

# **Assessing the Needs of Gender Minority Students at the University of Connecticut**

## **Preliminary Findings**

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## INTRODUCTION

Research from colleges and universities across the country suggests that LGBT students often experience an oppressive campus environment (see, eg, Brown et al. 2004; Rankin 2005; Zubernis and Snyder 2008). This oppression may be the result of one or more negative experiences ranging from harassment from peers to anti-LGBT classroom experiences to violence. Such environments are not congruent with a positive learning environment for either LGBT students or for the general student body. However, previous research has rarely considered the experiences of transgender, gender-nonconforming, and non-binary (gender minority) students separately from lesbian, gay, or bisexual (sexual minority) students, and as a result the experiences of gender minority students have not been adequately understood or addressed.

What unique concerns and needs do gender minority students at the University of Connecticut experience? How does the University of Connecticut's Storrs campus manage, or fail to manage, these concerns and needs? This project was designed as a pilot exploration of these questions, focusing on the undergraduate population. The majority of the research has been conducted and analyzed by undergraduate and graduate students under the guidance of Dr. Barbara Gurr and Dr. Sherry Zane as assigned coursework, through independent studies, and as extracurricular work, and reflects, in true Husky fashion, the commitment of these students to improving campus experiences for all of their peers.

Data continues to be collected and analyzed, and we anticipate that a full report will be made available to the University community at the end of the spring 2017 semester. However, in recognition of the pressing nature of many of the needs identified by gender minority students on our campus, this report offers a glimpse into our preliminary findings about their experiences with regard to campus climate, experiences of harassment and assault, student perceptions of the impact of campus and classroom experiences on educational outcomes, and gender minority students' engagement in the university community and access to institutional resources. We explore both the strengths of the UConn community as well as areas identified as needing improvement, on both the formal and informal level. Lastly, we offer recommendations to help improve the educational and social experiences of all of our students. After all, there is no need to wait to improve the UConn experience for all of our students!

## METHODS

Following an in-depth review of relevant literature in Higher Education, Sociology, and Psychology as well as the interdisciplinary field of LGBT Studies, our research team has conducted and begun to analyze the following:

- semi-structured interviews with self-identified gender minority students and one semi-structured interview with a student who self-identifies as cisgender
- A photovoice project
- Two on-line surveys (n=17 fall 2015; n=18 spring 2016)

**Total unique respondents:      n = 39**

Unique interviews :              n = 17

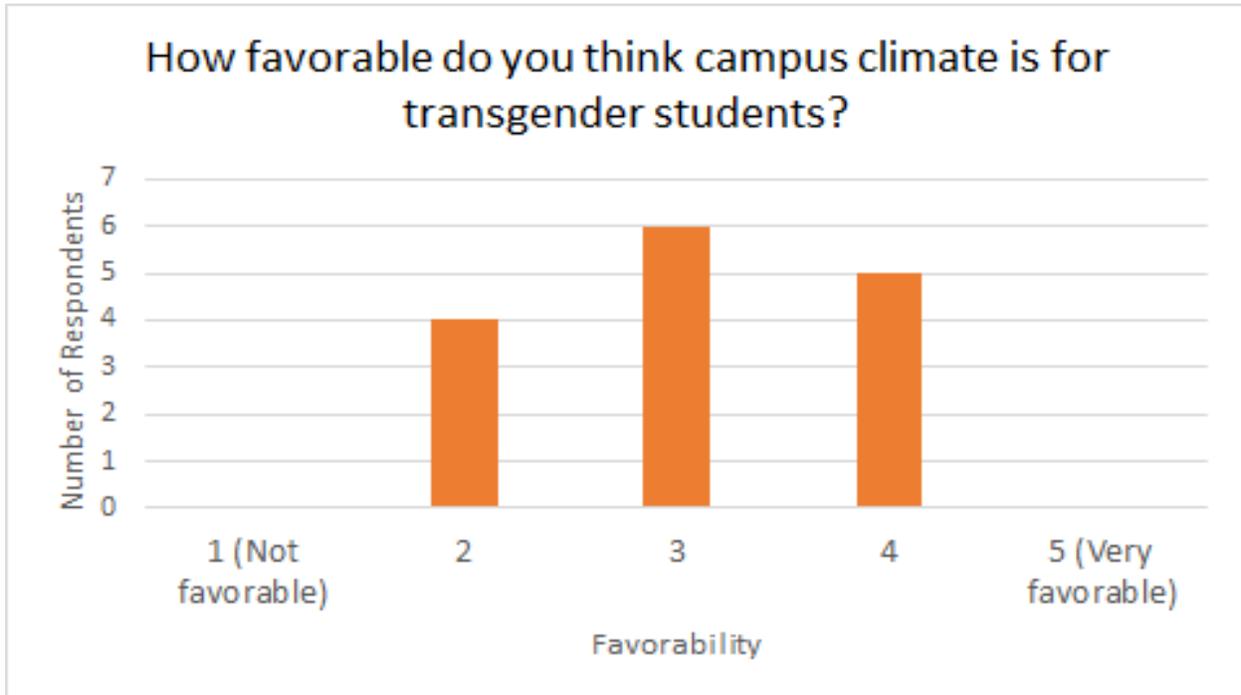
Unique survey respondents:      n = 22 (13 students responded to both surveys)

Several survey respondents also participated in interviews or photovoice; this approach, as well as developing a second, follow-up survey, allowed us to seek unique responses as well as follow up with participants for clarification and elaboration.

We have also reviewed relevant general policies on campus and specifically examined policies and practices in key campus areas such as Residential Life, Student Activities, the Cultural Centers, Greek Life, Athletics, and Student Health and Mental Health Services.

## KEY FINDINGS

### CAMPUS CLIMATE



When asked how favorable campus climate is in general for gender minority students, almost all survey respondents responded that it was fairly comfortable; however, when asked if they felt safe from verbal or physical harassment on campus, responses indicated slightly less confidence in a safe, comfortable campus environment.

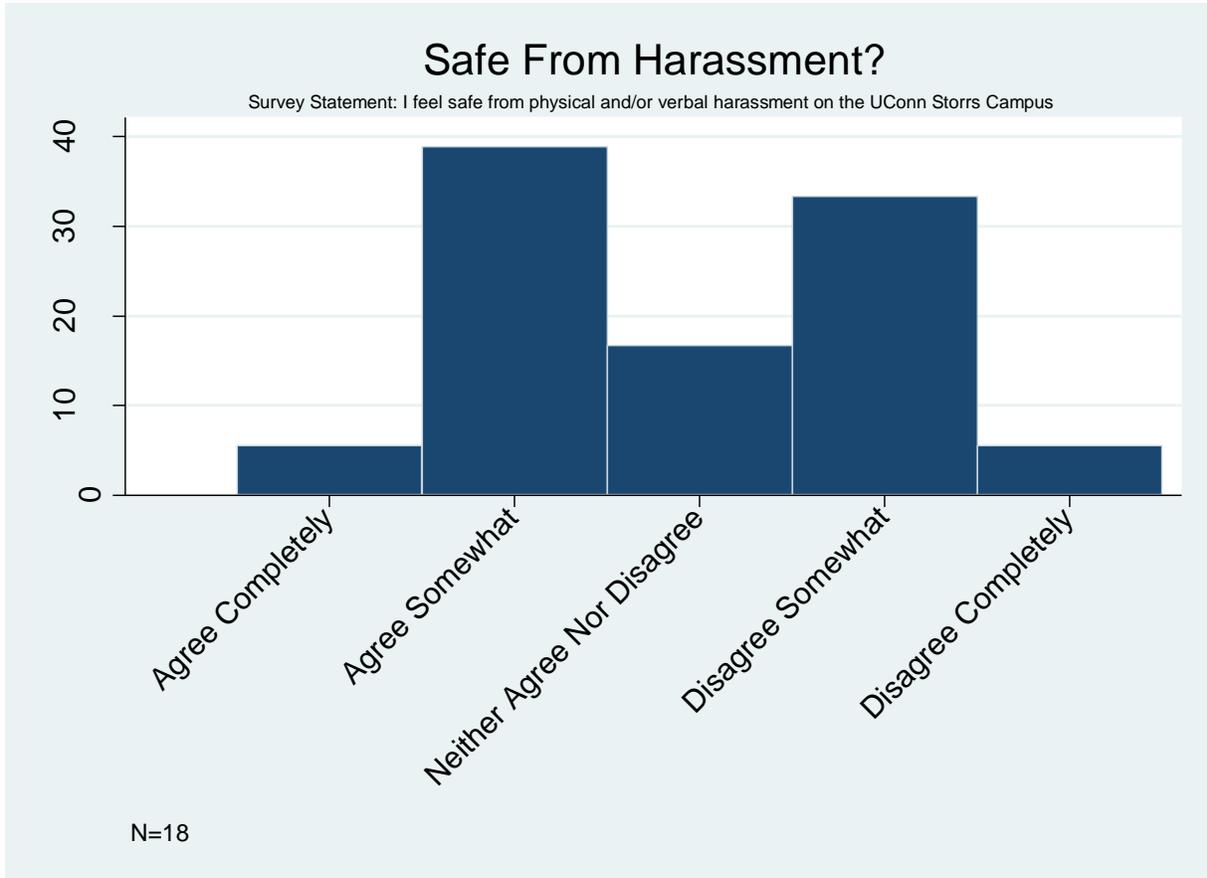
- One interviewee did not feel campus climate was comfortable at all and was considering transferring to another school. Only two interviewees felt our campus was “very comfortable.” It is worth noting that the two who felt it was very comfortable also described themselves as “passing”, or being easily recognizable as either male or female. Further, each of these two noted that campus climate can be challenging for their peers who do not easily pass as one of only two genders.
- Several students described a reluctance to become involved in large social activities, specifically citing Greek life and Athletics; and also described reluctance to participate in large-scale campus events because they felt unsafe.

- Study participants described a general lack of awareness of gender minority lives on campus; this made many of them feel “invisible”, “marginalized”, and “ignored” by staff, faculty, and peers. This general lack of knowledge was corroborated in our only interview with a self-identified cisgender student, who did not understand basic vocabulary around transgender experiences, although further research with the cisgender population should be done to better ascertain overall knowledge.

## ***SAFETY***

Our research reveals that safety from harassment, bullying, and even physical violence for gender minority students on campus often relies on “passing”; for those students who are gender-nonconforming (the visible appearance of their gender expression does not neatly fit social expectations of “male” or “female” categories), large public spaces such as the Student Union, sporting events, and other student activities as well as public gendered bathrooms present the greatest risks of harassment.

- Several informants cited the Rainbow Center as a safe space, though others had more mixed reviews, citing tensions among students at the Center as impacting their use of the Center. The Women’s Center was also cited as a safe space by a small number of informants, as were Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies classes taught by specific instructors and the Fine Arts Department in general.



Survey Statement: “I feel safe from physical and/or verbal harassment on the UConn Storrs Campus”

- Only 1 out of 18 survey respondents agreed completely that they felt “safe from physical and/or verbal harassment on the UConn Storrs Campus.” Almost 40% disagreed somewhat or completely with this statement. Only one interviewee described feeling safe in the majority of spaces on campus, but explained that this is often contingent on context, saying, “It really depends on the day and space.”
- Most of our informants have taken advantage of the opportunity to live in gender-inclusive housing, though several live elsewhere on and off campus. Almost all informants, regardless of their living arrangements, cited the new gender-inclusive floor arranged by Residential Life for the 2015-2016 school year as a safe and positive space.

“This is my first semester at Storrs (I had previously gone to a regional campus), and by far the gender inclusive housing is the best part of my experience here. I feel much safer than I ever had been there; it is an extremely valuable program.” (Jane)

### *BATHROOMS AND OTHER GENDERED SPACES*

- Three informants described specific incidents in gendered bathrooms where they were verbally harassed.
- Informants universally felt that gendered bathrooms (male/female) are risky spaces for them if they do not successfully pass as a binary male or female, yet approximately 80% of survey respondents felt that UConn does not offer an adequate number of gender-neutral bathrooms; in addition, many informants described reluctance to use bathrooms designated as “handicap” for fear of taking the space away from someone else who might need it.
- Many students also described being unsure of where to find the gender-neutral bathrooms that do exist on campus; in the spring 2016 semester the Rainbow Center has updated the location of all gender-neutral bathrooms on campus and made this information available on its website in both list form and as a pdf map.
- When asked about their comfort level using gendered locker rooms, two-thirds of informants responded that they were “comfortable” to “very comfortable”; the remaining third responded that they would be uncomfortable or would not use them at all.

### *CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES*

“Encouraging students to respect each other is crucial for academic success.” (Jo)

The majority of our informants are majoring in the Arts or Humanities; one was a STEM major who was considering changing their major, and one was a former STEM major who had recently changed. There appears to be a strong reluctance to participate in the STEM fields based on negative classroom experiences there as opposed to more positive experiences in other disciplines (however, please see notes).

- Several students described classroom incidents that resulted in anxiety and a deep reluctance to return to class.
- Several interviewees described reluctance to take certain classes they felt might be unsafe (STEM classes were specifically cited several times). Three described dropping classes where they felt either unsafe (for example, had their gender identity revealed or gender minority experiences discussed in inappropriate ways) or felt that gender minority experiences were appropriate to the material but ignored by the instructor.
- Students described a general preference for smaller classes, describing them as “safer” and more respectful of their own experiences, but this was not universal; several students cited inappropriate incidents (for example, being misgendered or called by the wrong name) in small classrooms, and feeling more “obvious” and “less anonymous”, thus perhaps less safe, in small classes.
- Students surveyed and interviewed felt strongly that both staff and faculty lack knowledge and training about gender minority experiences, particularly around the use of appropriate language, appropriate teaching materials or complete lack of inclusion in curricula, and general lack of knowledge about campus resources.

“I wish (faculty) would project the idea that... "I see you for who you are and I respect that."” (Sam)

#### ***GENERAL POLICY AND PRACTICE***

- UConn is in compliance with both state and federal laws regarding gender non-discrimination and specifically includes gender identity and expression in our

non-discrimination policy. However, our research reveals that many units on campus are not directly informed about these laws, and rarely offer services or support above the minimum required for compliance.

- Additionally, compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act is particularly important for students undergoing some level of physical transition (for example, the use of “binders”; see glossary); many students cited physical challenges in reaching their classrooms and their residences.

“The lack of elevator is the big issue, because it erases and also makes the floor inaccessible to disabled trans people and people who are going to have a hard time walking up stairs. They super didn’t consider the fact...that there would be a lot of people in binders on that floor. Stairs are hard.... Culturally it was a great location for it but accessibility-wise not the best.” (Nic, referencing the location of the gender-neutral housing)

- Most units on campus regard the Rainbow Center and its Director as the “go-to” for students and will direct students there for any and all needs that arise regarding gender minority issues.
- Both informants and researchers for this project frequently had trouble locating resources; content analysis of various websites, for example (both for academic departments and for non-academic units such as Student Activities, Cultural Centers, and the One Card Office) revealed little to no information specific to gender minority concerns, and several informants described difficulty in finding information they needed for transition, insurance, and healthcare purposes.

## *UCONN'S STRENGTHS*

- The University of Connecticut offers health insurance which partially covers the cost of physical transition for those students who choose to pursue it.
- Although this praise was not universal, many students praised the caregivers at Student Health Services and Student Mental Health Services, who follow the guidelines set out by the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH); Student Mental Health Services plans to pursue further training in these guidelines.
- The Rainbow Center provides a number of formal and informal, student-run groups and meetings for gender-minority students. The Rainbow Center also offers a regular speaker series that frequently features gender minority concerns, provides classroom resources (for example, the recent release of the LGBT Classroom guide [see resources] as well as their Rainbow Speakers Bureau) and offers Diversity of Gender (D.O.G.) Training for staff and faculty.
- Prior to 2015, Residential Life had offered gender-inclusive housing in Garrigus Suites, but not all students knew about it or could afford it. When made aware of student concerns in the fall of 2014, Residential Life responded quickly and worked directly with students to move the housing to a more affordable location as well as make appropriate changes on the housing application. In response to ongoing dialogue with gender minority students, Residential Life is implementing further changes for the 2016-2017 year.
- The Women's Center is currently undergoing staff training regarding gender minority issues both on and off campus; is revising their website to reflect a more inclusive approach to gender; and has planned to include gender minority training in their annual Advance Conference in May 2016.
- The Asian American Cultural Center and the Puerto Rican Latin American Cultural Center both have strong relationships with the Rainbow Center; student informants for this study did not cite using either of these centers at all or frequently, but were aware that they were in communication with the Rainbow Center on various aspects of programming.

- All units with which we were able to meet expressed a desire to learn further how they could better meet the needs of gender minority students.
- Gender minority students generally express a strong willingness and ability to speak for themselves in classrooms and other campus spaces, although they may not always feel safe doing so. They have also formed both formal and informal networks of support amongst each other and with select staff and faculty who are recognized as allies.
- UConn’s Office of Diversity and Equity in partnership with the Rainbow Center offers “Transition Guidelines” which are useful for staff and faculty as well as students, although they do not speak to the diversity of gender minority experiences and thus may be misleading in some respects.
- Each year, UConn co-sponsors and hosts the annual True Colors conference for LGBT youth. Regularly attended by over 2000 participants from across Connecticut and several other states, this is an excellent opportunity for students on campus as well as potential future Huskies to learn, network, and collaborate in a safe, affirming space.

“I’ve come to the True Colors conference every year for, like, ever. That’s how I knew I wanted to come to UConn.” (Adam)

“I volunteer at True Colors every year. I love it.” (Tori)

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is not reasonable to expect all gender minority issues to be handled via the Rainbow Center and its staff. We recommend that all units on campus designate at least one member who will receive ongoing training to share with their colleagues. This training is currently available through the Rainbow Center, but we caution against demanding too much of this one unit without providing adequate support to meet increased demand.
- It is imperative for the academic success of *all* UConn students that faculty in particular are trained on gender minority concerns so that classrooms can not only be experienced safely, but also so that UConn can fulfill its mission of honoring, respecting, promoting, and teaching about diverse human experiences.
- There are numerous faculty on campus whose research and teaching incorporate or focus closely on gender minority experiences. We suggest that these faculty be tapped in ways that do not add to their workload, but that acknowledge and utilize the many resources we have available on our campus. This might include campus-wide events such as panel discussions, but could also include time and space allocated at departmental meetings to share research findings, consult on syllabi, etc.
- We recommend a central and well-advertised portal for diversity information which includes access to all campus information relevant to gender minority students so that these students as well as staff and faculty on campus can find information when needed.
- We urge UConn to consider ways in which gender minority students can change their names throughout our administrative system, particularly in Peoplesoft as well as on their ID cards, as easily as possible, and to make this change transparent so that students will know about it. This will help to prevent students being misgendered or incorrectly named in class as well as the various locations across campus where they use their ID cards.
- We strongly urge the university to undertake a more thorough examination of the needs and concerns of gender minority students on our campus, similar to the recent studies considering campus climate and violence. While we believe our

study reveals important findings and our final report, to be released in spring 2017, will corroborate what has been shared here, it is equally clear to us that the needs of these students have been sorely neglected and under-considered on our campus.

## CONCLUSION

In 1999 the University of Connecticut was ranked by the Princeton Review as Number twelve among the twenty most homophobic campuses in the country. Today UConn has become well-recognized for its efforts to ensure a safe, quality education experience for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer, efforts which encompass a wide variety of approaches and reflect the hard work and dedication of numerous individuals across campus. UConn is currently listed in The Advocate's *College Guide for LGBT Students*, which selects the best 100 schools in the country for queer-identifying undergraduates based on a variety of measures. The entire university should be proud of these efforts, as they reflect our broad commitment as a community to the safety and well-being of all our members.

**Yet our research confirms that weaknesses continue to exist on the Storrs campus, particularly in the areas of safety, infrastructure, and academic support, and that these areas are especially challenging for gender minority students. For example, students may be unclear how to enact their gender transition on campus in terms of their records, their housing, their medical care, and other concerns, and they may feel unsafe in particular classrooms or at particular social events or activities. Nor are staff and faculty across the university adequately trained to support the needs of gender minority students, or even to direct them to resources.**

Nonetheless, and despite these challenges, gender minority students are a vital part of the Huskies tradition and valuable members of our campus community. We look forward to working closely with the University to further identify their needs and strategize appropriate ways to meet them.

## Resources

We recommend the following resources for further information and support:

[LGBT Classroom Guide \(pdf, through the UConn Rainbow Center\)](#)

[UConn Transition Guidelines \(pdf, through the Office of Diversity and Equity\)](#)

Erickson-Schroth, Laura. 2014. *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community*. Oxford University Press. New York. (available as an e-book from Homer Babbidge Library)

## Glossary

**LGBT** – Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Generally used as a blanket term to cover all people who are either of a gender minority or a sexual minority. This acronym, while still in wide use, is sometimes criticized for either excluding certain identities or become a “word salad” type of jumble (for instance, LGBTQIA+.)

**SOGIE** – Sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression. Similar to LGBT, SOGIE is a blanket term used to cover all who are of a sexual or gender minority. A newer term, the acronym takes on a more complex meaning by including all sexual orientations, gender identities, and expressions (including a heterosexual identity or a cisgender identity,) and generally stands as a more inclusive form of LGBT.

**Cisgender** – Cisgender is the opposite of transgender; that is, cisgender means to identify with the gender one was assigned at birth.

**Passing** – Passing, in this context, means for a transgender person to appear, both through visual appearance and through voice, as a cisgender person. This can be for the benefit of the person themselves or to avoid instances of bigotry and hate speech from others.

**Transition** – The process by which transgender people alleviate Body Dysmorphic Disorder or other such states. Crucially, not all transgender people want to transition, but for many

transgender people transitioning through Hormone Replacement Therapy or various surgeries is essential to positive emotional wellbeing.

**Gender-nonconforming** – To be gender-nonconforming means to present outside of the traditional male/female gender binary, lying outside commonly held beliefs of what a “male” or “female” should look like or be.

**Non-binary** – Non-binary is a kind of identity that lies outside of the male/female dichotomy. Non-binary individuals may feel as if they are both, neither, someone else entirely, or someone else in between one or more of these axes of identification.

**Binders** – For those who develop breasts, binders may be an essential part of gender expression and presentation as binders are designed to flatten the user’s chest. There are different types of binders and some are unsafe, but binding as a practice is popular among transgender individuals with breasts.

**Gender-neutral** – Gender-neutral implies a space that is not gated by gender. In the case of gender-neutral bathrooms, the idea is to have spaces that people of any gender can access for the sake of inclusivity. Often interchangeable with gender-inclusive.

**Misgendering** – Misgendering is when a transgender person is referred to by the wrong name or pronouns, thus “outing” them in a social setting as being transgender, or having once been commonly referred to by those pronouns or that name. This experience can be dangerous for some individuals and particularly traumatic to some individuals; it may also prompt discomfort, anxiety, or panic attacks.

**Queer** – Another blanket term for those who identify outside of “cisgender” and “heterosexual.” The term “queer” is still a contested term, as some LGBT individuals feel uncomfortable with referring to themselves as “queer” because of its previous popular usage as a slur.

**Stealth** – If a transgender person passes as cisgender and does not indicate that they are trans, they are considered “stealthed,” essentially living as if they are cisgender to escape transphobia, to live without the label of transgender, or for any other reason.

## Notes

1. Identifying and reaching students who self-identify as transgender, gender-nonconforming, and non-binary can be challenging for many reasons; many students enter the university system before identifying as transgender, gender-nonconforming, non-binary, or queer, although anecdotal evidence indicates that increasing numbers join our university community ready for some form of gender transition. Many students choose to live in stealth, meaning they are not “out” as gender-nonconforming; additionally, due to societal experiences of oppression and marginalization, many students may not be comfortable talking to researchers about their experiences. For example, a 2011 study from the National Gay and Lesbian Taskforce and the National Center for Transgender Equity found that 71% of transgender people hide their gender or gender transition to avoid discrimination (Grant et al. 2011). The university does not collect census data about these students, and so it is impossible to accurately estimate the number of UConn undergraduates who identify as transgender, gender-nonconforming, or non-binary.

Similarly, there is currently no national data for this population. However, two recent studies using census data and health surveys to measure the number of US citizens who have changed their name and/or sex conclude that approximately 0.3% of the US population is transgender *and* has sought some level of transition (see Gates 2011 and Harris 2015).

2. Photovoice is a participatory action research method in which participants are encouraged to illustrate various aspects of their lives or the research question using photography; photos are then shared and discussed in group analysis.
3. Because we focused on the experiences of undergraduate students, many other voices were left out of this research. It is important to acknowledge the numerous graduate student, staff, and faculty across the university who identify as transgender, gender-nonconforming, or non-binary and did not have a chance to contribute to this study. Additionally, although our survey was distributed to all undergraduates, the majority of

our active recruitment was through snowball sampling; we are aware that many students may have been missed through this strategy, and this may be reflected by the low number of respondents from majors outside of the arts and humanities.

4. Both of our surveys were designed to exit anyone 22 years or older. As a result, twelve undergraduate students who self-identified as gender minorities were unable to take the survey. This was a flaw in our design which cost us data, but also brings up an important question: as these students are older than the statistical average for undergraduates at UConn, what exactly has delayed their graduation, and is it related to their gender minority status? Further research is needed to explore this question, but in light of our findings it certainly seems possible. This may also have implications for retention rates.
5. For further information regarding this study, please contact:  
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