

Transgender Issues at the Institute

Final Draft

MIT prides itself on having some of the best minds in the world. It is often thought of as a meritocracy, where anyone is accepted as long as they work hard enough and are smart enough. Many programs exist to help minority students excel and the current undergraduate population is about half female. MIT added sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policy in 1981 and fulfills almost all of the recommendations made for schools to create a "safe campus environment for LBGT (Lesbian, Bisexual, Gay, and Transgender) people" (Sanlo xvii). Is MIT a utopic academia filled with a diverse, accepted, student body? There are many issues still surrounding race, women, sexuality, and religion. Many individuals have biases, some living groups are not accepting of a certain group of people, tradition is used as justification for biased practices, and when a group claims to have been discriminated against, many people do not take them seriously. While MIT tries to eradicate some of these problems, it also must consider the idea of gender, beyond having a student body equally composed of men and women. What about the students who have a gender identity different from their biological sex? What about students who don't want to identify within the constricting categories of male and female?

The latest group of people to gain media attention for their issues in higher education are transgender people. According to Riki Wilchins, in *Read My Lips*:

Transgender began its life as a name for those folks who identified neither as crossdresser nor as transsexuals - primarily people who changed their gender but not their genitals. An example of this is a man who goes on estrogen, possibly lives full-time as a woman, but does not have or want sex-change surgery.

The term gradually mutated to include any genderqueers who didn't actually change their genitals: crossdressers, transgenders, stone butches, hermaphrodites, and drag people. Finally... people began using it to refer to transsexuals as well, which was fine with some transsexuals, but made others feel they were being erased. (15-16)

While all transgender people face discrimination, it changes form based upon their gender identity and expression. Transgender (or 'trans') will be used as an umbrella term inclusive of transsexuals, but some problems specifically affecting transsexuals will be discussed using the word 'transsexual'. When appropriate, the pronouns 'her' and 'she' will be used to reflect a gender neutral possessive and third-person [pronoun](#). Since the language of the discussion of gender is constantly changing, it is difficult to use terms that people will identify with or find inclusive. The issues in this paper may affect people beyond who I am considering, so perhaps the definition of 'transgender' should be taken to mean 'affected by the issues discussed herein'. As paradoxical as it seems, this definition shows how pervasive the gender-binary is. By removing the 'male or female' assumption, there is little common vocabulary left for discourse. Foucault connects power to discourse, hence without the vocabulary to discuss gender beyond 'male' or 'female', there is no power to create a knowledge or understanding of gender beyond 'male' and 'female'.

This study is meant to be a pragmatic analysis of some of the issues transgender people face. There are many studies and books dealing with the concept of transgender, but none that would help make a student's life at MIT any easier. In *Read my Lips*, Wilchins criticizes the works, since

[t]he fact that [transgender people] are a community under fire, a people at risk, is irrelevant to [academics, shrinks, and feminist theorists]. They pursue Science and Theory, and what they produce by mining our lives is neither addressed to us nor recycled within our community. It is not intended to help, but rather to explicate us as Today's Special: trans under glass, or perhaps only gender à la mode. (22)

The issues of prison abuse, homelessness, employment, hate crimes, and the government are only some of the things that transgender people must face, sometimes daily. These are all much worse than a person being asked their gender on a college application form. However, all these issues stem from the same gender-binarchy. Fighting some injustices, even if they are small, helps create havens of acceptance that can help destroy the status quo. If few colleges ask for gender in a way that assumes the only answers will be male or female, this practice will spread to other institutions. While this does nothing for today's street youth, subjected to despicable treatment due to their gender-identity, a gradual change in society will help future generations.

Transsexuals may have a variety of feelings over how they wish to be treated. Some may wish to identify as a transsexual, others may wish to transition as quickly as possible and then pass as gender-normative (i.e. non-transgender). Some (such as Lucas in *Transgenerations*) may choose to distance herself from the trans community after being involved, for the sake of being better accepted as her self-identified gender. Whether or not a transgender person should try to hide this aspect of their identity and try to pass as normatively-gendered is an issue of vast disagreement between the theoretical and medical community. While the medical process tries to transform a person from one sex to the 'other' sex and make sure that she is able to live 'completely' as that gender, not all transsexuals agree that this is the best path. Many theorists, such as Spade, Stone, and Wilchins, see the possibility of the transsexual life being an indication of the fallacy of the binary system. According to Stone,

In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries.

If transgender people identified more openly, society would realize how many people did not fit into the gender binary. According to Wilchins. "They may be 100,000 or so transsexuals in the United States, but there are undoubtedly several million cross-dressers" (*Gender Theory* 27). How many people would take the opportunity to self-identify in a more complex way than male or female if given the chance? First they must know that the possibility of being genderqueer exists. If many people can not exist within the system, perhaps the system would be dismantled, or at least discussed. It is not MIT's job to determine the validity of the medical or theoretical viewpoints, but it is MIT's job to help students, who may wish to live their lives in a variety of ways.

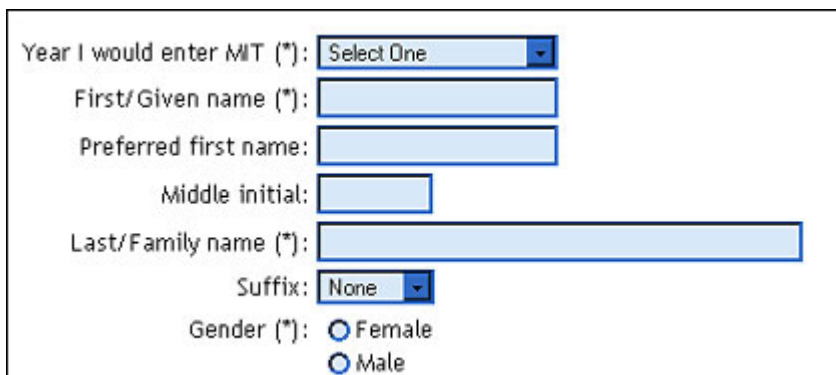
Courtesy of Nicole Ackerman. Used with permission.

MIT has many opportunities to make life easier or more difficult for transgender students. MIT needs to look like, and actually be, an accepting environment such that all potential students and employees feel comfortable coming here. MIT needs to make the application process as friendly as possible for trans students, both for the sake of making them feel welcomed, and making sure they are not discriminated against because of their gender-identity. Once students are accepted, they should be able to live their life here as they choose. This means equal access to housing, bathrooms, and being addressed in a way consistent with their gender-identity. Looking at MIT's policies, it does seem that the institute attempts to be sensitive to the needs of transgender people. However, this is mostly reflected in the attitudes people have, and there are few tangible indications of this acceptance. There are many simple issues MIT can address for it to become the accepting environment that it obviously wants to be. Simply modifying forms and providing sensitivity training will help fix a large portion of the issues discussed in this study.

First Impressions

If a transgender student does not think a college is an accepting place, the student is likely to not even apply. How would a student judge the acceptance level at MIT? Perhaps they would go to the MIT Web site and do a search. Searching for the term "transgender" comes up with a Transgender Brochure ([PDF](#)) and the [Trans@MIT](#) Web site and searching for "trans" brings up the [Trans@MIT](#) Web site. Searching for "Transgender Friendly" results in the [Living Pink Guide](#), a guide to LGBT-friendly housing at MIT. While using "transsexual" results in the [Trans@MIT](#) Web site, using the less used form "transexual" does not result in any LGBT or Trans Web site. Doing nearly [any search](#) similar to these would result in the student learning that there are transgender support groups on campus.

The MyMIT program is an online account prospective students create when applying to MIT. It is necessary to create this account to apply online, or even to request a host for an overnight visit. When creating an account, a student must choose either male or female for the **required** category of gender. There is no indication of whether this is intended to be self-reported gender identity, or 'legal' gender. The only hint of instructions are given at the top of the page,



The image shows a registration form with the following fields and options:

- Year I would enter MIT (*):
- First/Given name (*):
- Preferred first name:
- Middle initial:
- Last/Family name (*):
- Suffix:
- Gender (*): Female Male

MyMIT Registration Form. (MIT Undergraduate Admissions. Image courtesy of MIT.)

Tip: We recommend that you provide accurate information about yourself when you register, including your legal name, so that we can match your registration with any records we may

already have for you, like your standardized test results or whether we've mailed you an application. (MyMIT Registration)

Nicole Ackerman	
Gender:	Female
Date of birth:	12/17/1984
MIT entrance year:	2007

'My Profile and Preferences' Screen. ("Biographical information." MIT Undergraduate Admissions. Image courtesy of MIT.)

While radio buttons for gender are not unusual, it does limit choices for students who wish to describe their gender outside of the boundaries of male and female. A transgender student is forced to either choose to select how they identify, which may disqualify them, because it is not their 'legal' gender, or to select their 'legal' gender, with which they are not comfortable. If the student's responses on this form are going to be matched to other documents, this is even more restricting. What if standardized tests were taken before a student was identifying as the gender they currently are? In addition, the layout of this form places unneeded emphasis on gender since it is the field after name. Certainly a student's name is the more identifying characteristic and should be the first field on a form, but gender is not the second most characteristic field. When one is inside MyMIT and follows the link "My MIT Profile & Preferences" they see a screen with a biological data listed. Gender is listed immediately after name, and anticipated year of entrance is listed fourth. Isn't entrance year much more relevant to the process than gender? While the order of this display is likely determined by the order of the questions on the form, it makes the misplacement of the gender field more conspicuous. Gender should be with Ethnicity (and similarly optional), not with name and birthday. If race can have categorical options, as well as an 'other' write-in category, why can't gender? The gender field should be formatted in a way that allows for students to identify as neither 'male' nor 'female', through a write-in category or an 'other' option when the choices are restricted.

Overnight Program: Visit Request Form
Please fill in the following information. Fields marked with an asterisk are required. Fields marked with a pencil icon can be edited from your personal profile. If you wish to change any information, please use the Maintenance function within the myMIT portal.

Overnight Program: Visit Request Form. (MIT Undergraduate Admissions. Image courtesy of MIT.)

Using a Web form, a prospective student can apply for a host for an overnight visit. However, to access this form the student must go through the [MyMIT Web portal](#). The MyMIT biological data (such as gender) is submitted as part of the request. The student has the opportunity to describe their interests in major and academic programs. They are also given text boxes with the prompts of "Give us a clue! Write a sentence or two about yourself that you think might give us better insight into who you are and help us match you with a host (required)" and "Do you have any special needs or requests that we should be aware of (i.e. allergies, smoking preference, staying with a minority host, etc.)?". Hopefully a student who identifies as transgender would

feel comfortable stating their gender-identity in either of these fields, if they felt that it was an issue in housing. Students who have transitioned may feel an overnight visit is an exciting opportunity to pass without their transgender status being known, and may choose to not mention it. However, if the student is then housed in a fraternity or single-sex living space, they may be made very uncomfortable. Students are informed of their hosts early enough that they can request a new one if necessary. Perhaps the student may not be concerned about it before they arrive, but may find that the single-sex environment they are hosted in is conservative, unaccepting, and the student may feel concerned for their safety if someone realizes they are trans. While many MIT living spaces are accepting, the single-sex environments are sometimes home to the most sheltered and conservative students, often with religious views that make them hostile towards LGBT students.

Even if a transgender student states that they need a trans-friendly host, it does nothing if a suitable host cannot be found for the student. I e-mailed overnight@mit.edu, the e-mail address listed for students to contact with questions about being hosted. The response I received from Admission Counselor Michael Yang was

I don't believe we've had any requests for transgender-friendly hosts yet, but many of the hosts that have signed up have indicated that they are LGBT-friendly. Transgender prefrosh would probably be placed in a co-ed living group (several of these are LGBT-friendly), although a match could be done on a special case-by-case basis, depending on the preference of the host and prefrosh. (i.e. if someone didn't indicate they were LGBT-friendly, we would probably make sure they were okay with it before matching someone with them). But regardless of who the prefrosh is, we always take the ultimate care in making the best match with a host for them, and try to make their stay go as smoothly as possible. (Yang)

This response shows that there is a level of LGBT sensitivity in the hosting program, however, living situations can be of a much more serious nature for trans students than for LBG students. A LBG student being hosted at MIT would not necessarily need to reveal their sexual orientation to every student they meet (such as in restroom facilities), but a trans student may face continual harassment. Hopefully the office would place students in the most LGBT-friendly housing available, however, some of these communities may be focused on different interests from what the student would like to pursue. For instance, some of the dorms that are the most LGBT-friendly allow cats and smoking, which may prohibit some students from staying there.

MIT can best influence a student's first impressions through the information they provide to prospective freshman. The [non-discrimination policy](#) is prominently displayed in literature provided to prospective freshman. It currently reads:

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is committed to the principle of equal opportunity in education and employment. The Institute does not discriminate against individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, religion, disability, age, veteran status, ancestry, or national or ethnic origin in the administration of its educational policies, admissions policies, employment policies, scholarship and loan programs, and other Institute administered programs and activities, but may favor U.S. citizens or residents in admissions and financial aid. (MIT Nondiscrimination Policy)

Notably, there is a footnote that the ROTC program does not abide by the nondiscrimination policy, but that "MIT continues to advocate for a change in DOD policies and regulations concerning sexual orientation". This change was made at the same time that gender identity was added to the policy; previously it read "On the recommendation of the Faculty, MIT is working to develop a modified on-campus ROTC program open to all students" (Winstein). Transgender is also a category that the ROTC discriminates against. Perhaps no one has thought to update this clause since gender identity was added to the policy, or perhaps it was assumed that transgender is included within sexual orientation. Either way, it is one instance of the invisible discrimination the trans community faces, even when the lesbian, gay, and bisexual communities have gained recognition of their discrimination.

The students who take the time to read this are the ones who need reassurance that they will be welcomed here. With the newly added category of 'gender identity', a transgender student has some assurance that they will be protected. Many universities include sexual orientation in their non-discrimination policy, however, gender identity has only been added recently. Gender expression is very rarely included. The original 2003 proposal ([PDF](#)) made by the LBGT Issues Group for the additions to the non-discrimination policy cites,

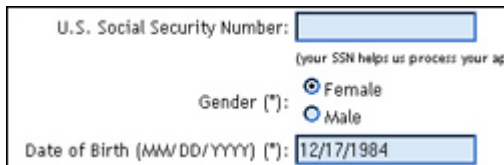
People need to be free to construct their own identity and to present that construct to the world as they choose. People should not be discriminated against or harassed because certain of their physical characteristics do not appear to match social norms for the gender they express... By being in the vanguard, MIT will attract employees and students who are transgender or who care deeply about human rights, people who may have extraordinary talent and would be unwilling to go to a more hostile environment.

MIT did include gender identity - which people had called for as early as 1999 - but did not include gender expression (You are Welcome Here...). There were multiple articles in the institution's newspapers and MIT sent a letter to all faculty and staff about this change. The letter included definitions of gender identity and expression and explained how some people's gender identity and expression can vary from the masculine male and feminine female that our society expects. In an article written for the Chronicle of Higher Education, it was stated that "colleges should, at a minimum, revise their policies to make it clear that they do not tolerate discrimination or harassment on the basis of gender identity..."(Hirschfeld, et al.). Through the policy and the letter to the community, MIT certainly has done this. The article also recommends sensitivity training for faculty and staff, which MIT has begun to do in the letter about the change, which included a discussion of pronoun usage. While MIT has fulfilled the recommended minimum, many had hoped the institution would go even further by also including 'gender expression' in the non-discrimination policy. Allen Rabinovich, then president of GaMIT (Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals, Transgenders and Friends) felt that gender expression was needed, "A person identifying him or herself as being of a particular gender maybe willing to express a different gender of traits from a different gender -- and realistically, most of the prosecution and discrimination arises from a person's appearance rather than the internal identity"(Winstein). In the future, MIT should reconsider adding the category of 'gender expression' to the policy in order to better protect people from discrimination.

Once a student visits MIT, they will likely see the "You Are Welcomed Here" cards posted around campus. These cards are distributed to staff and faculty who are encouraged to visibly post them in their offices. They are visible in the main hallways of academic buildings, offices in corners of the Institute, and even in off-campus research facilities. Graduate resident tutors (GRTs), House Masters, and other authority figures in living groups may choose to post them as well. These cards are index card size with 'You are Welcome Here' in large block letters, the LBGT@MIT logo and Web site address. The rainbow of the LBGT@MIT logo helps signify who it is who is welcome. While these cards help students who identify with the LBGT community, they do little for the mind set of those for whom the rainbow means nothing. It is also possible that many staff and faculty would put up the cards with the intent to be accepting to LBG persons (of which there are many) but not with an attitude of acceptance towards transgender people. If a transgender student walks into an office with the card posted and is met with confusion, stares, and discomfort, the cards will cease to mean anything to them. Simply stressing the need for trans acceptance and sensitivity in the letter that is distributed with the cards is a good way to help the cards mean a little more.

Admissions

It's easy to become interested in MIT, but it is substantially harder to actually apply. While all students face the same challenges of performing well on standardized tests and writing personal essays, transgender students may find the biographic info to be the most challenging. If a student is in the process of transitioning, what gender should they use? International and domestic students use the same application, so some international students may find the Western categories of male and female not appropriate to their gender identification.



U.S. Social Security Number:

(your SSN helps us process your ap

Gender (*): Female
 Male

Date of Birth (MM/DD/YYYY) (*):

Online Freshman Application. (MIT Undergraduate Admissions. Image courtesy of MIT.)

Many students use the online application through MyMIT. The biographical information on the application form become pre-filled with the biographical information from the MyMIT registration form. The first questions on the application are Name, U.S. Social Security Number, Gender, Date of Birth, Place of Birth, Citizenship, and Ethnicity. Name, gender, date of birth, and citizenship are all required. Name is entered with first and last names being required, with optional middle initial, suffix and preferred first name. It is logical that the name fields are expected to match a student's legal name, since it is possible to also specify a 'preferred first name'. But what about gender? All of the questions around it are asking some determinable fact. To a trans person, gender is not such a fact. "Does the "M" or "F"... mean Male or Female, Masculine or Feminine?" (Feinberg 20), Feinberg asks about the equally 'straightforward' field on a driver's license. There is no 'help' link on the page corresponding to an explanation of the questions, or a number to call if something is confusing. Presumably a student would call the Admissions Office if they were really unsure about this question. Those who didn't call may choose one or the other, but some may give up and not apply. Because this application pulls data

from the MyMIT profile, giving students better options on the registration could result in better options on the online application form. Simply providing some clarification, such as small text saying 'self-identified', would also help make this form more trans-friendly.

What if a student doesn't apply online? They are asked the same questions, but now aren't forced to fill out the question of gender. Again, there is no indication as to whether or not the question of gender is based on self-identification or legal status. Presumably a student sufficiently confused would contact the Admissions Office or simply leave it blank. A student who doesn't identify as M or F could fill in their own box - perhaps labeling it 'other' or giving a better category to how they personally identify. If students did this it would help show Admissions that the gender checkboxes should be replaced with a write-in field. That would give all students to identify as they choose.

What does the Admissions Office do if they receive an application with a blank gender field? On the database that admissions fills out about a student there is actually 3 fields corresponding to gender, M, F, and MM. MM is used when a student does not fill out the gender box. At later parts of the application process they would want this to be completed, and the gender of the student would be inferred from how they are referred to in recommendations and the interview report. In the case of a transgender student who is able to pass as their self-identified gender, they would be referred to as their self-identified gender. This may not be the 'official' gender of the student, as recognized by the government. In cases where it was not able to be determined from the recommendations the student may be called and asked. The office seemed understanding about issues that could arise dealing with a student's gender, even though this is an issue they rarely deal with. Their approach always referred back to the student, and in cases of confusion would contact the student or the student's guidance counselor (Cummings, Interview). While contacting the student is a good choice for the purpose of self-identification, the guidance counselor may not be understanding about the student's gender identity or adequately able to express it. If the student has not their gender-identity with the guidance counselor the student's choice should be respected and the knowledge not shared with the counselor. If a student is coming from a very conservative region, she may be more willing to share information with the (presumably accepting) strangers at MIT than with the people she knows at home, and possibly knows to be unaccepting.

The Admissions Office assumes they are receiving a student's self-identified gender, and don't require that it be the legal gender. Why then, is gender a required field on the online application? When I asked the Freshman Admissions Officer if it was required, she contacted multiple people before it was determined that it is required. If there is no obvious reason for it to be a required field, it shouldn't be, just like race. At no point is there any indication that the question refers to self-identified gender on any of the forms (Cummings, E-mail). Having a write-in field instead of check boxes would allow gender-normative people to identify as they choose, and allow transgender people to feel free to express their gender-identity however they choose.

Financial Aid

After the student has been accepted and is looking towards matriculation, the next step may involve applying for financial aid. It does not seem that gender should play a role in financial

aid, but insidiously it creeps in through the laws of the U.S. Federal Government. MIT requires students who apply for financial aid to fill out the FAFSA and CSS/Profile form. The FAFSA is required by the U.S. Government for the student to be eligible for any federal grant or loan money. It asks a student's gender, and presumably this is expected to be the state-recognized gender of a student. It also asks about whether a student has applied for the selective service. A student who is eligible to register for the selective service must have done so in order to qualify for federal money. From the selective service Web site:

How does the Military Selective Service Act apply to individuals who have had a sex change? Individuals who are born female and have a sex change are not required to register. U.S. citizens or immigrants who are born male and have a sex change are still required to register. In the event of a resumption of the draft, males who have had a sex change can file a claim for an exemption from military service if they receive an order to report for examination or induction (Instructions For filling out the "Request for Status Information Letter").

Hence, all students who had male written on their birth certificates at birth must register with the selective service. A student applying for financial aid may be forced to deal with the issue of the selective service for the first time. Kenneth Hayes, an Assistant Director of Financial Aid, seemed to be aware that this may cause some difficulty for students. While MIT does not have the power to change this situation, they can work to decrease a student's discomfort about answering why they aren't registered (Sanlo 5). Any student who requests financial aid, even if they are not eligible for federal money, fills out the CSS/Profile form. This form does not have a required field of gender but does have an optional courtesy title field, such as Ms. or Mr. (Hayes). Unfortunately there is little MIT can do about the issue of selective service and federal financial aid. MIT can make sure that the Financial Aid officers understand the need to be sensitive to these issues. Any person who has legally changed their gender will have a difficult time navigating the selective service system, so the financial aid officers should be able to provide information and what the student needs to do.

Housing

The housing system at MIT is relatively unique, and in some ways this is beneficial to transgender students. Living options are rarely single-sex, except for individual rooms, students have control over where they live, and they have multiple opportunities to change their living situation. Some dorms have single occupancy bathrooms and many have gender neutral bathrooms. While many schools are taking steps to make their housing trans-friendly, most of these approaches are not applicable at MIT. Creating a LBGT culture hall has helped some schools, but some would say that these communities have already formed through the self-selected living groups at MIT. Matriculating freshmen are sent the "Guide to Residences" during the summer before their Freshman year. This book contains a CD-ROM with student-produced videos and electronic materials from each dorm, 'official' information on each dorm, and the necessary paperwork. While all freshmen are required to live on campus, they are able to live in any of the dorms. Freshmen submit a ranked list of the dorms and a placement lottery is run, most getting one of their top choices. In one of the few cases of MIT having a written policy, this guide book contains information on the transgender housing policy,

What if I have special housing needs? Each year, a number of incoming MIT students make special requests for consideration in housing based on medical conditions, religious preference, transgender identity, age, or other circumstances. We do our best to consider special and extenuating circumstances. In order to facilitate this process, we must have a request, in writing, from the student no later than June 17th. Please mail in or fax the Special Housing Request Form [page 48] along with any supporting documentation from medical or counseling professionals or religious leaders to the Assistant Director for Undergraduate Housing to be received by June 17th. (Gray 7)

The Special Housing Request Form on page 48 has the normal biographical information section, check boxes for reason of request, and a space to write the request. The biographical section has a write-in field for gender, instead of checkboxes. The 'reason for request' section includes a checkbox for "Transgender Identity", as well as a write in field for "Other". On the housing lottery form gender is also a write-in field, instead of a checkbox. However, the preferred access for entering the housing lottery is through an online form. The online form can only be viewed by freshman during the lottery period, so I cannot see whether they replicate the write-in field or use radio buttons.

How does the Housing Office deal with a special housing request from a transgender student? They determine the housing need on a case-by-case basis, working with the student to find an optimal situation. Often times this will result in the student being placed a single, unless they know a roommate they would like to live with. Since few areas of residence halls are single-sex, placement isn't very difficult. If a black transgender student wanted to live in Chocolate City, a black men's living group, presumably the housing office would talk to representatives of the group to see if it is an acceptable situation for the members of the group. If a student doesn't fill out the Special Housing Request form, they would be assigned a room before they moved in. Room assignments are handled by the Room Assignment Chairs (RAC) who are students who live in the dorm. They receive a list of the students who are moving in, with a list of their genders and a brief description, if the student filled it out. From this they attempt to place students in temporary rooms.

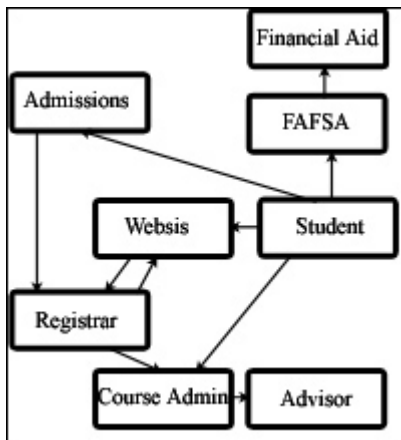
The rooms students move into when they get to campus may not be the room they remain in. There is a housing adjustment lottery after orientation, so students have the opportunity to move to a different residence hall. After everyone is assigned a residence hall for the term, the in-house rooming is done. Often dorms have smaller communities inside, either in a suite, hall, or floor setting. Students are encouraged to find the smaller community they fit best in. This is also a time when students pick who they want to live with. While a transgender student may be assigned a single during the summer lottery, they have the opportunity to find an accepting community within the residence hall.

Certain floors, suites, and halls of dorms are single gender, but this is through the tradition and choice of the communities. A RAC would have the ability to place a transgender person in the environment that is most desirable for all involved. It is possible that a transgender student listed as female could room with another student listed as male. The housing office does not constantly monitor room assignments, though they would investigate if they noticed that cross-gendered rooms were assigned. While this system allows for the most flexibility and for everyone to find

the best rooming situation, it only works if the RAC's are open-minded and sensitive to the needs of students. T. J. Torres, one of the RAC's for Senior House, said that he did not receive any training on sensitivity issues. The position is student elected, and the previous RAC's are expected to 'train' the incoming RAC's (Torres). While this process may be adequate in the dorms known for their acceptance (of which Senior House is one), this could become a problem in the less-accepting dorms. Unfortunately the types of communities that are the most LGBT-friendly are the most extreme in personality, so transgender students may be forced to choose between living with accepting people they don't have anything in common with, or living with students they like but could never be out to. The Housing Office needs to be aware that a trans student's gender-identity may not be the most important aspect of her personality, and ready to find solutions that use gender-identity only as one factor in determining housing and not the only factor.

Changing Gender on MIT Documents

Gender is recorded by many offices at MIT, and this information is not shared between offices in a consistent manner. The student has many opportunities to access and change this data, but this fact is rarely publicized. While many states require Sex Reassignment Surgery (SRS) for a legal gender change, and sometimes additional fees up to \$300 (Allison), MIT does not specifically require it. Transgender students should know that they have the opportunity to change the gender in the eyes of MIT, even if not in the eyes of the U.S. government. The process should be as streamlined as possible so that students know exactly what steps they need to take to get recognized as their gender-identity in the entirety of the institute.



After a student matriculates, their admissions data are sent to the Registrar's office where the data begin being part of the students record. This means that the student will be identified by the gender they indicated on their application. How important is gender in the registrar's data? It is not listed in "What Appears on a Transcript", but it is also not listed as "What Does Not Appear on a Transcript" (Academic Transcript). This makes it the only field to be assumed to be so completely public that one would not care who knew it. It does not appear on class lists, but it may appear on forms given to a student's advisor. It may be used in housing assignments and to put students on lists for gender-specific organizations and meetings. A student may want control of these aspects, or may simply want MIT to recognize them as the gender they identify with.

How would a student change their gender, as recognized by MIT? Perhaps a student would look on webSIS, the online system used for registration, academic, financial, and biographic data. It would take a bit of exploration to find that gender can be changed by following the link called "Name(s), Last School Attended, Birthdate, SSN, Citizenship". If they stumbled into this area, they would find they have the opportunity to change a drop-down box to male, female, or 'unknown'. Perhaps a student would change this if they listed 'official' gender on the application but identify differently. Again, there is no indication that the field isn't required to be an officially recognized gender, but the inclusion of the category 'unknown' does make it more apparent. However, the top of the page states that "It is essential that your MIT student record contains complete and accurate information." Is accurate gender the one that the student identifies as, or as they are recognized by the government? Almost every field on the page has a description of it on a help page, but gender is notably missing. If a student needs any clarification about the "birthdate" field (drop down boxes for day, month, and year), there should certainly be some additional clarification provided about the gender field. It seems that help is warranted when the category of 'unknown' is a possibility for gender specification. If someone has a gender-identity that is not male nor female (yet is known to them), should they use the category of unknown? Or is it only for people who are currently questioning their gender identity?



Biographic Records page, accessed from main student webSIS page. ("Biographic Record." MIT Websis. Image courtesy of MIT.)

What does the Registrar do if a student changes their gender through webSIS? All biographic data changes are reviewed by the Registrar's Office, including gender. To make sure that this is an intentional change, the registrar's office would attempt to contact the student. Associate Registrar, Connie Scribner said that the usual course of action is to contact the academic administrator for the course the student is enrolled in and ask them to contact the student. It is difficult to know how well this system works, since gender has been changed on webSIS only one or two times since the system was put in place (Scribner). Presumably the academic administrator would be more familiar with the student than the Registrar would be. Anne Hunter, the Undergraduate Administrator for Course VI (Electrical Engineering and Computer Science) told me that she refuses to be a messenger service for the Registrar's Office regarding any matter and that she often does not know students (course VII is the largest undergraduate department). Brian Canavan, the Academic Administrator for Course VIII (Physics) stated that he would

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contact the student if he knew them, but would otherwise ask the Registrar's office to contact the student. Obviously this is a place where there is a flaw in the system.

The image shows a web form titled "PERSONAL" with several sections. The "Local Name" section has fields for "Last Name", "First Name", "Middle Name or Initial", and "Suffix". The "Address" section has fields for "Address" and "City". The "U.S. Social Security Number" section has a field for the number. The "IMMIGRATION STATUS" section has radio buttons for "U.S. Citizen", "U.S. Perm Resident", and "International Student".

Page for changing biographic information. ("Biographic Record." MIT Websis. Image courtesy of MIT.)

A student may also go to a course administrator to change their gender. A student may do this instead of or in addition to going to the Registrar. While the individual departments get their data from the Registrar's data, they then keep the data separate and don't always check for updates. Hunter said that she never is informed of name changes that go through the Registrar's Office, which are certainly more frequent and affect more things than a gender change. Her department begins with the Registrar's data, but doesn't check for updates. Canavan said the physics department does a yearly update, but more to check that they have all of the correct students listed as enrolled in physics. If at any time the Physics Department noticed a discrepancy between the Registrar's and their data, they would fix it, however, they are likely to miss changes, especially in gender. It is more difficult to know how a student's gender is listed in a department than how it is listed for the Registrar since there is no online listing to check. The only use of the department's gender designation seems to be in supplying it to advisors. Both Canavan and Hunter stated they would be happy to change a student's gender based on a request (not requiring any documentation) though Canavan stated he would make sure that the student had also changed it with the Registrar so that the databases would match. Both would be receptive to a student wishing to identify neither as male or female, as the registrar allows for this designation (Canavan; Hunter).

The image shows a close-up of the "PERSONAL" section of the form. The "Gender:" label is followed by a dropdown menu with "Female" selected. To the right, the "Birthdate:" label is followed by a date picker showing "17 DEC 1984". Below the gender dropdown, the "IMMIGRATION STATUS" section has radio buttons for "U.S. Citizen", "U.S. Perm Resident", and "International Student".

Gender is changed through a drop-down box. ("Biographic Record." MIT Websis. Image courtesy of MIT.)

The image shows a close-up of the "PERSONAL" section of the form. The "Birthdate:" label is followed by a text input field. Below it, the "U.S. Social Security Number" label is followed by a text input field. The text "Your birthdate displays on your transcript." is above the birthdate field, and "Your social security number displays on your enrollment certifications and financial documents." is above the social security number field.

The help screen has descriptions of all fields, except gender. ("Websis Help." MIT Websis. Image courtesy of MIT.)

Why does a department need to know a student's gender? They want to provide it to the advisor. The only reason provided for this is so that if a student walks into the room, the advisor can use gender to help figure out which student it is. The department also have students' pictures, which are obviously a better way to identify students. While it may be beneficial for an advisor to know if one of their students identified as transgender - for the sake of knowing they need support - it should be up to student to tell them. While some advisors would be very accepting of trans students, some would not be. A student should be able to change advisors if they felt that her current advisor was transphobic. Hunter said that advisor reassignments are given often and with minimal questions asked. Changing advisors in the physics department takes some explanation, but the explanation seems to be needed so that the department can judge if an advisor is doing something wrong. Both courses VI and VIII seem to be sensitive to the needs of all students, including transgender. Canavan stated that he felt that the majority of the course administrators would be trans-friendly. MIT needs to make sure that all course administrators are friendly towards transgender students. A program currently exists called "When Support Gets Personal" that is provided to MIT support staff, but is not required. Making sure that the needs of transgender students are discussed and that all staff participate in this program would be a great step in making all departments trans-friendly. A student deserves the guarantee that any department she enrolls in will be as accepting as the institute as a whole.

Alumni face a much greater challenge in changing their official gender, even though the Registrar receives more requests for changing gender from alums than from current students. They are required to provide a written request and some sort of identity verification. While the policy (as listed on the [Trans@MIT](#) Web site) indicates that a doctor's note certifying surgery is required for MIT to recognize the change, I was informed that documents such as revised birth certificates and licenses are accepted, though strongly requested to be notarized. Since some states would not allow a gender change on birth certificate or license, the doctor's note allows more flexibility in the policy. The official documents also serve as evidence for a name change, which MIT allows only when it is because of a sex change. The policy of requiring documentation is in place partially to prevent identity theft (Scribner). However, requiring SRS or changes in identifying documents will make it almost impossible for poor people (or people without medical insurance coverage of SRS) to change their gender as alumni at MIT.

Recommendation and Conclusions

This project has only addressed a few issues a transgender student would face here. Bathrooms are a large problem, and while MIT has a good attitude, there has been little action to help transgender people on this issue. According to LBG@MIT, "If your gender identity does not conform to your physical sex, then MIT accepts its responsibility to work with you and your co-workers to resolve any bathroom usage issues in a manner respectful to all parties involved." Transgender students also have to face major issues dealing with medical insurance coverage and care. While Massachusetts Blue Cross/Blue Shield has the majority of control over coverage decisions, MIT could evaluate the coverage for trans people and possibly seek a more trans-friendly provider. Athletics is also an issue, both in facilities usage and ability to participate. MIT

has a family changing area in its athletic complex that transgender students can use, and the staff has received some sensitivity training.

MIT tries to portray itself as an accepting environment. I would not consider this a misrepresentation, on the whole, the MIT community is very accepting. All of the MIT staff I spoke with seemed to have a level of understanding and sincerity of transgender issues far above what would be expected of people not involved in the LBGT community. All seemed happy to work with students to help the student be as comfortable as possible. However, dealing with every student on a case by case basis means that there are few policies in place that a student could use to defend themselves if they were to face discrimination. While the non-discrimination policy protects students in the realms of admissions and financial aid (when it is not under the jurisdiction of the federal government), recognizing a student's gender-identity is less regulated. Trans-phobic people in the system could make students uncomfortable before another body (like Student Support Services) stepped in to remedy the problem. Having more clear cut policies in place would help prevent any one person from causing a student duress.

One weakness in the MIT system is that it works under the necessity of trans students 'coming out' in order to take advantage of the protections offered to them. While some students may identify as transgender and proud of this part of who they are, others may simply want to be treated as the gender-identity they live as. Leslie Feinberg addresses this issue in *Trans Liberation: Beyond Pink or Blue* in the context of a patient revealing her trans status to medical staff. Feinberg doesn't feel like it is the business of the doctors and that patients have the right to privacy. Perhaps one staff member would want to know for the sake of being more sensitive, however, once this knowledge is public others would have a reason to mistreat the patient (84). For a student to change their gender at MIT, they shouldn't need to share their trans status with many people. If the registrar wants confirmation of the change, they should contact the student directly instead of using the student's department administrator. If the database system was more localized, the student wouldn't need to involve the course administrator. In addition, therapy encourages trans people to not identify as transsexual and to create whatever lies are necessary to give the illusion of being normatively-gendered (Bornstein 62). The therapist has the ability to limit a patient's access to hormones and surgery, so MIT should not place the student in a position against the therapist.

Truthfulness is usually not rewarded with hormones, surgery, or even simply being treated as a transsexual by many therapists and doctors (Spade, "*Mutilating*"). MIT needs to make sure that it is not replicating this treatment. A student should be recognized as they wish to identify, even if they don't have a therapist, hormones, or a surgery data. Shouldn't MIT make clear from the beginning what categories will be affected by the field of 'gender'? If a student is going to be forced to choose between male, female, and unknown, she has the right to understand how that will affect her housing, eligibility for athletics, and right to use bathrooms. Students shouldn't have to abide by any standards of medical approval when wanting to change their gender, especially if no proof was required in the beginning. Students shouldn't feel like they are forced to identify as trans if they do not wish to identify that way, but they should also not feel like they are forced to hide that identity. Gender doesn't need to be public knowledge. It just happens that in many gender-normative people it is possible to tell their sex traits and gender-identity from looking at them. People should not be forced to reveal these aspects of themselves if the

conclusion couldn't be reached, or was wrong. Wasn't the purpose of the stars and triangles in Nazi Germany to know how people identified? If people are forced to reveal characteristics beyond how they choose to **publicly** identify, there must be a reason, and likely a suspicious one.

Many people are aware that transgender people exist, and that they may have some difficulty in filling out the gender box on forms. Yet it is still assumed that there is an answer to this question, and that it remains a valid, necessary question. Whether people believe that one should respond to the question with biological/birth gender or self-identified gender, most would assume that when phrased with these parameters, the question has an answer. Both views reflect an assumption that there is a 'true' gender, and that it is either male or female. Many trans people want to expand beyond these possibilities, creating their own identities or occupying different identities at different times. Spade says she is "...fundamentally opposed to the regulatory notion of dichotomous gender, and [lives]... in a non-cohesive, dichotomy-defying body and mind" (Spade, "*More Gender*"). Forms which ask race don't give the options of 'white' and 'non-white' because race is far more complex than that. Even with seven categories listed, an 'other' box is listed for students to describe their racial heritage. Gender should be given the same respect.

The biggest weakness is that 'gender' is rarely given any explanation, both in regard to what is being asked and how it will be used. While so many of the departments realize that a student may not identify with their legal/biological gender, in few cases is the category of gender portrayed with this understanding. Online forms should not require gender, or should provide the other/unknown/undesigned option that is present in many other parts of the system. If a department assumes they are getting a student's self-identified gender on a form (which always seems to be the case) they should somehow specify on the form that this is what they want. If instructions and clarifications are provided for other fields, there is no reason why gender should be expected to be universally understood and agreed upon. A smaller step would be moving gender away from such factual information as name, birthday, and social security number and moving it nearer to optional, self-reported fields like race/ethnicity or religion. The MIT departments asking for gender should also question why they need it. Admissions needs to report to many agencies the gender distribution, just like race, and should then treat the gender field like race: optional with many possibilities. Housing issues revolve around the heteronormative assumption that men and women can't room together. Trans housing causes such problems since it has no place in this framework, but the framework is so deeply rooted that housing can't be done in a gender-blind way without making many people very unhappy. Departments really don't need to know students' genders.

MIT has succeeded in being a 'trans-friendly' institution, but is not an institution ideal for trans students. It is amazing to see such widespread acceptance and knowledge, when the departments have had little or no interaction with trans students. However, MIT's friendliness is in comparison to the rest of the world: the government, employers, high schools, and other universities. It hasn't yet recognized many problems that transgender students still face here and sought the simple solutions to these problems, such as modifying online forms. Perhaps MIT would remedy these problems if more transgender students enrolled and complained about the forms and other problems. Yet transgender students need to think MIT is accepting before even applying. MIT has the ability to solve this Catch-22 by being proactive in making changes, even though students haven't yet complained. The greatest minds in the country should be at MIT

solving the world's problems, not worried about the implication of the question 'gender' on the application.

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