

# Lived Experiences of Transgender and Gender Nonbinary Adults Aged 50+ Shared Through Art & Film: Reflections of a Social Work Educator

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**Abstract:** By featuring artists from diverse and underrepresented groups, institutions of higher education have the potential to make the invisible visible, foster connections between universities and communities, build a sense of belonging, and improve campus climate. I, a social work educator, share reflections after coordinating a college campus art exhibit with artists aged 50+ who identify as transgender and/or gender nonbinary and a companion film screening featuring a family with a transgender woman parent. Themes of visibility, belonging, and campus climate weave throughout the discussion. Beyond LGBTQ+ services on campus, programs focused on trans inclusivity and transgender and gender nonbinary identities are recommended.

**Keywords:** visibility, belonging, campus climate, trans spaces

## Terminology

The following terms and their definitions according to the Human Rights Campaign (2023a) are provided to assist readers. However, please keep in mind that terminology is ever changing, and terms are used in personal and unique ways by each person.

- LGBTQ+: Acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer with a “+” sign to recognize the limitless sexual orientations and gender identities used by members of the community (Human Rights Campaign, 2023a). The acronym LGBT+ will also be used to represent the community in this essay.
- Transgender (T): Umbrella term for individuals whose gender identity and/or gender expression is different than cultural expectations based on the sex they were assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2023a). *Trans* and *gender diverse* are also inclusive umbrella terms used for a person whose gender is different to what was presumed at birth (TransHub, 2023).
- Cisgender: Term that describes individuals whose gender identity aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth (Human Rights Campaign, 2023a).
- Gender nonbinary (GNB): Individuals who do not identify as exclusively male or female. They may identify as both, in between, or falling outside of the binary concepts of male and female. It can also be used as an umbrella term encompassing other gender identities (e.g., genderqueer, gender-fluid; Human Rights Campaign, 2023a).

- Gender non-conforming (GNC): Someone whose gender identity and/or gender expression expands beyond, actively resists, and/or does not conform to the current cultural or social expectations of gender, particularly in relation to male or female (see also gender nonbinary; TransHub, 2023). Both GNB and GNC can be used as umbrella terms for various gender identities. Throughout this essay, GNB and GNC will be utilized interchangeably as umbrella terms.

### **Statement of Positionality**

I am a White, cisgender, older adult, able-bodied lesbian with my doctorate degree in social work. I am on faculty at the School of Social Work at Monmouth University in the United States.

### **Introduction**

Monmouth University's LGBT+ Older Adult Project (OAP) is an initiative in the School of Social Work that seeks to improve the quality of life of older LGBT+ adults through research, education, advocacy, and community service. As the new coordinator of OAP in 2020, I searched for ways to advance this mission. Initial ideas included starting a podcast series and hosting conferences related to LGBT+ older adults.

The first two conferences were related to the larger LGBT+ older adult community, but the conference held in 2022 focused solely on older adults in the transgender and gender non-conforming (T/GNC) community. Titled "Aging and the Lived Experiences of Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming (T/GNC) Adults," this national conference was well attended, and the feedback was overwhelmingly positive. Many, including myself, particularly liked the stories told by panelists about their lived experiences. Afterwards, I was motivated to sponsor more initiatives on issues related to older adults' gender identities. I realized I had not done enough to highlight the oftentimes invisible group of T/GNB older adults.

Six months later on a vacation in Vermont, needing an indoor activity due to rain, my spouse and I decided to visit the Middlebury College Museum of Art. Besides a handful of staff, there was no one there but us. We were not sure what to expect and had nothing but time. There was a sign at the gallery articulating this museum's mission. Museums typically have prioritized art created by White men, and contributions by marginalized groups have been overlooked. In contrast, this museum sought to feature artists from diverse groups, especially women, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of color), and LGBTQ+ individuals (Middlebury College Museum of Art, 2023). This moved me. Perhaps the lived experiences of T/GNB individuals could be expressed through their own artwork and highlighted at my school.

Upon return, inspired by the power of what I saw and felt at the Middlebury Gallery, I immediately began planning an art exhibit and film screening featuring artists aged 50+ who identify as T/GNB. With support and guidance, the process was underway, and our Center for Arts issued a "call to artists and filmmakers" posted on an art gallery platform reaching people across the United States and internationally. An excerpt from the "call" is as follows:

[We are] seeking artists and filmmakers aged fifty and older who identify as transgender, gender nonconforming, gender expansive, gender non-binary or additional gender identity beyond the binary. ...

Piece(s) submitted should represent for you aspects of your life as a T/GNC individual. The art may reflect your journey (emotional, psychological, and/or physical) to live your authentic self and/or may represent other experiences you have had related to your gender identity. A short narrative should accompany any artwork you submit and include your reflections on the experiences of living as a T/GNC individual.

Films submitted should be related to the lives of T/GNC older adults.  
(Monmouth University Center for the Arts, 2022, paras. 3–5)

### **Art Exhibit & Film Screening Details**

After a number of digital submissions arrived, the artwork was reviewed, and a total of 27 pieces of high-quality mixed media art—including a short video from six artists and one full-length film for a film screening—were selected. Of note, within the T/GNC community there is tremendous diversity in all identities including, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, religion, socioeconomic status, and age. The community also varies by gender identities such as trans men, trans women, gender nonbinary, gender fluid, two-spirit, etc. The artists that participated in our exhibit were all aged 50+ and their gender identities were as follows: two identified as trans women, one identified as a trans man, two identified as gender fluid and/or two-spirit, and one did not share their gender identity. We do not know the artists' other identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, etc.). The exhibit was held for one and a half months in the winter of 2023, and approximately 200–250 individuals visited the art show.

The film selected was titled *From This Day Forward* (2015). It is a documentary sharing the story of director Sharon Shattuck's family, her parents, and their marriage after Sharon's father came out as transgender and changed her name to Trisha. Trisha and wife Marcia stayed together, and daughter Sharon sought more understanding as she reunited with her parents to prepare for her own wedding. The film screening was held on one day only in February 2023 and was followed by a Zoom panel discussion with Sharon, Trisha, and Marcia Shattuck.

### **Feedback**

After visiting the exhibit, people had the opportunity to complete a brief exit survey. The surveys were not part of a research study but were a means to gather feedback both for the gallery and for OAP about the exhibit. No hypotheses were made and no data was analyzed. Overall, the feedback was very positive and affirming.

Verbal feedback was also positive. Prior to, during, and after the art exhibit and film screening, individual LGBTQ+ students and faculty contacted me sharing that they felt this was a significant and meaningful event to them. A common theme was that this event made them feel welcomed and supported by our university. Feedback from the community outside of the

university was complimentary. The exhibit and film screening's visitors expressed a strong appreciation—both for the beauty of seeing art from the perspective of their own community and for the show's simple existence.

The film screening had a similar effect. After the film screening, attendees from the public spoke with me and shared firsthand experiences about family members and friends. Some people attended the exhibit and film hoping to increase their understanding specifically so that they could be a “better ally” to their loved ones. Some were there because they had little knowledge about the topic, and they communicated that the film and discussion afterwards opened their eyes. Most mentioned how moving the film was and listening to the family after the film was especially poignant. A few commented that it was a tribute to Monmouth University that they had this exhibit and film screening given the current hostile rhetoric related to trans and gender nonbinary individuals across the country. The art exhibit and film screening gave visibility to the T/GNC older adult community and, as a result, I hoped that a message of inclusivity was conveyed to students, faculty, staff, and the public.

## **Challenges**

### **Bathrooms**

I realized when I visited the exhibit soon after its opening that there were no gender-inclusive, gender-neutral, and/or single-occupancy restrooms in the building housing the art gallery and theatre. As recommended by the Williams Institute, universities should provide an ample number of gender-inclusive or single-stall restrooms across their campuses (Goldberg, 2018). I inquired about this with the directors there, who let me know that there was a gender-neutral restroom available in the building next door. I walked from the art gallery to this building. Although close by, it was highly inconvenient and would also be challenging for anyone with ambulation problems. I asked if there was any way this issue could be rectified—at least for the day of the film screening. One of the public restrooms was temporarily assigned as gender-neutral, and a sign was created for it in the lobby and hallway.

Although an arrangement was made, I was disappointed in the school and in myself. I had not thought about the issue of whether the building offered non-gendered restrooms in the planning of this event. I had visited the building on multiple occasions, including visiting the exhibit the night before it opened. Each time I used their bathroom, I never noticed there were no gender-inclusive restroom options. This very visible issue for T/GNB individuals was invisible to me. It was a significant oversight and came from a position of privilege. I suspect that if I identified as T/GNB, bathroom accessibility would have been incorporated into the planning of these events.

This lack of awareness prompted me to find out what buildings on campus have these options. The good news is that there are gender-inclusive, gender-neutral, and/or single-occupancy bathroom options scattered across campus. Unfortunately, not every building has a non-gendered bathroom option, and some of these bathroom options are inconveniently located (e.g., on the third floor). According to Beemyn, director of the UMass Amherst Stonewall Center, the lack of a sufficient number of gender-inclusive and single-user bathrooms is an example of a

cisnormative structure on college campuses, and this can negatively impact T/GNB students and their experiences at school (Harvard Business School Publishing, 2023). Beemyn explains that trans students must choose whether to face potential harassment and discrimination in a gendered bathroom; “hold it in,” which can lead to health issues; or go out of their way to get to the gender-inclusive bathroom options. None of these options are acceptable.

### **Art Entries**

Compared with other calls for art entries that the gallery has had, we received fewer submissions than usual for consideration. Although the specific reasons for this are unclear, one plausible reason is the heightened visibility of identifying as T/GNC simply by participating in the exhibit. As compared with other exhibits where artists may or may not share their gender identity based on their comfort level, our exhibit required that the person identified as T/GNB.

This guess is in part based on a conversation I had with one of the artists whose artwork was already accepted. They reached out to me with questions about who would be attending the exhibit and film screening and had expressed reluctance to participate in an exhibit displaying the artwork of T/GNC individuals. Yet, they also expressed that this exhibit and their participation in it was important for them and for others. The artist ultimately decided to have their art included in the exhibit. Their reluctance, though, was understandable. Given the current backlash against the T/GNC community across the United States, fear of publicly identifying as T/GNC is a legitimate concern.

Other reasons for the limited number of entries may have been the strict inclusion criteria related to the artists’ identities (i.e., age 50+ and gender identity of T/GNC) and the inclusion criteria regarding content of the artwork (i.e., expressing artists’ journeys—emotional, psychological, and/or physical—to live their authentic selves and/or other experiences they had related to gender identity). In retrospect if we had the call for artwork open to T/GNC artists of all ages we may have had more artwork submitted. The percentage of T/GNC individuals in the general population is small. Thus, the number of artists within this group is even smaller. Age also impacts the numbers—older T/GNB adults are less likely than youth to be “out” with their gender identity. According to the Pew Research Center (Brown, 2022), only 0.3 percent of adults ages 50+ identify as trans or nonbinary as compared with 5.1 percent of adults ages 18–29.

This differential by age of those who identify as T/GNC may be related to older T/GNC adults having experienced a lifetime of discrimination, rejection from families, and violence (McDowell et al., 2019; Sloan & Benson, 2022). Yet, focusing on those aged 50+ highlighted a group oftentimes overlooked and invisible within both the larger LGBTQ+ community and within the T/GNC community. T/GNC older adults are impacted by multiple levels of stigma, oftentimes faring worse than their LGB older adult peers in many health and mental health measures (Fabbre & Gaveras, 2020; Fredriksen-Goldsen et al., 2014; Hoy-Ellis & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Lampe et al., 2023; Velasco et al., 2023).

## Reflections

After the art exhibit and film screening, I wondered if these events helped current T/GNB students, faculty, and staff at Monmouth University feel supported and welcome on our campus. I also considered how these events impacted the larger community's sentiments about our school. Would prospective LGBTQ+ college students seek Monmouth as a school because it hosted these events? Will Monmouth University be perceived as providing a positive campus climate for LGBTQ+ students and T/GNB students in particular?

These are important questions to ask because unfortunately many T/GNB college students have negative experiences, do not perceive their campus climate as positive, and do not feel a sense of belonging (Austin, Craig, Alessi, et al., 2016). T/GNB students are a marginalized group within college communities nationwide. Prior to entering college, the majority who were out and/or perceived as transgender in grades K-12 had one or more negative experiences correlated with poor outcomes, such as higher rates of attempted suicide and psychological distress (James et al., 2016).

These negative experiences continue for T/GNB college students in IHEs. Challenges for these students include experiencing higher levels of harassment, feeling less accepted as part of the campus community, and reporting more discrimination as compared with their cisgender peers (Goldberg, 2018). Using data from the US 2015–2017 Healthy Minds Study which randomly selected 65,213 students at 71 campuses including 1,237 gender minority (GM) students, Lipson et al. (2019) found that GM college students have a significantly higher prevalence of symptoms across multiple mental health measures (i.e., depression, anxiety, eating disorders, self-injury, and suicidality) than cisgender students. The difference was dramatic—GM status was associated with 4.3 times higher odds of having at least one mental health problem (Lipson et al., 2019). According to James et al. (2016), approximately 16 percent of T/GNB students leave school to avoid being harassed or for other reasons related to being transgender.

Findings were similar when Budge et al. (2020) sought to understand the impact of minority stress on college students who identified as nonbinary. The authors looked at the students' perceptions of campus climate and sense of belonging at the school. They found that nonbinary students who did not feel they belonged on campus and did not have a positive perception of campus climate reported more impact from minority stress than those who reported feelings of belonging and a more positive climate. The results reinforced the need for universities to improve campus climate and be more welcoming to nonbinary students. Budge et al. recommended that IHEs need to build in programming and training for faculty and staff that focus on nonbinary students and their needs, offer nonbinary inclusive mental and physical health services, and post visible and inclusive information across departments.

According to the Williams Institute (Goldberg, 2018), college curricula that addresses gender identities, and specifically trans identities and experiences, can improve T/GNB students' experiences in IHEs. Although the art exhibit and film screening were one-time events lasting for one and a half months, they were T/GNB-specific and were integrated into some course work. Visiting the art exhibit was woven into the syllabus of one social work course and

integrated into one art course. Attendance at the film screening was required by one social work course and encouraged by one communications course. Additionally, some courses offered extra credit opportunities if students attended the art exhibit and/or film screening. In these ways, curricula in three academic areas—social work, communications, and art—exposed students to learning about gender identities and lived experiences. Research shows that T/GNB students who participate in LGBTQ+ academic experiences tend to perceive a warmer campus climate (Garvey et al., 2019).

The art exhibit and film screening also highlighted the visibility of T/GNB people on campus. One aspect of belonging mentioned by minoritized students in Vaccaro and Newman's (2016) study was seeing similar people so that they do not feel like they are the "only one" on their campus. While the exhibit and film screening did not feature fellow students, faculty, or staff who identify as T/GNB, the events displayed T/GNB persons' artwork. Also, the events were not hidden—they were vigorously promoted through advertising in the student online paper, posting hard-copy flyers around campus, and advertising on social media. Thus, most of Monmouth University's students learned that these events were happening.

Ideally the visibility of these events gave some students a feeling like they are not alone, and fostered a sense of belonging. Students' sense of belonging, which can include being valued, connected, heard, respected, understood, and being their authentic selves, has been found to be closely linked with whether the students will feel comfortable and succeed at an IHE (West, 2022). Privileged and minoritized students explain belonging differently, though, with privileged students describing a sense of belonging if involvement in activities is fun and people are friendly and, in contrast, minoritized students emphasizing the importance of involvement opportunities where they could be real and find an authentic fit (Vaccaro & Newman, 2016).

Visibility serves other purposes too. It is one way that the LGBTQ+ community has advocated for rights over the years and creates opportunities to have community and support. According to GLAAD (2023), as the LGBTQ+ community has expanded and become more visible, acceptance and attitudes towards LGBTQ+ persons in the United States has improved, with more non-LGBTQ+ persons supporting equal rights for the LGBTQ+ community than ever before. In contrast, if marginalized communities are invisible, they can be ignored, overlooked, and have no voice—and stigma and social marginalization are reinforced.

Efforts to increase visibility of the LGBTQ+ community can be seen in various initiatives, especially since the Stonewall Uprising in 1969. The first Pride march was held in New York City on the one-year anniversary of Stonewall on June 28, 1970, and over the years it morphed into a series of gay pride events throughout the month of June celebrated now as LGBTQ+ Pride month (Library of Congress, 2023). The International Trans Day of Visibility (TDoV) created by Crandall-Crocker (2021) years later in 2009 has made a significant difference for trans individuals, especially youth. Crandall-Crocker (2021) has heard from T/GNB individuals that this day is the "most important day" of the year for them and has "saved their lives" (para. 7).

With the increasing visibility of T/GNB individuals, however, there has also been an increase in backlash, political attacks, and violence against the community, especially against trans women

of color (Human Rights Campaign, 2023b). In 2023 alone, as of May 2, 2023, over 540 anti-LGBTQ+ bills were introduced in state legislatures, and over 220 bills specifically aimed against transgender and gender nonbinary individuals were introduced (Peele, 2023). Of the 45 anti-LGBTQ+ laws that were enacted in 2023 thus far, most target the rights of transgender and gender nonbinary individuals (Peele, 2023). In addition to political attacks, we know T/GNB individuals are vulnerable to victimization and violence and are at an increased risk of psychological distress, depression, suicidality, and substance abuse as compared with their LGB peers (Hoy-Ellis & Fredriksen-Goldsen, 2017; Newcomb et al., 2019; Price-Feeney et al., 2020).

Thus visibility, while necessary for progress, acceptance, and support, can be potentially harmful and could be considered a “double-edged sword” for marginalized groups. It can also be argued that visibility is not problematic for the dominant culture. My positionality as a cisgender individual provided me with privilege and a perceived level of safety while coordinating these events that T/GNB persons in the same position may not have experienced. For those in marginalized groups, visibility can indeed be scary.

Mercer (2019), a member of the Stonewall Trans Advisory Group, raised the issue that many trans individuals are fearful and face potential abuse and discrimination every day, so they do not necessarily feel comfortable being visible on the TDoV. Mercer argues that to help trans individuals feel safe more people must come out as allies and show their support for the trans community. When asked, Crandall-Crocker (2021) acknowledges that any visibility can bring attacks and agrees that it is not the trans individuals who need to be visible so much as the allies. Hopefully, the art exhibit and film screening increased awareness, understanding, acceptance, and allyship of cisgender persons towards T/GNB individuals.

Finally, the art exhibit created a temporary trans-specific space on campus. Trans-specific spaces are vital in improving T/GNB student experiences (Goldberg, 2018). Goldberg (2018) explains that spaces and/or groups should support trans-related programming and events. Even if college campuses have LGBTQ+ resource centers and student groups, many are centered around sexual orientation rather than gender identity. Further, Garvey et al. (2019) found that perceptions held by trans students regarding campus climate were not solely due to the presence of LGBTQ+ student services but rather by the quality and trans inclusivity of those services. The authors recommended that IHEs create trans-centered services and programs.

## **Conclusions**

The art exhibit and film screening were successful events and may have helped promote a positive campus climate and sense of belonging for T/GNB faculty, staff, and students at Monmouth University. In addition, the events created a temporary trans-specific space on campus. Those who do not identify as T/GNB may have increased awareness and understanding and hopefully will consider themselves to be allies and advocate for their T/GNB peers.

One takeaway for faculty in higher education is to think creatively and consider the use of art and/or film for learning activities related to understanding the lived experiences of other cultures and groups. Educators may not have the opportunity, time, and/or resources to initiate an exhibit

or film screening but can explore what their campuses and local community offer. Attendance at these events with corresponding assignments (e.g., reflection papers) can be incorporated into syllabi.

Specific towards improving climate and a sense of belonging for T/GNB students, faculty should include the topic of gender identities formally into curricula, provide educational opportunities for students related to the T/GNB community, help create trans-specific spaces, and encourage T/GNB sensitivity trainings for fellow staff/faculty on campus. These steps may also encourage true allyship for those who do not identify as T/GNB. Beyond LGBTQ+ services at IHEs, programs focused on trans inclusivity and transgender and gender nonbinary identities should be initiated.

Finally, more research assessing the best ways to improve campus climate and belonging for T/GNB students should be conducted. Although suggested guidelines for T/GNB affirmative education in IHEs have been published (e.g., Austin, Craig, & McInroy, 2016; Goldberg, 2018), these reports do not capture current literature. Research from recent years may shed light on which guidelines can be the most and least helpful in creating a welcoming environment, positive campus climate, and sense of belonging for T/GNB students.

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