Challenging Gender at a Women's Institution: Transgender Admission and Inclusion at Smith College

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Abstract: This case study examines the factors that influenced Smith College's decision to consider accepting transgender women for admission. In 2013, Smith rejected the application of Calliope Wong, a prospective transgender student, because of the sex listed on her documentation. Wong started a campaign for Smith to change its policies regarding trans people, which led to questions about how women's colleges across the country should operate in the twenty-first century. Wong's campaign also drew attention to students who enter women's colleges as women-identified but later transition to another gender identity. Smith College, among other institutions, had to decide to what degree it would welcome gender minorities and provide support services for these students. Over time, women's colleges have adapted their missions to reflect changing attitudes about gender, while holding true to their founding principles. As society increasingly views gender as a spectrum and widens its definition of feminism, students, alumni, and administrators of women's colleges grapple with how to reconcile ideological evolution with time-honored traditions.

An Uncommon Application

Calliope Wong was a smart and talented high school girl. She loved making her own music, talking to her friends about feminism, and delving into new literature. As many students do, Wong began to explore different options for college toward the end of her junior year. She came across Smith College and fell in love with the school. Calliope dreamt of attending a place full of "iron-willed and astonishing women," where she could realize her goal of being both Pre-med and an English major (Wong 2015, n.p). She envisioned a future at Smith and with nervous excitement, began to plan her application. While Calliope Wong looked like an average rising senior in high school from Connecticut, something major set her apart from her peers: Calliope Wong is transgender.

Wong began researching Smith's admissions policy and found that as of the 2012-2013 admissions cycle, the College would only consider applicants whose Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) indicated they are female (Smith 2018). While she consistently lived, presented and identified as a woman, Calliope Wong's official documentation listed her biologically assigned sex as male. Instead of giving up, Wong launched a campaign to earn a place at Smith. She started a tumblr blog entitled "Trans Women @ Smith" and issued a call to action for her friends and followers to vocally support her in getting Smith to change their admissions policy—or at the very least, evaluate transwomen applicants beyond the sex on their official documentation (Wong 2015).

Because of its policies, Smith College did not extend an offer of admission to Calliope Wong. Smith claimed accepting Wong would jeopardize its Title IX funding as an all-female institution (Feldman 2014). Wong's campaign drew attention to the complicated web of sex and gender that trans students must navigate when applying to college, one that becomes especially tangled at women's colleges. Various news outlets published stories about Wong and the issue of trans admission at women's colleges in the following months and years. In addition, Wong inspired many women's colleges to re-evaluate their policies (or lack thereof) for transgender admission.

However, Smith and other institutions soon found that there is no one clear approach to this issue. How should Smith College define "woman" in their admissions policies? Should the school extend admissions to include nonbinary, genderqueer students or trans men who were raised as female? If the administration changes who is allowed to attend Smith, how will this alter the mission and environment of the college? Finally, if Smith admits gender minorities, how can the institution create policies to support these students while maintaining its strongly rooted identity?

Smith College

In 1871, an heiress named Sophia Smith donated her fortune to create an institution for the education of young women with the "means and facilities for education equal to those which are afforded now in our colleges to young men" (Smith College 2018e, n.p). The college opened its doors in 1875 in Northampton, Massachusetts. Smith is one of the "Seven Sisters," a consortium of prestigious, historically women's colleges of the Northeast along with Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, Bryn Mawr and others (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d.). While it has added new academic disciplines over the years, the college cites a dedication to freedom of thought and study as unwavering values that have continued throughout its history. Smith also emphasizes knowledge of world affairs and women's and human rights as core principles of the institution (Smith College 2018e). Smith boasts several influential alumnae, including writers Margaret Mitchell and Sylvia Plath, chef Julia Child, and feminist activists Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem (Encyclopaedia Britannica n.d).

Despite the college's values of worldly knowledge and equality remaining constant since its inception, Smith's mission has evolved to reflect the changing times. From its founding until the mid-twentieth century, Smith was primarily concerned with providing women with an education equal to that of men. By the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, numerous traditionally male colleges and universities began opening their doors to women. As a result, fewer women elected to attend single-sex institutions and the priorities of these colleges adapted to the times. Now that women had more educational opportunities, women's colleges wanted to educate female leaders to occupy male-dominated spaces in society. Former Smith College President Carol Christ described how women's colleges prepare students for real-world leadership: "There aren't that many women in leadership positions, and so this tends to reinforce any prejudice against women being in such positions that exist. At women's colleges, every leadership role is held by a woman… and this develops the capacity for leadership" (Kraschel 2012, 477)

Since the early twentieth century, women's colleges like Smith have not only drawn students with a desire to lead, but also those with same-sex romantic inclinations. What started as a common practice of "crushes" and "romantic friendships" later developed into an increased acceptance for lesbian and bisexual women (Faderman 2012, 18). Because of the greater

visibility of women in nontraditional roles and relationships, by the second half of the twentieth century women's colleges became places of activism and self-expression (Kraschel 2012). Some students began to specifically seek women's colleges for their queer and feminist communities. (LaFleur 2015). Others advocated for greater inclusion for women of color and economically-disadvantaged women at their institutions (Cummings and Spade 2014).

Smith prides itself on its progressive racial and economic ideals. In 1900, Otelia Cromwell became the first African-American graduate of Smith College. The school commemorates her achievements on Otelia Cromwell Day, an annual symposia on race, diversity and community (Smith College 2018a). When Smith's School of Social Work recognized the lack of racial diversity in its student body in 1995, the program initiated what has become a decades long, comprehensive strategy to combat racism within the school. This strategy includes a commitment to unbiased admissions, curriculum, and publications. In the 2011-2012 academic year, students of color represented 29.3% of the total student body. In addition, Smith offered need-based financial aid to 63.1% of students (Smith College 2018b).

Despite its outward commitment to diversity, racial and economic issues lie beneath the surface at Smith College. At the time when Otelia Cromwell studied at Smith, her classmates were writing paternalistic articles referring to African American citizens in society as a "race problem" (Smithipedia 2012). In 1989, a group of anonymous students sent racist letters to four of their Black classmates (Berger 1989). In 2016, a member of the administration leaked racially-charged emails from School of Social Work faculty members. The professors alleged that the school over-estimated the amount of racial bias in the classroom and professional settings. They also claimed some students of color entered the program unfit for its rigor (Krantz 2016).

As a private college, many middle- and lower-class students incur a high financial burden to attend Smith. While many Smith students received financial aid in the 2011-2012 year, those who did not qualify faced a full cost of attendance of $51,600. The average debt for Smith students was $24,501 upon graduation (Smith College 2018b). On one hand, Smith College portrays itself as an inclusive environment for students of all backgrounds. On the other, its cost, admissions policies, and internal tensions reveal that while some students—including queer and trans ones—seek Smith for its welcoming environment, they may face a more nuanced reality.

Smith's Admission Procedures and Federal Funding

Smith is a highly selective private college of around 2,500 undergraduate students (Smith College 2018b). In 2013, the college accepted 41% of applicants, a percentage which has gone down in recent years (Abrams 2013). When Calliope Wong applied to Smith, the college only considered "female" applicants for admission. Female refers to biological sex, not gender identity or presentation. To determine whether or not an applicant was female, Smith used the sex indicated on one's FAFSA documents. In order to be considered female in this capacity, an applicant would need to have her sex changed on their birth certificate. According to the laws of several states--including Connecticut where Wong resides and Massachusetts where Smith is located--a transgender person must undergo genital reconstruction surgery to alter the sex on their birth certificate (Wong 2012). In other words, for Wong to have been fit for admission to Smith, she would have had to endure an extremely expensive, irreversible surgery by age 17 and submit to a tedious process to alter her federal documentation.

Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 states, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any education program or activity receiving Federal financial

assistance" (U.S. Congress 1972, 373). If an educational institution wishes to receive federal funding, it may not discriminate based on sex as to who will be able to attend and receive the benefits of the institution. However, the law makes exceptions for certain types of organizations, including those who have "traditionally and continually" had a policy of only admitting a single sex (U.S. Congress 1972, 373).

Some institutions that remained single sex after the Title IX transition period have faced lawsuits claiming their policies violate the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. In *US v. Virginia,* the Supreme Court ruled that the Virginia Military Academy's male-only admittance policy did not advance an important government objective (1996). Therefore, the academy could not continue to admit solely male applicants. Since courts generally agree that women's colleges advance the important government objective of ending gender-based discrimination by creating educational opportunities for women and cultivating women leaders, these colleges have continued to operate legally as single-sex institutions (*United States v. Virginia* 1996).

One of the reasons Smith cited for rejecting Wong's application is that admitting her would violate their funding under Title IX. However, Title IX states that women's colleges do not have to accept anyone who is *not* a woman, but not that they have to reject them (Nanney and Brunsma 2017). In addition, Kraschel (2012) argues that Title IX actually provides the framework for how women's colleges could admit transgender students. She states that according to case law, Title IX allows for affirmative action for those of disadvantaged genders. She asserts that with regard to enrolling instead of just admitting transgender students, women's colleges would then face an additional obstacle of having to provide equal opportunities for these students and accommodate their gender-specific needs.

Defining Womanhood

The feminist movement and women's spaces have historically had a complicated relationship with transgender people. In 1979, Janice Raymond wrote *The Transsexual Empire: The Making of the She-Male.* In her book, Raymond argued that transsexual women--those born as men who identify as women--are not "real" women and claimed they were a threat to women's safety and feminist spaces. She equated trans women with cisgender male (biologically and mentally male) sexual predators (Raymond 1979). Raymond and other anti-trans feminists are referred to as Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists, or TERFs (Weber 2016). TERF ideology such as Raymond's, which suggests that trans women will use access to women's spaces to become predators or that they will never fully understand what it means to be a woman, continues to exist in recent times. In 2015, the women's music festival MichFest celebrated its 40th anniversary. The festival reaffirmed its "womyn born womyn" admittance policy even amongst artist boycotts. MichFest founder Lisa Vogel stated that while she considers trans women to be her "sisters" she stressed the need for community around the experience of being born and raised a woman in a patriarchal society (Weber 2016).

Continued TERF ideology in the feminist community comes perhaps as a response to increased visibility for people on all parts of the gender spectrum. As lesbian, gay, and bisexual people have fought for and won greater acceptance and legal protections, trans people have fought alongside them. The changing consciousness surrounding sexual orientation in American society has allowed for a similar shift regarding gender. In recent years, more people have been publically self-identifying as genderqueer or nonbinary, or outside the strict categories of male and female. These people may have chosen to identify with their assigned gender or with the

opposite sex in the past, but with increased discourse surrounding gender diversity have found a label that fits their identity more closely (Richards et al. 2016).

The medical community has shifted its definitions of alternate gender identification as well. The American Psychological Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM) removed the condition Gender Identity Disorder and replaced it with Gender Dysphoria. While Gender Identity Disorder was defined as the desire to change one's gender from male to female or female to male, the DSM now states that Gender Dysphoria is not a disorder, but includes having typical feelings of, or wishing to be treated as, an alternate gender from one's assigned gender (Richards et al. 2016). The number of people seeking clinical services for gender dysphoria has increased in recent years in North America and Europe, likely due to increased visibility and acceptance in society. This acceptance is more prevalent in "online and youth oriented media" (Richards et al. 2016, 4). As a result, transgender men and women and nonbinary or genderqueer people (those on the spectrum somewhere between male and female) may feel more comfortable to self-identify as transgender or nonbinary, seek counseling and care, and make bureaucratic changes to their documentation (Richards et al. 2016).

Defining who is and who is not a woman becomes difficult as people begin to identify in increasingly complex ways. For instance, some nonbinary individuals still identify with being raised female. Feminist author Suzannah Weiss (2018), identifies as a nonbinary woman: "this identity acknowledges both that I don't have an innate identification with any gender and that I've been socialized as a woman." Those individuals assigned female at birth (AFAB) who identify like Weiss honor the female parts of their experience such as culture, politics, public perception and in some cases, their biologically female bodies. Although some feminists and queer activists see an expanding web of identity as increased freedom, others see it as a way for ciswomen to dismiss themselves from experiencing the difficult aspects of being female. Writer Susan Cox (2016) describes coming out as nonbinary as "throwing other women under the bus" (n.p). Cox believes that AFAB nonbinary people use their identity to dismiss patriarchal conventions of femininity and masculinity; something that she feels feminists fight for already. People who share Cox's view think that AFAB nonbinary people should channel their energy into fighting for women to express themselves in different ways, rather than identifying out of the category altogether.

Despite the social progress which has allowed for varying views of transgender and nonbinary people, gender minorities still face disproportionate violence, discrimination, and poverty. A report by the National Transgender Discrimination Survey revealed that transgender people are four times more likely to live in extreme poverty as compared to the rest of the population (Grant et al. 2011). Across the majority of survey categories, racial minorities fared worse than their white counterparts. While 1.6% of Americans attempt suicide in their lifetimes, 41% of transgender people surveyed had done so. Seventy-eight percent of the survey respondents faced harassment in a K-12 school setting and 26% had lost their jobs due to anti-transgender bias (Grant et al. 2011). The discriminatory treatment trans people face can persist even in self-proclaimed feminist and progressive spaces. People concerned with the future of Smith College have weighed in on how best to reconcile traditional views of gender with a desire to preserve funding and uphold the mission of the college. Is Smith's goal to educate those assigned female at birth, or to add to a history of ideological evolution by accepting trans or nonbinary students?

The Role of Smith Alumnae

The debate over how to define a woman at women's colleges occurred not only on campus between students and administrators, but also among alumnae. Alumnae have varying opinions about who should be admitted and included in the college's student body, commensurate with their own experiences at Smith, generational conventions of gender, and personal backgrounds. Smith's administration needs to consider alumnae opinions for many reasons. Besides the fact that these women are a part of the college's history and have contributed to its culture, Smith alumnae contribute financially and their donations fund significant college projects. For example, Margaret Wurtele, a graduate of the class of 1967, recently donated $10 million for a new Leadership Center. Smith also just raised $486 million, primarily through alumnae donations, during its Women of the World Campaign (Smith College 2018d). Without the support of its alumnae, Smith cannot continue to fund its programs and create new ones for a changing educational landscape. Furthermore, many alumnae are not just financially influential, but also public figures such as authors, filmmakers, and business executives who have the ability to show support or disagreement about the college's policies.

A recent study analyzed several discussion threads on Facebook of alumnae responses to trans inclusion at an unspecified women's college during the three year period between 2013, when Calliope Wong was denied admission to Smith, and 2016, when the group closed. While the alumnae were not specifically mentioned as being from Smith College, they were from a New England women's college and were reacting to publicly known events occurring at Smith. A majority of the alumna responses were in support of trans inclusion, but they were often dominated by hostile discussion between those who do not consider trans women to be women and those who do (Nanney 2017). Attackers on both side of the debate often drowned out the more civil and supportive discussions occurring on the forum. Many who opposed trans inclusion did so in the name of the mission of a women's college. They felt that expanding the definition of "woman" beyond "biologically female" would allow women's colleges to become inclusive of practically any disadvantaged group, in spite of gender identity. Those who supported trans inclusion were quick to call out those alumnae who opposed it and claim they did not represent the college community as a whole (Nanney 2017).

The differences of opinion in these threads reveal how important feminist debate and the mission of a women's college are to its alumnae. Regardless of how much Smith could reform its admissions and inclusion policies, the college needed to take these alumnae opinions into account if they wished to continue to receive financial and ideological support from the alumnae community.

Coming Out as Trans at Smith

Although Smith's admission policy was strictly limited to those whose official documentation showed they were female, many prospective and current students see the college as an environment for widened gender expression. Several students have entered Smith openly identifying or presenting as female but began transitioning to male or another gender during their time in college. On one hand, the Smith environment is conducive to varying forms of expression and self-discovery. On the other, individuals who no longer identify as women find themselves in a difficult position. To what extent do trans men and gender nonconforming people feel included in the community they were previously welcomed into? How much is the Smith administration responsible for making them feel welcome in a women's space?

Jayke, a trans man who graduated Smith in 2012 and began his transition during college, spoke about how the college is an environment where students feel safe to come out as queer or trans: "I think [Smith] gave me the freedom to experiment with gender presentation. I know a lot of first-years who said they came here because they would feel safe for being trans, genderqueer, or just queer in general … it is a refuge for a lot of people" (Weber 2016, 38). At other colleges, students may feel a pressure to conform to stereotypical gender presentation or heteronormative dating practices. Smith's historically rooted activism and social acceptance of queer students removes this pressure and allows for more exploration. Jayke's sentiments partially explain why trans students may change their outward identity or appearance after enrolling at Smith, but how they experience the college's female-centric policies may change.

Reed Wetmore also graduated from Smith in 2012. He came out as trans in 2010 and began visually documenting his physical transition on YouTube shortly after. In a video called "Being a Man at a Women's College," Wetmore describes falling in love with the Smith community, only to feel like the administration would not acknowledge his existence (Wetmore 2015). He felt an outpouring of support from friends and colleagues after coming out, but felt something different from everyone else at the school: "My experience was not that I was unwelcome… I didn't want to change anything about how the college represented women and empowered women… I just wished that my identity as a trans man, as a trans person and as someone who didn't identify as female was more acknowledged" (Wetmore 2015, n.p.). Any student who chooses to transition while enrolled at Smith may continue to earn a degree from the institution, and the college publicizes the process by which a student can change their name in the records (Smith College 2018c). However, as Wetmore (2015) echoed in his video, the college did not openly recognize it had non-female members of the student body. He explained that a major part of this exclusion stems from the language that faculty and staff use which refers to an all-female, all women's community.

Hart and Lester (2011) conducted a study on how transgender students experience life at Cady College, another single sex institution in North Carolina. The authors found that the campus community saw trans students as both "invisible" (203) and "hyper visible" (205). They go unnoticed in the sense that many speeches by university figures refer to a homogenous women's community. But, the students are highly recognizable in a crowd of the female-presenting majority. Smith has tried to foster an all-women's space by using female pronouns ("she/her") in organizational materials. Even at commencement, which includes the all-gender graduate programs, speakers refer to a community of women (Wetmore 2015).

Smith straddles the line between ignoring and including their students who come out as transgender. If the college chooses to change its admission policies to make the community more inclusive of trans students, it may need to examine the way the administration supports both new and existing gender minorities. Student Affairs administrators at Smith could provide, both through the administration's instruction and their own personal actions, different degrees and types of resources for trans students. When interviewing 31 Student Affairs professionals at various women's colleges, Marine (2011) categorized them into three main categories: ambivalent, supportive, and advocates. Ambivalent and supportive administrators exhibited a large range of inclusive behavior such as using students' chosen name and pronouns, designating staff members to work on specific transgender needs, and assisting students in finding other on-campus resources such as medical care, counseling, or gender neutral bathrooms. Professionals who took on an advocate role for trans students took other actions such as communicating with

faculty on behalf of students, bringing up trans issues to colleagues and superiors, or leading committees on trans inclusion.

Students and Administrators Debate Gender Diversity in a Women's Space

After the college rejected Calliope Wong's application in 2013, students at Smith began to express their opinions about how the administration should treat trans applicants and current students in the future. The Smith College student group Q&A, or Queers and Allies, started conducting protests and other activism on campus to urge the administration to change their transgender admissions policy. Q&A organized rallies and sent petitions and demands to the admissions office urging them to include trans women and even create an affirmative action policy benefiting other marginalized groups such as older, undocumented, disabled and economically disadvantaged students. The group also drafted a "Pledge of Nonsupport" which asked members of the community to withhold donations until the administration enacted these changes (Weber 2016). Q&A's demands to the administration did not mention admitting other gender minorities, but did advocate for changes in how those already admitted students could more efficiently change their names or gender markers in institutional records (Bobadilla 2014).

The Smith student newspaper, *The Sophian,* covered Q&A's activity as it occurred. A common theme found in the paper's coverage was the need for Smith to stay true its mission as a women's college (Nanney and Brunsma 2017). What this goal means differs depending on who is stating it. To members of Q&A and its supporters, staying true to Smith's mission means evolving the college's policies to reflect changing ideas of womanhood and gender in general. Julia Marciano, a Q&A group member, stated that she believes this means making women's colleges havens for people of "minority genders" (Weber 2016). To the Smith administration, it may mean drawing the line as to who is included in the community. In 2013, the Vice President of Public Affairs responded to student and alumni activists by saying:

> This is a complex and evolving issue on which people of good intent hold a range of views. . . . Smith is committed to continuing the conversation about transgender students. We are committed to being as welcoming as possible in the context of our mission as a women's college (Nanney and Brunswa 2017, 157).

The Admission Policy Study Group

In November 2014, over two years after Calliope Wong first submitted her application to Smith, the college's President Kathleen McCartney announced she was forming an Admission Policy Study Group to review the institution's transgender admissions policy (McCartney 2014). The group would include faculty, students, staff, and alumnae and would be co-chaired by a professor and the Vice President for Enrollment. The group planned to study the question of what it means to be a woman and how Smith's mission fits into a world with ever-evolving views of gender. The Admission Policy Study Group would hear community opinions through an online form and meet throughout the course of the academic year (McCartney 2014). The administration had already sent their rejection to Calliope Wong, but the fates of future trans and nonbinary people at Smith had not yet been sealed.

Epilogue

Calliope Wong accepted an offer of admission at University of Connecticut in 2013 and graduated in 2016 with a degree in English on a pre-med track. While at UConn, she was a

student in the Honors Program and received a prestigious grant from the University to record an instrumental piano album inspired by her experience growing up trans and Chinese-American. Wong plans to attend medical school and eventually use her degree to provide other trans people with access to safe and quality care (Stiepock 2016).

Wong's campaign and the work of young activists spurred other women's colleges to change their policies. Mills, Simmons, Scripps, Bryn Mawr and Wellesley Colleges all altered their admissions policies between 2014 and 2015 to reflect varying degrees of inclusivity of gender minorities. Mount Holyoke maintains the most inclusive one: an all-persons-but-cisgender-men policy, where they consider anyone for admission except those born and identifying as male (Weber 2016).

On May 2, 2015, Smith President McCartney issued a letter to the college community announcing a new admissions policy. Under the new rules, Smith considers trans women for admission based on a process of self-identification. If an applicant selects "female" on their Common Application, the college will consider them for admission (McCartney 2015). Smith will not consider genderqueer or nonbinary students for admission, as it aims to prioritize education for those who identify strictly as women. This policy does not affect those genderqueer, nonbinary students or trans men who come out while at Smith. McCartney states that the administration will support students who come out and created a group to address issues specific to trans and non-binary students (McCartney 2015).

Smith created and continues to maintain a webpage list of resources for trans students. It includes a document with over 200 gender neutral bathroom locations and the contact information of a trans activist, a campus physician, and a wellness director who serve as allies in the community. The site also links to national hotlines and websites and local support groups for trans youth and adults (Smith College Resource Center for Sexuality and Gender 2018).

When Calliope Wong found out that Smith had changed its admissions policy, she was disheartened that the change had come too late, but excited about the impact her activism had on trans history. Wong asked Smith College to grant her an honorary degree as part of the Class of 2017, the one she had hoped to be a part of (Wong 2015). Smith has never responded.

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