

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

A Narrative Study on the Environmental and Interpersonal Interactions Transgender and/or  
Nonbinary Undergraduates in the United States Take Into Account When Making  
Postsecondary Academic Selections

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

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2023

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University of California San Diego  
California State University, San Marcos

2023

## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the out, the closeted, and yet-to-be Transgender and/or Nonbinary youth and young adults who are just trying to live their truth while navigating the pressures of a biased, narrow world. There are so many of us and our allies who are ready and willing to hear you, see you, love you, and support you. We cannot wait to meet you and help you reach your goals so you can change this world for the better for everyone. I see you doing your best out there. You are beautiful the way you are.

This work is dedicated to the educators who see our most vulnerable populations and advocate for them loudly, fiercely, and tirelessly every day in the face of political pressures, threats, and non-livable wages. You are the catapults that launch society's hidden gems towards success and the catalysts for social change. I see you doing your best out there. Thank you for being you.

This work is dedicated to my two kids. I dream of you growing up in a world where my study and similar others become obsolete because we would have succeeded in celebrating and incorporating gender-expansiveness and Queerness and other aspects of diversity into society rather than relegating them to the shadows. Until then, everything I do as an educator will always be with you two in mind. No matter who you both grow up to become, I hope this work and others like it help to positively shape your educational institutions, faculty, and staff so that your friends, classmates, neighbors, coworkers, employers, employees, life partners, medical/mental health providers, public service providers, and community become more beautifully colorful in all sorts of various ways.

Finally, this work is dedicated to my younger self. I know you've always wondered, and I really tried my best to find answers for you. Turns out: It wasn't you; they just weren't ready for

you yet. But the struggles you went through will become the foundations for why you're so passionate about your profession and career and why you won't let students feel the same way you did. I hope this study brings you validation when others couldn't, wouldn't, or didn't know how to. I see you, everything's going to turn out alright and be ok. You're going to be ok.

## EPIGRAPH

Geoff Bennett:           What are the leading misconceptions about Transgender youth? What do people fail to understand?

Dr. Meredith McNamara:           For my Transgender and Gender-Expansive patients, their gender identity is the least interesting thing about them. They are vibrant, young people who have so much to offer. They're our greatest assets in society. And they deserve to feel safe and loved.

Yang, J. (2022, November 27). *Debunking common myths about gender-affirming care for youth*. PBS NewsHour; PS News Weekend.  
<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/debunking-common-myths-about-gender-affirming-care-for-youth#transcript>

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## GLOSSARY

| Term                              | Definition   |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Academic selections               | The observable manifestations of academic decisions.   |
| Assigning gender at birth         | The categorization of sex based on Western medical practices, often dichotomized as either Female or Male.   |
| Assigning sex at birth            | See <i>assigning gender at birth</i> .   |
| Binary Transgender                | Individuals in the Transgender community who align their gender identity and expression to what is socially considered the cisnormative ‘opposite’ gender they were assigned at birth, with some individuals desiring or using medical treatments toward that end. Some in this community identify simply as a Woman or Man, foregoing the ‘Transgender’ label altogether. |
| Cis                               | Shorthand for Cisgender.   |
| Cisgender                         | When gender identity and/or gender expression align with one’s gender assigned at birth and conform to societal gender norms.  |
| CisHet                            | Shorthand to describe someone who is Cisgender and Heterosexual.   |
| Cisnormativity                    | Notion that one’s gender identity and expression should align with their sex and that both are immutable, interchangeable, and can only be read as Cisgender.  |
| Clocked                           | Being recognized by others as a Transgender and/or Nonbinary individual  |
| Chosen family                     | A term originating in the LGBTQ community to refer to people in an individual’s social circle who are not biologically or legally related to them but provide emotional support and community kinship to the point they are seen as surrogate family members to the individual (Gates, 2017; Weston, 1991).  |
| College                           | See <i>postsecondary education</i> .   |
| Coming out                        | Revealing one’s identity to others.  |
| Communal reinforcement phenomenon | When a community of people have a shared, reinforced belief with little to no evidence.  |
| Compulsory heterogenderism        | Assumption that a gendered body can only be attracted to someone of “the same or opposite” gender based on the dichotomous gender social norm which simultaneously erases and questions the existence of Transgender and/or Nonbinary gender identities through the lens of sexual orientation (Nicolazzo, 2017).  |
| Crisis competence                 | Special competency individuals who face discrimination gain in handling difficulties, giving them the ability to   |

|                            |  |
|----------------------------|--|
|                            | adjust to developmental challenges (Schmidt et al., 2011).   |
| Dead name                  | (n.) A Transgender-identified individual's birth and/or legal name no longer in use. See <i>To dead name</i> .   |
| Environmental interactions | Interactions individuals have with structural, cultural, societal, situational, temporal, analog (e.g., books), and digital (e.g., television, web-based media, passive social media browsing and consumption) mediums that do not directly involve interacting with other individuals.  |
| Fem                        | Shorthand for feminine, often spelled this way so as not to appropriate the term <i>Femme</i> , which is used in Lesbian culture and history to describe a Lesbian who expresses a traditionally feminine gender expression.   |
| Gender                     | The way in which one mentally, behaviorally, and culturally embodies the asserted and learned social constructs typically associated with Femaleness or Maleness.  |
| Gender expansive           | Descriptor for those who identify as Transgender and/or Nonbinary and go beyond or expand notions of gender. This term positively situates them in juxtaposition to an assumed standard norm and is used in this study instead of <i>gender non-conforming</i> which situates them in negative juxtaposition.  |
| Gender expression          | Mannerisms, attire, language, and other various means individuals choose to express their gender identity others.  |
| Gender identity            | One's internal sense of self in a societal context.  |
| Gender non-conforming      | See <i>gender expansive</i> .  |
| Gender restrictive         | Systems that uphold genderist, cisnormative ideologies.  |
| Genderism                  | The hegemonic nature of gender where individuals are influenced, regulated, and pressured by and through their interactions to conform to the normative gender they are presumed to be (Wilchins, 2002a).  |
| Going stealth              | A form of <i>social recategorization strategy</i> often used by Binary Transgender individuals. Expressing their gender, living socially, and/or employing medical interventions to physically transition their bodies to conform to the cisnormative 'opposite' gender they were assigned at birth to be socially read as Cisgender by others without question or having to disclose their Binary Transgender identity. |
| Heterosexism               | The perpetuation of Straight or Heterosexual identities as the normative sexual orientation which upholds genderism and the concept that only two acceptable genders exist: Women and Men (Watkins, 1998).   |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Heterosexual                             | Being attracted to the ‘opposite’ gender based on the dichotomous social norm.   |
| Hidden curriculum                        | The “unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, and norms that exist in the educational setting” (Alsubaie, 2015, p. 125) in schooling environments.  |
| Higher education                         | See <i>postsecondary education</i> .   |
| Identity management                      | The decision to share or present one’s identity affiliation with others or not (Roberts et al., 2008).   |
| Informal interpersonal interactions      | Interactions occurring with individuals who are not employed by the postsecondary institution such as family, friends, and peers.  |
| Institutional interpersonal interactions | Interactions with individuals employed by the postsecondary institution such as staff, faculty, and those working in conjunction with or at the behest of such actors such as guest lecturers or speakers.   |
| Internalized homophobia                  | Internalization of negative self-perceptions based on sexual orientation subjugation.  |
| Internalized transphobia                 | Internalization of negative self-perceptions based on gender subjugation.  |
| Interpersonal interactions               | Interactions individuals actively and directly have with other individuals either in-person or virtually (i.e., social media interactions).  |
| Masking                                  | A form of <i>social recategorization strategy</i> . Not disclosing one’s identity and conforming to the normative identity out of fear of retaliation and policing.  |
| Nonbinary                                | Those in the Transgender community whose gender identity encompasses both, oscillates between, transcends, and/or rejects the dichotomous societal gender construct. A variety of constantly changing nomenclatures are used by both out-group and in-group members to describe this gender identity, including Agender, Gender Fluid, or Genderqueer. Though often embedded in the ‘Transgender’ hypernym due to their gender identities and/or expressions expanding beyond cisnormative social norms, literature demonstrates they have different experiences compared to their Binary Transgender counterparts to the point some even distinguish themselves outside of the ‘Transgender’ hypernym entirely. |
| Passing                                  | Being perceived by others as Cisgender and Heterosexual.   |
| Passing privilege                        | The ability to live and exist in society in a binary gender identity without question or fear from others clocking or being able to read them as Transgender and/or Nonbinary.   |

|                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| Postsecondary education            | The optional, tertiary education beyond the high school level with intent of attaining a degree. Used purposefully instead of <i>higher</i> education to push against classist and socially constructed hierarchies imposed on the U.S. education system since the latter implies learning derived from colleges, universities, and their variations are inherently superior to other forms of education provided through various means, avenues, and instructional systems. Used interchangeably with the term <i>college</i> in this study. |
| Pre-college                        | Experiences students bring with them upon matriculation into postsecondary education Museus's (2014).   |
| Retention                          | Continued enrollment of students through to degree completion.  |
| Sex                                | Biological processes and genetic reactions that form genitalia which are often categorized dichotomously as either Female or Male.  |
| Sex-type                           | Categorization along dichotomous gender stereotypes; cisnormatively gendered.   |
| Sexual Orientation                 | One's sexual attraction preferences.  |
| Social recategorization strategies | The practice of identity management where one manages the perceptions of others by both evading being categorized into a socially marginalized gender identity and aligning with more socially favorable identities because of social regulations (Roberts et al., 2008).   |
| Straight                           | See <i>Heterosexual</i> .   |
| Stopping out                       | Withdrawing from schooling  |
| T                                  | Shorthand for Testosterone hormone therapy  |
| Temporal echo effect               | When environmental and/or interpersonal interactions are recalled by individuals at a later date and influence academic selections. A finding from this study and term coined by the researcher.  |
| To dead name                       | (v.) The disrespectful practice of referring to a Transgender-identified individual by their birth and/or legal name rather than their new, lived name. See <i>dead name</i> .  |
| Transgender                        | Individuals whose self-determined gender identity and gender expression differ from their gender assigned at birth. Sometimes shortened to Trans, Trans*, or T such as the acronym 'LGBTQ'  |
| Transition                         | The process of using medical treatments to align one's gender identity and expression to what is socially considered the cisnormative 'opposite' gender assigned at birth. Often utilized by Binary Transgender individuals.  |

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work would not have been possible if not for the three undergraduate affinity researchers and six participants who gave the gift of their time, their stories, and their voices to this study. I am honored that you allowed me to share your truth with the world. May they serve to enlighten educational institutions and entities towards better experiences and existences for our Transgender and/or Nonbinary siblings and invisibilized others.

To the faculty and staff at UCSD's Department of Education Studies and CSUSM's School of Education, thank you for encouraging my curiosity and providing me with the knowledge, skills, and tools for becoming a critical researcher. To my dissertation committee members: Dr. Sinem Siyahhan, your assignment and feedback during that first quarter of the program helped me to formulate the focus and foundation of my study; Dr. Sam Museus, your willingness to meet with a random doctoral student who contacted you out of the blue who was interested in using your theory as a framework helped to contextualize this study within postsecondary education and through an asset-framed lens; and, finally, Dr. Brooke Soles, as my Chair, you spent years and countless hours helping me tame this wild beast of a dissertation into what graces the following pages. Thank you all for your generosity in time, support, guidance, and expertise.

To my JDPham, Cohort 15 – yes, *that* cohort – our educational journey occurred in a way that no other cohort has ever experienced before us, nor will they ever experience after us. It is thanks to your commitment, passion, humor, dedication, and care that I was able to make it through to this moment. A special thank you to Dr. Julia Martinez, Dr. Felicia Singleton, Dr. Christabelle “Belle” Tan, and Dr. McKenzie Campbell for those late-night COVID Café study sessions. To Dr. Jennie Goldstone, 899x.



To Mary, words cannot describe how much your support, time, and partnership have meant to me throughout the years. This would not have happened without you; I hope we can continue to support each other towards becoming our best selves.

To my parents and my sister, you were my first teachers growing up. You taught me how to ask questions, listen, recognize injustice, value differences in others, know my self-worth, take action, and be a lifelong learner. Most of all, you taught me what it means to be a generous, supportive, and loving family. There's so much evidence on the devastating and cruel outcomes trans kids face in the absence of supportive families. I know I was one of the lucky ones. Thank you for loving me and for teaching me to love myself. I love you and I hope to continue making you all proud. Chai yo!

พ่อ แม่ และ พี่แพม

ทั้งสามคนเป็น“ครู”สอนผมตั้งแต่ผมยังเป็นเด็ก ทั้งสามคนสอนให้ผมถามในสิ่งที่ผมไม่เข้าใจ

สอนให้ผมฟังคำพูดของคนอื่น ให้เห็นและเข้าใจสิ่งที่ไม่ถูกต้องและไม่ยุติธรรมต่อคนอื่น

สอนให้ผมเข้าใจว่าคนเราจะไม่เหมือนกัน ว่ามีการแตกต่างกัน สอนให้รู้ว่าตัวเราเองมีค่า

สอนให้แสดงออกและทำในสิ่งที่ถูกต้อง และสอนให้ผมมีความสนใจเรียนรู้เสมอ แต่ที่สำคัญที่สุด

ครอบครัวสอนให้ผมเป็นคนที่มีความมั่นใจและดูแลครอบครัวและรักครอบครัวเป็นอันดับแรก

บ่อยครั้งชีวิตคนที่แปลงเพศจะเจอการตอบสนองจากครอบครัวที่ร้ายแรงและมีการกระทบต่อจิตใจถ้าไม่มีครอบครัวที่สนับสนุนและให้ความอบอุ่นให้ลูก ผมถือว่าผมเองเป็นคนที่โชคดีที่ได้รับความอบอุ่นจากครอบครัว

ขอขอบคุณครอบครัวที่รักผมเสมอและสอนให้ผมรักตัวเองด้วย ผมรักพ่อแม่และพี่แพมที่สุด

และหวังว่าผมจะทำให้ทุกคนภูมิใจในตัวผมตลอด ไชโย!!!

Finally, I acknowledge that both the University of California San Diego and California State University, San Marcos where I attended and earned my doctoral degree are built on the

traditional, ancestral, unceded territory of the Kumeyaay Nation. I acknowledge that the County of San Diego where I live, work, raise my kids, and earned all of my postsecondary educational degrees has, “eighteen federally recognized reservations, home to more than any county in the United States,” (CSUSM, 2021, 0:41-0:47) and is considered to be, “the most diverse geography of any other tribe in the United States” (Indigenous Americans, 2018, 1:13–1:17). I acknowledge that the Cupeño, Kumeyaay, and Ipai peoples have occupied this region for over 12,000 years and over 600 generations. I respectfully acknowledge that they were forcefully converted and indoctrinated by Franciscan missionaries, their lands confiscated by a colonizing Spanish force, and enslaved as food production laborers for their captors. I recognize and acknowledge and take to heart that stories exist of Kumeyaay members who fled to the mountains to avoid capture and conversion, including important spiritual, gender-expansive members of the community known as Two-Spirits. I acknowledge that, to this day, the Kumeyaay nation continues to maintain their political sovereignty and cultural traditions. As LGBTQI+ communities have a long history of invisibility and erasure, I pay respects to the Kumeyaay people, their elders, my Two-Spirit/LGBTQI+ siblings, their struggles, and the ancestral land they have looked after for generations.

I also understand that land acknowledgements in themselves are not actions towards change; merely starting points in highlighting the current, ongoing colonialism that continues to exist today. I also acknowledge my presence and participation within that systemic system. In honor of this land acknowledgement and the culmination of my doctoral degree, I plan to take action in supporting the Kumeyaay community by making a donation to the Rainbow of Truth Circle, part of the La Jolla Band of Luseño Indians’ Avellaka program, which centers the experiences of Native American Two-Spirit/LGBTQI+ community members:

<https://avellaka.com>. I encourage others to also strive towards supporting Indigenous, First Nations, and Native communities and to learn more about whose land they are on at

<https://native-land.ca>

Thank you. Eyaay ahan. **ขอบคุณครับ**

CSUSM. (2021, October 11). *CSUSM land acknowledgement* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Q3w3MQkT9B0>

Indigenous Americans. (2018, December 21). *San Diego's first people – Kumeyaay Native Americans* [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Q3w3MQkT9B0>

## VITA

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

A Narrative Study on the Environmental and Interpersonal Interactions Transgender and/or  
Nonbinary Undergraduates in the United States Take Into Account When Making  
Postsecondary Academic Selections

by

Baramée Peper Anan

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California San Diego, 2023  
California State University, San Marcos, 2023

Professor Brooke Soles, Chair

Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations in the United States experience significant rates of harassment, discrimination, victimization, and psychological distress in nearly all aspects of life due to systemic stigmatization against those who violate societal gender norms. Such social disparities are often enacted through the environmental and interpersonal interactions of

Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals beginning in their formative years and throughout their lifespan. Tangible consequences from these biased interactions can be seen in their systemic economic stratification due to employment insecurity, which hampers their ability to participate in mainstream society and perpetuates their marginalization. Given the relationship between postsecondary degree attainment and the economic and employment security of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, the focus of this study was to uncover the ways in which they perceive their environmental and/or interpersonal interaction factors influencing their postsecondary academic selections. Drawing from Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model, and Museus's (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (CECE Model) of College Success, a participatory-social justice, narrative inquiry design was used to answer this study's research questions. Potential implications from this study on the U.S. educational system and the experiences and life trajectories of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates are discussed.

*Keywords:* Transgender, Nonbinary, postsecondary education, academic selections, environmental interactions, interpersonal interactions

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In U.S. society, individuals learn and are taught during formative years through immediate environmental and interpersonal interactions that only two socially acceptable genders exist—Women and Men—and any form of gender-expansive variation is understood to be a social stigma that deviates from this social norm (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Wilchins, 2002a, 2002b). This message has been reiterated throughout various life arenas to the point it has been understood as an inherent, immutable fact (Bilodeau, 2007; Butler, 1990; Seelman, 2014; Simmons & White, 2014; World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.-b). Only when a transgression from these norms occur does its existence come into question and brought to light (Evans et al., 2009b; Nicolazzo, 2017). For those whose gender identity and/or expressions expand beyond these rigid societal gender norms, they often identify themselves within the Transgender and/or Nonbinary community.

An estimated 0.6% of the U.S. adult population identify as Transgender and/or Nonbinary, which translates to about 1.4 million people (Flores et al., 2016). These individuals experience significant societal regulations through their environmental and interpersonal interactions for violating gender norms. Such regulation can be seen in the alarming rates of anti-Transgender and/or Nonbinary harassment, discrimination, victimization, and even legislation reported in nearly all aspects of their life and throughout the course of their lifespan. Life arenas impacted include familial, emotional, intimate, and spiritual relations; physical and mental healthcare; the housing sector; interactions with public services, facilities, and accommodations; economic security, which is closely related to and often a result of employment; and education (Divan et al., 2016; GLSEN, 2018, 2020, 2022; Haas et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Spade,

2015). The prevalence of this bias in U.S. society against Transgender and/or Nonbinary existence can be seen in federal reports consistently documenting hate crimes rising against Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations on an annual basis (Uniform Crime Reporting Program [UCR], 2019). Mistreatment can be found even in locations considered to be more liberal, including states with anti-discrimination laws (Hartzell et al., 2009; Spade, 2015). Such experiences set a precarious tone for Transgender and/or Nonbinary existence and participation in mainstream society that leads to systemically stratified life trajectories.

Of the various life arenas where these prejudices occur, economic security has had the most significant impact on Transgender and/or Nonbinary life trajectories. Low or lacking economic status and security has negatively affected people's housing security, access to physical and mental healthcare, and ability to afford and access legal and government services (Divan et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2011; Haas et al., 2014; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Paired with socially ubiquitous anti-Transgender and/or Nonbinary discriminatory interpersonal interactions, this contributes to their marginalization from mainstream society and places them at risk physically and psychologically (Divan et al., 2016; GLSEN, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Haas et al., 2014; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). As mentioned previously, Transgender and/or Nonbinary economic status and security is a consequence of, and associated with, employment status.

In 2020, the Supreme Court ruled Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964—which prohibits employment discrimination based on specific identity traits—also protects employees based on gender identity (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020). Though significant, positive legal gains have been made since this decision (see J. Davidson, 2022), it is still too soon to determine the exact, long-lasting impacts of this ruling on Transgender and/or Nonbinary employee



experiences and trajectories. From what is currently known, Transgender and/or Nonbinary employees have reported twice the unemployment rate compared to the general population with roughly one-third reporting being fired or mistreated in the workplace due to their gender-expansive expressions or after disclosing their gender identity (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). Thus, Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals' economic outlook—which impacts various life arenas, life trajectories, and hinges on employment status—is dire compared to the general population and heavily influenced by anti-Transgender and/or Nonbinary sentiment.

For the general population, lower earnings and higher rates of poverty have been associated with lower degree attainment. Similarly, earnings for Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations have been found to correlate with level of education (Hartzell et al., 2009). When it comes to income disparities between Transgender and/or Nonbinary racial groups, the earnings gap decreases markedly with higher levels of educational attainment; especially if beyond a high school degree (Hartzell et al., 2009). Thus, it appears schooling, particularly postsecondary educational attainment, is the underlying determinant factor that precipitates subsequent employment and economic results for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals living in a social context that does not value or recognize their existence. Given those ages 18 to 24 are more likely to identify as Transgender and/or Nonbinary—an age-group that corresponds to traditional-aged undergraduate populations—examining the experiences of traditional-aged Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates may be the key to understanding how best to support this population toward more positive life trajectories (Flores et al., 2016; Spitzer, 2000).

## **A Focus on Postsecondary Education and Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates**

*Retention* in postsecondary education, or the continued enrollment of students through to degree completion, is dependent on the congruence between student factors and postsecondary environmental and interpersonal factors (Bean, 1990). These factors include a students' characteristics, dispositions, abilities, supports, and experiences upon entering an institution and the degree to which their postsecondary ethos and community supports their academic, cultural, and social needs during their tenure (Aljohani, 2016; Bean, 1990; Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994; Museus, 2014). Based on this definition, students are the arbiters on whether they perceive their environmental and interpersonal interactions during their postsecondary tenure as being supportive of their academic, cultural, and social needs which may determine whether they decide to persist or not in postsecondary education.

Unfortunately, U.S. educational environments have often been cited as primary arenas where hegemonic societal norms are introduced, perpetuated, and through which individuals are indoctrinated (Rands, 2009; Stevenson, 2007; Valenzuela, 1999; Zamudio et al., 2011). Regarding postsecondary environments, numerous aspects of college life are predicated upon socially-constructed, dichotomously gendered assumptions and norms that ignore or render Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities as nonexistent (Bilodeau, 2005; Evans et al., 2009b; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015). In addition, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates have reported facing similar biases, victimization, and marginalization experiences in and outside the classroom during college that parallel pre-college schooling experiences (Effrig et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Given these negative environmental and interpersonal interaction factors, it can be concluded that the overall academic, cultural, and social needs of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates are not being adequately met.

## Purpose of the Study

There is a complex interaction between the academic, cultural, and social needs of undergraduate students during postsecondary experiences (Bean, 1990). However, research on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates has primarily focused on their cultural and social experiences while only accounting for their academic journeys as mere by-products of those rather than as a central focus for analysis. In addition, such research has focused primarily on negative experiences and disadvantageous results. An example of this includes anti-Transgender and/or Nonbinary environmental and interpersonal interactions inside and outside the classroom being associated with poor academic performance and disengagement; leading to limited subsequent academic choices (Goldberg, 2018; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). This can be seen in relationships made between high levels of discrimination, more narrowed views on career options and, therefore, more narrowly perceived academic choices by Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates (Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Such negative, unsupportive experiences have been shown to prompt Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates to change their academic and career selections altogether or, worse, lead to attrition from postsecondary institutions which has been associated with higher rates of future unemployment (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015). Such research focused on adverse cultural and social experiences that lead to grim academic results has continued to perpetuate deficit perceptions and narratives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' academic experiences.

Very little research has been dedicated to directly understanding how Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates make *academic selections*—the observable manifestations of academic decisions (Chung, 2003). In addition, as of this writing, few to no studies exist that

have focused specifically on how environmental and/or interpersonal interactions contribute to the academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to understand, from the perspectives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, the environmental and/or interpersonal interactions that contribute to and influence their postsecondary academic selections. For this study, *environmental interactions* were defined as interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals have with structural, cultural, societal, situational, temporal, analog (e.g., books), and digital (e.g., television, web-based media, passive social media browsing and consumption) mediums that do not directly involve interacting with other individuals. *Interpersonal interactions* encompass interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals actively and directly have with other individuals either in-person or virtually (i.e., social media interactions).

### **Why Academic Selections and Not Career Selections?**

This study focused narrowly on academic selections such as course enrollments, academic declarations (i.e., major[s] and/or minor[s]), and academically related cocurriculars (i.e., study abroad opportunities, student organization involvements, internships, and/or jobs) for several reasons. First, as mentioned previously, retention is partially determined by students' perceptions of their *academic* needs being met so analyzing factors that influence academic selections and the reasons behind them may reveal such perceptions.

Second, a *decision* does not necessarily precipitate an action or selection and postsecondary academic *selections* have been found to ultimately determine *career* selections and career-related development. Despite the close relationship between academic development and career development (see Dunkle, 1996) and how academic selections can be driven by a salient career identity, career identity itself can be amplified or mitigated through environmental

and/or interpersonal experiences through academic selections and influence career identity development and subsequent academic selections (Goodson, 1978). For students whose career identities have yet to be solidified, postsecondary institutions still necessitate enrolling in coursework to continue their student status and most institutions require declaring a specific major by a certain time which, again, invariably impacts career identity development (Goodson, 1978).

The third reason for focusing on academic selections for this study is because one's ability to even participate in postsecondary culture is fundamentally based on academics. Being able to access and take advantage of institutional opportunities and resources are often determined by a student's registration and enrollment status with some opportunities requiring additional evidence of sustained, sufficient academic standing such as a minimum overall or major grade point average (GPA). Such opportunities, resources, and involvements may affect future academic selections and vice versa which can subsequently impact career development and future employment opportunities and trajectories.

Fourth, relationships have been found between undergraduates' demographic factors, socioecological factors, and academic selections that subsequently led to available employment opportunities later in life (Denice, 2020). This highlights the significance of academic selections in determining future career opportunities and career identity development while also introducing the importance of identity factors in influencing such academic selections. Evidence of this can be seen in the postsecondary institutions that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) students select to apply to and attend based on their pre-college perceptions and assumptions (Schneider & Dimito, 2010). More specifically, LGBT students' *perceptions* on whether an institution was LGBT-friendly or not affected their institutional selections even if

those perceptions were inaccurate. Again, such academic selections based on environmental and interpersonal interactions can have long-term effects on career identity development and employment opportunities regardless of whether a solidified career identity exists upon matriculation to postsecondary education. Based on these reasons, this study is of the understanding that one's academic selections have a direct impact upon career-related development and subsequent employment opportunities available upon graduation.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions are used to focus and guide the pursuit of this study:

1. What environmental and/or interpersonal interactions do Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates describe as informing their postsecondary academic selections, if at all?
2. How do the narratives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates provide insight into the ways in which their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influence their postsecondary academic selections, if at all?

### **Significance of the Study**

As noted previously, U.S. educational settings perpetuate social constructs and stratifications. An example of this can be seen in racial disparities found in educational settings, framed by Zamudio et al. (2011) as:

Indoctrination through education foster[ing] complacency toward social and racial inequality for it views those inequalities as natural occurrences or perhaps due to biological or cultural deficiencies in oppressed groups, and not as the outcome of particular systemic structures and practices (p. 124).

As meritocracy and systemic racism in the U.S. education system places the burden of the racial achievement gap in the hands of Students of Color, gender-based oppression and regulation

blames and penalizes Transgender and/or Nonbinary students for perceived shortcomings under the false pretense of a level playing-field (Singleton & Linton, 2015).

The majority culture suffers in this sanctioning of gender. Such promotion of gender-restrictiveness through the policing of even the most minor of gender transgressions throughout the U.S. educational journey maintains traditional gender systems and perpetuates stereotypical notions of what it means to be a Woman or a Man (Namaste, 1996). Results can be seen in the oppression of Women in employment pursuits and advancement while Men are strictly limited to rigid career options and definitions of masculinity. Expanding and challenging notions of gender through understanding the unique experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students can simultaneously support efforts to recognize and include them in the environmental and interpersonal fabric of the U.S. education system and liberate others from narrowly defined gender roles and employment opportunities. Such inclusion and liberation could permeate into Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals' postsecondary academic selections, improve their employment prospects as college graduates, and promote their retention as skilled and trained employees in the workforce which benefits the overall community and economy (Hartzell et al., 2009). This retention in employment can also provide more opportunities to develop and increase Transgender and/or Nonbinary role models and visibility in a variety of occupations, expanding perceptions of potential career options and, subsequently, postsecondary academic selection options for future Transgender and/or Nonbinary youth (Chung, 1995, 2003; Taylor et al., 1998).

Thus, an exploration of what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates perceive to be influential in their postsecondary academic selections would add to the overall dearth of literature on this population and provide insight into how institutions and educators can support their retention and persistence toward graduation.

Such retention and degree attainment efforts by educational institutions and personnel can subsequently increase Transgender and/or Nonbinary life options and opportunities to participate in mainstream society and potentially reduce mistreatment and violence enacted on their lives.

To this end, Chapter 2 reviews relevant literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations by outlining their experiences in a linear progression throughout the lifespan. Formative and adolescent experiences are presented first, followed by an in-depth focus on postsecondary experiences, ending with experiences in the employment and economic sectors to contextually position this study in existing literature.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Methodological Overview**

This study drew from Spade's (2015) *Critical Trans Politics*, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) *Process-Person-Context-Time Model*, and Museus's (2014) *Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (CECE Model) of College Success* to holistically frame the environmental and interpersonal interactions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and how these relate to their postsecondary academic selections. Using these frameworks, a participatory-social justice, narrative inquiry design was chosen as the approach to answer the research questions for this study. More specifically, this study involved the collection and analysis of qualitative narratives from Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates using in-depth, semi-structured interviews to garner insights into their perspectives on how or whether their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influenced their postsecondary academic selections. A more in-depth description of this study's framework and methodology is presented in Chapter 3.



### Stylistic Choices for This Study

In this study, the term *postsecondary* education was intentionally used instead of the term *higher* education. This was done to push against the classist and socially-constructed hierarchy imposed on the U.S. education system since the term *higher* education implies learning derived from colleges, universities, and their variations are inherently superior to other forms of education provided through various means, avenues, and instructional systems individuals may have access to pursue and attain. Thus, the term *postsecondary* education best represents institutions this study intended to encompass: the optional, tertiary education beyond the high school level with intent of attaining a degree in the U.S. context. Furthermore, the term *college* was used interchangeably with the term postsecondary education in this study as it aligned with Museus's (2014) CECE Model on which this study was partially framed.

Considering the array of potential identities that exist in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary communities which are elaborated on in Chapter 2, this study strove to use appropriate pronouns as identified by individuals whenever possible; including those of authors from cited literature. If pronouns were unknown, the inclusive, singular *they/them/their* pronouns were respectfully employed (Purdue Online Writing Lab, n.d.). This was also enforced in hypothetical examples explored in this study.

Another stylistic choice was the capitalization of identities (e.g., Bisexual, Transgender, Students of Color) to recognize their importance and relevance when it comes to lived experiences. This also prevented the potential inference that one identity is favored over or considered superior to another. However, direct quotations from references are presented as-is and individuals' agency in naming their own identities are also honored and presented in the style introduced by participants for this study.

Finally, the researcher purposefully decided to keep with traditional academic writing and avoid using first-person writing, save for the researcher's positionality section of this study. Though the researcher is acutely aware of the importance of reflexivity, how one's positionality effects the direction of research and the ability to be an objective observer, and how third-person writing implies neutrality, the purpose of using third-person writing was to align with this study's philosophical approach of centering the voices and experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates rather than that of the researcher's voice (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Emerson et al., 2011; Zhou & Hall, 2016). More information on the philosophical approach for this study is addressed in Chapter 3.

### **Researcher Positionality and Relation to Study**

At the age of 5, I was aware I should not have been the gender I was assigned at birth but had no words to describe the sentiment. Through environmental interactions with books, television, and movies as well as implicit and overt interpersonal interactions, I learned in my formative years that my self-perception was considered "abnormal" and kept it secret due to the hegemonic nature of gender in which individuals are influenced, regulated, and pressured by and through their interactions to conform to the normative gender they are presumed to be—labeled *genderism* by Wilchins (2002a). It is in this context I also understood my sexual orientation to be Bisexual at age 11, a fact I also kept hidden due to pervasive *heterosexism* which promotes identifying as *Straight* or *Heterosexual*—being attracted to the "opposite" gender based on the dichotomous social norm—as the normative sexual orientation and, in turn, upholds genderism and the concept that only two acceptable genders exist: Women and Men (Watkins, 1998). During early adolescence, I saw postsecondary education as an opportunity to explore my

identities away from the environment I grew up in and began treating my academics as a means toward that goal.

Attending college following high school at age 18, I got involved with my institution's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, Intersex, Agender/Asexual/Aromantic (LGBTQIA) community and, through those environmental and interpersonal interactions, found words to describe my gender identity as both Transgender (i.e., seeking to *transition* or use medical treatments to be read as Male) and Gender Queer (i.e., seeing my gender as fluid). Simultaneously, as a Southeast Asian brought up in a tight-knit ethnic community, I sought out racial and ethnic student organizations for a sense of familiarity in an unfamiliar environment away from home. However, those racial and ethnic student organizations were unwelcoming or ignorant toward variant sexual orientations and gender identities while much of my LGBTQIA involvements did not fully embrace my racial, ethnic, or even my Transgender identity. Needing to feel a sense of belonging, I became a student leader and began mentoring other LGBTQIA students who felt similarly displaced.

During this time, I continued my pre-college practice of compartmentalizing my personal identity journey away from my other life arenas—including my academics and environmental and interpersonal interactions outside of the LGBTQIA campus community—because I was still developing what it meant for me to identify as a Transgender, Gender Queer, Bisexual and how it intersected with other aspects of my identity and social relations. On top of that, genderist and heterosexist environments were still upheld in my academic spheres, the overall campus environment and community, the surrounding community outside my institution, and society overall which did not provide space for me to fully exist in all my identities simultaneously.

Because my attention was largely on my personal exploration of my gender identity and sexual orientation development, seeking community, and creating a community in which to belong, my academics were mostly secondary. I maintained good academic standing merely to continue my eligible participation in these cocurricular activities and to avoid conflict with familial relations who were financially supporting my college attendance. This translated into a lack of time and mental bandwidth to even consider venturing or exploring much outside of the prescribed academic plan provided by my institution.

At the age of 21 and in my fourth year of college, I realized I was about to graduate without having thought much about my career goals due to the lack of identity development spaces and supports during my pre-college experiences which impacted my developmental experiences in college. Because most of the skills I was made to develop up to that point directly resulted from my cocurricular activities as a student leader in my campus's LGBTQIA community, I decided to pursue a career in postsecondary education to continue supporting my community and identity siblings in these environments.

With the increasing number of Transgender and/or Nonbinary-identified college students, the increasing politicization of Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities in the U.S., and my now over 17 years of experience assisting undergraduates in their academic and career decision-making processes (see Beemyn, 2003; *Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020; Effrig et al., 2011; Exec. Order No. 2021-01761, 2021; Memorandum No. 2017-18544, 2017; Totenberg, 2017), understanding how best to support Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in their academic selections and how those may be influenced by their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions have been personally and professionally important to me. Such an understanding may assist educational institutions and personnel in determining ways to improve

Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' persistence toward graduation, preparation for employment, and future life outcomes. The focus of this study stemmed from my own experiences and how my unique identities, environmental interactions, and interpersonal interactions affected my undergraduate academic selections and subsequent life trajectory.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

Though there has been growing research on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations, little remains known about their unique experiences overall let alone experiences of those attending postsecondary education and their postsecondary academic selections (Bilodeau, 2007; Effrig et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016). To critically understand the scant literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and their postsecondary academic selections, definitions and assumptions must first be explained to contextually outline the social parameters in which Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities exist, navigate, and are measured against in society which, in turn, impacts existing literature.

After these definitions and assumptions are explained, literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences are presented in a linear progression through the lifespan from formative years to adulthood. Environmental and interpersonal interactions, academic selections, and an overview of Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences in and outside the education system are covered to demonstrate how formative social, environmental, and educational experiences shape Transgender and/or Nonbinary life outcomes.

### **Definitions and Assumptions**

Language is ever-changing, fraught with meaning, and heavily dependent on context. When it comes to gender, this study recognized the limitations of language in attempting to classify non-definitive and potentially innumerable experiences and existences that may intersect, overlap, or oscillate between each other (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Nicolazzo, 2017). The following concepts are outlined only to better clarify, contextualize, and define their use in previous literature and in this specific study. Simultaneously, the researcher also cautions against understanding them to be deterministic or rigid in their definitions.

## **Sex Versus Gender**

*Sex* has been commonly understood to be biological processes and genetic reactions that form genitalia which are often categorized dichotomously as either Female or Male based on Western medical practices of *assigning gender at birth*, also known as *assigning sex at birth* (Beemyn, 2019a; Bilodeau, 2007; Evans et al., 2009b; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; World Health Organization [WHO], n.d.-a, n.d.-b). *Gender*, on the other hand, has been considered the way in which one mentally, behaviorally, and culturally embodies the asserted and learned social constructs typically associated with Femaleness or Maleness (American Psychological Association [APA] & National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2015; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Seelman, 2014).

Evidence has suggested a *communal reinforcement phenomenon* exists when it comes to gender, meaning a community of people can have a shared and reinforced belief with little to no supporting evidence that certain roles, behaviors, and activities are considered either appropriate or inappropriate for Females and Males based on social norms (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Spence & Hahn, 1997). These understandings are contextually driven, susceptible to influence, and can fluctuate or change over time (Patton et al., 2016; Spence & Hahn, 1997). Again, the term *genderism* was used in this study to label this hegemonic phenomenon of gender (Wilchins, 2002a).

## **Gender Identity and Gender Expression**

*Gender identity* refers to one's internal sense of self in a societal context, traditionally understood to be either as a Woman or Man (APA, 2015; Bem, 1983; Bilodeau, 2005, 2007; Scott et al., 2011). For most people, they exist as *Cisgender* where their gender identity and/or outward *gender expression*—mannerisms, attire, language, and other various means individuals

choose to express their gender identity to others which are commonly dichotomized as Feminine or Masculine—aligns with their gender assigned at birth and conforms to societal gender norms (Bilodeau, 2007; Evan et al., 2009b; Flores et al., 2016; Green, 2006; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Simmons & White, 2014). These individuals are reaffirmed by genderism and, thus, perpetuate *cisnormativity* or the notion that one’s gender identity and expression should align with their sex and that both are immutable, interchangeable, and therefore, can only be read as Cisgender (Bilodeau, 2007; Butler, 1990; Lev, 2004; Seelman, 2014; Simmons & White, 2014; WHO, n.d.-b). It is through this hegemonic genderism that the ubiquity of the gender dichotomy has been ingrained in society, making it difficult to recognize its existence until a violation of those norms occur (Evans et al., 2009b). In short, “gender is at once ever-present and largely invisible” (Patton et al., 2016, p. 195). For the purpose of this study, the primary focus was on gender, gender identity, and gender expression as they relate to the environmental and interpersonal experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and their postsecondary academic selections.

### ***Transgender and/or Nonbinary Identities***

The existence of *Transgender* individuals whose self-determined gender identity and gender expression differ from their gender assigned at birth is one such violation of the socially constructed, dichotomous gender norms and allows for the conceptualization of other gender-expansive identities (APA, 2015; Bilodeau, 2007; Butler, 1990; Chung, 2003; Green, 2006; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016). Like the hypernym “Asian,” which is often used to encompass an array of ethnic identities with uniquely diverse experiences and cultures, the term Transgender also encompasses a wide range of experiences and various identities individuals may use to describe their gender identity and



expression more specifically (Beemyn, 2003; Singh et al., 2011). Given the term Transgender<sup>1</sup> has been formally used in legislative and medical contexts, this study broadly used it in reference to this community of differences (Committee on Transportation and the Environment, Council of the District of Columbia [CTE], 2018; Gender Recognition Act, 2017, 2019; WHO, n.d.-a, n.d.-b).

To demonstrate the various gender identities and gender expressions in the Transgender community, some people align their gender identity and expression to what is socially considered the cisnormative “opposite” gender they were assigned at birth, with some individuals desiring or using medical treatments toward that end (APA & NASP, 2015; Carroll et al., 2002; Effrig et al., 2011; Flores et al., 2016; Hines, 2010; Patton et al., 2016; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Singh et al., 2013). There are those in the Transgender community who also identify simply as a Woman or a Man, foregoing the “Transgender” label altogether (Beemyn, 2019b; Beemyn et al., 2005). For this study, such individuals who subscribed to the gender binary system were referred to as *Binary Transgender* to identify them and their experiences more specifically.

There are also those in the Transgender community whose gender identity encompasses both, oscillates between, transcends, and/or rejects the dichotomous societal gender construct (Beemyn, 2019b; Beemyn et al., 2005; Hines, 2010; James et al., 2016; Lev, 2004; Linley et al., 2016; Patton et al., 2016; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Scott et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2013; Wilchins, 2002a, 2002b). It is unclear how many individuals identify as such, but a review of mental health data collected during 2015 to 2016 in California found 27% of adolescents aged

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<sup>1</sup> As of this study, there are three prevalent ways in which scholars and community members abbreviate or shorten the term “Transgender.” This includes the abbreviation *T* as seen in the acronym LGBTQ, the prefix *Trans* on its own, and *Trans\** with an asterisk to signal an array of identities within this hypernym (Nicolazzo, 2017). Due to the various debates, contentions, and opinions regarding such shorthands, this study used the formal, full term “Transgender” in referring to this community.

12 to 17—approximately 796,000 individuals at the time—identified within this fluid gender identity (Wilson et al., 2017). Literature has documented a variety of constantly changing nomenclatures used by both out-group and in-group members to describe this gender identity, including *Agender*, *Gender Fluid*, or *Genderqueer* to name a few (Beemyn, 2019b; Bilodeau, 2007; Dugan et al., 2012; Evans et al., 2009b; Linley et al., 2016; Nicolazzo, 2017). In this study, the hypernym *Nonbinary*<sup>2</sup> was used for this population because it has been adopted and formally used in legislation (CTE, 2018; Gender Recognition Act, 2017, 2019).

Though Nonbinary individuals are often embedded in the “Transgender” hypernym due to their gender identities and/or expressions expanding beyond cisnormative social norms, literature has demonstrated they have different experiences compared to their Binary Transgender counterparts to the point some have even distinguished themselves outside of the Transgender hypernym entirely (Beemyn, 2019b; Nicolazzo, 2017). Hence, the phrase *Transgender and/or Nonbinary* was employed throughout this study to recognize the simultaneous inclusion of, and differentiation between, these populations. This study included both identities to understand and uncover their common and diverging experiences.

### **Gender Identity Versus Sexual Orientation**

Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities are gender identities, not *sexual orientations* or one’s sexual attraction preferences. These concepts are not determinant of each other though they

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<sup>2</sup> As of this study, the two most common shorthands for “Nonbinary” are the initialism *NB* and the phonetic vocalization of the initialism, *Enby*. Similar to the term “Transgender,” debates, contentions, and opinions also exist regarding these shorthands within the Nonbinary community. One such criticism regarding the initialism “NB” is its existing use by Black activists to distinguish between Black and *Non-Black* People of Colors’ diverging experiences when it comes to historical and systemic anti-Blackness and racism in the United States (AnaMardoll, 2018; Smith, 2017; u7traviolet, 2018). Though society has the ability to recreate, reinvent, or reclaim words over time and through various contexts, this study recognized historical and social contexts and respect the work of Black activists by honoring requests to avoid appropriating the initialism which causes confusion on its use. Thus, this study also used the formal, full term “Nonbinary” in referring to this community.

are closely related and are heavily influenced and informed by each other (Chung, 2003; Evans et al., 2009b; Lev, 2004; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Scott et al., 2011). This conflation between gender identity and sexual orientation can be broadly seen through pervasive heterosexism (Watkins, 1998).

A more common conflation between gender identity and sexual orientation can be seen in the conflation of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals with *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Queer*—also known simply as *Queer*—communities under the acronym LGBTQ. Though this conflation in literature and practice has often been made due to both populations being similarly discriminated against based on both genderism and heterosexism, it has become problematic since it assumes both Transgender and/or Nonbinary LGBTQ and Cisgender LGBTQ populations have synonymous experiences when evidence suggests this is not the case (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Watkins, 1998). Though Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations have found some support in the Queer community given these shared experiences, they are often marginalized, discriminated against, or even rendered invisible in this community with which they are often associated (Bilodeau, 2007; Chung, 2003; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Spade, 2015). This is due to *compulsory heterogenderism* that assumes a gendered body can only be attracted to someone of the “same or opposite” gender based on the dichotomous gender social norm that simultaneously erases and questions the existence of Transgender and/or Nonbinary gender identities through the lens of sexual orientation (Nicolazzo, 2017).

To further elaborate on the intricacies within Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations, evidence in literature has further demonstrated gender identity as being distinct from sexual orientation by documenting some Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals identifying as

Straight/Heterosexual or any one of the many identities in the LGBTQ hypernym (Effrig et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016; Scott et al., 2011). This added layer of identity intersection further complicates the simplistic conflation of Transgender and/or Nonbinary communities with Queer communities and ignores the unique ways in which these identities interplay and impact the lived experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals.

### **Implicitly Biased Literature and Transgender and/or Nonbinary Identities**

Taking the time to define these Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities alongside dominant, dichotomous narratives of sex, gender, gender identity (i.e., Cisgender), and gender expression serves, “to [understand] the oppression of transgender people. Just as White people directly gain unearned privileges when people of colour are oppressed, cisgender individuals benefit when society continues to oppress trans and gender variant people” (Seelman, 2014, p. 619). Evidence of this oppression can be seen in empirical, theoretical, practical, and anecdotal literature that has perpetuated deficit, stereotypical, and medical/clinical narratives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary existence and preserves the erasure and interrogation of their identities and experiences through genderist and cisnormative practices and assumptions (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). Even language used to describe Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities as *gender non-conforming* has situated them in negative juxtaposition to an assumed standard norm via deficit negation. For this reason, this study consciously used the term *gender expansive* to describe these identities while also referring to systems that uphold genderist, cisnormative ideologies as *gender restrictive*.

Research that includes Heterosexual, Queer, and/or dichotomously gendered participants (i.e., Women and/or Men) has overwhelmingly not discerned between Cisgender and Transgender and/or Nonbinary participants. Only rarely have researchers even asked participants

to disclose their gender identity. This is presumably due to pervasive cisnormativity that, again, ignores the existence of Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities. Such outright negation of Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities in empirical data collection and reporting practices—whether intentional or not—has made it difficult to distinguish Transgender and/or Nonbinary unique experiences overall and potentially skew existing research. Furthermore, in LGBTQ research that has conflated Cisgender and Transgender and/or Nonbinary participants, data on Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences have often not been discussed, analyzed, or even collected despite using an acronym that suggests Transgender and/or Nonbinary inclusion (Pepper & Lorah, 2008). When Transgender and/or Nonbinary data and experiences *are* provided in LGBTQ research, Binary Transgender and Nonbinary experiences have often not been distinguished from each other or findings referred exclusively to Binary Transgender experiences despite using the broad Transgender hypernym which renders Nonbinary identities invisible in such data results and analyses (Beemyn, 2019b; Patton et al., 2016). As a result, though there has been an increase in overall Transgender and/or Nonbinary literature, a false impression may exist as to the amount and extent of research actually available that references this community due to conflation between sex, gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity. One must practice extensive diligence when reviewing literature only to discern there is still very little research on Transgender, and especially Nonbinary, experiences (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Scott et al., 2011).

### ***Identity Management of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Identities***

*Identity management* or the decision to share or present one's identity affiliation with others or not has been a significant concern many Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals consider in their environmental and interpersonal interactions (Roberts et al., 2008). More

specifically, the use of *social recategorization* strategies to manage the perceptions of others by both evading being categorized into a socially marginalized gender identity and aligning with more socially favorable Cisgender identities because of genderist and cisnormative regulations have been found in empirical, theoretical, practical, and anecdotal literature (Roberts et al., 2008). Evidence of this can be seen in reports that suggest the degree to which Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals are able and willing to conceal their gender identity and conform to genderist and cisnormative schemas is correlated with lower rates of discrimination, rejection, and bias (Feder, 2020; Herman et al., 2014; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). For those who disclose their Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity or whose gender expressions span beyond existing cisnormative notions, they are often considered in violation of cisnormative expectations and face dire consequences (Effrig et al., 2011). In other words, concealing one's Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity and conforming to genderist and cisnormative schemas has been shown to be a protective factor to an extent in being able to even exist in mainstream society without the threat of social or physical harm (Tourmaline et al., 2017).

A common social recategorization strategy employed by Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals is *masking* or not disclosing one's gender identity and conforming to the normative gender expression associated with their gender assigned at birth out of fear of retaliation and gender policing (Effrig et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2011; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015). Another strategy used by some Binary Transgender individuals is *going stealth*, meaning they express their gender, live socially, and/or employ medical interventions to physically transition their bodies to conform to the cisnormative "opposite" gender they were assigned at birth so as to be socially read as Cisgender by others without question or having to disclose their Binary Transgender identity (Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Pusch, 2005). This reality of hiding

one's Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity due to concerns for safety was even a primary topic in a U.S. documentary on Transgender and/or Nonbinary media depictions where Tiq Milan, Senior Media Strategist of National News for the LGBTQ media monitoring organization GLAAD, described it succinctly as, "The paradox of our [Transgender and/or Nonbinary] representation [in media] is: The more we are seen, the more we are violated" (Feder, 2020, 1:30–1:45). Actress and model, Jamie Clayton, echoed this reality in the same documentary by noting, "The more positive representation there is [in media], the more confidence the community gains, which then puts us [Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals] in more danger" (Feder, 2020, 1:45–1:50). In other words, Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who gain a sense of confidence through seeing positive representations and then either disclose or present their gender in expansive, identity-confirming ways are at times subjected to social policing and retaliatory interpersonal interactions due to existing hegemonic genderism and cisnormativity. This can be seen in reports of suicidal behaviors and attempts being highest amongst those who told everyone they were Transgender and/or Nonbinary while the lowest numbers were reported by those who never told anyone (Haas et al., 2014). These identity management practices and cisnormative assumptions that implicitly influence research practices and findings further complicate the ability to truly capture the experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary communities in virtually all aspects of society.

### **Definitions and Assumptions Conclusion**

These definitions reveal deeply rooted societal assumptions and, as a result, how research has been implicitly biased against Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals and their experiences. This has left very little data and resources for society overall—let alone postsecondary institutions and personnel—to understand and assist Transgender and/or

Nonbinary individuals' unique development and experiences, especially those making postsecondary academic selections during their undergraduate careers (Chung, 2003; Pepper & Lorah, 2008). Therefore, an intentional exploration of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' perceived environmental and/or interpersonal interactions that contribute to their academic selections would add to the paucity of knowledge on this community and may provide much needed insight into practices postsecondary institutions and personnel can implement to positively support them toward optimal life trajectories.

To set the stage for this study, the following sections of this chapter present a review of literature on the linear progression of Transgender and/or Nonbinary lifespan experiences. The review begins by presenting experiences in formative and adolescent years including developmental, familial, and educational arenas where genderism and cisnormativity are introduced, indoctrinated, and perpetuated. This is followed by an in-depth focus on Transgender and/or Nonbinary postsecondary experiences and how genderist and cisnormative environments and interpersonal interactions influence their academic performance, perceptions, and selections which subsequently affect their retention and persistence toward degree completion. Concluding the review is an overview of Transgender and/or Nonbinary societal experiences and how systemic genderist and cisnormative environments and interpersonal interactions continue to stratify their life courses in various ways beyond the completion of their educational journey. This tour through Transgender and/or Nonbinary lifespans provides a contextual understanding of their lived environmental and interpersonal interactions, the impact these have on their perceptions and life choices, and the potentially important role postsecondary institutions and personnel play in their life trajectories.



Given most research on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations has either focused solely on Binary Transgender populations or has not distinguished between Binary Transgender and Nonbinary individuals in participants and findings (see Beemyn, 2019b), distinctions between Binary Transgender and Nonbinary experiences are highlighted if distinctions were made in available literature. In addition, as there is a dearth of literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations overall, research not explicitly Transgender and/or Nonbinary-specific are included to glean insight into potential experiences as these individuals may exist in those studies through masking, going stealth, cisnormative data collection practices, and/or conflation between them and Cisgender LGBTQ populations.

As Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals are considered the minority for both gender and sexuality (see Effrig et al., 2011), literature that also provides depth and dimension on the various experiences in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary population by way of intersecting this identity with other embodied, marginalized identities are also highlighted in the following review.

### **Formative and Adolescent Experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individuals**

Bem's (1983) *Gender Schema Theory* suggests gender identity development occurs as early as age 3 when children begin to understand societal definitions of gender that typically only include the binary categories of Women and Men. In other words, they begin to develop a *gender schema* based on these definitions and start to catalog their interactions, environments, and culture into these two implicitly prescribed gendered categories. As this sorting occurs, gender identity develops when children compare these gendered environmental, interpersonal, and societal aspects to their self-perceptions and, thus, begin cataloging themselves into their

perceived gender schema (Bem, 1983; Galambos et al., 1990). This sorting and gender identity development continues and intensifies as children approach early adolescence.

Bandura's (2001) *Social Cognitive Theory* supports this gender identity development process as it posits individuals internalize and develop gendered behaviors and actions through environmental, personal, and behavioral factors. Environmental factors are interpersonal interactions and interactions with immediate surroundings, including media and digital interactions; personal factors are biological properties and internalized conceptions; and behavioral factors are gender-based activities such as gender expression (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Through these experiential, social, and observational interactions and seeing whether specific behaviors result in positive or negative outcomes, individuals may internalize or reject said behaviors during their social cognitive development which develops their sense of gender (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

Both Bem's (1983) Gender Schema Theory and Bandura's (2001) Social Cognitive Theory suggest one's gender identity and understanding of how to behave as a gendered being begins to develop as early as pre-kindergarten. They also suggest such development is predicated upon the interaction between an individual's perceptions, biological and socially presented self, and their gender-coding interpretations of their environmental and interpersonal interactions. It is through such coding and interactions where individuals are indoctrinated into societal genderist and cisnormative schemas as they develop and solidify their own gender identity and gendered behaviors during their formative and adolescent years.

Similar gender identity development timelines have been documented for Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations, meaning they may be learning and internalizing as early as preschool that they are different from the majority Cisgender community and society overall

(Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). In a grounded theory study by Levitt and Ippolito (2014), Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals described growing up experiencing pervasive Cisgender indoctrination and scrutiny to uphold and enact socially appropriate paradigms for their gender assigned at birth. These formative developments and gendered codings of one's context, including environmental and interpersonal interactions, have been found to cause Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals to resort to using social recategorization strategies to repress and/or isolate themselves due to mistreatment, resistance from others, or shame (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).

When it comes to interpreting environmental and interpersonal interactions, Tilcsik et al. (2015) found Gay and Lesbian youth developed keen abilities to carefully read social cues and determine levels of Queer acceptance by others as a protective factor. This ability presumably emerged through unavoidable, formative, proximal interpersonal interactions with family, educators, and peers as a means to safeguard themselves from rejection or mistreatment. Given the prevalence of genderism and cisnormativity in the environmental and interpersonal interactions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, it is possible they may possess a similar ability in interpreting the level of gender expansiveness accepted by others which may have developed from formative interactions with family, educators, and peers. This assumption is further supported by Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals citing genderist and cisnormative pressures and enforcement being most often enacted by family and schooling communities (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Therefore, the following section reviews these formative familial interactions along with adolescent interactions in educational

settings and the impact they have on Transgender and/or Nonbinary socialization to provide context for how they develop their perceptions, selections, pursuits, and outcomes later in life.

### **Familial Relations of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individuals**

As of this study, two notable, large-scale national reports have been done on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations in the United States. One is the seminal National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS; Grant et al., 2011), which collected responses between 2008–2009 from over 7,500 respondents. The other is the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey (USTS; James et al., 2016), which amassed 27,715 respondents. Both encompassed the wide diversity that exists in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary community and provided insights into their lived experiences, including depicting relentless anti-Transgender and/or Nonbinary bias in nearly all life arenas such as familial relations and the education sector.

The NTDS found over half of their sample population experienced some form of rejection after *coming out*—revealing their gender identity—to their immediate family with Binary Transgender respondents experiencing this more often than Nonbinary respondents (Grant et al., 2011). Examples of rejection include unsupportiveness, avoidance, being victims of violence at the hands of family members, and being kicked out of their homes (Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Such rejection experiences have been associated with various negative outcomes, including increased probability of suicide attempts (Herman et al., 2014). Of these rejection experiences, ones with the highest level of negative outcomes were associated with experiencing violence by a family member (Herman et al., 2014).

Though these reports depicted a grim introduction to societal gender norms for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals in their formative years, there also appeared to be a trend toward increased Transgender and/or Nonbinary acceptance in recent years. The NTDS

report found less than 50% of their 2008 and 2009 sample who came out to family maintained most of those relations while the USTS found 60% of their respondents in 2015 reported family as being supportive (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). This increase in positive familial experiences stemmed from increased Transgender and/or Nonbinary representation in media, supportive surrounding communities, and resources available online (Beemyn, 2019b). Such familial support has been shown to be a protective factor against the likelihood of Transgender and/or Nonbinary suicide attempts, homelessness, psychological distress, and negative health risks (Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016).

Despite these positive trends, a significant percentage of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals have continued to experience negative reactions and consequences after disclosing their gender identity to family which impacts their gender identity management decisions, perceptions of self-worth, outlook on life, available life choices, and their subsequent life outcomes and well-being (Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Because Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals cited family interactions as having the most influence in shaping their cultural, social, mental, and emotional upbringings, these findings emphasize the integral role such environmental and interpersonal interactions have in perpetuating societal genderism and cisnormativity onto Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

In addition to familial experiences, interactions in schooling environments have been the most cited arena for genderist and cisnormative enforcement (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Such interactions that have lasting, negative consequences on Transgender and/or Nonbinary academic and life directions include those with peers, school

staff, and faculty. The following provides an overview of such interactions in K–12 schooling environments.

### **K–12 Transgender and/or Nonbinary Students’ Experiences**

As a system, the structure of schooling in the United States has been known to create divides formally and informally between students and their interpersonal communities such as peers and school personnel based on social identities (Patton, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). Alsubaie (2015) describes this, “unspoken or implicit values, behaviors, and norms that exist in the educational setting,” (p. 125) as the *hidden curriculum* in schooling environments. This hidden curriculum can be subtractive in nature where students are often taught and required to assimilate into majority culture at the expense of their own culture and academic success (Valenzuela, 1999). Considering the hegemonic way genderism and cisnormativity is enacted and enforced within broad and immediate contexts through explicit and subtle means, schools become primary sites where individuals are taught socially defined gender schemas that shape their formative social experiences (Rands, 2009). Such divisions and subtractiveness can be seen in the schooling experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students.

Reports have indicated K–12 students who openly identified as, or even *perceived* to be, Transgender and/or Nonbinary had at least one negative experience in school due to their gender identity or expression (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). The USTS noted as many as 77% disclosed having had such experiences (James et al., 2016). These included verbal harassment, physical and/or sexual assault, being disciplined for defending themselves against mistreatment, and expulsion from school (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014).

When it comes to interpersonal experiences in schools, Transgender and/or Nonbinary students are, at the very least, rendered invisible and, at most, actively subjugated and policed by peers and school personnel through coercive means into conforming to genderist and cisnormative roles and expressions associated with their gender assigned at birth (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017). Peer groups and even those considered friends were cited by Transgender and/or Nonbinary students as sources of gender-policing which impacted their health and well-being. These experiences included harassment, alienation, physical assault, and sexual assault (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). More disturbing are reports of harassment and physical and sexual assaults at the hands of K–12 school employees which researchers assumed led to distrust in school officials and, therefore, underreporting of such incidents (Grant et al., 2011). This finding has been exacerbated by surveys that found 3 out of 5 bias incidents reported by LGBT students to school administration were met with inaction or administrators advising them to disregard the incident (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022). Thus, it comes as no surprise that half of students who were mistreated in K–12 schooling did not report incidents due to mistrust in the reporting system, lack of faith in a beneficial resolution, or fear of exacerbating their situation (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022). This silencing of K–12 Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences for fear of serious consequences or repercussions invisibilizes their experiences, perpetuates their victimization, and preserves the hegemonic notion that Cisgender identities are the norm while other gender identities are positioned as deviant, abnormal, and second-class. As a result, experiencing such mistreatment has been shown to cause some Transgender and/or Nonbinary students to avoid attending school for at least a full day or leaving their school altogether; both of which interrupts and negatively impacts their academic learning experiences which has negative implications on

their academic and overall future (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; James et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2001).

A representative survey performed in 2017 estimated Transgender students made up about 1.8% of the U.S. high school student population (Johns et al., 2019) or nearly 300,000 students at the time (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Given this statistic, the effects of mistreatment and victimization becomes evident when looking at the postsecondary plans of these students. Those who reported experiencing higher levels of victimization were twice as likely to have no plans to pursue postsecondary education (GLSEN, 2018, 2020, 2022). In addition, overall enrollment in school by 18- to 24-year-old Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals were found to be lower than those in the general population (Grant et al., 2011). Such lower levels of postsecondary educational attainment have long-term, negative ramifications on Transgender and/or Nonbinary employment, economic security, and life trajectories.

When it comes to the academic identity development of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students and how they come to their academic selections, no developmental framework exists currently. However, existing literature has associated early adolescent academic and career identity development with both Cisgender identities and sexual orientation for LGBTQ populations. Insight into these social paradigms that govern the gendering of individuals and frame the academic and career fields they are permitted to pursue provides a lens for understanding the societal hegemonic genderism and cisnormativity in which Transgender and/or Nonbinary students must navigate and exist.



*Academic Identity Development Experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Students  
During K–12 Schooling*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the career identity development process is closely intertwined with academic identity development which makes it necessary to include such literature in this review (Dunkle, 1996). However, this study was primarily focused on the academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and how they perceived these to be influenced by their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions, if at all. Thus, to be clear, career identity development literature is included in this chapter only as it relates to the academic identity development of Transgender and/or Nonbinary K–12 experiences which are precursors to their overall undergraduate academic experiences.

Along the lines of Bem's (1983) Gender Schema Theory and Bandura's (2001) Social Cognitive Theory covering early-life gender identity development concepts, Gottfredson's (1981) *Theory of Circumscription and Compromise* suggests children start to categorize potential career choices and fields by *sex-type*—along dichotomous gender stereotypes—around the age of 3 based on their immediate environment and their self-perceptions. These potential career choices progressively narrow as they develop their self-perceived sex (i.e., gender identity) until about age 13. This suggests as individuals begin to gender themselves through the process of gender-coding their environmental and interpersonal interactions, they are simultaneously developing gendered concepts of careers they become familiar with and what potential career options are available to them based on societal gender norms and their self-perceived gender identity. Evidence has suggested a similar process occurs in Cisgender LGBTQ individuals where their sexual orientation identity development and career identity development take place concurrently and affect the development of each other (Etringer et al., 1990; Fassinger, 1996).

Given this paradigm, one is led to wonder how Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who may not see themselves reflected in the strict, binary, societal cisnormative norms or even in their environmental and interpersonal interactions come to understand their available academic and career options.

The Theory of Circumscription and Compromise (Gottfredson, 1981) provides a clear relationship between one's gender identity development, external factors such as environmental and interpersonal interactions, and the career selection process. However, this paradigm does not consider how variations in environmental and interpersonal interactions influence the career identity development (R. G. L. Pryor & Taylor, 1989). In other words, it assumes a homogenous, presumably optimal environment where all individuals have the capacity to engage in career identity development without hindrances and does not account for how stressors or oppressive environments and interactions may impact or impede this process. Using Myers et al.'s (1994) *Optimal Theory* that suggests the forced suppression of marginalized identities impedes the optimal development of career identity, it could be assumed Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity repression during early development may restrict or impede perceived career options and impact academic selections. In short, Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals exist in a societal context that does not allow them to have an optimal career—and therefore, academic—identity development experience which may impact how they circumscribe or even over-circumscribe career and academic choices.

Looking closer at academic identity development, evidence of such restriction and impediment can be seen in Schmidt and Nilsson's (2006) study testing Hetherington's (1991) *Bottleneck Hypothesis* on Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual (LGB) youth ages 15–19. Evidence confirmed LGB youth spent most of their mental capacity focused on sexual orientation identity

development and protecting themselves from stigmatization through identity management strategies which took away from their ability to focus on developing their academic identity. Repercussions of such experiences in Gay Men resulted in being mischaracterized by school personnel and even themselves as underperformers or inferior compared to their peers in their academic and vocational development (Prince, 1995). Similarly, *internalized homophobia*—the internalization of negative self-perceptions based on sexual orientation subjugation—has shown to negatively impact Lesbian and Gay academic efforts, resiliency, and pursuits through self-sabotage based on the perception that societal bigotry via proximal interactions would hinder their ability to reach their career and academic goals (Gonsiorek, 1988). Support for this theory in the form of *internalized transphobia* could arguably be seen in reported high school grade point averages for first-time, full-time matriculated Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates being lower than the national average (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Therefore, it could be hypothesized that Transgender and/or Nonbinary adolescents may experience a similar academic identity development postponement or hindrance via a bottleneck phenomenon or internalized transphobia sentiment that favors gender identity management during their K–12 experiences due to pervasive genderism and cisnormativity.

When it comes to the more subtle effects of bias in schooling, Datti (2011) used Krumboltz's (1979) *Social Learning Theory of Career Decision Making* to postulate LGBT students and students questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity who are dissuaded by teachers from using Queer-related topics for class assignments develop negative internalizations that may impact their views on academic and subsequent career options for the future. Though Datti (2011) conflated LGB with Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities, the study provides an additional lens through which to understand how Transgender and/or

Nonbinary students may learn and are taught the value, or lack thereof, of gender-expansive people in society and how this may impact their career and academic direction and attainment perceptions. Direct impacts of such pervasive mistreatment and marginalization through environmental and interpersonal interactions on the academic journey of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals is evident when looking at their postsecondary plans.

### ***Postsecondary Plans of Transgender and/or Nonbinary High School Students***

As mentioned previously, about 1.8% of the U.S. high school student population—almost 300,000 students—were estimated to identify as Transgender (Johns et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Of these students, those who experienced higher levels of victimization due to their gender identity were twice as likely to have no plans of pursuing postsecondary education (GLSEN, 2018, 2020, 2022). In addition, overall enrollment in school by 18- to 24-year-old Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals were found to be lower than those in the general population (Grant et al., 2011). Again, such lower levels of educational attainment may have long-term negative ramifications on Transgender and/or Nonbinary employment, economic security, and life trajectories.

In addition to the potential over-circumscription of possible career and academic options due to identity management, evidence has suggested those who decide to pursue postsecondary education are affected by their pre-college experiences which influences their perceptions and assumptions of viable college campuses and campus climate options during their exploration process (Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Such perceptions and assumptions can directly impact which colleges they apply to and attend and the subsequent academic options available to them upon matriculation based on the institution's academic focus and culture (Schneider & Dimito, 2010).

Surveys have shown Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates reported their previous schooling experiences in K–12 settings were the most traumatic aspects of their lives (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Therefore, these negative pre-college experiences are being carried by these matriculating students into postsecondary settings which may impact their decisions and selections in those environments.

### **Formative and Adolescent Experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individuals**

#### **Conclusion**

Based on the literature, it seems Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals may be simultaneously coming into their gender identity and navigating stressful social narratives received via formative familial environmental and interpersonal interactions even before attending formal schooling. Such interactions have been found to enforce the concept that gender expansiveness is invalid and unwelcome which could lead to masking or repressing Transgender and/or Nonbinary gender identities. As these individuals continue their development within K–12 schooling environments, they experience continued genderist and cisnormative paradigm enforcements through formal and hidden curricula that further influences their gender identity management and impacts their ability to adequately develop their career and academic identity. Moreover, such biases that favor genderist and cisnormative social norms impact their perceptions of available career options based on their gender identity (Patton et al., 2016). Consequently, these translate into tangible actions Transgender and/or Nonbinary students take with their academic selections while attending K–12 schooling such as choosing to avoid or leave school given pervasive mistreatment and whether to pursue postsecondary education. These pre-college environmental and interpersonal interactions continue to influence the

academic selections and future of those who choose to continue to postsecondary education by framing their college exploration perceptions and assumptions.

As Kumashiro (2000) noted regarding the need for anti-oppressive education, “Rather than assume that a student’s class, background or community has no bearing on how [they engage] with schooling, educators should acknowledge the realities of day-to-day life that can hinder one’s ability to learn” (p. 29). By exploring these pre-college experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, it provides a necessary backdrop for understanding those who matriculate into postsecondary education and how they come to perceive themselves and their postsecondary academic options and selections. In the following section, an overview of both the deficit-based and asset-framed experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in postsecondary environments are presented to best understand how they may perceive their academic selection options.

### **Postsecondary Education and Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates**

Postsecondary education has been shown to play a significant role in the life trajectories of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals. As mentioned before, survey research reported lower enrollment by traditional-aged Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals in postsecondary education compared to the general population (Grant et al., 2011). However, Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals overall had 2–3 times the college and graduate degree attainment rates compared to the general population (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). This statistic would be encouraging given increased Transgender and/or Nonbinary educational attainment was found to correlate with increased earnings and significantly decrease the wage gap between Transgender and/or Nonbinary racial groups (Hartzell et al., 2009).

Unfortunately, Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals with postsecondary degrees were more likely to earn much less than the average population or even live below the poverty line (Datti, 2011; Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). This conundrum was attributed to employment mistreatment or employment loss and the use of postsecondary education as a means to avoid similar discrimination in the same field to relaunch into different career fields. This strategy results in higher levels and rates of educational attainment, potentially higher levels of debt due to the cost of postsecondary education, loss of employment service time and longevity in a prior field, and older Transgender and/or Nonbinary employees starting careers over in introductory positions that are often associated with lower pay-scales (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009). Thus, there exists a, “revolving door of [sic] between the classroom and the job market driven by educational and workplace abuses” (Grant et al., 2011, p. 46).

Such findings in undergraduate and graduate degree attainment emphasizes the relentless impacts of genderism and cisnormativity on their existence that prevents them from fully being able to participate in society. More importantly, it highlights how the experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in postsecondary education and the scope of their perceived environmental and interpersonal experiences may vary greatly, especially if comparing traditional-aged and nontraditional-aged undergraduates who may be matriculating at different stages and ages in their life. Studies done on traditional-aged and nontraditional-aged Cisgender undergraduate populations have also supported the notion that these two populations come to postsecondary education with differing social needs, academic and career goals, and varying predictors of success (Spitzer, 2000). Thus, the following review and this study focused on traditional-aged Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates to narrow the scope of the

population to those with more aligned life-experiences and who are presumably preparing for their initial careers, the workforce, and life in society.

Despite lower enrollment in postsecondary education by Transgender and/or Nonbinary 18- to 24-year-olds compared to the overall population, they do exist in postsecondary communities and their numbers have been increasing (Beemyn, 2003; Effrig et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016; Pusch, 2005). An exploration of this specific population and their overall experiences in such environments is important for contextualizing their environmental and interpersonal interactions that may come into consideration when making postsecondary academic selections.

It is important to reiterate that most of the literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations has focused primarily on adverse, deficit experiences rather than positive, asset-framed ones (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). Though growing literature depicting more affirming perspectives on this population does exist—including within postsecondary education—most that center Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates have focused primarily on their campus climate experiences and successful social navigation strategies (Chung, 2003). Little to no empirical data exists on whether identifying as Transgender and/or Nonbinary has an influence on one's academic selections let alone how their environmental and/or interpersonal experiences translate into academic selections that are crucial to their postsecondary experience and participation. Therefore, understanding the postsecondary environments and communities that affect Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' academic selections may lead to understanding the impact on their future employment, economic pathways, and trajectories.

The following section provides an overview of the unique environmental and interpersonal experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and how these may



impact their academic development and selections. Postsecondary environmental experiences are presented first to contextualize the spaces Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates are required to navigate followed by the postsecondary interpersonal experiences that form the social interactions they must negotiate. Again, to potentially understand how Transgender and/or Nonbinary environmental and/or interpersonal experiences may influence their academic selections, the limited studies on this population are explored alongside studies done with Cisgender Heterosexual and Cisgender LGBTQ undergraduate populations to derive potential insights.

### **Environmental Interactions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education**

According to Stephens and Townsend's (2015) *Cultural Mismatch Theory of Inequality*, environments that perpetuate dominant social norms create inequalities for marginalized communities because they enter the environment under a different set of norms. Such incongruences, "decrease[s] . . . comfort, increase[s] their stress, and undermine[s marginalized communities'] performance" (Stephens & Townsend, 2015, p. 1304). As defined in Chapter 1, environmental interactions for this study include structural, cultural, social, situational, temporal, analog, and digital interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals have outside of interpersonal interactions. Thus, this portion of the literature review discusses how postsecondary environments potentially influence Transgender and/or Nonbinary academic selections.

### ***Genderism and Cisnormativity in Postsecondary Education***

Postsecondary institutions are unique in that they have a long-standing history of being seemingly independent, insular entities but are in fact subject to societal influences and are

closely tied to societal goals and norms (Kezar, 2018). Because of this, they are perfect environmental examples of Cultural Mismatch Theory of Inequality (Stephens & Townsend, 2015) as they perpetuate hegemonic genderism and cisnormativity in their structures and cultures which favors conformity to dominant, dichotomous, patriarchal gender views (Catalano, 2015; Evans et al., 2009b; Goldberg, 2018; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015). Examples can be seen in quintessential aspects of university life such as on-campus housing assignments, cocurricular participation opportunities like Greek Life and athletics, binary gendered facilities such as locker rooms and restrooms, and classroom rosters and campus identification cards that are limited to only using official student records such as gender assigned at birth and birth name (Bilodeau, 2005; Evans et al., 2009b; Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; J. T. Pryor, 2015). Even university statistics and assessment practices that collect gender variables through a binary lens ironically perpetuate the very genderism they wish to combat while simultaneously oppressing and rendering Transgender and/or Nonbinary student experiences as nonexistent (Bilodeau, 2007). Because of these genderist and cisnormative structural and cultural environments, postsecondary institutions have tended to struggle in even recognizing Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates let alone providing for their needs or retaining them (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011).

**Transgender and/or Nonbinary Marginalization and Invisibility Through Postsecondary Experiences.** Matriculating Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, “come to college anticipating the need to resist a hostile climate” (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017, p. 43) due to their K–12 educational experiences. Studies that conflate Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates with Cisgender LGBTQ peers have described postsecondary institutions as environments that fail to create an inclusive community, resulting in their isolation

(Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017). Isolation, avoidance, and mistreatment have been found to significantly impact Cisgender LGBTQ career identity development, Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity development and management, and Transgender and/or Nonbinary career perceptions (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bilodeau, 2005; Chung, 1995; Fassinger, 1996; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Because the current study recognized academic selections and experiences gained from them to be fundamental to career identity development and perceptions, it becomes necessary to question and understand the relationship between Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' gender identity experiences, their environmental interactions in postsecondary contexts, and how those influence their academic selections.

Even in postsecondary spaces meant for their inclusion like LGBTQ identity centers, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates are still marginalized or rendered invisible as programs tend to focus on sexual orientation topics, and Transgender and/or Nonbinary-specific programs are geared toward educating Cisgender populations rather than serving Transgender and/or Nonbinary needs (Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014). These blatant and implicit connotations and perpetuations of sex, gender, genderism, and cisnormative dominant notions in postsecondary environments through their programs, structures, and cultures sends a clear message to Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates that they, at most, exist within the margins of the institution or, at least, do not belong nor are they considered valuable members of the campus community.

Regarding Nonbinary undergraduates specifically, evidence since 2016 has shown their numbers have progressively increased to the point most undergraduates in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary population identify within the Nonbinary hypernym (Beemyn, 2019b). Unlike Binary Transgender undergraduates, those within the Nonbinary hypernym face difficulties in

being able to exist in postsecondary environments because their gender identity and gender expressions do not align with cisnormative paradigms and, therefore, do not align with postsecondary institutional structures and cultures (Beemyn, 2019b; Goldberg, 2018). Oftentimes, this causes them to be read as or forced into Binary Transgender identities by others, which negates their Nonbinary identity (Beemyn, 2019b; Goldberg, 2018). Though more researchers are beginning to recognize the unique experiences of these identities compared to Binary Transgender experiences, genderism and the conflation of Nonbinary populations with Binary Transgender populations has made Binary Transgender experiences the predominant focus in empirical, theoretical, practical, and anecdotal literature (Beemyn, 2019b). Furthermore, virtually no research exists regarding Nonbinary postsecondary academic attainment or selections compared to their Binary Transgender peers; making it difficult to determine whether their unique gender identities and postsecondary environmental and/or interpersonal interactions have an influence on their academic selections and subsequent life trajectories.

### ***Financial Barriers of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education***

Another layer of stress that has served as a barrier to Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate retention, engagement, and success is cost of attendance that can include tuition, institutional fees, academic supplies, cocurricular involvement fees, basic needs expenses, and transportation expenses. Stolzenberg and Hughes (2017) found Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates were significantly more concerned about how to pay for their postsecondary education compared to the general population. Financial difficulties or lacking financial resources due in part to unsupportive familial interpersonal relations were cited as yet another reason for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates *stopping out*, or withdrawing from

postsecondary education. Such familial strains inhibit their ability to depend on familial financial support, making the need for full-time employment more likely during their college experiences. As Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals have a high percentage of familial rejection and employment discrimination, this highlights the negative impact postsecondary environments can have on their academic selections via financial constraints and demonstrates the interrelatedness between their gender identity, environmental interactions, and interpersonal interactions before and during their postsecondary experiences (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Again, such environmental stressors can affect subsequent employment and economic stability and life trajectories.

Regarding Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates of Color specifically, they were most likely to report financial concerns as obstacles to their postsecondary retention and attainment compared to their White counterparts (Grant et al., 2017). Such intersections for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who embody multiple marginalized identities further compounds their marginalization; impacts their postsecondary academic experiences, selections, and attainment; and perpetuates their social stratification in mainstream society and between each other.

Though finances have been a significant stressor for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, they reported receiving higher rates of financial aid assistance compared to the general population, which was attributed to a higher level of astuteness in being able to ascertain needed resources (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). In addition, Binary Transgender undergraduates have noted being able to take advantage of institutional student health insurance to cover costly medical transition procedures and prescriptions to enter or reenter the workforce with a name and gender expression that aligns with their gender identity (Hartzell et al., 2009).

These findings speak to a level of resiliency Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates possess in the face of barriers during their postsecondary experiences.

### ***Resiliency of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates in Postsecondary Education***

Despite overwhelming deficit literature documenting persistent marginalization, mistreatment, and the negative ramifications of genderist and cisnormative oppression on Transgender and/or Nonbinary existence, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates possess a fair amount of resiliency to persevere through their pre-college experiences and matriculate into postsecondary education (Goldberg, 2018; Grant et al., 2011; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Studies have suggested this resiliency is developed as a means to counter and cope with stressors like oppressive experiences and limited support (Nadal et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2011). Such resiliency includes an understanding of their own subjugation, having a sense of self-worth, and exercising self-advocacy practices (Nadal et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2011). Evidence of this can be seen in Binary Transgender individuals who noted feeling mostly positive about their gender identity and felt it strengthened their interpersonal relations, amplified their empathy, increased their civic engagement, and aided in the development of their personal growth (Riggle et al., 2011).

As the internet has played a role in improving familial relations for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals through increased representation and resources in recent years, so too has it proven to be a supportive tool in promoting Transgender and/or Nonbinary resilience (Beemyn, 2019b). The use of social media and online digital platforms to find information and a supportive community more easily has helped newer generations of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates better develop their gender identity, ascertain their needs, have more self-efficacy, be more resourceful and resilient, and actively seek out formal campus services

during times of stress compared to their Cisgender peers (Becker et al., 2017; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Nicolazzo, 2017; Singh et al., 2013; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017).

Though research has suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates possess notable resiliency in the face of cultural and structural aspects of postsecondary education that channels societal genderism and cisnormativity and greatly influences their social, emotional, mental, and financial well-being, evidence has suggested these matriculated undergraduate students may actually come to college with already developed resiliencies due to prior experiences. Such experiences, therefore, aid them in overcoming postsecondary environmental adversity and persisting toward degree attainment. Given this current study (a) viewed academics as an important factor in postsecondary participation and retention, and (b) was specifically focused on uncovering what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influence Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' academic selections, understanding and being conscious of these pre-college environmental contexts is important when considering their postsecondary academic experiences. The following section outlines such academic experiences in postsecondary environments.

### ***Academic Experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates in Postsecondary Environments***

Undergraduate academic selections are not fixed and can change more than once during the postsecondary experience due to demographic, socioecological, and environmental factors (Denice, 2020; Kramer et al., 1994; Leu, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). Though race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status have all been found to affect undergraduate academic selections, gender was found to have the strongest effect on such selections (Denice, 2020; Germeijs et al., 2012; Goodson, 1978; Staniec, 2004). Gender and systemic genderism have long been shown to

significantly impact Cisgender undergraduates' academic identity development, career and academic selections and perceptions, academic mentors they seek or avoid, and cocurricular experiences in which they choose to take part (Bilodeau, 2005; Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Fassinger, 1996; Germeijs et al., 2012; Goodson, 1978; Patton et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). Such effects on academic development, perceptions, and selections can impact academic performance and sense of belonging in an academic field and the institution that then shapes undergraduate pathways toward graduation, time to degree, and persistence toward degree attainment (Denice, 2020; Kramer et al., 1994). Thus, discussions regarding undergraduate academic selections necessitate the inclusion of gender identity, environmental experiences, and interpersonal experiences in postsecondary education (Patton et al., 2016).

Regarding environmental impacts on Cisgender academic experiences, societal genderism has been shown to affect undergraduate Cisgender Women and Cisgender Men in different ways. Cisgender Women were found to have more career maturity in their academic planning and career vision due to imposed, societal gender expectations that places family planning obligations on them while Cisgender Men were more focused on pursuing careers that provided extrinsic rewards such as financial gain and career status due to imposed parental expectations because of their gender (Luzzo, 1995; Poole et al., 1991). Given these understandings of how systemic genderism impacts Cisgender undergraduates' approaches to academic and career selections, it begs the question how these are considered and enacted through the environmental and/or interpersonal interactions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates when making their academic selections.

Previously presented literature has suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates may enter postsecondary education having either limited or hindered pre-college



career and/or academic identity development or much narrower perceptions of career and/or academic options compared to their Cisgender counterparts (Datti, 2011; Gonsiorek, 1988; Gottfredson, 1981; Hetherington, 1991; Myers et al., 1994; Prince, 1995; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Given Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates may lack a sense of belonging in postsecondary environments due to genderist and cisnormative cultures and structures, it could be deduced that their academic selections and perhaps even academic performance may also be impacted. Evidence of this can be seen in Schneider and Dimito's (2010; Nonbinary undergraduates were not explicitly included) study that found Queer Transgender undergraduates experienced the highest levels of discrimination compared to Queer Cisgender undergraduates, which strongly correlated with having the most narrowed views on career and academic choices and the highest levels of dissatisfaction in those choices. More research is needed to uncover the extent to which these environmental experiences exist in the broader Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate population and how they may influence their academic selections.

**Potential Influences of Postsecondary Environments on Academic Selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates.** Cisgender undergraduates tend to choose sex-typed (i.e., cisnormatively gendered) majors that positively reinforce their own and societal concepts of gender roles (Evans et al., 2009b). These choices may also be due to Cisgender undergraduates being positively affirmed and provided more opportunities toward gender “fitting” academic and career pursuits than if they pursued gender-atypical ones (Chung, 1995). Thus, there exists a discouraging effect on those pursuing gender-atypical academic selections and careers based on genderist and cisnormative constructs that systematically limits being able to fully explore all academic and career opportunities available and perpetuates hegemonic

genderism. For Cisgender Women, evidence of such discouragement can be seen in those who have perceived Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) majors as being less welcoming to them and so were less apt to choose those types of majors (Ganley et al., 2018). Cisgender Women who left STEM majors also cited gender-based discrimination as the reason for pursuing majors with more favorable experiences instead (Ganley et al., 2018; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2016). For Cisgender Men, those in gender-atypical majors switched majors at a higher rate than Cisgender Men in gender-typical majors (Riegle-Crumb et al., 2016).

These findings suggested both internalized and externally imposed systemic genderist and cisnormative expectations have significant impacts on Cisgender undergraduate academic selections, which has led to drastic social stratification that perpetuates societal hegemonic genderism. This can be seen in the persistent underrepresentation of Cisgender Women in STEM majors despite composing over half of awarded bachelor's degrees while Cisgender Men are the minority in fields with perceived nurturing qualities such as teaching, nursing, and social work (Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Patton et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). This stratification in academic major choices based on gender has been identified as the cause of gender-based wage gaps between Cisgender Women and Cisgender Men post-graduation, given higher-paying career fields like STEM have been more associated with Male-associated gender schemas (Denice, 2020; Staniec, 2004). This heavy skewing toward one gender in employment fields due to genderism affects academic major choices and is also why such fields are unable to reach their full potential given the lack of diversity in experiences in their employee populations (Staniec, 2004).

Literature has also found national, state, and local political environments to be a significant consideration when it comes to conflated LGBT undergraduate populations and their

academic and career selections (Moorehead, 2005; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Political acceptance and protections in an industry and the surrounding community, informally and legislatively, either draw or deter Cisgender Lesbian and Gay undergraduates to specific fields of study (Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Similarly, political events that target these individuals such as state or federal employment legislation or the ability to serve in the military play a role in their undergraduate academic and career selections (Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Evidence has suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate populations may also make their academic selections based on similar political and sociopolitical environmental considerations that directly impact their gender identities. Data analyzed from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) Freshmen Survey found 47.4% of Transgender students not only reported having participated in some type of activism compared to 20.8% of the national sample, but they also considered promoting racial understanding an important or essential goal (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017; Nonbinary undergraduates were not explicitly included). This finding was supported by the USTS that showed Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals were more civically engaged and had more social agency than the national average (James et al., 2016). Though a statistically small number of undergraduates have identified as Transgender and/or Nonbinary, the positive impact these educated students have on institutional culture has been especially profound regarding promoting a culture of diversity through supporting other marginalized groups and being civically engaged in their community and environment. Given the political and racial tensions in the current sociopolitical climate, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates have already been primed to become active citizens who can promote and champion diversity, equity, and inclusion in their postsecondary communities. However, without a positive or supportive community for themselves—let alone in specific academic or career

fields—there is less likelihood these undergraduates will be able to thrive and become valuable change agents in various avenues in society (Arenas et al., 2016).

Given these environmental findings, it could be deduced that the overall academic experiences and selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates have been influenced in substantial ways by societal genderism and cisnormativity that exists outside and within postsecondary environments and may also be imparted on them through their environmental and interpersonal interactions. However, even in the face of societal hegemonic genderism and cisnormativity that is innately part of postsecondary environments and underscores the alarming rates of Transgender and/or Nonbinary marginalization and victimization, these undergraduates have considered postsecondary institutions to be safe places to explore and express their gender identity overall (Evans et al., 2009b; Hartzell et al., 2009; Patton et al., 2016). In addition to these environmental experiences, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates often experience the enactment of such environments through their interpersonal interactions. Thus, this serves to contextualize the following section that presents literature on the interpersonal interactions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in postsecondary environments and how they may influence their academic selections.

### **Interpersonal Experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates**

To better understand the interpersonal experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, it is important to first understand the role postsecondary education plays in their gender identity development process. Such development may influence their interpersonal interactions, interpretations, and set the stage for their academic experiences and possibly their academic selections.

Research on Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity development has suggested individuals begin moving toward self-acceptance and incorporating their gender identity into their holistic identity upon meeting and knowing other Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). For some Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, their postsecondary experiences are the first time they have the ability to name their gender identity, participate in their identity exploration, or find a local community of other Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (Patton et al., 2016). Thus, it can be assumed that formative, negative genderist and cisnormative K–12 experiences that necessitate Transgender and/or Nonbinary social recategorization strategies serve to hinder or prolong Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity integration and acceptance until attending postsecondary education. This suggests those who choose not to attend postsecondary education may continue such repression or masking practices for much longer and later in life, delaying their gender identity development. Furthermore, considering Hetherington’s (1991) Bottleneck Hypothesis, such impediments to Transgender and/or Nonbinary gender identity development and the need to use identity management strategies to protect themselves in their K–12 interpersonal interactions may negatively impact their pre-college academic development and subsequent postsecondary academic experiences and selections. Such findings position postsecondary interpersonal interactions as integral to the Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity development process.

Though Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates have been less likely to experience the same level of K–12 mistreatment and victimization, they nonetheless have faced similar biases and marginalizing experiences (Effrig et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). These have resulted in Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates reporting perpetual stress, poor academic performance, and negative impacts on their mental and

emotional health (Goldberg, 2018; Hendricks & Testa, 2012). Reports of stopping out from postsecondary enrollment, a factor that has been associated with unemployment, came from those whose experiences were especially unbearable (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016).

The following sections detail the known informal and formal social, emotional, and political interpersonal interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates experience during postsecondary education to better understand how these may influence their academic experiences and selections during their postsecondary tenure. Similar to Lindsey et al.'s (2018) naming convention for leaders who influence educational change, *informal interpersonal interactions* are defined in this literature review as occurring with individuals who are not employed by the postsecondary institution such as family, friends, and peers while *institutional interpersonal interactions* are considered those with individuals employed by the postsecondary institution such as staff, faculty, and those working in conjunction with or at the behest of such actors such as guest lecturers or speakers.

### ***Informal Interpersonal Interactions and Academics Experiences***

As discussed previously, Transgender undergraduates have typically reported having fewer sources of informal supports and, thus, had higher rates of isolation during their postsecondary experiences that negatively impacted their identity development, career identity development, and academic success (Pusch, 2005; Nonbinary undergraduates were not explicitly included). Given such negative outcomes have generally been associated with attrition from postsecondary education overall, this may also be true for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and may impact their persistence in postsecondary education (Bean, 1990).

Regarding academic success, data from the CIRP Freshmen Survey showed only 33.4% of incoming Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates reported having strong time

management skills compared to 51.8% of the national sample (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). This lack of time management skills was attributed to insufficient social, emotional, and political supports available in their immediate postsecondary environments that drove Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates to spend much more time interacting with supportive friends, online social media relations, or engaging in political and social activism with supportive others to push against anti-Transgender sentiment (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017).

For Queer Binary Transgender undergraduates, high levels of social support and high perceptions of sexual orientation discrimination resulted in the lowest levels of vocational indecision and was suggested to be due to *crisis competence* where individuals facing discrimination gained special competency in handling difficulties and could adjust to developmental challenges like career development (Schmidt et al., 2011; Nonbinary students were not included). This assertion harkens back to Tilcsik et al.'s (2015) findings on Gay and Lesbian youth and their heightened ability to interpret social situations and ascertain the degree of Queer acceptance. It also suggests high levels of social support may contribute to the development of such crisis competence in the face of high perceived discrimination.

However, these findings also assume Queer Binary Transgender undergraduates who had the lowest rates of career indecisiveness were satisfied with their career selections. Because Schneider and Dimito's (2010; Nonbinary students were not explicitly included) study noted high discrimination levels were correlated with more narrowly perceived academic choices and high dissatisfaction in those choices, results from this current study could aid in uncovering the relationship between Transgender and/or Nonbinary informal interpersonal interactions, career choices, and how these may translate into perceived academic options from which they make their selections.

### *Institutional Interpersonal Interactions and Academic Experiences*

Studies have consistently noted supportive institutional personnel as the greatest resiliency factor for Transgender and/or Nonbinary youth in educational institutions (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Linley et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). In postsecondary environments, campus mental health professionals were sought out most by Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in times of stress due to high levels of psychological distress from discrimination, marginalization, and isolation (Becker et al., 2017). Unfortunately, an overwhelming rise in the number of college students overall seeking assistance from campus mental health services across the United States have caused wait times for even an initial intake appointment to span weeks (Boyd-Barrett & Haire, 2018; James et al., 2016; Thielking, 2017). After campus mental health professionals, academic support personnel such as faculty and academic advising were sought out most by Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in times of stress (Becker et al., 2017).

Despite previously mentioned online interpersonal interactions promoting Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' ability to better identify their needs, have more self-efficacy, and seek out resources and services compared to Cisgender counterparts in times of stress, research has also suggested they may still be underutilizing campus services due to wariness of institutional personnel's level of comfort and training working with Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (Becker et al., 2017; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bieschke & Matthews, 1996; McKinney, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2017; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Singh et al., 2013; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). These findings indicated Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates may avoid or delay seeking support and resources until absolutely necessary and possibly too late, leading to negative impacts on their academic success (Beemyn et al., 2005).



More exploration is needed in understanding the role institutional interpersonal interactions have on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' academic experiences and how these are taken into consideration when making academic selections.

**Faculty Interpersonal Interactions and Academic Experiences.** Faculty interactions seem to have the strongest effect on undergraduates' academic and career selections overall. For Cisgender undergraduates, supportive faculty interactions yielded positive effects including higher grade point averages, increased likelihood of pursuing a graduate degree, and increased social and cognitive development (Y. K. Kim & Sax, 2009). Supportive faculty interactions were also found to have significant levels of positive effects for Cisgender Men compared to Cisgender Women and Cisgender racial minorities, especially African American students (Linley et al., 2016).

However, Cisgender LGB undergraduates reported experiencing much less institutional support and guidance compared to their Cisgender Heterosexual counterparts regarding their academic and career selections, which stifled their overall career development (Nauta et al., 2001). Such results in Cisgender LGB populations indicated faculty interactions directly impact their academic experiences and selections which suggests similar effects may exist for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate academic experiences and selections.

Transgender undergraduates specifically reported academics as their greatest stressor in part due to their negative classroom experiences with faculty such as mistreatment, transphobia, or complicity when mistreatment and transphobia occur from fellow students (Becker et al., 2017; Bilodeau, 2005; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Seelman, 2014). Such hostile learning environments have led to poor academic performance or even changing academic majors and career pursuits altogether (Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015). This suggests further exploration is needed for

how interpersonal interactions between faculty and Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates affect their academic considerations and selections.

### **Postsecondary Education and Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates Conclusion**

Postsecondary degree attainment has been associated with higher employment earnings and postsecondary interpersonal and environmental interactions appear to be essential catalysts in Transgender and/or Nonbinary gender identity development (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Hartzel et al., 2009; Patton et al., 2016). Thus, postsecondary institutions and communities may play a significant role in promoting positive Transgender and/or Nonbinary life trajectories.

However, in addition to stressors that already exist in postsecondary education (i.e., financial concerns), societal genderism and cisnormativity that perpetuates dominant notions of gender in these systems, environments, and interactions create climates that perpetuate and exacerbate Transgender and/or Nonbinary subjugation, alienation, and invisibility, thereby presenting further stressors that cut across this population in unique ways. Such conditions affect Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' ability to perform academically, develop career and academic identities, persist, and even exist in postsecondary education. These adverse environmental and interpersonal interactions depict a bleak experience for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates that can lead to stopping out from the institution, resulting in long-term consequences on their employment and economic well-being such as higher rates of unemployment later in life.

Furthermore, the unique variations and intersections in Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' identities, backgrounds, and pre-college experiences point to simultaneous and compounding systemic oppressions that exist in these environments and manifest in their environmental and interpersonal interactions. These multi-identity Transgender and/or

Nonbinary undergraduates are important to recognize to unpack the varying and unique environmental and interpersonal interactions they may have in postsecondary education and how these may influence their academic selections toward degree attainment.

As explained previously, literature on this population has primarily highlighted the cultural and social disparities of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates while only referencing their academics as asides despite academics constituting a core, if not central, aspect of the postsecondary experience. This brings up questions as to how their academic needs are being met or disregarded and how their perceived postsecondary environmental and interpersonal interactions have shaped their academic selections toward subsequent life trajectories. Thus, if retention is considered an alignment between students' individual factors and an institution's ability to meet their academic, cultural, and social needs as outlined in Chapter 1, this review confirmed that postsecondary institutions may be mostly unsuccessful in meeting Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate needs and are overall underprepared to retain them toward degree attainment (Beemyn, 2003; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011). Although Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates have demonstrated considerable resiliency, agency, self-efficacy, and resourcefulness in persisting through their postsecondary experiences to degree attainment, this persistence appears to be despite these adverse, oppressive, and marginalizing experiences rather than due to institutional environmental and interpersonal support. Thus, a focus on how Transgender and/or Nonbinary environmental and/or interpersonal interactions affect their academic selections may illuminate much needed insight into how postsecondary institutions and personnel can move toward supporting them and, ultimately, promote their persistence to degree attainment through all three retention factors and not just the cultural and social factors.

To contextualize this study in the existing literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, the following section covers their employment experiences, economic ramifications, and other life arenas outside the education sector. In doing so, the literature underscores the salience of economic and employment security in their lives, how both impact their ability to participate and survive in society, and the important role postsecondary education and degree attainment may play in disrupting these social and societal stratifications.

### **Employment Experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individuals**

Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals have existed in society with insufficient state and federal legal protections overall that have implicitly and explicitly suggested they are second-class to Cisgender identities (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). This has been exacerbated in U.S. locations that are more conservative in their social and legal understandings and enforce genderism, cisnormativity, and Cisgender identities (Hartzell et al., 2009; Spade, 2015). Given the Supreme Court only recently ruled Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 included protections for employees based on gender identity, it was difficult to determine the impact and ramifications of this ruling on the national and local employment experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (*Bostock v. Clayton County*, 2020). Thus, the following is a review of the known Transgender and/or Nonbinary employment experiences at the time of this study.

Workplace experiences for those who disclose their Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity or are presumed to be Transgender and/or Nonbinary range from unwelcoming to hostile regardless of industry, educational level, race, and age (Hartzell et al., 2009; Lombardi et al., 2001). Examples include verbal harassment, physical and sexual assault, and employment termination. Furthermore, experiencing economic (i.e., employment) discrimination was found to have the strongest correlation with experiencing Transgender-related violence (Lombardi et al.,

2001). Such mistreatment was found to promote Transgender and/or Nonbinary social recategorization identity management practices, social avoidance, or leaving the career field altogether and using postsecondary education to enter a new career field (Datti, 2011; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; J. T. Pryor, 2015).

Interestingly, younger Transgender individuals were more likely to have experienced anti-Transgender violence, which correlated to employment discrimination (Lombardi et al., 2001; Nonbinary individuals were not explicitly included). Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations who were older and earned higher incomes, usually due to years of employment, tended to report lower levels of discrimination and victimization (Hartzell et al., 2009; Lombardi et al., 2001). Though there was no indication as to why this was the case, these findings imply younger Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations who have yet to establish themselves in the workforce may have lower income levels due to lower degree attainments experience higher levels of victimization, bias, and even suicidal behaviors. It could be argued this finding supports the role postsecondary degree attainment may play in promoting their economic and employment outcomes that may lead to more positive life outcomes for them in the future. Thus, this finding endorses the need to focus on their experiences in postsecondary education, including their academic needs, to understand how best to support them toward degree attainment.

For Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who embody other marginalized identities, studies have demonstrated they experienced compounding negative effects on employment status (Adams et al., 2005; Datti, 2009; M. M. Davidson & Huenefeld, 2002; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Schilt, 2006). Undocumented Transgender and/or Nonbinary immigrants reported higher rates of unemployment and economic instability compared to their legal residency peers, presumably due

to lack of status (James et al., 2016; Renfroe, 2018). Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals with disabilities also reported high rates of unemployment and economic instability compared to peers without disabilities (James et al., 2016). When it comes to sexual orientation, Transgender individuals who identified as part of the Queer community were more likely to have experienced twice the economic discrimination rate of heterosexual Transgender individuals (Lombardi et al., 2001). Consequently, these experiences were, again, amplified for Queer-identified Transgender and/or Nonbinary People of Color (Datti, 2011).

Regarding race and ethnicity, a study done on presumably Cisgender service members of Color found a significant number declined career-advancing assignments due to fears about facing potential racism in the assigned city's environment and culture (Blue Star Families, 2022). Such societal racism and discrimination not only have negative employment advancement and ramifications for Cisgender populations, but were also cited as a stressor by Black and Latinx Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations who were less likely to hold bachelor's degrees and had much lower income earnings compared to White Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (Hartzell et al., 2009). As Cisgender LGB People of Color experience augmented discrimination based on race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation, so do Transgender and/or Nonbinary People of Color who face similar biases due to systemic racism, genderism, and cisnormativity (Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000). Evidence of this in the workplace can be seen by Transgender and/or Nonbinary People of Color reporting 2–3 times the employment discrimination rate of White Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016).

For Binary Transgender individuals, they experience unique dilemmas when it comes to their employment and economic experiences. Survey research found these individuals were more

likely to experience some form of economic discrimination compared to other Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (James et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2001). This was especially true for Transgender Women who were disproportionately found to have lower socioeconomic statuses compared to their peers due to harsh persecution occurring in schooling environments that led to high rates of stopping out (Liamputtong et al., 2020; Restar & Operario, 2019).

For those who have means to medically transition and change their name and gender-marker while having past work experiences under their assigned gender at birth and given birth name, they face a dilemma of whether they should omit or disclose their employment history (James et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2001). By using identity management strategies and omitting their employment history, it removes the risk of malicious employer references and avoids the need to disclose their gender identity but complicates their ability to obtain new employment or higher employment positions (Scott et al., 2011). In contrast, disclosing their employment history reveals their gender identity and places them at risk of being targeted for discrimination and potential job loss (Pepper & Lorah, 2008). Given this and the relationship between postsecondary education and Binary Transgender students' ability to affordably pursue medical transition using institutional student health insurance, it brings up questions as to how such transitioning experiences affect their environmental and interpersonal interactions and shape their academic selections, which affects their career development (Hartzell et al., 2009).

Despite negative experiences in the workforce, most Binary Transgender individuals who did transition while employed reported an improvement in their job performance and a higher comfort level at work (Grant et al., 2011). This finding supported the Optimal Theory (Myers et al., 1994) and indicated a high likelihood that Binary Transgender individuals have not been given an opportunity to reach their optimal employment development or their talents have been

lost due to termination based on employment discrimination (Hartzell et al., 2009; Myers et al., 1994). This, again, points to the existence of genderism that penalizes gender-expansive individuals and further demonstrates the need to understand the potential heterogeneity in experiences among Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals as various identities in this population have yet to be examined for comparison (Chung, 1995; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000).

Given these examples of the varying experiences and levels of discrimination Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals face due to overlapping marginalized identities, it indicates similar environmental and interpersonal interactions may exist for young adult Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates navigating their postsecondary experiences, which may affect their academic selections toward degree attainment and career development.

### **Ramifications of Transgender and/or Nonbinary Employment Experiences**

These employment discrimination experiences and the inability to maintain employment because of genderism and cisnormativity have long-term negative ramifications on most major life arenas. Such experiences include higher rates of unemployment and living in extreme poverty, twice the likelihood of being homeless, higher rates of HIV infection, higher use of alcohol or drugs as coping mechanisms, and an overwhelmingly higher likelihood of being incarcerated compared to Cisgender counterparts (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Liamputtong et al., 2020). In addition, lack of funds due to lacking or limited employment and lower informal supports like familial relations become barriers to accessing legal assistance, financing identity documentation changes to match one's gender identity, finding affordable healthcare and services that typically are included with employment benefits, and having physical and mental health distress including increased suicidal behaviors and higher likelihood



of attempting suicide as a result (Chung, 2003; Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). The following sections cover four primary arenas within Transgender and/or Nonbinary life trajectories that are directly impacted by adverse employment experiences which hinder them from fully participating and thriving in society. These include housing, interactions with law enforcement, identification documents, and healthcare.

### ***Housing Ramifications***

Regarding housing insecurity and the prevalence of homelessness due to employment and economic insecurity, it would seem reasonable for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals to access public accommodations for support. However, reports have suggested a significant majority of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who seek assistance from homeless shelters and substance treatment programs experience some form of bias such as harassment, sexual or physical assault by fellow patrons or staff, denial or rejection of services due to mismatched gender identity expression from name and identity documentation, or removal from services after uncovering their Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity (Chung, 2003; Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Such experiences have led Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals to either leave services of their own volition or avoid services altogether due to safety concerns (Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). Limited access to safe housing support systems put Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals at risk for further health concerns which could be mitigated through stable employment (Herman et al., 2014). Thus, employment—and, therefore, economic—stability appears to be a notable protective factor for Transgender and/or Nonbinary housing security and stability.

### ***Law Enforcement Ramifications***

Law enforcement has demonstrated a history of bias, harassment, and assault against Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations, especially Transgender and/or Nonbinary People of Color (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). Over half of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who interact with police have reported being disrespected, harassed, assaulted, or forced to perform sexual acts based on either knowing their gender identity or assuming their gender identity as Transgender and/or Nonbinary (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Of these individuals, those experiencing homelessness and Transgender Women of Color were the most vulnerable to such biases (Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). This was especially true for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals in locations where there were limited or no Transgender and/or Nonbinary legal protections (Chung, 2003). Such interactions have been associated with higher prevalence of lifetime suicide attempts, avoiding seeking police assistance, and an overall underreporting of anti-Transgender and other bias incidents including those committed by law enforcement agents (Herman et al., 2014; Spade, 2015). This is particularly disturbing given some interactions are predicated simply on police assumptions of gender identity that echo reports from K–12 schooling regarding students having at least one negative experience based on their gender identity or expression due to openly identified as, or merely being perceived to be, Transgender and/or Nonbinary (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). This further underscores the tangible and even longitudinal ways in which genderism and cisnormativity have perpetuated and jeopardized the well-being of both the Transgender and/or Nonbinary community and the general population.

These employment, economic, and housing insecurity barriers to participating in mainstream society have driven some Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals to the underground economy for survival (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). This further jeopardizes their physical health and safety and leads to confrontations with law enforcement (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). In short, this ousting of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals from mainstream employment perpetuates their victimization, invisibility, and vilification via stereotypical depictions (Spade, 2015). These findings exhibit insidious and substantial ways employment insecurity, economic insecurity, societal genderism, and cisnormativity causes Transgender and/or Nonbinary exclusion from mainstream society and promotes the silencing and policing of their identities and expressions. Such ramifications further subjugate and stratify them from mainstream survival and potential success.

### ***Gender Expression and Identification Documents Ramifications***

Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals whose gender expressions do not align with their state or federal identification documents such as a passport, driver's license, or social security information experience higher levels of mistreatment, assault, or denial of services (Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Though there are several barriers Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals experience when it comes to pursuing these identification document changes such as obtaining court orders, navigating bureaucratic procedures that vary drastically between jurisdictions, and procuring health provider documentation, the primary barrier cited was cost, with some reporting having to spend over \$500 for such changes (James et al., 2016). This information, again, highlights the impact interpersonal interactions have on Transgender

and/or Nonbinary experiences and the vital role employment and economic stability can have on the trajectory of Transgender and/or Nonbinary lives.

### ***Healthcare Ramifications***

For Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals with health insurance, employer-sponsored plans were reported as the most common source of coverage (Herman et al., 2014). However, economic insecurity due to employment instability limits access to such services and insurance (Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). Limited access to affordable health care and lack of health insurance that includes or provides reduced costs toward Transgender-related services (e.g., hormone replacement therapy and surgical procedures) were noted as barriers as well (Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). These barriers were especially significant to Binary Transgender individuals who were more likely to seek such services in varying degrees to transition their physical beings to align with their gender identity (Herman et al., 2014). Such barriers to gender-affirming care have been shown to negatively affect mental health as evident in the higher prevalence of suicide attempts reported by those who have had or have yet to have transition-related care and procedures compared to Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who do not desire these services (Herman et al., 2014). This demonstrates the intricate intersections between genderism, cisnormativity, Transgender and/or Nonbinary gender expression, and identity management; stressors that lead to their physical and mental health stratification; and their employment and economic stability which factor into their ability to gain access to needed healthcare.

### **Employment and Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individuals Conclusion**

What becomes evident in the employment experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals is its impact on economic stability that can significantly mitigate a variety of negative

social ramifications. Furthermore, the existence of hegemonic genderism and cisnormativity in the employment sector appears to govern most of their environmental and interpersonal interactions and impacts their ability to participate in mainstream society in measurable ways. Documented literature on Binary Transgender individuals and those with additional marginalized identities (e.g., race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability, citizenship) has shown they experience unique and compounding stratification that situates them in more precariously vulnerable positions. Given these reports and evidence that suggests postsecondary education and degree attainments may have a vital role in promoting higher income earnings that are associated with lower instances of discrimination and victimization, a closer look into the postsecondary experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and how their academic selections are impacted by their environmental and interpersonal interactions may aid in determining best supports for them toward degree attainment and employment stability (Hartzell et al., 2009; Lombardi et al., 2001).

### **Literature Review Summary**

In nearly all aspects of life, Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals experience pervasive discrimination and victimization due to socially constructed and perpetuated genderism and cisnormativity that is inflicted upon them through their environmental and interpersonal interactions. Two areas in which such biases have the most impact on Transgender and/or Nonbinary lives are (a) the employment sector due to its relationship with economic stability, and (b) the education sector given its relationship with future employment opportunities and potentially higher wages. Because of this, postsecondary education and degree attainment become key factors in Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals' ability to survive in a society already skewed against them and their existence.

The intersection between students' cultural, social, and academic needs toward degree attainment may determine Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' retention, persistence, and career development. However, literature has predominantly prioritized the cultural and social needs of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate experiences and overlooked their academic needs. This missing component and, arguably, principal feature of the postsecondary educational experience leaves much to be desired when considering all possible best practices for supporting Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in their academic development toward degree attainment and postbaccalaureate preparedness for employment and economic stability.

To best explore the academic needs of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, this study focused specifically on the environmental and interpersonal interactions they consider when making their postsecondary academic selections. In the following chapter, specific aspects of three theoretical frameworks are presented and combined to make the methodological lens for this study. From there, an explanation of this study's design and methods is detailed.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

The purpose of this study was to understand, through a critical lens that centralized the voices of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, *what* environmental and/or interpersonal interactions they perceived as informing their academic selections, if at all, and *how* and *why* such interactions influenced their selections. This study was meant to serve as an extension to prior empirical, theoretical, practical, and anecdotal literature and provide in-depth understanding and insight into Transgender and/or Nonbinary students' experiences, which have been understudied and often mis-studied. To achieve this, the current study employed an asset-framed, participatory-social justice, narrative inquiry design that embedded a narrative, story-telling approach in a social justice framework (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The following chapter details this study's methodology and the philosophical approaches and theoretical frameworks used to inform such an approach. Also included in this chapter are the *delimitations* or decisions made by the researcher to bound the study and determine what to include and what to exclude (McGregor, 2018).

#### **A Narrative Research Philosophical Approach**

Methodological approaches define, and are defined by, their unique methods and philosophies. In the case of *qualitative research methods*, these generally favor a complex, constructivist philosophical view that involves the in-depth analysis of text data from a small number of respondents to find how individuals understand and make subjective meaning of their environment and contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertler & Charles, 2011). As one of many qualitative research methodologies, *narrative research* is the use of stories to examine how individuals construct meaning of themselves and their experiences in their respective cultural and temporal contexts (Clandinin & Caine, 2008; Josselson, 2010; Squire et al., 2013).

Narrative research specifically subscribes to the philosophical notion that, given a specific context, varying stories can exist across individuals and are highly subjective and relative, meaning no one universal experience exists (Josselson, 2010). Such variations in experiences obtained through narrative research can provide a richer, more holistic understanding of human existence (Squire et al., 2013). As evident in Chapter 2, Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences can vary drastically and coincide or contradict each other depending on a multitude of variables. In addition, given the dearth of Transgender and/or Nonbinary perspectives and voices in literature and the limited literature on their experiences overall—especially in their postsecondary academic selections—this philosophical lens was chosen for this study to explore and recognize the various ways in which Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates may perceive their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions in their specific contexts affecting their postsecondary academic selections.

An inherent, yet secondary, aspect of narrative research’s philosophical approach is its ability to expose conventionally invisible, omnipresent, systemic constructs (Squire et al., 2013). In other words, the various stories and existences surrounding a given context could shed light on social constructs that exist in society. As demonstrated in Chapter 2, limited literature exists on how to support Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals overall let alone in their postsecondary academic selections due to implicit biases that underlie empirical literature on this population and in general. Thus, by comparing and exploring contextually driven meaning-making across Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates’ narratives, potential insight could be gleaned on existing social and societal constructs (e.g., genderism and cisnormativity) and their perceived relationship to the postsecondary academic selections via their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions given this philosophical approach (Josselson, 2010; Mertler &



Charles, 2011). To complement and further the boundaries of this philosophical approach and uncover potential best practices to support Transgender and/or Nonbinary students toward optimal life trajectories, a transformative philosophical approach was also included as part of this study.

### **A Transformative, Narrative Research Philosophical Approach**

Comparable to critical theory and complementary to narrative research, a *transformative* philosophical approach involves the inclusion of “a political change agenda to confront social oppression at whatever levels it occurs” (Creswell & Creswell, 2018, p. 9). This approach emphasizes the need to be collaborative with and involve marginalized community participants into research methodology and to centralize them in a study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens et al., 2010). The inclusion of participants and their perspectives on their needs brings their voices directly into the realm of research and makes their experiences visible, addresses their social disenfranchisement, and allows them the opportunity to actively challenge normative social schemas rather than perpetuate their marginalization further (Cook-Sather, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens et al., 2010). Such an approach allows for studies to directly inquire on participants’ experiences and environments that are impacted by social inequities with the goal of creating positive change for these populations and promote a social justice and human rights agenda (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens et al., 2010). In other words, as narrative research focuses on embracing the varying voices and stories of its participants to ascertain a more complex and in-depth understanding of human experiences, a transformative philosophical approach focuses on using those voices and perspectives to shift criticism off of individuals for any perceived deficiencies based on their characteristics and places that burden on existing social paradigms and norms that support their systemic subjugation and perpetual marginalization.

As made evident in Chapter 2, a deficit-lens approach has been the predominant stance on examining the experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals. Such depictions that invariably uphold negative and even stereotypical portrayals position Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals and their experiences as subordinate, marginalized, and deviant in juxtaposition to normative Cisgender populations and experiences. This approach ultimately perpetuates genderist and cisnormative views that result in the interrogation and erasure of their identity (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). Therefore, this study subscribed to this additional philosophical approach to counter the long-standing victimizing and marginalizing master narrative in literature; centralizing Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate experiences and voices while critically examining how they perceive systemic social constructs in their environments and communities influencing their academic selections. In short, a transformative approach allowed this study to push its narrative research approach to critically examine and interrogate archetypal, deficit-based narratives on Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities and experiences to reframe the conversation “from a medical problem that needs to be fixed to a sociocultural basis for oppression” (Mertens et al., 2010, p. 198).

An important principle in research is the theoretical framework through which a study is examined to explain how philosophical approaches are embedded into the research design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). This means a study’s philosophical paradigm informs its theoretical lens, which informs its research design. Thus, using this transformative, narrative research approach, the following introduces the theoretical framework for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework: A Case for Three Concepts**

The ways in which identities intersect and are enacted upon by individuals who embody them; their structural, cultural, societal, situational, temporal, analog, and digital environmental

interactions; and others via interpersonal interactions are never one-dimensional, linear, or objective. As evident in the literature, the uniquely multifaceted identities that exist in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary hypernym are already intricate on their own let alone considering the myriad of other identity amalgamations that can exist alongside them at any given time. Thus, to address such complexity, the use of more than one theoretical framework was necessary to comprehend and contextualize these various identity dimensions and experiences.

For this study, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model and Museus's (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments Model (CECE Model) of College Success were both used as the foundation on which to conceptualize what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates perceived as impacting their academic selections and how they understood and interpreted those interactions. This study also drew from Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics to enhance its lens and holistically encompass the unique existences of this population.

The following sections describe the three foundational frameworks, beginning with Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics, then Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model, and ending with Museus's (2014) CECE Model. Explanations are also provided on how these frameworks assist in answering this study's research questions and intersect with its philosophical and methodological approaches.

### **Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics**

In the spirit of critical race theory, which "stress[es] the need to allow students of color to 'name their own reality'" (Zamudio et al., 2011, p. 124), Critical Trans Politics (Spade, 2015) provides a lens through which to reveal, interrogate, and critique the endemic, socially constructed, systemic genderism and cisnormativity that exists in the United States and its

institutions that oppress Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals. By focusing on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' accounts of their lived experiences, this theory allowed for the reframing of their experiences away from typical, deficit-based lenses that used genderism and cisnormativity as the standard by which they are measured against and provided space for potential counternarratives. Thus, *Critical Trans Politics* (Spade, 2015) aligned with this study's transformative paradigm and provided the means through which to (a) centralize the voices of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates; (b) present a richer, more diverse perspective on their heterogeneous experiences; (c) explore contradictions and critiques to the largely bleak master narrative on their existences; and (d) advance the knowledge-base on their experiences to better inform educational practices (Bilodeau, 2007).

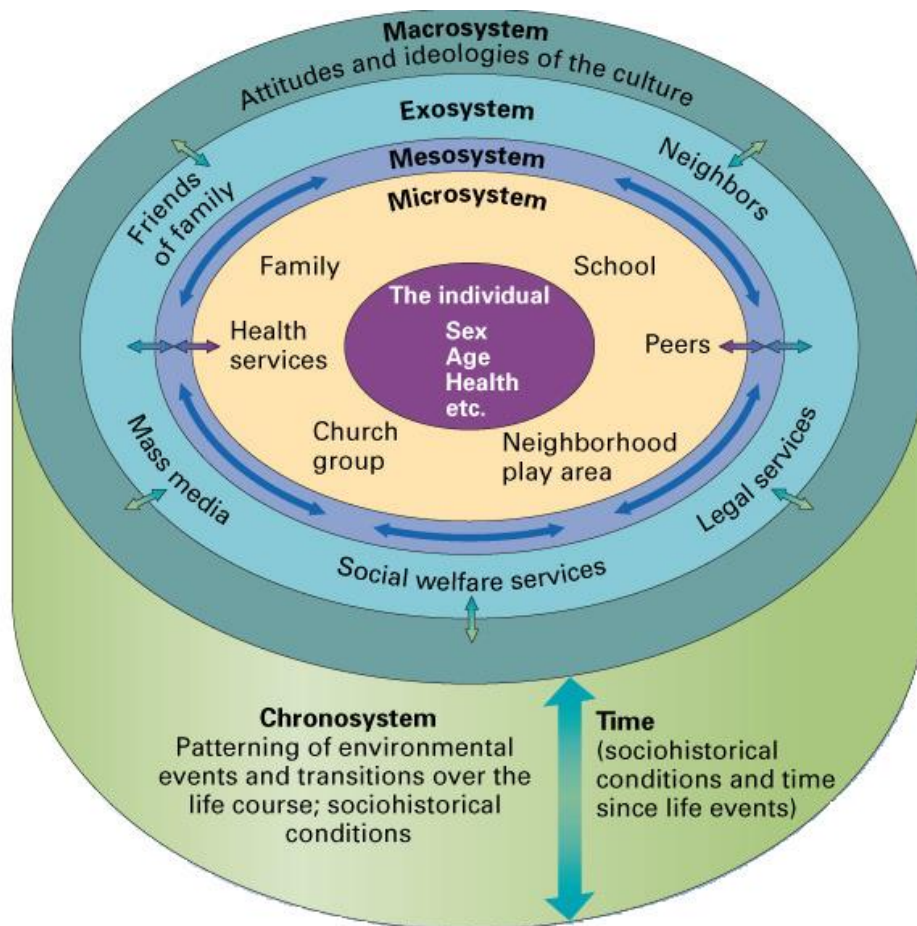
This framework also provided justification for the methodology used to address this study's research questions, which involved ascertaining from Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' narratives what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions informed their postsecondary academic selections and how and why they perceived these as influencing those selections. Such a framework supported a qualitative approach to understanding how Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates made meaning of their experiences, which required the researcher to develop rapport and partnership with community members to obtain deep, thick, rich, and detailed descriptive data to inductively understand the processes and outcomes of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertler & Charles, 2011). In addition, as the way individuals make sense of their experiences can vary greatly depending on social and historical contexts, using a narrative inquiry approach was fitting as it allowed for an openness to the various ways Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates

derived meaning from their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and translated them into academic selections (Mertler & Charles, 2011).

### **Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model**

Bronfenbrenner (1994) originally developed the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development that contextualized the individual, their environment, and how development and learning occurs in early life and throughout life. Succinctly, this theory focused on the interaction between individuals and their environments and communities and how individual development “takes place through processes of progressively more complex reciprocal interaction between an active, evolving biopsychological human organism and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1644).

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) later created the Process-Person-Context-Time research design model as a means to conceptualize and test the Bioecological Systems Theory of Human Development and learning throughout an individual's lifespan. The following sections explain elements of the Process-Person-Context-Time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) design model and how they related to this study (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model. Republished with permission of McGraw Hill LLC, from *A Topical Approach to Life-Span Development* (9th ed.), by J. W. Santrock, 2018; permission conveyed through Copyright Clearance Center, Inc.

**Process**

*Development*, meaning the “stability and change in the biopsychological characteristics of human beings over the life course” (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 796), is a fundamental concept in the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) that occurs through *proximal processes*, which are regular interactions between an individual and their environment that become increasingly more complex throughout their lifespan. This developmental concept is corroborated by previously mentioned theories in Chapter 2 (see

Bandura, 2001; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bem, 1983; Gottfredson, 1981) and goes further by proposing the sustained, long-term interactions an individual has in their immediate environment are the most impactful on their development and contextual understanding of their positionality in that environment. These proximal processes, as defined in the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), became a fitting lens through which to contextualize this study as both research questions aimed to understand the environmental and/or interpersonal interactions associated with the postsecondary academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates.

### ***Person***

This aspect of the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) is also referred to as the *individual* and is the central focus as seen in Figure 1. Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) noted individuals carry three types of characteristics with them into any given environment: disposition, resource, and demand. These characteristics determine the level of impact proximal processes have on their development as well as the direction in which their future development takes.

**Disposition.** *Disposition* characteristics are related to individual personality and intrinsic attributes such as resilience and self-efficacy. Such characteristics can vary one's developmental trajectory, stimulate specific proximal processes, and perpetuate those processes toward a particular developmental direction. Because literature suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates tended to have a significant level of resiliency and self-efficacy despite pervasive mistreatment, marginalization, and bias experiences (see Becker et al., 2017; Singh et al., 2013; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017), accounting for such disposition characteristics was necessary in

understanding how they perceived their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions relating to their academic selections.

**Resource.** *Resource* characteristics refer to the various genetic (i.e., biological) resources and social capital an individual may possess. This includes an individual's unique, "ability, experience, knowledge, and skill" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 796), which can determine whether proximal processes are operating effectively at any moment of development. These characteristics can also include mental and emotional capacity along with access to social and economic capital like a supportive community or medical and mental health resources (Tudge et al., 2009).

For Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, evidence in Chapter 2 suggested their academic experiences and skills were impeded by existing genderist and cisnormative biases. These could be seen in the form of school avoidance, stopping out, prioritizing mental energies on identity development, safeguarding themselves from biases at the expense of their academic development, and lower high school grade point averages compared to the national average due to self-sabotage from internalized transphobia (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Gonsiorek, 1988; James et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2001; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Furthermore, they may have limited social capital and economic capital due to these same genderist and cisnormative paradigms that tax their mental and emotional capacity (Chung, 2003; GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2014; Hetherington, 1991; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Lombardi et al., 2001; Myers et al., 1994; Nicolazzo, 2017; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Such examples presented the need to consider resource characteristics as factors related to Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates'



academic selections and how these selections may be cultivated or inhibited by environmental and/or interpersonal interactions.

**Demand.** Finally, *demand* characteristics refer to an individual's physical and demographic attributes. These serve as stimuli for interpersonal experiences, specifically, and influence how such interactions occur. Because literature demonstrated those who are even simply perceived to be Transgender and/or Nonbinary experienced genderist and cisnormative victimization although those who masked or went stealth tended to avoid such mistreatment, it suggests gender presentation and expression may influence interpersonal experiences and related proximal processes to some degree (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Effrig et al., 2011; Feder, 2020; GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2001; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). In addition, research showed other systemic oppressions such as xenophobia based on citizenship status, racism, homophobia, and ableism had compounding negative effects on Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals when combined with systemic genderism and cisnormativity (Grant et al., 2017; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016; Renfroe, 2018; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Furthermore, gender presentations and expressions may even influence certain environmental interactions for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals such as using gendered locker rooms and restrooms, placement in gendered postsecondary on-campus housing assignments, and gendered cocurricular involvements such as Greek Life and athletics (Bilodeau, 2005; Evans et al., 2009b; Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; J. T. Pryor, 2015). Therefore, understanding Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' gender expression and/or presentation, level of outness to themselves and others, and other demographic characteristics was needed to uncover deeper understandings and dimensions for how demand characteristics influenced their

environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and how those may relate to their postsecondary academic selections.

**Person Conclusion.** These disposition, resource, and demand characteristics outlined by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) are supported by literature and have the ability to influence each other in unique ways to either limit or expand an individual's proximal processes and potential development (see Bandura, 2001; Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Examples presented in Chapter 2 included how individuals began to understand and develop their gender identity and expressions through the reciprocal interactions between themselves (e.g., perceptions, characteristics, attributes) and their immediate environmental and interpersonal interactions. Thus, including these converging characteristics in this study's data collection and analysis was important to understanding individual nuances that affected Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and how they related to their postsecondary academic selections.

### ***Context and Time***

As evident in Figure 1, there are five systems involved in the Process-Person-Context-Time design (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) that account for most of its visual elements. This includes (a) an individual's immediate surroundings called the *Microsystem*; (b) the interaction between their Microsystem and the circumjacent surroundings called the *Mesosystem*; (c) the circumjacent surroundings itself called the *Exosystem*; (d) the sociocultural norms and ideologies that exist in each societal context called the *Macrosystem*; and (e) the longitudinally sustained or changing surroundings, experiences, interactions, and norms in each system called the *Chronosystem*. The first four of these systems constitute the *Context* aspect of the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006), and the Chronosystem

represents the *Time* aspect. Each system and how they converge and influence each other to affect an individual's development could also be factors that influence environmental and interpersonal interactions and, thus, postsecondary academic selections. Therefore, these elements were taken into consideration to inform and contextualize Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' experiences.

**The Microsystem.** This system is the closest concentric circle to the individual in Figure 1 and describes the immediate environment in which they spend a significant amount of time. This is also where an individual's environmental and interpersonal proximal processes occur, directly impacting an individual's understanding of their positionality and social role, influencing their development, and subsequently impacting their future proximal processes and future development. Examples of environmental proximal processes that contribute to their development are activities that engage individuals' "attention, exploration, manipulation, elaboration, and imagination" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 798), including playing a musical instrument or reading a book. Interpersonal proximal processes are those between the individual and family members, peers, educators, mentors, significant others, or employment colleagues that shape development (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006).

These perspectives aligned with this study's interest in understanding the environmental and interpersonal interactions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and how those related to the development of their academic selections. As most research on Microsystems have focused on familial environments as opposed to other environments like education, the Microsystem aspect provided a lens through which to further conceptualize whether such environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influenced postsecondary academic selections and, if so, how they were perceived by Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates

(Bronfenbrenner, 1994). For this study, more specific examples of environmental proximal processes were considered including (a) academic topics, assignments, and materials; (b) institutional policies and culture including those based on genderist and cisnormative schemas; (c) popular culture; and (d) passive social media interactions that may have engaged the consciousness of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates.

**The Mesosystem.** Beyond the Microsystem, the interplay between an individual's Microsystems is visually represented by the Mesosystem aspect of the model. This system considers the ways in which an individual's community is interconnected with each other and such interconnectedness could influence an individual's development. An example of this could be the interpersonal relationship between an individual's family and their teachers. Whether the relationship between both Microsystem entities is in cohesion or conflict with each other has effects on the individual's proximal processes and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Furthermore, examples such as whether an individual's home environment is conducive to their academic performance and success in school demonstrates how environmental Microsystems could also impact proximal processes and development. Again, an exploration of such immediate environmental and/or interpersonal interactions factors that may directly impact Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and possibly translate into their postsecondary academic selections was necessary for this study.

**The Exosystem.** Circumjacent to the Mesosystem, the Exosystem specifically denotes environmental settings that are external to an individual's immediate Microsystems but still have influence on an individual through their surrounding Mesosystem and Microsystem. This can include parents' occupations, neighborhood context, local community, and mass media (Bronfenbrenner, 1994; Hong & Garbarino, 2012). The Exosystem directly related to this study's

research interest and aided in understanding what environmental interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates took into consideration when making postsecondary academic selections and how such influences impacted those selections.

**The Macrosystem.** This system includes more abstract influences such as “belief systems, bodies of knowledge, material resources, customs, life-styles [sic], opportunity structures, hazards, and life course options” (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1646) that shape the sociocultural context in which an individual exists. Given literature presented in Chapter 2 that demonstrated the pervasiveness of genderism and cisnormativity in social norms and the real and theoretical influences they had on the environmental and interpersonal contexts of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, such Macrosystem factors were also explored in this study in the context of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates’ academic selections.

**The Chronosystem.** This system encompasses the cylindrical body of the model in Figure 1 and depicts the aging of an individual, the distance of time between life events, and the changes that occur in an individual’s existing context (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Regarding gender identity and gender expression development for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, consciousness of time is crucial in better understanding postsecondary academic selections made given contextual environmental and/or interpersonal interactions. Regarding postsecondary education, temporal changes can be seen in academic selections such as choosing a major, which is a varied, long-term selection developed over time rather than being a one-time selection (Denice, 2020; Galotti et al., 2006; Germeijs et al., 2012). Even for undergraduates who solidified their postsecondary academic selections early, their educational journeys present many opportunities to test those commitments and impact subsequent selections during their educational tenure (Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Ganley et al., 2018; Kramer

et al., 1994; Leu, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2016). Therefore, understanding the temporal relations between the gender identity and gender expression development of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, their environmental and interpersonal interactions, and their academic selections at given points in time and over time were included to elucidate more insight into how and why such interactions could impacted those selections.

### ***Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) PPCT Model Conclusion***

Literature has consistently demonstrated environmental and interpersonal interactions have a significant impact on Transgender and/or Nonbinary perceptions, considerations, and life trajectories (Beemyn, 2019b; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bilodeau, 2005; Chung, 1995; Datti, 2011; GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Patton et al., 2016; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Spade, 2015; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Thus, including details on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' process, person, context, and time experiences as outlined by Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) model aided in answering this study's questions on what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influenced their academic selections.

Unlike Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics framework, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model is a comprehensive developmental model that essentially includes all potential variables and intersections that can affect the development of an individual. An example of this could be seen in the ways a Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate's interpersonal proximal interactions with postsecondary personnel in the Microsystem may be governed by Exosystem rules and regulations set forth by the institution, which may be informed by societal genderism from the Macrosystem and mediated by their temporal gender identity and gender expression development in the Chronosystem. In other

words, through an in-depth examination of individual narratives, the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) provided an effective overview for understanding *what* various temporal environmental and/or interpersonal interaction factors influenced Transgender and/or Nonbinary developments and perceptions in a given moment; conversely, the Critical Trans Politics (Spade, 2015) framework provided an effective lens through which to understand *how* Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates made meaning from these interaction factors, *why* these shaped their development and academic selections throughout their lifetime, and ways in which the resulting knowledge may be able to push against their systemic marginalization. Thus, the Process-Person-Context-Time Model (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) justified the need to include Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' demographic information, gender expression and/or presentation, degree to which they were out with their gender identity, and intrinsic or developed academic dispositions and abilities at various points in time. More specific details about how this model informed this study's methodology are presented later in this chapter.

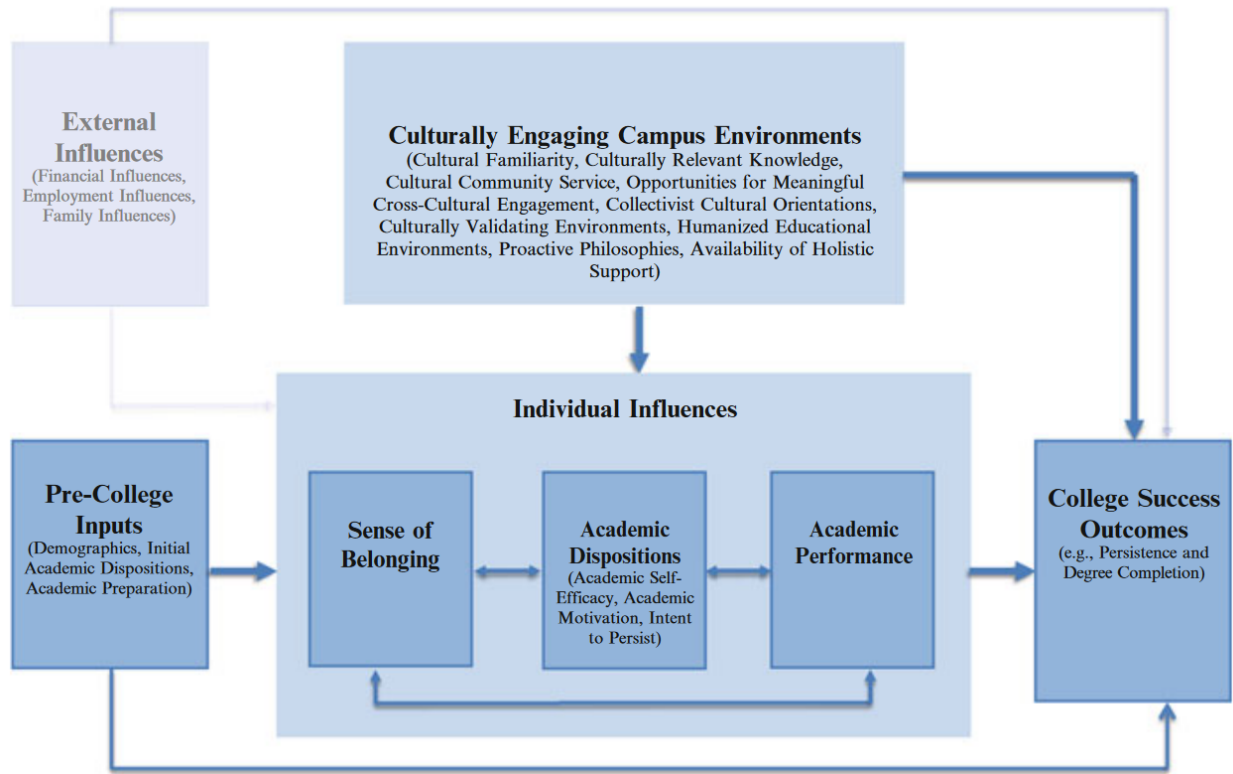
Despite the significant contributions these two models provided in being able to broadly answer this study's research questions, both lacked the ability to specifically address and understand the proximal processes that can occur in the unique microcosms of postsecondary education that governed participants' contexts as undergraduates. Thus, Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success was used as another lens for this study given its specific focus on the postsecondary environment.

### **Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success**

Museus (2014) developed the CECE Model in response to decades of literature on college student success that largely ignored how racial and cultural experiences influenced

diverse students' college success outcomes. More specifically, the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) directly critiques both Tinto's (1975) *Theory of College Student Success*—a notable and revered framework in this area—and the substantial body of research that has been built upon it. Such critiques include how Tinto's (1975) theory supports cultural, social, and academic assimilationism; negates and is implicitly culturally biased against marginalized students, especially Students of Color; lacks the inclusion of student voices and their perceived relationships with their institution; and upholds meritocracy that interrogates disadvantaged diverse students on their college success outcomes, or lack thereof, without acknowledging the role institutions and systemic oppressions have on such outcomes (Museus, 2014). Building from these critiques and deriving from numerous qualitative and quantitative studies, the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) provides a framework through which to understand college success outcomes of diverse students in postsecondary education (National Institute for Transformation and Equality [NITE], 2017c; see Figure 2).





**Figure 2:** Museus’s (2014) Culturally Engaging Campus Environments (CECE) Model of College Success. Reprinted by permission from Springer Nature Customer Service Centre GmbH. Springer Nature Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Vol. 29, by M. B. Paulsen, 2014, Springer Science Business Media Dordrecht.

The CECE Model (Museus, 2014) proposes nine indicators (i.e., *CECE Indicators*) on whether a given postsecondary institution possesses a culturally engaging campus environment. The more CECE Indicators that exist in an institution, the higher the positive *Individual Influences* (i.e., sense of belonging, academic disposition, and academic performance) exist for a given student that has been correlated to a higher likelihood of *college success outcomes* such as persistence, degree completion, and positive postsecondary experiences (Museus, 2014; Museus & Smith, 2016). In the following section, aspects of the CECE Model are explained, how it related to this study, and how the aforementioned frameworks were used to complement and expand its purview for this study.

### ***External Influences and Pre-College Inputs***

The CECE Model (Museus, 2014) acknowledges the role both *External Influences* (i.e., finances, employment, and family) and *Pre-College Inputs* (i.e., individual demographics, academic disposition, and academic performance) have in contextualizing Individual Influences and college success outcomes; though they are not considered the primary focus of the model. This acknowledgement is in line with the Cultural Mismatch Theory of Inequality (Stephens & Townsend, 2015) presented in Chapter 2 and considers the marginalized cultures students may bring with them to college that may not align with dominant postsecondary social norms (Museus, 2014). By recognizing the relevance of such External Influences and Pre-College Inputs, the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) incorporates them as valuable inputs in the college success discourse for diverse students and relevant to shaping their postsecondary experiences.

The concept of External Influences is supported by Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Microsystem where immediate environmental and interpersonal proximal processes occur and directly impact an individual's development and perceptions of their social positionality, which subsequently affects future proximal processes and developments. An example of this in Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate populations can be seen in literature that has cited the interplay between gender identity, immediate financial concerns, and family relations as significant factors that impacted Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' persistence in postsecondary education (Beemyn, 2019; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). These environmental and interpersonal interactions fit with the CECE Model's (Museus, 2014) recognition of the role such External Influences play in college success outcomes.

The Pre-College Inputs echo literature presented in Chapter 2 and suggest the interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary K–12 undergraduates had in and outside the classroom—which are couched in existing genderist and cisnormative social constructs—influenced their pre-college academic perspectives, perceived academic options, and academic performance; all of which informed their postsecondary academic selections (see Patton et al., 2016; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). This is also supported by Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2006) three Person characteristics that indicate intrinsic, biological, social, and physical attributes determine the degree to which proximal processes impact development and the direction subsequent development takes. This further supported the need to include various demographic and gender-related temporal developments of Transgender and/or Nonbinary participants in this study to discern how these characteristics informed their perceptions of their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and postsecondary academic selections.

Given literature and existing frameworks supported the significance of both these External Influences and Pre-College Inputs on undergraduate college success outcomes and Individual Influences, their relationship to environmental and interpersonal interactions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates provided insight into perceived postsecondary academic options and how these perceptions were converted into academic selections. Regarding environmental and interpersonal interactions in the postsecondary context, those factors are housed in the CECE Model’s (Museus, 2014) CECE Indicators.

### ***CECE Indicators***

Considered the primary aspect of the CECE Model, nine CECE Indicators are associated with increased sense of belonging, academic disposition, academic performance, and college success outcomes for diverse students if found in a given postsecondary institution (Museus,

2014). These Indicators are divided into two categories: Cultural Relevance and Cultural Responsiveness.

**Cultural Relevance.** The first five CECE Indicators delineate the ways in which a given postsecondary environment cultivates *Cultural Relevance* for students, or “relevan[ce] to the cultural backgrounds and communities of diverse college students” (NITE, 2017c, Survey & Indicators section). These include: (a) *Cultural Familiarity*, the ability for students to form relationships with other students, staff, and faculty who embody similar backgrounds; (b) *Culturally Relevant Knowledge*, opportunities that encourage education on students’ specific culture or community; (c) *Cultural Community Service*, opportunities to positively support the social welfare of students’ communities; (d) *Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement*, positive and intentional interactions with students of different cultural backgrounds; and (e) *Culturally Validating Environments*, feeling valued in culture and identity in the environment (Museus, 2014).

As described in Chapter 2, postsecondary environments often served as spaces where Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals found other Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals for the first time, a factor associated with moving toward gender identity self-acceptance and incorporation into their holistic identity (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Patton et al., 2016). However, dominant social constructs such as genderism and cisnormativity that are perpetuated in postsecondary environments promoted and reinforced Transgender and/or Nonbinary negation and invisibility, which may impede them from experiencing cultural relevance (Catalano, 2015; Evans et al., 2009b; Feder, 2020; Goldberg, 2018; Herman et al., 2014; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). An examination of whether Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates experienced

these Indicators at their institution provided insight into their relationship with their postsecondary environment and assisted in answering both of this study's research questions that sought to understand what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions they considered when making their academic selections and how those influenced such selections.

**Cultural Responsiveness.** The last four CECE Indicators uncover whether a given postsecondary environment promotes *Cultural Responsiveness* to students, or “support systems [that] take into account and respond to the norms and needs of diverse students” (NITE, 2017c, Survey & Indicators section). These include: (f) *Collectivist Cultural Orientations*, having a community-based postsecondary environment rather than an individualistic one; (g) *Humanized Educational Environments*, having postsecondary staff and faculty who build rapport and relationships with students; (h) *Proactive Philosophies*, when staff and faculty take proactive measures to support students; and (i) *Availability of Holistic Support*, access to staff and faculty who support students by providing resources and facilitating connection with other supports as needed (Museus, 2014).

Literature repeatedly points to supportive institutional personnel as being a significant source of resiliency for Transgender and/or Nonbinary students (GLSEN, 2016, 2018; Linley et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). This supports the CECE Model's hypothesis that postsecondary persistence and degree completion are partially associated with higher levels of cultural responsiveness, especially given these Indicators are predominantly based on interpersonal interactions from institutional staff and faculty. However, evidence also suggests these students may not seek out or use needed services and resources to the extent they should out of caution against having to interact with institutional staff or faculty who may not be comfortable or versed in working with them in a respectful manner (Bieschke & Matthews,

1996; McKinney, 2005; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016). Furthermore, evidence of faculty mistreatment toward Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates resulting in poor academic performance and changing academic selections points to potential examples of deficiencies that exist in their cultural responsiveness experiences (Bilodeau, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Seelman, 2014). As the inhibitor to Transgender and/or Nonbinary resilience may lie in an existing or even perceived lack of cultural responsiveness from institutions and their personnel, additional exploration on how these factors relate to Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individual Influences may illuminate further answers to the first question for this study about which interpersonal and/or environmental interactions are related to their academic selections.

**CECE Indicators Conclusion.** These CECE Indicators aligned with this study in various ways. First, given this model asserts these CECE Indicators are positively associated with sense of belonging, academic disposition, academic performance, and college success outcomes for diverse students, such a relationship fits with this study's first question in understanding the environmental and/or interpersonal interactions related to Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate academic selections. More specifically, the CECE Indicators provided concrete, defined postsecondary environmental and interpersonal interaction factors that both diverse students and extant literature indicated as promoting increased Individual Influences and college success outcomes (Museus, 2014). Thus, this study was able to use these nine Indicators to assist with answering its first research question and uncover what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions, especially in postsecondary institutions, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates described as informing their academic selections and, subsequently, how and why such interactions influenced their academic selections.

Second, as alluded to in the first point, both prior literature and diverse student voices were used in identifying these nine Indicators that supported diverse students' cultural identities, needs, and success outcomes (Museus, 2014). The incorporation of diverse student perspectives on the societal norms that perpetuate their marginalization within the foundation of these CECE Indicators addressed the model's critiques on their absence from prior frameworks such as Tinto's (1975) theory of college student success and allowed for their existence and inclusion in empirical and theoretical discourse on their experiences (Cook-Sather, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Mertens et al., 2010).

Third, these CECE Indicators included factors that supported rather than hampered the Individual Influences and college success outcomes of diverse students. This was done purposefully so as to ground the model in an asset-framed approach with the assumption that the increased presence of these Indicators in a given postsecondary environment would decrease students' level of negative experiences (Museus, 2014).

Fourth, it is imperative to note here that the CECE Indicators and this model are not determinant when it comes to the college success outcomes of undergraduate students. Indeed, students are capable of achieving college success outcomes—including disadvantaged diverse undergraduates—despite some or many seemingly absent CECE Indicators in their postsecondary educational contexts. However, evidence in literature has indicated the quality of students' experiences and well-being and degree of college success outcomes may wane or falter when CECE Indicators are lacking at an institution. In other words, Museus's (2014) CECE Model provides a rubric outlining the ideal postsecondary environment for the most optimal college success outcomes. By focusing on CECE Indicators, this model shifts the onus of college success outcomes away from diverse students and onto postsecondary institutions themselves

and their ability or shortcomings in being able to cultivate an environment that “engage[s] students’] cultural identities . . . and reflect[s] the needs of these students” (Museus, 2014, p. 209). By focusing on the role institutions have on diverse students’ Individual Influences and college success outcomes, this model challenges Tinto’s (1975) Theory of College Student Success and its subsequent body of research as being meritocratic.

These three latter points particularly complemented and supported this study’s philosophical approach that used both Spade’s (2015) Critical Trans Politics lens and a transformative view to counter the predominantly deficit-based approaches in prior literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences. By supporting the visibility and centralization of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates’ perceptions on their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and framing postsecondary environments and communities as subjects for critique, this framework allowed for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate voices to be heard and provided space for critically assessing existing socially constructed, genderist and cisnormative systems, cultures, and structures surrounding their experiences and postsecondary academic selections. This focus on the inclusion of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates’ perceptions of their environmental and interpersonal interactions and the role their institutions played in shaping such interactions provided clarity and contextualized their academic selections. As mentioned previously, such an approach supported the use of qualitative methods and directly related to the second question for this study that sought various Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate experiences regarding how they perceived their academic selections being influenced by their environmental experiences and/or interpersonal interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).



Although the CECE Indicators specifically refer to environmental and interpersonal interactions postsecondary institutions and personnel may or may not provide, Individual Influences also consider individuals themselves and their character, abilities, and interpretations as they relate to the CECE Indicators and their college success outcomes.

### ***Individual Influences***

Individual Influences are composed of an individual's sense of belonging, academic dispositions, and academic performance. The CECE Model (Museus, 2014) proposes these Individual Influence variables are notable predictors positively associated with college success outcomes of diverse students and influenced by institutional CECE Indicators. Given how closely intertwined these Individual Influences are to each other, the following defines each Individual Influence first then concludes with their relationship to this study.

**Sense of Belonging.** Given postsecondary environments promote and uphold dominant social norms, research on Tinto's (1975) Theory of College Student Success' academic and social integration constructs for predictors of college success has been criticized as implicitly supporting assimilationism by upholding integration behaviors associated with White undergraduate experiences (Kezar, 2018). This approach positions White experiences and dominant social norms as the standard to which marginalized students are measured against and must conform, narrowly defines successful academic and social integration based on behavioral outcomes, and ignores students' own perceptions of their academic and social integration into their postsecondary culture and community. In other words, most research on college student success has failed to account for students' *sense of belonging* or perceived fit in their postsecondary environment, a construct that has been shown to significantly predict intent to persist and college success outcomes for culturally diverse students (Museus, 2014). Thus, the

CECE Model (Museus, 2014) incorporates it into its framework as an important factor positively associated with college success outcomes.

**Academic Dispositions.** This Individual Influence variable includes students' attitudes as they relate to their academics. These dispositions include *academic self-efficacy*, meaning a student's self-assurance in their academic abilities to succeed; *academic motivation*; and the *intent to persist* to graduation. Such dispositions have been found in literature to be positively associated with academic performance, persistence, and college success outcomes (Museus, 2014).

**Academic Performance.** As noted previously, students' ability to access and participate in available postsecondary opportunities and resources is inherently rooted in their registration and enrollment status at their institution. Furthermore, maintaining such status is dependent, to a large extent, on minimum satisfactory academic performance. Indeed, even opportunities considered to be cocurricular like student organizations require minimum credit enrollments or have minimum grade point average requirements as prerequisites for participation. This supports the model's assertion of academic performance being a significant factor positively associated with college success outcomes and persistence (Museus, 2014).

**Individual Influences Conclusion.** As presented in Chapter 2, research on Cisgender undergraduates has found gender identity and systemic genderism to be factors that significantly influenced their environmental and interpersonal interactions which impacted their academic perceptions and selections (Bilodeau, 2005; Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Fassinger, 1996; Germeijs et al., 2012; Goodson, 1978; Patton et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). These, in turn, affected their sense of belonging and academic performance, and subsequently governed their college success outcomes (Denice, 2020; Kramer et al., 1994). Such findings based on gender and

genderism in Cisgender undergraduate populations suggested there may also exist relationships between Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' Individual Influences and their environmental and interpersonal interactions. An example of such associations could be gleaned through Transgender and/or Nonbinary academic performance with lower grade point averages being reported by Transgender and/or Nonbinary high school students matriculating into postsecondary education compared to their Cisgender counterparts (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Another example was the lack of intent to persist toward postsecondary education by Transgender and/or Nonbinary high school students who reported experiencing high levels of gender-based victimization (GLSEN, 2018, 2020, 2022).

However, despite stigmatization, lack of sense of belonging as a result of genderist and cisnormative discrimination, and limited social support resources, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates also demonstrated noteworthy resilience in the form of academic motivation and intent to persist (Goldberg, 2018; Grant et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2011; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Evidence of this may be gleaned from survey data revealing 2–3 times the degree attainment rate in Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations compared to the general population (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). These examples from the literature suggest environmental and/or interpersonal interactions do play a role in affecting Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' Individual Influences.

Regarding academic selections, evidence suggests these may be embedded in the Individual Influences variables. More specifically, because Cisgender and Transgender and/or Nonbinary academic perceptions and selections appeared to affect sense of belonging and academic performance, it could be concluded that academic perceptions and selections are rooted in the Academic Dispositions variable of Individual Influences. This is understandable given

academic self-efficacy, academic motivation, and intent to persist could arguably be considered perceptions and selections in themselves. Therefore, understanding the relationship between environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and their impact or perceived impact on Individual Influences, especially the Academic Dispositions variable, provided needed insight into uncovering the specific factors that were taken into account and impacted Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' academic selections.

### ***Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success Conclusion***

Literature has overwhelmingly depicted postsecondary education as not providing a supportive environment for Transgender and/or Nonbinary students to exist and thrive overall (see Bilodeau, 2005; Catalano, 2015; Effrig et al., 2011; Evans et al., 2009b; Goldberg, 2018; James et al., 2016; Marine & Nicolazzo, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). This impacts their sense of belonging, compromises their academic performance, and undermines their academic identity development and potential academic selections (Myers et al., 1994; Stephens & Townsend, 2015). Given this relationship between postsecondary environmental and interpersonal interactions and Transgender and/or Nonbinary sense of belonging, performance, and academic identity development, Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success provided an ideal foundational framework through which to explore such associations. Thus, an examination of CECE Indicators in postsecondary institutions and whether Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates perceived a relationship between them and their academic selections provided insight into the role postsecondary environments and communities played in influencing these selections and students' persistence toward degree completion. Again, such an understanding directly answered this study's first

research question that asked what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates indicated as informing their academic selections.

The CECE Model of College Success (Museus, 2014) focused on postsecondary factors that positively promoted college success outcomes, reframing experiences toward the ability to thrive and centralizing the interrogation of student success onto postsecondary environments and communities. This focus is not to ignore inhibitory factors that may exist but to take an antideficit approach that assumes the more CECE Indicators undergraduates encounter, the less likely they are to experience marginalization (Museus, 2014). Such an asset-framed approach runs counter to the prevalence of deficit-based literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations that focuses on negative experiences, oppression, and marginalization. This shift in perspective and empirical focus aligned with this study's use of Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics lens and transformative paradigm to interrogate dominant social constructs that exist in postsecondary institutions and marginalizes Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates. Furthermore, as the CECE Indicators were developed using both empirical literature and diverse student voices and situates postsecondary institutions as the focus for analysis, this also aligned with this study's use of Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics lens and transformative paradigm, which sought to illuminate Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences to critique the genderist and cisnormative structures in postsecondary education that perpetuate their marginalization. Therefore, this study continued that legacy by including the descriptions and perspectives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates so as to further understand how they experienced these CECE Indicators, which included environmental and interpersonal postsecondary interactions, as informing their academic selections. This inclusion directly answered this study's second research question, which depended on qualitative means.

Similar to Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model, which is a comprehensive model on the factors that affect the development of an individual throughout their lifespan, Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success provided a holistic perspective on the factors that promoted the college success outcomes of diverse undergraduates during their time in college. More specifically, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Microsystem concept posits the sustained proximal processes from an individual's immediate environmental and interpersonal encounters interact with their disposition, resource, and demand characteristics and determine both their understanding of their social and political context in their environment and the direction of their future development. This theory parallels Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success; however, the CECE Model is more specific in surmising the immediate environmental and interpersonal interactions using the CECE Indicators and their impact on diverse undergraduates' Individual Influences toward college success. Such similarities supported the viability of Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success and justified its consideration and use as another framework for this study on undergraduate Transgender and/or Nonbinary academic selections, especially given its predominant focus on postsecondary environments.

### **Theoretical Framework: A Case for Three Concepts Conclusion**

To review, this study aimed to understand (a) what environmental and/or interpersonal interactions do Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates describe as informing their postsecondary academic selections, and (b) how do the narratives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates provide insight into the ways in which their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influence their postsecondary academic selections. To answer these questions, this study used both a narrative research philosophical approach that assumes a

multitude of human experiences simultaneously exist for any given context and can reveal systemic social constructs, and a transformative philosophical approach that requires the inclusion of participants' voices to critically examine and challenge social constructs that perpetuate their oppression and marginalization to promote positive social change. These philosophical approaches informed the decision to use Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics as a framework through which to elevate the voices and experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates into empirical discourse as counternarratives to existing, deficit-based literature and systemic genderism and cisnormativity; Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model to examine the various individual, environmental, interpersonal, and temporal factors that Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates describe as informing their academic selections; and Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success to critically interrogate postsecondary educational cultures and communities via Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' narratives on how their postsecondary interpersonal and/or environmental interactions influenced their academic selections.

The philosophical approaches and theoretical lenses presented in this chapter justified the use of a qualitative research design to answer this study's research questions. The following provides an explanation of the specific research design and strategy used for this study.

### **Research Design and Strategy**

As previously mentioned, literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals has overall used deficit frameworks (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). For Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in particular, much of the literature has primarily centered on strategies undergraduates use to successfully navigate postsecondary environments. Such accounts perpetuate genderist and cisnormative norms in postsecondary environments as the

standard, marginalizes Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates by implicitly blaming them for their gender-expansiveness, and places the burden on them in needing to adapt to that socially constructed norm. In addition, the dearth of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate voices and narratives in empirical and theoretical literature further invisibilizes their experiences and silences their critiques on such social contexts that define their environment and frame their oppression. Based on these points and this study's use of a transformative, narrative research philosophical approach and Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics framework, a *participatory-social justice, narrative inquiry* design and strategy was employed for this study.

### **Participatory-Social Justice Research Design**

Given this study's philosophical approaches, its use of Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics framework, and the postsecondary educational lens of Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success, its intention was to analyze postsecondary realms as subjects of critique rather than Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates to promote an asset-framed, critical perspective rather than a deficit-based approach of erasure, marginalization, and stereotyping often seen in empirical, theoretical, practical, and anecdotal literature (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). Thus, a participatory-social justice design and strategy was added to a narrative inquiry design and strategy for this study.

*A participatory-social justice* design and strategy aims to:

Collaborat[e] with participants and call for changes in society or in communities as a result of the research . . . [and employ] a theoretical perspective (or lens) based in human rights, racial or ethnic thinking, social class, disability, or lifestyle, or some combination of these. (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018, pp. 123–124)



To this end, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate participation was included as part of this study's design in the form of affinity researchers and participant member-checking to centralize their perspectives and experiences (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Mero-Jaffe, 2011; Seidman, 2013). Such inclusions are elaborated on later in this chapter.

### **Narrative Inquiry Research Design**

What differentiates *narrative inquiry* as a research design from other qualitative methods are the principles and paradigms that frame its approach (J.-H. Kim, 2016). This approach understands narratives to be distinctively social acts and a crucial means through which individuals form their self-concept and make experiences intelligible for themselves and others. The development of narratives requires the use of *narrative thinking* or the creation and recounting of stories through reflection on what an individual considers to be salient information to the story and organizing them through causal relations based on previous relevant experiences and learnings (J.-H. Kim, 2016). Through this process of reflection and organization, previous relevant experiences and learnings are simultaneously interpreted and revised that play a crucial role in determining what information individuals consider salient in the construction of such narratives. By participating in this process, individuals are able “to understand and analyze how past events and actions led to a past outcome, and to imagine what actions to carry out to achieve future ends” (J.-H. Kim, 2016, p. 155). As this study aimed to understand how Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates describe their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions as informing their academic selections, this approach was fitting given such narratives “[yield] a story that facilitates an understanding of the actions of others and oneself in relation to others” (J.-H. Kim, 2016, p. 156).

In addition, as academic selections and gender identity and gender expression understandings can develop and change over time, aligning with this study's use of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model as a theoretical framework given its inclusion of the temporal plane and its influence on the social realm, a narrative inquiry research design fit well as it provides a temporal and social dimension through which to uncover deeper, richer understandings of participants' experiences (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). In other words, a narrative inquiry research design allows researchers to excavate rich narratives from *participant-storytellers* on the who, what, where, when, why, and how of their experiences to situate such experiences in temporal and social contexts (J.-H. Kim, 2016). Such a method requires an *open-ended questions* strategy that does not restrict responses to predetermined options and allows the researcher to explore the various ways in which participants respond to inquiries on their narratives in their own voice and from their own cultural and social positionality rather than through the researcher's lens or past literature (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). As interviews are the predominant method through which narratives can be elicited from participant-storytellers, narrative interviews were the chosen method through which this study captured such data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Mertler & Charles, 2011).

### **Interview Approach**

As mentioned previously, interviews are the primary method through which varied understandings and meaning-making perspectives of a common experience can be elicited from participants. Thus, the chosen method for this study was in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015; Mertler & Charles, 2011). More specifically, one-on-one, internet-based, synchronous, semi-structured interviews using either video conferencing software or

internet-based telephone was the method through which such narratives were obtained. There were several reasons for choosing this particular method as a delimitation for this study. First, the use of video conferencing or phone interviews allowed for a cost-effective approach to connecting with volunteer participants (O'Connor et al., 2008). Second, it reduced the limitation of distance between the researcher and individual participants, especially when selected volunteer participants were located far away from the researcher (Seidman, 2013). In addition, it allowed for both the participant and researcher to adhere to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2020) social-distancing guidelines at the time of the study due to the 2019 coronavirus disease (COVID-19) global pandemic, which will be discussed later in the Recruitment section (Rahman et al., 2021). Third, for video conferencing in particular, this method allowed for the researcher and participants to interact in a manner similar to in-person interviews and provided a spontaneity that minimized *social desirability bias*, or the likelihood of participants responding in a way that would be viewed by others favorably, on the part of participants (O'Connor et al., 2008; Seidman, 2013). Fourth, again, video conferencing specifically allowed for the ability to capture both the contextual verbal and nonverbal cues that are typically imperative to rapport-building with participants (O'Connor et al., 2008).

Regarding the semi-structured interview format itself, this approach was chosen for a few reasons. First, it allowed the researcher to control the topic but gave participants latitude to determine the span of response (Ayres, 2008). In other words, the researcher was able to keep the interview focused on exploring the topic of identities, environmental and/or interpersonal interactions, and academic selections despite allowing participants the leeway to determine the course the interview took and share the experiences and views they considered to be salient to the topic at hand (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). More information regarding the questionnaire is

addressed later in the chapter. Strategies employed by the researcher and recommended by literature to encourage participants to describe their experiences included listening, avoiding interrupting, and asking clarifying questions when needed (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Second, semi-structured interviews require an interview protocol (see Appendix C) as a guide for inquiring on such narratives, ensuring all necessary information is provided to participants before and throughout the interview process, but also allowing for the flexibility to either follow it as written or to proceed non-sequentially depending on a participant's responses (Ayres, 2008; Castillo-Montoya, 2016; O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). This enabled the researcher to adjust or add questions to the protocol to delve into participants' specific responses through probes or strategies that built rapport (e.g., active listening, reflection, and paraphrasing) and invite participants to share additional details on their narratives (Ayres, 2008; O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Such flexibility allowed for the exploration of notions that the researcher may not have previously conceptualized as applicable to this study's questions (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). Again, this spontaneity has been shown to decrease social desirability bias and provided the researcher with opportunities to develop rapport through conversation and encourage participants to expand on their experiences of choice that illustrated or contradicted observations found through the participant screening questionnaire; the latter of which will be discussed later in this chapter (O'Connor et al., 2008; O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). The interview protocol also included details regarding the context of the study, notifying participants of the interview being video and/or audio recorded for accuracy when reviewing during data analysis, obtaining their verbal consent to participate in the interview, and notifying them that the study was completely voluntary.

As this study was grounded in both a transformative and participatory-social justice paradigm aimed at centralizing Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate voices and bringing their experiences into the domain of research which, for the most part, has preserved their subjugation and maintained normative genderist and cisnormative social schemas, the third reason for using a semi-structured interview method was to give participants the agency to use their own words in recounting their experiences; however, the researcher had the flexibility to adjust the interview to explore relevant experiences (O'Reilly & Dogra, 2017). In addition to using the semi-structured interview method toward this goal, the researcher asked participants at the conclusion of their interviews for final thoughts regarding the questions presented, interview process, and the study itself to be included in their narratives. As part of the participatory-social justice design, the researcher used a reputable, online speech-to-text program called rev.com to transcribe the interview. Upon receipt of the transcript, the researcher reviewed and cleaned transcriptions to ensure they reflected the narratives obtained from participants and sent them to the respective participant for review as a means of member-checking or response validation to ensure the transcriptions captured their narratives accurately (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell, 2013; Mero-Jaffe, 2011; Seidman, 2013).

The researcher was keenly aware that one's positionality affects the ability to be an objective observer in research (Emerson et al., 2011). However, one's positionality as an in-group individual allows for a deeper understanding of the nuanced experiences that can occur and affords the ability to "explore [those] various shades of meaning and differing import as well as the uses made of them by members positioned differently within the setting" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 143). This deep consciousness allowed the researcher to have an openness in exploring with participants how they may understand and interpret events and situations similarly and/or

differently and how these tensions and harmonies provided insight into how Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates described their academic selection processes (Emerson et al., 2011). During interviews, the researcher took preliminary jottings of observations, impressions, and analytic ideas to engage in the practice of bracketing assumptions as asides to highlight and understand them during data analysis later (Emerson et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2016). Preliminary coding, or the categorically surmising of themes that emerged from the data, were noted within jottings during interviews as data were collected (Saldaña, 2016). At the conclusion of the interview, the researcher converted these preliminary jottings into reflective analytic memos so as not to lose the rich, nuanced, detailed observations that emerged for the researcher during the interview (Emerson et al., 2011; Maxwell, 2013) and preserved what Geertz (1973) called “thick description” (p. 14) to include in the data analysis.

This study performed one 90-minute interview per selected participant as a delimitation to the interview process. According to Seidman (2013), 60 minutes would be too short for an interview as participants are being asked to recount and reflect on experiences, which could take a considerable amount of time. However, 120 minutes was considered too long of a duration to ask of participants; thus, 90 minutes was concluded to be an adequate duration of time for an interview (Seidman, 2013). In addition, limited time and financial resources necessitated the researcher to bound these interview procedures to a manageable load.

The researcher attempted to mitigate risk to participants by encouraging them to choose an environment and location where they felt comfortable discussing their identity during the interview and provided them with Transgender and/or Nonbinary community support resources. Preliminary jottings taken during the interview by the researcher were kept in a secure, fireproof safe in the researcher’s lockable office that only the researcher used. Video recordings, audio

recordings, and transcripts were accessible only to the researcher and kept in a password-protected digital file on the researcher's password-protected laptop with updated antivirus and cybersecurity software. The researcher did not record participants' contact information during the interview and only used pseudonyms participants chose for themselves at the onset of the interview to identify each participant. Given the aforementioned research design, the following sections outline the recruitment procedure, data collection process, and context for this study.

### **Recruitment**

To reiterate, this study was interested in understanding the ways in which Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates perceived and made meaning of whether and how their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influenced their academic selections during their postsecondary education, if at all. Thus, the following sections describe the recruitment parameters this study set to target undergraduate students who would best be able to speak to the research questions for this study, the recruitment strategy, and results from recruitment. The unique global climate in which this study took place and how it impacted recruitment and responses are also elaborated upon in this section. In addition, as part of this study's participatory-social justice design, details on this study's inclusion of undergraduate affinity researchers are provided.

### **The COVID-19 Global Pandemic**

At the time of this study, the rapid spread of COVID-19 caused a global, public health pandemic that quickly and abruptly upended the nature and system of education across all levels in the United States and the globe (Toquero, 2020). Restrictions were imposed by respective governing bodies (e.g., California For All, 2020; New York State Education Department, 2020) in conjunction with CDC (2020) guidelines due to viral outbreaks that resulted in many schools

offering courses either fully online, as a hybrid model of online and in-person instruction, or pivoting between in-person instruction and either one or both of the aforementioned offerings intermittently beginning Fall of 2020 and through the beginning of Spring 2022. This historic situation, its impact on schooling, and how students interacted environmentally and interpersonally with their school community was unprecedented and distinctly unique for those who matriculated in the 2020–2021 undergraduate cohort and those attending postsecondary education toward the tail-end of the 2019–2020 academic year.

This situation prevented the exploration of continuous, in-person environmental and interpersonal interactions Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates might have had in postsecondary environments that Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) and Museus (2014) considered critical to development and college success. In addition, emerging literature on the COVID-19 global pandemic indicated LGBT individuals were disproportionately impacted in unique ways. This was especially true for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals who experienced either (a) interruption or loss in accessing to gender affirming medications or procedures and/or (b) mental, physical, and emotional distress due to stay-at-home orders that positioned them either in isolation or hostile living environments without access to supportive LGBT spaces or centers (Konnoth, 2020; Woulfe & Wald, 2020). This study took place in this context and captured participants' unique narratives and insights into their undergraduate environmental and interpersonal interactions during this time and how such interactions influenced their academic selections.

### **Participant Parameters**

This study chose to include undergraduates who self-identified in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary gender identity community and (a) were considered traditional-aged undergraduates,



meaning at least 18 years of age and no older than 24 years of age; (b) attended school continuously since high school through to matriculation into a postsecondary institution in the United States; and (c) were currently enrolled or enrolled within the last academic year as an undergraduate at a postsecondary institution within the United States at the time of this study (see Table 1). The following sections detail these participant delimitations for this study.

**Table 1: *Participant Parameters.***

| Target participants   | Age      | Settings   | Enrollment status   |
|---|----------|--|---|
| Undergraduate students who identify as Transgender, Nonbinary, and/or other identities within these hypernyms<br>Matriculated into postsecondary education directly after high school | 18 to 24 | 4-year postsecondary institutions in the United States | Currently enrolled at least part time<br>Enrolled within the last academic year |

***Rationale for Traditional-Aged Transgender and/or Nonbinary Undergraduates Who Matriculated Into Postsecondary Education Directly After High School***

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the life and identity experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in postsecondary education has varied drastically given evidence that both traditional-aged and nontraditional-aged students from this population exist (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Spitzer, 2000). Thus, this study limited participants to traditional-aged Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, ages 18–24, who matriculated into postsecondary education directly after finishing high school. This included undergraduates who matriculated directly into a 4-year institution after high school as first-year students or transfer students who matriculated into a 4-year institution after attending a previous institution directly after high school. In addition, as this study’s philosophical and theoretical approaches included

examining and critiquing the role postsecondary arenas play in the environmental and interpersonal interactions that may impact the academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, delimiting participants to first-year or transfer students who entered postsecondary education immediately after high school allowed for the understanding of that specific dynamic and limiting other potential influences outside of the postsecondary arena that may have occurred for those who instead took a gap between high school and postsecondary education. Therefore, this narrowing of eligible participants bounded this study to those with more similarly aligned life-experiences and assisted in controlling for potentially larger variations among participants.

Approximately 1.8% of U.S. high school students were estimated to be Transgender and not all of them had plans to pursue postsecondary education (GLSEN, 2018, 2020, 2022; Johns et al., 2019; National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Though survey research reported those ages 18–24, which corresponds to the age-group of traditional-aged undergraduate population, had a higher likelihood of identifying as Transgender and/or Nonbinary, overall enrollment in school by 18- to 24-year-old Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals were found to be lower than those in the general population (Flores et al., 2016; Grant et al., 2011). Furthermore, due to genderism and cisnormativity, literature suggested some Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates may mask their identity (Efrigg et al., 2011; Grant et al., 2011; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015). In addition, some undergraduates come to identify as Transgender and/or Nonbinary during their postsecondary experiences (Patton et al., 2016). Because of these variations, there is no absolute reliable data to determine the number of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in postsecondary education. Thus, this study chose to recruit participants from more than one institution to cast a wide net of participant

involvement for this study. More details regarding the number of participants for this study are provided later.

***Rationale for Participants Currently Enrolled at Least Part Time or Enrolled Within the Last Academic Year at a 4-Year Postsecondary Institution in the United States***

More variations exist between community colleges and 4-year institutions than between different 4-year institutions including academic focus, housing options, time to degree, academic requirements, and class sizes (Geller, 2001; International Student, n.d.). Thus, this study chose to limit its scope to 4-year postsecondary educational institutions. This attempt to control for institutional variations among participants assisted in bounding the study and better understanding the role postsecondary institutions had on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' environmental and interpersonal interactions and, subsequently, academic selections.

There is an important robust nature that comes with being able to obtain information on experiences close to the time the experience is happening. As academic selections during the undergraduate experience have short- and long-term ramifications on subsequent academic selections and experiences, this was especially true for this study given the aim was to understand the environmental and/or interpersonal factors that contributed to the postsecondary academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates (Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Galotti et al., 2006; Ganley et al., 2018; Germeijs et al., 2012; Kramer et al., 1994; Leu, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2016). Thus, the choice to limit participants to those who were currently enrolled allowed for this study to capture that robustness. In addition, as one's academic selections change and could be influenced during postsecondary

tenure, this study solicited all Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates across years from matriculation to graduation in the postsecondary educational life-cycle.

This study also recruited participants who were enrolled within the last academic year, meaning those who may have either recently completed their degree or stopped out from postsecondary education. As evident in Chapter 2, environmental and/or interpersonal interactions played a role in the retention of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates such as mistreatment being shown to impact their mental and emotional health which resulted in low academic performance and high levels of stress associated with stopping out (Goldberg, 2018; Hendricks & Testa, 2012; James et al., 2016). In addition, financial hardships due to limited support such as familial rejection were also linked to stopping out (Grant et al., 2011). Thus, this study allowed for participants with such experiences to be included.

### **Recruitment Strategy and Results**

To recruit participants for this study, non-probabilistic, multistage sampling was employed, which included volunteer sampling, convenience sampling, and snowball sampling (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fowler, 2009). Volunteer sampling is performed when research necessitates relying on participants who are willing to take part in a study, particularly if the research is considered sensitive to some degree (Jupp, 2006). Evidence in literature indicated the ways in which Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals come into or express their gender identity are dynamic and determined by their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions, including whether they exhibit internalized transphobia or decide to use social recategorization strategies (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Efrigg et al., 2011; Gonsiorek, 1988; Grant et al., 2011; Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; J. T. Pryor, 2015). Thus, this purposeful sampling approach was an appropriate choice for this study.

Convenience sampling from more than one institution was done in response to (a) the need to secure participants for this study with no reliable data in existence to determine how many Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates there are in the United States or enrolled in postsecondary education, and (b) the COVID-19 global pandemic that was occurring during this study that prevented in-person contact and the ability to recruit in that manner. This sampling approach provided a selection of participants who were readily available, overcame geographic proximity for data collection, and allowed the researcher to recruit through known contacts for assistance in soliciting for participants (Waterfield, 2018).

Snowball sampling was also employed to increase potential participants in the study (Crouse & Lowe, 2018). The researcher requested assistance from selected volunteer participants, interested participants who did not qualify for the study, and undergraduate affinity researchers to share the initial interest questionnaire (see Appendix A) for this study with their respective networks and with gatekeepers who would be supportive and willing to share this study with qualified participants (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). In using this sampling strategy, the participant engagement later during this study's participant screening questionnaire potentially and theoretically increased with the assistance of these volunteer participants themselves (Crouse & Lowe, 2018).

### ***Conditional Semi-monetary Incentives***

The decision to provide incentives for this study, including the specific amount and type, was made due to literature in Chapter 2 indicating financial concerns as a significant stressor for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, especially those of non-White racial and ethnic backgrounds (Grant et al., 2011; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). In addition, employment discrimination for Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations have been linked to financial

hardships (Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016). Thus, the researcher was committed to respecting the time and involvement of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates who chose to take part in this study by offering monetary compensation. This included those who participated in the study and the undergraduate affinity researchers who were recruited to aid in providing insight into the study and findings. More details on these undergraduate affinity researchers are provided later.

The amount of \$15.00 was chosen for those who were considered eligible for this study based on the initial interest questionnaire and who chose to take part in completing the subsequent participant screening questionnaire. Twenty dollars was chosen as an incentive for those who participated in and completed the interview process. More details regarding these recruitment and data collection procedures are provided later in this chapter. As the researcher did not want to provide an exorbitant amount of incentive that would exert pressure on respondents to participate in the study, these amounts were selected due to being comparable to the minimum hourly rate of an on-campus, undergraduate employee position at both of the researcher's educational institutions at the time of this study, which was \$14 per hour (Sthli & Joye, 2016). The COVID-19 global pandemic restrictions imposed by local governments and the CDC complicated the ability of participants to use traditional, in-person commerce at the time of this study (CDC, 2020). This led to offering e-commerce gift cards to Amazon.com as one incentive option for participants.

As literature has suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates are more civically engaged than the national average, this suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals may not be inclined to receive a semi-monetary gift to a specific company such as Amazon.com (James et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). This sentiment was confirmed

by undergraduate affinity researchers who suggested an alternative incentive option for participants to donate their incentive instead. Thus, participants had the option to choose an Amazon e-gift card as their incentive or to donate those funds to Campus Pride, a U.S.-based nonprofit organization geared toward providing supportive resources for LGBTQ students in college (Campus Pride, 2021).

### ***Undergraduate Affinity Researchers***

As part of the participatory-social justice design for this study, three Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate affinity researchers were recruited as consultants and assistants in various aspects of the study (see Table 2). One student identified as a Queer, Transmasculine Nonbinary, Neurodivergent, 2nd-year undergraduate who was double-majoring in Political Science and Sociology at the time of this study. They indicated being of German and Polish descent but specified they did not identify with their race in a way that was meaningful or important due to their view that race, like gender, was a social construct rooted in White supremacy. Another student was a 3rd-year undergraduate student double-majoring in Media and Psychology at the time of this study. They identified as Queer, Trans, and of mixed racial identity which included Native Puerto Rican and Jewish heritage. The final student identified as a Nonbinary/Agender Lesbian who enjoys presenting as more Femme. They noted being a first-generation (First-Gen) Latinx immigrant, a First-Gen college student, and a 5th-year student receiving their undergraduate degree in a Media and Art History double major. All three affinity researchers attended what is considered to be a huge (i.e., over 30,000 students), public land-grant research university in the western United States.

**Table 2: Undergraduate Affinity Researchers.**

| Affinity researcher   | Gender identity / expression                                     | Sexual orientation | Year in college | Major(s)  | Other salient identities  |
|-----------------------|--|--------------------|-----------------|---|---|
| Affinity Researcher 1 | Transmasc<br>Nonbinary   | Queer              | 2nd Year        | Double Major:<br>Political Science<br>and Sociology | Neurodivergent<br>German and Polish<br>descent*                         |
| Affinity Researcher 2 | Trans  | Queer              | 3rd Year        | Double Major:<br>Media and<br>Psychology            | Mixed racial<br>identity: Native<br>Puerto Rican and<br>Jewish heritage |
| Affinity Researcher 3 | Nonbinary /<br>Agender who<br>enjoys presenting<br>as more Femme | Lesbian            | 5th Year        | Double Major:<br>Media and Art<br>History           | First-Gen Latinx<br>immigrant<br>First-Gen college<br>student           |

*Note.* All three affinity researchers attended a huge (over 30,000 students), public land-grant research university in Western United States.

\* Affinity researcher specified they did not identify with their race in a way that was meaningful or important due to their view that race, like gender, was a social construct rooted in White supremacy.



These undergraduate affinity researchers assisted in reviewing recruitment materials and the participant screening questionnaire itself during the month of April in 2021 for readability (a) to verify whether questions were geared toward obtaining pertinent data for this study, (b) to confirm whether additional considerations or edits needed to be included, and (c) to ensure the questionnaire avoided positioning Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates as variables in themselves to be critiqued through genderist and cisnormative deficit-based lenses (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fowler, 2009). Such preliminary reviews before official dissemination of the questionnaire were beneficial because particular care is required when a researcher is unable to be immediately available to answer questions and oversee quality assurance of participants' responses (Fowler, 2009).

During the month of May in 2021, these undergraduate affinity researchers assisted in recruiting participants for the study and were asked not to participate themselves due to their involvement in the study. With the guidance of these recruitment parameters and strategies, the researcher engaged in recruiting for participants between May 2021 and June 2021. During the month of September 2021, they provided insight on the anonymized, aggregated results from the participant screening questionnaire and were consulted on potential questions to inquire upon for the interviews that would assist in answering this study's research questions. The researcher partnered with these undergraduate affinity researchers individually via one-on-one meetings and email correspondences. These undergraduate affinity researchers were compensated for their extensive assistance in the form of \$40.00 Amazon e-gift cards or donating those funds to Campus Pride.

### ***Invitation: Initial Interest Questionnaire***

To recruit participants for this study, the researcher created emails and a social media advertisement post that included a link to an initial interest questionnaire. This initial interest questionnaire—created and disseminated using an online survey software program called Qualtrics—asked potential participants for their age, gender identity, sex assigned at birth, whether they matriculated into postsecondary education directly after high school, whether they were currently enrolled at least part time or were enrolled within the last academic year at a 4-year postsecondary institution in the United States, and their school email address. This information was used to ensure participants met the minimum qualifications for the study and the school email address was used to (a) contact the student, (b) verify they were currently enrolled in or had attended a 4-year postsecondary institution in the United States, and (c) ensure no duplication of participation.

The researcher engaged in convenience sampling by individually contacting personal networks in various postsecondary institutions and asked that they disseminate the invitation email to those who may qualify for the study. Again, undergraduate affinity researchers also assisted in disseminating the invitation email to their personal networks.

As part of this study's volunteer and convenience sampling procedures, a social media advertisement was posted on Facebook to the researcher's personal networks and groups that included postsecondary educational affiliates and/or Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations. Invitation emails and social media posts were disseminated in early May 2021 and were repeated approximately 10 days after initial contact to minimize nonresponse (Fowler, 2009).

This invitation process garnered 2,895 interest responses. However, 2,709 were deemed unsuitable due to various reasons that included responses that indicated participants did not fit

this study's parameters, not providing contact information to follow-up, or submitting unusual responses that did not address questions prompted in the initial interest questionnaire. Thus, 186 respondents were considered eligible to take part in the participant screening questionnaire for this study.

### ***Participant Screening Questionnaire***

Literature has indicated the academic selections of Cisgender undergraduates are influenced by environmental and interpersonal interactions based on socially constructed genderism and cisnormativity (Chung, 1995; Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009; Ganley et al., 2018, Riegle-Crumb et al., 2016; Patton et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). This suggests similar associations may exist for Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates. Evidence also suggests the degree to which Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates were out with their gender identity, how they expressed their gender, and their environmental and interpersonal interactions may have reciprocal relationships to each other (Feder, 2020; Tourmaline et al., 2017). In addition, intersecting systemic oppressions can exacerbate negative impacts on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates (Grant et al., 2017; Hartzell et al., 2009; James et al., 2016; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Therefore, this study was of the assumption that associations exist between the environmental interactions, interpersonal interactions, and academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates that are tempered by the degree to which they are out, how they express their gender, and the degree to which they are read as Cisgender or gender-expansive. Additional modulations to such associations could be due to other existing, unique identity factors.

To intentionally select a variety of participants from the 186 eligible participants who completed the initial interest questionnaire and who could speak to such heterogeneity, a *single-*

*source, cross-sectional screening questionnaire* (see Appendix B) was employed. This screening questionnaire was chosen for a few reasons. First, using a cross-sectional questionnaire allowed for the collection of a variety of information at one time during a specified time period to make quick comparisons between participants on a number of variables for further exploration in interviews (Jann & Hinz, 2016; Liu, 2008). Due to a limited timeframe for this study, the ease of being able to ascertain a variety of data points at one time from participants was ideal (Liu, 2008). In addition, it allowed for the collection of demographic information from Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates from various points in time which aligned with Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model to understand the temporal factors related to their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and academic selections. Second, because one objective of this study was to centralize and amplify the perspectives and experiences of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates, using a single-source approach focused on Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates centered their perceptions and understandings.

This participant screening questionnaire (see Appendix B) was adapted from the existing CECE Four-Year College Survey that was developed from the CECE Model of College Success (S. Museus, personal communication, September 12, 2020). This CECE Four-Year College Survey was originally intended to measure the perceptions of undergraduates at a particular 4-year institution on its environment and the degree to which they characterized the institution as having culturally engaging campus environments based on the CECE Indicators (NITE, 2017a, 2017b). This instrument also included other individual variables such as "demographics (e.g., race, ethnicity, gender, age, religion, family income, parents' education), pre-college factors (e.g., academic preparation), academic dispositions (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy, intent to

persist), sense of belonging, educational plans, academic performance, and learning outcomes” (NITE, 2017a, footnote).

The types of questions this questionnaire employed were *closed-ended*, 5-point Likert-scale with a range from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* and multiple-choice questions. In addition, qualitative, fill-in, *open-ended questions* were included to capture further clarifications on participants’ salient unique identities, environmental interactions, and interpersonal interactions that were considered while completing the questionnaire. Such questions that did not restrict responses to predetermined options allowed the researcher to contextualize and explore the various ways in which participants approached and responded to questions that informed the selection process for potential interview participants for this study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Fowler, 2009).

As the original CECE Four-Year College Survey instrument was created for 4-year undergraduate students in general, modifications and additions to the questionnaire were made to garner information related to gender identity, gender expression, environmental and interpersonal interactions, and academic selections (e.g., academic declarations, enrollments, cocurricular involvements) of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates. This also included distinguishing between institutional peers, faculty, and staff when applicable to compare such interactions more narrowly. Additions that were made to address this study’s research questions were chosen from three add-on modules for the CECE Four-Year College Survey. These were the *Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy* module and the *Culturally Responsive Support Systems* module (S. Museus, personal communication, September 12, 2020). The first module was intended to capture the degree to which faculty used culturally relevant and responsive practices (NITE, 2017a, Culturally Relevant and Responsive Pedagogy section). The

second module captured the degree to which participants received “holistic, proactive, and humanized support” (NITE, 2017a, Culturally Responsive Support Systems section). These modules were designed to directly capture environmental and interpersonal interactions in postsecondary contexts and assisted in revealing how such interactions affected Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individual Influences and academic selections.

As the focus of the CECE Four-Year College Survey was primarily on postsecondary environmental and interpersonal perceptions, additional questions were included regarding academic dispositions and selections. To this end, sections of Galotti’s (1999) survey on the attitudes and affective reactions of undergraduates and their choice of major were used, specifically, the affective and descriptive rating scales. This study adapted these questions to ask participants to rate their level of agreement regarding their comfort level and confidence in their chosen academic selections. Other questions that were added included participants’ (a) gender identity and expression, (b) degree to which they were out as Transgender and/or Nonbinary in and outside the institution, and (c) academic year they began at the institution as this would determine whether they experienced their institution pre-pandemic or not.

As with the initial interest questionnaire, this participant screening questionnaire was hosted on Qualtrics. Due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, this format allowed participants to complete the online questionnaire in a convenient location either on a computer, tablet, or mobile device that had internet capabilities. Given literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals’ use of social recategorization strategies to conceal their gender identity from others, such self-administered questionnaires typically provide a higher likelihood of valid sensitive data responses as it reduces social desirability bias (Effrig et al., 2011; Fowler, 2009; Grant et al., 2011; Nicolazzo, 2017; O’Connor et al., 2008; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Seidman, 2013).

Once review of the participant screening questionnaire itself was completed by the researcher and undergraduate affinity researchers, the 186 eligible respondents from the initial interest questionnaire were invited to complete the participant screening questionnaire in late May 2021. In a similar fashion to the initial interest questionnaire, follow-up emails reminding participants to complete the screening questionnaire were sent approximately 10 days later to promote a higher response rate (Fowler, 2009). At the end of June 2021, 31 individuals completed the participant screening questionnaire. Information collected through this participant screening questionnaire was accessible only to the researcher and saved in the same manner described previously in the interview approach section. Participants' identifying information was disassociated from the data and kept in a separate, password-protected document.

### **Participant Selection**

From July 2021–September 2021, the researcher began the process of reviewing participant screening questionnaire responses. Undergraduate affinity researchers were consulted for their insights on responses received and these were used to compare the researcher's personal and postsecondary practitioner perspectives against current Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' lived experiences and expressions. These debriefings served to triangulate and identify different dimensions of responses to augment the researcher's interpretations and assisted in determining which participants would be invited to interview for the study.

In addition, because this study aimed to understand various environmental and/or interpersonal associations between Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and their academic selections, a *maximum variation purposeful sampling strategy* approach was used on the pool of 31 participants who completed the participant screening survey. This involved using demographic information and responses from the screening survey (i.e., perceptions of support

from various environmental and interpersonal relations on gender identity and academic selections, institution type, academic disposition) to select a broad, diverse range of participants who could provide breadth and depth of insight into the academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates based on environmental and/or interpersonal interactions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Schwandt, 2007). As this study was primarily interested in narratives from undergraduates who specifically identified in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary hypernyms, a range of individuals who identified in Binary Transgender identities (i.e., Trans Male/Trans Man or Trans Female/TransWoman), Nonbinary identities, and those who chose more than one of these identities were the primary participant factors narrowly selected from the available participant pool. Additional demographic variables that were considered for maximum variation purposeful sampling in these identity categories included gender expression, degree of outness with their gender identity to various populations, race and ethnicity, sexual orientation, (dis)ability, socioeconomic background, year at the institution, employment, academic discipline(s), and cocurricular involvement(s).

Given this sampling strategy and insights, 15 participants were selected in September 2021 from the 31 individuals who completed the participant screening questionnaire. These 15 participants were invited via email to schedule a phone interview or a virtual interview using the video conferencing platform, Zoom. Participants were reminded via email about 14 days after initial contact to schedule an interview if they had yet to respond by that time (Fowler, 2009).

Unlike quantitative studies, qualitative research does not define a standardized number of participants needed to be considered adequate for data collection and analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Seidman, 2013). What is emphasized in determining adequacy in qualitative data and collection is having sufficient representation of the



individuals and views in the population being examined as well as having *saturation* where new information is no longer appearing in data being collected (Seidman, 2013). However, as mentioned previously, temporal and resource limitations were also taken into consideration regarding data collection and determining participant sample size (Seidman, 2013). Suggested sample sizes of even as little as one or two participants have been considered adequate due to the depth of information typically explored in narrative studies (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Of the 15 participants who were invited to interview for this study, six participants responded and completed the 90-minute individual interview during October 2021. More information on participants is provided later.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis began during the first interview and continued throughout the duration of the interview data collection process. In line with this study's transformative approach and its use of Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics lens, the researcher used a *critical discourse analysis* approach to highlight and uncover "the ways in which social relations, identity, knowledge, and power are negotiated" (Siegel, 2018, p. 525) by Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates through their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and how those influenced their academic selections. To accomplish this, the researcher used *open coding* to uncover emic findings by identifying distinct components in the narratives and comparing them to each other for themes (Saldaña, 2016). More specifically, *Narrative coding* or the application of story elements to narratives using an adaptation of the *Labovian model* aided in understanding the linear order of events in the narratives to find patterns:

1. Orientation: Introduction and setting the stage for the story. Who? When? Where?
2. Complicating Action: What was the primary issue that set the story in motion?

3. Evaluation: What were the succeeding events that resulted from the Complicating Action introduced? What thoughts, reactions, or emotions came up for the student during the experience?
4. Results: How did the interaction end or resolve? How did the student describe the experience upon reflection? What thoughts, reactions, or emotions came up for the student at the end of the experience? (J.-H. Kim, 2016; Patterson, 2008; Saldaña, 2016)

As academic selections are actions taken by participants based on negotiating various factors experienced temporally, *Process coding*, or coding that denotes action emerging within a given time, was employed to uncover how participants perceived their positionality in their academic selection strategies and recounted the factors that played a role in them (Saldaña, 2016). In addition, *Affective coding* methods such as *Emotion*, *Values*, and *Versus coding* were implemented given the relationships and proposed impacts on academic selection found between sense of belonging, academic dispositions, and academic performance (Museus, 2014; Saldaña, 2016). This iterative process of *codifying* and *synthesizing* the data as they were collected informed ensuing data collection efforts and uncovered contiguity-based relations and persistent, repeated patterns between transcripts and memos (Emerson et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2016). Prevalent themes and contradictions from this process were also recorded in analytic memos to document findings (Emerson et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2016).

Once all interviews and initial codings were completed, continued iterative coding occurred using a second cycle on the data corpus. More specifically, *Selective* or *Focused coding* was used to categorize emergent codes together or separately as they related to preestablished etic codes based on literature presented in Chapter 2 and this study's theoretical frameworks

presented in Chapter 3 as to whether environmental and/or interpersonal interactions existed in participants' academic selection narratives in and across the data (Saldaña, 2016; Thornberg & Charmaz, 2014). Again, analytic memos were used to record patterns and themes during this iterative process to assist with subsequent coding efforts (Emerson et al., 2011; Saldaña, 2016).

To determine the rigor, accuracy, and completeness of data analysis, the researcher engaged in participatory-social justice design by inviting interviewed participants to review findings as "rigorous examiners and auditors of [the researcher's] analysis" (Saldaña, 2016, p. 37). Such a review assisted in evaluating and validating the researcher's postulations and perspectives through this iterative process and triangulating these interpretations and analyses (Jick, 1979; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Maxwell, 2013). Based on this methodology, the following chapter provides detailed findings and analyses resulting from these processes.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

Chapter 1 introduced an existence marred by socially constructed, systemic genderism and cisnormativity for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals and highlighted postsecondary education as a potential key factor in promoting more optimistic outcomes. It also introduced the purpose of this study, which was to understand from Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates the perceived relationship between their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and their academic selections. Given the limited, existing literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, Chapter 2 illustrated postsecondary environments and communities as hostile, at most, and ignorant at the very least toward the cultural and social needs of their Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations. Very little focus or attention has been paid to their academic needs, which might negatively impact their postsecondary retention, degree attainment, and, ultimately, future ability to participate and survive in mainstream society.

Chapter 3 laid out the theoretical framework, methodology, and target participants for this study's participatory-social justice, narrative inquiry approach. It also detailed the use of Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics as a pragmatic and transformative lens through which to understand Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate experiences in both Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model and Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model of college success frameworks. This approach aimed to answer the research questions of this study, which were:

1. What environmental and/or interpersonal interactions do Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates describe as informing their postsecondary academic selections, if at all?

2. How do the narratives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates provide insight into the ways in which their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influence their postsecondary academic selections, if at all?

To align with Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics and prioritize participants' words and experiences, the following sections present participants' unique profiles, perceptions, and stories first to set the stage for the findings. Following are the findings that discuss themes that emerged across narratives and along Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model and Museus's (2014) CECE Model of College Success. The chapter ends with how findings answered this study's research questions along with a comparison on how such findings aligned with, deviated from, or expanded previous literature and this study's theoretical models.

### **Participant Overview**

A total of six Transgender and/or Nonbinary participants took part in interviews and provided narratives on their environmental interactions, interpersonal interactions, and academic selections for this study. Tables 3, 4, 5, and 6 are provided as a general overview of the participants based on information collected from their respective screening questionnaires and interviews to illustrate their various identity, demographic, academic, and institutional information. Although participants chose their own pseudonyms for themselves, the researcher created pseudonyms for their respective postsecondary institutions and other entities such as close individual contacts or cities.

**Table 3: Participants' Gender Information.**

| Name (pseudonyms) | Pronouns                                  | Gender identity            | Gender expression  | Gender importance   |
|-------------------|---|----------------------------|--|---------------------|
| A. Gonzales       | He/him/his                                | Transman                   | Very flamboyant and Androgynous                                    | Extremely important |
| Aaron Le          | He/him/his                                | Male, Female-to-Male (FTM) | Mostly Masc[uline]   | Extremely important |
| Andrew Williams   | He/him/his                                | Transmasculine             | Exclusively Masculine  | Important           |
| Ever McDaniel     | Rotating they/them/their and she/her/hers | Nonbinary                  | Flexes between Androgynous to Semi-Feminine but mainly Androgynous | Important           |
| Lee               | He/him/his or they/them                   | Transmasc, Nonbinary       | Butch  | Extremely important |
| Sunny             | They/them/their                           | Transmasc, Agender         | More masculine, Whatever I feel on the day                         | Extremely important |

*Note.* Gender importance information was in response to the screening question, “Compared to your other identities, how important is your gender identity to your self-identity?”

**Table 4: Participants' Additional Identity Information.**

| Name (pseudonyms) | Age | Racial/Ethnic identity                         | Sexual orientation            | (dis)Ability           | Religion                                       |
|-------------------|-----|--|-------------------------------|------------------------|--|
| A. Gonzales       | 24  | Latinx/e, Brown                                | Queer/Gay                     | Did not disclose       | Spiritual                                      |
| Aaron Le          | 20  | Southeast Asian<br>(Vietnamese, Laotian, Thai) | Bi[sexual]                    | Did not disclose       | Does not identify with any religion            |
| Andrew Williams   | 22  | White  | Bisexual/Pansexual<br>Asexual | Did not disclose       | Spiritual, Does not identify with any religion |
| Ever McDaniel     | 22  | White  | Queer                         | Neurodivergent         | Agnostic                                       |
| Lee               | 21  | Half-Korean, Half-Mexican                      | Lesbian                       | Disabled /<br>Autistic | Spiritual, Does not identify with any religion |
| Sunny             | 20  | Black, Descendant of<br>American slaves        | Lesbian                       | Did not disclose       | Spiritual, Ifa                                 |

**Table 5: Participants' Socioeconomic and Familial Educational Background.**

| Name (pseudonyms) | Class         | Highest level of education by any parent/guardian | Hours employed at institution per week | Hours employed outside institution per week |
|-------------------|---------------|---|--|---|
| A. Gonzales       | Working-class | Associate degree or equivalent                    | Over 30 hours                          | 0 hours                                     |
| Aaron Le          | Upper-class   | Master's degree or equivalent                     | 0 hours                                | 6–10 hours                                  |
| Andrew Williams   | Middle-class  | Bachelor's degree or equivalent                   | 16–20 hours                            | 0 hour                                      |
| Ever McDaniel     | Middle-class  | Prefer not to respond                             | 0 hours                                | Over 30 hours                               |
| Lee               | Middle-class  | Doctoral or professional degree or equivalent     | 11–15 hours                            | 0 hours                                     |
| Sunny             | Working-class | High school diploma or GED                        | 11–15 hours                            | 16–20 hours                                 |

**Table 6: Participants' Undergraduate Information.**

| Name (pseudonyms) | Year at current institution                       | Entered current institution as | Major(s)              | Minor(s)                           | Estimated current college grade point average | Current institution(s) (pseudonyms)                  | Previous institution(s) (pseudonyms)              |
|-------------------|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------|---|--|---|
| A. Gonzales       | 6th year and a term (Final term)                  | First-year                     | Animation             | None                               | 3.1–3.5                                       | Meeno State University                               | High school                                       |
| Aaron Le          | 4th year (Final term)                             | First-year                     | Communication         | Creative Writing, Computer Science | 3.6 or above                                  | Treven University, Loct University (studying abroad) | High school                                       |
| Andrew Williams   | Graduated Spring 2021 (Total: 4 years and a term) | Transfer                       | Psychology            | None                               | 3.6 or above                                  | Strodon University                                   | Zeyra State University<br>Breon Community College |
| Ever McDaniel     | 2nd year  | Transfer                       | Sociology             | None                               | 3.6 or above                                  | Quirt State University                               | Geera Community College                           |
| Lee               | 4th year (Final Term)                             | First-year                     | Studio art, Sociology | Art History                        | 3.1–3.5                                       | Edent College  | High school                                       |
| Sunny             | 3rd year  | First-year                     | Theatre, Cinema       | None                               | 3.1–3.5                                       | Roco State University                                | High school                                       |



**Table 7: Institutional Information.**

| Institution<br>(pseudonyms)  | Size   | Type                                  | Location                        |
|------------------------------|--------|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Breon Community College      | Large  | Public community college              | Western United States           |
| Edent College                | Small  | Private liberal arts college          | Midwestern United States        |
| Geera Community College      | Huge   | Public community college              | Western United States           |
| Loct University <sup>a</sup> | Large  | Public research university            | English-speaking country abroad |
| Meeno State University       | Huge   | Public university                     | Western United States           |
| Quirt State University       | Medium | Public university                     | Western United States           |
| Roco State University        | Large  | Public research university            | Western United States           |
| Strodon University           | Large  | Public land-grant research university | Western United States           |
| Treven University            | Large  | Private research university           | Western United States           |
| Zeyra State University       | Large  | Public university                     | Western United States           |

*Note.* Size of institution was defined as: Small, fewer than 5,000 students; Medium, between 5,000–15,000 students; Large, between 15,000–30,000; and Huge, more than 30,000 students.

<sup>a</sup> Participant Aaron Le was attending this institution as part of a study abroad opportunity at the time of his interview.

Given that literature suggested there exists a relationship or, at the very least, a simultaneous development between gender identity and academic identity that may temper the academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (e.g., Bandura, 2001; Bem, 1983; Etringer et al., 1990; Fassinger 1996; Gottfredson, 1981), narratives from participants about their pre-postsecondary educational gender identity and academic development were included to contextualize and fully understand participants' perceived intersections between their environmental, interpersonal, and academic realms during college. Participants provided varying degrees of detail in their narratives of what they deemed to have informed their gender identity, gender expression, academic development, and how their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influenced their academic selections during college.

The following section illustrates the gender identity, gender expression, and academic selection narratives of each participant with descriptions of environmental and/or interpersonal interactions related to those experiences. Narratives are organized broadly into two different timeframes—pre-college and during college—and are formatted in an adapted Labovian model to understand the linear, temporal order of events within them (J.-H. Kim, 2016; Patterson, 2008; Saldaña, 2016). The term *pre-college* was used in this study to align with Museus's (2014) use of the term to describe experiences students bring with them upon matriculation into postsecondary education. Because of this narrative choice and previously mentioned simultaneous gender and academic identity developments, narratives occasionally weave in and out of both gender and academic developments in this linear, temporal format but are generally organized with gender identity development aspects presented first and academic developments second.

Again, as evident in literature, the lived identities and expressions of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals are not fixed and can be fluid depending on their identity development

positionality and the necessity to use identity management practices based on various interpersonal and environmental factors (APA & NASP, 2015; Beemyn, 2019b; Beemyn et al., 2005; Carroll et al., 2002; Effrig et al., 2011; Flores et al., 2016; Hines, 2010; James et al., 2016; Lev, 2004; Linley et al., 2016; Patton et al., 2016; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Scott et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2013; Wilchins, 2002a, 2002b). Similarly, academic selections can also change or be malleable depending on various factors (Denice, 2020; Kramer et al., 1994; Leu, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). In addition, gender identity and sexual orientation are distinct concepts though they are often conflated together due to the aforementioned (a) relationship between them as they influence and inform each other, and (b) how Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations experience similarly targeted discrimination that stem from genderism, compulsory heterogenderism, and heterosexism (Chung, 2003; Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Evans et al., 2009b; Lev, 2004; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Scott et al., 2011; Watkins, 1998). In short, due to the complexities and fluidity of such concepts and identity developments based on temporal and proximal processes, there are infinite ways in which Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals may experience, perceive, and narrate their developments and understandings. Thus, it is important to note the following narratives directly used participants' own words throughout most of the narratives and reflected participants' perspectives as accurately as possible given the limited, temporal parameters inherent in language. Due to this writing style, to avoid having to continuously cite each sentence in participants' narratives and interrupt the flow of the narrative, the researcher included broad, overarching citations at the beginning of each narrative.

### **A. Gonzales (he/him/his)**

In a phone interview with A. Gonzales on October 25, 2021, he self-identified as a Queer/Gay, Latinx/e, Brown, “very flamboyant and Androgynous,” Transman from a working-class socioeconomic background who matriculated to Meeno State University as a first-year student. Of these identities, he emphasized being Trans as his most salient identity; using the term *Trans* to refer to the identity and community as a whole, not himself. He was beginning his last term as a 7th-year Animation major with an estimated college grade point average (GPA) of 3.1–3.5 at the time of this study.

#### **Pre-College**

A. Gonzales never really paid much attention to his gender identity until he started puberty. It was not until he learned what dysphoria and Trans meant in his early teens that he had the language to describe what he felt. This prompted him to question and deeply explore his gender identity, leading him to identify as Gender-Neutral or Agender under the Trans hypernym for some time. The only individuals who knew he identified as such were his Trans-identified friends. He also began exploring his self-expression—being drawn to Gothic and punk fashion—and expressing his gender androgynously in what he considered “very flamboyant and androgynous” ways.

#### ***Pre-College Academic Selections***

A. Gonzales was always confident in wanting to do art and this carried throughout his life from childhood into his Animation major. There was only a brief period in high school where he contemplated being a therapist or Sociologist due to an interest in how people interacted with and influenced each other. However, being unsure how to combine his artistic creativity into

those pursuits made him stick with Animation as an academic pursuit by the time he began attending Meeno State University.

Going to college had been instilled in him from a young age by his family and parents so he never thought of it as a choice. When applying to college, A. Gonzales only focused his college research on whether institutions had good Art programs. He applied to Meeno State University along with four to five other institutions, most of which were private art colleges, and was only accepted to Meeno State University so he decided to go there.

### **During College**

Upon entering Meeno State University, others perceived him as an androgynous Woman even though he identified as Trans or Gender-Neutral or Agender. During his early 20s while still attending Meeno State University, A. Gonzales came to the realization he identified as a Man and had been repressing that part of himself up to that point. He immediately decided to transition socially and medically as he did not want to graduate from Meeno State University being seen as a Woman. He began to come out with his gender identity whenever the opportunity presented itself, starting with his Trans friends, other non-Trans friends and peers in student organizations he was a part of, social media friends, and in his on-campus job at the institution's LGBTQ identity center. Other than his peers, he came out to his mother and to his professor for his Queer Television and Film elective course. All of these experiences were positive.

A. Gonzales noted his gender identity as a Transman influenced his social circles because he intentionally built friendships with Queer/Trans people and Cisgender, Heterosexual individuals who were enthusiastically supportive. This support helped him to feel comfortable exploring his gender identity and provided him with opportunities to see various ways other Trans people could exist, which aided in his own identity development. In addition, he used

virtual groups on social media platforms to connect with other Transmasc-specific individuals during the COVID-19 global pandemic but recently moved away from those virtual groups to focus more on his career goals.

A. Gonzales did not feel completely comfortable presenting as a Binary Man and was nervous about it until about a year after he came out as a Transman. This shift was prompted by being misgendered unintentionally by others, including in Queer and Trans spaces, and he began putting more effort into presenting a more masculine gender expression. This effort was also supported by the COVID-19 global pandemic stay-at-home orders which allowed him (a) the space to explore his masculine gender expression away from others, and (b) the time to start hormone replacement therapy (HRT) to physically transition. At the time of his interview, classes were mostly going back in-person and he noted many people saw him now as “a regular dude.” Though he is not opposed to dressing in feminine ways and attributed this comfort to his Queer/Gay Man identity, he found it more convenient and less taxing on his mental health and energy to present in more masculine ways to get through daily tasks and carry on with his business without hassle from others. Thus, his gender expression choices were dependent on his daily assessment of his stamina to deal with others potentially misgendering him.

Regarding his institutional perceptions and experiences, he described the rhetoric at Meeno State University as very supportive of marginalized groups but felt the intent behind it was more “commercial” because the culture itself was lacking the same level of enthusiasm in promoting support for marginalized groups in everyday experiences. He also described the culture as disconnected, in which students had to choose between completing academic assignments or developing community and so students did not have time to, or chose not to, get to know each other due to the academic rigor.

Similar to the environmental culture, he noted his peers tended to be outwardly accepting of his identity but would become distant over time with him due to feeling awkward about being unfamiliar with Trans people or out of fear of saying something offensive. He also noticed when he began HRT that others he had interacted with before began to respond in subtly, negative ways toward his physical changes. He mentioned feeling a sense of disappointment in those subtle reactions and the distancing that tended to occur. He also recalled experiencing harassment in the past from conservative students at his institution due to his employment at the LGBTQ identity center.

The only place at the university A. Gonzales did not actively come out to was in his classroom settings, except if he felt the need to do so. This meant he was often perceived as a Man in his classes because there were classmates who did not know him before the COVID-19 global pandemic stay-at-home orders and met him for the first time in class after he already started HRT. This choice to not disclose his identity in class was mostly out of convenience due to his mental stamina assessment, wanting to avoid the potential of facing transphobia, and a self-consciousness of appearing self-aggrandizing about his identity.

### ***During College Academic Selections***

He described his academic selections as very individualistic, saying he did not really take others into consideration when making them. His friends did help him find some academic resources toward his career goals and his mother was supportive financially so he could focus on school rather than on financial issues while in college.

It was not until his last year at Meeno State University that he realized postsecondary education was optional, especially for his particular field. However, he decided it was better to continue attending and complete his college degree because he was already nearly complete and

it could help him have better chances of getting an internship or accessing career information and peer feedback on his work. Given the benefits of being in college, the influence from his family to attend college, and being so close to finishing his degree, he did not see a reason to not continue finishing his degree. Despite this decision to continue his academics, he noted feeling stressed about needing to manage his medical transition and academics simultaneously because these presented competing priorities. He often made the decision to prioritize his mental health by tending to his medical transition needs and skipping classes, which negatively impacted his academics.

A. Gonzales participated in many culturally based cocurricular student organizations at Meeno State University, including those related to Latinx identity, advocacy, dance, and art due to his racial/ethnic identity. Because of these experiences, he developed an understanding that even though people might have similar identities, they have varying, unique experiences. This influenced his outlook on his gender identity. Though A. Gonzales identified as a Man and used he/him/his pronouns, he emphasized his unique experiences being Trans and not “just a dude” believing there was no one way to be a Man. Along those lines, he also believed there was no one way to be Trans.

A. Gonzales described his environmental considerations and academic selections in a similar manner to how he described his perspectives on gender identity and expression. He understood environments could vary from each other; like professions, schools, or towns that were either more or less liberal, conservative, or Male-dominated. Given this understanding, he often avoided uncomfortable situations if he could but was aware he eventually might need to confront uncomfortable situations due to his identity. Thus, he spent a lot of time contemplating how to navigate such situations living as a Transman. He was also conscientious of his



positionality and how his gender identity was perceived in various settings so he often thought of ways he could potentially use privileges others place on him as a Man to his advantage and help support and promote marginalized others. However, as it was difficult for him to imagine what potential situations may occur, he felt his imagination was limited for what he could plan. In short, he took environments into consideration in his academic selections, but also did not let them deter him from his pursuits.

A. Gonzales and his friends observed most Queer students tended to pursue what he considered to be serious and respected academic selections such as Sociology, Social Work, Teaching, and Therapy. However, he saw himself humorously as the odd-one-out as an Animator. He also described his major department as not having a lot of Queer professors and, if there were, “they’re very, very, very in the closet because it just never comes up.”

As an Animator, A. Gonzales described himself as a story-teller and wanting to tell his own stories. Sometimes he wanted to tell stories involving Trans characters navigating everyday experiences and not just their gender identity or transitioning. However, his identities and the identities of his peers never came up in his academics. Though he wished he could talk about his experiences in class more, wanting to bridge the gap and normalize relations between him and his Cisgender classmates, courses were so assignment-focused that it often led to a lack of time and energy for him and his peers to learn about and elaborate on each other’s identities in the classroom setting.

For professors in his major department, he often cultivated working relations with them and perceived his interactions with them as generally positive and them wanting students to succeed. However, this was mostly within the parameters of their job rather than wanting to connect personally with students. The few professors he built lasting relations with helped him to

negotiate ways he could succeed academically in their classes, made referrals to campus resources, or aided in expanding his professional network through personal referrals to colleagues in the field. He noted the few faculty and staff at the institution who were intentional, showed care, and took the time to talk to students and knew what students needed were often overburdened with students wanting to meet with them. This on top of their own busy schedules due to their positions caused them to not always have the time to give the attention they wanted to students.

When he first got to college, many classes he took were prescribed or required. Otherwise, for the most part, as long as he took courses from a list of approved options for his requirements, he could choose whatever courses he liked. When asked about how he decided what classes to choose, he noted not having a set plan and based his decisions on consulting with peers on what professors and classes they enjoyed. He also consulted with professors who made recommendations on classes to take toward his career goals.

He mentioned on one occasion early on in his academic career that he avoided taking a core major class with a certain professor because a lot of his Women-identified friends warned him the professor was biased toward Men. Because A. Gonzales was still perceived as a Woman by others at the time, he decided to wait and take the course with another professor to avoid having to deal with that situation. He also referenced his Queer Television and Film elective class again, noting he took it for fun because it was focused on Queer identity and Trans expression and was not a requirement toward graduation. He was able to write his final paper for that class on Trans representation and had opportunities to explore his own identity while watching course-required media with different forms of historical expression. In addition, this professor was the most impactful of all of A. Gonzales professors because he was also Queer-

identified and provided emotional and academic support for A. Gonzales's gender identity exploration, including providing additional film recommendations related to his personal gender identity exploration experiences.

### **Reflection and Assessment**

When asked how he felt about his academic selections during his time in college, he mentioned a duality of feeling content with the choices he made and his journey but also dissatisfied due to what he saw as poor administrative handlings such as classes constantly being full and having to constantly choose alternative classes toward requirements. He did not have a clear sense of who to communicate with regarding guidance on what classes to take, whether his academic plans were realistic, and whether his choices would help him in the future to secure a career and be financially secure.

Along those lines, A. Gonzales still wanted to be in the Animation industry and, as mentioned previously, was actively using online social media platforms to connect with others regarding his career field such as looking for job opportunities to apply to or having others critique his portfolio and resume and cover letters. However, he had begun second-guessing whether he wanted Art and Drawing to be his main form of income. He attributed this change in outlook to a couple of factors. First, he noted those in his profession were not paid or treated well and the COVID-19 global pandemic caused him to develop low post-graduation expectations regarding being able to secure a job in the current climate and being financially stable.

Second, he understood his professional field to be predominantly Male, Cisgender, and Heterosexual and knew there was concern for him navigating that field as a Transman and maintaining job security. An example of this was a conundrum that came up for him recently in applying for jobs. Because of his hyper-awareness of identifying as a Transman, he was

conscious of the ways in which genderism colored the lens through which others may perceive him compared to when he was seen as a Woman. Thus, in writing his cover letters, he developed an anxiety of potentially coming across as egotistical or potentially receiving unearned opportunities and privileges over others due to being perceived as a Man compared to if he were applying as a Woman or an Agender individual. In addition, he is aware that if those in his profession discovered his gender identity, it could potentially jeopardize his employment.

Third, he felt overall “burned out” in his major due to aforementioned academic demands it imposed that did not provide room to consider the personal lives of its students. He noted the stress of having to navigate managing his medical transition with his doctor and medical insurance company, his everyday personal needs, and the rigors of school caused him to often feel drained to the point he seriously began to assess his priorities and debated being content graduating and working in retail just to afford basic needs and focus on managing his medical transition and mental health.

### **Aaron Le (he/him/his)**

Aaron Le completed a Zoom interview on October 18, 2021 and self-identified Bi[sexual], Southeast Asian (Vietnamese, Laotian, and Thai), mostly Masc[uline], Male or Female-to-Male (FTM) from an upperclass socioeconomic background who matriculated to Treven University as a first-year student. He noted his gender identity as being extremely important to him in relation to his other identities. At the time of his interview, he was studying abroad at Loct University and beginning his 4th year as a Communication major and double minor in Creative Writing and Computer Science. His estimated college GPA at the time was a 3.6 or above.

## **Pre-College**

When asked about pre-college experiences related to gender identity and academic developments and selections, Aaron specifically disclosed experiences encountered during elementary school, middle school, and high school timeframes. The following illustrates Aaron's narratives during these timeframes.

### ***Elementary School***

From a very young age, Aaron thought of himself as a Tomboy. In elementary school, he gravitated toward mostly Male social circles. Though he was often the only perceived Female in his social circles, he felt like "one of the boys." When he played video games, he tended to choose avatars that were Male. When he did Creative Writing, he wrote about Male characters. During this time, he imagined going into acting and singing, though those were short-lived pursuits. He also mentioned his father taught him and his sibling about the Ivy League universities during this time, so he had already memorized their names, locations, mottos, and mascots early.

### ***Middle School***

In middle school, he dressed as a Boy one Halloween, and he recalled feeling so happy. Despite this and his earlier tendencies toward Male social circles and virtual manifestations, his gender expression was mostly Fem;<sup>3</sup> typically wearing flowery dresses, using nail art to paint his nails, and was accustomed to complimenting or being forward and friendly with others. He mentioned his father, who he described as a "Cis[gender], Straight, Masc Man" and immensely accepting of the LGBTQ community, often took him and his sibling to Pride parades in their

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<sup>3</sup> Similar to the term *Femme*, which is used in Lesbian culture and history to describe a Lesbian who expresses a traditionally feminine gender expression, the term *Fem* is often used to describe one's gender expression as feminine but is spelled in this way so as not to appropriate from the history and culture of the term *Femme*.

hometown when they were young. During this time, Aaron began to lean toward Business as an academic goal and he attributed this to his father's influence because he considered him a role model. His father worked in Business and taught him what a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree was during this time. Aaron imagined becoming a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of his own company in the future but he also considered becoming an author instead.

His parents were always supportive of his academic success in their own ways. His father checked to make sure he and his sibling did their homework, and his mother ensured they were fed and had transportation to and from school and cocurricular activities. Aaron participated in his middle school's Science Olympiad and Math teams where he experienced sexism as a perceived Female and described the environments as "male-dominated STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, Math] spaces." An example he provided was when he and a Male teammate won first place in a competition and the teammate began spreading rumors about Aaron being "emotional and panicked" throughout the event and his teammate carried them to victory. Aaron disagreed with how his teammate characterized him and his involvement in the competition and believed he would not have received the same treatment if he was a Male or perceived as Male at the time. Along these lines, Aaron described the coastal city in the western United States that he grew up in as privileged, where the academic culture was hyper-competitive and his peers were more rivalries than supports in their quest to attend postsecondary education. He noted the culture was heavily focused on scores, grades, and getting into the best colleges. Because of this, attending college was never a question for Aaron and he considered it a natural progression in life without ever thinking about not wanting to go.

## *High School*

It was not until the end of his 1st year in high school that Aaron happened upon some online videos made by Trans YouTubers about their experiences. The content of those videos and how they described feeling Male resonated with Aaron; this was when he realized he was Trans. He began obsessing about gender and his gender identity, noting it was all he could think about for months. He remembered not even being able to focus on lectures in class due to being preoccupied with thinking he was “a guy,” contemplating gender and what this would mean for the rest of his life, and deeply questioning if this was really who he was.

During his 2nd year of high school, he began to change his gender expression by dressing in what he considered significantly more masculine ways such as graphic tees and cargo shorts as those were easy to obtain though not necessarily fashionable. He also began to bind his chest and stopped painting his nails during this time to pass as Male more. During this time, he believed his father began suspecting what was going on and became more vocal with Aaron and his sibling about always accepting them and loving them as his children, no matter their gender identity or sexual orientation. Despite this support, Aaron was still nervous to come out to his family.

As for his academics during this time, Aaron played chess competitively, which he also described as a very Male-dominated field, so he felt pressured as “the single Girl in the tournament hall.” He described a frustrating culture in the sport that promoted a double standard for Women where, if he performed badly, it would be attested to his gender, at the time being perceived as Female. If he performed well, it was viewed as an insult toward his Male counterparts to be “beaten by a Girl.” He only saw himself as playing chess like anyone else, regardless of gender identity or expression.

When Aaron came out to his family his junior year, he recalled the next day coming home from school to find his father had hung a Transgender flag and a Rainbow Pride flag up in their family room, had done research all day, and presented him with numerous tabs open on his computer of various Trans-affirming educational resources for Aaron to review. His mother was also accepting and validating in language, including using his correct pronouns. His sibling was more subtle in acceptance, being nonchalant about his coming-out yet making a point to use correct pronouns among their shared social groups, which Aaron noticed and appreciated. Aaron remembered feeling both overwhelmed and grateful for his family's support, especially from his father.

Afterward, Aaron noted both parents empowered him to discover a gender expression that felt most right, especially his mother who was insistent on expanding his wardrobe to help him pass and feel confident in himself. She was particularly enthusiastic about going shopping with him to try on clothes and he was grateful his parents financially supported his wardrobe transition due to how expensive clothes were. Though Aaron stopped painting his nails to pass, he continued his nail-art hobby by painting his mother's nails instead and it became a way for them to spend time together. His father expressed feeling left out, so nail-art became a bonding activity between him and both his parents. During this social transition, Aaron noted he presented in hyper-Masc ways such as aggressively dropping his voice or "being macho" because he was so hyper-aware about trying so hard to pass. His peer group also began to change in this period from mostly Male to mostly Trans individuals who supported him and he felt a sense of belonging with them.

Aaron started taking Testosterone (T) soon after coming out to his parents, during the end of his junior year in high school. Most of his physical transition occurred over the summer and



he returned to his senior year in high school with his voice dropped and was physically different, prompting his coming out to his school environment. Subsequently, he underwent gender-affirming surgery to complete his physical transition and completed his legal name change.

Aaron recalled his transition being surprisingly and overwhelmingly fast. Though he was excited because it was what he wanted, there was still a small part of him that was nervous and hesitant of whether he was sure of this decision. It was also around this time when Aaron began to end most of his friendships at school because their academic competitiveness was becoming toxic and impacting his confidence and mental health in how he viewed his self-worth.

Once he began *passing* and being perceived by others to be a Cisgender, Heterosexual Male, he felt he could recalibrate his gender expression to be more his authentic self, which leaned more Fem, and he was okay with others seeing him as a CisGuy who liked traditionally feminine expressions. In addition, seeing his father eager and excited every time to get his nails done, especially because his father gravitated toward bright colors and lots of glitter, made Aaron more confident in doing his own nails again once he was passing. His peer group changed again during this time to be mostly Female.

When applying to college, Aaron noted prestige was an important factor in his decision due to the academic culture in his city and schools. Though safety as a Trans individual was also important to him, he noted not feeling the need to take it into much consideration because all the institutions he was interested in were already Queer and Trans-friendly based on his research and being able to find Queer-related student clubs, communities, resources, and supports at each campus. He decided on Treven University in the end due to various reasons such as receiving the most financial aid from them, the resources available to him as a student, and the financial ease of travel to visit home. He selected Economics as a major because he was still considering going

into Business and eventually getting an MBA. Despite this, he noted he only thought about his academics when prompted by others on what he wanted to be when he grew up. He described his academic selections as open to being a lot of things rather than knowing what exactly to be.

### **During College**

Having begun most of his transition journey before college, he entered Treven University with his name and gender expression already reflecting his identity. Thinking on his transition happening before college and his nervousness of whether it would be what he wanted, he noted he was happy he did it so quickly and was able to start college already who he wanted to be as he believed it would have been a hassle to manage that process during college.

When asked if he was stealth at Treven, he noted he was fine with others knowing his Trans identity but was also not overtly forthcoming with his identity, often having to consider the social groups he found himself in and whether he was ready to out himself to the group or not. He did note because he was able to pass as Male without being *clocked* or recognized as Trans, he did not have to think much about his safety due to the *passing privilege*—the ability to live and exist in society in their binary gender identity without question or fear from others clocking or being able to read them as Transgender and/or Nonbinary—he had compared to other Trans individuals. He also characterized Treven University as having an accepting and supportive culture toward LGBTQ individuals.

Regarding his gender expression, Aaron noted some differences between his gender expression at Treven University versus when he was at home. He did not do his nail art because it was an inconvenience for him to carry his equipment to school rather than having issues regarding his gender identity; though, he recognized this may impact how others read his gender

compared to if he did continue doing his nails. He was also more conscious about being complementary or as forward or friendly to others now being seen as a Male compared to before.

Though Aaron noted not having experienced being treated differently due to his Trans identity, he noticed how differently he was treated as a Male compared to before when he was a Female, especially in STEM-fields. In spaces with others who perceived him as *CisHet* (Cisgender, Heterosexual), he sometimes heard questionable or transphobic comments and he wondered how they would treat him differently if they knew he was Trans.

Aaron described Treven University as being very accommodating and open to him as a Trans student. When he completed his on-campus housing application and noted he was Trans, a staff member from the Housing department contacted him to discuss accommodations, options available, and what he would feel comfortable and safe with regarding his on-campus living situation. He noted many of the Treven University staff have Queer-related symbols visible in their office like Pride flags and they normalize sharing pronouns, which he perceived as being supportive of Trans identities. When Aaron began attending Treven University, he signed up for the LGBTQ identity center's listserv and received emails often of various resources and events available which made him perceive the institution as being very supportive.

Aaron also described Treven University as being very competitive academically and cocurricularly. He used the term "duck syndrome" to describe its high-achieving culture where students would posture and appear composed with each other but would conceal how hard they were actually working to maintain such a high level of achievement and involvement. Treven University also had a strong Computer Science emphasis where most students took at least one Computer Science course during their tenure at the institution, with many pursuing careers in top Computer Science firms.

### *During College Academic Selections*

Regarding his academic selections, Aaron noted he mostly made his choices based on whether he enjoyed what he was doing and whether it could potentially provide him with skills and opportunities to get a job after graduation.

**Cocurricular Involvements.** Aaron was involved in various on-campus groups related to his interests and academics. Related to his major and Creative Writing minor, he held various positions over the years for the university's newspaper and was involved in the campus Marketing student organization. He was also involved in the Theatre student organization, which stemmed from his young desire to be an actor or singer. He was also involved in various LGBTQ student organizations. However, because he was studying abroad, he was not currently involved in those activities.

He attributed his ability to codeswitch—change the way he interacted with groups or emulated people he was around—between explicitly Queer spaces and straight-presenting spaces to his involvement in Queer student organizations at Treven University. For example, he tended to drop his voice or present himself more as Male while in straight-presenting spaces to not get misgendered whereas he did not do that in Queer spaces.

When Aaron attended new student events upon matriculation to Treven University, many alumni and current students provided testimonials and presentations on how studying abroad was a significant part of their Treven University experience. The academic advisor he was assigned to his 1st year also recommended that he study abroad during his undergraduate experience. Thus, he planned early on to make room for it in his academic plans while attending Treven University. He originally planned to go during his junior year but, due to the COVID-19 global pandemic, had to postpone to his senior year.

In his application to study abroad, one of the prompts asked what nonacademic challenges he would have to face while abroad. Aaron wrote about his Trans identity and how he researched the likelihood of getting hate-crimes in various locations based on the rise in anti-Trans sentiment and violent incidents globally. Through this research, he learned about Loyola University and its surrounding area's liberal culture and wrote how it seemed to be the safest option and location for him to attend abroad. Despite this, Aaron noted he was not sure how safe it would actually be for him being Trans so he decided to go back to not painting his nails while studying there to have one less thing to worry about while abroad.

Regarding his studies abroad, he was completing requirements for his Creative Writing minor and expanding his writing skills. For cocurricular involvements, Aaron is part of the university's Theatre organization, e-Sports student organization, and LGBTQ student organization.

Aaron began as an Economics major and quickly realized his 1st year that it was not the major for him due to his dislike of Math and how quantitative the major was. In addition, Treven University did not offer a Business degree so he began to explore what other major options were available to him. He entertained being an English major due to enjoying writing or a Computer Science major because Treven University was well-known for that field. He even considered a Computer Science undergraduate/graduate dual program. However, he wanted to still pursue an MBA and did not think having that and both a bachelor's and master's degree in Computer Science would be a good use of his time. He ended up taking an Introduction to Communication class for a General Education requirement and enjoyed it while also excelling in it, so he changed his major to Communication. He noted Communication was a good fit for him as he was interested in how and why people behave and communicate in certain ways and how

different mediums shape the ways in which people communicate with each other. This led him to consider pursuing a career in Marketing with this major, which allowed him to continue pursuing his long-term goal of Business and getting an MBA after his undergraduate degree.

Aaron chose Creative Writing as a minor due to his passion for writing from a young age. He noted how great it would be if he were able to write a novel and have success but did not think it was a realistic pursuit when considering employment and economic stability. This is why he decided to pursue Business and Marketing as a career, which could afford him the time and finances to write as a hobby on the side. He brought up, again, his father's unconditional support and how he offered for Aaron to come home after graduating and not work for a couple years to write a novel and his father would put down the needed capital to publish it. Though Aaron was grateful and appreciated his father's continued, unconditional enthusiasm from his academic and career pursuits, he felt an innate daunting pressure to make responsible, thought-out choices given that support and is cautious of what he says and decides to do.

Aaron noted he added his Computer Science minor last minute to his academic record because of the heavy Computer Science culture at Treven University and given some requirements for the minor also counted toward his Communication major. He explained there was environmental pressure to do Computer Science at the university because of the value placed on it and STEM-fields generally compared to Humanities at the institution. He indicated feeling more legitimate among his peers at the institution having a Computer Science major because of negative judgements directed at his Communication major and Creative Writing minor fields and this minor allowed him to connect with other STEM peers. Despite doing well and enjoying his Computer Science classes, he did not want to pursue Computer Science as a career long-term.

Regarding the culture of the Computer Science department, Aaron observed the culture was Male-dominated and felt Women were not given the same credibility or attention that Men received. As a passing Male student, he was granted more credibility in his environmental and interpersonal interactions with others as being “one of the guys” in his STEM-related courses. He also recognized a culture that faults Girls for being bad at STEM due to their gender although it would not be as big of a deal if he or other Male-presenting peers were bad at STEM. Aaron explained he did not feel, nor was he made to feel, ignorant if he went to his professors to ask questions on course material he did not understand. However, from conversations with his Female friends, if they did the same, they were perceived as vapid and felt pressure to not perpetuate stereotypes of Women being incompetent in STEM, so they ended up not reaching out for help. Aaron noted he empathized with this sentiment as he felt similarly in STEM-related spaces before he transitioned.

As mentioned previously, Aaron was assigned an academic advisor for his 1st year at Treven University who helped him with course selections during that time. He also mentioned the advisor had a Trans son, so they bonded over that. He suspected he was paired with that advisor based on information he submitted to the university that indicated his Trans identity and was grateful for it. This advisor was integral in helping him switch from Economics to Communication when he was not doing well in the former major and encouraged him to study abroad. He appreciated the advisor did not pressure him toward any particular academic route and asked him questions about his interests and recommended classes that fit those interests.

After his 1st year, Aaron mostly chose his classes based on interest and requirements that needed to be completed to graduate, not by professor. He also described Treven University as a safe place for Queer people, so he was not concerned when he was selecting his classes. Also,

because he passed as Male pretty well, he did not have to worry about any potential transphobia directed at him. He used a database made available by the university of reviews by students on classes and professors to inform and finalize his selections; but, he noted there was not a lot of information provided related to gender identity, so his decisions were often not based on that. He did get recommendations from friends on Trans professors and gender identity-related classes and, though he was interested in them, he had no room in his academic plans to take them due to the academic rigor of his institution.

Despite this, he did mention a Memoirs course he took for his diversity requirement for his general education. In the course, he explained there was only one Female classmate in attendance and the professor would single her out whenever there was a Female character in a class reading and would question her as if she were a representative for all Women, which made Aaron uncomfortable and concerned. Later, the class was assigned to read a memoir by a Trans FTM author and Aaron had a lot to say on the matter but was unsure if he wanted to out himself to the class. He was glad he did not because his professor turned out to be transphobic and would make disparaging comments about Transgender individuals during class discussions, which also made Aaron feel unsupported or accepted in the course. Aaron ended up not participating at all in class after that. He also described how the final assignment for the course was to write a memoir about himself and he ended up gender-swapping his childhood to Male to avoid outing himself and potentially making himself a target for the professor. He was glad when the course was over.

### **Reflection and Assessment**

Aaron sometimes thought of what direction his life would have taken if he were not Trans. He reflected on his time before transitioning, noting he was always doing STEM-related



activities and cocurricular activities in an attempt to be perceived as a Guy because he associated Maleness with STEM-related academic pursuits. He believed if he never transitioned and was Female that he would most likely gravitate toward a STEM career such as Computer Science due to negative judgments toward Women in STEM and toward Humanities as a field. He attributed this to an internal pressure as a Female to further gender equality in STEM fields and because he “like[s] going against the grain.” However, as a Man, he felt less concerned about his gender as it related to his academic selections, noting he felt able to freely pick whatever major resonated most with him without having to think about the perceptions of others.

Along this line, Aaron indicated being happy with his academic selections, including his major and minor selections, both institutions he was attending, opportunities available to him, and friends he was able to make. He hoped these would set him up for success after he graduates from Treven University. However, he noted it may be too soon to tell whether his choices in major and minors would allow him to be employable with a living wage.

Despite spending his undergraduate career working toward an MBA and potentially going into Marketing, including studying for the Graduate Management Admissions Test (GMAT) toward an MBA program, Aaron mentioned again that he was still not sure what he wanted to do after college and was not settled on a career yet. He tentatively had plans to become a Chief Marketing Officer (CMO) for a company or maybe assist his father in making a family start-up company with him and his sibling once they graduated. But, as of now, he planned on taking it one step at a time by first completing his bachelor’s degree, then completing graduate school, then deciding from there. He noted he wished he had someone to talk to at the institution about long-term goals and what he could do during his undergraduate career rather than having to do most of that planning himself. Though he did appreciate being allowed to take

responsibility for his journey and discovering the resources available at his institution, he wished he had assistance with knowing the mechanics of what to do and when toward his academic goals and someone to point him toward available resources.

In addition, Aaron came to realize college involved a lot of navigating life and social environments, not just attending school and academics. Thus, he tried to maintain balance in his life with activities he enjoyed and not be as focused on academics as he was before college; though he noted it was difficult given the culture of the university.

### **Andrew Williams (he/him/his)**

On October 20, 2021, Andrew Williams completed a phone interview for this study and self-identified as Bisexual/Pansexual, Asexual, White, exclusively Masculine, and Transmasculine from a middle-class socioeconomic background. He attended Zeyra State University after high school for 2 years, transferred to Breon Community College for 1 year, then transferred to his current institution of Strodon University for a year and a term. He considered his gender identity important to him in relation to his other identities. At the time of his interview, he had just graduated with a degree in Psychology with an estimated college GPA of 3.6 or above.

### **Pre-College**

Andrew described himself as a shy, quiet person throughout his life. He did not really understand what being Trans was and had never considered experimenting with gender or identifying outside the binary an option or a possibility until his junior year of high school. He spent a lot of time online then and was introduced to the concept via Tumblr by seeing other Trans people. He described the experience of seeing other people not feeling positive about their assigned gender at birth as a way for him to put into words for himself the same feelings. From

there, he began to identify as Nonbinary and noted having a “gender crisis,” thinking quite a bit about his gender identity, gender overall, and being acutely aware of others seeing him as Female. Andrew noted he never came out officially to his family, but he did tell them the name he wanted to be called at that time and they were aware of his gender exploration and were supportive. He started experimenting with his gender expression in little ways by cutting his hair and using a binder for his chest because his high school and his job both had uniforms, so he did not have much leeway to experiment in that way and was not passing as Male. Though he described his hometown community as super accepting of people, he came out to some online friends first before presenting more masculine and introducing himself with a new name the 1st day of his senior year of high school to his classmates and teachers. He remembered they were all supportive of him.

### *Pre-College Academic Selections*

Andrew’s father was in the fire department, so he wanted to be a firefighter at a young age because of that. In first grade, an invited guest from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration came to speak to his class, which made him want to become an astronaut and go to space. However, he recalled his mother not allowing him to “leave the planet,” so he lost interest in that profession. In third grade, he told his mother he was going to leave society and live in a Redwood tree, which later influenced his academic choices. Starting in fifth grade, he wanted to become a writer, created a pen name, did a lot of Creative Writing, and recruited his friends to be illustrators and editors. When he entered high school, he began to lose interest in that career and worked for a bakery, which prompted him to consider owning his own bakery. He also briefly mentioned his advanced placement (AP) Psychology teacher was influential to him

only because he looked up to her as a role model at the time, but she was not influential academically to him until he was already in college.

During his high school career, he began to struggle with his mental health and described his shyness developing into social anxiety so he became unable to talk to anybody. He explained this impeded him from seriously thinking about having a job and a career in the future. He described it as feeling detached from his classmates because he mostly listened and did not talk to anyone. Andrew clarified his gender identity was a part of his mental health concerns but was only one of many topics and not the sole issue, describing his mental health as sadness and feeling “like a weirdo” because he was sometimes the only Queer student in class. Eventually, his mental health led to depression and suicidal ideations to the point he was certain he would not be alive long enough to have a career or future to be concerned about, describing it as operated under the assumption he would be dead before getting to that point. Despite this, Andrew still applied to colleges, seeing it as the next thing he had to do during his high school career rather than something he would actually follow through with doing. He applied with the bakery idea in mind as a Business Major per his mother’s recommendation only because he was not sure what to put. His mother was in banking and worked in a nonprofit so she pointed out he could learn good skills in Business as a starting point and he could change his major later. Other than this, Andrew did not feel he had to study something specific or attend a specific school to please his parents as they were supportive of his decisions.

He admittedly did not do extensive research into the colleges he applied to due to his mental health and assuming he would most likely be deceased before matriculation. Though he noted Strodon University was his “dream school” because his AP Psychology teacher attended there, he was waitlisted when deadlines to submit his acceptance for other universities were

approaching. Thus, he chose to accept his admission to Zeyra State University because he was admitted into their honors program in Entrepreneurship. It was only after he submitted his deposit to Zeyra State University that he found out he was accepted into Strodon University, but it was too late to change by that time.

Following his high school graduation, he was admitted into a week-long treatment program for his mental health. After this experience, Andrew stopped presenting as Male and went back to presenting a feminine gender expression and identifying as Female. It was not until he was packing his things and getting ready to move into the residence halls at Zeyra State University that going to and starting college felt like a reality regarding his next steps in life, even if he was not planning for anything beyond that.

### **During College**

As a transfer student, Andrew matriculated into Zeyra State University immediately after high school but then transferred to Breon Community College after 2 years. After one year of attendance at Breon Community College, he transferred to Strodon University for a year and a term to complete his bachelor's degree. The following recounts Andrew's narratives on these experiences.

#### ***Zeyra State University***

Andrew started at Zeyra State University identifying and presenting as Female due to his summer experience; he described himself as "closeted," explaining he was suppressing and disregarding his gender identity in all parts of his life during this time. This continued throughout his 2-year tenure at the institution. His 1st year, he spent most of his time with his 12 Female residence hall peers who all joined sororities, so he often attended fraternity parties with them and they were unaware of his gender identity. His 2nd year, Andrew met his partner who was

attending Breon Community College back in his hometown, so he spent more time going home on the weekends to visit his partner, which meant he stopped talking to his Zeyra State University peers and going to parties. Andrew noted his partner is also a Transman.

Andrew described the city of Groht where Zeyra State University was located as small, predominantly White, majority Republican, homophobic, and hostile. He was quite surprised by this when he moved into his residence hall at the institution. He described once having a homophobic slur yelled at him from a passing car while he was still presenting Feminine and wearing a shirt with former President Barack Obama on it carrying a rainbow flag. Others he knew had experienced worse before and he felt unsafe and not at home in this city. At the same time, his partner was working on transferring from Breon Community College to Strodon University. Andrew explained, despite Groht being an unwelcoming city and environment, he would most likely have stayed at Zeyra State University if it was not for his partner. Thus, the influence from his partner and the hostile environment pushed him to leave Zeyra State University and transfer to Breon Community College.

**Zeyra State University Academic Selections.** During his time at Zeyra State University, Andrew participated in a 1-term internship with the university's gender-based activist organization, which provided lessons related to gender, including Queer content. Besides that experience, he took Business classes toward his intended major and described the curriculum as regimented and prescribed. He described his experience in the major as being able to complete coursework and do well, but he did not enjoy it or saw himself continuing to take such classes. He ended up losing interest and was unsure of what he was going to do academically after that.

### *Breon Community College*

When Andrew left Zeyra State University, he moved back into his parents' house, got an off-campus job at a homeless shelter, and began attending Breon Community College to complete required courses to transfer to Strodon University like his partner had done. He realized during this time that ignoring his gender identity would not make it go away so he began identifying as Trans again, cutting his hair short and wearing binders. He also began to buy and exclusively wear Men's clothing, which he was not doing previously. About 6 months after starting at Breon Community College, Andrew spoke to his mother about wanting to start taking T and he began medically transitioning at home and identifying fully as Male; though he noted he did not officially come out to his parents this time either.

Similarly, Andrew transitioned while employed at the homeless shelter and never officially came out to his coworkers about his identity. He considered addressing his transition during staff meetings and decided he did not want to, seeing his transition as more a personal journey. He noted his coworkers would appear confused as he began to transition because they were accustomed to seeing him more Feminine but never directly addressed it with him. The extent to which he came out to them was putting his pronouns on his nametag.

Before his transition, Andrew described being hyper aware of others perceiving him as Female, so his transition and being seen as Male gave him immense confidence due to not having to worry about how others perceived his gender identity. This allowed him to clear up "brain-space" and was much less preoccupied with the matter once he was able to pass as Male. He also noted his social anxiety subsided and he was significantly alleviated by his transition, so he reverted back to being just shy and quiet. In addition, he described becoming more aware of his Whiteness since transitioning and being seen as a Man. Before transitioning, he noted being

afraid to walk places by himself at night or feeling paranoid about being attacked in those circumstances. Now, he did not experience the same fear and was very aware that he felt safer because others perceived him as a “White dude.” However, because of this, he was now navigating being aware that others may ironically perceive him as a threat, which has become an interesting development for him.

When he transferred to Breon Community College, he stopped connecting with people from Zeyra State University and his pre-college friends. He also noted he did not interact with many others at Breon Community College due to his work schedule, so he mostly interacted with his partner, his parents, and the few coworkers he had while he was transitioning.

**Breon Community College Academic Selections.** Andrew chose to attend Breon Community College out of convenience because his partner had gone there and knew how to guide Andrew in navigating the institution. Regarding his courses, Andrew explained he was required to take a lot of Math and Programming classes to transfer to Strodon University, which were difficult for him because his academic skills were not inclined toward STEM courses. He was, however, able to take some elective courses out of interest such as a yoga class or a course on Race and Socioeconomics that discussed Queer issues. While considering what to major in, Andrew took a self-care and meditation Psychology course where he learned a new self-care activity every week. This prompted a rediscovery of Andrew’s interest in Psychology based on the influence his AP Psychology teacher had on him in high school and the work he was doing in his off-campus job. He thought about becoming a Case Manager and going into Social Services to support Queer youth so began taking Psychology classes alongside his requirements to transfer. Once he completed his requirements, he transferred to Strodon University.



### *Strodon University*

Aside from the influence his AP Psychology teacher and his partner had on him to transfer to Strodon University, Andrew explained the overall environment of the institution was a big factor in drawing him there. He referred to his third-grade desire to live in a Redwood tree and felt he did that by transferring to the institution, given its aesthetic. He also described the culture as Queer-friendly, diverse, and inclusive with a strong emphasis in student well-being, mental health, and self-care which he appreciated.

Unfortunately, 6 weeks after Andrew transferred to Strodon University, stay-at-home orders due to the COVID-19 global pandemic were enforced. Because of this, he mostly kept to himself and did not have many opportunities to get involved in the campus community or develop many relationships with anyone at the institution. In addition, online learning due to the COVID-19 global pandemic was not his preferred platform for learning so attending his virtual classes and connecting with his partner was the primary extent of his peer relations at the institution. Despite this, he described Strodon University as having a great community because he observed his peers were very supportive of each other and proactive about creating online Discord servers to build community during this time. Andrew also noted he believed Strodon University did everything that could have been done to support Transgender students from the information he was able to find via researching the university website and from his partner, including gender-inclusive restrooms and various options for on-campus housing. Because of this, Andrew explained even though it might have been easier to stay at Zeyra State University to finish his degree, his transfer to Strodon University—where he found an accepting, supportive, and open community with like-minded people—was worth the time and effort as it benefitted his mental health.

**Strodon University Academic Selections.** Andrew transferred to Strodon University and enrolled as a Psychology major. However, in his last semester, he took a Human Development Psychology course to complete his major. This course changed his understanding of the field and discouraged him enough to not want to pursue the field anymore but still complete his degree because he was already finishing it. He explained the course was focused on how non-White and non-Western communities passed on knowledge and skills to children while simultaneously highlighting the field of Psychology as being rooted in White, Euro-centric, and upper-class ideologies, which it perpetuates through its studies and practices. Though he enjoyed his classes, he noted he could not work in a career that did not actively cater to everyone and ignored a wide variety of people. Thus, he graduated with his Psychology degree knowing before leaving the institution that he would not pursue the field.

He described his course selections as a good mix of courses he was required to take and having the option to choose courses out of interest that could meet other graduation requirements. For example, he took a course that focused heavily on various sexual identities, including Queer and Trans identities and a Biological Psychology class that discussed various biological sex developments like Intersex bodies in juxtaposition to notions of gender. Though he noted Strodon University offered a wide selection of courses related to sexual orientation and gender identity, he did not actively seek them out because most of the information was not new to him so he would not necessarily be learning anything from them.

When the COVID-19 global pandemic regulations began to ease, he participated in an in-person summer internship with the university's agroecology farm learning about plant ecology, the environment, and water conservation, which he greatly enjoyed. Because of this, his interest

in the outdoors since third grade, and being drawn to Strodon University partially by its outdoor aesthetic, he decided postgraduation to pursue a career in the field of Environmental Science.

### **Reflection and Assessment**

Regarding his gender identity and expression, Andrew was in the process of changing his wardrobe to more of a style he wanted to cultivate rather than items that would help him pass because he was perceived as a Man nowadays. He also noticed how sexist society was because he saw how people treated him differently as a Man compared to when he was perceived as a Woman, being more willing to believe him or listen to him now compared to before.

When asked about his academic selection process, he did not feel inclined toward any specific profession based on his gender identity, and his selections were more dependent on his interests. He described his path as “meandering” because he did not have the consistency and continuity of attending one institution for the entirety of his undergraduate experience that other people may have had. In retrospect, if he could do it again, he would have wanted to do more research on the colleges he applied to and consider factors that might have influenced his future, including the culture of the surrounding community of the institution.

If it were not for the COVID-19 global pandemic, Andrew believed he would have made attempts to be more involved and connect with more people at Strodon University, including going to the LGBTQ identity center to meet people. He attended the Queer-specific graduation ceremony for Strodon University and saw how his peers connected and reminisced with each other and he wished he had been part of that, musing how getting involved more might have led him to consider making other academic selections such as adding a minor. However, he noted he allowed himself to get comfortable with not interacting with anyone due to the circumstances.

Given his circumstances, he was content with the academic choices he made overall and believed having to make those decisions and find out what was best for him was beneficial for his personal development. He described establishing a confidence in himself to decide what he was capable of doing and wanted to do rather than pursuing an academic direction just because he could do it well. As of now, he did not want to do more schooling, so he was hoping to get fieldwork experience toward a career in Environmental Science.

Regarding academic support, Andrew did not have a large social circle, so he mostly had his parents who were unconditionally supportive and encouraging of him to find something he wanted to do, especially throughout his undergraduate experience with changing majors and institutions. He also had his partner who he primarily connected with throughout most of his undergraduate career and was a significant role in influencing his academic selections. When it comes to institutional supports, he did not personally connect with any counselors or instructors at any of the institutions he attended but wished they recognized students holistically as people with lives outside of school so they could help students make connections between academics and other aspects of their lives.

**Ever McDaniel (rotating they/them/their and she/her/hers)**

Ever McDaniel completed a phone interview for this study on October 24, 2021, and self-identified as a Queer, White, Neurodivergent, Nonbinary young adult from a middle-class socioeconomic background whose gender expression was mainly Androgynous but “flexes between Androgynous to Semi-Feminine.” She attended Geera Community College after high school for 3 years then transferred to Quirt State University. They indicated her gender identity was important to them in relation to her other identities. At the time of their interview, she was beginning their second and final year as a Sociology major while being dual enrolled at Geera

Community College to complete graduation requirements. Her estimated college GPA was a 3.6 or above. Ever's narrative is written to rotate between they/them/their and she/her/hers pronouns for every pronoun usage.

### **Pre-College**

Ever realized their sexual orientation early on in life and came out as Queer her 1st year in high school. They were also aware early on that she was not Female but did not have a label with which to identify themselves. She noted feeling very isolated during this time because they did not know anyone else who was Queer nor was anyone she knew out at that time. This led them to turn to social media (e.g., Instagram, Tumblr) and online searches where she found the term Demiflux and identified as such until their sophomore year when she found the term Nonbinary, which they explained was similar to Demiflux but was more recognizable to others and easier to explain. She started learning about different LGBTQ labels, developed an LGBTQ blog, and met Queer-identified long-distance friends online through that process. It was through these experiences that Ever started feeling connected to the LGBTQ community.

This led them to start visiting the local LGBTQ community resource center (Center) where she began volunteering for the Center and doing speaking-engagements about Transness, gender identity, gender expression, and gender socialization at different K–12 and higher education schools. These experiences gave Ever opportunities to discuss these topics with people who did not identify as Trans, Nonbinary, or Queer, which helped Ever process and develop their own ideas and concepts on the topic.

Starting junior year in high school, Ever's in-person friends began coming out in various ways with gender identities and sexual orientations and started visiting the Center as well. This prompted Ever to come out to friends with her own gender identity and sexual orientation, noting

their friends coming out first gave Ever confidence that she would be accepted and receive a positive response. Ever noted they were still friends with this social group to this day.

It was during this time also when Ever began to express her gender identity more and explore different styles, primarily rotating between dressing androgynously to dressing Semi-Feminine. They explained there was not a lot of Queer or Trans representation in media at the time, so her friends were a major influence on their gender expression experimentation. Ever's friends helped her realize they could express gender in ways other than Femininely and it was okay to do so. Though many of Ever's friends and chosen family<sup>4</sup> at the Center were Trans, she learned well during this time how to look for indicators in conversation as to whether a person who did not identify as Trans would be okay to come out to with their gender identity. Oftentimes, Ever would talk about gender identity in general with an individual in question first and see how the person would react or would wait to see if an individual responded positively or negatively to gender identity topics before determining her own comfort and safety level of coming out or waiting to come out to that person.

Ever's relationship with their parents was already poor regardless of her gender identity or sexual orientation. Toward the end of junior year, Ever came out to their parents for the first time because she wanted to start using they/them pronouns exclusively and have their parents not use her birth name when getting dropped off at the Center. In addition, Ever noted their parents frequently violated her privacy by going through Ever's room and personal possessions so they would have most likely found out eventually anyway. As Ever expected, the experience did not go well and has since had to come out numerous times to their parents because her parents'

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<sup>4</sup> A term originating in the LGBTQ community, it is used to refer to people in an individual's social circle who are not biologically or legally related to them but provide emotional support and community kinship to the point they are seen as surrogate family members to the individual (Gates, 2017; Weston, 1991).

response was often to ignore it, thinking it would go away. They also came out to a lot of extended family and had similar experiences. Because of this, Ever presented more Cisgender with family to not have to come out repeatedly and reeducate on her Nonbinary identity. Though Ever understands the importance of education regarding gender identity, they described this approach as being “less complicated” for her given they are constantly educating others given her volunteer work and how taxing it is to do that in their personal life as well.

### *Pre-College Academic Selections*

Ever always thought going to college was what people were supposed to do, so she never considered not going. In addition, because of Ever’s adverse relationship with their parents, she spent a decent amount of time thinking about a future career and being financially stable to become independent from their parents and get out of her parents’ house. There was a time when they really wanted to go to Cosmetology school because she enjoyed doing hair and understood the profession as being Queer-friendly where they would get to talk to people and offer support as part of the job. However, she knew Cosmetology school would be seen as unacceptable by their parents so never saw it as a legitimate academic option.

For a long time, Ever wanted to be a Zoologist until sophomore year of high school when she discovered it required intensive biology and other STEM courses and that deterred them from the profession. She also felt it was best not to pursue that field because many of the majors that led to Zoology were Male-dominated and was skeptical of how accepting those academic fields were for Queerness or Nonbinary identities. Though they admitted this perception was just her assumption and was open to possibility being incorrect, their past experiences with those academic fields led her to believe those fields were not Trans-accepting. During this time, they had a good History teacher that made her interested in History to the point they began to study it

in her spare time. This experience made Ever realize there was not much diversity or representation in History taught in schools and cited their gender identity and sexual orientation as major influences in pursuing supplemental learning on Queer history and Disability history. This prompted Ever to decide on becoming a History educator to teach more diversely representative history.

Ever's college plans were to attend community college first then transfer to a 4-year institution as it was the most affordable option for completing her degree. A self-proclaimed "very Type A person," Ever had a detailed academic plan written out before matriculating to college to complete their History degree and graduate with the least amount of debt as possible. This plan outlined what courses to take per term, how many courses, and how long she expected it would take to complete their undergraduate degree. During high school, Ever took some courses at Geera Community College and another local community college. From these experiences, she decided to attend Geera Community College after high school as (a) it had more course options available which would aid in their long-term academic plans, and (b) the environment felt more like a 4-year institution, which she wanted to experience.

### **During College**

Similar to Andrew, Ever as a transfer student attended Geera Community College immediately following high school and transferred to Quirt State University after 3 years. The following captures Ever's narratives on these timeframes.

#### ***Geera Community College***

Upon entering Geera Community College, Ever did not think about their gender identity as much anymore because she felt confident in it by that time in their life. This confidence, Ever explained, had a lot to do with her peers and friends demonstrating it was okay to feel



comfortable identifying how they wanted and there was no one way to be Nonbinary. In addition, she described Geera Community College as accepting for the most part and they felt safe while attending so she did not feel the need to focus on their gender identity so much.

**Geera Community College Academic Selections.** Ever began as a History major at Geera Community College and, during her first term, their academic counselor advised her to take a difficult course load toward their major requirements. She described this term as very stressful because they were also working two off-campus jobs and one on-campus job. While in her second term, Ever took various other courses for general requirements outside of their History major, including a Gender Studies class and a Sociology class.

For the Gender Studies course, Ever recalled the professor attempted to teach on gender identity and provided incorrect information to the class that conflated gender identity, gender expression, and sexual orientation. She understood the professor was doing their best to teach the subject but was not doing well. Ever approached the professor after class regarding the matter and ended up becoming a guest speaker for the professor in teaching their peers about those concepts. In this experience, Ever concluded to be able to teach this part of the course effectively that she would need to come out with their gender identity and share her experiences and resources to illustrate those different concepts to their classmates.

For the Sociology course, Ever ended up enjoying it even though she initially only took it to complete an academic requirement. This, in addition to realizing they would need to take Economics courses toward her history major, prompted Ever to change their History major to a minor and declare a Sociology major. Ever also noted she concluded becoming a History teacher was not financially sound and a major in Sociology would provide more employment options. They noted being frustrated about “wasting a lot of time” taking courses toward a history major

only to end up not pursuing it and diverging from her original academic plan as their original goal was to finish as debt-free as possible. However, she was thankful to have switched majors before getting too far into the History major.

When it came to their gender identity and gender expression, Ever noted typically not taking those into consideration when making academic selections. She also noted not being particularly close with any faculty or staff at the institution either. But they would typically decide after a week or 2 into the term, depending on the classroom climate, whether to be out or not and share her pronouns in each class. They would watch and see if anyone else stated any personal pronouns and, if so, she would wait for an appropriate moment to come out when it would not be out-of-place in the class conversation or activity. An example Ever gave regarding what they considered an unsafe environment was in a Sociology class where some of her classmates shared their support of the 45th president of the United States and other conservative topics so they decided to not come out in that course.

Ever mentioned living in her parents' house at the time had a significant impact on the courses they would consider taking each term. This was due to her adverse relationship with their parents overall, so Ever often considered what classes would be manageable to take while “[having] to deal with a lot of their mental health stuff and a lot of their abuse,” stating, “[I would] consider whether or not I should take this really intense class while also having to deal with entering a war zone at home.” Because of this tension, Ever navigated her academic journey during Geera College without their parents' assistance but still with them in mind. Ever planned to transfer to Quirt State University to finish her degree and move out of their parents' house. She applied only to that school because it was the most affordable option given their financial

situation and it was still local enough that she did not need to move far away from both off-campus jobs.

Ever often spent time at the institution's LGBTQ identity center where they got involved in a gender-related student organization. Ever noted having many friends due to her various involvements and would often consult friends on choosing classes. Ever also noted losing touch with high school friends after starting at Geera Community College.

### *Quirt State University*

In between leaving Geera Community College and matriculating into Quirt State University, Ever moved out of their parents' house right before the COVID-19 global pandemic stay-at-home orders were enacted. This meant Ever had never been on-campus and felt unable to provide insight into the culture of the institution as her only interaction with the school was attending online classes. This also meant Ever had not participated in any cocurricular activities offered by the university.

Based on interactions, Ever felt her professors were supportive of their academics and gender identity. However, Ever recalled having a difficult time with staff and administrators when wanting to have her lived name populate the university's online systems instead of their birth name for her courses. They were transferred and referred numerous times to various campus departments and individuals for months before the issue was resolved, which Ever found to be frustrating and unsupportive.

Regarding family assistance during their Quirt State University experience, she noted their aunt assisted them in submitting a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) and proof-reading her academic essays for class assignments. Otherwise, Ever was on their own without family assistance.

**Quirt State Academic Selections.** Once Ever began at Quirt State University, she decided to drop the History minor and only pursue a Sociology major to graduate sooner and with less debt. They mostly followed the recommended course pattern prescribed by the university to complete the major and had enrolled full time or over full time to complete her degree as soon as possible.

When selecting specific courses to take, Ever used online student reviews and discussions with peers regarding what classes to take with which professors. Many of their coworkers at her job with a youth community center graduated from Quirt State University with Sociology degrees, so they would often consult coworkers on class experiences. It was also through these conversations that Ever decided to pursue Social Work as a career because her coworkers provided insight into options available in that academic major field. Ever saw the career as a means to support and promote diversity and representation of their gender identity and sexual orientation. Because her Sociology major required an internship experience, they worked with their supervisor at the youth community center to expand her job duties and incorporate opportunities that would meet this requirement to graduate and provide experience toward a career in Social Work.

At the time of Ever's interview, they mentioned Quirt State University did not offer the foreign language she wanted to take to complete their Language requirement so she chose to dual-enroll at Geera Community College for the term to complete that requirement. Though Ever wished they could have done some things differently to graduate on time or sooner, she mentioned being happy with their academic selections.

## **Reflection and Assessment**

Ever believed it was important for institutions and staff to not make assumptions about students, students' identities, and students' experiences. She suggested being more aware of what students' lives were like outside of school, being an ally to students in various ways by using that knowledge, and understanding school was only one aspect of and not the entirety of students' lives.

Ever also wished they had more opportunities to get academic assistance from staff in-person and had difficulty making appointments and meeting with those individuals. Though she recognized the unique situation Quirt State University was in regarding this issue due to the COVID-19 global pandemic regulations, they indicated feeling the same way when attending Geera Community College prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic regulations. She also wished there was more consistency with services as they had different staff members who provided her with varying and sometimes conflicting information, which made navigating postsecondary education on their own frustrating and confusing.

### **Lee (he/him/his or they/them/their)**

On October 17, 2021, Lee completed a Zoom interview and self-identified as a half-Korean and half-Mexican, Disabled/Autistic, Transmasc, Nonbinary, Butch Lesbian from a middle-class socioeconomic background who matriculated into Edent College as a first-year student. He described his gender identity as being extremely important to him in relation to his other identities. He was starting his 4th and final year as a Studio Art and Sociology double major with an Art History minor at the time of his interview. He estimated his college GPA to be between 3.1 and 3.5. Lee's narrative is written to alternate between he/him/his and they/them/their pronouns for every paragraph.

## **Pre-College**

Growing up, Lee recalled whenever they wore anything slightly masculine their mom made comments about them appearing “Butch” in a negative way. Thus, they internalized being seen as more masculine was considered a negative perception and would overcompensate by presenting themselves very Fem.

When Lee was about 12 years old, he recalled thinking, “I like girls because I’m a boy inside,” but did not explore that thought further. Between the ages of 13–15, he became more aware of Trans and Nonbinary identities. However, because his middle and high school only had a handful of openly LGBTQ-identified students and no openly Trans-identified students, he did not see or know anyone who identified as Trans or Nonbinary; so, he was unable to conceive of those identities as being a possibility for himself. In addition, when he explored Trans and Nonbinary identities and social groups online, he described those spaces as very White and upper-class or upper-middle-class, which did not reflect his identities or experiences; so, he thought being Trans or Nonbinary was not open to someone like him.

Lee described their mom and dad as being homophobic and not associating with anyone who identified as LGBTQ. But, they came out to their dad as Bi[sexual] around the age of 13 or 14 because their dad was less homophobic than their mom. They indicated the experience was more or less ok.

Regarding his high school, Lee recalled the environment being politically liberal but still very homophobic and transphobic.

### ***Pre-College Academic Selections***

As a kid, Lee developed a strong interest in becoming a veterinarian due to their love of animals and watching various humane society shows and Animal Planet, resonating with how

much effort and care the veterinarians put into rescuing animals. They also noted entertaining the idea of becoming an exotic veterinarian or an aquarium veterinarian due to their interest in fish and Marine Biology. They spent a fair amount of time thinking about the profession and doing a lot of reading on animal husbandry and animal health. Despite this, Lee still considered this a passive interest and was not actively researching veterinarian schools or requirements, only researching occasionally when their dad yelled at them to do so. Lee also noted they stuck to the idea of becoming a veterinarian because they saw it as a safe career option out of a list of careers they thought people typically wanted their children to become such as a lawyer, doctor, or engineer. Though their parents both supported this academic aspiration, their dad commented on how they might be best suited for a Humanities-based career instead of STEM. At the time, Lee disagreed and ignored their dad's assessment due to their difficult relationship.

Lee also drew and made a lot of art growing up, going so far as to sell some commissions as a high schooler. However, he did not consider Art a career option because of previously mentioned perceptions on what was considered an appropriate career. Thus, he applied to college as a Biology major.

While Lee was applying to colleges, they worried about potentially being harmed at the institutions they were applying to and nervous about not being able to find LGBTQ friends with whom they could connect. Thus, they researched how Queer-friendly each campus was to which they were applying and found all of them were rated fairly high online, so they stopped worrying about their safety but still had concerns about finding LGBTQ friends.

At the behest of his dad, Lee applied to about 10 colleges that were recruiting at his high school and was either rejected or waitlisted from all institutions. As a result, he enrolled at a local community college. Before classes began, he got off the waitlist and received an acceptance

letter from Edent College, so he dropped his community college enrollments and attended Edent College instead.

### **During College**

Lee described Edent College as very liberal where they met more gender-expansive presenting and LGBTQ-identified peers than at any other point in their life. Though Lee described the student body as being predominantly White, they began their experience at Edent College living on-campus in the Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) themed residence hall where they were exposed to more Trans and Nonbinary-identified People of Color. Seeing a variety of Trans and Nonbinary individuals who were not the typical “skinny, White, upper-middle class people” they often saw online resonated with them and allowed for them to begin seeing such identities as an option for themselves. This experience was also a comfort that soothed their anxieties around finding LGBTQ friends and being able to exist at the institution without the threat of death due to their gender identity. Lee also described the physical space of the campus being separated into two different cultural regions where one half was predominantly Queer and the other predominantly Straight, which they found to be an interesting cultural separation.

However, this liberal environment also made Lee very nervous as the culture for introductions at Edent College in general was to include one’s name and pronouns. Having come from a homophobic and transphobic high school environment, Lee noted this was a new experience for him and he was still grappling with his own gender identity. When he attended the school’s orientation event with his dad, he was asked by members of the Edent College community what name and pronouns he used and he felt pressured in the presence of his dad to identify as a CisWoman and respond with his deadname and she/her pronouns. From then and



through his first 2 years at Edent College, he was asked for his name and pronouns so often that he felt pressured to continue giving his deadname and she/her pronouns each time to meet the expectation of others and not bring attention to himself for providing a different answer.

Lee attended Edent College their 1st year and noted they felt fine but then took a year off of school during their 2nd year for medical leave due to mental health concerns related to their gender identity development. During this time off, they began identifying as a Lesbian and decided to not bother coming out to their dad again or come out to their mom at all, assessing their parents would continue to make rude comments about LGBTQ individuals so they saw there was no point in coming out to either of them. However, when their mom asked outright whether they were a Lesbian, Lee confirmed this identity. Though their mom seemed to tolerate this identity, she was relieved when she asked if they identified as Butch and they said no. Lee explained they did not fully understand their mom's long-time concerns over being Butch or appearing Butch until they both went clothes shopping around this period of time and Lee—who was still presenting Fem at the time—made a passing comment on how their Butch-appearing friends at Edent College were able to find button-up shirts that fit them well. Lee was perplexed when their mom got very angry and pulled them out of the store to scold them for using the term “Butch” in public, saying it was a derogatory, homophobic slur. Lee knew their mom's understanding of the term Butch being a slur was incorrect and at this moment, Lee understood their mom's deeply negative perceptions on gender-expansive identities, expressions, and varying sexual orientations given her past use of the term toward them when they appeared more masculine.

Lee noted his relationship with his parents had gotten worse since his time away from Edent College, describing his parents as less homophobic but exponentially more transphobic

now, with his dad being the more problematic one making homophobic and transphobic comments directed at Lee. Lee perceived the reason for this was because identifying as Transmasc and Nonbinary was not what his dad wanted or envisioned for Lee. Because of this, Lee held a lot of resentment toward his parents and felt valid in this resentment.

When Lee returned to Edent College for their sophomore year, they noted having a lot of gender identity crises and their college friends were their biggest supporters; they constantly consulted friends to process their gender identity. When they changed their name, they blocked all their high school friends from their social media accounts so as not to have to answer questions about their gender identity.

One college friend in particular, Lexi,<sup>5</sup> was a Trans Guy and Lee's biggest supporter who Lee would talk through these things with and found to be helpful. Lee did mention one incident when having a conversation with Lexi during lunch about gender identity and another Edent College student and acquaintance of Lexi's approached mid-conversation to tell Lee to identify as Butch instead of Transmasc "because Transmasc people are bad." This experience made Lee awkwardly uncomfortable and prevented him from identifying as Butch for a while and purposefully identifying as Transmasc exclusively out of spite.

Throughout this time, Lee was still presenting Fem because their parents were not accepting of their gender identity. They also started meeting with a therapist at Edent College's psychological services about their gender identity and was referred to the Assistant Dean of Students to file a request for emergency funds to help with their social transition. At first, Lee was reluctant to do so, not wanting to take funds from other students who may need it for

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<sup>5</sup> A pseudonym.

emergencies. But they went along with the recommendation once their therapist insisted and assured them the College had enough money to support them and their experiences were a valid reason for accessing funds. Lee recalled walking into the assistant dean's office wearing a dress and after sharing their lived masculine name and explaining their situation, Lee was awarded \$200 from the college emergency fund and the assistant dean took them to a clothing store to purchase gender-affirming clothes using the college credit card. During the drive, Lee also discovered the assistant dean was Mexican and from the same area as Lee's hometown, so they bonded over those shared experiences. Lee described this moment as a great experience and was very grateful for the support.

After this experience, Lee was able to begin expressing his gender as more masculine. Regarding his feminine clothing, Lee explained Edent College had a free clothing exchange program where students could donate gently used clothing and other students could pick out and take whatever they wanted. Thus, Lee donated his feminine clothes to this program and posted it on his social media, specifically inviting any TransFem or Students of Color to take some. He recalled many students coming to take some items and even seeing some of his old clothing being worn around campus, about which he was happy.

Eventually, through conversations with college friends and with the support of their therapist and the college staff, their identity progressed into including Nonbinary and Butch as part of their self-identity. Lee described their social group as being mostly other Transmasc people, such as Transmasc Nonbinary Lesbians or Trans Guys, but did also include a few CisWomen and TransWomen. They also described their partner as a masculine presenting Nonbinary Lesbian. Lee believed the reason they developed this social group was due to their common identities and seeking each other out as safe community members to be around and be

authentically themselves. In addition, Lee explained the small size of Edent College allowed them to develop a quintessential community of mostly positive relations with students across campus either as friends, coworkers, classmates with whom they had worked on assignments, mentees, or as second-degree friends to those individuals.

Prior to the COVID-19 global pandemic, Lee noted students at Edent College primarily used Facebook to connect virtually with each other but when the COVID-19 global pandemic stay-at-home orders were enacted, the student body shifted to using Discord to actively build community through its various servers. Lee described these online communities as offering a lot of support to him during that time. He was also able to connect with others and get support there for questions related to navigating academics, academic stress, and job applications and opportunities. He was even commissioned to create artwork by a server member.

Though Lee described Edent College and the immediate surrounding neighborhood as a safe environment, they were clear to mention they would not step foot outside of campus without being cautious because “outside of that becomes Trump-country pretty quick.” They recounted a time walking home late at night from class as someone in a car sped by yelling, “I hate Mexicans,” to which Lee quickly left the area to get to their on-campus housing to safety. They noted several friends had also experienced transphobic and homophobic street harassment by outside community members driving through town.

### ***During College Academic Selections***

Despite not considering Art as a career option prior to college, once Lee entered Edent University he added Studio Art as a double major to his Biology major. However, after taking some STEM classes for the Biology major and preveterinarian requirements, he realized he just liked animals and did not enjoy STEM, so he promptly dropped the Biology major. At that point,

Lee concluded he was either going to pursue some form of Art career and major or was going to settle for working in retail in favor of pursuing a degree. Thus, he decided to exclusively pursue a Studio Art major. It was then Lee reluctantly admitted his dad was correct in assessing Lee was more suited for a career in the Humanities field.

Lee took an introductory course in Sociology toward their general education requirements with a professor who presented the topic in a way Lee considered accessible, well-rounded, racially inclusive, socioeconomically inclusive, and funny, which kept them interested. Though Lee mentioned their professor was not as inclusive when it came to gender, they were willing to overlook that due to how inclusive the professor was in other ways. This course was significant because it not only prompted Lee to declare Sociology as a second major, but it also led Lee to their current career goal as a tattoo artist because the professor highlighted tattooing as an example of subculture for a week by introducing an ethnographic research study on the topic and inviting local tattoo artists to share their artwork and knowledge on tattoo culture.

Lee acknowledged being nervous about entering the tattooing industry as it is a highly competitive field and outsiders still have classist assumptions about the profession, those in the profession, and those who participate in receiving services. In addition, he cited biases against racial minority tattoo artists that exist due to the profession being a predominantly White, CisMan field with people who gatekeep the profession. Lee also noted the few marginalized individuals in the field also gatekeep the profession from similarly marginalized identities due to the industry's competitiveness and lack of opportunities for non-White and non-CisMen. Despite this, Lee wanted to pursue this career to make it more open for People of Color and Queer and Trans individuals.

Before college, Lee never thought about tattooing as a career due to classist and racist perceptions their parents instilled in them as a child. They credited this course for challenging and breaking down those biases and perceptions. Lee did inform their parents of this career choice and their parents chose a similar approach to their gender identity and sexual orientation: purposefully ignoring and forgetting. Lee also suspected their parents' disdain of their career choice exceeded that of their gender identity and sexual orientation.

Lee described his Biology course selections as tracked and very structured with little ability to deviate from the academic plan. For his Art major, due to his specific Art focus, there were only very specific and limited courses available at the institution that related, so he did not have much choice and had to take what was available when it became available. Due to this, Lee did not have much ability to pick his professors.

Though Lee noted they largely did not take their gender identity into consideration when making academic selections, they perceived STEM as a whole, even at Edent College, as being less Trans-friendly than other academic programs. However, they cited Edent College's Biology department as being the exception and perceived the department made efforts to stress that biological sex was not binary. They considered this approach to be very helpful as an introduction for people who have not thought about Trans, Nonbinary, and Intersex identities.

Regarding professors, Lee had heard of other departments outside of his own (i.e., Biology, Art, and Sociology) where professors were not welcoming toward Transgender and/or Nonbinary-identified students. For his departments, Lee noted the worst that would happen would be professors misgendering due to being elderly and forgetting rather than out of malicious intent. However, Lee also perceived the culture in Humanities fields, especially in his Art major, as exploitative of marginalized identities, experiences, and traumas, which he

described as tiring because he was constantly being made to dive into those experiences by professors for assignments.

When it came to gender expression, Lee mentioned this complicated their experiences in the classroom depending on how professors interpreted their identity based on their expression. Lee explained they typically drew Trans bodies in their art; but to non-Trans people, those images may be read as feminine bodies. They recalled an experience where they made a painting of their partner, who was assigned Female at birth, in what they described as a moderately androgynous to masculine pose for a class assignment. Their CisWoman professor provided feedback on their work and added they should think about how problematic it was for Men to be drawing feminine bodies, which Lee interpreted as the professor reading their gender expression as masculine and immediately assumed they identified as a Man rather than Nonbinary. Lee was taken aback by the comment and believed the professor would not have said that if Lee presented themselves as a feminine CisWoman or at least took the time to know more about their gender identity instead of just assuming.

Despite Lee's introduction to Edent College's LGBTQ community via his 1st-year residence hall experience and how it positively impacted his gender identity development, he described the Edent College LGBTQ community outside of that as overwhelming, problematic, and, at times, racist. His past experiences playing on the club sports rugby team, which he described as exclusively Queer, and being involved in the school's Trans student organization reinforced this sentiment; so he had since moved on to focus exclusively on his on-campus jobs. At the time of Lee's interview, he was a Resident Assistant in a hall that was predominantly Straight, an academic support tutor, and illustrator and comic artist for the school newspaper.

## **Reflection and Assessment**

Lee learned from their experiences related to their gender identity that repressing it does not make it go away and being in tune with oneself, identity, and how that is expressed is one of the healthiest things a person can do.

Regarding his academic selections, Lee mostly felt happy with how he made those decisions. However, he described being “in a rough spot” currently with his Studio Art degree, explaining his final project to graduate required him to create a body of work to display in a gallery show. However, he perceived the culture of the department as forcing students to create art that was required rather than what he as the artist wanted to create. He described the culture of his major department as viewing his illustrative style of art as lesser than the more valued concept art that exploitatively forced students to constantly display traumas faced due to their identity. He found this exhausting as a Trans Person of Color in a majority White academic environment as he was made to constantly discuss and put his personal struggles on display for the class and through his assignments. Lee recalled some years ago when his family was the victim of a crime, and he brought it up with one of his professors as the court hearing was coming up; he was stressed about it impacting his ability to attend to his academics. His professor only responded eagerly with “I can’t wait to see this in your art,” which made him more guarded and not wanting to share further.

Regarding their identity and academic goals, Lee identified their partner as being the most supportive, encouraging, and excited. Their partner at the time was pursuing a career as a therapist and both Lee and their partner understood if they continued to be together that their financial stability may be difficult in the short-term because both professions required additional training such as apprenticeships and fellowships for a time before being able to practice and gain



a steady income. After that, Lee noted their friends were the next biggest support group for their identity and academics followed by Edent College staff members, such as their supervisors, various deans and assistant deans, and their therapist. Their faculty members and classmates were listed after that, and their family was considered at the very bottom of the list.

### **Sunny (they/them/their)**

Sunny participated in this study by completing a phone interview on October 17, 2021. They self-identified as a Black, Spiritual, Lesbian, Transmasc, Agender (within the Nonbinary hypernym), descendent of American slaves, First-Generation (First-Gen) college student from a working-class socioeconomic background who matriculated into Roco State University as a first-year student. Their gender identity was noted as extremely important in relation to their other identities and they described their gender expression as more Masculine or “Whatever I feel on the day.” At the time of their interview, they had begun their 3rd year as a Theater and Cinema double major with an estimated GPA of 3.1–3.5.

### **Pre-College**

Sunny had a big family and was brought up in a very conservative Christian household. Their father and grandfather were deacons and their godmom and uncle were pastors. Because of this family upbringing, they grew up knowing being Queer or Trans was very taboo. Though Sunny knew Queer and Trans individuals experienced bias incidents due to their identities, they grew up already knowing they were a target in society due to their Black identity; so, potentially facing Queer/Trans biases was not a major factor in their sexual orientation or gender identity development. Predominantly, their family’s conservative and religious influence impeded them from coming into these identities. In addition, Sunny explained their family environment at home

involved a lot of toxic masculinity, misogyny, bigoted views, and being asked frequently when they were going to get a boyfriend.

Sunny grew up with their gender identity always at the back of their mind but did not pay much attention to it because they did not and could not have the space to begin analyzing and developing those thoughts in their home environment. They described always distancing themselves from Womanhood overall, especially when speaking about Black Women; thus, they never included themselves in that categorization. However, they did not have a term at the time that fit their conceptualization of themselves. However, Sunny remembered spending a lot of time being sad about it, not being able to step fully into who they were, not having anyone to lean on for support, and feeling really lonely about it for many years.

Sunny described their gender expression before college as “forced-Feminine,” dressing like a Straight, Cis-person and wearing clothing that, if given the choice, “[they] would burn, personally.” In high school, they were out as Pansexual to their friends but not to their family. It was not until before college when they came out as Pansexual to their two sisters, but only because their sisters were also Queer.

### ***Pre-College Academic Selections***

Sunny always loved movies, television, and productions so they aspired to become an actor around fifth and sixth grade. Around eighth grade, Sunny became interested in becoming a doctor because they were inspired by a popular medical drama television series. However, this aspiration ended once Sunny realized their math skills were lacking and they did not enjoy the subject.

Sunny described their high school comprising predominantly of low-income families in an environment that heavily pushed students to seek postsecondary education and become First-

Gen students. Because of this environment, and Sunny's parents also pushing them to go to college, they started pursuing college because others wanted them to do it. However, as they got older and began realizing their gender identity and sexual orientation, their desire to get out of their house became progressively more of a motivator for them to pursue college to gain independence.

As their 1st year in high school, Sunny became really passionate about social justice but felt pressured by society into addressing it due to seeing a lot of racial injustice and wanting to fight for their community. During this time, a few Black lawyers were invited to their school to speak, and Sunny, seeing Black individuals like themselves in such careers working toward enacting political and social change, decided to become a lawyer and potentially run for Congress. Sunny specifically pointed out they really did not want to go to law school and saw that career as a dead end. However, they did not know any other career options toward social justice existed so they could not conceptualize any other academic pathways.

Their high school did have college counselors to help with career choices; however, because they told them about their idea to become a lawyer, the career counselors only showed them academic roadmaps toward that specific career field, such as majoring in political science and nothing else. Sunny recalled these career planning meetings were overwhelming because Sunny did not feel very passionate about becoming a lawyer, though they did not disclose these feelings to their college counselors. Nonetheless, Sunny volunteered for a member of their city council and applied to colleges to pursue a political science major toward law school.

Other than their career counselor, Sunny's volleyball coach pushed them to get good grades but that was the extent of support they received academically. They noted never discussing their academic plans with their friends because such topics were not their main focus

at the time. Because Sunny was a First-Gen student, their family saw becoming a lawyer as a “respectable” career path and were very supportive, though not well-versed in postsecondary education; so, they were unable to assist Sunny much toward that goal.

Sunny pointed out, at the time, they did not think they could make a career out of enjoying television from a young age, having always been a writer, and wanting to see diversity on-screen that aligned with their passion for social justice. Because of this, they reluctantly moved forward with the idea of becoming a lawyer and majoring in Political Science. They applied to about six colleges and, though they were accepted into all of them, Sunny selected Roco State University because the city it was in was well-known for being accepting of LGBTQIA+ identities and because they received full tuition covered for their attendance.

Regarding cocurricular activities, Sunny always had a passion for community service and was part of their high school’s service leadership program all 4 years. Thus, they had already planned to do the same thing in college.

### **During College**

Much of Sunny’s identity growth started when they were able to move out of their home to go to college. Upon entering college, they knew they were going to be out with their sexual orientation and gender identity automatically and this, along with living away from home, allowed Sunny the confidence to come out of their shell more. They described the experience as having a significant weight lifted off their back.

Once they had the space to consider their gender identity and sexual orientation, they reflected on their dating history and began identifying as Lesbian instead of Pansexual because they only dated non-Men. They also found out about the term Nonbinary and researched day and night on it because they felt there was finally a term that fit their gender identity. They also

started dressing more androgynous their 1st year and, though they described their gender expression as depending on how they felt each day, they typically dressed more Masculine. After being able to come into their own through this process, they began to surround themselves with other Queer and Trans folx of Color at Roco State University.

More recently, Sunny began searching for a therapist outside of Roco State University because they were looking for a Black Female-bodied provider and there were none at their institution. After extensive and exhaustive research, they found a therapist who was a dark-skinned, Black, CisWoman who Sunny connected with very well about 8 months prior to this interview. This therapist assisted Sunny in learning how to set boundaries; not long afterward, they came out to their dad and sisters about being Trans. This did not go well because their dad was not ready to respect their pronouns and their sisters were transphobic and uneducated on Nonbinary identities. But Sunny was able to set boundaries, which prompted their dad and sisters to start learning more about their gender identity and their relationships have gotten better. Sunny did not intend on coming out to their godmom, grandpa, or uncle as they did not feel they had the capacity to take on that labor.

Around this same time, Sunny met a group of Black Trans spiritual individuals online and received support and education on decolonization from Whiteness, White Supremacy, and Western society. This led to them to identify as Agender instead of Nonbinary to disassociate from Western labels of gender and due to understanding the term as having a more spiritual connotation than other terms. This also led to them coming out as Transmasc.

As of this interview, Sunny noted they did not communicate with their high school friends anymore and only connected with friends they made at the university. However, Sunny was still connected with their high school friends through social media and assumed their high

school friends knew about their identity now because Sunny came out with their gender identity on Instagram.

Despite selecting Roco State University due to the city surrounding it being Queer-accepting, Sunny was unsure upon matriculation as to how accepting the institution itself was. Generally, Sunny described students at Roco State University as very accepting and easy to find others with whom they could connect. Many students, they noted, had androgynous gender expressions, typically asked for pronouns, and some had the same pronouns as them, so they saw their identities reflected in others. However, they noted staff and faculty were far from this assessment; however, they identified staff as more accepting than faculty because they typically asked for pronouns and had Queer symbols in their offices such as flags. Sunny attributed the lack of acceptance from faculty to either being of an older generation or out-of-touch with the current generation of students as they tended to use binary, gendered language and had an unwelcoming demeanor toward those who did not fit cisnormative gender representations.

Sunny did note, before the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Roco State University community was not as familiar with Trans and Nonbinary identities. When the COVID-19 global pandemic stay-at-home orders were enforced, they observed a “mass education” on pronouns, gender identity, and gender expression that seemed to spread throughout the university population. One small indicator of this was how pronouns were asked for during class introductions or added to naming conventions on university video conferencing platforms.

### ***During College Academic Selections***

Sunny started with as a Political Science major but already knew by this point that becoming a lawyer was not for them. In college, they were exposed to other ways they could fight for social change outside of going to law school and becoming a lawyer, which pushed

them further away from that career. At the end of their 1st year at Roco State University, Sunny was watching television and had an epiphany to pursue writing and directing for television and become a showrunner with a diverse cast that looked like themselves that their younger self would have loved to watch. They knew Roco State University had both Theatre and Cinema majors and went online to research more details on them. After a week of researching, they changed their major to Theatre and made Political Science their minor. However, after finding out minors were not a requirement for graduation and, given their lack of passion for the subject, they quickly removed the Political Science minor from their records and added Cinema as a second major instead. After telling their family about their new academic pursuits, their family was not excited, and their dad still wanted them to go to law school and run for office.

Sunny indicated their decision to change their major was personal because they had been on their own in their academic journey due to being First-Gen. In addition, they indicated the choice to pursue this career path was in large part due to their identities, including their gender identity and gender expression, and having never seen people like themselves on screen. They also considered the possibility that their identities might be a hindrance toward their career goal because who they were was not really who many imagined when thinking of a Hollywood director. Sunny explained they found themselves faced with the dilemma of how to put people like themselves on screen and how to get themselves into the industry.

Luckily, Sunny's on-campus job supervisor and Sunny's close friend and mentor, Garder,<sup>6</sup> who was a year above Sunny and also used they/them pronouns, were both supportive and encouraged Sunny to visit the campus Career Center for assistance in their academic and

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<sup>6</sup> A pseudonym.

career pursuits. Because these individuals did not judge Sunny and understood them and accepted them as a person in their identities, Sunny took their advice and visited the Career Center despite feeling skeptical of whether the Career Center would be able to assist in their endeavor. Sunny visited and was surprised to find the Career Center did have resources for their career goals, which made their academic path more tangible. Sunny noted these academically related resources at Roco State University, including how many majors were available, exposed them to all the options they had available to them and how many career paths they could pursue based on a variety of academic combinations.

Sunny described the Theatre major as having a lot of Queer and People of Color, so they feel very comfortable in that major and in those classes. However, they described the Cinema major as being predominantly CisHet White Guys, which was a hard environment for them to be in. But they tolerate it because Cinema was the only major that would get them to their career goal. In addition, because the Cinema major's course pattern was fairly prescribed, they did not have the luxury of selecting the type of environment in which they were enrolled. Sunny recounted a class discussion in a Cinema course where CisHet White students were advocating for marginalized individuals to divulge their experiences so they could write more accurately about them because "White people are not going to stop writing stories about marginalized folx." When Sunny wanted to speak out about it as one of the very few marginalized individuals in the course, they were not given the opportunity; other CisHet White students spoke over them, and the professor did not moderate the conversation to mitigate that. This caused Sunny to become closed-off and disengaged from the course for the rest of the term. This incident reminded Sunny of their positionality in the industry with their identities, the type of people they would be



engaging with in their chosen profession, and that this would be their reality for a long time if they continued to pursue this career.

Sunny noted most of the classes offered in their majors had only one professor that taught the topic, so they did not have many opportunities to choose or avoid a professor for any reason. Regardless, they typically looked up student ratings for the professor only after enrolling in classes. When selecting courses, Sunny noted not being used to bringing other people into those decisions, again citing their First-Gen identity as the reason.

Regarding environmental factors, Sunny wished they had the option to take those into consideration when making their academic selections as they would have wanted to choose different classes and a different major than Cinema toward their career goal. Thus, Sunny tolerated their classes and Cinema major as a means to an end. They did describe always being intimidated at the beginning of the term in classes as one of only a few Queer and Trans Students of Color, but the more they spoke and relied on their knowledge, they would get more confident as the term progressed. Sunny's approach to class discussions and papers was to bring both their race and gender identity in whenever they could. This always resulted in a good grade because those identities were so salient to them that they would always end up putting all their energy into those assignments and discussions.

Sunny described themselves as not a great student due to not liking school. It was their love for cocurricular activities that kept them in school, without which they probably would not be a student. At the time of their interview, they were a resident assistant, a part of Roco State University's student government, and a member of the university's Black student organization.

At the time of their interview, Sunny was beginning to apply for summer internships and fellowships related to writing and directing. When asked how they found these opportunities,

they noted Garder was the one who proactively went online and found them for Sunny so that Sunny could get some experience in the field.

### **Reflection and Assessment**

Sunny understood their identity to be ahead of what many people conceptualized when it came to gender and they often did not have a choice of who they interacted with and felt safe around, especially with their family and in their classes. With this, they noted nothing came easy for someone who identified as they do and they believed everything was going to be a challenge when interacting with others. They generally did not think people had an accurate understanding of their gender identity and, most often, needed to be educated when they misgendered Sunny. However, these explanations required energy and emotional labor that Sunny might or might not have in those moments; sometimes, these efforts went unnoticed and others would still be ignorant. So, Sunny learned the importance of setting boundaries, needing to take up space to not be ignored, and leaning on those who shared the same experiences for comfort.

However, Sunny noted when they went to visit their family that individuals who were still learning about their Trans identity and using they/them pronouns ended up being unsure how to interact with them, not knowing what to say or not having the right words to say; and so those individuals would not say much or behave in a manner that made for very awkward moments. These became so awkward that when Sunny was misgendered they often ignored it to avoid such moments. However, if Sunny had the energy to correct their family, they did, but not all the time. When it came to their other identities in relation to their gender identity, Sunny explained society has often associated dark skin with Masculinity due to societal racism. Thus, as a dark-skinned Transmasc person, Sunny knew no one questioned their more Masculine gender expression.

For their academics, they noted being happy with the selections they made to this point but wished they made them sooner; though, they were content with having made them at all. When asked what they would have needed to make those academic selections earlier, Sunny explained they only considered Theatre a hobby in high school but did not think it was an actual career they could go toward and do writing for money. They expressed they would have wanted to know more about career options they had available to them and that it was possible to find a job that related to their passions.

When asked who supported them most in regard to their academics, Sunny noted staff and faculty were at the bottom of their list given their only interaction with them was via video conferencing for courses. They wished their staff and faculty would be proactive in making themselves more available to students and offer opportunities to network and get to know them rather than leaving it up to students to have to reach out. When it came to gender identity and gender expression, Sunny wished faculty would bring such topics up in class discussions more often as those were not brought up at all in their classes.

### **Findings**

As mentioned in Chapter 3, individual development and perceptions of their relationship and place in society is promoted through continued interactions, or proximal processes, that occur in their environment over long periods of time (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). As evident in the presented introspective narratives of participants, various aspects of their development were significantly impacted by a wide variety of environmental and interpersonal interactions. However, not all these interactions led to academic developments or influences on their academic selection. Given the topic of this study was on academic selections and how such were informed or influenced by environmental and/or interpersonal interactions, the following

analysis focused on environmental and interpersonal interactions cited by participants as being directly influential on such selections. Some interactions not directly related to such selections may be briefly referenced in the analysis; but they are not the primary focus. In addition, some of the participants' narratives revealed how one academic selection may have been influenced by more than one interaction factor. This is also considered and highlighted in the presented findings. Furthermore, though this study was focused on the environmental and/or interpersonal interactions considered specifically by Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates when making their academic selections, some interactions cited were found to not have a direct relationship to their gender identity. Nevertheless, these factors were still included as participants referred to them as being influential to their academic selections.

The following sections present environmental interactions extracted from participants' narratives that were considered impactful on their academic selections. This is subsequently followed by interpersonal interactions cited by participants. Regarding the temporal aspects of this analysis, both environmental and interpersonal factors that occurred before and during college were considered and identified by participants as being influential to postsecondary academic selections. Thus, both pre-college and during college environmental and interpersonal interaction factors are presented. Analysis also compared results to literature presented in Chapter 2 and how these aligned with, deviated from, or expanded the theoretical frameworks for this study.

Participants' narratives mentioned a wide range of environmental interaction factors being influential to their academic selections compared to the number of interpersonal interactions cited. Again, environmental interactions in this study were defined as structural, cultural, societal, situational, temporal, analog (e.g., books), and digital (e.g., social networking

spaces) interactions that individuals have outside of interpersonal interactions with other individuals.

Evidence in Chapter 2 presented family, friends, and schooling interactions with peers, faculty, and staff as having significant influences on the cultural, social, mental, emotional, and academic development of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students during their pre-college and college experiences (Beemyn, 2019b; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bilodeau, 2005; Chung, 1995; Fassinger, 1996; Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Lombardi et al., 2001; Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Narratives from participants support this and detail similarly notable influences interpersonal interactions have on their academic selections. Though participants presented less interpersonal interaction factors influencing their academic selections compared to environmental interaction factors, interpersonal interaction factors were narrated as taking up more consideration and having more significant influences on their academic selections. Again, interpersonal interactions were defined in this study as active interactions participants had with other individuals, whether virtually through social networking mediums or in-person. In addition, interactions with individuals not employed by participants' educational institutions are further designated as *informal interpersonal interactions* in this study and include familial relations, friends, and peers. Those who are employed by or tangentially associated with participants' educational institutions such as faculty, staff, or guest lecturers are considered *institutional interpersonal interactions* in this study.

As the reporting of research is linear in nature and the nature of human interactions is complex and can intertwine in unique and varying ways, it was difficult to determine the order in

which to present cited factors. This was especially true when multiple factors were cited as being equally influential on particular academic selections. Thus, factors are presented in alphabetical order for ease of reference. Again, Ever's pronouns rotate between they/them/their and she/her/hers for every pronoun usage and Lee's pronouns alternate between he/him/his and they/them/their for every paragraph in which he is cited.

### **Pre-College Environmental Interactions**

Formative and adolescent experiences have significant influences on individuals, especially Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, and their academic identity development and postsecondary educational pursuits (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Patton, 2011; Valenzuela, 1999). Evidence can be seen in the narratives of participants as such pre-college environmental interactions did influence their postsecondary academic selections. Nine pre-college environmental factors that participants cited included (a) Career Culture; (b) Cocurricular Influence; (c) Financial; (d) High School Microsystem; (e) Macrosystem Influence; (f) Personal Nonevent; (g) Postsecondary Institutional Factors, including Institutional Culture and Exosystem; and (h) Television.

#### ***Career Culture***

All but one participant noted making undergraduate academic selections based on a career field they had in mind before attending college. However, Ever was the only participant who noted taking career culture into consideration during this timeframe when making her pre-college academic selections, by stating:

I wanted to be a Zoologist for a while . . . I think that stopped around, I want to say, sophomore year [of high school] . . . I feel like, definitely in the Zoology realm, I felt it was best that I didn't go into that because a lot of those majors are Male-dominated fields. So I feel like – I don't know how accepting they are to Queerness or Nonbinary [identities].

Regardless of whether this perception of the Zoology career environment or related majors were accurate perceptions, Ever's perceptions of them being Male-dominated environments—which translated to them as being potentially unwelcoming to her gender identity and sexual orientation—caused them to completely change her career aspirations during high school and negate entire departments of study before even applying to postsecondary educational institutions. The results of this decision subsequently impacted their conceptualized and actualized career options and undergraduate academic selections.

As discussed in Chapter 2, students were found to be positively affirmed toward gender-restrictive academic selections and discouraged from atypical selections (Chung, 1995). In addition, studies on Cisgender students showed their perceptions of whether an academic field was welcoming or not to their gender identity impacted their academic selections and subsequent academic trajectory (Bilodeau, 2005; Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Fassinger, 1996; Ganley et al., 2018; Germeijs et al., 2012; Goodson, 1978; Kramer et al., 1994; Patton et al., 2016; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). Given this and Ever's narrative regarding her aversion toward the Zoology career field based on notions informed by environmental perceptions, their experience could be explained by Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) model where genderist Macrosystem beliefs seemed to have permeated into Ever's Microsystem proximal processes and influenced her pre-college academic development, academic selections, and postsecondary academic trajectory.

Furthermore, evidence from Schneider and Dimito's (2010; Nonbinary undergraduates were not explicitly included) study found LGBT undergraduates favored attending a postsecondary institution that had a reputation, or at least a perceived reputation, for supporting LGBT communities regardless of whether this information was accurate. In other words,

environmental perceptions and potential interactions in such environments were considered by LGBT undergraduates when making postsecondary institutional selections. This aligns with Ever's narrative as a Nonbinary student and their perceptions of the Zoology career field as being potentially unaccepting of her gender identity. Through the lens of Museus's (2014) CECE Model, it becomes clear that Ever's Pre-College Inputs (i.e., the circumscription of potentially viable career paths and, ultimately, academic selections based on environmental inputs) directly shaped their academic dispositions and academic preparation going into postsecondary education.

### ***Cocurricular Influence***

Based on the literature, experiences outside the classroom—either environmental or interpersonal—can be influential on students' academic development and pathways. For Andrew, his employment experience working for a bakery during high school influenced him to consider opening a bakery of his own in the future. This, in turn, was an environmental factor that influenced him to apply to postsecondary institutions as a Business major, which ultimately led him to be accepted into Zeyra State University's honors program in Entrepreneurship. Andrew did not take his gender identity into consideration in this selection.

According to Museus's (2014) CECE Model, External Influences such as employment are factors that shape and inform the undergraduate experience. Andrew's narrative demonstrates such External Influences occur, influence academic selections, and become the foundation on which students' undergraduate academic paths are formed even before matriculating into postsecondary education. Using Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) model as a framework, it also becomes clear that environmental proximal processes in the Microsystem, such as



employment experiences, can influence an individual's pre-college academic development and subsequent undergraduate academic selections.

Despite involvement in cocurricular activities being shown to have impacts on students' academic outcomes and performance (see Astin, 1984), little research has been done on how such activities influence students' actualized academic selections. Thus, Andrew's narrative provides evidence about the relationship between cocurricular environmental experiences and how such proximal processes may influence and impact undergraduate academic selections.

### ***Financial***

Researchers have found economic insecurity to have significant impacts on the life course of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (GLSEN, 2018, 2020, 2022; Haas et al., 2014; James et al., 2016). For Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate students, such financial concerns and limited access to financial resources was a barrier to retention and persistence in postsecondary education (Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Such financial barriers were also found to be associated with negative or unsupportive familial interpersonal relations. Similar findings were observed in participants' narratives in which financial environmental factors were influential to pre-college academic selections. In particular, Ever, Sunny, and Aaron noted this factor was influential in their postsecondary institutional selections.

For Ever and Sunny, both of whom identified within the Nonbinary hypernym, they described growing up experiencing adverse family interactions due to their gender identity. Thus, their desire to gain distance and self-sufficiency from their family was heavily reliant on them pursuing postsecondary education and becoming financially independent. For Ever, this experience influenced her decision to exclusively apply to and attend a local community college

after high school and transfer to a state school to complete their degree to incur minimal financial debt; Ever stated the following:

To be honest, [planning to be a transfer student and graduate from Quirt State University after attending Geera Community College] was the most affordable option. My goal was to be able to graduate as debt-free as possible. So that seemed like the best option and it also meant that I didn't have to move away—further away—from my work from both my jobs. So, it just seemed more convenient and more rational.

Ever's concerns regarding their financial independence, including taking on two jobs while attending high school, created clear parameters for her perceived postsecondary institutional selections. Similarly, Sunny selected to attend Roco State University due to the full-tuition coverage the institution offered. Though this decision was prompted in part by Sunny's desire to be financially independent from their family, they also noted having limited access to funds to cover college expenses due to growing up in a working-class environment. Aaron also selected Treven University because the institution offered the best financial aid package; however, he noted it was also the closest in proximity to his family, which made traveling home to visit more financially sound.

Comparing these three participants' narratives, Aaron had substantially more positive family interpersonal interactions overall, including those related to his gender identity, compared to Ever and Sunny, which are discussed in more detail later in this chapter. This familial support, in addition to Aaron's upper-class socioeconomic background, provided him with more access to financial means for his postsecondary education, or Resource characteristics as identified in Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) model (Tudge et al., 2009). Therefore, the financial environmental factors Aaron considered when making his postsecondary institutional academic selection were more by choice rather than necessity. In other words, Aaron had the latitude to select a postsecondary institution closer to family to ease his financial burden on traveling home

though it was not a requirement as he was not faced with considerable financial constraints or concerns. Meanwhile, Ever and Sunny were significantly more limited in their academic selections to options that would provide the least amount of financial burden on them overall to gain financial independence from their family. Given this, it could be argued Ever and Sunny's financial environmental concerns due to negative familial interactions positively influenced them to pursue postsecondary education in the first place despite also limiting their academic options and possible future academic avenues of development. Again, more exploration on family influences is discussed in the Pre-College Interpersonal Interactions section of this chapter.

Most of the literature presented in Chapter 2 on financial factors depicted finances as a barrier to Transgender and/or Nonbinary academic success compared to their Cisgender counterparts, including as a hindrance to their pursuit of postsecondary education. Though this may be the case for some Transgender and/or Nonbinary students, it underscores, yet again, the deficit-based lens through which Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals are primarily viewed in literature and ignores potentially asset-framed possibilities and understandings of their experiences. In Ever's case, though they shared financial concerns that paralleled literature, she used these concerns as a motivating resilience factor to pursue postsecondary education, providing a counternarrative on how financial environmental factors may influence postsecondary educational pursuits. This finding aligned with Museus's (2014) CECE Model because finances are noted as a relevant External Influence on students' postsecondary educational success outcomes. In addition, it goes further by providing insight into how such factors can influence Transgender and/or Nonbinary students' academic success outcomes in ways that contradict the current lens presented in existing literature.

Though these three participants indicated financial environmental reasons for their postsecondary institutional selections, it could also be argued that the financial opportunities Sunny and Aaron were afforded stemmed from aspects of the postsecondary hidden curriculum imparted on them through their pre-college environmental and interpersonal interactions that assisted in their academic trajectory—interactions Ever did not have the opportunity to obtain. These findings are also discussed further in the High School Microsystem and Familial Influences sections of this chapter.

### *High School Microsystem*

As alluded to in the Financial factors section, Aaron and Sunny noted their high school culture influenced their pursuit of postsecondary education and institutional selection. For this study, these were considered as part of their high school Microsystem.

Aaron described his high school culture as being exceedingly fixated on promoting academic rivalry and superiority due to the affluence of the surrounding area, by stating:

It was kind of, like, a toxic environment . . . not at all related to my gender identity. I went to a school that was in a relatively privileged area and my school specifically was hyper-competitive when it came to academics and so there was a lot of focus on scores, or grades, or getting into the best colleges and it was just really toxic. . . . So, of course, my friends were right along with me with trying to be academically the best. Probably not in the healthiest way.

This pressure from his competitive high school environment to excel academically and pursue postsecondary education instilled in Aaron the need to pursue what his high school community considered to be premier institutions. It became clear the environmental culture of Aaron's high school stemmed from the city in which his high school was located and its affluent culture. This, in turn, impacted Aaron's academic disposition and academic selections.

In Sunny's case, they attended a high school with a culture set on having its students attend postsecondary education overall, as they said:

I went to a school that pushed for us to seek higher education. And it was a really small school. Mostly, almost all the students came from low-income families. We were going to be First-Gen. So, they just pushed for us to go to college and so did my parents. At first it was, like, I was doing it because other people wanted me to do it. But I guess the older I got, the more I wanted to get out of my house.

Sunny's pursuit of postsecondary education was motivated initially and primarily by external factors, namely the pressure from their high school environment. They also cited their parents as a factor, which, again, is discussed in later section. In any case, it was clear Sunny's pursuit was initially influenced by their high school environment and not necessarily due to Sunny's perception of its intrinsic value.

Referring back to Financial factors, both Aaron and Sunny's high school cultures provided opportunities to which Ever did not mention having access. Aaron attended a high school environmental culture in which prestigious postsecondary education was heavily encouraged and he was exposed to those who could assist in directing him toward finding financial assistance for postsecondary education. Sunny's high school culture also prioritized sending First-Gen students to postsecondary education, which included information on how to obtain postsecondary financial assistance and was able to secure full-tuition coverage. In contrast, Ever traversed their academic trajectory primarily on their own during high school, including having to complete the government Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) form themselves. This missing factor influenced Ever's academic disposition and perceived plans for achieving a postsecondary degree given its financial burden and, ultimately, determined the postsecondary academic pathway she selected to pursue.

As depicted in Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) model, a person's immediate environmental interactions in the Microsystem can be directly impacted by the Exosystem through an interplay between them via the Mesosystem. This subsequently influences proximal

processes and, in both Aaron's and Sunny's case, shaped their academic selections and opportunities through the longitudinally sustained interactions with their high school environments via the Chronosystem. In other words, the Exosystem influences and interactions via the Mesosystem that shaped their Microsystem high school environment appeared to have influenced their pursuit and pathways toward postsecondary education. This is especially evident when compared to Ever's environmental experiences and academic selections. Though it was clear in both Aaron's and Sunny's narratives that interpersonal interactions were cofactors in their experiences; these are addressed in the Interpersonal Interactions section.

### ***Macrosystem Influence***

It is evident participants' Microsystem environmental cultures, influenced by Exosystem and Mesosystem interactions, were factors participants considered when making academic selections. In addition, participants directly cited Macrosystem Influences as factors they considered in academic selections. Specifically, selecting to pursue postsecondary education and college academic field selections were influenced by this factor.

In addition to pursuing postsecondary education due to financial environmental and familial interpersonal interactions, Ever's pursuit of postsecondary education was generally understood to be the subsequent step to take after high school; Ever stated the following:

I always thought that [going to college] was an expectation. That's, like, what you're supposed to do is go to college. So, I don't think there was ever a time that I really considered—or really seriously considered—not going to college . . . at least there wasn't a time that I didn't consider it.

Ever was unable to elaborate where this perceived expectation came from, just that it was a cultural norm they perceived from a general, sociocultural ideology that existed in her context. In other words, Ever's contextual Macrosystem influenced their perception of her educational pathway and, subsequently, academic selection to pursue postsecondary education.

In Andrew's case, this Macrosystem influence to pursue postsecondary education could be seen more clearly. Despite Andrew's mental health during his high school years and his assumption that he would not be alive before matriculating into postsecondary education, he noted still going through the process of completing college applications and selecting an institution to attend. In describing this process, he explained selecting to apply to postsecondary education was more a compulsion from implicit, external expectations of college being the subsequent step in life he had to take rather than an expectation from any individual or as a result of an innate choice. Although gender identity did play a part in Ever's pre-college decision to pursue postsecondary education due to its influence on familial relations, Andrew did not take his gender identity into consideration to pursue postsecondary education.

Regarding Macrosystem Influences on college major selections, Lee and Aaron noted having a general sense that certain majors or academic fields were more acceptable than others but were overall unable to specifically identify where they understood that concept to come from. Lee described their pre-college career aspirations of becoming a veterinarian as such:

I would say, growing up, even though I drew a lot and made a lot of art and even sold commissions as a high schooler I was just, like, "Oh, Art isn't a career for me." As a kid, I pretty consistently wanted to be a veterinarian because I really liked animals . . . I feel like me wanting to be a vet as a kid was a very safe thing to say. I feel like, oh yeah, lawyer, doctor, veterinarian is always what people want their kids to be. [Or], like [an] engineer.

For Lee, though wanting to become a veterinarian originally stemmed from personal interest, it was encouraged by the perception that it was a more acceptable academic path and career to pursue over being an artist. Similarly, Aaron described his pre-college understanding of how STEM majors were perceived in comparison to Humanities majors in society, by stating:

I would say, in general, there seems to be a valuing of STEM majors above Humanities. People are, like, "Oh, if you're in STEM, you could do science things like being a doctor. You're going to help people. Engineer, you're physically

building things. You're actually physically making things." With a lot of STEM fields, it's very easy to see its direct impact on society whereas with a lot of Humanities you're, like, "What are you going to do with, like, philosophizing?" Or, like, artists; there's a reason why they're starving. Whatever. People have these notions that contribute to and perpetuate this idea that STEM is more valuable than Humanities. And, so, I guess there's a little bit of that where some majors are seen as, like, more legitimate or more difficult than others. Whereas if you're, like, a Math major with a 4.0 you're so much smarter than an Art major with a 4.0. But, of course, GPA is, like, not the only measure of intelligence and whatnot and things like that. But I definitely feel, in general, society does kind of pressure people to go into STEM because it's seen as more valuable and seen as more intellectual.

As evident in these narratives, both Lee and Aaron's pre-college academic field selections were influenced by their perceptions on societal norms and what they understood to be acceptable selections. In addition, these Macrosystem conventions encouraged them to be drawn toward STEM-based academic fields due to either a sense of social security via financial stability or social acceptability. Though not a focus of this study, it is also interesting to note Aaron's understanding of STEM academic fields and topics compared to other fields was a motivating factor for Aaron pursuing STEM-related cocurricular opportunities during his formative K-12 academic years although he was still perceived as a Woman and before coming out as FTM. This means such Macrosystem influences may shape academic selection pursuits before college and contribute to foundational formative academic experiences leading into college. Both Aaron and Lee did not take their gender identity into consideration regarding their college academic field selections.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) described the Macrosystem as encompassing the ideologies of a given culture. Such ideologies have the ability to reach an individual and be perceived as an intrinsic aspect of the given culture by permeating through the Exosystem and influencing an individual's Microsystem through Mesosystem interactions. Given all four participants perceived the pursuit of postsecondary education as an ideological expectation and



STEM-fields as more favorable socially compared to other academic fields as a norm, it would seem their cultural contexts in their respective environments were the underlying influence on their academic selections rather than factors developed through interpersonal interactions. In addition, these participants from various contexts described similar culturally inherent academic perceptions drawn from their environmental interactions and found it difficult to explain how these influenced their specific academic selections outside of being simply culturally inherent. This further supported the idea of Macrosystem concepts penetrating through to participants' Microsystem environments and impacting participants' college academic selections before attending postsecondary education. This influence was strong enough to drive participants toward taking on the complex and time-sensitive college application process and pursuing STEM-related fields over innate interests during their pre-college experiences.

### ***Personal Nonevent***

Whether it was an environmental or interpersonal interaction factor participants cited as influencing their academic selections, all participants noted having a level of agency in determining those academic selections. However, only one factor was the exception where the interaction did not provide participants with much agency at all in their academic selections and options. These were considered *Personal Nonevent* environmental interactions.

According to Schlossberg's (1981) *Transition Theory*, a nonevent is a type of transition individuals experience when an event is expected to occur but does not take place. In this concept, a personal nonevent is when an individual's ambition toward an expected transition event does not occur (Evans et al., 2009a). An example of this is when a prospective student is not admitted into a postsecondary institution to which they applied. Using this concept, A. Gonzales's, Andrew's, and Lee's postsecondary institutional academic selections were shaped by

when and whether they were admitted to the institution they applied to rather than being able to determine for themselves the institution they would attend after high school. A. Gonzales applied to about five institutions but was only accepted into Meeno State University, hence why he ended up attending that institution. Lee applied to about 10 institutions but was either rejected or waitlisted by all 10 institutions. He initially selected to enroll at a local community college but later unenrolled to attend Edent College instead after being admitted late from the waitlist. Despite Strodon University being Andrew's "dream school," he settled on attending Zeyra State University and continued his matriculation there given he was already well into that process by the time he received word from Strodon University that he was admitted late.

Comparing these participants' narratives, A. Gonzales and Lee noted doing some level of research on the institutions they applied to and had an idea of a field of study or career they wanted to pursue. In addition, although Lee also considered their gender identity and sexual orientation in their research, A. Gonzales prioritized institutions with an academic focus toward the Art field and did not take his gender identity into consideration. Regardless, both were satisfied to some degree with the institutions they were admitted to and were eager to attend even if admitted late or only admitted to just that one. In contrast, Andrew did not do much research on the institutions he applied to, nor did he have a solid idea of a field of study or future career due to his mental health. Thus, he was mostly indifferent toward both his acceptance and matriculation into Zeyra State University and late acceptance into Strodon University. However, his negative experiences at Zeyra State University later became one of the catalysts for him making the academic selection to transfer out of the institution. This concept is discussed further in the During College environmental interactions section.

Using Museus's (2014) CECE Model, External Influences are shown to have a one-way, influential relationship on Pre-College Inputs. This relationship is corroborated by this Personal Nonevent concept in that such environmental parameters set by external entities (e.g., college admissions processes on students' postsecondary institutional academic selections) can have an influence on academic disposition and preparation when transitioning into college. However, these narratives also provided additional insight into the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between these two areas of the model where students' Pre-College Inputs—like academic disposition, academic preparations, and even mental health during the researching and college application process—may shape the External Influences that impact their academic selections later on. Such relationships are explored in Chapter 5.

### ***Postsecondary Institutional Factors***

Regarding postsecondary institutions to which participants selected to apply, postsecondary institutional environmental factors were cited most as a factor for consideration. These included Institutional Culture and Institutional Exosystem environmental factors.

**Institutional Culture.** The type of environmental culture participants wanted from their postsecondary institutions played a role in their research and subsequent applications to specific institutions. A. Gonzales and Ever based their selections on the academic culture provided by institutions over other factors. Because A. Gonzales considered being an artist, “predestined” for him since childhood due to personal interests, he researched and targeted institutions that had an Art academic focus or at least a positive reputation as Art schools. Similarly, as noted previously, Ever prioritized being a transfer student to make attending postsecondary education more affordable. Thus, they intentionally only selected to attend Geera Community College after high school compared to other community colleges in her area due to its institutional culture being

more similar to 4-year institutions and able to support their ability to transfer to another institution more easily. Again, A. Gonzales did not take his gender identity into consideration in these selections and Ever was partially motivated by her gender identity in this selection due to family interactions.

In Aaron's case, due to his aforementioned high school Microsystem environmental interactions, he applied to institutions based on their reputation; he shared the following:

I would say the ranking and prestige definitely came first. . . . Considering colleges based on if they were Queer-friendly or Trans-friendly definitely would have come into play if any of the colleges I was interested in were not Queer or Trans-friendly because, of course, my safety is important. But, fortunately, all of the colleges I was interested in were Queer and Trans-friendly so I didn't have to think about it too much in like a, "Will I be safe here?," kind of way.

Aaron further explained these prestigious institutions he selected were already well-established as having a Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary accepting culture. Though it could be argued Aaron took both institutional prestige and acceptance of Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities into his selection considerations, he clearly prioritized institutional status over the Transgender and/or Nonbinary positive environment in his narrative due to not needing to focus on his personal safety. This allowed him to make institutional prestige the determining factor in his academic selection.

Lee, as noted before, explicitly considered his gender identity and sexual orientation when researching institutions due to concerns over potential harm and social relations. He said:

When I was applying to colleges, the one thing I did think about was I looked up all their scores [online] where it rates how Queer-friendly campuses are. And all the colleges I [ended up applying] to were either 4 or 5 stars [out of 5], with Edent College being 5 stars I'm pretty sure. And, so, I wasn't worried about being harmed but I guess in a way I kind of was [while I was researching]. I was also nervous about just not being able to find friends who were Gay and who I could really connect with on that level . . . I feel like here [at Edent] I've met more gender nonconforming people than I have at any other point in my life. And so,

coming in as a Freshman and seeing that was very different but also very soothing, like, “Oh, okay, I can exist here and I won’t die.”

Unlike Aaron who had the security of knowing the institutions he targeted during his application process had well-known reputations for being Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary-friendly, Lee prioritized his safety as a Transmasc, Nonbinary individual and his ability to develop social relations with similar others during his postsecondary educational research. Only after confirming institutions had a high Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary acceptance ranking online did he begin to consider other institutional factors during his application and selection process.

Interestingly, A. Gonzales, Ever, and Aaron did not prioritize or consider their gender identities when selecting institutions to apply to and all three participants narrated having been able to deeply explore their gender identity during their teenage years in various ways. In addition, each had some level of support during their pre-college identity exploration and development either through having Transgender and/or Nonbinary friends, Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary cocurricular involvements, or supportive family. In contrast, Lee prioritized their gender identity in their institutional selection process and narrated experiencing negative family interactions related to their gender identity with no community of support to explore their gender identity before college. This finding aligned with Hetherington’s (1991) Bottleneck Hypothesis presented in Chapter 2 and supported the notion that freeing up students’ mental capacity from having to be concerned about gender identity could allow for academic identity development to be addressed and prioritized. In addition, this adds to literature presented by Schneider and Dimito (2010; Nonbinary undergraduates were not explicitly included) that found pre-college experiences related to gender identity and sexual orientation for Transgender

undergraduates played a role in their perceptions of postsecondary institutions and their academic selection processes.

According to Museus's (2014) CECE Model, a postsecondary institution's ability to foster Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) for their students to feel valued in their identity and cultural backgrounds positively supports students' Individual Influences (i.e., sense of belonging, academic dispositions, and academic performance). Aaron's and Lee's narrative furthers the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) by suggesting an institution's ability to demonstrate they can provide Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) to prospective students may also impact Pre-College Inputs (i.e., academic disposition) toward the institution itself and influence postsecondary institutional selections. Furthermore, this finding also suggests the level in which Transgender and/or Nonbinary students are validated in their gender identity before matriculating into college through environmental and/or interpersonal experiences may determine the level of importance and relevance of Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) to prospective Transgender and/or Nonbinary students as a factor when researching potential postsecondary institutions. In other words, despite Museus's (2014) CECE Model being developed for the postsecondary educational context, evidence has suggested such a model may be applicable to other academic environments such as K-12 environments. This finding, again, highlighted how academic selections may be influenced in intricately converging ways depending on individuals' development as a result of their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and their ability to have the space to prioritize various aspects of their identity such as gender.

**Institutional Exosystem.** Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) denoted the environment external to an individual's immediate environmental and interpersonal interactions as the

Exosystem that could include an individual's neighborhood or local community. In this study, an Institutional Exosystem was considered the surrounding city and community immediately encompassing a postsecondary institution.

For Sunny, they noted the city in which Roco State University resided had a well-known reputation for being accepting of Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations compared to other institutions to which they applied. Along with financial reasons discussed previously and negative Familial Influences discussed later, this became another determining factor for them selecting to attend Roco State University over other institutions. This factor, again, aligned with Schneider and Dimito's (2010; Nonbinary undergraduates were not explicitly included) findings regarding pre-college gender identity and sexual orientation experiences influencing Transgender undergraduates' academic selection processes.

Regarding Museus's (2014) CECE Model, given its focus on postsecondary institutions themselves, CECE indicators such as Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) exclusively referred to postsecondary institutional environments and cultures. However, this finding expands this notion by suggesting Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) may also encompass environments external to the college environment that could provide positive influences on students' Individual Influences such as academic dispositions. It could also be argued such a factor may be an additional one to consider in understanding External Influences and their impact on matriculating undergraduates' pre-college academic perceptions, experiences, and selections.

### ***Television***

As noted in Chapter 3, Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) described environmental proximal processes as activities that stimulate and occupy one's consciousness and interests such

as reading a book. Given the current prevalence of technology in society compared to when Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) published the Process-Person-Context-Time Model, interactions with digital media could arguably be considered another environmental proximal process that directly impacts an individual's development.

Regarding Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals, literature has suggested they have increasingly used the internet as a source of support in recent times due to increased representation and resources available (Becker et al., 2017; Beemyn, 2011, 2019b; Nicolazzo, 2017; Singh et al., 2013; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Thus, there is precedent that such digital environmental interactions play a role in development that potentially influences their academic selections. Evidence of such digital environmental interactions influencing academic selections noted in participants' narratives came in the form of Television.

Lee narrated having always possessed an innate interest in animals that was furthered by television and led him toward becoming a veterinarian as an academic selection. He said:

I liked animals. I had a strong interest in fish and Marine Biology and things like that. So, I thought, maybe, I'd want to be an Exotic Vet or an Aquarium Vet, specifically . . . The closest thing [that made me want to be a veterinarian] was TV because I would, like, watch *Animal Planet* as a kid; especially a lot of those Humane Society shows. And I thought that was pretty cool just how much work and care and effort they put into rescuing these animals.

Lee's consistent interaction with television programs that provided in-depth insight into a potential career field based on his interests laid the foundation for him to select an academic path toward becoming a veterinarian. Similarly, Sunny considered becoming a doctor and a career in the health profession based on their deeply invested interest in *Grey's Anatomy*, a medical drama television program. Though these pre-college career goals for Lee and Sunny did not last, these narratives demonstrated how digital interactions could expose students to conceptually potential



career paths regardless of whether the representation was a realistic or dramatic portrayal. Both participants did not consider their gender identity in these selections.

As noted in Chapter 3, disposition characteristics referenced by Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006) denoted an individual's character could promote particular proximal processes. In this case, Lee's interest in animals and Sunny's interest in medical dramas influenced them toward specific television programs in their Microsystem interactions that, subsequently, impacted their academic selections. Though evidence of television and its influence on academic environments has been found in Mass Communication Studies (see Tucciarone, 2014), it has yet to be considered or explored overall in the field of Education and even less so when considering its influence on the academic selections of marginalized populations such as Transgender and/or Nonbinary students. Thus, this finding adds another digital factor in understanding the environmental interactions that could influence the academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students.

### ***Pre-College Environmental Interactions Conclusion***

As evident in this analysis, participants cited a variety of pre-college environmental interaction factors that influenced their postsecondary academic selections from electing to pursue postsecondary education, to which institution(s) to apply, which institution to attend, and what academic fields to major in or avoid. Though this study was primarily interested in postsecondary academic selections, it was obvious from this analysis that such selections were shaped and impacted by environmental interactions long before students matriculated into college. Regarding Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model, clear influences existed between the individual themselves and the various systems surrounding an individual when it came to how academic selections were made. However, given Museus's

(2014) CECE Model as it exists, its limitation became apparent in that Pre-College Inputs and External Influences might have more of an impact on individuals and their academically related college Individual Influences factors than what is currently addressed by the model. Furthermore, these findings suggested such a model may be applicable to K–12 settings or potentially expanded upon to include such settings more in its framework. Further discussions on this are addressed in Chapter 5. In the following section, environmental interaction factors participants cited as influencing their academic selections during college are discussed.

### **During College Environmental Interactions**

Though some environmental interaction factors during college that participants cited were similar to those taken into account pre-college, they were viewed from a different perspective and influenced academic selections differently. These included (a) Career Culture, (b) Cocurricular Influence, (c) Financial, (d) Postsecondary Institutional Culture, and (e) Postsecondary Institutional Exosystem—five factors in total. In addition, participants cited other environmental interaction factors that did not appear during pre-college experiences. Six such factors included (f) Beyond the Turning Point, (g) Career Opportunities, (h) Identity Awareness, (i) Postsecondary Institutional Factors such as Institutional Bureaucracy and Resources, and (j) Social Network Platforms. As with the pre-college environmental factors, factors are reported in alphabetical order for consistency and pronoun usage for participants remains consistent.

### ***Beyond the Turning Point***

According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), the Chronosystem accounted for temporal aspects of an individual's development and how proximal processes influenced such development both in a given moment and throughout time. Again, an example brought up in Chapter 3 of an academic selection influenced by time was academic major selection. However,

some participants noted even after experiencing a proximal process that would have influenced a change in their academic selections, time constraints negatively impacted their ability to make such selections. In other words, they perceived themselves to be temporally beyond the point at which such academic changes could be made.

Despite Andrew's revelation that his values did not align with his Psychology degree and him deciding not to pursue that career field after graduation, he was already well on his way to completing his degree given it was his last term when he discovered this misalignment. Thus, he found himself beyond the point at which he could make alternative academic selections, which influenced him to persist and complete his Psychology degree. Upon graduating from Strodon University, Andrew pursued a career in Environmental Science instead. Similarly, A. Gonzales only discovered postsecondary education was not a requirement for his particular field in his last year at Meeno State University. However, he continued toward completing this degree as he was already near completion; he shared the following:

It wasn't until I [was in] college and actually moved out and had a sense of self that I was, like, "Huh, [college] actually is an optional thing in life." But by then I was like, "You know what? I have a year left. I'm just going to finish it." . . . You don't technically need a college degree [in my career field], you just need a portfolio.

Andrew and A. Gonzales did consider their respective gender identities when selecting to continue pursuing their degrees; however, their selection was more in relation to other environmental interaction factors rather than this particular factor.

Similar to pre-college Personal Nonevent environmental interactions in which participants' agency in their institutional academic selections was significantly limited depending on when and whether an institution accepted them, Andrew and A. Gonzales noted having limited agency in their major academic selection and postsecondary educational pursuit selection

due to when they received critical information related to such selections. These narratives highlighted the crucial role that Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Chronosystem aspect of the Process-Person-Context-Time Model plays and how such environmental interactions affect academic selections. Because of when Andrew and A. Gonzales were able to uncover information on their potential career fields—namely, toward the end of their respective college tenures—their environmental interactions were prioritized over such deterrent factors that were not enough to influence them to alter their academic selections. In short, they both resigned to complete their academic degrees despite these deterring factors. Implications of this temporal limitation factor as an environmental interaction influencing academic selections are explored further in Chapter 5.

### ***Career Factors***

In contrast to cited pre-college environmental interaction factors, several participants took environmental career aspects into consideration when making academic selections during their undergraduate tenure. More specifically, Career Culture and Career Opportunities were determinant factors for academic selections.

**Career Culture.** In addition to their Beyond the Turning Point environmental interaction considerations and similar to pre-college Career Culture environmental interactions, both A. Gonzales and Andrew took their chosen career culture into consideration during their college experiences. A. Gonzales selected to continue completing his degree because he was concerned about his career security in his chosen career due to his gender identity. He shared the following:

In the field [of Animation] . . . it's Male-dominated but it's also Cisgender, Heterosexual dominated. So even though I might navigate life as a Man in that career, if people found out I was Trans or was Gay or Queer, I wouldn't be surprised if there were a bunch of higher-ups or coworkers or bosses who just would treat me a different way. Things like harassment is not abnormal . . . It's just one of those – I'm already dealing with basic day-to-day stress of me just

trying to transition normally as I want to and now I have to deal with it in my career, now I have to deal with it in other aspects of life . . . but I know I have to [deal with it] if I want to be in that career.

Though A. Gonzales perceived his career field as potentially unwelcoming or hostile toward his gender identity due to the culture being predominantly Male, Cisgender, and Heterosexual, he came to terms with these cultural perceptions and selected to continue pursuing his degree to cultivate and gain more opportunities that would assist him toward his career goal.

A. Gonzales's concerns regarding how his career culture may negatively interact with his gender identity did have an influence on his academic selections. In a similar manner, Ever had an experience during their pre-college timeframe in which she opted out of becoming a Zoologist. Again, this aligned with literature on Cisgender students and their academic selections and trajectories being influenced by how welcoming an academic field was to their gender identity (see Bilodeau, 2005; Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Fassinger, 1996; Ganley et al., 2018; Germeijs et al., 2012; Goodson, 1978; Kramer et al., 1994; Patton et al., 2016; Riegle-Crumb et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). Furthermore, this also aligned with Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Macrosystem concept where the culture of A. Gonzales's projected career, factual or otherwise, informed his Microsystem proximal processes. However, the academic selection results differed significantly between A. Gonzales and Ever, which could be attributed to the Beyond the Turning Point environmental interaction factor. Ever's pre-college perceptions toward the Zoology career culture influenced them to change her academic and career selections altogether before matriculation. A. Gonzales's revelations, on the other hand, occurred right before his last year in college, which conversely influenced him to continue his pursuit of his degree to fortify his security in his career field. This, again, brought up nuanced understandings of how Transgender and/or Nonbinary students used Career Culture environmental interaction

factors in their academic selections and the role limited temporal environmental interactions may have had in swaying such selections. Further exploration is discussed in Chapter 5.

In contrast to A. Gonzales's experiences, Andrew's perception of Psychology's career culture shifted negatively after taking a course in his last term. Andrew shared the following:

My last [term] of college . . . I took a class that kind of blew apart my whole understanding of Psychology and I lost interest in that field pretty much. It was a good realization, but it also blew apart my understanding of the field so much that I was like, "Nevermind." . . . The main takeaway I got [from the class] is the field of Psychology isn't how all people learn and think and grow and develop. It's how select groups of White or European or upper-class Americans – it's how a specific niche of people – mostly learn and develop and all of that. But it's not true for everybody. And Psychology has a replicability crisis where, basically, the studies aren't redone so there's a lot of the foundations of Psychology that are based on findings that may or may not even be true for people. Even if they recreate it – the demographics of the study group – they might not even be true for that group. So . . . it's a great field and I liked the classes I took in it and I definitely learned things, but . . . I was, like, "I can't spend a whole career building on a field that doesn't actively cater to everybody and ignores so many people." . . . For me, personally, it was – I just sort of realized it wasn't the direction I was going to go.

Because of Andrew's environmental interaction with this course, his perception of the Psychology career culture came in conflict with his personal values, and he selected to not pursue that career any longer beyond graduation.

As discussed in Chapter 2, Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates tended to be more socially aware and inclined toward social justice and civic engagement (James et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Evidence found on Cisgender Lesbian and Gay undergraduates suggested such disposition characteristics may even influence whether students were enticed by or repelled from specific academic selections based on sociopolitical considerations (see Schneider & Dimito, 2010). This supposition was supported by Andrew's narrative in selecting to reject the Psychology career field due to discovering its culture via his classroom environmental interaction. Using Museus's (2014) CECE Model, parallels could be drawn

between Andrew's narrative and his perceptions regarding a lack of Collectivist Cultural Orientations (CECE Indicator 6) in his major and career culture. Because Andrew understood his academic field to be deficient in its community-based environment, this negatively impacted his Academic Disposition and Sense of Belonging toward his major and career field overall.

Despite this incongruence in values, temporal factors took precedent in Andrew's academic selections in a similar way to how they influenced A. Gonzales, causing Andrew to select to complete his degree. This contrasted literature described in Chapter 2 that found having negative Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 6), as defined by Museus (2014), toward gender identity within academic major fields deterred Cisgender students from atypical academic selections (see Ganley et al., 2018; Riegler-Crumb et al., 2016). Again, implications regarding aforementioned temporal environmental factors and their relationship to career culture factors on academic selections are explored further in Chapter 5.

Participants' narratives in this factor also suggested a relationship between Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' value systems, Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Microsystem and Exosystem concepts, an expanded application of Museus's (2014) Cultural Community Service (CECE Indicator 3), and a nuanced understanding of the Museus's (2014) Culturally Validating Environment (CECE Indicator 6) factors when it came to academic selections. An example of this was demonstrated when Andrew's career culture did not align with his social justice values, a perception brought on by the curriculum presented to him in his Psychology course environment. This Microsystem environmental interaction was informed by the Psychology career field's Exosystem and caused Andrew to opt out of the career field due to a lacking Culturally Validating Environment (CECE Indicator 6) in the major toward his personal value systems. Because Andrew pursued a Psychology degree with the intention of

entering a Social Welfare Services career to support Queer youth, the course and the major itself did not provide Andrew with the perception that he could positively support the social welfare of his community, a defining factor for the Cultural Community Service Indicator (CECE Indicator 3) in providing cultural relevance for students at postsecondary institutions and increasing sense of belonging and academic disposition (Museus, 2014). Because literature found Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals tended to be more civically engaged and more inclined to participate in activism compared to the general population (see James et al., 2016; Riggle et al., 2011; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017), Andrew's narrative provided insight into specific environmental interaction experiences that may cause Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals to pivot their academic selections.

As alluded to in A. Gonzales's narrative and academic selection to continue completing his degree, Career Opportunities were another environmental interaction factor considered by participants.

**Career Opportunities.** Participants described taking advantage of specific academic selection opportunities during college either to develop needed skills toward specific careers or to have broader career opportunities in the future. For Aaron, his academic selections were targeted toward a specific future career field and academic pursuit. Specifically, his Economics major selection, subsequent Communication major selection, and involvement in Treven University's Marketing student organization were all selected to develop skills toward a career in Marketing and a potential MBA degree in the future. Though his specific academic selections were varied, his career goal was not and his academic selections were consistently geared toward promoting more career opportunities for himself toward that career goal. Similarly, Lee's



cocurricular participation as an illustrator and comic artist for their school newspaper was related to their Studio Art academic major and career interest as a tattoo artist.

Sunny selected to pursue a double major in Theatre and Cinema given their aspirations of becoming a television writer and director. However, unlike Aaron and Lee who were satisfied with the environmental aspects of their major selections, Sunny continued with their Cinema major selection despite it being an unwelcoming environment for them because it was the only academic option available at Roco State University that would lead to their career aspirations.

Sunny stated the following:

I thought about all my identities [when choosing my career and majors] because one of the ways I want to make change is – growing up, I never got to see people like me on screen. So that’s a really big part of why I want to do what I do . . . [I was concerned about my identities in this career] definitely as a negative thing, too. Just because I’m not really who you see when you think of a director that directs things in Hollywood. So, I knew that it was going to be hard for me to get into the industry. So, I think about how I can put people like me on screen and also how I can also get into the industry myself. There’s a lot of Queer and People of Color in [my Theatre major], so I love Theatre . . . But as for Cinema, definitely not. Like, that’s not the kind of space . . . If I could [have taken into account my surroundings and community when making my academic selections], I would because Cinema is mostly CisHet, White guys. And if there was another major that I could have chosen or classes I could choose, I probably would. But I don’t [have those options].

Similar to A. Gonzales’s assessment of his career culture, Sunny characterized their Cinema major and prospective career culture as being predominantly comprised of Cisgender, Heterosexual, White Men, meaning they perceived and experienced their major and potential career as being unwelcoming toward their gender identity, sexual orientation, and racial/ethnic identity experiences. However, despite these negative environmental perceptions and experiences, Sunny selected to continue with the Cinema degree due to the career opportunities and skills it provided toward their career goal and given the limited options provided by their institution.

Aspects of Andrew's and A. Gonzales's environmental interaction experiences with their major could be paralleled with Sunny's experiences. Both Andrew and Sunny's Academic Dispositions and Sense of Belonging toward their respective majors were negatively impacted by their majors' lack of Collectivist Cultural Orientations (CECE Indicator 6); yet, both selected to continue in those majors due to limitation factors such as time and available academic selection options related to their career goals. In addition, both A. Gonzales's and Sunny's academic intent to persist was driven by their desire to gain career opportunities through their academic experiences out of concern for their career security in their career fields due to their identities. This finding provided further nuanced understandings of what environmental interaction factors Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates consider when making academic selections and how such factors were weighed comparatively when making such selections. More discussion on this is explored in Chapter 5.

Ever selected to switch from a History major to Sociology during their college experience in part due to the perception that she would have comparatively more employment opportunities with the latter degree. In addition, because they selected to pursue a career in Social Work, she chose to have their Sociology major's internship requirement incorporate experiences that would provide skills toward such a career. Similarly, though A. Gonzales primarily selected to continue completing his degree due to being so close to completion, he also did so to maintain access to wider career-related opportunities provided by his institution like internships, career insights, and peer feedback.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, academic selections were significant in determining career opportunities and shaping career identity (Goodson, 1978). Narratives from these participants demonstrated they saw their academic selections playing a role in providing opportunities toward

their career aspirations. These narratives also provided insight into the complex relationship between identity; career aspirations; Microsystem environmental interactions in classroom and major department settings; perceived career Macrosystems; and an institution's ability, or limited ability, to provide Cultural Familiarity (CECE Indicator 1), Opportunities for Meaningful Cross-Cultural Engagement (CECE Indicator 4), and Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) factors. Such relationships between various factors that were considered either supported or hindered academic pathways. In Sunny's case, the perceived absence of their identities in their career field—or Demand characteristics according to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006)—was reinforced through their Microsystem interactions in their classes and academic major department. This absence and their experienced marginalization and tokenization in their Cinema major also pointed to a lack in the aforementioned CECE Indicators in their Microsystem environment. However, despite this negative environment, Sunny chose to persist in this academic major in favor of accessing career opportunities it provided. In addition, it was the only academic selection option available at their institution that would aid in their career pursuit.

Evidence exists in the literature about Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals and those presumed to identify as such facing widespread negative workplace environments due to their gender expression and identity (Hartzell et al., 2009; Lombardi et al., 2001). Narratives from these undergraduate Transgender and/or Nonbinary participants revealed they understood or had perceived knowledge of such negative environments existing in their career fields toward those who identify within their gender-expansive hypernyms. Furthermore, literature in Chapter 2 indicated Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates had considerable levels of resiliency in pursuing their academic goals due to facing repressive experiences with little support prior to

matriculating into college (Goldberg, 2018; Grant et al., 2011; Nadal et al., 2014; Singh et al., 2011; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Participants in this study similarly displayed a level of determination and resilience, selecting to persist in their academics to gain access to career opportunities for career security and fortify against potentially negative career environments. Such findings suggested Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Disposition characteristics, such as resiliency, may be at work or were being further developed through such proximal processes.

### ***Cocurricular Influence***

Literature found both systemic genderism and academic performance to be influential in Cisgender undergraduate students' cocurricular selections and involvements (see Bilodeau, 2005; Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Fassinger, 1996; Germeijs et al., 2012; Goodson, 1978; Museus, 2014; Patton et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). Indeed, as evident in the college Career Opportunities factor in this study, evidence from participants' narratives demonstrated how their academic and career pursuits influenced their cocurricular selections. However, as noted in the pre-college Cocurricular Influence factor, there exists a paucity in literature on the inverse relationship between how cocurricular involvements may influence academic selections. As Andrew was the only participant to provide a pre-college narrative on how his cocurricular involvements influenced his academic selections, Sunny was the only participant to provide a during-college narrative.

Sunny cited their cocurricular involvements promoted their continued enrollment in postsecondary education. In other words, their continued enrollment at Roco State University was a means to continue their passion in being involved in their cocurricular activities. Sunny stated the following:

In terms of extracurricular . . . I just loved community service and just giving back to my community. So, I planned to do the same thing in college. And, so far, it's

been great . . . I love being involved with my school. I'm not really a great student and I don't really like school. So, if I wasn't really involved in a lot of the things I am involved in, I probably wouldn't be a student.

As a resident assistant, a member of Roco State University's student government, and part of the Black student organization, Sunny's narrative emphasized the importance of Cultural Community Service (CECE Indicator 3) opportunities in postsecondary education and how it could promote retention and persistence in college. Again, this narrative of student involvement and its positive correlation to academic persistence is supported by prior literature (see Astin, 1984), though specifics on how such involvement influences academic selections is limited.

Sunny's narrative also expanded the notion that merely having Cultural Community Service (CECE Indicator 3) opportunities available to students was not necessarily enough to entice students to participate and persist in college as implied in Museus's (2014) model. In Sunny's case, their positive Disposition—a characteristic noted in Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) model—toward community service before attending postsecondary education was an important factor that influenced their pre-college Academic Disposition—a factor in Museus's (2014) model—to continue with cocurricular academic selections while in college. This, in turn, promoted their academic selection to persist toward their college degree. Therefore, it seemed Museus's (2014) CECE indicators and Individual Influences may have a similar bidirectional interrelationship as depicted between Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) concentric circles rather than a unidirectional relationship as displayed in its current idealistic form.

### ***Financial***

As found in pre-college academic selections, financial factors were cited by participants as influencing their during-college academic selections. Specifically, academic major and minor selections were impacted most by this factor. Though Aaron had a passion for writing since he

was young, he perceived the career path to not be economically viable. Thus, he selected Economics and subsequently Communication as his major to pursue a career in Marketing and Business while, instead, making Creative Writing his minor. Aaron stated the following:

With Creative Writing . . . there's still a part of me now that would be, like, "It would be great if I could just write a novel and – boom – it's a hit and then I wouldn't have to do anything else, but write." Because I do love writing a lot but it doesn't feel super realistic, I guess, because there are just so many books out there. It's hard to be one of the successful ones where you could make a living off of it. But ideally, if I am able to go into Business and have, like, a stable income or maybe my own company where it would afford me the time to write on the side then maybe I could still do Creative Writing. That's still a career that I entertain . . . But in terms of, like, writing, like, a New York Times best-selling series of fiction novels there's just different levels of, like, realism, I guess.

Aaron's perception of a career in writing and his financial concerns directly impacted his academic selections and what he prioritized as a major versus a minor. Similarly, Ever's longstanding concerns of having financial independence and security from her parents also directly impacted their major and minor academic selections during college. Ever stated the following:

I wanted to be a History educator because I think I wanted to educate more on more of a diverse representation within history. So, I would say that my gender identity, my sexual orientation kind of impacted my desire to teach History because I wanted to teach more diversity and more representation because I didn't see that a lot in my history classes . . . Sociology is not a major that's super well-funded, but it is very much needed. So, I feel like you're always going to be able to find a job within the Sociology field. History teachers, teachers in general, are just not paid well . . . I felt like I had more of a chance of becoming more financially stable in the Sociology realm just because there was so many job opportunities within that field.

In Ever's case, though her identities influenced them to declare a History major when matriculating into college, financial stability concerns influenced her to change their major selection to Sociology and make History her minor instead. From there, Ever ended up removing History as a minor altogether to graduate sooner and save money on tuition.

In contrast, Sunny was not even aware that their career interest was a financially viable option until they were in college. Sunny stated the following:

I wish that I would have made [my major selections] sooner, but better late than never. I guess I would have needed to know about the options that I had and know that I can do things that I am really passionate about as a job. For the longest time, it was just a hobby. Like, I was in Theater in high school but I didn't think that was an actual career that I can go to and do writing for money. So, I guess I would have needed to know that that was available.

In comparing these participants' narratives, Financial factors played a role in deterring Aaron and Ever from certain academic selections that were perceived to not provide a financially secure future career. Similar to the findings in pre-college interaction factors, Financial factors were found to limit what students perceived to be viable academic selection options and potential academic paths. However, Financial factors also played a role in introducing a viable academic pathway for Sunny to pursue a career they were passionate about. Again, these narratives shed light on Museus's (2014) CECE Model regarding External Influences on undergraduates' academic journeys in college while also furthering literature on how environmental financial factors could either deter or promote specific academic selections during the college experience rather than simply serving as an impediment to Transgender and/or Nonbinary students.

### ***Identity Awareness***

As mentioned in Chapter 2, Transgender and/or Nonbinary Demand characteristics, such as gender presentation and expression, could precipitate specific interactions and impact the ways in which such interactions occurred (Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Efrigg et al., 2011; Feder, 2020; GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Lombardi et al., 2001; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). In addition, identity management was a notable apprehension for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals because of genderist and cisnormative social norms that often

prompted the use of social recategorization strategies like masking and going stealth as a protective measure to avoid discrimination, rejection, and bias incidents (Efrigg et al., 2011; Feder, 2020; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017; J. T. Pryor, 2015; Pusch, 2005; Roberts et al., 2008; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Tourmaline et al., 2017). Other systematically oppressed identities these individuals may embody could also compound such interactions (Datti, 2011; Denice, 2020; Fukuyama & Ferguson, 2000; Grant et al., 2011; Hartzell et al., 2009; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Renfroe, 2018; Schneider & Dimito, 2010). Similar findings surfaced in this study where participants' awareness of how their environmental surroundings interacted with their perceived gender expression influenced their academic selections.

For Aaron, his ability to pass and be read as a Man in his environment made it easier for him to pursue what he was passionate about academically compared to when he was perceived as a Woman prior to his transition. Aaron shared the following:

Hypothetically speaking, if I never transitioned and I was just a Female in college, I think I would have, kind of, gravitated towards being a Woman in STEM because I feel there's just some judgment around Women being in the Humanities. And I always liked, kind of, going against the grain and I think I would've liked being a Woman in STEM and maybe pursuing [Computer Science] or maybe Psychology . . . Now that I'm perceived as a Man, I was less concerned about my gender identity going into picking a major. I felt I could just freely pick the thing that resonated most with me without having to worry about how people perceive me because, I guess, if you're a Man you, kind of, can do whatever you want and it's fine . . . Before I transitioned, for example, I was always trying to do STEM-y things like Science Olympiad, Tech as an elective, or things like that. I don't know if it was because I was trying so hard to be perceived as one of the guys because a lot of guys do STEM . . . But since I am perceived as Male, I did not really think too much about my gender identity and the majors and minors that I picked.

Before transitioning, Aaron noted being attracted to cocurricular activities and academics that were socially associated with Men due to him identifying as a Man and wanting to align with



that gender identity. In addition, he wanted to push against socially constructed norms being perceived as a Woman. However, after he transitioned and his gender expression and the perception of others aligned with his perception of himself as a Man, he no longer felt the need to make selections with his gender identity in mind and described feeling freer to make selections based on interests. Though there may be elements in his narrative related to categorically different genderist and cisnormative environmental influences placed on perceived Cisgender Women's and Cisgender Men's academic selections, for the purposes of this study, Aaron's narrative provided insight into how such categorically different genderist and cisnormative environmental influences could be read and enacted upon by Binary Transgender undergraduates when it comes to their academic selections. Such selections, thus, appear to be dependent upon environmental ideologies and how gender identity and expressions are perceived and read by others in their environment.

In contrast, Sunny selected a double major in Theatre and Cinema due to an awareness of their identities and the lack of those identities reflected in their environment. Sunny shared the following:

I think me changing my major [to Theatre and Cinema from Political Science] was definitely a personal decision. I had an epiphany one night, because I've always been a writer and I've always been just really into [television] shows and wanting to see diversity on-screen . . . From society, I get I'm ahead of what a lot of people see, I guess. A lot of people have never seen my gender expression, my gender identity, and so they're just unfamiliar with it.

Sunny's identity invisibility and perceived lack of representation in society and through media like television ultimately influenced them to pursue academic selections that would aid them in being able to change that for themselves and others.

Existing literature on Cisgender populations provides evidence for how systemic genderism influences Cisgender Women's and Cisgender Men's academic identity development

and academic selections differently (Bilodeau, 2005; Denice, 2020; Evans et al., 2009b; Fassinger, 1996; Germeijs et al., 2012; Goodson, 1978; Patton et al., 2016; Staniec, 2004). This included evidence of being pushed into cisnormative, gendered academic selections or pushed out of gender-expansive selections (Chung, 1995; Evans et al., 2009). Both Aaron's and Sunny's narratives aligned with Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Macrosystem concept and demonstrated how genderist and cisnormative social norms could permeate through to the Microsystem environment and influence Transgender and/or Nonbinary academic selections.

Literature also showed Binary Transgender undergraduates' academic experiences were influenced by genderist and cisnormative cultures and structures that limited or hindered their academic identity development and perceived academic options before and during college (Datti, 2011; Gonsiorek, 1988; Gottfredson, 1981; Hetherington, 1991; Myers et al., 1994; Prince, 1995; Schmidt & Nilsson, 2006; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). However, no literature exists on how Nonbinary undergraduates navigate their academics in an environment that does not recognize their gender identity and causes them to be read as and treated in Binary Cisgender ways. Aaron's and Sunny's narratives expanded this knowledge through Museus's (2014) framework by demonstrating how lacking or supportive Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) within academic selections could influence Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates toward certain academic selections. For Aaron, based on his speculations, his pre-college and pre-transition attraction towards STEM academic selections were because they were associated more with Men and due to a lack of Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) because he was still perceived as a Woman. However, matriculating into college being perceived as a Man, he described a supportive Culturally Validating Environment (CECE Indicator 5) that affirmed his gender identity and

gender expression that gave him the confidence to make academic selections without having to consider his gender identity or expression. For Sunny, having an unsupportive Culturally Validating Environment (CECE Indicator 5) toward both their gender identity and racial identity in their intended career field and academic selections were the catalysts that prompted them to select their career interest and major academic selections.

### ***Postsecondary Institutional Factors***

Similar to pre-college interaction factors, participants most cited Postsecondary Institutional factors as influencing their academic selections. These included Institutional Bureaucracy, Institutional Culture, Institutional Exosystem, and Institutional Resources.

**Institutional Bureaucracy.** Due to accreditation requirements and institutional policies, the academic affairs of postsecondary education are fraught with rules and regulations to which students are required to adhere. Participants cited such regulations as influential to their academic selections in various ways. This factor, understandably, did not appear in pre-college environmental interaction factors as participants would not have experienced these interactions before attending their institution.

All participants cited heavy restrictions and not much leeway when it came to required coursework toward their major and graduation requirements. Most described their major course patterns as “prescribed” and detailed insufficient available seating in required courses, limited course availability, and scarce alternative course options. Thus, major courses were often taken if and when they were made available rather than selected out of interest or when participants wanted to take them. This was the case for A. Gonzales who described having to do “a lot of jumping around for classes” due to perceived administrative mismanagement by his major department and limited availability of required courses. Sunny indicated their required courses

often only had the same professor designated for each course, so they had very little choice in their classroom environments. A. Gonzales, Aaron, and Lee did receive elective course recommendations from peers related to Transgender and/or Nonbinary topics or courses that were taught by Transgender and/or Nonbinary faculty they were interested in but lamented at not having space in their academic schedules to explore such courses given the limited availability of required courses for their majors and the academic rigor and rigidity of their major course patterns toward graduation.

Though these academic bureaucracies hindered participants' major academic selections to narrowly tailored paths, other bureaucratic regulations expanded academic selection options for some participants. More specifically, Aaron changed his major from Economics to Communication after taking an introductory Communication course, Ever changed their major from History to Sociology after taking an introductory Sociology course, and Lee made Sociology a second major after taking an introductory Sociology course; all of these examples were required courses for their respective general education requirements. In addition, an internship course requirement as part of Ever's Sociology major provided her the opportunity to pursue experiences and develop skills toward their intended Social Work career.

According to Museus's (2014) CECE Model, postsecondary institutions that are able to cultivate environments that supported Cultural Relevance (CECE Indicators 1–5) led to increased sense of belonging, higher academic dispositions, better academic performance, and improved college success outcomes for its students, especially those with marginalized identities. In analyzing these four participants' narratives, their institutions narrowly prioritized academic regulations and requirements over Cultural Relevance indicators (CECE Indicators 1–5). More specifically, students had limited to no opportunities to select coursework that provided

culturally relevant interactions related to their identity background and communities overall—let alone their Transgender and/or Nonbinary identities—due to the rigidity of their curriculums toward graduation. Though participants were made aware of Transgender and/or Nonbinary related courses and professors available at each institution, they felt unable to fit those options into what they perceived to be a predetermined academic schedule toward graduation. This rigidity caused participants to not even consider such courses or professors as academic options from which they could select. In addition, classroom environments in their strictly tailored academic pathways toward graduation, including general education requirement courses outside of their major, also provided limited to no culturally relevant interaction opportunities. Given this was a theme across participants’ narratives from various institutions, it revealed the lacking consideration postsecondary educational institutions had in infusing Cultural Relevance (CECE Indicators 1–5) into their academic course patterns for majors, general education, and curriculums for undergraduates. Instead, such opportunities were outside of these graduation requirements and relegated to being optional electives.

**Institutional Culture.** As seen in pre-college environmental interactions, Postsecondary Institutional Culture was also a factor participants considered when making their academic selections during college. When selecting to transfer out of Zeyra State University, Andrew considered Strodon University’s culture as part of his decision, by stating:

For Strodon, definitely, I was pulled in as far as it being super Queer-friendly and inclusive and diverse and focusing a lot on student well-being and mental health and self-care and all of those things. And the campus is beautiful. In, like, third grade I told my mom I was going to go leave society and live in a Redwood tree and I feel like I did that coming to Strodon. So, the overall environment were big factors.

In the pre-college Postsecondary Institutional Culture environmental interactions, Lee prioritized his gender identity and institutional culture when researching postsecondary institutions to apply

to due to a lack of support and community for his gender identity. Similarly, as discussed in the Institutional Exosystem section, Andrew's lack of support from Zeyra State University's Exosystem was a factor that prompted him to be drawn toward Strodon University's culture because he perceived the latter having a welcoming and supportive environment for his identities and needs. Such influences were similar to those found by Schneider and Dimito (2010) on how perceptions of college campus climates could impact institutional selections of pre-college students applying to college. This finding aligned with Museus's (2014) description of a Culturally Validating Environment (CECE Indicator 5) indicated an institution's physical landscape and level of Culturally Validating Environment (CECE Indicator 5) may significantly influence academic selections over time across pre-college and during-college experiences. In other words, the postsecondary institutional academic selection process did not necessarily end once a student matriculated to the institution they selected after high school; environmental interaction factors and perceptions could still influence students' postsecondary institutional academic selections. This finding aligned with Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Chronosystem concept and how such proximal processes over time could shape future academic selections, directions, and subsequent proximal processes.

In Aaron's case, he described how Treven University's strong Computer Science culture influenced him to add Computer Science as a minor, by stating:

With Computer Science, that was kind of tacked on last-minute . . . I was, like, "I might as well try it out, everyone at Treven [University] takes CS [Computer Science] classes." And I ended up, kind of, liking it and I thought it would be cool to have a CS minor on my transcript, I guess. And, I guess, there was, like, a little bit of pressure to do some kind of CS. Or that, like, STEM is more valuable than the Humanities or things like that. Not that I need validation that my degrees are worth it or whatever, but it feels legit to have a CS minor. I don't know, it feels wrong to say that. But I feel like people do judge you for the majors and minors that you have. And so, at least, when someone's like, "Oh, I'm a STEM major," I

can be, like, “Yeah, I relate to that. I’ve got a CS minor. I can do CS.” . . . So, I guess that’s how I chose my minor.

The environmental culture at Treven University favoring Computer Science and STEM as a prestigious field furthered Aaron’s pre-college environmental Macrosystem influence interactions and subsequently influenced his minor selection. This, again, aligned with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2006) proximal processes concept where consistently continuous interactions between individuals and their environments had the most influence and effect on their perceptions of their contextual positionality. In other words, Aaron’s understandings and perceptions during his pre-college experiences that STEM fields were seen as more valuable than Humanities fields were further affirmed by Treven University’s environmental culture and caused him to add Computer Science to his academic selections. These narratives from Andrew and Aaron furthered literature regarding environmental interaction considerations that may attract Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates to certain academic selections and institutional selections during their postsecondary experiences.

**Institutional Exosystem.** As with Institutional Culture, participants cited Institutional Exosystems as pre-college and during-college environmental interaction factors influencing their academic selections. Similar to Sunny’s pre-college environmental interactions that influenced them to select Roco State University based on its surrounding city environment, both Aaron and Andrew took into account institutional Exosystems in their postsecondary institutional academic selections.

When applying for study abroad, Aaron researched institutions to apply to when making his institutional selection, by stating:

With study abroad, I actually did mention being Trans in my application because they were asking about a nonacademic challenge that you may face while you’re abroad and how you would handle it. And I was, like, “Well, I am Trans,” so I

had to do some research. I'm, like, "Will I get hate-crimes if I study abroad in this place?" And I mentioned that there has been a rise in anti-Trans violence or sentiment in [my chosen study abroad country] because very prominent figures here are expressing anti-Trans sentiment . . . I was, like, "Maybe I'll get hate-crimes, but probably not in Loct [the study abroad city]," because it's a liberal kind of place, like, nestled within more conservative areas. And so, I was, like, "That's why I want to go to Loct [the University]. Because, of all the different places that are available to us to study abroad, Loct [the city] is probably going to be the safest for me. Please let me in." And so [my gender identity] did come into account when I was deciding where to study abroad.

During Aaron's pre-college experiences, he applied to and selected Treven University without needing to consider his gender identity due to its well-known Queer and Transgender and/or Nonbinary-friendly culture and reputation. Thus, he was able to prioritize other factors such as Financial and Postsecondary Institutional Culture when making that selection. However, because of his lack of knowledge on institutions abroad and their surrounding areas, Aaron's approach to his study abroad postsecondary institutional selection research process caused him to reprioritize his gender identity over other factors.

In contrast, as alluded to in the during-college Institutional Culture section, Andrew was both drawn to Strodon University due to its culture and was compelled to leave Zeyra State University due to its location in the city of Groht. Andrew stated the following:

[The city of] Groht is rather small and very White and rather Republican and homophobic and it wasn't my people. At some point, I got a [homophobic and transphobic] slur yelled at me from a passing car. People have had far worse things happen to them [there] but it was not the best city for me to be in. So, definitely, there was some push there as far as not feeling super at home and at times feeling unsafe in Groht.

Based on Andrew's narrative, he selected to leave Zeyra State University due to the institution's hostile Exosystem toward his perceived gender identity and sexual orientation. What should be noted for Andrew was he also identified as White but characterized the city of Groht as "White" in a way that denoted an intolerant environment toward marginalized communities.



Comparing these two narratives, participants appeared to use both elements of Identity Awareness and Institutional Exosystem environmental interaction factors when making academic selection considerations and were either pushed toward or pulled away from selections based on how they perceived they would be directly impacted by them due to their gender identity. Again, such findings expanded Museum's Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5) concept and how such Exosystem environments or External Influences of postsecondary institutional settings had a continuous, temporal influence on Transgender and/or Nonbinary students' academic selections during their pre-college experiences and into their college experiences.

**Institutional Resources.** Like Postsecondary Institutional Bureaucracy, another environmental interaction factor that was not mentioned in pre-college environmental interaction factors was Postsecondary Institutional Resources. Participants who cited this environmental interaction factor narrated both the presence and lack of resources provided by their respective institutions influenced their academic selections. For academic course selections, A. Gonzales used sample long-term academic plans provided by Meeno State University that prescribed required course schedules each term toward graduation. Aaron used Treven University's database of reviews from students on courses and professors to aid in finalizing his course selections. However, Ever took a foreign language course while attending Geera Community College before transferring to Quirt State University that she could not continue taking at Quirt State University toward their Language requirement because Quirt State University did not offer that language. Thus, she had to enroll concurrently at Quirt State University and Geera Community College to complete their Language requirement to avoid starting a new language, which would have delayed her degree completion.

For major selections, Sunny explained being exposed to potential majors and career paths due to Roco State University's transparency and having all academic options and requirements posted on institutional websites; this aided in their research to switch their major and declare a double major toward their career goal. Aaron, on the other hand, entered Treven University knowing he wanted to pursue a career in Business but was restricted to declaring an Economics major because Treven University did not offer a Business major. He ended up changing his major soon after his first term and, again, had to choose a major outside of Business due to the absence of that academic option.

Participants also cited limitations on institutional resources due to the COVID-19 global pandemic as having an impact on their environmental interactions and academic selections. Andrew, already a shy individual, narrated his ability to connect with academic staff and counselors at Strodon University as significantly hampered due to the COVID-19 global pandemic restrictions, which limited his access to potentially useful resources that could have assisted him in his academic selections. In addition, Aaron's study abroad experience was postponed from his 3rd year to this 4th year due to the COVID-19 global pandemic restrictions eliminating the opportunity for students to take part in such experiences during that time. Though Aaron's experience could have been categorized as a Personal Nonevent during college, it was coded under Institutional Resources for this study because the primary influence on his academic selection options was the limited or eliminated environmental resources due to the COVID-19 global pandemic.

For A. Gonzales, Aaron, and Sunny, their institutions provided academic transparency and tools to make decisions on their courses and major selections. On the other hand, lacking academic courses and major options limited Aaron and Ever in their ability to make academic

selections toward their academic goals. In addition, external factors—namely, the COVID-19 global pandemic—also impacted Aaron’s ability to select study abroad as an academic option in the timeframe he was considering. Thus, institutional resources as an environmental interaction factor aligned most with Bronfenbrenner and Morris’s (2006) Exosystem and Microsystem concepts because it demonstrated how the structure and priorities of postsecondary institutional Microsystems either expanded or limited academic selection options and opportunities for participants. Furthermore, Andrew’s narrative related more to Museus’s (2014) Cultural Responsiveness factors (CECE Indicators 6–9) because his needs as a shy and anxious student were unmet due to Exosystem influences by the COVID-19 global pandemic on his institution’s Microsystem environment and the institution’s inability to proactively connect and build rapport with him to support his academic journey.

### *Social Network Platforms*

Similar to pre-college experiences where participants cited Television as a digital environmental interaction factor that influenced their academic selections, social network platforms were mentioned as resources participants used to navigate academic selections. Though social networks platforms could arguably involve interactions with individuals and be categorized as an interpersonal interaction, for this study it was specifically categorized as an environmental interaction because participants acted as passive reviewers of such spaces rather than actively engaging or interacting with others.

Both A. Gonzales and Lee used social network platforms for various academic-related concerns. A. Gonzales considered opinions posted by others in his intended career field to gain insight into his career field’s culture and determined experiences and skills he still needed to be considered a competitive candidate for a position. He also used community postings to find

cocurricular opportunities related to his major to which he could apply and gain experience toward his career interest. Similarly, Lee used social networking community boards to research job postings in their career field and find opportunities that could help toward their career goal. Both participants turned to social networking platforms and communities to determine how to navigate their academics and to find experiences needed to be successful in their respective career fields over campus resources given the wide-ranging access to community members employed in their respective careers. Both participants gave such testimonials and insights significant and they swayed their academic selections.

These passive social networking interactions acted as significant proximal processes in participants' Microsystem environments. Such environmental interactions engaged both A. Gonzales's and Lee's academic attention and exploration, which directly influenced their academic positionality conceptualization and subsequent proximal processes (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Thus, these passive interactions with social networking platforms provided them with information that impacted their career goal perspectives and identified gaps in their academic and cocurricular resumes toward such goals. This, in turn, influenced their academic selections when it came to courses and cocurricular opportunities they targeted and strove to obtain.

### ***During College Environmental Interactions Conclusion***

As seen in the analysis provided, participants cited more environmental interaction factors influencing their postsecondary academic selections during their college experiences compared to pre-college environmental interactions. Given the focus of this study was on postsecondary academic selections and participants being undergraduates at the time, this was not surprising. However, it was unexpected that 5 of the 11 unique environmental interaction

factors cited during college were similar to those cited pre-college. Such findings, again, highlighted Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Chronosystem aspect as a point of interest for further considerations when understanding how environmental interaction factors influenced Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates when they made academic selections over time. In addition, these findings and narratives illustrated how Museus's (2014) CECE Indicators, specifically Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5), Cultural Community Service (CECE Indicator 3), and Collectivist Cultural Orientations (CECE Indicator 6), influenced Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' academic selections. In the following section, interpersonal interaction factors and how these influenced Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate academic selections are presented.

### **Pre-College Interpersonal Interactions**

Evidence in Chapter 2 presented family, friends, and schooling interactions with peers, faculty, and staff having significant influences on the cultural, social, mental, emotional, and academic development of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students during their pre-college and college experiences (Beemyn, 2019b; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bilodeau, 2005; Chung, 1995; Fassinger, 1996; GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Lombardi et al., 2001; Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Narratives from participants supported this finding and detailed similarly notable influences of interpersonal interactions on their academic selections. Though participants presented less interpersonal interaction factors influencing their academic selections compared to environmental interaction factors, participants narrated interpersonal interaction factors as being considered more and having more significant influences on their academic selections.

Again, interpersonal interactions were defined in this study as active interactions participants had with other individuals, whether virtually through social networking mediums or in-person. In addition, interactions with individuals not employed by participants' educational institutions were further designated as *informal interpersonal interactions* in this study and included familial relations, friends, and peers. Those who were employed by or tangentially associated with participants' educational institutions, such as faculty, staff, or guest lecturers, were considered *institutional interpersonal interactions* in this study. Similar to how environmental interactions were laid out in this chapter, pre-college interpersonal interactions are presented first followed by during college interactions.

Though literature has detailed pre-college familial relations, friends, peers, and school personnel as being influential interpersonal experiences for Transgender and/or Nonbinary students and their academics (see GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Nicolazzo, 2017), participants did not cite pre-college friends, peers, or institutional staff interactions as being influential to their academic selections. The only Pre-College informal interpersonal interaction factor cited was Familial and Parental Interactions, which supported prior literature. For pre-college institutional interpersonal interaction factors, one of the two cited by participants was faculty, which, again, aligned with previous literature. Surprisingly, another was guest speakers invited by faculty or the institution; a factor that has not been cited by literature.

Regarding interpersonal interactions, this study distinguished between supportive interactions and interactions that lacked support. Interactions lacking in support were defined as both (a) unsupportive, negative interactions and (b) interactions in which support was absent or not provided.

### ***Informal Interpersonal Interactions***

As stated previously, Familial and Parental Interactions were the only pre-college informal interpersonal interaction factor cited by participants as being influential on their academic selections.

**Familial Interactions.** Expanding on findings from literature, participants cited informal interactions with extended family in addition to parents as influencing postsecondary educational pursuits. As alluded to in the pre-college Financial environmental interaction section, both Ever and Sunny faced challenging familial interpersonal interactions due to their gender identities that influenced their pre-college academic selections. Ever described having a “really strained . . . really poor relationship” with their parents and extended family who deliberately and continuously ignored her Queer and Nonbinary identities and pronouns. These interactions pushed Ever to present herself in more Cisgendered gender expression around them to avoid familial conflicts and the need to exert energy in reaffirming her identities to their unsupportive family. Such experiences influenced Ever to pursue postsecondary education as a means to distance herself from these toxic interactions. Ever shared the following:

I think I spent a decent amount of time thinking about my future career [before college]. I was trying to find a field where I could be financially stable, [to] be independent from my parents. So, a lot of my school education was focused on getting out of my family’s house.

As evident in Ever’s narrative, lacking both supportive familial interpersonal interactions and financial environmental interactions were closely related factors that amalgamated into their selection to pursue postsecondary education, the career she pursued, and the academic pathways they took to accomplish this in a financially sound way. In other words, though financial environmental interactions were indeed reasons she pursued postsecondary education and the basis for their institutional and career-related academic selections, an equally compelling reason

behind selecting to pursue postsecondary education was to remove themselves from negative family interactions and live independently and authentically as herself in their identity.

Similarly, Sunny described being “surrounded by bigoted [family members] because of religion” and experiencing “just a lot of toxic masculinity and misogyny” in their familial interactions. Such interactions inhibited them from being able to discuss their gender identity and sexual orientation with their family let alone explore or develop such identities. This caused Sunny to present their gender expression in “forced Feminine” ways that negatively impacted their mental and emotional well-being. Therefore, although they also cited financial and high school Microsystem environmental interactions as factors that pushed them to pursue postsecondary education, their familial interactions were also significant factors that contributed to their postsecondary educational pursuits so they could become independent and set boundaries between them and their family.

Ever and Sunny’s lack of support through familial interpersonal interactions substantiated existing literature presented in Chapter 2 in a few ways. First, both participants described being aware of their Transgender and/or Nonbinary identity from a young age and its development over time pre-college, and experiencing pervasive Cisgender indoctrination via familial relations during this time and how it impacted their academic selections (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). Second, Ever and Sunny turned to social recategorization strategies to survive their adverse familial interactions and sought out postsecondary education as a means toward autonomy (Bandura, 2001; Beemyn & Rankin, 2011; Bem, 1983; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014; Nadal et al., 2014; Riggle et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2011; Tilcsik et al., 2015). Such resiliency strategies echoed literature regarding Transgender and/or Nonbinary youth being able to recognize their self-worth and advocate for



the development of their personal growth (Riggle et al., 2011). Though literature described negative familial interactions as being detrimental to Transgender and/or Nonbinary youth, both Ever and Sunny used such negative familial interactions as a means to bolster their determination toward a path to freedom via their postsecondary educational pursuits and career-related academic selections. Thus, these experiences provided counter-narratives to deficit-based literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences. Furthermore, given the paucity of literature on the experiences of Nonbinary individuals, especially regarding academic selections, these narratives from both Ever and Sunny provided further insight into their unique familial interaction experiences and how such pre-college interactions may influence academic selections toward the pursuit of postsecondary education and a future career.

In addition, literature described Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates perceiving postsecondary institutions as safe environments to express and explore their gender identity (Evans et al., 2009; Hartzell et al., 2009; Patton et al., 2016). From both Ever and Sunny's narratives, it became apparent that their negative family interactions were incompatible with their ability to exist freely and fully as themselves, especially given their gender identity. This inhibition made postsecondary education an enticing path toward liberation from such interactions. Thus, Ever and Sunny's narratives furthered literature by suggesting postsecondary institutions were perceived as positive environments for gender identity expression and exploration by Transgender and/or Nonbinary youth even before attending postsecondary education. In other words, these participants' motivations to pursue postsecondary education were prompted by adverse family interactions and the understanding that postsecondary institutions were places where they could freely identify and explore their identities.

**Parental Interactions.** Aligning with literature, A. Gonzales, Aaron, and Sunny cited informal interpersonal interactions with their parents as influential to their pursuit of postsecondary education. More specifically, participants noted their parents imparted on them the notion that postsecondary education was expected after completing high school, which influenced them to pursue it initially. A. Gonzales summarized this by stating:

To be honest, it's been instilled into me since I was young. As an adult, I realized it was, like, it wasn't forced but it was definitely my parents [who] really instilled into me that I had to do it. And they made it seem like I didn't have a choice so I didn't see it as an issue. I was very much like, "Yeah, this is what you're supposed to do in life." And it was very nonchalant for me. So there really isn't a time period of where I decided [to pursue college]. It was just I thought this is what was going to happen, what you had to do. Just the same as, like, I knew I was going to be an adult, I knew I was going to learn to drive a car, and I knew I was going to college. It just was a matter of fact.

Because this factor involved participants' parents, responses to the screening questionnaire on participants' parents were considered alongside participants' narratives that revealed distinctions between Aaron's background and narratives from A. Gonzales and Sunny (see Table 5). Aaron came from an upper-class socioeconomic background with the highest level of education by any parent/guardian being a master's degree or equivalent whereas both A. Gonzales and Sunny came from working-class socioeconomic backgrounds with the former having any parent/guardian whose highest level of education was an associate degree and the latter being a high school diploma or GED (i.e., First-Gen). In addition, A. Gonzales noted having a positive, yet considerably subtle, experience of acceptance from his mom regarding his gender identity, but Sunny experienced negative parental and familial interactions on the matter. Aaron, on the other hand, depicted his parents as being "almost overwhelming [in] how accepting" they were of his gender identity, especially his dad who used the internet to do extensive research on his gender identity. Given this information, Aaron's narrative regarding his parents differed from the

other two participants in three areas: (a) education level of any parent/guardian who raised them, (b) class background growing up, and (c) parental acceptance of gender identity. In this context, Aaron's narrative included in-depth information and specific details on how he perceived his supportive parental interactions directly influenced his academic selections. Although both A. Gonzales and Sunny only briefly mentioned their parents encouraging them to attend postsecondary education as a factor without providing much more detail or reasoning beyond that, Aaron recounted specific interactions, particularly with his dad, that included Aaron and his sibling being taught at a young age about the names, locations, mottos, and mascots of each Ivy League university and what an MBA degree was. Aaron's early experiences with his dad learning about Ivy League universities directly influenced to which institutions Aaron selected to apply. His knowledge about an MBA degree also influenced him to pursue postsecondary education to subsequently pursue such a degree.

As mentioned in previous chapters, there exists a hidden curriculum in schooling environments that demand assimilation into the majority culture, often at the expense of students' success, culture, and identity (Valenzuela, 1999). Evidence of this can be seen in literature on presumably Cisgender students that indicated low-income students, First-Gen students, and students of Color having a more difficult time pursuing postsecondary education compared to students from affluent backgrounds, students whose parents attended postsecondary education, and White students (Daugherty, 2012; Rall, 2016). Such contrasts in postsecondary educational pursuits and pre-college influences that led to this academic selection were seen in these participants' narratives given the differing levels of descriptive details, class backgrounds, and highest education level by any parent/guardian. Though the focus of this study was on the environmental and interpersonal experiences that influenced Transgender and/or Nonbinary

students' academic selections in particular, these narratives confirmed academic selections could also be influenced in complex, intersecting ways beyond just one identity when students embody varying identities.

When it comes to major selection, Aaron's supportive parental interactions, more specifically with his dad and looking up to him as a role model, further influenced Aaron selecting to pursue Economics as a major pre-college. Similarly, Andrew was unsure of what he wanted to pursue when applying to Zeyra State University and cited his mom as positively influencing him to pick Business as a major. Given his mom's background in banking and the nonprofit sector, Andrew recalled his mom noting he could gain overall beneficial skills from the major even if he decided to switch his major later.

Much of the literature on Transgender and/or Nonbinary experiences has been based, again, on negative interactions and grim outcomes due to gender-based biases that continue to victimize these individuals through a deficit lens (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). Although this finding supported literature in Chapter 2 that identified familial relations as influential to individuals during formative years, it was unique in that it provides a glimpse into how actively supportive parental interactions are compared to muted or negative interactions and how those influenced participants' academic selections, particularly in the pursuit of postsecondary education, determining to which institutions to apply, and determining academic fields to pursue after high school. Furthermore, this finding supported the role the internet had in providing positive familial interactions for Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals (see Beemyn, 2019b), given that Aaron's dad was able to do his own research online to support Aaron in his gender identity. Moreover, it was evident based on participants' narratives that A. Gonzales's and Aaron's parental interactions with their gender identity as Binary Transgender individuals

were more positive compared to Sunny's experiences as a Nonbinary individual. This, again, may be due to a focus on Binary Transgender experiences in empirical, theoretical, practical, and anecdotal literature due to genderist connotations that invisibilizes Nonbinary experiences in the Transgender and/or Nonbinary population (Beemyn, 2019b). Further research is needed to understand such distinctions in experiences between these populations and their parental interactions.

For parental interactions that lacked support, Ever noted wanting to go into Cosmetology but knew her parents saw it as an unacceptable career, which further pushed Ever toward pursuing postsecondary education to assist in creating distance between herself and her parents. For Andrew, his desire to become an astronaut was curtailed by his mom "saying [he] can't leave the planet and [Andrew] wasn't interested in doing some desk job on Earth so [he] lost interest" in that career option. Similarly, Lee noted not even considering tattooing as an option based on his parents' classist and racist perceptions of the field. In Sunny's case, they experienced both supportive interactions and interactions that lacked support from their parents. When Sunny was considering pursuing law school during their pre-college experience, their parents encouraged this academic selection because they considered it a respectable career path. However, as Sunny matriculated into college as a First-Gen student and began exploring academic pathways, their parents were unable to provide assistance or support toward their academic goals given their lack of experience and knowledge in the postsecondary experience and its academics. These narratives regarding limited or lack of support from parental interactions provided insight into how such interactions shaped academic directions and subsequent academic selections.

### ***High School Institutional Interpersonal Influences***

Literature has invariably highlighted supportive institutional faculty and staff as significant sources of resiliency for Transgender and/or Nonbinary students (GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Linley et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). Regarding academic selections, participants cited Faculty Interactions and Guest Speaker Interactions as pre-college institutional interpersonal interactions that inspired them to pursue specific academic selections.

**Faculty Interactions.** As noted in literature, supportive faculty interactions have been shown to have the most significant influence on, presumably Cisgender, students' academic selections and development (Y. K. Kim & Sax, 2009; Linley et al., 2016). For Andrew and Ever, their pre-college institutional interpersonal experiences with high school teachers, who were engaging and inspiring, influenced their academic selections and academic paths before entering college and even years later while attending college.

Though Andrew did not come to his final major selection until later in his college career, he cited his high school Advanced Placement (AP) Psychology professor as influential on both his major selection and decision to transfer to and attend Strodon University, by stating:

My teacher for AP Psychology in high school had gone to Strodon [University] also to study Psychology and I really liked her and looked up to her as a role model. I didn't keep in contact with her after I graduated or anything, but there was some influence there in terms of me deciding to study Psychology in the first place.

Andrew's experience supported the Chronosystem concept of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) framework because his college academic selections were informed by his pre-college proximal processes with his high school teacher whom he admired. Furthermore, it suggested particularly influential pre-college temporal proximal processes, such as Andrew's positive faculty interactions, may be selectively recalled by individuals to influence current or future

proximal processes. Similar to an echo effect where a sound is held or delayed and comes after the initial auditory stimulus, such recollection of positive interactions that incur proximal processes further down the temporal line from the initial interaction, may be considered a *Temporal Echo Effect*, as the researcher has titled, in the Chronosystem concept when it comes to academic selections. This concept is discussed more in Chapter 5.

Like Andrew, Ever cited their high school History teacher as influencing her major selection and career aspiration before matriculating into college, by stating:

I wanted to be a History educator because I think I wanted to educate more [students] on more of a diverse representation within history . . . I had a really good History teacher, too, that made me also really interested in History even though there wasn't a lot of diverse representation within the history that I learned. So, I really think that inspired me a lot to teach History and do supplemental learning about Queer history and Disability history and all that. All that kind of kick-started my love for history and realizing that there are people that look like me in history and who look like other people – other minority groups – that aren't represented.

Despite changing their major and career selections while attending college, this positive pre-college interpersonal interaction with her History teacher significantly influenced Ever's pre-college academic interests and pathways during their high school tenure and even beyond into her personal time outside of school. Such proximal processes subsequently influenced their college applications, institutional selection process, and initial college academic experiences as a declared History major her first term.

Andrew and Ever's narratives supported previously mentioned literature on positive impacts faculty have on students' academic selections (see Y. K. Kim & Sax, 2009; Linley et al., 2016) and provided insight into how Transgender and/or Nonbinary students considered such interactions when making academic selections. In addition, such findings provided further

insight into how faculty in pre-college institutional settings influenced college academic selections before, during, and even well into the undergraduate experience.

**Guest Speaker Interactions.** A factor that did not present itself in literature but was brought up by Sunny and Andrew regarding their high school experiences was the impact that invited guest speakers had on their academic selections. Sunny cited Black lawyers who were invited to speak at their high school as influential in their decision to pursue a career in law because Sunny was able to relate to both speakers' racial identity and the lawyers' ability to connect the legal profession and Sunny's passion for social justice. Despite Sunny not particularly wanting to go to law school, they still pursued the career initially due to the connections they saw between their passion, the legal profession, and their racial identity from the guest speakers. Similarly, Andrew cited invited guest speakers from the National Aeronautics and Space Administration as inspiring him to become an astronaut, though that pursuit was short-lived due to parental influence.

This finding was initially surprising given such interactions were significantly limited temporally and interpersonally, yet had an influence on these participants toward specific academic selections. However, what became apparent was the shallowness of influence such interactions had on participants' academic selections. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (2006), proximal processes resulted in development in an individual; meaning consistent, sustained interpersonal interactions may influence an individual's academic development. Evidence of this could be seen in prior literature that indicated faculty interactions had significant influences on undergraduate academic selections because classroom environments promoted consistent and sustained interactions between faculty and students (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006; Y. K. Kim & Sax, 2009; Linley et al., 2016). Given this understanding, it became



clear why these guest speakers' interpersonal influences had limited impact on Sunny and Andrew's academic selections.

Nevertheless, such interactions undeniably have an influence on academic selections and were highlighted by participants in this study. Thus, it would seem exposure to various academic pathways and professionals in the field might have some influence on students' perceptions and potential academic selections during their pre-college experience leading up to college. This seemed especially true in Sunny's case as Sunny's school was able to expose students to diverse professionals who embodied similar racial and ethnic identities and inspired Sunny to lean toward the legal profession and pursue the field academically pre-college despite not being interested in the field itself. This revealed the significance of Museus's (2014) Cultural Familiarity (CECE Indicator 1) and Proactive Philosophies (CECE Indicator 8) even in high school settings. Therefore, this finding indicated more understanding is necessary about the role high school institutional personnel have in curating such pre-college academic proximal processes through invited guests, especially regarding how the intersection between gender identity and other salient identities such as race may factor into such interaction influences for Transgender and/or Nonbinary students.

### ***Pre-College Interpersonal Interactions Conclusion***

In reviewing participants' narratives on the pre-college interpersonal interactions that influenced their academic selections, distinct relationships were revealed between positive and negative/lacking interactions, how these pushed or pulled participants toward certain academic selections, and the degree of relationship participants had with the interpersonal interaction. When it came to informal interactions, positive familial interactions tended to pull participants toward certain academic selections, such as Aaron and Andrew being drawn toward Business or

A. Gonzales perceiving postsecondary education as a natural progression after high school. In these cases, participants had positive, supportive interactions and so academic selections were positively accepted or even expected as inevitable trajectories.

However, in Aaron's case, his commitment to his academic selection was significantly more than Andrew's toward his academic selection and A. Gonzales's toward pursuing postsecondary education. This may be attributed to the comparative extent of positive familial interaction Aaron was able to narrate and relate to his selections. This was further supported by findings from institutional interactions in which positive faculty interactions pulled Andrew and Ever toward specific academic major selections, with both being positively committed to these decisions for a significant time compared to positive guest speaker interactions that pulled Sunny and Andrew toward specific career field selections but were more easily dissuaded given the comparatively limited interaction. Moreover, Sunny's commitment to the law field appeared to be additionally encouraged by their racial ties to the guest speakers and their social justice interests; however, Andrew did not mention other such connections with his guest speaker or the field of space sciences.

Conversely, negative or lacking familial interactions pushed participants toward specific academic selections as a means to disrupt existing interactions. This was seen with Ever and Sunny pursuing postsecondary education for the sake of their autonomy and their significant commitment to this selection that appeared to have a direct relationship to the degree of negative or lacking familial interactions they experienced. Though the focus of this study was to simply determine what interactions informed Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate academic selections and the ways in which such interactions influenced academic selections, further

studies should be considered about the quality and quantity of interpersonal interactions on influencing academic selections.

Overall, such informal interpersonal interactions aligned with literature and involved Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) framework regarding participants' Chronosystem and Microsystem proximal processes and how such interactions—either brief, sustained long-term, positive, or negative—were perceived by participants as being influential to their academic selections. These factors also involved Museus's (2014) External Influences concept and provided insight into how they may relate to Pre-College Inputs like Initial Academic Dispositions and considered by Transgender and/or Nonbinary students when making academic selections before matriculating to college.

### **During College Interpersonal Interactions**

As with during-college environmental interaction factors, participants cited similar interpersonal interaction factors during pre-college that influenced their academic selections such as (a) Parental Interactions and (b) Faculty Interactions. However, such during-college interactions either influenced participants toward different academic selections or further influenced academic selections mentioned during pre-college experiences. Additional interpersonal interaction factors cited during college that were not mentioned pre-college were (c) Friends and Peer Interactions, (d) Romantic Partner Interactions, and (e) Staff Interactions. Again, factors were organized into *informal* and *institutional* interpersonal interactions and are presented alphabetically.

### *Informal Interpersonal Interactions*

As stated previously, interpersonal interactions with friends and peers during pre-college were not mentioned by participants as influential factors on their academic selections. However, participants discussed these individuals were influential during their college experiences.

**Friends and Peer Interactions.** When asked about friend interactions versus peer interactions and influences on academic selections, participants referred to their friends as peers and vice versa when discussing academic selection influences; therefore, there was little to no distinction between those considered friends and those who were merely classmates or schoolmates. Thus, both terms were combined in this theme.

Overall, participants cited interpersonal interactions with college friends and peers as significant influences on their academic selections. A. Gonzales, Aaron, and Ever noted seeking out friends and peers for recommendations on courses and professors they should consider enrolling in when making course selections. Participants typically took recommendations into account and went with those courses if they fit in their academic schedule and plans. Aaron, again, also noted receiving positive recommendations from friends and peers on Transgender professors and elective courses related to Transgender and/or Nonbinary topics but was unable to enroll in any due to his already rigid academic schedule toward graduation. A. Gonzales brought up a time before he transitioned when he was still perceived as a Woman and avoided enrolling in a required course for his major during a specific term because his friends and peers warned him that the professor teaching the course that term had a bias against Women. He ended up enrolling in the required course a different term when a different professor taught the course. When Sunny selected a career in television writing and directing, it was their friend and mentor, Garder, who encouraged them to visit the school's Career Center, helping Sunny conceptualize a

tangible path toward their career goal. Garder also proactively researched summer internships and fellowships on Sunny's behalf to help Sunny toward their intended career goal.

Though literature has cited pre-college peer groups and friends as sources for stress due to gender-policing (see Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016), evidence also pointed to supportive friends during college being a source of resiliency (see Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017). This distinction in relations between pre-college and college friends was apparent in these narratives in addition to all participants mentioning having supportive friends in college and either actively avoiding pre-college friends or simply no longer having any interactions with them once matriculated into college. This theme was seen across all participants regardless of whether they were out as Transgender and/or Nonbinary pre-college or not.

For Sunny's situation, it could be argued they experienced aspects of what Museus (2014) considered a Collectivist Cultural Orientation (CECE Indicator 6) or even Proactive Philosophies (CECE Indicator 8) and Availability of Holistic Support (CECE Indicator 9) due to Garder's support and encouragement toward their academic and career goals that promoted Sunny's academic dispositions. However, because Garder was a friend and fellow student and not an institutional actor, the applicability of Museus's (2014) indicators to Sunny's experiences are negated, thereby reiterating the idealistic nature of the model. Nevertheless, Garder's proactive involvement in Sunny's academic journey supported Museus's (2014) concepts on indicators that could support students' Individual Influences toward college success outcomes.

**Parental Interactions.** As with pre-college interpersonal interactions, parental interactions continued to be cited as influential on participants' postsecondary major academic selections. As an alternate narrative to Aaron's own pre-college narrative in selecting Economics as a major due to his supportive parental interactions, he noted his dad's emphatic support for

any of his academic and career selections was also a source of academic apprehension, by stating:

He's super supportive with everything that I do. It's almost kind of daunting because I know if I say that I want to do something, he's going to support me so I better know that I want to do it and do it well. He gives me a lot of freedom there and his unconditional support is really nice to have. I just want to make sure that I do the right thing with it.

Again, literature has documented how adverse familial interactions or lacking familial support could lead to negative outcomes for Transgender and/or Nonbinary students that could limit or inhibit positive life trajectories (Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016).

Though literature also indicated familial support could be a protective factor against psychological tribulations and negative health risks (see Grant et al., 2011; Herman et al., 2014; James et al., 2016), there has been limited to no literature regarding how the presence of overwhelming support may instead be a source of indecision, self-doubt, and stress on academic selections and pursuits. Though this study was primarily focused on the academic selections themselves and environmental and/or interpersonal interactions that influenced such selections, this did bring up questions surrounding the relationship between students' commitment to an academic selection, confidence in the academic selection, degree of positive or negative interpersonal interactions, and degree of closeness between an individual and their interpersonal interactions as Aaron and his dad had a very close relationship.

In addition to influencing major selections, Ever noted parental interactions influenced their course selections, which was not a factor cited by participants pre-college. When Ever matriculated into Geera Community College after high school, she was still living with their parents. This fact played a direct role in their course selections. Ever stated the following:

When I did live with my parents, I would consider what classes would be good to take while I was living there because I had to deal with a lot of their mental health

stuff and a lot of their abuse. So, I would consider whether or not I should take this really intense class while also having to deal with entering a war zone at home, if that makes sense.

As mentioned previously, Ever's relationship with her parents was not favorable and these interactions caused Ever to limit the types of classes they enrolled in to manage day-to-day stressors while living with her parents. Though Ever's narrative did not indicate whether this had an impact on their overall academic trajectory, it provided insight into the reality that some Transgender and/or Nonbinary students face and the complex considerations they must consider when selecting courses and academic schedules toward graduation. This finding brought up, again, questions around the degree of positive or negative interpersonal interactions and proximity of interpersonal interactions because Ever did not have a close relationship with her parents but was in close vicinity living with them. This finding, as well as the finding for Aaron and his dad, expanded Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Microsystem concept regarding the proximity of actors to an Individual and how physical or emotional distance may influence academic selections.

**Romantic Partner Interactions.** A factor that has yet to be cited in empirical literature related to academics—let alone academic selections—is the influence of romantic partners on such selections. For Lee, because of the absence of support from their parents due to hostile, homophobic, and transphobic views, they cited their partner as the primary source of support and encouragement for their academic journey, by stating:

Definitely my partner, probably first and foremost [supports me in my academic goal in becoming a tattoo artist]. And we've had to talk a lot about this because it is a big financial risk because it's 1 to 3 years with zero to very limited income. And that's *if* I get [the job]. Before that, I'd have to work full-time somewhere else. And then, once I get the apprenticeship – *if* I get the apprenticeship – it is full-time working at the shop and then part-time, if even, working somewhere else and then all night drawing . . . So, that's something, like, "Uh oh." You know,

we're going to be, like, "It's rice and beans." But, regardless, [my partner is] still super supportive and super excited about it.

Though this study and literature have documented financial concerns and limited familial support as significant factors regarding academic selections, Lee's narrative provided insight into how supportive romantic partners may bolster confidence and optimism in the face of such adversity and serve as a resilience factor to counteract those negative factors.

For Andrew, though he mentioned some influence from his high school AP Psychology professor on his institutional selection, he noted his partner was a prominent influential factor in that selection as well, by stating:

I had originally started off at Zeyra State [University] and my partner was attending [Breon] community college at that time and planning to transfer to Strodon [University]. And, so, I guess I sort of considered him in the sense that I sort of followed him. Strodon [University] had always been my dream school but I don't think I would have actually worked towards transferring and done it if not for him also doing the same thing. So, I would say he was a pretty big influence there . . . but I wouldn't say that I transferred out of Zeyra State [University] mostly due to influence from my partner . . . I did end up going to [Breon Community College after Zeyra State University and before Strodon University] because it was the one my partner had gone to so he knew the most about it and how to navigate it and all of that so that was helpful.

As mentioned previously, Andrew selected to transfer from Zeyra State University due to its hostile Exosystem and into Strodon University due to its institutional culture. However, his decision to attend Breon Community College in between the two was due to following his partner's academic path because his partner attended that institution. This finding expanded Museus's (2014) CECE Model by including romantic partners in External Influences and provided context to Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model as to how proximal processes from romantic partners situated in the Microsystem could influence academic selections.



### *Postsecondary Institutional Interpersonal Influences*

As with pre-college high school institutional interpersonal influences, participants also cited Faculty Interactions as influential to their academic selections. However, unlike pre-college institutional interpersonal influences, Staff Interactions were also cited as another significant factor in such selections.

**Faculty Interactions.** Both A. Gonzales and Lee mentioned professors being influential to their academic selections. A. Gonzales made an effort to build rapport with professors in his academic department and noted seeking assistance from some who were well-known in the department for being advocates for students. Because of this, he was able to gain access to networking opportunities and course recommendations from them toward his career goal.

Similar to Sunny's experiences with Cocurricular Influences, A. Gonzales's narrative brings to the fore Museus's (2014) framework, which focuses on CECE Indicators having the primary effect on Individual Influences, like college Academic Dispositions, with a limited focus on Pre-College Inputs, such as Initial Academic Dispositions. In the case of A. Gonzales, his pre-college or Initial Academic Disposition to proactively develop relations with his professors created positive influences on his college academic Individual Influences and a pathway toward his career goal. Because the CECE Model (Museus, 2014) centralizes institutional influences on students' Individual Influences and maps an ideal environmental and interpersonal interaction set up for positive college success outcomes, it assumes an institution lacking in CECE Indicators could hinder or limit Individual Influences. Ironically, this assumption does not consider how students' Pre-College Inputs and their innate Individual Influences such as resiliency, proactiveness, and self-efficacy could promote or instigate CECE Indicators to occur when such indicators are absent in an institution. In other words, a bidirectional relationship may currently

exist between CECE Indicators related to institutional actors and Individual Influences rather than the idealistic unidirectional relationship from CECE indicators to Individual Influences. This suggested the existing presence of Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) proximal processes between students and postsecondary institutional personnel may mutually create CECE Indicators rather than the onus being on just students, as Tinto (1975) suggested, or on just institutions, as Museus (2014) suggested, when it comes to how college success outcomes are cultivated.

For Lee, his Introduction to Sociology course and professor was a significant influence on him adding Sociology as a second major and selecting to become a tattoo artist. Lee stated the following:

[I added Sociology as a second major because] I took 'Intro. to Sociology' with Professor Owk<sup>7</sup> and he was just really cool. He presented Sociology in a way that was really accessible and also really funny. And he usually works with Sociology in the African American community and so I feel like he presents Sociology in a way that's very well-rounded and very inclusive. And he tries to be very aware of classism and racism. He's a little 'meh' on gender [identity], but you can only have so much. But . . . he did a whole week on tattooing as a subculture – as an example of subcultures – and it was really cool. And he invited the local tattoo artists to come in and we saw examples of artwork and stuff from tattoo culture and this ethnography done way back in the day about tattooing. And that really broke down classist and racist barriers I had in my brain from my parents about tattooing [as a career].

Because Lee's professor was able to align Lee's interests and values with topics in the field of Sociology (e.g., being accessible, funny, inclusive, aware of classism and racism), Lee was drawn to the subject and motivated to add it as a second field of study.

Despite Lee indicating their gender identity was extremely important (see Table 3), their academic selections were still influenced by a professor they described as having limited

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<sup>7</sup> A pseudonym.

knowledge and experience on gender identity topics. Similar to findings in the environmental interactions Career Culture factor presented earlier, this factor supported a potential convergence between Transgender and/or Nonbinary value systems and academic selections in which an alignment encourages students toward certain selections. In this case, proximal processes presented by Lee's professor challenged Lee's perceptions of the tattooing industry and aligned Lee's values with those in the Sociology field. Therefore, a lacking Culturally Validating Environment (CECE Indicator 5) for their gender identity did not seem to be a factor in deterring Lee from selecting this optional secondary major.

**Staff Interactions.** Unlike Faculty interactions, participants indicated positive academic influences from Staff interactions would not have been possible if deep rapport and support from the staff member toward their identities and autonomy did not exist. Aaron described his relationship with his academic advisor by stating:

[Treven University] assign[s] you to an [academic advisor] for your 1<sup>st</sup> year and [mine] had a Trans son and so that's something that we bonded over. I felt really close to her . . . She would talk to me about the classes I was taking and everything. And I never felt pressure from her to do any particular thing. I felt she would really listen to me and what I wanted and try to guide me from there without trying to pressure me in any specific way. She did, however, encourage me to study abroad. That's something I remember. I did write about her in my [study abroad] application because they also asked, "Are there any staff members that have encouraged you to study abroad?" She was one of them. But in terms of classes for the times that I did talk to her, it was pretty early in my academic career so I still didn't really know what I wanted to do. And she kind of just bounced things back at me when I was, like, "Oh, maybe Econ[omics]? Maybe Communication?" And she would recommend classes that students had really liked in these different majors and I tried to take those.

This closeness Aaron had with his academic advisor and how she acted as a sounding board and resource for his academic pursuits allowed him the space to explore and ultimately make his academic selections, such as choosing classes to take, choosing a major, and studying abroad. Similarly, Sunny described their supervisor for their on-campus resident assistant position as

very supportive and nonjudgmental, and as someone who accepted and understood them. Thus, despite Sunny's skepticism, they visited the Career Center at Roco State University partially on referral from their supervisor. This decision led to having access to more Roco State University staff who were able to provide Sunny with resources toward their academic and career goals.

In contrast, Ever narrated their academic advisor at Geera Community College provided a prescribed course schedule by rote for their 1st semester without taking time to develop rapport or understand Ever's circumstances outside of school. Thus, the academic advisor did not take into consideration Ever's two off-campus jobs, one on-campus job, and home dynamics with parents, which caused a significant amount of stress for Ever during their 1st semester experience in postsecondary education. This experience, along with other difficult experiences Ever had with postsecondary educational staff and institutional bureaucracy related to their gender identity, tarnished Ever's perceptions and narratives of their interpersonal experiences with postsecondary educational staff and institutions. As a result, Ever tended to lean more on informal interpersonal interactions with friends and peers for academic selection influences in the absence of familial support and given their disillusioned relations with institutional staff. As mentioned previously, Andrew described himself as already a shy person to begin with, and so notably, he did not interact with many staff at the institution or develop connections with them. This, along with limited environmental interactions due to the COVID-19 global pandemic and the resulting remote learning regulations imposed, caused Andrew to resort primarily to interpersonal interactions with his romantic partner for academic selection influences in the absence of any relations with institutional personnel.

These narratives collectively illustrate the importance of Museus's (2014) Cultural Responsiveness indicators—specifically Humanized Educational Environments (CECE Indicator

7), Proactive Philosophies (CECE Indicator 8), and Availability of Holistic Support (CECE Indicator 9)—in relation to students' sense of belonging and academic success. In both Aaron's and Sunny's case, it was evident their interactions with staff who built rapport with them, proactively supported them, and provided them with resources to support their needs promoted the advancement of their academic selections and uncovered pathways for such advancements toward their academic goals. This was especially true for Sunny whose confidence in their supportive supervisor overshadowed their own cynicism on supports Career Services might have had for their academic goals. On the other hand, lacking or even negative interpersonal interactions with institutional staff precipitated negative or limited perceived academic selection pathways in Ever's case.

#### ***During College Interpersonal Interactions Conclusion***

What became clear in this analysis was participants had a wider range of individuals during college with whom they cited interpersonal interactions influencing their academic selections in broader ways compared to their pre-college timeframe. In addition, these interactions were overwhelmingly more positive and supportive in juxtaposition to pre-college interactions. Such positive interactions were narrated by participants as promoting their path toward their academic goals that aligned with Museus's (2014) Cultural Familiarity (CECE Indicator 1) and Culturally Validating Environments (CECE Indicator 5). Conversely, negative interactions were cited as hampering academic selections and progress. Findings also expanded previous literature and included unexplored informal interpersonal interactions (i.e., romantic partners) and their relation to Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' academic selections. Given postsecondary experiences were where some Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates found communities of other Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals for the

first time (see Patton et al., 2016), it made sense these findings indicated participants' social circles expanded during college and provided opportunities for them to encounter more like-minded and supportive others. Additionally, given the size and intricacies involved in postsecondary institutional structures, the need for more staff personnel compared to high school institutions also may have provided Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates with more opportunities to have significant and positive interactions with various postsecondary institutional personnel outside of academic affairs, further expanding their social circles and resources.

However, as noted in the analysis, merely the presence of supportive informal others and postsecondary institutional personnel resources was not enough to facilitate influences on academic selections. Proactive interpersonal interactions were required either from the participants or postsecondary others for influences—positive or negative—to occur regarding academic selections. This provided evidence and insight into Museus's (2014) Cultural Responsiveness Indicators and External Influences and their relevance and impact on Individual Influences and academic selections during college. In addition, proximity to informal others or postsecondary institutional personnel also played a significant role in how and why such interactions influenced participants' academic selections; furthering both Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Microsystem and Museus's (2014) External Influences concepts.

### **Findings Conclusion**

Due to the paucity of knowledge regarding Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' experiences overall and especially regarding their academic selections (see Bilodeau, 2007; Chung, 2003; Effrig et al., 2011; Patton et al., 2016), this study put forth the following research questions:

1. What environmental and/or interpersonal interactions do Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates describe as informing their postsecondary academic selections, if at all?
2. How do the narratives of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates provide insight into the ways in which their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions influence their postsecondary academic selections, if at all?

The purpose of these questions was to bring to light various environmental and/or interpersonal interactions participants saw as shaping their postsecondary academic selections to develop a foundation of what factors participants considered when making such academic selections to better understand from their narratives how and even why such interactions influenced them.

Based on the analysis, participants described a total of 20 environmental interaction factors (nine pre-college and 11 during college) and nine interpersonal interaction factors (four pre-college and five during college) as informing and influencing their postsecondary academic selections pre-college and during college, making a total of 29 factors. Examining further, some environmental interaction factors and interpersonal interaction factors appeared in both pre-college and during college timeframes, respectively.

Insights were uncovered regarding how interaction factors influenced academic selection perceptions and the direction in which participants were pushed away, pulled toward, or even unmoved in their selections. Participants noted more environmental interaction factors compared to interpersonal interaction factors influencing their postsecondary academic selections.

However, participants tended to describe environmental interaction factors in broad terms and considered them through perceptions, impressions, or notions; interpersonal interaction factors consisted of more substantial narratives with concrete, first-hand experiences and examples that

took up more of participants' attention when making academic selections. In other words, environmental interaction factors contributed to participants' general sense of their postsecondary academic options that either led to selections in the absence of interpersonal interaction factors or further supported selections made based on interpersonal interaction factors. Furthermore, some environmental interaction factors were out of participants' control yet had significant impacts on their academic selections, such as not being admitted or only admitted into specific postsecondary institutions. This shaped subsequent postsecondary academic selections like academic field options while also setting up their environmental interaction potentials due to postsecondary institutional culture, postsecondary institutional exosystem, and postsecondary institutional resources. Interpersonal interaction factors contributed depth and substantial rationale for participants' postsecondary academic selections, including even negating influences from environmental interaction factors. However, interpersonal interaction influences and their impact on postsecondary academic selections were moderated by the degree and quality of relationship between participants and the individuals with whom they interacted.

Based on these findings, it would seem interpersonal interactions were far more influential on academic selections than environmental interactions, though participants did not consider factors in isolation when making such selections. Rather, factors intricately weaved in and out of each other to shape participants' postsecondary academic selections and were further tempered by participants' gender identities and gender expressions. Additional factors such as timeframe and participants' personal characteristics also played significant roles in their interpretations of Environmental and Interpersonal Interactions as they related to academic selections; both were not the primary focus of this study but related to Bronfenbrenner and



Morris's (2006) Person and Chronosystem concepts and Museus's (2014) Pre-College Inputs and Individual Influences concepts.

Departures in experiences between Binary Transgender and Nonbinary participants based on environmental and interpersonal interactions further influenced participants' unique perspectives and contributed to nuanced postsecondary academic selections. Thus, narratives revealed common environmental interaction factors, interpersonal interaction factors, and even identify factors present across participants did not necessarily result in similar postsecondary academic selections or paths. Moreover, evidence from narratives indicated interaction experiences typically cited as having negative influences on postsecondary academic selections in literature were instead used by participants as positive motivating influences on their academic selections. These points aligned with Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics concept of bringing to light the heterogeneous experiences and voices of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals to expand existing knowledge and critique predominantly deficit and oversimplified connotations presented in master narratives on this population.

Though some interaction factors spanned across both Binary Transgender and Nonbinary participants, evidence from the analysis revealed their experiences and perspectives differed along gender identity and gender expression lines; meaning how they identified, how they were perceived in their context, and how they interpreted being perceived in their context played a role in their environmental and interpersonal interaction interpretations and moderated subsequent postsecondary academic selections. Findings supported previous literature (see Tourmaline et al., 2017) that indicated Binary Transgender individuals who aligned with Cisgender notions of gender expression possessed a degree of passing privilege. Though this passing privilege invisibilized Binary Transgender participants' Transgender identities, it granted them more

freedom and movement when it came to their environmental and interpersonal interactions, which influenced their postsecondary academic options and selections. Conversely, Nonbinary participants faced more notable invisibilization and friction in their gender-restrictive environmental and interpersonal interactions because their Nonbinary identities were *not* being recognized, which also impacted their perceived postsecondary academic options and selections.

Given existing literature, participants' narratives, and findings presented based on analysis, the following chapter explores how these results may further understanding on Transgender and/or Nonbinary students' needs and promote positive academic pathways for them toward successful life trajectories.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion**

Underlying genderist and cisnormative connotations and assumptions on Transgender and/or Nonbinary populations in most of the existing literature has depicted a bleak existence for these individuals and perpetuated implicit biases and negative stereotypes (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016). In addition, the emphasis on viewing Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals through a deficit lens compared to genderist and cisnormative social norms has preserved their marginalization in society and the supposition that such social constructs are immutable and inherent for all (Nicolazzo, 2017; Patton et al., 2016; Wilchins, 2002a, 2002b).

However, very little has been explored regarding to the academic journeys of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students through the U.S. education system, especially regarding postsecondary academic selections; thus, leading to little resources for educational institutions and educators to support them in those endeavors toward college success outcomes and positive life trajectories (Chung, 2003; Pepper & Lorah, 2008). Given the focus of this study and its findings, more information can be added to the knowledge-base regarding the lived experiences that some Transgender and/or Nonbinary students go through during their educational journeys and in their postsecondary academic selection processes. The following chapter discusses findings as they relate to literature and this study's theoretical frameworks and approach and distinguishes findings that arose but fell outside the purview of this study. Implication of findings, recommendations for future research, and limitations of this study are also blended into the following discussions.

### **Literature Discussion**

When it comes to connotations in the Transgender hypernym, participants' narratives support previous literature that indicate diverging experiences exist between Binary Transgender

and Nonbinary individuals along pervasive genderist and cisnormative lines that frame the environmental and interpersonal contexts they must navigate on a daily basis on top of having to make postsecondary academic selections in their educational journeys (see Beemyn, 2019b; Goldberg, 2018). This confirmed prior recommendations for the need to distinguish between these populations intentionally and clearly in data collection and to include analysis and more of their unique narratives in educational settings and in all manners of empirical research (see Beemyn, 2019b; Patton et al., 2016; Pepper & Lorah, 2008). Such distinctions can aid in pushing against oversimplified genderist and cisnormative connotations and provide institutions and educators with more accurate understandings of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students' experiences to build nuanced supportive resources for their needs and the needs of their various counterparts.

Regarding informal interpersonal relations, research has found Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals cited familial relations enacting negative genderist and cisnormative pressures most in their experiences (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016; Levitt & Ippolito, 2014). This was evident primarily in the experiences of Nonbinary participants like Ever, Lee, and Sunny that ultimately influenced their academic outlooks, selections, and pathways; this finding further highlighted earlier studies that suggested the need for more intentional and exclusive research on Nonbinary populations to further clarify and understand their distinct experiences outside of the Transgender hypernym (Duran & Nicolazzo, 2017; Schneider & Dimito, 2010; Scott et al., 2011).

This study also presents a counternarrative of positive and proactively affirming familial relations through Aaron's experiences that supports survey trends toward Transgender and/or

Nonbinary acceptance and the benefits of online resources and representation in aiding parental figures in providing support (Beemyn, 2019b). Such findings provide further insight into positive Transgender and/or Nonbinary interaction experiences that have mostly been absent throughout empirical, theoretical, practical, and anecdotal literature (Beemyn, 2019b; Grant et al., 2011; James et al., 2016). Further research is needed to explore such positive interactions, how these may differ between Binary Transgender and Nonbinary populations, and how these influence postsecondary academic selections and other life trajectories.

Looking at temporal dimensions and informal interpersonal interactions considered when making postsecondary academic selections, participants revealed a shift between pre-college and during college periods, with pre-college experiences centering around familial and parental interactions while during college experiences included interactions with friends/peers and romantic partners. Unlike previous literature that indicated friends and peers were influentially negative toward Transgender and/or Nonbinary students' identity development, friends and peers in pre-college settings were generally absent from participants' interpersonal interaction narratives, with most participants noting no longer interacting with pre-college friends or peers upon matriculation into college regardless of where they were in their gender identity development process. These findings illuminated which, when, and to what extent various relations influence academic selections, including romantic partners, which have not been cited as factors in previous literature. Future studies on such interpersonal interactions, timeframes, and their influence on Transgender and/or Nonbinary students are needed to further clarify the significance of such interactions on their postsecondary academic selections. Future studies may also consider focusing on those informal interpersonal populations as subjects themselves and how they relate to Transgender and/or Nonbinary students.

Regarding gender identity development and simultaneous academic identity development, findings from this study support Myers et al.'s (1994) Optimal Theory, Hetherington's (1991) Bottleneck Hypothesis, and Schneider and Dimito's (2010) work on the potential over-circumscription of viable postsecondary institutions because Transgender and/or Nonbinary participants who could deeply explore and develop their gender identity while also having environments and individuals that proactively accepted and supported their gender-expansive identities had more capacity to also focus on their academic development and selections. Furthermore, regarding supportive environments, findings suggest merely having gender-expansive philosophies may be enough to entice prospective Transgender and/or Nonbinary students to apply to and select certain postsecondary institutions; however, students expect to see explicit and proactive support and celebration of gender-expansiveness upon matriculation in the environment and community, not just performative rhetoric. Despite most participants noting the institutions they applied to and the ones they matriculated into had philosophies or reputations for being supportive of gender-expansive identities, each participant encountered poor or adverse gender-related environmental and interpersonal experiences in various institutional arenas such in as classrooms and academic departments, with peers on-campus, or even in institutional Exosystems. This suggests the need for postsecondary institutions to take intentional and proactive concrete gender-expansive actions that align with their philosophical diversity, equity, and inclusion principles and curated public relations images. Based on literature that indicated supportive institutional interpersonal interactions as being a significant resilience factor (see GLSEN, 2016, 2018, 2020, 2022; Linley et al., 2016; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017), findings from this study suggested the positive and supportive gender-related interpersonal interactions participants had were substantially more influential on

academic selection; regardless of how such interactions occurred either by luck, happenstance, or due to participants' own proactive engagement rather than through institutional intentionality. Educational institutions still have much work to do in regard to its personnel and even student body community to align with the ideal framework of Museus's (2014) culturally engaging campus environments (CECE) model for college success. Though participants such as A. Gonzales used their own innate Individual Influences to initiate positive CECE Indicators for themselves, findings suggested it does not come without sacrifices like increased stress or emotional/mental fatigue. Institutions may consider partnering with and listening to Transgender and/or Nonbinary students as they identify supportive institutional environments and personnel. Such partnerships, such as developing a taskforce or steering committee, may allow institutions to learn from those individuals and spaces on how to duplicate those experiences across various areas on campus and infuse them into institutional decision making such as faculty and staff recruitment criteria, hiring, training, and environmental/interpersonal performance evaluations. As literature suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates may underuse or avoid seeking institutional supports because of lack of confidence in institutional staff competence in working with them and their gender identity (see Becker et al., 2017; Beemyn, 2011; Bieschke & Matthews, 1996; McKinney, 2005; Nicolazzo, 2017; Sangganjanavanich & Headley, 2016; Singh et al., 2013; Stolzenberg & Hughes, 2017), postsecondary institutions should consider implementing a similar requirement Aaron had at his institution to meet with his academic advisor during his 1st year because his advisor was integral to him being supported early on toward the right path in his academic goals. Postsecondary institutions should also invest in recruiting and hiring diverse staff who may identify as Transgender and/or Nonbinary or who have personal relations with the Transgender and/or Nonbinary community like Aaron's

academic advisor who had a Trans son which helped Aaron to bond and build trust with his academic advisor based on that relation.

As a significant industry in their local contexts and given narratives from participants around concerns and negative interactions in their institution's Exosystems, leaders at postsecondary institutions should take a leadership role in their respective local governments and communities to negotiate and actively advocate for the expansion and promotion of gender-expansive supports and protections in the institutional Exosystem. Active partnerships with local industries that are owned by or employ gender-expansive individuals may also expose students to various potential industries. The inclusion of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students in these campus community, local community, and leadership opportunities with institutional support can provide them a voice in developing such supportive environments and institutional relations they need while also potentially developing cocurricular opportunities in support of their future academic selections.

Though not a focus of this study, this finding also suggested the need for high school institutions to do the same and provide environments where gender identity can be explored and supported earlier on so students may focus more on their academic development in preparation for postsecondary education. This focus could include having gender-expansive guest speakers from various career fields to speak on viable academic pathways and their employment experiences because participants also noted those experiences as influential. Given participants' narratives of popular culture (e.g., television and social media) having influenced their gender identity and academic identity development during pre-college experiences, including such factors into academic conversations and even assignments may help draw students into



discussions that may expand their development of both academic and gender identities earlier on and simultaneously.

Financial barriers and access to Transgender and/or Nonbinary related healthcare supports were also a factor participants noted as having significant influence on their academic selections pre-college and during college; this finding supports and furthers literature on the effects of such factors on this population. As noted in Chapter 4, more considerations and research are needed regarding the nuances on how lacking these factors may instigate resiliency and academic achievement rather than being seen as merely deficit-based barriers (e.g., Ever's and Sunny's situations). Such findings supported Schmidt et al.'s (2011) crisis competence notion, though, as noted previously, such competence does not come easily or without stress, more narrowed perceptions of academic options, and potential dissatisfaction with perceived and selected options. Thus, this suggests additional financial support and access to gender-affirming healthcare may provide space for a breadth of academic opportunities and selections compared to an absence of such factors, as seen in A. Gonzales's, Aaron's, Sunny's, and Ever's situations.

If educational institutions are in the business of promoting educational environments and supports, this finding suggests pre-college institutions should provide more financial support for students in need who are applying to college and for college institutions to continue providing similar financial support and healthcare coverage to undergraduates that includes easy access to local gender-affirming care. Another consideration would be to have specialized staff in educational institutions who act as case managers for Transgender and/or Nonbinary student communities to aid and ease them in addressing their specific needs to promote their academic development and achievement. This assistance would especially be useful for transfer students like Ever and Andrew who noted having much more limited connections to and time with their

respective transfer institutions. Given Andrew's, Lee's, and Sunny's narratives around mental health and medical providers, employing an adequate number of diverse mental health staff who can address gender identity topics may also be another way postsecondary institutions can ease barriers for Transgender and/or Nonbinary students to focus on academic development.

Though literature has suggested variations between Cisgender Women and Cisgender Men regarding academic selections due to systemic genderism, this study was only able to account for a limited number of Men-identified, Binary Transgender individuals and some Nonbinary individuals; all of whom were assigned Female at birth. This leaves a gap in knowledge regarding the academic selection experiences of Women-identified, Binary Transgender individuals; other various Nonbinary-identified individuals; those assigned Male; and even those assigned Intersex at birth when considering their environmental and/or interpersonal interactions. Further studies need to be conducted to explore such missing narratives and illuminate them in empirical research.

In a similar vein, as most participants in this study were toward the latter-end of their postsecondary experiences, including a variety of participants in various stages of postsecondary education and a longitudinal examination on their academic selections and resulting academic pathways in future research would benefit the knowledge-based on this topic. Additionally, this study only examined what influenced academic selections and how but did not qualify whether such selections were considered positive, negative, or neutral as it related to participants' academic pathways or even whether participants themselves viewed their selections favorably or not. Thus, more research is needed to elaborate on such academic selections.

Findings also suggested Transgender and/or Nonbinary students have postsecondary academic selection concerns, influences, and motivations that lie outside their gender identity

and that may be similar to those of their Cisgender counterparts. Future studies should consider exploring the environmental and/or interpersonal interactions impacting Heterosexual, Cisgender undergraduates' and LGBTQ, Cisgender undergraduates' academic selections to further confirm or contradict this supposition and obtain more nuanced converging and diverging experiences and influences on academic selection guidance and solidification needs.

An interesting finding from this study not found in prior literature on this topic was a Temporal Echo Effect when environmental and/or interpersonal interactions are recalled by individuals at a later date and influence academic selections. Though a study by Cornbleth (2008) has been done on a similar echo effect concept regarding the impacts of societal current events and media on curriculum in K–12 settings, there has yet to be any research done on this particular phenomenon related to recalling environmental and/or interpersonal interactions and how those may influence students and their academic selections and future pathways.

### **Theoretical Frameworks and Approach Discussion**

To explore the environmental and interpersonal interaction factors that Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates consider when making academic selections, this study used narrative inquiry as a methodological approach. Given this study's research questions and its philosophical approach, narratives provided insight into the varying experiences that exist surrounding this topic and a more holistic perspective on their existence by bringing their voices to light and directly into empirical research (Cook-Sather, 2006; Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Josselson, 2010; Mertens et al., 2010; Squire et al., 2013). In addition, narratives revealed the ways in which systemic genderist and cisnormative constructs exist in their various life arenas and influence their experiences, including academic selections (Josselson, 2010; Mertler & Charles, 2011; Squire et al., 2013). Future studies may consider taking a quantitative methods

approach to these research questions that usually involves the use of surveys and experiments to measure and find probable cause-and-effect associations or correlations between variables from a large quantity of respondents (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Such an approach may elucidate further information on relationships between environmental and/or interpersonal interactions on a much broader scale than what transpired from this study. Additionally, a larger pool of respondents that include more diverse identities and academic experiences such as those who did not attend postsecondary education, attended other forms of academic programs after high school, or perhaps stopped out of postsecondary education may provide more information on such influences on their academic selections.

For this study, three theoretical frameworks aligned with its approach and philosophy and were used to guide and analyze findings. With the help of Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics guiding the participatory-social justice, narrative inquiry design, and the need to include the marginalized voices of Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals in the research and design, this study was able to accentuate Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates' voices and maintain its focus on exploring and documenting their lived experiences. Thus, this framework and the inclusion of Transgender and/or Nonbinary affinity researchers is recommended for future studies on this population as a foundation for bringing more Transgender and/or Nonbinary voices and understanding into empirical research.

Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Process-Person-Context-Time Model provided a three-dimensional, comprehensive lens through which to understand where interaction factors were situated in relation to participants in differing systems and timeframes. This lens also gave insight on which systems such factors had to permeate to interact with participants and influence their postsecondary academic selections. Thus, this model aided in answering the first research

question for this study in identifying what environmental and interpersonal interaction factors participants considered when making their postsecondary academic selections and when those interaction factors occurred and were most salient. This finding, in itself, added to the scant literature on this population and provides a foundation on which future research may test, build upon, and/or provide further clarity regarding Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates and their academic experiences. However, given this framework's comprehensive nature, the model does not provide a means for understanding how or why such interaction factors influenced participants and their postsecondary academic selections. Therefore, it is recommended qualitative narratives continue to be included alongside such research so participants may name their experiences and provide insider interpretations and perceptions as to reasons for why and how such factors are considered by Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates.

As Museus's (2014) CECE Model of college success interrogates postsecondary institutions for their role in providing or lacking culturally engaging campus environments to support students' college success outcomes, this study also strived to focus on environmental contexts, interpersonal relations, and related interactions as factors to critique rather than Transgender and/or Nonbinary participants themselves when it came to their postsecondary academic selections. Though this framework provided this study with key concepts and contexts to describe environmental and interpersonal interaction factors Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates identified as influencing their postsecondary academic selections, it is an idealistic standard and falls short of providing a holistic picture for how current interactions and selections exist given societal constructs and how education is enacted. Ironically, this model negates the unique perspectives, processes, and agency of Transgender and/or Nonbinary

students regarding such interactions and assumes them to be passive recipients, with External Influences and CECE indicators shaping their Individual Influences.

As demonstrated by participants like A. Gonzales and Sunny, Transgender and/or Nonbinary students may be able to draw from their own Individual Influences or Pre-College Inputs and instigate positive CECE Indicators from their campus environment toward their own college success outcomes, pointing to the unique resiliency this population possesses that contradicts existing deficit lenses in literature. In addition, though not directly a focus of Museus's (2014) CECE Model, Ever's and Sunny's experiences revealed how their academic motivations in their Academic Dispositions under Individual Influences also generated positive employment opportunities in their External Influences. Again, this suggests a bidirectional rather than a unidirectional relationship between Individual Influences and both CECE Indicators and External Influences. Thus, rather than focusing solely on Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals as past literature has done or focusing solely on institutional factors external to Transgender and/or Nonbinary individuals as Museus's (2014) CECE Model suggests, results from this study indicated the necessity to include both simultaneously in such empirical inquiries and analysis for a holistic and realistic understanding of their experiences.

### **Outside This Study's Purview Discussion**

Though this study focused on environmental and interpersonal interaction factors and their influence on Transgender and/or Nonbinary postsecondary students' academic selections, other findings were uncovered as a result of this research that should be further explored. These include the role intrinsic abilities, interests, and mental health of Transgender and/or Nonbinary students played in their academic selections and how conflicting Pre-College Inputs and External Influences may shape academic selection.

Studies have indicated presumably Cisgender students may select academic and career paths based on genderist and cisnormative norms at the same time as their simultaneous development of their gender identity, sexual orientation identity, and career identity before high school (see Etringer et al., 1990; Fassinger, 1996; Gottfredson, 1981). However, participants for this study noted changes in their academic selections occurred mostly during high school or even during college; with the most cited influential factor being their personal ability and interest or lack thereof on topics related to their originally intended selection. Such personal factors relate closely to Bronfenbrenner and Morris's (2006) Disposition characteristics. It could be presumed that these characteristics may be common across populations of students regardless of gender identity. Such findings indicated more research is needed on holistically exploring Transgender and/or Nonbinary students' interests, abilities, and intersecting identities to develop a fuller and richer picture of their needs and experiences rather than reductively focusing on just their gender identity and expression in isolation.

Along these lines, a factor Andrew and Lee revealed in this study unrelated to environmental interactions, interpersonal interactions, or gender identity was mental health. Though literature has addressed negative mental health as a result of gender identity marginalization, there is very little research on mental health as it relates to academic selections overall and especially for this population. Future studies should be done to examine such relationships for various populations and how institutions may support students in need. Furthermore, Ever and Lee both self-identified as neurodivergent, which was not explored in this study but may have played a role in their academic selections. Future studies should also consider this factor.

As noted previously, bidirectional interactions may occur between Transgender and/or Nonbinary Individual Influences and CECE Indicators at their institutions as well as their Individual Influences and their External Influences. Though Museus's (2014) CECE Model of college success was developed as a framework to highlight and conceptualize the college success outcomes of racially and culturally marginalized diverse students in an ideal postsecondary context, it approaches from the assumption that an alignment exists between the student and their External Influences where the former would only receive input from the latter. This assumption does not consider students who may have conflicting or differing Pre-College Inputs based on demographics or perspectives (i.e., political views, gender identity, sexual orientation, academic disposition) from their External Influences such as Ever's, Lee's, and Sunny's experiences being at odds with their respective families and parents. This further supported a bidirectional interaction existing and continuing to exist between Individual Influences and External Influences. This finding also suggested a bidirectional interaction between Pre-College Inputs and External Influences may be possible. Thus, it is recommended that future research using this model to understand populations with contrary Pre-College Inputs from External Influences should take such potential bidirectional interactions into account.

Moreover, as noted in Chapter 4, further consideration and studies should be explored to apply this model to K–12 institutional settings, especially high school institutions, as a means to measure those Success Outcomes and support diverse students well before matriculation into postsecondary education. Another consideration would be to expand this model by applying it to both K-12 settings and college settings with the ending of one leading into the beginning of another as a transitional section in between. This overlapping and combining of the K-12 Success Outcome and college External Influences and Pre-College Inputs could depict the



matriculation phase and further understand the longitudinal life-cycle of diverse students traversing the U.S. education system as a whole towards college success outcomes.

### **Final Note From Participants**

Given this study's commitment to Spade's (2015) Critical Trans Politics and using a transformative narrative approach to centralize them in empirical research, participants were provided an opportunity to share, based on their environmental and interpersonal interactions, what it means to live in their gender identity and gender expression and what they wished postsecondary educational institutions and personnel would do to better support their gender identity, gender expression, and academic journeys. To close this study, participants' responses to these questions are presented and are meant to be considered by postsecondary educational institutions, faculty, and staff in tandem with participants' narratives and findings found in Chapter 4 on ways to best serve Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate students' needs toward college success outcomes.

### **Based on Environmental and Interpersonal Interactions, What Does It Means to Live in Your Gender Identity and Expression?**

#### ***A. Gonzales (he/him/his)***

A. Gonzales stated:

Primarily, what I've noticed, it's less people being transphobic and it's more that they just don't have a lot of Trans people in their lives so they just don't know what to say or how to interact and they just distance themselves because they don't want to accidentally say something wrong or they're not familiar with it. And, unfortunately, their way of approaching things that are unfamiliar is to just keep away from it. I have noticed that even amongst other Men I hang out with, it was just . . . we were on friendly terms and they were just really chill with me and then I noticed over time we just suddenly became really distant and not as close for that reason, which is weird. I expected either people to get upset or for them to be super enthusiastic . . . But, for the most part, people just . . . they take a very distant and non-approachable way of interacting with us which can also lead to just – they just look away when they see transphobia or they just don't get to

know you because there's this weird awkwardness . . . There's always this gap that I feel with people and it sucks because I know why it's happening but I also don't know how to approach them about it and be like, "You can be comfortable with me," you know what I mean? It's just, like, I know none of them are going to call me a slur or hurt me but it's also I don't know if they would be my ally in a strong sense; if they would be open and outward about defending anything or I just don't get to know them personally because there's that gap.

There really isn't one way to be a Man. I say this in different layers: 1) because, in general, whether someone clocks you as a Trans person or not, people just have a perception of what a Man should be and, even if I was Cis, I wouldn't be that in terms of expression and sexuality and just how I look at life in general; 2) when I am able to be open about being Trans, I don't want people to think it's a very linear way of transitioning and expressing your Male identity because, again, it goes back to, like, "Yeah, I'm a dude, but that doesn't mean I want to be a dude in the way that you assume." I'm still going to dress how I want to, I'm going to live my life the way I want to, and it might not match your perception of how a Man should be. But also just, again, expression sometimes I dress Feminine, sometimes I am just Masculine. But because I'm flamboyant, I'm not stiff. I'm very Queer and Gay-presenting. So, it's, like, there's no one way to be a dude. I'm still always going to be, like, "We're not a monolith," basically. We're always going to have very different expressions and ways and individual paths and I want people to understand that and not think that being Trans has a linear, similar story to it.

### ***Aaron Le (he/him/his)***

Aaron stated:

I think one big lesson is empathy, I guess, because as a Trans person you will have lived experiences as a number of genders depending on where you've transitioned from, where you're transitioning to, what your gender identity journey is like. And, so, you've kind of gotten to see the world through these different gender identities and also been able to experience how people treat you based on their perception of you. And, so, I would hope that part of being Trans is having this heightened sense of empathy and understanding of different genders, problems, and experiences living in the world as that gender. I think another important takeaway of Trans-ness is kind of being in-tune with yourself because you have to do a lot of soul-searching about like, "Who am I?" and, like, "What does gender mean to me and mean to my self-identity?" And just being comfortable with yourself, because if you worry too much about what other people think you may not even start to transition because there is that awkward phase of having to constantly assert who you are and what your gender is and what your name is and things like that. You have to really be able to stay true to who you are and stand up for yourself in that way. And, so, I think it helps with being a little bit more self-confident. Once you do those battles of asserting who you are and finding who you are and really being comfortable with that then you

come out of that really being able to enjoy the point that you get to in your transition where you feel comfortable in your skin and you feel happy with where you are and you're able to just be yourself in the world . . . There will always be people who don't agree with who you are or the choices that you make in life. Not to say that being Trans is a choice, but transitioning is, like, a choice and choosing to present as who you know you are is a choice and there will always be people who will not support you and you kind of have to be okay with that. Otherwise, you're just going to have a rough time in life trying to please everyone that you meet and you kind of have to learn how to have tough skin to be able to just kind of brush off any of the hate that you get. I think being Trans . . . you get to really see who are your friends and who are your family. It's a beautiful thing to be vulnerable and tell people that you're Trans and to have them accept you with welcoming arms and support you. It's such a good feeling, very euphoric. And I think that's one of the beautiful things about transitioning is you come out of it with a new you and also a new kind of social circle. You know all these people who are still stuck with you really do genuinely care about you and support you. I'm sure there's definitely some differences in responses [from people who do have passing privileges and people who don't have passing privileges]. Since people don't always perceive me as Trans, they usually don't change how they interact with me based on me being Trans so I can kind of get away with not always thinking about being Trans.

*Andrew Williams (he/him/his)*

Andrew stated:

I was a shy person through all of school. I didn't really talk to a lot of people, in general. So, I'm sure that impacted my academics and was just kind of part of who I am, gender aside, just being a quiet person. I had always been a shy person. I kind of went from a little bit shy to socially anxious to miserably, socially anxious/can't talk to anybody. And now that I'm 2-ish/2-plus years into transitioning, a lot of the anxiety has left and I'm back to being just kind of shy and quiet but not also gripped with anxiety over it. I feel like so much confidence came from not worrying that other people were going to see me as a gender that I wasn't. Once I gained the confidence that people were going to see me as a Man and that wasn't something that I had to take up my brain-space for or was a thing in the back of my mind – I didn't get a whole lot more social, I'm still pretty quiet – but it was worth taking the plunge to make the permanent choice of transitioning because there's just so much less worry and preoccupation once I committed to it.

It was so worth it to make the move to [a college and city] where the whole community was accepting and open as opposed to a community that was, as a whole, less accepting and, at times, hostile. It, in some ways, may have been easier to stay where I was at [Zeyra State University] and finish the degree I had started and see it through to the end. But, mental health-wise, it was so worth it to find a place [Strodon University] that was, like – not even exactly where 'my

people' were at because I still don't talk to a lot of people – but finding like-minded and supportive people is a huge benefit to mental health.

***Ever McDaniel (Rotating They/Them/Their and she/her/hers)***

Ever stated:

I think I've learned that visibility is so important in regards to my gender identity. Then I think also – I think it's so important with interpersonal interactions in school is just supporting one another and understanding where people are currently out and in [with their gender identity] at that area, if that makes sense. I think the biggest lesson I've learned is to not assume. I think, since we live in a really gendered society, it can be easy to do and put people in boxes. But I've tried, at least made an effort, not to do that as much as possible. Yeah, so I think that's a big thing that I've learned. That's the biggest lesson I think I learned is not assuming anything and then being an ally when you can, too, with other communities. Because I feel like if you're an ally to the Trans community, it's really helpful because it's exhausting advocating for yourself all the time. Instead, to have those allies are really important.

***Lee (he/him/his or They/Them/Their)***

Lee stated:

I think, honestly, the biggest one was if you repress [your gender identity and expression], it does not go away. Or I'd say that's relatively foundational. And then, in addition to that, trying to be in tune with yourself and your identity and how you want to express yourself is one of the healthiest things you can do.

I would say most of my friends are other Transmasc people. Usually, other Transmasc Nonbinary Lesbians. I have a few friends who are Trans Guys, and then I have a few friends who are CisWomen and TransWomen. But it's mostly, and this includes my partner, they're mostly Nonbinary Lesbians who are Masculine presenting. I honestly feel like we just see each other, and are, like, "Oh, you're a safe person. I'm going to say insane shit to you, and then we'll be best friends." A group of people who can rely on each other and, ideally, that community is safe. . . . who can count on each other, who aren't super codependent on each other, but who have safe boundaries in how they help each other.

I feel like my strongest sense of community, honestly, is probably right now [at Edent College]. I feel like I have, just looking at my personal support system . . . I have a lot of people who I can count on and who can count on me. And right now, with being post-COVID – I shouldn't say that. Being post, "Uh oh, we're all going to die,"-COVID into, "We're not all going to die,"-COVID, having that combination of online circles with people who I know in real life but I can still associate with virtually in a more COVID-safe manner as well as folks who I see on a daily basis around campus and in class and at the gym, to me, that

is the biggest sense of community I felt at Edent. I would say a lot of [people I see around campus] are friends but some of them are coworkers or classmates who we've worked together on projects with, or – for my job – residents or people who I've tutored. And because Edent's so small, they also all know each other. So, it kind of creates this web of people who we can all count on and talk to and hang out with. And I feel like that's quintessential community.

***Sunny (they/them/their)***

Sunny stated:

I would say nothing comes easy from identifying as how I identify. Almost everything is going to be a challenge when interacting with other people. Most of the time people need to be educated. But even after that, people are just ignorant. And to set boundaries and you have to take up space in these spaces or else you're going to get ignored . . . But I also am not alone because there are other people who share the same experiences as me, so there's comfort in that.

I feel like my gender identity plays just a huge role in who I interact with and who I feel safe around when I can choose that option. I don't have a choice about classmates or – when I even go back home – I don't have a choice but to surround myself by these people. I try to go where I would feel, like, the most accepted. Like [Roco] State, I'm glad that I chose this college. I didn't know how accepting [Roco] State was before, but I'm glad that it is just a Queer-Central, Queer and Trans-Central. I love it. And even on campus, I'm an RA for the Queer floor so I try to shape my environment to a space for people like me, I guess. And I learned so much from my residents, too, because I'll have a lot of Trans residents and just hearing about their experiences, too. So, I love it. I purposely applied and chose to be the RA for that floor.

**What Do You Wish Colleges, Faculty, and Staff Would Do to Better Support Your Gender**

**Identity, Gender Expression, and Academic Journey?**

***A. Gonzales (he/him/his)***

A. Gonzales stated:

Man, it's hard because it's like the ones who do care about the students don't have a lot to work with. What I wish is more time, more direct questions and interactions with students of, "What will work with you?" "What do you want?" "What are issues you see?" I wish administration and general college staff would think about the people that their job consists of. They're the ones serving us, for lack of a better way of saying it. And there's just not a lot of actual intention of like, "Well, what do they need?" The ones that, of course, do have more intention and care, they know what we need because they talk with us but they can't always give the attention they want to. I'll give an example: Two of the professors in my

Animation major . . . they have that genuine care but it's, like, if you don't schedule a one-to-one meeting with them at the beginning of the semester – so we're talking like the 1st or 2nd week of school – you will never have a meeting with them. They get booked so quickly. And it's almost like they're never not constantly trying to meet or squeeze in time with students. They're just constantly busy, constantly going to meetings, or, if not, they're just teaching their class. They're doing their job and it's, like, I don't know how they cope with all the stress that they do because they need to and want to so it's really hard. If you genuinely need help, they will help you, but it's like you can tell that they're like, "Okay, now I have to spend time with this student but now I have to shift the rest of my day because of it." And it's just, it's not their fault, but I wish we didn't have to deal with that in such a very structured meeting time and in such a short amount of time.

In my school, it is very much there's a lot of talk about, like, "Oh, we support these groups of people," but it feels commercial. It's like we're in a business, like, "Oh, yeah, we support this, we support that." But then it's, like, the day-to-day doesn't match that enthusiasm, you know what I mean? I just wish that they took it more seriously and not just as something they have to keep saying. Meaning, respecting pronouns or just not assuming pronouns or just, like, "Okay, this individual student might have a particular issue that relates to their identity." And it's, like, I wish that they would actually not just see it as a nonchalant thing. I wish they took it more seriously and I wish that they didn't shout, like, "Oh, yeah, professors should respect pronouns," and it's just becomes a marketable slogan and not, like, "Yeah, we need to actually make sure our professors are actually being polite and interacting with students respectfully." It just seems very disconnected.

Because of my mental space right now of just being so hyper-focused on my place in life and trying to get the medical transition I want to get just leaves me exhausted that I don't want to focus on anything else. Meaning, I don't want to focus on my career, I don't want to focus on school, I don't care about academia when you weigh like, "Okay, this specific major and classes and homework," versus my mental well-being of, "I need my hormones, I want to have top surgery." It just, like . . . I'll always choose myself, you know what I mean? The burnt-out is mostly . . . because there's just so much homework you're assigned and it's just you're trying to navigate having a normal life on top of schoolwork. I mean, honestly . . . sometimes when you have to focus on you transitioning socially and physically and how you fit in that place; in life that becomes so stressful and overwhelming that having to also deal with academia on top of that just becomes draining. You start to ask yourself, "What is your priority?" And that's how I've been, just managing your time. Throughout this past year, I've been trying to get top surgery which required me going to different consultations and talking on the phone with insurance. So there have been so many times where I ditched class because I had to drive an hour to go to a surgeon and it's, like, "Okay, what's my priority? Going to class and turning in my homework or going to the surgeon and spending hours on phone calls with

insurance?,” you know what I mean? It was, like, “What is my priority in life? My future potential career or my comfortability with my body?”

***Aaron Le (he/him/his)***

Aaron stated:

I’m not sure if I could really speak for a whole community or if I’m in-tune enough with my Transness to know what specifically Trans people need that is different from Cis people. For me specifically and my Transness, I think it would have been kind of cool if they asked you, “What are your long-term goals?” and then work backwards from that because when I was a freshman, my long-term goal would have already been wanting to be CEO of my own company or going to Business school or things like that. But when I was a freshman, I wasn’t in any preprofessional societies or things like that. And maybe they don’t want staff to be holding your hand when you’re in college? That you should connect the dots yourself, like, “Oh, if I want to do these things long-term, then I need to be looking for professional studies and things like that.” Because, for me, I didn’t find out about [the student marketing org] until my junior year and so I’ve only been in it the past couple of years when I could have been in it since freshman year and gotten more experience then. I just didn’t know about it. So, maybe if staff helped with awareness of those things or helping you plan out, like, “Here’s when you should be doing preprofessional societies,” or, “Here’s when you should be looking into grad schools,” “Here’s where you should be taking grad school entrance exams,” “Here’s where you should be applying for jobs,” and things like that. And I think they probably already have these resources out there, people just don’t really know that much about them or aren’t really tapping into them as much as they could be. I think they are out there, but I’m just not using them. I guess there’s this balance between wanting people to tell you what to do and help you along and also wanting to be proactive and kind of taking control and responsibility of your own future and actions. But it would have been nice if little freshman me who didn’t really know what to do or when to do it had that kind of resource. I think I might have been too stuck in the academics part of this. But when you’re in college, it is a lot of just living it’s not just the academics.

I liked how [my institution was] conscious and accommodating of [my] Transness when it comes to housing. When I was a freshman, I had someone reach out to me about what gender identity I would be most comfortable with my roommate having and it made me feel safe and welcome that they made sure my living situation would be comfortable. They also have an [accessibility office], so you can get a housing accommodation if, for example, you wanted a room with your own bathroom or a gender-neutral bathroom nearby or a single because it made you feel safer as a Trans person . . . There’s a big wealth of resources [at my institution] so I think if staff and faculty are able to just point to us in that direction, that’s good.

Whenever there is a reading [assignment for class] that has to do specifically with Trans individuals, I’m in that uncomfortable situation where I

have a lot to say but don't know whether or not I want to out myself as Trans. For example, I took a class and one of the readings was *Some Assembly Required*. It was a memoir by a Trans, FTM individual. And so, of course, I had a lot of reflections, a lot of things to say, but the professor was kind of old and kind of weirdly, subtly transphobic. I don't think I said anything that entire discussion because I was kind of concerned about what the professor would say. And then, also, in that class we had to write a memoir. And, instead of coming out as Trans and writing genuinely my memoir, I just gender-swapped all the people and pronouns in my memoir. I was a little bit worried there about how he would react because during the discussion he was saying things, like . . . I just remember it making me uncomfortable, but he was inferring that being Trans is a choice and a questionable one at that . . . like, "Why are people mutilating their bodies and doing these weird things?" or whatever. It didn't feel very supportive and accepting, it felt very, like, questioning these people's choices, like, "Why are they doing these things?" There was a single Female student in our class and every time there was a Female character in a book, he would talk at her. It was really weird. I'm glad that class is over.

*Andrew Williams (he/him/his)*

Andrew stated:

Sometimes it was hard to feel like a part of the group in class if I was just there listening and not talking to anybody. I could feel kind of detached from classmates and then that could be a sort of sadness. Sort of feeling like a weirdo because I was the only Queer kid in class sometimes.

I never really got super-close with any professors or TAs [teaching assistants] or staff or counselors or anything like that. There was one professor that I talked to one-on-one for maybe like 10 minutes once and I think that's probably the most personal interaction that I had. Certainly, they were always supportive broadly, but not a lot of one-on-one. I certainly would've tried to go to more things or talk to more people [at Strodon University if it wasn't for COVID] because I very much let myself get comfortable in not talking to anybody and that's just not the best place to be in, in general. I think, in general, joining more things or going to more things or trying more things would be a choice I'd make. Maybe doing a minor so I could have rounded things out a little better. I think maybe I would have, like, I don't know . . . I wish I would've gotten the chance to go to Strodon's [LGBTQ Center] in-person because I tried to go one time pre-COVID and it was just closed on the day I happened to be there and then COVID started then they've been closed in-person ever since. So, I kind of wished that was a space I'd gotten to hang out in and meet people more, or at all.

I definitely took a weird sort of meandering path. Transferring twice, I didn't really have the consistency and continuity that a lot of people have if they go the same place for 4 years. But I also think that all the moving around and making choices, finding out what was actually going to work better for me, helped a lot with my personal identity development. So even though I took kind



of a weird path and I took a bunch of classes that didn't really end up giving me credit for things, in the end, I think overall I'm still happy with the choices I made. I mean, I'd probably make them differently if I was in the same place again in some spots but, as far as it being what I did, I'm pretty content with it. I took an Intro Accounting class and I was, like, "Oh, okay. I can do this. I can do the homework and turn it in on time, but I don't love it. It's not fun. It's not exciting." Same sort of thing with the Programming class I took. I'm, like, "Oh, this is awful." Well, that one was awful but it was a thing where I took a class in it, I tried it out, and I saw that it was very much not for me. Or, I took Politics of East Asia and I was like, "This is actually super cool and interesting and I had no idea I would care about this class so much." And it was like super cool, but I'm also not going to continue taking classes in Politics necessarily. So, I guess the development of confidence that even if I can do a thing and do it well, it doesn't have to be the direction I go in just because I'm capable of doing it. That I can figure out what I can do and also what I want to do and then go from there.

***Ever McDaniel (rotating they/them/their and she/her/hers)***

Ever stated:

I think the biggest thing is for educators to be more aware of what students' lives are like outside of school and realizing that school isn't their whole life. I think I would like to see more human counseling opportunities. I think that would be more helpful because I feel like it's hard to make those appointments, and sometimes . . . I feel like a lot of college counselors in general give a lot of different mixed information. So, one counselor will tell you one thing and the other counselor will tell you another thing. So, there's a lack of consistency definitely, yeah.

I think the biggest thing also is making it easier for people to change their names before they've legally changed it – to change the names in my courses. It doesn't have to be on my – well, now it does as I've legally changed it, but before that – it didn't have to be on my graduation diploma. I think it'd be really nice if they made it more convenient to change it within my courses to where it could show it to other students.

***Lee (he/him/his or they/them/their)***

Lee stated:

I feel like I'm usually forced to make art that is for school instead of art that I want to create. And that art that is for school, almost always, has to be boiled down to identity-based stuff that's exploitive and I'm really tired of. At Edent, they really value concept-based art and I would say that concept-stuff, as in most cases, often boils down to struggles that the artist faces or has faced usually due to their identity. And we're shown a lot of work by artists who, to be fair, are great and they're doing a lot of great stuff but it's always, like, "I'm a Mexican

American immigrant, and I want to do art about, like, other immigrants at the border,” which is great art. But on the college-level, when it’s just me hanging out with a bunch of – to be fair, it’s not all White people – but with all my little marginalizations and then I have to go and stand up and be like, “Okay, this is a piece about being a Trans Person of Color,” then it’s always just like, “Oh, man!,” you know? It’s just very exhausting. Even when it’s a concept that I haven’t talked about before, talking about my own personal struggle is just so exhausting. Like, that’s for therapy! So, my family was the victim of a felony arson . . . and the case was coming up and I spoke to my professor and I was just, like, “Hey, this is what’s going on. I’m really stressed out.” And they’re like, “Okay, I can’t wait to see this in your art,” and I’m, like, “No, you’re not going to see it in my art!”

***Sunny (they/them/their)***

Sunny stated:

I find that if I’m surrounded by people that I trust and support me, I would take their opinion for academic questions that I have and really use them as a sounding board. [Trust is when] I feel safe with them. There isn’t a lot of judgment either. And they understand and accept me as a person. With staff and faculty, you really have to reach out to them so I guess I haven’t made that effort yet. I think when I maybe email them, something will happen. But, as of right now, they’re pretty much just people that I see on Zoom. I guess I would say I wish they made themselves more available and offered opportunities for us to get to know them more and basically network with them rather than us go to them. I guess also make gender more of a conversation in class, it’s not really a topic in these classes.

Students are very accepting and I can find a lot of my people here . . . Staff, not really. I would say staff is more accepted than faculty. Faculty needs an update. It’s really weird. They’re mostly older and out of touch even if they’re not older. Sometimes when I walk into staff offices in the Student Center, I see they have flags. And they ask pronouns. They’re easy to be around. And when I do tell them my pronouns, usually, it’s not weird. It’s like, “Okay, yeah.” And they tell me their pronouns. [Faculty] gender everything. Their language is usually, like, Man or Woman so the examples they’re using in class and how they’re communicating is very binary. They don’t ask pronouns. They’re usually older . . . and it’s just, like, the way that they interact with people is not really welcoming for people that don’t match these descriptions.

## APPENDIX A: INITIAL INTEREST QUESTIONNAIRE

1. \*Which **gender identity** most closely reflects your own? (select all that apply)
  - Cisgender Female / Woman
  - Cisgender Male / Man
  - Nonbinary, Agender, Demigender, Genderqueer, Gender fluid
  - Transgender Female / Woman
  - Transgender Male / Man
  - Questioning or unsure
  - I prefer to self-describe [*fill-in*]
  
2. \*What **sex** were you **assigned at birth**?
  - Female [*excluded from study if Cisgender Female/Woman chosen also*]
  - Male [*excluded from study if Cisgender Male/Man chosen also*]
  - Intersex
  
3. \*What is your **age**?
  - Younger than 18 [*excluded from study*]
  - 18
  - 19
  - 20
  - 21
  - 22
  - 23
  - 24
  - Older than 24 [*excluded from study*]
  
4. \*What is the **highest level of education** you have **completed**?
  - High school diploma or GED
  - College Certificate
  - Associate's Degree (AA) or equivalent
  - Bachelor's Degree (BA, BS) or equivalent [*excluded from study*]
  
5. \*Have you **attended school continuously since high school (e.g., no time off or gap years)** prior to entering your most recent four-year college/university?
  - Yes
  - No [*excluded from study*]
  
6. \*Did you enter your most recent four-year college/university as a **First Year / Freshman** student or **Transfer student**?
  - First Year / Freshman student
  - Transfer student

7. \*What **term and year did you start attending** your most recent four-year college/university in the U.S.? (e.g., Summer 2011, Fall 2012, Winter 2013, Spring 2013, Summer 2013, etc.)  
*[fill-in]*
8. \*Are you **currently enrolled at a four-year college/university in the U.S.**?
- Yes *[skip to Q9]*
  - No *[continue to Q8.1]*

8.1. *[If No]* \*You indicated you are **NOT currently enrolled** at a four-year college/university in the U.S.

Were you enrolled at a four-year college/university in the U.S. **any time during this last academic year (Fall 2020 through Summer 2021)**?

- Yes
- No *[excluded from study]*

--- Survey Break ---

9. \* The following questions are to verify human participation in this study. Please type what you see below, including spaces and punctuation.

This study is about the academic selections of Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduates in the U.S. *[Fill-in]*

10. \* Please type the **sixth word** of the sentence you just copied: *[Fill-in]*

11. \* Please spell out **how old you are**: *[Fill-in]*

--- Survey Break ---

12. This study involves completing an **online screening questionnaire** that will take approximately 20-30 minutes. The questionnaire asks about your gender identity, gender expression, demographic information (race, class, etc.), academic selections and dispositions, and perceptions of your environmental and interpersonal experiences at your most recent four-year college/university. If you are eligible to participate, you may choose to either receive a \$15.00 Amazon e-gift card or have a \$15.00 donation made on your behalf to [CampusPride.org](https://CampusPride.org) for completing the questionnaire. If the e-gift card option is chosen, it will be delivered to you via email for completing the questionnaire. Submissions may be deemed incomplete if unusual responses are provided (e.g., irregular timing or responses across participants for fill-in questions, etc.).

- If you **agree to participate** in the screening questionnaire, please provide an **email address** below to receive the online survey link. College/university email addresses with a **.edu** are preferred to verify college affiliation. Check to make sure the email address you provide below is correct.
- If you **do not agree to participate** in the screening questionnaire, you may exit this initial interest questionnaire now. *[Fill-in]*

12.1. *[If email provided]* Your responses to the screening questionnaire will be reviewed and an email regarding your eligibility to participate in an interview for this study will be sent to your email address. This study involves scheduling and taking part in **one 60–90 minute video conference or phone interview** to share how you made your undergraduate academic selections at your most recent four-year college/university. These interviews will be **video and/or audio recorded and transcribed**. You may choose to either receive a \$20.00 Amazon e-gift card or have a \$20.00 donation made on your behalf to [CampusPride.org](http://CampusPride.org) at the conclusion of the interview. If the e-gift card option is chosen, it will be delivered to you via email. If a second 60-90 minute interview is required, you may choose to either receive a \$20.00 Amazon e-gift card or have a \$20.00 donation made on your behalf to [CampusPride.org](http://CampusPride.org) at the conclusion of that interview.

- If you **agree and are invited to participate in an interview** for this study, please provide a phone number below to best contact you for scheduling. Check to make sure the phone number you provide below is correct.
- If you **do not agree to participate in an interview**, you may leave this question blank and click Next. *[Fill-in]*

--- Survey Break ---

## **- END SURVEY CONFIRMATION PAGE -**

Your responses will be reviewed and an email regarding your eligibility for this study will be sent to your email address, if provided. All information submitted will be kept confidential and secure.

If you could please share the initial interest questionnaire for this study with other Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate students who may be eligible, I would greatly appreciate it.

## APPENDIX B: PARTICIPANT SCREENING QUESTIONNAIRE

### **Gender Identity**

The following questions ask about your **gender identity**:

1. **Before attending college**, which **gender identity** most closely reflected your own? (select all that apply)
  - Cisgender Female / Woman
  - Cisgender Male / Man
  - Nonbinary, Agender, Demigender, Genderqueer, Gender fluid
  - Transgender Female / Woman
  - Transgender Male / Man
  - Questioning or unsure
  - I prefer to self-describe [Fill-in]
  
2. **Before attending college**, how **open** were you with your **transgender and/or nonbinary identity** to... [Never – Rarely – Sometimes – Frequently – Always – Not Applicable]
  - Family
  - Friends
  - School Classmates/Peers
  - School Instructors
  - School Staff and Administrators
  
3. **Before attending college**, based on your perspectives, the following groups **perceived** your **gender identity** to be... [Cisgender Female / Women – Cisgender Male / Man – Nonbinary, Agender, Demigender, Genderqueer, Gender fluid – Transgender Female / Woman – Transgender Male / Man – Questioning or unsure – I don't know - Not Applicable]
  
4. Currently, which **gender identity** most closely reflects your own? (select all that apply)
  - Nonbinary, Agender, Demigender, Genderqueer, Gender Non-Conforming
  - Transgender Female / Woman
  - Transgender Male / Man
  - Questioning or unsure
  - I prefer to self-describe [Fill-in]
  
5. **Currently**, how **open** are you with your **transgender and/or nonbinary gender identity** to... [Never – Rarely – Sometimes – Frequently – Always – Not Applicable]
  - Family
  - Pre-College Friends
  - College Friends
  - College Classmates/Peers
  - College Instructors
  - College Staff and Administrators

6. **Currently**, based on your perspectives, the following groups **perceive** your **gender identity** to be... [Cisgender Female / Women – Cisgender Male / Man – Nonbinary, Agender, Demigender, Genderqueer, Gender fluid – Transgender Female / Woman – Transgender Male / Man – Questioning or unsure – I don't know - Not Applicable]
- Family
  - Pre-College Friends
  - College Friends
  - College Classmates/Peers
  - College Instructors
  - College Staff and Administrators
7. Compared to your other identities, how **important** is your **gender identity** to your self-identity?
- Not very important
  - Somewhat important
  - Moderately important
  - Important
  - Extremely important
8. Rate your level of agreement with the following statements about **gender identity**: [Strongly Disagree – Disagree - Neither Agree nor Disagree - Agree - Strongly Agree - Not Applicable]
- My **family** provides encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender identity**
  - My **pre-college friends** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender identity**
  - My **college friends** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender identity**
  - My **college classmates/peers** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender identity**
  - My **college instructors** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender identity**
  - My **college staff and administrators** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender identity**
9. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about **your most recent four-year college/university**? [Strongly disagree – Disagree - Neither disagree nor agree - Agree - Strongly agree – Not applicable]
- It is easy to find people with a similar **gender identity** as me at this institution
  - I frequently interact with people who have a similar **gender identity** as me at this institution
  - It is easy to find people who understand my **gender identity** at this institution
  - It is easy to find people who understand my **gender identity struggles** at this institution

- People at this institution are generally willing to take time to understand my **gender identity experiences**

### Gender Expression

The following questions ask about your **gender expression** within the U.S. context.

10. **Before attending college**, which **gender expression** most closely reflected how you wanted to express your gender? (select all that apply)
- Mostly Feminine
  - Somewhat Feminine
  - Equally Feminine and Masculine
  - Somewhat Masculine
  - Mostly Masculine
  - Neither Feminine nor Masculine
11. **Before attending college**, which **gender expression** did you present most to... [Mostly Feminine - Somewhat Feminine - Equally Feminine and Masculine - Somewhat Masculine - Mostly Masculine - Neither Feminine nor Masculine – Not Applicable]
- Family
  - Friends
  - School Classmates/Peers
  - School Instructors
  - School Staff and Administrators
12. **Before attending college**, based on your perspectives, the following groups **perceived** your **gender expression** to be... [Mostly Feminine - Somewhat Feminine - Equally Feminine and Masculine - Somewhat Masculine - Mostly Masculine - Neither Feminine nor Masculine – I don't know – Not Applicable]
- Family
  - Friends
  - School Classmates/Peers
  - School Instructors
  - School Staff and Administrators
13. **Currently**, which **gender expression** most closely reflects how you want to express your gender? (select all that apply)
- Mostly Feminine
  - Somewhat Feminine
  - Equally Feminine and Masculine
  - Somewhat Masculine
  - Mostly Masculine
  - Neither Feminine nor Masculine



14. **Currently**, which **gender expression** do you present most to... [Mostly Feminine - Somewhat Feminine - Equally Feminine and Masculine - Somewhat Masculine - Mostly Masculine - Neither Feminine nor Masculine – Not Applicable]
- Family
  - Pre-College Friends
  - College Friends
  - College Classmates/Peers
  - College Instructors
  - College Staff and Administrators
15. **Currently**, based on your perspectives, the following groups **perceive** your **gender expression** to be... [Mostly Feminine - Somewhat Feminine - Equally Feminine and Masculine - Somewhat Masculine - Mostly Masculine - Neither Feminine nor Masculine – I don't know – Not Applicable]
- Family
  - Pre-College Friends
  - College Friends
  - College Classmates/Peers
  - College Instructors
  - College Staff and Administrators
16. Rate your level of agreement with the following statements about **gender expression**: [Strongly disagree – Disagree - Neither disagree nor agree -Agree - Strongly agree – Not applicable]
- My **family** provides encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender expression**
  - My **pre-college friends** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender expression**
  - My **college friends** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender expression**
  - My **college classmates/peers** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender expression**
  - My **college instructors** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender expression**
  - My **college staff and administrators** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **gender expression**
17. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements about **your most recent four-year college/university**? [Strongly disagree – Disagree - Neither disagree nor agree -Agree - Strongly agree – Not applicable]
- It is easy to find people with a similar **gender expression** as me at this institution
  - I frequently interact with people who have a similar **gender expression** as me at this institution
  - It is easy to find people who understand my **gender expression** at this institution
  - It is easy to find people who understand my **gender expression struggles** at this institution

- People at this institution are generally willing to take time to understand my **gender expression experiences**

--- Survey Page Break ---

### **ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES**

The following questions ask about your **academic** experiences:

18. What is your **age**? Please spell out, do not use numbers. *[Fill-in]*
19. Please estimate your **overall high school GPA**:
- 0.0-0.5
  - 0.6-1.0
  - 1.1-1.5
  - 1.6-2.0
  - 2.1-2.5
  - 2.6-3.0
  - 3.1-3.5
  - 3.6 or over
  - Not applicable
20. About how many **advanced placement (AP)** or **international baccalaureate (IB)** courses did you complete before college?
- 0-9
  - 10 and over
  - Not applicable
21. Which of the following best describes the **students in your high school**? If you attended more than one, choose the one you feel most connected to.
- Mostly Alaska Native, American Indian, or Native American
  - Mostly Asian
  - Mostly Black or African
  - Mostly Latina/Latino/Latinx
  - Mostly Pacific Islander
  - Mostly White
  - Mostly racially diverse
  - Not applicable (e.g., you were home schooled, etc.)
22. What **term did you start** attending your most recent four-year college/university? (e.g., Summer 2010, Fall 2011, Winter 2012, Spring 2012, Summer 2012, etc.) *[Fill-in]*
23. **About how many credits have you completed** at your most recent four-year college/university? Do not include currently enrolled courses, if applicable.

- 0
- 1-30
- 31-60
- 61-90
- Over 90

23.1. *[If not zero]* Estimate your **overall GPA** at your most recent four-year college/university

- 0.0-0.5
- 0.6-1.0
- 1.1-1.5
- 1.6-2.0
- 2.1-2.5
- 2.6-3.0
- 3.1-3.5
- 3.6 or over
- Not applicable

24. How many **majors** do you have or expect to have?:

- 1
- 2
- 3

25. Please select the **academic field(s)** for your **major(s) or expected major(s)**. Select all that apply:

- Agriculture and natural resources
- Biological sciences
- Business or Economics
- Communication, media, and public relations
- Computer Science and technology
- Education
- Engineering
- Fine and Performing Arts (e.g., dance, music, Theatre, visual arts.)
- General and multi/interdisciplinary studies
- Health professions
- Humanities (e.g., ethnic studies, history, international studies, language studies, linguistics, literature, philosophy)
- Mathematics and Statistics (including data science or logic)
- Physical sciences (e.g., chemistry, physics)
- Social Sciences (e.g., anthropology, criminal justice, law, political science, psychology, Sociology)
- Other field *[Fill-in]*

26. How many minors do you have or expect to have?

- None
- 1
- 2
- 3

26.1. *[If 1, 2, or 3 selected]* Please select the **academic field(s)** for your **minor(s) or expected minor(s)**. Select all that apply:

- Agriculture and natural resources
- Biological sciences
- Business or Economics
- Communication, media, and public relations
- Computer Science and technology
- Education
- Engineering
- Fine and Performing Arts (e.g., dance, music, Theatre, visual arts.)
- General and multi/interdisciplinary studies
- Health professions
- Humanities (e.g., ethnic studies, history, international studies, language studies, linguistics, literature, philosophy)
- Mathematics and Statistics (including data science or logic)
- Physical sciences (e.g., chemistry, physics)
- Social Sciences (e.g., anthropology, criminal justice, law, political science, psychology, Sociology)
- Other field *[Fill-in]*

27. When you **first enrolled** at your most recent four-year college/university, what was the **highest credential you intended to complete in your lifetime?**

- I did not intend to complete a college certificate or degree
- College certificate
- Associate's degree (AA) or equivalent
- Bachelor's degree (BA, BS) or equivalent
- Master's degree (MA, MBA, MEd, MFA) or equivalent
- Doctoral or professional degree (EdD, JD, MD, PhD) or equivalent
- Other *[Fill-in]*
- I don't know

28. What is the **highest credential you currently intend to complete?**

- College certificate
- Associate's degree (AA) or equivalent
- Bachelor's degree (BA, BS) or equivalent
- Master's degree (MA, MBA, MEd, MFA) or equivalent
- Doctoral or professional degree (EdD, JD, MD, PhD) or equivalent
- Other *[Fill-in]*
- I don't know

29. How likely or unlikely is it that you will **complete a Bachelor's degree (BA, BS) or equivalent at any institution in the future?**
- Very unlikely
  - Unlikely
  - Neither likely nor unlikely
  - Likely
  - Very likely
  - I don't know
30. Considering your experience overall, how **satisfied** are you with your **college experience at your most recent four-year college/university?**
- Very dissatisfied
  - Dissatisfied
  - Neither dissatisfied nor satisfied
  - Satisfied
  - Very Satisfied
31. **Compared to when you first entered your most recent four-year college/university, how would you describe your CURRENT ABILITY to do the following? [*Much worse – Worse - About the same – Better - Much better – Not applicable*]**
- Analyze complex problems
  - Generate your own solutions to complex problems
  - Be an effective leader
  - Write effectively
  - Verbally communicate your ideas effectively
  - Learn on your own
  - Work productively on a team with others
  - Be successful in college
  - Perform well in a job
  - Understand your different career options
  - Understand viewpoints that are different than your own
  - **Understand** cultures different from your own
  - **Appreciate** cultures different from your own
  - **Accept** people from cultures different from your own
  - Communicate with people from communities different than your own
  - Work effectively with people from communities different than your own
  - Have a positive impact on the community of people who share your **gender identity**
  - Have a positive impact on the community of people who share your **gender expression**
  - Have a positive impact on larger society
32. **Compared to when you first entered your most recent four-year college/university, how would you describe your CURRENT COMMITMENT to do the following? [*Much worse – Worse - About the same – Better - Much better – Not applicable*]**
- Work hard in school
  - Get good grades

- Learn as much as possible during college
- Have a positive impact on the community of people who share your **gender identity**
- Have a positive impact on the community of people who share your **gender expression**
- Have a positive impact on larger society

The term “**academic selections**” can mean many things. It can refer to academic declarations such as majors and/or minors, courses you decide to enroll in, and co-curricular participations such as a learning community (a program where groups of students take 2 or more classes together), a research project with a faculty member, a class-based community service project, or a study abroad program.

33. Rate your level of agreement with the following statements about **academic selections**:  
[Strongly disagree – Disagree - Neither disagree nor agree - Agree - Strongly agree – Not applicable]

- My **family** provides encouragement and support when it comes to my **academic selections**
- My **pre-college friends** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **academic selections**
- My **college friends** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **academic selections**
- My **college classmates/peers** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **academic selections**
- My **college instructors** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **academic selections**
- My **college staff and administrators** provide encouragement and support when it comes to my **academic selections**

34. Rate your level of agreement with the following statements about **academic selections**: [*1- Not at all, 2, 3, 4, 5 – A Great Deal, Not Applicable*]

- How much emphasis are you placing on the future consequences of your academic selections?
- How difficult is it making your academic selections, relative to other decisions you have previously made?
- How comfortable are you with the way you are making your academic selections?
- How much are your academic selections guided by your overall values, principles, goals and/or objectives?
- How open are you to discovering new options for your academic selections?
- How likely are you to make your academic selections at the last minute or on the spur of the moment?
- How much are you enjoying making your academic selections?
- How certain are you that you are making the right academic selections?
- How much are you using specific criteria to make your academic selections?
- How stressful is it to make your academic selections?

- How satisfied do you feel with the amount of information you are obtaining while making your academic selections?
- How often are you ruling out possible academic selections because of one or a few criteria?
- How much are you drawing on your intuitions, “gut” reactions and feelings to make your academic selections?
- How rushed or pressured do you feel in making your academic selections?
- How final is your current list of options for your academic selections?
- How much are you making trade-offs among different possibilities in making your academic selections?
- How independently of other people are you making your academic selections?
- How much are you using previous habits or policies in making your academic selections?
- How well informed are you about each of your academic selection options?
- How much are you avoiding or putting off making your academic selections?
- How much have you explored your current options for your academic selections?

35. Which academic selections came to mind when you answered the questions above ? *[Fill-in]*

--- Survey Page Break ---

36. \* The following questions are to verify human participation in this study. Please type what you see below, including spaces and punctuation.

What does the B in LGBTQI stand for? *[Fill-in]*

37. \* Please answer the question you copied in the space provided here: *[Fill-in]*

--- Survey Page Break ---

### **INTERPERSONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL INTERACTIONS**

The following questions ask about your **interpersonal and environmental interactions** at your **most recent four-year college/university**.

38. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements? Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering these questions. *[Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Agree, Strongly agree, Not Applicable]*

- I know people at this institution who often send me important information about new learning opportunities.
- I know people at this institution who often send me important information about supports that are available.
- I know people at this institution who check in with me regularly to see if I need support.
- If I need support, I know a person at this institution who I trust to give me that support.

- If I have a problem, I know a person at this institution who I trust to help me solve that problem.
  - If I need information, I know a person at this institution who I trust to give me the information that I need.
  - I feel like I am part of my institution's community.
  - I feel like I belong at this institution.
  - I feel a strong connection to my institution's community.
39. When you **first entered** your most recent four-year college/university, how **frequently** did you experience the following: [*Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always, Not Applicable*]
- Difficulty making friends
  - Difficulty maintaining strong ties with pre-college friends
  - Difficulty maintaining strong ties with family
  - Feeling isolated
40. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements? Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering these questions. [*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Agree, Strongly agree, Not Applicable*]
- At this institution, there are enough opportunities to discuss important **social** issues with people from different cultural backgrounds.
  - At this institution, there are enough opportunities to discuss important **political** issues with people from different cultural backgrounds.
  - At this institution, there are enough opportunities to discuss important **diversity-related** issues with people from different cultural backgrounds
  - In general, people at this institution help each other succeed.
  - In general, people at this institution support each other.
  - In general, people at this institution work together toward common goals.
41. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements regarding those who share the same **gender identity** as you [*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Agree, Strongly agree, Not Applicable*]
- At this institution, there are enough opportunities for me to connect with people who have the same **gender identity** as me.
  - In general, people at this institution value knowledge from those who have the same **gender identity** as me.
  - In general, people who have the same **gender identity** as me are valued at this institution.
  - In general, people at this institution value the experiences of those who have the same **gender identity** as me
  - At this institution, there are enough opportunities to learn about the challenges that exist for those who have the same **gender identity** as me.
  - At this institution, there are enough opportunities to learn about important issues that exist for those who have the same **gender identity** as me.
  - At this institution, there are enough opportunities to gain knowledge about those who have the same **gender identity** as me.
  - At this institution, there are enough opportunities (e.g., research, community service



- projects, etc.) to **help improve the lives** of those who share the same **gender identity** as me
- At this institution, there are enough opportunities (e.g., research, community service projects, etc.) to **give back** to those who share the same **gender identity** as me
  - At this institution, there are enough opportunities (e.g., research, community service projects, etc.) to **positively impact** those who share the same **gender identity** as me
42. Can you describe any **activities/programs** that made you **feel included** at your most recent four-year college/university? Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering this question. [*Fill-in*]
43. Can you describe any **activities/programs** that **helped you succeed** at your most recent four-year college/university? Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering this question.

--- Survey Page Break ---

### **INSTRUCTOR INTERACTIONS**

The following questions ask about your experiences with **instructors** (i.e., professors who have taught your classes) **at your most recent four-year college/university**. Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering these questions.

44. To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements? [*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Agree, Strongly agree, Not applicable*]
- In general, **instructors** care about students at this institution.
  - In general, **instructors** at this institution are committed to my success.
  - In general, I view **instructors** at this institution as caring human beings.
45. Instructors at this institution are effective at... (**Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Agree, Strongly agree, Not applicable**)
- creating environments where my **gender identity** feels welcomed.
  - creating environments where I am comfortable expressing my **gender identity** viewpoints.
  - facilitating difficult conversations around issues of oppression and **gender identity**.
  - engaging **gender identity** diversity as a learning tool in the classroom.
  - creating classrooms in which all **gender identity** perspectives are equally valued.
46. How often have your **instructors** done the following in your courses? Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering these questions. (**Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always, Not Applicable**)
- Explicitly talked about the importance of **gender identity diversity** in the classroom.
  - Focused classroom conversations on **gender identity inequality**
  - Invited guest speakers to class to speak about **gender identity inequality**
  - Included required readings from authors who represent **diverse gender identities** in the syllabus.

- Offered assignments that allowed me to relate the task to my **gender identity**
- **Failed to respond** to offensive transgender and/or nonbinary statements made in the classroom.
- **Stereotyped** transgender and/or nonbinary individuals.
- **Made offensive statements** about transgender and/or nonbinary individuals in class.

47. How often has an **instructor** done the following in general? Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering these questions. (**Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always, Not applicable**)

- Shared their personal story with me.
- Asked me about my life outside of class
- Given me advice/guidance about non-academic matters.
- Demonstrated passion for the work they were doing.
- Checked in on me to see how I was doing.
- Checked in on me to see if I was handling my school work well.
- Did something to show me that they want me to succeed.
- Told me that they know I can succeed.
- Invested more time than they expected to invest in me.
- Did something that showed me that they cared about me.
- Sent me information about **opportunities** that would benefit me without me asking for it.
- Shared with me information about **resources** that would benefit me without me asking for it.
- Introduced me to someone (e.g., in person, over the phone, via email, etc.) who gave me the support that I needed.
- Spent time with me even if there was not an immediate task that needed to be completed.
- Put me in contact with students from similar backgrounds as me.

--- Survey Page Break ---

### **COLLEGE STAFF AND ADMINISTRATORS INTERACTIONS**

The following questions ask about your experiences with **college staff and administrators** (i.e., college personnel who are not professors) **at your most recent four-year college/university**. Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering these questions.

48. **To what extent do you disagree or agree with the following statements?** [*Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Agree, Strongly agree, Not Applicable*]
- In general, **college staff and administrators** care about students at this institution.
  - In general, **college staff and administrators** at this institution are committed to my success.
  - In general, I view **college staff and administrators** at this institution as caring human beings.
49. College staff and administrators at this institution are effective at... (**Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither disagree nor agree, Agree, Strongly agree, Not Applicable**)

- creating environments where my **gender identity** feels welcomed.
- creating environments where I am comfortable expressing my **gender identity** viewpoints.
- facilitating difficult conversations around issues of oppression and **gender identity**.
- engaging **gender identity** diversity as a learning tool
- creating environments in which all **gender identity** perspectives are equally valued

50. How often has a **college staff or administrator** done the following? Please consider your **overall experiences** when answering these questions. (**Never, Rarely, Sometimes, Often, Always, Not Applicable**)

- Shared their personal story with me.
- Asked me about my life outside of class.
- Given me advice/guidance about non-academic matters.
- Demonstrated passion for the work they were doing.
- Checked in on me to see how I was doing.
- Checked in on me to see if I was handling my school work well.
- Did something to show me that they want me to succeed.
- Told me that they know I can succeed.
- Invested more time than they expected to invest in me.
- Did something that showed me that they cared about me.
- Sent me information about opportunities that would benefit me without me asking for it.
- Shared with me information about resources that would benefit me without me asking for it.
- Introduced me to someone (e.g., in person, over the phone, via email, etc.) who gave me the support that I needed.
- Spent time with me even if there was not an immediate task that needed to be completed.
- Put me in contact with students from similar backgrounds as me.

--- Survey Page Break ---

### **DEMOGRAPHIC AND ATTRIBUTES INFORMATION**

The following questions ask about your **Demographics and Attributes**.

51. How **old** are you currently? [*Fill-in*]

52. What **race** do you identify with? (select all that apply)

- Alaska Native, American Indian, or Native American
- Asian or Asian American
- Black or African American
- Latina/Latino/Latinx
- Middle Eastern or Northern African
- Pacific Islander
- White
- Multiracial

- I prefer to self-describe [**fill-in**]
- I prefer not to respond

53. Which **sexual orientation** most closely reflects your identity? (select all that apply)

- Asexual
- Bisexual / Pansexual
- Gay
- Heterosexual / Straight
- Lesbian
- Queer
- Questioning or unsure
- I prefer to self-describe[**fill-in**]
- I prefer not to respond

54. What are your **religious/spiritual affiliations or beliefs**? (select all that apply)

- Agnosticism
- Atheism
- Baha'ism
- Buddhism
- Christianity
- Hinduism
- Jainism
- Judaism
- Islam
- Native American Tradition(s)
- Native Hawaiian Tradition(s)
- Paganism
- Secular Humanism
- Shintoism
- Sikhism
- Spiritual
- Taoism (Daoism)
- Unitarianism
- Other Religion [**fill-in**]
- I do not identify with any religion
- I prefer not to respond

55. Have you been diagnosed with a **disability, impairment or neurodiversity**?

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to respond

56. What best describes your **class background growing up**?

- Working class

- Middle class
- Upper class
- I prefer not to respond

57. What is the highest level of education completed **by any of your parents/guardians who raised you?**

- Did not finish high school
- High school diploma or GED
- Some college, but did not complete a college certificate or degree
- College Certificate
- Associate's Degree (AA) or equivalent
- Bachelor's Degree (BA, BS) or equivalent
- Master's Degree (MA, MBA, MEd, MFA) or equivalent
- Doctoral or Professional Degree (EdD, JD, MD, PhD) or equivalent
- I don't know
- Not applicable
- I prefer not to respond

58. Are you a **student athlete?**

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to respond

59. Are you a **military veteran** (former member of the U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard) or **current member** of the **U.S. Armed Forces, Reserves, or National Guard**

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to respond

60. Is **English** your **second language?**

- Yes
- No
- I prefer not to respond

61. What is your **status in the U.S.?**

- U.S. citizen, U.S. national, or permanent resident
- International student
- COFA migrant (with Palau, Marshall Islands, or Federated States of Micronesia citizenship)
- Other status **[fill-in]**
- I prefer not to respond

62. About how many **hours per week** do/did you **work for your most recent four-year college/university?** Include paid jobs, internships, and assistantships.

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- Over 30
- I prefer not to respond

63. About how many **hours per week** do/did you **work for an employer other than your most recent four-year college/university**? Include paid jobs, internships, and assistantships.

- 0
- 1-5
- 6-10
- 11-15
- 16-20
- 21-25
- 26-30
- Over 30

64. Would you like to receive a \$15.00 Amazon e-gift card or have a \$15.00 donation made on your behalf to CampusPride.org (<https://www.campuspride.org/tpc/>) for completing this survey?

- Amazon e-gift card
- CampusPride.org donation
- I prefer to not receive or donate my incentive

--- Survey Page Break ---

**- END SURVEY CONFIRMATION PAGE -**

### **Resources for Support**

If you are in need of counseling or social support services, please consider utilizing the following resources:

- **National Center for Transgender Equality**  
*Transgender support hotlines, healthcare, legal, and employment services resources*  
<https://transequality.org/additional-help>
- **Trans Lifeline**  
*Peer support phone service run by trans people for trans and questioning peers. Available if you need someone trans to talk to, even if not in crisis, or if you are not sure you are trans*  
<https://translifeline.org/>  
U.S. Hotline: 877-565-8860

- **The Trevor Project**  
*Crisis intervention and mental health services for those ages 13-24*  
<http://www.thetrevorproject.org/>  
Crisis hotline: 866-488-7386
- **Crisis Text Line**  
*Free, 24/7 support for people in crisis*  
<https://www.crisistextline.org/>  
Text 741741 from anywhere in the USA to text with a trained Crisis Counselor.
- **The LGBT National Help Center**  
*Offering confidential peer support connections for LGBT youth, adults and seniors, including phone, text and online chat*  
<http://www.glbtnationalhelpcenter.org/>  
Hotline: 888-843-4564
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness: LGBTQI Resources**  
*How to Find the Right Mental Health Professional for LGBTQI Individuals (scroll to the middle of the page)*  
*Mental Health Resources for LGBTQI Individuals (scroll to the bottom of the page)*  
<https://www.nami.org/Your-Journey/Identity-and-Cultural-Dimensions/LGBTQI>
- **Contact the Counseling Center, Psychological Services, and Mental Health/Wellness resources available to you at your college/university.**

**What happens to the information collected for this study?**

Information collected from this study will be kept confidential. De-identified data will be shared with affinity researchers of this study for data analysis and the results of this study may be used in reports, presentations, or publications but only pseudonyms will be used. Research records will be kept confidential up to five years after the project is finished. The researcher will dispose of research data by shredding paper records and erasing digital files.

**If you are invited to participate in an interview for this study...**

You will receive an email and phone call to schedule and take part in one 60–90-minute video conference or phone interview to share how you made your undergraduate academic selections at your most recent four-year college/university. These interviews will be audio and/or video recorded and transcribed. You may choose to either receive a \$20.00 Amazon e-gift card or have a \$20.00 donation made on your behalf to [CampusPride.org](http://CampusPride.org) for completing the interview. If the e-gift card option is chosen, it will be delivered to you via email for completing the interview within 24-72 hours. A possible second 60–90-minute interview may be required if additional information is needed. If the donation is chosen, it will be delivered to the organization upon completion of the interview within 24-72 hours. If a second 60–90-minute interview is required, you may choose to either receive a \$20.00 Amazon e-gift card or have a \$20.00 donation made on your behalf to [CampusPride.org](http://CampusPride.org) for completing that interview.

**Please share this study with other Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate students**

If you could please share the initial interest questionnaire for this study with other Transgender and/or Nonbinary undergraduate students who may be eligible, I would greatly appreciate it.

## APPENDIX C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION

- Pronouns:
- Institution:
- Majors/Minors:
- Year in college:
- Transfer or no? (institutions?)
- Cocurricular Involvements (paid/unpaid):
  - Hours work?:
- Gender Identity:
- Gender Expression:
- Salient Identities:

### INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

#### *Identity Development as Foundation for Academic Interests*

1. Can you tell me the story of when you began to realize your gender identity?
  - a. What was happening at that time?
  - b. Who/What was involved?
  - c. Where were you?
2. When did you come out to others regarding your gender identity?
  - a. Who first then next? Why?
  - b. Who didn't you come out to? Why?
  - c. How was it?
3. Can you tell me the story of when you began to express your gender identity?
  - a. What was happening at that time?
  - b. Who/What was involved?
  - c. Where were you?
  - d. How did it go?
4. How has your gender identity changed or developed from then until now, if at all?
  - a. Who/What was involved? Why? When? Example?
5. How has your gender expression changed or developed from then until now, if at all?
  - a. Who/What was involved? Why? When? Example?
6. How much time do you think you spent thinking about your gender identity/expression before college? How about now?
  - a. What was that like? Example?
7. Do you think your social relations are influenced by how your gender identity / expression is perceived? How? Why? Why not?
8. Has anyone treated you differently depending on your gender expression/identity? How? Who? When?
9. Do you try to be stealth or hide your gender identity? When and with who? How?
10. How do your other identities interact with your gender identity/expression?



11. Do you think people have an accurate understanding of your identity? Who?

### ***Academic Selections Before and During College***

12. Tell me the progression from your earliest memory to now of what you wanted to be when you grew up and how it changed over time?
- Did you know someone who was in that career or did you see someone in that career before (i.e., TV?)
  - Did anything or anyone in particular cause you to change your mind?
  - What options did you think were available?
  - Were you supported or not in your choices? By who/what? When? Why?
  - How did you know what you needed to do to achieve that goal?
13. Before college, how much time do you think you spent on thinking about your future career?
- What did you spend most of your time thinking about?
14. Do you take your gender identity into consideration when you make academic decisions? If not, why? If so, how and how often?
15. Do you take others into consideration when you make academic decisions?
16. Do you take environments into consideration when making your academic decisions?
17. Are most of those in your social circle of your major or do they vary?
18. When did you decide to go to college and why? What influenced you?
- Did you have an academic plan before going to college? (major/minor, classes, activities like clubs or study abroad, etc.) Based on what?
  - How did you decide on which college to apply to?
  - Why did you choose this college?
19. Were there any classes in which you learned about Trans/Nonbinary material? Did you have presenters or assignments on that? How did that impact your academics?
20. How did you come to choose the academic selections you made in college? (classes, opportunities, grad school, college resources, etc.).
- What do you take into consideration?
  - Who was involved? When did this happen? How?
  - How do you think these influenced your future choices?
21. Are your classes prescribed so you don't have a choice or do you have a lot of choice in your selections?
22. Did you think your academic selections were influenced by your gender identity/expression before college? During College?
- Why? Why not? How?
23. How have people been supportive of your academic journey and selections?
24. Are you happy with your academic selections and how you made them? Why or why not? What would you have done differently and what do you wish happened instead?

### ***Environmental and Interpersonal as Foundation for Academic Selections***

25. Do you think your academic selections were influenced by how people interacted with you based on your gender identity? Expression? How so? If not, then how do people influence your academic selections?

26. Do you think your academic selections were influenced by your environments in relation to your gender identity? Expression? How so? If not, then how do environments influence your academic decisions?
27. Whose voices do you value / take into consideration most when making academic decisions, if at all?
28. Have you had any negative interactions or conflicts based on your academic selections with others? Who? When? How?
  - a. For those who don't support you, what do you draw upon to keep going at it?
29. Who supports your gender identity / academic selections most in order? (family, pre-coll friends, coll friends, classmates, school/coll instructors, school/coll admin)
  - a. When? How? Why?
  - b. What role did each play then?
30. What do you wish staff and faculty did to support your academic selections in college?
31. What do you wish staff and faculty did to support your trans/nonbinary identity?
32. Were there any online communities you connected with regarding your gender identity or academics?
33. Does your gender identity or expression come up in class or interactions? (professors, staff, family, friends, classmates?)
34. How would you describe the culture of your campus?
35. Have you faced discrimination before on your campus?
36. What aspects of an environment do you think signal to you that it is a welcoming/supportive space?
37. What was your friend group make-up pre-college? During college? (gender, expression, race, etc.)
  - a. Do you still keep in touch with them?
38. Are you close with any faculty/staff pre-college/during college?
39. Based on environmental and interpersonal interactions, what does it mean to live in your gender identity and expression?
40. What do you wish colleges, faculty, and staff would do to better support your gender identity, gender expression, and academic journey?

### **Final thoughts**

41. Is there anything else you think I should know about when it comes to your gender identity, gender expression and how those relate to your academic selections?
42. Is there anything else you think I should know about when it comes to your gender identity, gender expression and how those relate to your interpersonal interactions?
43. Is there anything else you think I should know about when it comes to your gender identity, gender expression and how those relate to your environmental interactions?
44. Is there anything else you think I should know about when it comes to your interpersonal interactions and how those relate to your academic selections?
45. Is there anything else you think I should know about when it comes to your environmental interactions and how those relate to your academic selections?
46. For your incentive, would you like to have a \$20 Amazon e-giftcard or make a \$20 donation to CampusPride.org?

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<sup>8</sup> *Dead Name*: (n.) a Transgender-identified individual's birth and/or legal name no longer in use. *To dead name*: (v.) the disrespectful practice of referring to a Transgender-identified individual by their birth and/or legal name rather than their new, lived name. Per personal communication with the author, they recommended using their lived name and initials in citations for their work to (a) avoid confusion surrounding whether this is the same person/author in various works and (b) avoid perpetuating the use of their dead name. They and I acknowledge and recognize this method of citing is not historically or scholarly accurate, but it is respectful to the author and their agency and identity.

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<sup>9</sup> The first author published this work under their dead name and now lives using this name. Again, the researcher is respecting this scholar's identity by avoiding the use of their dead name.

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