

Challenging the Gender Binary: Gender Diversity, Inclusion, and Student Activism at Wellesley College

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要 旨

多様な性自認に対する社会的認識が高まる中、アメリカでは、2014年以降、多くの女子大学が「女性」の概念を拡大し、トランスジェンダー女性を含む様々な性的マイノリティの学生を受け入れるというアドミッション・ポリシーを策定してきた。しかし、こうした学生の多くは依然としてキャンパス内で様々な「排除」や「抑圧」の問題に直面している。この状況を鑑み、近年女子大学では、性的マイノリティの学生にとってより「包摂的な」キャンパスづくりを目指す学生運動が活発化している。本論文では、2023年にウェルズリー大学で起きた学生運動の分析を通して、学生たちが女子大学という空間でどのように「包摂的な」キャンパスの形成を実現しようとしているかについて考察する。当該運動の中で学生たちが特に問題視した、現行のアドミッション・ポリシーや、大学内で公式に使用されている言語（gendered language）に関する議論をもとに、本論文では、多様なジェンダーを包摂するキャンパスを形成するために、大学内の様々な政策や実践において性別二元論に基づいた考え方を改めることがいかに重要であると学生たちが考えているかを明らかにし、学生たちが思い描くこれからの女子大学の在り方を探る。

キーワード：21世紀アメリカ, 女子大学, 学生運動, アドミッション・ポリシー, ジェンダー, ダイバーシティ, インクルージョン

I. Introduction

Student activists have long played a critical role in shaping the nature of women's colleges in the United States. In the 1990 student-led strike at Mills College,¹ for instance, students protested the announcement made by the board of trustees to admit male students into their institution.² After sixteen days of protest, they successfully reversed the board's decision. Their insistence on being part of the decision making for their school's future highlights the crucial role students have long played in shaping learning spaces specifically catered for women. As Robert A. Rhoads describes the 1990 Mills College strike as "an effort to forge a more participatory form of decision making at the college,"³ the strike demonstrated that students demanded not just to be heard, but to actively participate in shaping the future of women's colleges.

About three decades have passed since then and American colleges have undergone countless changes. Yet students' struggles to shape the future of women's colleges never cease. As in the 1990s, they still actively grapple with the same, fundamental question of what it means to be a women's college. The challenges they now face in addressing this question, however, have subtly shifted. While still remaining rooted in fundamental questions of gender, students at women's colleges today are challenging to ask what it means to have a space for "women" in higher education by addressing such intricately intertwined issues as gender identity, diversity, and inclusion.

A particularly fraught issue facing contemporary student activists concerns trans-inclusive admissions policies. Pushed forward by student-led activism,⁴ over twenty women's colleges since 2014 have broadened the meaning of "women" and adopted new admissions policies to formally admit historically underserved gender minority applicants, including transgender women (i.e., people assigned male at birth who identify as women).⁵ While the admissions policies for transgender and gender nonconforming students vary widely, women's colleges have begun expanding their willingness to define their student body by moving toward embracing gender diversity and fluidity. Pushed by students and applicants alike, women's colleges have increasingly recognized gender identity as a spectrum, rather than as a binary. Through student-led activism, more women's colleges are also adopting additional inclusive campus policies regarding housing, restrooms, and name and pronouns changes.⁶ In so doing, students are challenging women's colleges to redefine their institutional role.

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However, research suggests that policies that appear to be “inclusive” of transgender students do little to actually improve their campus experiences. One study, for example, contends that what seem to be “best practices” to promote gender inclusion, such as having trans-inclusive housing, could in fact simultaneously promote trans oppression in all other campus housing areas.⁷ What matters, therefore, is not making specific “inclusive” policies an “end goal” of an institution’s efforts to be inclusive, but to move beyond “best practices.”⁸ In addition, while adopting a “formal” policy can be an important part of promoting “inclusion,” “informal” practices of campus community members (e.g., administrators and peers) could still contribute to a hostile campus climate for transgender students.⁹ Simply adopting policies and/or “best practices,” therefore, may still result in perpetuating oppression of certain students. As Z Nicolazzo points out, it can be “overly optimistic” to think that “inclusion comes as a result of adopting certain policies.”¹⁰

And yet it is equally important to note that policies do in fact play a significant role in determining which students are “included” in the institution, and that policies also greatly affect students’ sense of inclusiveness on campus. Studies on trans-inclusive admissions policies, for example, reveal varying combinations of biology-, identity-, and legal-based criteria employed by women’s colleges to determine who can be “included” in their definition of “womanhood,” thereby making admissions difficult for those who fall out of the categories employed by the colleges.¹¹ Some studies point out that requiring applicants to provide evidence of legal or surgical gender transition to be considered eligible only allows economically privileged transgender people to apply to their schools.¹² This results in excluding many other transgender applicants who may not have access to such legal or medical services the policy requires. As highlighted by a recent student activism that will be examined below, the exclusionary implications embedded in the admissions policies adopted by the majority of women’s colleges have in fact continued to create significant barriers for enrolled students as well, particularly those who do not self-identify as “women” (e.g., transgender men and nonbinary students), in terms of their safety, sense of belonging, or sense of inclusiveness on campus.

The present study thus aims to further build upon these insights to better understand how contemporary student activists try to promote “inclusion” to shape the future of gender diversity on women’s college campuses. By examining a range of archival and contemporary media sources to explore recent activism on issues surrounding admissions

policies for those who do not self-identify as “women,” this study shows how student activists have challenged the gender binary to foster an “inclusive” campus for diverse gender identities. After briefly reviewing the current issues at stake, the study illustrates the historical context of exclusionary discourse experienced by students in women’s colleges who do not self-identify as “women.” It then shows how student activists have disrupted the gender binary discourse to make their campuses more “gender-inclusive.” In particular, this study focuses on student activism surrounding a non-binding referendum at Wellesley College in 2023, which urged college administrators to change their admissions policy to be inclusive of all marginalized genders, including those who do not self-identify as “women,” particularly transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth.

II. Admissions Policies for Those Who Do Not Self-Identify as “Women”

Issues concerning students who do not self-identify as “women” have long been at the center of discussion at women’s colleges. The primary discussion up until the early 2010s centered around the question of whether women’s colleges should allow students to remain until graduation if they transition to male while enrolled. This question has developed into a heated debate over the years. However, when announcing their newly revised trans-inclusive admissions policies, the majority of women’s colleges that accept applications from those who identify as “women” regardless of their gender assignment at birth, also officially stated that they would allow students transitioning from female to male to continue to stay and earn a degree at their institutions. As long as students identify as “women” at the time of application, therefore, they are eligible for admission and, once admitted, they gain institutional support throughout their college years regardless of their gender identity or expression. These women’s colleges, in short, have officially communicated their institutional commitment to supporting their students throughout their college years, which suggests that they would acknowledge and affirm that gender is fluid and that a student’s gender identity may change at any time.

However, these official statements by women’s colleges did not put an end to the discussion surrounding students who do not self-identify as “women.” As contemporary student activism since the early 2020s in particular shows, the issues concerning students not identifying as “women” are still at the center of the discussion on many women’s

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college campuses today. Yet the focus of the debate has now shifted to a slightly different question: that is, whether women's colleges should officially open and extend admissions to those who do not self-identify as "women" at the time of submitting their application for enrollment. In particular, the recent discussion has centered around the admission eligibility of transgender men (people assigned female at birth who identify as men), and nonbinary people assigned male at birth (people assigned male at birth who do not fit into the binary categories of "man" and "woman"). The majority of women's colleges today either do not allow them to enroll or do not explicitly make any official statements about their admission eligibility. In most women's colleges today, therefore, applicants are expected to clearly identify as "women" at the time of application regardless of the gender assigned to them at birth. And while some colleges accept applications from people who identify as nonbinary, most require their gender assignment at birth to be female.¹³

With their new admissions policies to accept applications based on students' self-identification as well as their commitment to supporting students who transition to men while in college, it seems that most women's colleges today are in favor of the idea of gender as a spectrum, rather than a fixed, binary concept. However, determining who can be enrolled into their institutions based on the current criteria inevitably pushes applicants to classify themselves into certain binary categories of "men" and "women," either through biology or self-identification.

As we will see below in the recent student activism in Wellesley College, contemporary student activists find this current admission eligibility situation for transgender men and nonbinary people problematic as it reinforces the gender binary, preventing the inclusivity of diverse gender identities on campus. By pushing college administrators to allow these students to enroll, student activists maintain that it is critical for the college to understand that transgender men, while they identify as "men," are not the same as cisgender men. They were born as female and have been oppressed and marginalized in a patriarchal society, just as cisgender and transgender women have been. Likewise, while nonbinary people assigned male at birth were born as male, they, unlike cisgender men, are also constantly faced with threats of social exclusion for identifying outside of the gender binary.

Rejecting their applications, student activists argue, would go against women's colleges' founding mission to support people who have been marginalized because

of their gender, and would send a transphobic message not only within the campus community but also to the outside world. Because our social understanding of gender has largely evolved and women's colleges today consist of people beyond the simple dichotomy of men and women, student activists believe that it is high time that women's colleges evolve their understanding of gender and revise their admissions policies to be inclusive of all transgender and nonbinary people as well.

III. Historical Context of Exclusionary Discourse for Those Who Do Not Self-Identify as “Women”

To better understand how contemporary student activists have been challenging their institutions to confront this issue, it is crucial to first examine the historical context of exclusionary discourse experienced by those who do not identify as “women,” particularly male-identifying transgender students, in women's colleges. According to a number of interviews conducted with graduates for the Alumnae Oral History Project at Smith College, those who graduated prior to the 2000s often said that gender was not considered a fluid concept, and being a transgender person was not part of the conversation in women's colleges for a long time.¹⁴ With a growing social recognition of gender fluidity, however, it became more and more common to see “younger and younger trans male students” and “people transitioning earlier and earlier” on campus in the 2000s.¹⁵ As many graduates from the early 2000s said, there were many transgender students around on campus, and the interaction with them would happen from the very first day of college life. It was “part of [their] day to day life” and the general campus movement by around the mid-2000s was “towards trans acceptance.”¹⁶ For example, questioning the use of gendered language (i.e., language of sisterhood) in the student government constitution, students at Smith College actively called for changing its language in 2003 to make their transgender population more welcomed, which resulted in having more gender-neutral language in the constitution.¹⁷ Transgender presence, therefore, was becoming more visible and a lot more common in women's colleges in the 2000s, and campus culture was becoming more and more supportive of transgender students.

And yet, at the same time, in this move towards transgender acceptance, there remains resistance to some transgender students on campus, especially those who self-

identify as “men” (i.e., transgender men). Underlying this conflicted campus atmosphere there has been a tendency to view transgender men in relation to cisgender men. Having engaged in a lot of campus activism to help allow transgender men to stay in college, Sara Pic, a 2000 Smith graduate, claimed as follows: “... this binary that people are stuck into—men, women—it’s hard, because I do believe in the value of a women’s education, so in that sense I do believe in that binary ... but that’s because we’re historically ... marginalized, disenfranchised group, and so these men who grew up as women and as girls, I feel that they should have access just as much.”¹⁸ While valuing the tradition that women’s colleges have historically upheld, Pic, along with a number of other advocates, acknowledged the need to discuss who women’s colleges should support beyond the scope of the gender binary categories of “men” and “women.” However, they found that most people on campus “didn’t know what it meant” and often heard them say, “Well, they’re men; they shouldn’t be here,” as if transgender men were no different from cisgender men.¹⁹ Pic and other activists, therefore, had to engage in “a lot of awareness-raising,” focusing on doing outreach and education to the campus community about how transgender men differed from cisgender men and why women’s colleges should support them.²⁰

This perceived association between transgender men and cisgender men continued to exist in many women’s colleges in the 2010s. There were even some cases in which transgender men were clearly denied the right to be in a leadership position on campus precisely because their presence was considered to evoke the idea of patriarchy. According to an article by Ruth Padawer in the *New York Times Magazine*, one notable case happened in Wellesley College in 2014 when a student named Timothy Boatwright, who introduced himself as “masculine-of-center genderqueer,” decided to run for a multicultural affairs coordinator (MAC) position on the student government cabinet at Wellesley College, “the highest position that an openly trans student had ever sought” in the College’s history.²¹ This position, whose primary mission was to promote “a culture of diversity,” was going to be sought after by Boatwright and three other women of color. However, all of these candidates except Boatwright stood down before the election, making him the only candidate left on the ballot. Then, what was called “Campaign to Abstain,” an anonymous Facebook campaign pushing students not to vote (i.e., vote “abstain”), was started so that Boatwright would not be able to gain enough votes to win. According to one student behind the campaign, this campaign was promoted not because Boatwright

was considered incompetent for the position, but because it was thought “inappropriate to have a white man” in that position, or any other elected leadership positions in Wellesley, as it would undermine the idea that Wellesley is “a place where women are the leaders.”²² In response to this argument, Boatwright, while believing that he “[had] important contributions to make to the MAC position,” found himself feeling conflicted because he thought that taking a leadership position at Wellesley might possibly mean to perpetuate the patriarchy, which he did not want to.²³ This incident shows that at least by the mid-2010s students identifying as “men” or presenting as “masculine” were not given the same level of opportunities as students identifying as “women.” Furthermore, students identifying as “men” or presenting as “masculine” did not seem to take this treatment as unfair, either. They rather seemed to view their own presence in women’s colleges as if they were little different from cisgender men.

This exclusionary environment for transgender men has continued to further remain prevalent on campus even after trans-inclusive admissions policies began to be implemented in many women’s colleges. While this policy change towards transgender inclusion certainly sent a positive, welcoming message to prospective transgender applicants, particularly those who self-identify as “women” (i.e., transgender women), it did not help make transgender men students already enrolled in women’s colleges feel welcome, because the majority of women’s colleges explicitly stated in their new policies that they would not admit transgender men.²⁴ Furthermore, along with this statement, three additional statements some of these women’s colleges issued in their new admissions policies have contributed to further perpetuating the somewhat chilly and hostile campus atmosphere for transgender men, instead of making the campus more welcoming for them.

One of the statements issued was concerning students’ gender exploration while in college. Some women’s colleges, when announcing their new admissions policies, stated that enrolled students who no longer identify as “women” and have taken the medical or legal steps to become a man are required to transfer to other institutions. Hollins University, for example, had this policy until they revised it in 2019 to make it more gender inclusive.²⁵ In an interview documented in the New York City Trans Oral History Project, a Hollins graduate Iele Paloumpis, who was enrolled in the College when Hollins still had this policy, recalled the time when one transgender man left the campus after starting hormones. Seeing him leave, Paloumpis remembered feeling “ostracization.”²⁶

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Paloumpis recalled that “huge culture of fear” existed and had been increasingly instilled on campus. There was an “underground ... secret trans community at Hollins because everyone’s like afraid of potentially being kicked out.”²⁷ While the College opened its admissions to transgender population, enrolled transgender students who identify as “men” in particular felt “as if they [had] to be in the closet,”²⁸ instead of feeling safe to openly share their gender identity, because of this policy. The new admissions policy which seemed to positively affirm transgender presence on campus, therefore, in fact worked rather conversely for students wanting to explore their identity and transition to male in some colleges. For these students, as Paloumpis described, campus was indeed filled with fear and students had to decide either to hide their identity and stay or to become their true self and leave. The ways in which these colleges broadened their admissions thus seem to have rejected the gender binary on the surface, but they in fact rather worked to perpetuate and reinforce it as they encouraged their students to openly express their gender only within the category of “women” defined by the gender binary.

Another statement that also led to an exclusionary environment for transgender men was related to the wordings used to describe applicant qualifications in trans-inclusive admissions policies. While some colleges, such as Smith and Scripps, only require applicants to self-identify as “women” to be considered for admission, others, including Barnard and Spelman, stated that they would admit those who “consistently” live and identify as women. What this means, according to their college websites, is that the applicant must not just self-identify “as a woman,” but her application materials must also “support” or “verify” this self-identification.²⁹ Wellesley, another college that also includes the word “consistently” in its applicant qualifications, states, “‘Consistently’ simply denotes a student’s commitment to her gender identity.”³⁰ On the one hand, since many of these colleges did not require students transitioning to male to leave their schools, they seemed to embrace the idea of gender fluidity and emphasize their willingness to support students’ self-exploration while in college. Yet, on the other hand, because they simultaneously expect all applicants to “consistently” live and identify as women, it is also quite evident that they define “women” as something that can be fixed, maintained, verified and committed by students’ own intentions. As Emily M. Lauletta argues, these colleges “tie womanhood to binary categorizations of both sex and gender” and, by specifically welcoming those who “consistently” live and identify as women, they “define womanhood as something that is innate, static, monolithic, and measurable,”³¹

which is quite opposite to the concept of gender as fluid, unstable and explorable. Thus, while many of these colleges did not go so far as to require students transitioning to male to transfer to other institutions, they also sent a discouraging message to all prospective and enrolled students who do not identify as “women.” That is, though they changed their admissions to be inclusive of transgender population, these colleges actually want to serve only those who “consistently” live and identify as women, which possibly suggests that they are in fact not supportive of those who identify outside of the binary categories of “men” and “women.”

Along with the two statements already described, the third statement about the continued use of gendered language in institutional communications has also contributed to an exclusionary, unsupportive environment for those who do not identify as “women.” Quite a few colleges, including Barnard and Wellesley, have explicitly stated that even after the adoption of the new admissions policies they would continue to use female pronouns and gendered language that they claim would reflect their identity as a “women’s college.” As students have long claimed,³² using she/her pronouns or the word “women” to refer to the campus community, as well as continually calling their institutions a “women’s college,” could leave out those who do not identify as “women,” making them feel excluded, isolated, and othered. Many transgender men students, therefore, find discomfort in the ways in which these women’s colleges use gender exclusive language in their institutional communications, which often works to erase or devalue their identities.

Thus, while overall women’s colleges seem to have been moving toward embracing a gender spectrum since 2014 with the adoption of trans-inclusive admissions policies, students who do not identify as “women” still continue to face challenges, and to feel unwelcome and alienated in women’s colleges today. The archival collections of oral histories at several women’s colleges and the New York Public Library help illuminate their conflicts and challenges. Grey Berkowitz, a 2021 Barnard graduate, for example, talked about how he “felt more and more unwelcome by the administration” as he transitioned while enrolled, feeling that “they couldn’t kick me out, but if they could, they would.”³³ Also, Ryan Rasdall, a 2011 Smith graduate who came back to Smith for a reunion in 2016 as a transgender man, described his conflicted feelings about his presence on campus: “I’m feeling it especially now ... I’m coming back as a trans guy ... Do I belong here? Do I fit in here? ... it’s just something I’m constantly negotiating right now ... When do I fit in? When is it OK for me to say something and be a part of

the Smith community? Which I know I am, but it's also a challenge.”³⁴ When asked if it is “alienating to be a guy in a woman’s space,” Rasdall also clearly said, “It’s definitely real.”³⁵ Aoife, another student from Smith, also shared their concerns about how “using he/him pronouns” can be “scary to do on campus” because some people would react, saying, “Oh my god are you a boy?” or “Man on my school campus?”³⁶ As these students’ experiences show, while many transgender men in fact do not perceive their gender identity as identical to that of cisgender men,³⁷ there seems to exist a widespread tendency to view them in relation to cisgender men. This conflation seems to make it quite difficult for transgender men to openly share their gender identity on campus.

And in more recent years, to make things even more challenging for transgender men, there was even a collective activism on social media against masculine-presenting students in Wellesley College. According to an article by Andreea Sabau in the *Wellesley News* (campus newspaper), an Instagram account named “WhoseMansWellz,” which is now deleted, was created in 2022.³⁸ The account namely asked Wellesley students to submit photos of men on campus. And by posting them “with an emoji blocking their faces,” it “encouraged students to engage in gender policing on campus, simultaneously upholding bioessentialist standards of masculinity and exclusionary standards on who belongs at Wellesley.”³⁹ While believing that the account creator should be held accountable for this harmful activism, Sabau argues that it alone does not help understand “what encourages these biases or ignorance on campus.”⁴⁰ Sabau believes that Wellesley administration’s continuous use of she/her pronouns and their ways of referring to their students as “Wellesley women” provide an answer to this question as they “double down on [their] ‘women-only’ message,” erasing the presence of transgender community on campus.⁴¹ This case, again, shows how women’s colleges’ current policies and stances surrounding transgender acceptance has continually contributed to perpetuating the exclusionary, hostile campus environment for those who do not self-identify as “women,” particularly those people whose gender identity are related to maleness.

IV. Overview of Student Activism at Wellesley College (2023)

Acknowledging the exclusionary environment for students who do not self-identify as “women,” contemporary student activists have launched activism to fundamentally challenge this campus culture. In particular, activism led by Wellesley College students

in 2023, which attracted nationwide attention, helps illuminate contemporary students' efforts in making their campus more "inclusive" for diverse gender identities. In this activism, Wellesley student activists challenged the current admissions policy and campus culture that are still largely structured around the concept of gender binary.

In February 2023, about half a dozen students at Wellesley created a non-binding, Gender Inclusivity Ballot Question, which called for the changes in the College's current admissions policy.⁴² Wellesley's current policy considers for admission "any applicant who lives as a woman and consistently identifies as a woman," welcoming applications from "those who were assigned female at birth and who feel they belong in [their] community of women," including cisgender women, transgender women, and individuals assigned female at birth who identify as nonbinary.⁴³ In other words, "[those] assigned female at birth who identify as men" (i.e., transgender men) and individuals assigned male at birth who identify as nonbinary are not eligible for admission.⁴⁴ The policy also clarifies that the College "will use language reflective of its identity as a women's college, i.e., female pronouns and other gendered language, in all institutional communications."⁴⁵ The Ballot Question created by the students in 2023 consisted of two proposals in opposition to this admissions policy. The first proposal called for the use of gender-inclusive language, replacing "women" with "students," and "alumnae" with "alumni," in all of the College's institutional communications. The second proposal called for the adoption of an admissions policy that is inclusive of all transgender and nonbinary students, including transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth, "moving away from the current policy of admitting who 'consistently identify as women.'"⁴⁶

Since the Ballot Question was non-binding, the election results were not going to directly change any policy at Wellesley. And yet, these students decided to bring this up in College Government Senate for the purpose of "[demonstrating] student sentiment to the Wellesley College Board of Trustees."⁴⁷ If a large number of students supported the Ballot Question, they hoped that it could serve as a powerful tool to appeal to the College Board of Trustees and influence decisions they would make.⁴⁸ Ailie Wood, one of the representatives for the Ballot Question, told the *Wellesley News* that Wellesley today is not already a women's college in the conventional sense because "you interact with students of all genders every day," including transgender and nonbinary students.⁴⁹ At an institution founded to support those who are marginalized because of their gender, Wood

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argues, all students, including “past, present and future trans and nonbinary students,” should be able to feel that “the College has their back, acknowledges their identity, and supports their access to a Wellesley education.”⁵⁰ Student activists, therefore, believed that the Gender Inclusivity Ballot Question could “strengthen Wellesley’s inclusive environment,”⁵¹ providing an opportunity for the administration to openly recognize and welcome its transgender and nonbinary population that they have so long failed to include and support in its official admissions policy and its use of language.

As the election date (March 14) was approaching, however, student activists met with a challenge by the College President Paula A. Johnson. On March 6, President Johnson made an announcement to the entire campus community through an email titled, “Affirming our mission and embracing our community,” in response to the Ballot Question. In her email, President Johnson acknowledged the valued role that Wellesley’s diverse community plays in “[helping] prepare students to be the leaders, changemakers, and citizens the world so desperately needs.”⁵² Within this diverse community where all members should “feel seen,” she nevertheless found that some transgender men and nonbinary students have felt excluded by the College’s policy to use gender-specific language (e.g., “women” and “alumnae”).⁵³ At the same time, she also acknowledged that students who identify as women and who are committed to Wellesley’s mission as a women’s college “have felt pressured to describe Wellesley as a historically women’s college.”⁵⁴ Asking how Wellesley’s campus community can “reflect [their] mission and identity as a women’s college” while also “recognizing and embracing the diversity of [their] community in a way that does not make any student feel erased or ignored,” Johnson made clear that Wellesley is both a “women’s college” and an “inclusive community,” claiming that “the two ways of seeing Wellesley are not mutually exclusive.”⁵⁵

In her view, Wellesley should remain a “women’s college” because of the ongoing, continued threats to women in the society. At a time when female reproductive health and freedom are threatened, and women’s rights and education are attacked in the world, Johnson argued that Wellesley’s mission as a “women’s college” is no doubt relevant and vital today. She thus opposed describing Wellesley as a “historically women’s college,” the term she believed “only applies to women’s colleges that have made the decision to enroll men.”⁵⁶ And as a “women’s college,” she further claimed that Wellesley can also foster an “inclusive community” by suggesting a number of commitments the College planned to make to embrace its diverse community. These included hiring a new director

for the Office of LGBTQ+ Programs and Services, uploading students' pronouns in internal systems, and increasing the number of all-gender bathrooms.⁵⁷ In her email, therefore, Johnson attempted to show her understanding of what student activists called for in the Ballot Question without amending the College's current policy, which excludes transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth, and clarified its use of gender-specific language. By highlighting what Wellesley can do to embrace diverse gender identities while remaining a "women's college," she further insisted on the importance of reaffirming the College's mission as a "women's college."

In response to the issues brought up in the referendum, Johnson was not alone in firmly believing that there is a certain limit to what Wellesley can do to support gender diversity as a "women's college." Most of the graduates who reached out to the Wellesley College Alumnae Association at the time of this referendum, for example, supported the commitments made by Johnson and the Board of Trustees.⁵⁸ Some enrolled students, while relatively small in number in public records, also expressed some concerns about the changes proposed in the referendum as they were still unsure of whether it is the right time to say that Wellesley is no longer a women's college.⁵⁹

And yet, despite a range of opinions, President Johnson's email immediately sparked significant backlash from the campus community, leading to a range of protests against the administration. Supported by trans activists as well as by a student organization named Siblings that affirms transgender and questioning students at Wellesley, a sit-in was organized the next day (March 7) in support of the Ballot Question and as a way to protest the administration's stance highlighted in Johnson's email.⁶⁰ Students came and supported the sit-in to send a message to the administration that Wellesley is not just a school for "women" but a community where a diverse student body, including transgender and nonbinary students, has always belonged and will continue to belong. The sit-in was also supported by faculty members who put out the department-wide statements and excused students from class to join the sit-in.⁶¹ Even after this day, the campus continued to witness daily sit-ins in different locations, organized by QTBIPOC (Queer, Trans, Black, Indigenous, People of Color). According to an article in the *Wellesley News*, one student who identified as "a queer and trans person of color" felt obliged to be "visible" at these daily sit-ins so that the campus community members could see that "this isn't an issue that only pertains to white students" but that "affects everyone in the community."⁶²

Along with the sit-ins, some student organizations released statements in response

to Johnson's email, with the *Wellesley News* Editorial Board taking the lead. Recalling their past attempts to urge the administration to openly recognize and uplift transgender and nonbinary population on campus, the *Wellesley News* Editorial Board once again clarified their stance on March 8 by stating that "[they] disapprove of and entirely disagree with President Johnson's email."⁶³ In particular, the Editorial Board pointed out that at a time when anti-trans legislation was being proposed and/or passed in many states across the country, Johnson only referred to the larger context surrounding how "women" still confront difficulties in the society, without mentioning any "legislative attacks against the trans community," to draw her conclusion regarding the Wellesley's future.⁶⁴ Criticizing her failure to acknowledge in her email the continuous threats and violence faced by transgender and nonbinary people in the society, the Editorial Board claimed that the Board of Trustees, for which President Johnson serves as the spokesperson, "must be held equally responsible for the College's transphobic rhetoric."⁶⁵ Reinforcing the fact that Wellesley has been and will always be a school for a diverse student body, they denounced the ways in which the administration and the Board of Trustees "monopolized conversations about Wellesley's community and future,"⁶⁶ as highlighted in Johnson's email.

In the midst of these protests, the referendum was held on March 14 as planned as part of the College's student government elections. Despite a longstanding rule of the College to not release the full results, the Committee for Political Engagement (CPE), a nonpartisan College Government committee, released an exit poll that was filled out anonymously after the official election. Having received 849 responses, the exit poll revealed that over ninety percent of students voted in favor of the Ballot Question, followed by 7.7 percent voting against it, and 2.2 percent voting abstain.⁶⁷ In response to this result, President Johnson issued a statement on March 15, stating that while the College "[acknowledges] the result of the non-binding student ballot initiative," it has "no plan to revisit [its] mission as a women's college or [its] admissions policy."⁶⁸ However, she also highlighted at the end that the College would "continue to engage all students in the important work of building an inclusive academic community where everyone feels they belong."⁶⁹

In the end, therefore, students' attempts through the non-binding referendum did not directly affect the College's admissions policy. However, it is quite evident that the student activists helped raised awareness of the issues concerning gender diversity and

inclusion on campus, further demonstrating the need for campus-wide discussions. As one of the Ballot Question representatives had hoped,⁷⁰ it seems that students continued to engage in the conversations the referendum had brought up, showing their support for the transgender and nonbinary students. Some student groups, for instance, organized a walk-out in celebration of trans joy after the election.⁷¹ And with more than forty media outlets having taken up a series of movements surrounding the referendum by the summer 2023,⁷² student activism at Wellesley has indeed sent a powerful message across the nation, reinforcing the need for further discussion.

V. Students' Efforts to Disrupt the Gender Binary

As this overview of activism and debate has indicated, student activists at Wellesley College severely criticized the exclusionary aspects incorporated in both the current admissions policy and the language used for institutional communications. And to push for the creation of a more “inclusive” campus, they aimed to disrupt the gender binary that has been instilled on campus and that has long determined the mission of women’s colleges. In particular, we can see that they tried to do so by challenging and overcoming two critical disconnects that have long existed between the student body and the administration.

First, student activists’ efforts in disrupting the gender binary can be seen in the ways in which they tried to overcome the disconnect surrounding how students and the administration perceive the “marginalized” genders. As highlighted in the current admissions policy, as well as the College’s insistence on calling its institution a “women’s college,” it seems clear that the Wellesley administration does not see transgender men and/or nonbinary people assigned male at birth as part of the “marginalized” genders that the College should serve. In her March 6 email to the campus community, President Johnson stated that the College “[continues] to challenge the norms and power structures that too often leave women, and others of *marginalized* identities, behind.”⁷³ However, as she made it clear after the non-binding election that the College has no plan to amend its current admissions policy, we can see that transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth are not included in “others of *marginalized* identities”⁷⁴ that the College is committed to supporting. In addition, Johnson further stated that Wellesley is not a “historically women’s college,” a term she claims that “only applies to women’s

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colleges that have made the decision to enroll *men*.⁷⁵ Together with the fact that the College has no intention of revisiting its admissions policy, her statement here suggests that the administration views transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth as if they are no different from cisgender men. That is, in their understanding, officially admitting these students would possibly mean to enroll “men,” which could technically make their institution a “historically women’s college.” In other words, the administration sees transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth only within the scope of the binary categories of “men” and “women,” rather than understanding their identity based on the idea of gender fluidity or spectrum.

Student activists have criticized this administrative view. They argue that transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth suffer from the same historical marginalization and patriarchal social order as cisgender and transgender women. While both transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth relate to cisgender men to some extent in terms of biology or self-identification, they, unlike cisgender men, have been constantly confronted with blatant threats and violence in a patriarchal society that insists on the gender binary. As *Wellesley News* Editorial Board also pointed out, with nearly forty states proposing and/or passing anti-trans legislations across the country, the transgender community is facing greater risks than ever.⁷⁶ At such a time when the society is largely filled with transphobia, student activists denounce the decisions made by the administration to continue to prohibit transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth from applying to their institution.

For those who support a more inclusive campus, Wellesley “was founded as a safe space for anyone experiencing gender discrimination—which would include trans men.”⁷⁷ One transgender student of color who organized the walk-out after the election spoke to the *Wellesley News*: “Wellesley promised inclusive excellence and leadership for *the marginalized*. In that spirit, I want Wellesley to keep its promise.”⁷⁸ As this student urgently insisted, student activists in favor of the non-binding referendum believe that transgender and nonbinary population are all part of “the marginalized” that Wellesley promised to provide with “inclusive excellence and leadership.” They thus claim that all transgender and nonbinary people, regardless of their gender assignment at birth or their gender identity, deserve an education at Wellesley precisely because of the historical discrimination and oppression of those outside of the traditional gender binary categorization. Student activists pushing forward the Ballot Question, therefore, urged

the administration to stop relying on the binary categorization of men and women to understand the presence of transgender and nonbinary population on campus.

Second, we can also see student activists' efforts to disrupt the gender binary in the ways in which they tried to challenge the disconnect surrounding how students and the administration aim to foster an inclusive, gender-diverse community. After receiving a severe backlash on her March 6 email, President Johnson joined one of the events with students on March 8, explaining that her email was intended to “define Wellesley as a gender diverse community.”⁷⁹ As described earlier, despite student activists' desperate call to adopt more gender-inclusive language, Johnson maintained in her email that the College would not change its policy or tradition, but that it would instead try to improve campus facilities and systems to embrace its transgender and nonbinary population. In short, her email demonstrated the administration's intention to create a “gender-diverse” community without directly addressing the concerns of its transgender and nonbinary student population regarding the College's continuous use of gendered language.

As we see in the different forms of protests against this president's email, student activists have questioned this administrative response to their urgent needs concerning how the College should refer to its student body. They argue that making changes only within campus facilities and systems is not enough to create an “inclusive” community for diverse gender identities because, as long as the College continues to officially call its student body “women” and “alumnae” to the outside world, transgender and nonbinary students would continue to feel “excluded” from the campus community. For instance, Marty Martinage, a nonbinary student in support of the Ballot Question, told the *Wellesley Magazine* that despite the College's statement which emphasizes its willingness to recognize and welcome transgender and nonbinary students, “its insistence on referring to the student body as women is hurtful.”⁸⁰ Another student Greysea McCooe also feels the same way. McCooe talked to the *Boston Globe*: “As a trans student, you are consistently given the messaging that this is a college for women ... It's on the website, it's in the college communications, you get an e-mail and it's only talking about *part of* the student body.”⁸¹ Because of its continuous use of “women” or she/her pronouns to refer to its student body, the College, in short, does not publicly acknowledge or affirm its transgender and nonbinary student population that already exists on campus whenever it talks about its student body in any institutional communication. McCooe thus feels that there is “a disconnect between Wellesley as [they] know it to be and Wellesley as it is

trying to be positioned and marketed by the college.”⁸² Student activists believe that in order to make their campus more “inclusive” for diverse gender identities, it is important to overcome this disconnect. Using various forms of protests, they thus pushed the administration to adopt more gender-inclusive language so that the College could truly recognize and embrace its student population that already exists on campus and that represents diverse gender identities beyond the gender binary.

VI. Conclusion

As a series of protests surrounding the non-binding referendum have shown, student activists at Wellesley College have maintained that the creation of an inclusive, gender-diverse community requires, more than anything, the administration’s efforts to stop relying on the gender binary, which has long excluded and oppressed transgender and nonbinary student population on campus. Students argue that unless the College starts to understand gender as a fluid spectrum by accepting applications from transgender men and nonbinary people assigned male at birth, using gender-inclusive language in institutional communications, and calling itself a “historically women’s college,” the College will never become a gender-diverse institution in the true sense.

And yet, despite the students’ efforts, the referendum, in which over ninety percent voted in favor of the Ballot Question, did not ultimately change the College’s policies or practices. President Johnson’s email and the Board of Trustees’ decision to make no changes to support the Ballot Question makes it quite evident that the College continues to rely on the gender binary as “normative.” This will obviously have a serious impact on future discussions about furthering and/or broadening the missions and identities of women’s colleges.

As a Wellesley graduate Katherine Lucas McKay told the *Washington Post*, while there is “a huge role for women’s colleges” just like Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), “what it means to serve and fulfill the mission has changed over time.”⁸³ As McKay argued, student activists at Wellesley were also trying to send a message to the administration that the College’s mission can and should evolve now to serve all marginalized genders suffering from patriarchy. By disrupting the gender binary, the normativity that has long remained embedded at the core of shaping the role of women’s colleges, student activists have pushed the administration to confront the fact

that this normativity has long hindered “inclusion,” and even fostered “exclusion,” for certain groups of students. As Niha Masih and Susan Svrluga called the student vote at Wellesley “the latest salvo in long-running efforts to broaden the identities of women’s colleges,”⁸⁴ student activists, in short, aimed to challenge the norm long held by the institution to truly change the longstanding dialogue and campus dynamics in reshaping the mission of women’s colleges in the twenty-first century.

Notes

- 1 Mills College, founded in 1852, was an all-women’s liberal arts college in Oakland, California, until it was merged with Northeastern University in 2022.
- 2 For the 1990 Mills College strike, see Robert A. Rhoads, *Freedom’s Web: Student Activism in an Age of Cultural Diversity* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998), 95–126.
- 3 Rhoads, *Freedom’s Web*, 122.
- 4 Colt Keo-Meier and Lance Hicks, “Youth,” in *Trans Bodies, Trans Selves: A Resource for the Transgender Community*, ed. Laura Erickson-Schroth (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 471.
- 5 Genny Beemyn, “Trans-Supportive Campus Policies: Trans Admissions Policies at Historically Women’s Colleges and Men’s Colleges,” Genny Beemyn, September 18, 2024, <https://www.gennyb.com/research/trans-supportive-campus-policies/historically-womens-mens-colleges/>.
- 6 Genny Beemyn, “Trans-Supportive Campus Policies: Background of This Research Project,” Genny Beemyn, September 18, 2024, <https://www.gennyb.com/research/trans-supportive-campus-policies/>.
- 7 Z Nicolazzo, *Trans* in College: Transgender Students’ Strategies for Navigating Campus Life and the Institutional Politics of Inclusion* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 141.
- 8 Nicolazzo, *Trans* in College*, 142.
- 9 Kari Dockendorff, Megan Nanney, and Z Nicolazzo, “Trickle Up Policy-Building: Envisioning Possibilities for Trans*formative Change in Postsecondary Education,” in *Rethinking LGBTQIA Students and Collegiate Contexts: Identity, Politics, and Campus Climate*, ed. Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher, Devika Dibya Choudhuri, and Jason L. Taylor (New York: Routledge, 2020), 155.
- 10 Nicolazzo, *Trans* in College*, 141.
- 11 Megan Nanny and David L. Brunsma, “Moving beyond Cis-terhood: Determining Gender through Transgender Admittance Policies at U.S. Women’s Colleges,” *Gender & Society* 31, no. 2 (2017): 145–70, <https://doi.org/10.1177/08912432176901>.
- 12 Megan Nanney, “Making Room for Gendered Possibilities: Using Intersectionality to Discover Transnormative Inequalities in the Women’s College Admissions Process,” in *Intersectionality and Higher Education: Identity and Inequality on College Campuses*, ed. W Carson Byrd, Rachelle J. Brunn-Bevel, and Sarah M. Ovink (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019),

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- 231–35.
- 13 The majority of women’s colleges adopting trans-inclusive admissions policies have included these criteria to determine who can be enrolled. Some exceptions include Mount Holyoke College, which welcomes applications from all students except for cisgender men.
 - 14 For instance, see Paula Roberts, interview by Vivian Andreani, transcript of video recording, May 25, 2012, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.; Jenny Dandy, interview by Tanya Pearson, transcript of video recording, May 22, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.
 - 15 Sarah Winawer-Wetzel, interview by Hana Sarfan, transcript of video recording, May 15, 2015, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.
 - 16 Jessica Chesnutt and Natalie Sauro, interview by Sunny Lawrence, transcript of video recording, May 13, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.
 - 17 “Smith College Students Strike Gender-Specific Terms from Their Constitution,” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, May 9, 2003, <https://www.chronicle.com/article/smith-college-students-strike-gender-specific-terms-from-their-constitution/>.
 - 18 Sara Pic, interview by Rachel Dean, transcript of video recording, May 14, 2010, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, p. 3.
 - 19 Pic, interview.
 - 20 Pic.
 - 21 Ruth Padawer, “When Women Become Men at Wellesley,” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 15, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/19/magazine/when-women-become-men-at-wellesley-college.html>.
 - 22 Padawer, “When Women Become Men.”
 - 23 Padawer.
 - 24 A student identifying as binary transgender male at Smith College, for example, said that when a policy to accept transgender women was pushed forward at Smith, he found that students “took ‘accept transgender women at Smith,’ to mean, ‘reject transgender men already at Smith.’” He was told multiple times that his presence made the campus unsafe and that he should have left Smith soon after he came out. See Student G, interview by Sam Davis, 2016, text response, Trans Archive Oral History Project, College Archives, CA MS 01201, Smith College Special Collections, Northampton, MA.
 - 25 Hollins’ transgender policy, before it was updated in 2019, required students to transfer out if they took surgical or legal steps to transition to male while enrolled. It also required prospective transgender women applicants to complete the surgical and legal transition from male to female to be considered for admission.
 - 26 Iele Paloumpis, interview by Kamryn Wolf, March 6, 2019, transcript, From The New York Public Library and the New York City Trans Oral History Project.
 - 27 Paloumpis, interview.
 - 28 Paloumpis.
 - 29 Barnard College, “Transgender Policy,” accessed September 28, 2024, <https://barnard.edu/>

- admissions/transgender-policy.; Spelman College, “Admissions Frequently Asked Questions,” accessed September 28, 2024, <https://www.spelman.edu/admissions/frequently-asked-questions.html>.
- 30 Wellesley College, “Gender Policy,” accessed June 28, 2024, <https://www.wellesley.edu/about-us/policies-procedures/gender-policy>.
- 31 Emily M. Lauetta, “Reimagining the Women’s College: A Critical Analysis of Historically Women’s College Transgender Admission Policies,” *sprinkle: An Undergraduate Journal of Feminist and Queer Studies* 14, (2021): 2.
- 32 For instance, see Philosophy Students, “Letter to the President from Philosophy Students Regarding ‘Women’s College’ Title,” *The Simmons Voice*, April 14, 2017, <https://simmonsvoice.com/8312/2016-2017/letter-to-the-president-from-philosophy-students-regarding-womenscollege-title/>; Caedyn Busche, “The Administration Cannot Continue to Ignore Trans Students,” *Mount Holyoke News*, September 29, 2016, <https://elizabeth-huang-d5mc.squarespace.com/opinion/2016/9/29/the-administration-cannot-continue-to-ignore-trans-students>.
- 33 Grey Berkowitz, interview by Autumn Johnson, 2022, transcript, Gender* in the Archives, Barnard Digital Collections, Barnard Archives and Special Collections, Barnard College, NY.
- 34 Ryan Rasdall, interview by Sunny Lawrence, transcript of video recording, May 21, 2016, Smith College Alumnae Oral History Project, Smith College Archives, p. 3.
- 35 Rasdall, interview.
- 36 Aoife, interview by Elliot Wesselborg, July 26, 2020, transcript, From The New York Public Library and the New York City Trans Oral History Project.
- 37 A student at Smith College, for example, stated that while he identifies as “binary male,” his gender is “not equivalent to that of a cisgender male.” See Student G, interview.
- 38 Andreea Sabau, “Dear Wellesley, We Need to Talk about Our Gender Policing Problem,” *The Wellesley News*, September 29, 2022, <https://thewellesleynews.com/2022/09/29/dear-wellesley-we-need-to-talk-about-our-gender-policing-problem/>.
- 39 Sabau, “Dear Wellesley.”
- 40 Sabau.
- 41 Sabau.
- 42 Lisa Scanlon Mogolov, “Gender, Language, and Wellesley,” *Wellesley Magazine*, Summer 2023, <https://magazine.wellesley.edu/summer-2023/gender-language-and-wellesley>.
- 43 “Gender Policy.”
- 44 “Gender Policy.”
- 45 “Gender Policy.”
- 46 Hunter Dodrill, “Wellesley College Isn’t an All-Women School,” *The Nation*, March 21, 2023, <https://www.thenation.com/article/society/wellesley-college-trans-students-referendum/>.
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- 48 Sofia Diaz, “Gender Inclusivity Ballot Question Passes Senate,” *The Wellesley News*, March 8, 2023, <https://thewellesleynews.com/2023/03/08/gender-inclusivity-ballot-question-passes-senate/>.

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- 61 Diaz, “Students Protest.”
- 62 Diaz.
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- 71 Diaz, “Students Protest.”
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- 79 Diaz.
- 80 Mogolov, “Gender, Language, and Wellesley.”
- 81 Hilary Burns, “‘No Plan’ to Change Wellesley College Admissions after Students Support Referendum to Admit Transgender Men,” *The Boston Globe*, March 15, 2023, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2023/03/15/metro/wellesley-college-referendum-supports-admission-transgender-men-administrators-disagree/>. (emphasis added).
- 82 Burns, “No Plan.”
- 83 Nina Masih and Susan Svrluga, “Wellesley College Students Vote to Admit Transgender Men,” *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/education/2023/03/15/wellesley-college-transgender-men-vote/>.
- 84 Masih and Svrluga, “Wellesley College Students Vote.”