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# The Paradox of Feeling Invisible Yet Overly-Visible

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# The Paradox of Feeling Invisible Yet Overly-Visible

## **Abstract**

A personal reflection on being transgender at Gettysburg College:

When I came out to myself, my friends, and Gettysburg's ALLies Club as transgender in the spring of 2012, I was one of only a very small handful of out *trans*\* students on campus. There were so few of us, in fact, that you could probably count us on the fingers of one hand, and the issues surrounding the "T" in "LGBT," while important, seemed to affect other people in other places rather than the people in our own community.

[*excerpt*]

## **Keywords**

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, sexuality, gender, Gettysburg ALLies, LGBTQA

## **Disciplines**

Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies | Gender and Sexuality

## **Comments**

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](http://www.gettysburg.edu) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that -isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

# SURGE

[ VERB ] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

## THE PARADOX OF FEELING INVISIBLE YET OVERLY-VISIBLE

June 26, 2013

A personal reflection on being transgender at Gettysburg College:

When I came out to myself, my friends, and Gettysburg's ALLies Club as transgender in the spring of 2012, I was one of only a very small handful of out [trans\\*](#) students on campus. There were so few of us, in fact, that you could probably count us on the fingers of one hand, and the issues surrounding the "[T](#)" in "[LGBT](#)," while important, seemed to affect other people in other places rather than the people in our own community.

Looking back, it was an interesting and perhaps even providential time to come out as transgender at Gettysburg, and it didn't take long before I was swept up in a whirlwind of activity and trans\* activism. In the few short months since my coming out, ROTC and ALLies were working together in dialogue, gender-neutral bathrooms were becoming more common on campus, the language of the Gettysburg's anti-discrimination policy was amended to include gender identity and gender expression, and plans were put in place for gender-neutral housing, which would be a major boon for current and incoming trans\* students. Trans\* issues even got special emphasis during ALLies Week that spring, providing a much-needed opportunity for visibility and education. And through all that, friends, faculty, and staff were uniformly encouraging and gave me the kind of acceptance that I'm still struggling to attain at home with my family.

While much headway has been made, progress is still needed. Administratively, that was made clear to me when I discovered, to my dismay, that I wouldn't be able to change my name in the school's database without official legal documentation. However, the more obvious gap is between decision-making at the administrative level and actual changes embraced within our everyday culture. Although the [Bias Related Conduct Policy](#) on campus creates protection from physical or verbal behavior that is motivated by bias, racial, religious, gender (and other) micro-aggressions still happen daily, making the culture on campus a challenge for many.

All the faculty and administrative support in the world didn't help me gain the courage to enter the men's bathroom in Servo by myself during the hours of heavy lunchtime traffic, even with the knowledge that there was nothing in the rules that would prohibit me from doing so. Gender-neutral bathrooms weren't everywhere or always easily



accessible in a pinch, so I often found myself rushing to an established safe space like ALLies House. The inclusion of trans\* identities in the anti-discrimination policy didn't alleviate my day-to-day concerns about how I would be perceived by my professors and peers in the classroom. I often had to ask myself whether coming out to my professors would have a negative effect on my grade.

The College certainly couldn't extend its protective aegis to my excursions into town, either, where I was often met with curious, wary stares (although that may be just as much due to my yarmulke and [tzitzit](#) as my gender expression).

Living in a strong heteronormative environment makes me (and others) painfully aware of my "feminine" physical features, preventing me from being easily accepted as just 'one of the guys.' The stereotypical female/male roles that are ingrained so deeply in society create an enormous obstacle for the trans\* community. Although I never faced anything worse than being asked a too-personal question once in awhile during my time at Gettysburg, I witnessed more than one of these micro-aggressions aimed at one of my friends, who had come out before the College had appointed a part-time LGBTQA advisor. She had a coming out journey roughly parallel to my own and served as my inspiration. She was a trailblazer who spearheaded a lot of dialogue about trans\* issues on campus and dressed and conducted herself according to who she knew herself to be, but rude stares and the occasional transphobic remark became part of her daily routine. The fact that I wasn't directly involved didn't make me any less upset.

There's the paradox of feeling invisible and overly-visible simultaneously. I was invisible in the sense that awareness of trans\* identities on campus was still not very widespread, but I was overly-visible because as one of the few openly trans\* individuals on campus, I felt pressured to be the expert on every single trans\* issue affecting the community. For some people, I was the token trans\* friend and occasionally had my story (including my birth name) divulged without my consent to people I had only just met, something I had thought would be [Rule #1 of Things Not to Do in Front of a Trans\\* Person \(or Ever\)](#). Occurrences such as these demonstrate the gap between policy and practice. Non-discrimination policies can only go so far in creating a comfortable, safe environment for people who don't identify as part of a dominant group.

With all this said, I'll readily admit that my experience as a transgender man at Gettysburg College was a surprisingly positive one. Maybe I was lucky to come out when the College was in a reforming mood, or maybe I didn't personally have to confront so much prejudice because I was so close to graduating when I came out. Perhaps the acceptance I felt was chiefly due to my near-constant association with a social group made up of people like me. Whatever the reasons, it's to the College's credit that I felt far freer to be myself there in tiny, historic Gettysburg than here at home with my family mere minutes away from the heart of Manhattan.

I'm glad I had the chance to avail myself of the resources and opportunities that opened up during my final semesters, although I know there's still plenty of work to be done. Anti-discrimination policy amendments made to include trans\* people can work to change dynamics, but a cultural shift needs to happen as well in order for us to realize the goal of equity and inclusion. With more trans\* students coming out on campus, I'm confident that they will not only benefit from the advances the College has already made, but continue to improve and expand upon them until the campus becomes a space where all students feel welcomed and affirmed regardless of gender identity.

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