning outcomes in the program assessment, the

overall success of the program can be identified and used as evidence of a need for future financial support from the institution to continue the training program.

Assessments should be performed directly following the training program over the summer, and at the end of the school year prior to the next years' training program. The assessment types should include both electronic surveys and in-person focus groups, to have a comprehensive assessment involving both quantitative and qualitative methods. Since this program has proposed outcomes directed at both the university professionals and students, separate assessments for these groups are recommended. Assessments for the student population should be performed towards the end of the school year after the training program has been implemented, with the focus of addressing student perceptions of the campus climate. Student assessment should be open to all students at the university, with demographic questions that ask the gender and cultural identities of the students participating in the assessment. Some researchers have found success in getting transgender students to participate in focus groups by providing free food or gift cards as incentives, and also to improve the accessibility of the assessment to a larger student population (Goldberg, Beemyn, & Smith, 2018). Since the program outcomes for students are directly addressing marginalized student populations, the student focus groups should have a majority representation of students with relevant marginalized identities. These focus groups for students can provide more detail and an understanding of how well the training program is addressing connections desired between the program outcomes for higher education professionals and their marginalized student populations.

Conclusion

The future of the RBC framework includes establishing the training program, putting it into practice, and conducting research on how well the framework fosters community for transgender and marginalized student populations. While any individual could utilize this

framework within their office and classroom environment on their own, there are implications for enacting these types of environmental and cultural changes at the departmental, institutional, and systemic level. One of the biggest barriers to being able to practice this framework is that it purposely goes against the traditional structure of our higher education institutions. It requires focusing less on our ability to fit within the dominant paradigm that showcases our university as leaders in student success, and more on our unique differences and needs to step outside the box of that dominant paradigm. Enacting this framework at the departmental or institutional level requires financial support for continued training and education on how to holistically support all of our students. In order to receive financial support, there ultimately needs to be systemic changes to the institution that acknowledges the need for this type of training and encourages collaborative efforts to continue this ever-changing work.

The inclusion of this framework in sustainability education practices will help reduce the issue of inequity in the field, because it is specifically focused on centering programming around marginalized populations. This is a neglected aspect of sustainability programs, and the need for equity is becoming more important as we try to shift the dominant narrative of sustainability away from those with the most privilege and power. It is also important that I acknowledge the influence my own power and privilege had on the creation of this framework. There are several crucial perspectives from marginalized communities missing from this framework that I cannot realistically portray due to the fact that I am an able-bodied, white, middle-class, educated individual. There is also a dearth of literature on intersecting transgender identities, especially from Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) and disabled perspectives. These perspectives are also of significant importance to sustainability education as a whole, and therefore highly recommended as a focus for future practice and research of this framework.

The intention is for this framework to be specific to the student experience on the PSU campus, yet broad enough that it could still be applicable for interested parties serving their community at varying education levels and connecting it to different marginalized populations entirely. The transgender student population was selected in this case because I am a living, breathing example of the transgender student experience at a university currently enforcing policies that erase my existence from the student body. That being said, I envision this framework being utilized in a way that is intersectional and all-encompassing when placed into the hands of another resilient leader advocating for their own marginalized identity within the community. While the main audience for this paper includes higher education professionals and educational leaders, I hope any reader interested in incorporating this framework can adapt it to fit within the needs of their organization as well.

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Appendix A

Practices of Resilience for Transgender Students

Examples from Nicolazzo (2017)

- Avoid locations on campus where they are met with resistance
- Remain close to queer-friendly locations on campus
- Wear headphones while walking across campus to avoid reactions or judgment from others on their gender presentation
- Never wear headphones while walking across campus to remain aware of potential harm or abuse
- Avoid pointing out when people misgender them
- Rely on friends to correct others when they are misgendered
- Always point out when people misgender them
- Withhold gender identity, chosen name, or pronouns if the space does not feel safe
- Share gender identity only when relevant to classroom topics or the environment on campus
- Share gender identity whenever in safe spaces
- Play games as characters with the gender they identify with
- Participate in activities and spaces that do not place an importance on gender
- Focus class projects and presentations on transgender issues
- Use gender expression to pass as cisgender
- Use gender expression to be viewed as Queer
- Live off campus to avoid gender-segregated housing policies
- Engage in student leadership to advocate for inclusive policies
- Seek community outside of the university
- Maintain physical, social, and/or emotional health
- Change major to a department that is inclusive of diverse gender identities
- Withdraw from the university

Appendix B

Professional Development Through Peer Exchange

This design incorporates student resource centers from PSU as an example of how to provide

a training program for professional development through peer exchange of information. For

example, the Queer Resource Center will offer strategies for supporting Queer students to

professionals within the other centers, and the QRC will receive information from the other

centers in return. The resource centers included below serve as an example, and are not

intended to be an exhaustive list of potential collaborators.

Figure B1
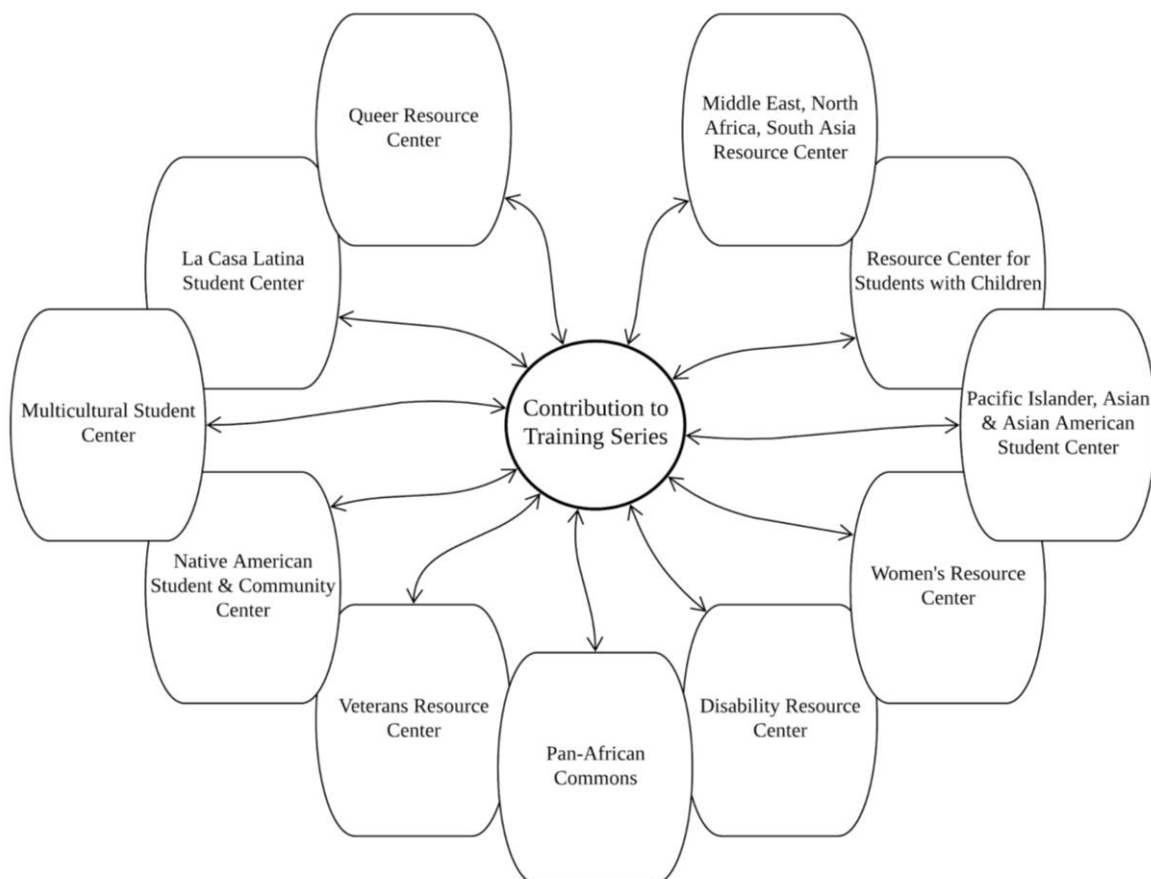
Appendix C

Example Agenda for SALP Training Program at PSU

The training program will occur multiple days throughout the month of August, with a

different student population and relevant topic serving as the theme for each day. For this

example, the QRC will be the facilitator with the theme being around transgender students.

The theme will address a current issue or issues that exist on campus for transgender students,

which will be explained in the opening keynote. The breakout sessions will serve to address

the issue(s) within the context of various environments on campus, providing attendees with

action steps and learning outcomes to focus on within their space on campus. The student

affairs session will be facilitated by a student affairs professional from the QRC, the

academic affairs session will be facilitated by a faculty member with relevant experience, and

the student leaders session will be facilitated by a student employee within the QRC.

Table C1

Day 1 Theme: Transgender Students

Schedule	Training Session			RBC Framework Element(s)
8:45am-9:00am	Coffee + Welcome			Relationship
9:00am-9:30am	Opening Keynote: Director of the Queer Resource Center *(Includes broad content regarding current transgender students' needs and issues at PSU, incorporating techniques for affirming and acknowledging practices of resilience)*			Affirmation, Resilience
9:30am-9:40am	Networking + Break			Relationship
9:40am-10:40am	Breakout Sessions *(Includes content specific for work environments on campus, how to advocate for students through collaborative relationships with colleagues, and tangible action steps to focus on throughout the school year)*			Relationship, Advocacy
	1. Student Affairs Professionals	2. Academic Affairs Professionals	3. Student Leaders + Student Organizations	