

Democracy's College

Episode 19: Supporting Trans Collegians

- Dr. Fox:** Welcome to the Democracy's College Podcast series. This podcast focuses on educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students in P-20 educational pathways. This podcast is a product of the Office of Community College Research and Leadership, or OCCRL, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Learn more about OCCRL at occrll.illinois.edu.
- Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** Today I have the distinct pleasure of being with Dr. Z Nicolazzo, an Assistant Professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs in the Department of Counseling Adult and Higher Education at Northern Illinois University. Dr. Nicolazzo's research has centered on college student development, post-secondary access, diversity, equity, and culture. In particular, Dr. Nicolazzo is an expert on trans collegians, with particular emphasis on trans student resilience and kinship building. Dr. Nicolazzo has published in a variety of scholarly and practitioner-focused journals and outlets, including the *Journal of LGBTQ Youth*, *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, *About Campus*, *The Journal for Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs*, as well as *TSQ*, *Transgender Studies Quarterly*. Dr. Nicolazzo, thank you for joining us on Democracy's College.
- Dr. Nicolazzo:** Yeah, thanks for having me. I appreciate it.
- Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:** One of the things we wanted to spend some time talking with you about is your book, a recent bestseller flying off the shelves. And in the opening of your book, *Trans in College*, you provide us with a very intimate, rich, honest, soul-stirring opening in which you talk about and demonstrate your own resilience as well as how you've navigated and been visible as a transgendered individual. So we wanted to just spend some time talking about this beautifully written introduction and your scholarship. Much of your scholarship, it really resonates with what we talk about as SPN, or scholarly personal narrative. Can you share with us how your journey has shaped your studying in terms of intersectionality and multiplicity of identities?
- Dr. Nicolazzo:** Yeah, sure. Thanks for the kind comments about the book. I tell people that any good part of the book really is all the participants' doing. It's really exciting for me to be able to talk about this work that I did alongside these nine trans students who are just . . . they continue to be a real bedrock for me in terms of who I am and how I live my life. So it's nice to be able to talk about it.
- Dr. Nicolazzo:** The introduction, yeah, kind of talks a little bit about my journey and my path around understanding my own trans identity and then how that leads into the study. I came out in my late 20s. I was living and working in Tucson, Arizona. I was working with fraternities and sororities, and so I was really in an environment both, I think, socially and politically as well as in my work, that was

highly restrictive around gender. So coming out as trans was a pretty scary thing for me. I didn't really know who to turn to. I didn't know what this meant for me in terms of my work and in terms of my life.

Dr. Nicolazzo:

And I remember having this . . . and I write about this in the introduction . . . this one conversation with my good friend, Chase, who's a trans man, on the phone at a coffee shop, and kind of whispering into the phone, "I'm trans, but I don't really know what that means, and I don't know what to do." And he told me, he said, "I know that you learn a lot through reading, so here are some books that you should read to get more of a sense of who you are and who you could become."

Dr. Nicolazzo:

So when I transitioned then to being a doc student at Miami of Ohio, I really wanted to know how it is that transgender college students come to know themselves and come to understand who they are. I had the, really, the privilege to move to a different place and almost to start over again, to be publicly trans after I moved. College students don't always get that choice. They sometimes are locked into particular areas, geographic areas, and thinking about where they can go to college, and once they're on campus maybe they feel pretty locked into that particular campus. So I wanted to think about how is it that they navigate these spaces that we know are chilly at best for trans students without being able to maybe go across the country.

Dr. Nicolazzo:

And, especially, too, I didn't have a trans college experience, so I was kind of curious what are some differences, what are some connections that I have with these students as we think about both of our experiences, mine post-undergraduate, and theirs while they're in college. And really to think about, as you were talking about, some of these multiple convergences of identities. So how does race mediate the way that trans identities are experienced? How does class status change the way that people think about gender? How does thinking about disability mediate the process of being trans? And I was excited to see some of those come to fruition through the research process.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher:

Wow. That is so interesting. I want to learn more and talk more, but one of the things I have to share with you is you must know how critical your work has been in offering us some intersectional framing for how we understand the nuances of gender, as well as the dilemma in deference for trans students, particularly in these heteronormative educational contexts that are largely white spaces as well. So could you share your perspectives on what it means to have equity in education for diverse trans students, as well as highlight some of the inequities in the middle and high schools, as well as post-secondary environments that you see?

Dr. Nicolazzo:

If we think about some of the inequities that currently exist, I talk about this in my book as being a part of this broader discourse. I talk about this gender binary discourse that exists. And certainly my research focuses on post-secondary environments, but we know that the same is true in primary and secondary schools, that it's not even just about spaces or facilities. We can think about

changing rooms, locker rooms, restrooms, and gaining access to spaces that work for our bodies and who we are as trans people, but we can also think about discourse broadly speaking in terms of curriculum.

Dr. Nicolazzo:

California is one of the first states, if not the first state, to actually have an LGBT curriculum infused into particularly their history and social sciences curriculum. So that means that in most states in this country, queer and trans youth at a primary and secondary school level aren't even really understanding who they have the possibility to be, and I think that that's super important. Especially if I think about my own experience. I didn't even know that being trans was an option until I was in college. I didn't even have the access to the language of trans to be able to then identify as trans.

Dr. Nicolazzo:

So we know that if we are unable to have a curriculum that talks about LGBTQ youth, trans youth, trans people through history, then we're foreclosing possibilities for how people could identify and live their life. And then when we move to college, we can think about how that shows up in the programming that we do. So leadership programs were organized around gender. Mentoring programs were organized around gender at City University. There were obviously student activities, I mentioned fraternity and sorority life, organized around rigid notions of gender and sexuality.

Dr. Nicolazzo:

And we can also think about gender in classroom spaces, too. I had a lot of participants, [one] in particular, who told me that when she would go to business classes, and before classes would even start she would hear horrible comments from some of her peers who didn't know that she was trans, and that sometimes students would joke around, and faculty members would laugh at those jokes. So even in the classroom students are experiencing intense trans oppression and microaggressions that then foreclose opportunities for what majors they want to be in, what fields they can feel comfortable in, and then what their future profession looks like.

Dr. Nicolazzo:

And the other thing, too, that I'll say is that a lot of this is mediated by various other identities. So when we think about connections around, let's say, race and gender, there's a phenomenon that I've written about where particularly black non-binary students that I worked alongside of didn't feel like they could exist in the Black Cultural Center because that wasn't a space to talk about queerness or wasn't a space to be openly queer and transgress gender binaries. But then they also felt like they couldn't really fully exist in the LGBT Center because we know, as research indicates, that these spaces are heavily white spaces. Even at City University, where the director of the LGBT Center was a black lesbian woman, they still felt like it was an overly white space, and they still felt like because it was an overly white space they questioned whether their black trans bodies could exist there.

Dr. Nicolazzo:

So one participant talked about, he used the phrase, "It's a hard line to walk, to think about where I can exist and how I can show up and always feeling like I'm giving up some sense of who I am," which is where this idea of kinship networks

really comes into play. How is it that trans participants were able to create the kinship networks and the pockets of community both on campus as well as off campus, as well as virtually, through online platforms, that they needed to be able to persist.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: So I should talk about the kinship networks in particular. Share with the audience what are some of the other various ways that trans students navigate campus life, and what policies and practices are really critical, what do we need in the way of confronting gender inequality?

Dr. Nicolazzo: Participants did all sorts of things, both, I think, small scale as well as larger scale things. For example, we talk about them in the book in terms of practices of resilience, this notion of practice that we can keep on trying different strategies to navigate what we know are hostile climates. Some of them work, and then we repeat them. Some of them don't, so maybe we try something different, we practice something different.

Dr. Nicolazzo: And these are everyday experiences like putting on headphones and listening to music as you go across campus so you don't have to actually hear disparaging comments. It means checking in with friends and saying, "Hey, if I don't text you when I get to my car in 10 minutes, give me a call." It means knowing where . . . participants talked about queer bubbles on campus. Where could they go to be seen as they show up as well as to see other queer and trans people? The coffee shop on campus was one of those places. The LGBT Center, for some folks, was one of those places.

Dr. Nicolazzo: And those places weren't just physical places. One participant, Megan, talked about feeling overtly focused on across the entirety of campus, and so what she would do to cope with that is she was a gamer, and she would go back to her room, and she would play women video game characters so that she could see herself represented at least virtually. So we talk about even virtual kinship being a platform for people to be able to navigate their space.

Dr. Nicolazzo: On an administrative level and on a faculty level, I really strongly think that what we need to be doing is not thinking about best practices as a checklist. Like, "Oh, I'm gonna create some gender-inclusive housing in a section of our residential community, and then I can just check that off my list, and I'm good, and I'm doing great, and the campus pride index will list our institution as being better."

Dr. Nicolazzo: What I think we need to be doing is revisiting our policies in an ongoing fashion. Think about the fact that, for example, having trans-inclusive housing or gender-inclusive housing is necessary, but it's insufficient at changing the way that we think about gender. It's insufficient at recognizing the reality that the gender binary operates in every single other residential space. So how can we as administrators think through our policies on an ongoing basis? How can we involve trans people and make trans people central to the work that we do rather than an accommodation or an add-on? What are some places that gender shows up that it doesn't need to show up?

Dr. Nicolazzo: I mentioned this leadership and mentoring program that operated through the Black Cultural Center at City University, and it functioned along gender binary lines. There was a mentoring program for men; there was a mentoring program for women. Sylvia, one of the participants, just couldn't participate in that. And we know that for first-year students, these kinds of programs have huge impacts on graduation persistence rates. So where are some places where we can actually just stop focusing on gender because it doesn't mean anything? It shouldn't be an identifying function for these programs.

Dr. Nicolazzo: And then for faculty, I think, how can we continue to center those voices most on the margins through our curriculum, and how can we think almost from the bottom up? I think a lot about Dean Spades' work, who talked about this notion of trickle-up activism that I really harness in the book to think about how can we focus on those who are most marginalized in our communities to then create environments and create knowledges that work for our entire student body.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: So there are ways in which gender expression and gender identity and sexuality are often conflated by many folks, and much of this begins with, one, socialization and indoctrination, that kind of detaches gender from biology and the politics of identity. So from your research, how have you seen trans collegians affirmed in their authentic selves?

Dr. Nicolazzo: When I was analyzing the data for the research, I was reading Bell Hooks' *All About Love*, and I remember asking all of these participants this question: If you had the full attention of all of the cisgender faculty, students, and staff on campus, what would you say to them? I'm analyzing the data from that particular question and reading Bell Hooks' *All About Love*, and immediately there's something that kind of clicks for me, and it's this notion around the epistemology of love that Hooks is really writing about.

Dr. Nicolazzo: And she talks about love as a form of openness. That we can meet each other in all of our strangeness and uniqueness, and we can hold open space so that people can show up differently across time and space, that we don't have to be cemented into one way of being or one way of operating, but that we can . . . She talks about meeting each other as strangers and the beauty of that notion. So I started thinking about how these participants really just wanted other folks to operate with an epistemology of love. That they could show up in various different ways, that they could play with gender, that they could change their pronouns, that they could go by multiple different names at different times, and that that would be seeing them in their "authentic selves." Although I know that word "authenticity" is rather problematic. But that they could show up and be their whole selves.

Dr. Nicolazzo: And that that was their biggest desire. Megan said to me, when I asked that question, "I just want people to use my pronouns and my name." In one sense, we can think, gosh, that's such a small thing, but really it meant the world to Megan to be able to be seen as she was in ways that she didn't feel affirmed. When I talk with educators, faculty and staff, I really encourage them to think

about how they can infuse this epistemology of love through their work and how they can create a sense of openness and really meet each other as strangers, so that you don't go into a room and say, "Oh, well I know exactly how Eboni's gonna show up. I know exactly what she's gonna look like. I know exactly what's gonna be going on for her in terms of gender and sexuality and so that's kind of the fixed idea that I have of Eboni as a person." But rather say, "Who are you today? How do you wanna show up? How can I be alongside of you in this process?"

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: When considering issues of climate, campus climate, institutional type, community colleges are among the more culturally pluralistic higher ed environments. So there's a dearth of literature, as you know, on trans students attending community colleges. Would you please share with our listeners any trends as it relates to trans students and their college attendance and outcomes at 2-year institutions as well as 4-year institutions?

Dr. Nicolazzo: Yeah. I think this is one of the very valid critiques of the book is that I follow in the same kind of trend of focusing on 4-year institutions. And you're right. You know this from your own research. There's a dearth of work that focuses on LGBTQ students at community colleges, but really specifically, too, about trans students. I'm very excited to be working with an EDD student at Northern right now who's gearing up to do her dissertation focusing on trans students at community colleges.

Dr. Nicolazzo: What we know is that for all of the problems that we have trying to codify or categorize how many people are transgender, we know that about three to six times more people who are under the age of 18 are identifying as trans or gender expansive, gender fluid in some way, shape, or form, than over the age of 18. That's our college-going demographic. We also know from national data, the *Injustice at Every Turn* report that came out a number of years ago, that trans people, in particular trans people of color, in particular trans women of color, experience increased levels of job insecurity, housing insecurity, and poverty, and homelessness.

Dr. Nicolazzo: So if we even just think about 2-year colleges, the cost of 2-year colleges and access issues, you're right. There's more access. These environments tend to be, as you say, more pluralistic in terms of college-going demographics. So my bet is that there are more trans students that are at community colleges. There are particularly more trans students of color at community colleges, and so we just need to be doing more research. We need to be meeting these trans students there.

Dr. Nicolazzo: And also, if we think about outcomes, we know that trans students, just like any student who gets an associate degree or transfers and gets a bachelor's degree, they'll have increased life chances in terms of economic gains, in terms of job possibilities, which can be hugely stabilizing for communities that face much instability throughout their young lives.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: My final question. What call to action or advice would you share with our listeners relative to fostering successful matriculation and collegiate satisfaction as well as completion of college for trans students?

Dr. Nicolazzo: So here's my call to action, and it stems from something that Dr. DL Stewart said recently. Dr. Stewart said, "We can no longer say that there's no literature about trans college students." There's less than perhaps we would like for there to be and me, and me and some of my colleagues are working diligently on that, but we can no longer say that there's no literature. So I think it behooves all educators to use the literature that exists. Me and my colleagues have been very steadfast in trying to get literature out very quickly.

Dr. Nicolazzo: There are a number of special issues that I've helped to co-edit that has allowed us to share some very current work, particularly very recent dissertations. That's super exciting, but then educators need to use it to transform their environments. Educators need to . . . especially cisgender educators, need to ask themselves some very hard questions about whose feelings and discomfort they're centering in the work that they do.

Dr. Nicolazzo: One of the recent studies that I just finished with Dr. Rachel Wagner at Clemson and Dr. Susan Marine at Merrimack College suggests that cisgender administrators working in housing and residence life are centering all of their decisions around gender-inclusive housing around their own feelings of fear, guilt, and shame. So they're centering themselves as cis people rather than trans people. So if we have the literature, we need to be using it.

Dr. Nicolazzo: The other piece of that call is we need to constantly center those who are most vulnerable and most on the margins, which are our trans students and our trans students of color. And I think that that takes constant self-reflection. I think it takes time. I think that people maybe need to slow down a little bit and do some inventory around what they know and how they feel about gender and to kind of push back against this idea that we need to do things right away and very quickly and just check things off our list.

Dr. Zamani-Gallaher: Thank you. Thank you so much for that. Again, we've just spent time with Dr. Z Nicolazzo, Assistant Professor at Northern Illinois University. Please check out Z's book, *Trans in College*. You can find it available online at Barnes and Noble, amazon.com, and other outlets by Stylus Publications. Thanks again, Dr. Nicolazzo.

Dr. Nicolazzo: Thanks for having me.

Dr. Fox: For more information about supporting trans collegians, we recommend that you visit Dr. Z Nicolazzo's webpages. For more podcasts, links to today's recommended resources, or to share your comments and suggestions, visit occrillinois.edu/democracy, or send them via Twitter @occril. Tune in next month when Francena Turner from OCCRL talks with Dr. Amelia Parnell, the Vice

President for Research and Policy at NASPA, about strategies that student affairs professionals can engage in to support community college collegians. Background music for this podcast is provided by Dublab. Thank you for listening and for your contributions to educational equity, justice, and excellence for all students.