

## *Original Paper*

# Beyond the Binary: Re-Examining Male-to-Female (MTF)

## Transgender Inclusion in American College Sports

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### **Abstract**

*Transgender bodies problematize sport. Currently structured within a strict gender binary of “male” and “female”, the visible structural challenge of transgender student athletes' existence has been a subject of heightened controversy and division. In particular, there is a perceived threat of transgender participation in American college sports. The purpose of this study is to outline the recent policy changes of the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) and to highlight the real-life impacts on transgender student athletes' (TSAs) experiences. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews of six male-to-female (MTF) TSAs to foreground their voices and lived experiences. Results were hierarchically coded, revealing the multi-layered risk exclusion poses to transgender well-being as defined by (a) the impact on self-identity, and therefore mental & emotional health (micro) and (b) the impact on their social inclusion and sense of belonging (meso). The paper concludes with a call to action for inclusive policy and the promotion of genuine athletic opportunities within the American education system.*

### **Keywords**

*transgender, inclusion, sport, NCAA, student-athletes, policy*

***“The revised rules are not about cheating... They are about leveling the playing field to ensure fair and meaningful competition in the sport of athletics where success is determined by talent, dedication and hard work rather than other contributing factors.”***

– World Athletics President, Lord Sebastian Coe, 2018

*Transgender* serves as an umbrella term for any individual whose gender identity and/or gender expression is incongruent with their biological sex (Klein *et al.*, 2018). The institution of sport has a problem with transgender bodies. Put differently, transgender bodies problematize sport. Although trans-athletes have been permitted to participate and compete internationally since the International Olympic Committee's (IOC) Stockholm Consensus in 2004, transgenderism has become fodder more recently for a culture war in the United States. During 2024, the ACLU was actively tracking 576

anti-transgender bills of varying nature, but sports and education have drawn particular attention (ACLU, 2024). As of January 2025, the administration passed Executive Order 14168, titled "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government" explicitly delineating human existence in terms of a biological binary and imagined biological baseline (despite the existence of intersex people). This kind of top-down decision making has serious implications for transgender recognition, acceptance and safety in several spheres, including sports, education, and military service; Project 2025 promises to roll back many civil liberties of transgender people – and by extension, cisgender women (ACLU, 2025; Yilek, 2025). This ideological battle around transgenderism challenges hegemonic notions of masculinity, compulsory heterosexuality, and fairness (Messner, 1988, 1992; Jones *et al.*, 2017, CCES, 2023). This politicized discourse is particularly rancorous concerning male-to-female (MTF) transgender student-athletes (TSAs), demonstrated by the media storm enveloping UPenn transgender swimmer Lia Thomas in 2022-23 season, and more recently, the opponents of San Jose State women's volleyball team boycotting matches and refusing to play them (Planas, 2024). However, to date, despite the number of medals won by openly LGBTQ+ athletes, only one 'out' trans-athlete has won an Olympic medal (identifying as non-binary) and two trans women have won National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) titles – runner CeCe Telfer (Div II) and Lia Thomas (Div I) (Longman, 2022). Thomas' NCAA championship-winning time in the 500-yard freestyle was nine seconds off the 2017 collegiate record set by Katie Ledecky (a cis-woman and prolific Olympian); she finished fifth in the 200-yard freestyle and last in the 100-yard freestyle final (Longman, 2022). Yet, Thomas' right to participate and win has been called illegitimate, attained through 'unfair biological advantages', applying pressure on the NCAA to restrict its more inclusive 2010 policies (Kleigman, 2022; NCAA, 2022). In February 2025, the Trump administration passed the "No Men in Women's Sports" executive order, a ban on transgender students in girls' sports. This order amends Title IX to remove protections for gender identity, underscoring these biases against MTF transgender athletes (Yilek, 2025). One day later, the NCAA changed its participation policy for transgender athletes, limiting competition in women's sports to athletes who were assigned female at birth. The abrupt NCAA policy change was effective immediately regardless of previous eligibility reviews (Macur, 2025).

Sport is valued as 'culturally male' – a fiercely guarded masculine arena (Lenskyj, 2012; Messner, 1990). Gender surveillance is prolific in sport, imposing limits on what women can achieve. When Algeria's Imane Khelif won a match against Italian boxer Angela Carini in just 46 seconds during the Paris 2024 Olympics, who stated she'd "never been hit so hard" (MacDonald, 2024), a media firestorm sparked outrage and controversy—despite Khelif being assigned female at birth and identifying as female. Instead of celebrating body diversity for women, female exceptionalism has been punished: Tonya Harding and the Williams Sisters are examples of cis women who are forced to toe a line of acceptable femininity, expected to produce the amazing feats of human performance without showing any muscle (Frogley *et al.*, 2018). MTF trans bodies represent a physical reminder of the complexity of gender, simultaneously illuminating and mystifying its cultural constructions (Lenskyj, 2012; Messner, 1990; Semerjian &

Cohen, 2008). Therefore, the presence of MTF TSAs in the NCAA poses a visible challenge to the inherent hegemonic structure of sport as a patriarchal domain. We focus specifically on MTF TSAs because FTM TSAs are largely absent from controversy, perhaps because they are not imagined having an unfair advantage in the male category (Klein *et al.*, 2019). While sport is extra-curricular to the educational project of US higher education, this context also provides the limited, linear pathways to US professional sport. Because US sport and education are irrevocably intertwined, TSA inclusion brings to question the educational purpose and value of interscholastic athletics as a cultural system (Buzuvis, 2011; Cunningham, 2015; Van Rheenen, 2019). TSAs like Thomas have invested years into their sports performance. If she can be trans on campus, but not in sport, we are nurturing the dichotomy between not only academic and athletic identities, but between athletic and authentic selves. This conflict of experience poses an educational, and perhaps, ethical, dilemma: can colleges and policymakers claim to offer TSAs an equitable chance to *participate* in sport, and an equitable educational experience to their cis peers?

### ***A Polarized Debate***

According to a Cornell University library guide "...in 2023, over 500 bills were introduced in the United States that target transgender people in public life, ranging from access to medical care, the ability to change legal names and gender markers, access to public restrooms, and the ability to play sports and perform publicly. In the first 5 days of 2024, 125 similar bills were filed." At time of writing, increased fervor for anti-trans legislation nationally and the subsequent IOC decision to defer to a sport-specific inclusion policy had resulted in bans on TSA participation in 25 US states (ACLU, 2024). Further, since the conclusion of this original research, the NCAA has banned MTF transgender athletes from competing in a way that aligns with their gender identity (Drenon, 2025). This decision runs counter to its core mission of student athlete development and participation rights.

At the crux of the polarized debate about transgender sports participation are the concepts of fairness and opportunity. Trans-exclusionist voices reject the expansion of Title IX protections, argue that sex and gender are the same, and immutable; they argue the presence of trans-women in cis-female spaces compromises the safety of, and protections for, cis-women (Cooper, 2023). Therefore, Testosterone (T) is a singularly 'male' hormone, responsible for developing athletically useful qualities, such as superior strength, height, muscle mass and lower body fat, resulting in 'naturally' superior athletic performance. Therefore, female athletes should compete separately as they have no chance of winning based on this inherent biological difference; since trans-women are not 'real women', but biological men, they retain unfair athletic advantages bestowed upon them by their sex and should not be allowed to compete, even on hormone replacement therapy (HRT). Allowing transwomen to compete means they will necessarily dominate competition, posing a risk to opportunities for cis-women to win at any athletic competition. Trans-exclusionists argue that swimmer Lia Thomas had an unfair advantage when competing in the NCAA championships; therefore, she only won because she is transgender (i.e., biologically male) (Hirschberg, 2020).

Contrastingly, despite Executive Order 14168 (2025), Title IX legislation protects trans inclusion in sport and that trans athletes have protections under the Constitution's equal protection guarantee. Trans inclusionists argue that gender identity is fluid and separate from biological sex; the existence of intersex people proves the complexity of biological sex, disproving the validity of the gender binary (Cooper, 2023). They argue that current policies overstate biomedical considerations (such as the presence of T, a hormone present in cis-men and women at varying levels) and understate legal or socio-cultural factors affecting sports performance (CCES, 2023; Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2018). Thus, they refute that TSAs hold an unfair athletic advantage. The small numbers of MTF athletes does not constitute 'domination' – therefore, at all levels, excluding LGBTQ+ youth and TSAs from sport damages their mental and emotional health, restricts their human rights, and bars them from the same opportunities and benefits gained from sport as their peers (CCES, 2023). Trans-inclusionists question the selective narratives and 'evidence' around trans-participation, and the damage done by elite-standard policies being employed at the school-sport level, exacerbating gender dysphoria (Buzuvis, 2022). The fraught middle ground is predominantly occupied by policymakers and medical professionals who seek to quantify athletic advantage, justify average sex-based T ranges and HRT requirements, and discuss the potential for a 'third' and separate category for gender non-conforming athletes (Kleigman, 2022). What's noticeably absent from this debate is *care for the individual*, and conversation about the multifaceted negative impact of macro-level policy on transgender student-athletes (TSAs) who occupy a unique position within the American education system.

### Purpose of Study

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the lived experiences and corresponding impacts on MTF athletes because of NCAA policy changes. Cunningham *et al.* (2022) highlight three levels to trans inclusion: **macro**, **meso**, and **micro**. Though these levels are undeniably connected, if not mutually reinforcing, this paper will focus on how the **macro**-level factors, such as legal rulings and policy changes, create the conditions for and influence significant **meso** and **micro** level human impacts for TSAs. Through this analysis, we hope to challenge the over-simplified and emotive approach to the trans-inclusion debate, instead highlighting its personalized and nuanced nature. Using an intersectional transfeminist framework (Koyama, 2003; Crenshaw, 1989), this study postulates that we can and should open dialogue regarding a more expansive definition of "womanhood" as a vehicle to improve U.S. collegiate sport's accessibility for *all* student-athletes. This study interviewed six MTF TSAs based on the following research question: *How do NCAA policies (prior to the most recent ban) regarding MTF transgender athletes impact their experiences as collegiate (NCAA) student-athletes?*

### Literature Review

There has been a growth in research on transgender athletes over the past 15 years. Most of these publications provide policy, equity, or theoretical analyses (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Buzuvis, 2011; 2021; 2022; Cunningham *et al.*, 2022; Tanimoto & Miwa, 2021; Cooper, 2023) or case studies (Klein *et al.*, 2018; Cohen & Semerjian, 2008). Few of these studies have interviewed more than one TSA or are focused on

trans-male athletes (Hargie *et al.*, 2017; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2011; Semerjian & Cohen, 2006). No studies have interviewed a diverse group of MTF TSAs in the US context, nor in relation to the impact of the NCAA transgender policy changes in 2022 on college student-athletes.

### ***Problematizing shifts in Transgender Sport Policy***

MTF athletes pose the greatest perceived ‘threat’ to collegiate and commercialized sport due to the assumed inferiority of women’s bodies, which calls for the ‘protection’ of the women’s category – a floating signifier disputed by scholars and activists (Torres *et al.*, 2022; McClearn, 2015; Sullivan, 2011, Cooper, 2023). Policy seeks to define the construct concretely, begging the question of who gets to decide what constitutes womanhood, and within which contexts do these decisions matter most? (Ellis, 2023). The difficulty with designing adequate inclusive policy is that the diversity of transgender experiences cannot be used to generalize about all transgender athletes (Cohen & Semerjian, 2008; Lucas-Carr & Krane, 2012). After the Beijing 2022 Winter Games, the IOC put a new, non-binding framework into effect, informed by conversations with legal and medical experts, to offer sports federations a “principled approach” to inclusion – but also defers to the “remit of each sport” (IOC, 2022, 1). The IOC acknowledges that its previous policy caused real harm to the well-being of TSAs (De La Cretaz, 2022), now cautioning against presuming, without evidence, that athletes have an unfair competitive advantage due to their sex variations, T-levels, physical appearance and/or transgender status, and emphasizes the need for sports organization to account for the vulnerabilities of trans people, and to prevent direct and indirect negative impacts on athlete health and wellbeing (IOC, 2022). They outline the following principles: (1) Inclusion, (2) Prevention of Harm, (3) Non-Discrimination, (4) Fairness, (5) No Presumption of Advantage, (6) Evidence-based Approach, (7) Primacy of Health and Body Autonomy, (8) Stakeholder-centered Approach, (9) Right to Privacy, (10) Period Reviews (IOC, 2022).

Despite TSAs’ technical status as amateur athletes, the NCAA deferred to sport-specific governing bodies to set TSA regulations, effectively washing their hands of responsibility (Barnes, 2022; NCAA, 2022). There were three phases to the NCAA’s approach, all of which only impacted MTF trans athletes. Phase 1 (2022) mandated that a female TSA not on HRT may not compete on the women’s team; to be eligible, T suppression must be for one year prior to competition at <10 nmol/L of blood, as per their previous 2010 policy. Phase 2 (2022/23, 2023/24 seasons) mandated TSAs meet phase 1 requirements, plus any requirements set forth by their sport’s National Governing Body (NGB). Where no policy is available, this is escalated to the IF, or the IOC policy. Phase 3 (2024/25 season) mandated that TSAs will be fully and only answerable to their NGB or IF sport-specific requirements. They emphasized flexibility if TSAs lose eligibility, enabling them to meet requirements in the future – but phase 3 is murky, and may involve extended HRT mitigation (Merrill *et al.*, 2022).

These policy changes significantly complicated transgender access to sport, creating a disparity between opportunities afforded to cis-student-athletes versus TSAs. Whilst the IOC’s new framework reduced barriers to transgender and intersex athlete’s participation in Olympic sports and emphasizes care and bodily autonomy, it had no mechanisms of enforcement. This provided the latitude for international

sports federations (IFs), whom the NCAA looked to for guidance, to reject multiple equity-minded framework principles and enact participation bans of varying severity (Longman, 2022; De La Cretaz, 2022; Buzuvis, 2022). This deference to IFs was seemingly incongruent to the NCAA's stated purpose of providing equal educational opportunity as a tax-exempt governing body.

This most recent NCAA decision results in further challenges to inclusion and equity than previously posed by their 2022 policy. Whilst NCAA President Charlie Baker says the changes "would provide 'clear, consistent, and uniform eligibility standards... instead of a patchwork of conflicting state laws and court decisions'" (Drenon, 2025), the ban restricts the participation and competition rights of specifically MTF transgender athletes, favoring simplicity over inclusion. Previous attempts at trans inclusion did suffer a lack of universal policy logic, creating space for confusion at the collegiate level and increased burdens on stakeholders. However, had these institutions and their athletic departments been disincentivized to support TSAs previously, recent restrictions will most certainly discourage athletic programs to be trans-inclusive in the future. Whilst Baker argues MTF athletes would still be allowed to train in line with gender identity (Drenon, 2025), it is unrealistic to assume that coaches will take up a roster spot for an athlete who is not available to compete, especially when programs are under pressure to manage roster sizes and perform (e.g., win). It is even more likely that university athletic departments will simply follow the NCAA's ban against all transgender athletes, in support of the federal government's exclusionary policies and practices.

The mindset governing NCAA athletes overemphasizes selective biomedical data which unduly focuses on MTF athletes, and which research has named as 'untenable' and 'fatally flawed' (Barnes, 2022; Jones *et al.*, 2017; Healy *et al.*, 2014). Consequently, it undervalues sociocultural factors despite evidence that nutrition, disparities in facilities, the gender pay gap, restriction due to social representation (Pape, 2019; CCES 2023) and exposure to sexual violence (Ohlert, 2020) or lesbophobia and racism (Lenskyj, 2012; Cooky & Rauscher, 2016) all contribute to competitive sex-differences. Female athleticism has been "hamstrung" – not by trans women – but systematically "by social inequality" (Buzuvis, 2021, 440). Informed by this bias, we now find ourselves facing a targeted ban for only MTF trans athletes, speaking to the preexisting misogyny against female athletes more broadly. In sum, where NCAA policies are supposed to protect *all* athletes' right to compete safely, the organization's decision has left TSAs in a far more unstable position than with their previous inclusive 2010 policy, and even the more restrictive 2022 policy. This research seeks to explore the individual (micro level) impacts of these policy shifts.

### ***The Need for Inclusive Sport***

Statistics indicate that a "staggering forty-one percent of transgender individuals attempt suicide" (Lenzi, 2018, 856). Denying trans-youth access to sport means denying them a significant mechanism for improving mental health and resilience and developing institutional belonging, potentially exacerbating the risk of depression and suicidality (Lenzi, 2018; Goldberg, 2021). The high avoidance of sporting environments by LGBTQ+ youth highlights the need to make sporting spaces feel safer and more inclusive (more often characterized as sites of verbal and physical harassment and/or social exclusion).

72.7% of trans-female students avoided locker rooms and 62.5% avoided gym class (Clark *et al.*, 2021), perhaps accounting for the small comparable number of elite transgender athletes versus cis-athletes. Sports organizations and people surrounding our TSAs have a real opportunity to provide this ‘strong support system’ which research suggests is significant in improving mental and emotional well being for transgender athletes, thereby enhancing their chances of success and positive life experiences.

College is a time during which some may “begin to question their own concepts of their gender identity,” placing TSAs in a developmentally unique and potentially vulnerable classification due to their age (typically 18-23 y/o), compounding identities, and especially if they transition *during* their athletic career (using hormones and/or surgery) (Ziegler & Huntley, 2013, 469). In higher education, marginalized students’ (particularly trans students’), psychological distress is on the rise (Gray *et al.*, 2018). Trans students nationwide report “greater levels of harassment and discrimination” and “feel less accepted as part of the campus community,” compared to cisgender populations (Goldberg, 2018, 6). Immersion in supportive, well-informed campus environments increases retention and persistence towards degree completion (Hardin, 2021); for example, participation in intercollegiate athletics has been shown to enhance self-worth, social integration, and improve academic outcomes compared to non-active peers (Gray *et al.*, 2018; Wretman, 2017).

However, by design and tradition, campuses prioritize the needs of cisgender students; they are largely unprepared to accommodate trans students on campus or in athletics (Hardin, 2021). TSAs face significantly higher barriers to equitable access than cis-athletes: negative experiences of sport and exclusion are highly reported in qualitative studies, including anxiety-provoking climates (via locker rooms, dress codes, staff, opponents), violence from staff, being pushed out of sport, and being publicly outed (Cunningham *et al.*, 2018, Cohen & Semerjian, 2008; Hargie *et al.*, 2017; Jones *et al.*, 2017). Sports policies center conformity and erase TSA’s embodied experiences of sport, creating a culture of suspicion and regulation rather than empowerment, even contributing to violence towards TSAs (Torres *et al.*, 2022; CCES, 2023; Ellis, 2023).

### ***The Impact of Exclusion***

Chan *et al.* (2024) found that from a cohort of 21,565 LGBTQ+ participants in their meta-analysis, 7152 (33%) were subjected to discrimination in sports participation. Transphobia specifically is well-documented and prevalent in sports spaces and organizations, suffering more prejudices from university peers and staff than other LGB minorities or cis-straight athletes (Pérez-Samaniego *et al.*, 2019). Structural stigma (e.g. policies, physical spaces) and individual stigma (e.g. derogatory remarks, bullying, ostracization, sexual or physical assault) are barriers TSAs must navigate to gain access to collegiate sports (Cunningham *et al.*, 2018).

Structural stigma means that MTF TSAs are often ostracized in or from physical spaces, such as locker rooms and bathrooms under presumptions of these spaces not being safe to enter (Cunningham *et al.*, 2018). When considering policy and access, implicitly, TSAs must meet more criteria than cis-athletes to avoid suspicion and access NCAA competition. Klein *et al.* (2018) describe the disproportionate burden

and responsibility on TSAs to disclose medical information and ‘come out’ to participate. The trans male student athlete they interviewed had to disclose their gender identity to many athletic personnel, apply for a medical exemption, and share their medical records detailing their testosterone levels to continue competing. Specifically, research has shown that restrictive policies (a) serve to segregate, isolate, and stigmatize; (b) negatively affect athletes’ health and well-being; and (c) create a climate of exclusion (Cunningham *et al.*, 2018).

Individual stigma, such as experiencing prejudice, verbal or physical harassment (especially from teammates or team/school staff) have a negative impact on TSAs. Witnessing discrimination or exclusion also affects cis-athletes sharing the space. Cultures of exclusion motivate trans youth to conceal their identities, triggering social and emotional problems ranging from loss of self-esteem to suicidality (Hellen, 2009). TSAs are aware of this stigma, which serves to exacerbate self-stigma (such as self-loathing and shame) and avoidance of sporting spaces because of being perceived as unwelcome or a ‘problem’ (Cunningham & Mosier, 2011; Hargie *et al.*, 2017). Combined, such stigma results in significant impacts on mental and emotional health for this population.

Finally, exclusion interferes with TSA’s legal right to participate and access sports as an extracurricular opportunity – but research reveals the impact of explicit or implicit exclusion to be multifaceted. Overall, studies show these forms of exclusion are burdensome for TSAs, and “limit the possibilities of trans persons’ access and participation in different forms of organized physical activity and sport” (Pérez-Samaniego *et al.*, 2019, 439). This literature review has established that policy and contextual factors which result in TSA exclusion. We now seek to surface the experiences of MTF TSAs, how, if at all, exclusion has impacted them, and what changes might in fact promote transgender inclusion in sport in the future.

### **Methodology**

This study is grounded in a transfeminist perspective which embodies feminist coalition politics (Koyama, 2003). Queer or transfeminist perspectives (Butler, 2006; Enke, 2012; Stryker, 2006) question two-sex categorization “when in fact a continuum of biological and psychological features may be a more accurate way of portraying the diversity of human individuals” (Travers, 2006, 433). Foregrounding trans voices ensures policy and practice recommendations are formed in conjunction with, rather than for, the queer community. Therefore, this study interviewed six MTF transgender athletes to gather information about their experiences and opinions of collegiate athletics and institutional culture, and of the policies that determine their participation opportunities.

### **Perspectives**

Transfeminism challenges us to examine our internalized patriarchal and heterosexist concepts of gender. Koyama (2003) emphasizes (1) the right to construct our own gender identities and express these without fear of discrimination or violence, and (2) the White, middle-class roots of ‘women only’ spaces who largely disregarded their own complicity in racist and classist systems. Some perceive expansive definitions of womanhood as threatening to the basis of feminist political work. If the category ‘woman’



is meaningless, then politically, ‘women’ and the corresponding oppression seem not to really exist – encouraging rigid policing of female identity (Travers, 2006; Koyama, 2003). However, “the category of “women,” the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (Butler, 2006, 4). Because gender is not always constituted coherently in different contexts, then “if one ‘is’ a woman, that is surely not all one is” (Butler, 2006, 5). Therefore, the category of ‘woman’ no longer belongs to only cis women – thus, this project invites readers to learn, and empathetically ‘hold your sister’s hand’ (hooks, 1994).

Assuming the lens of the ‘excluded group’ allows us to elevate MTF TSA voices and reexamine decisions and biases that perhaps prevent inclusive practices. As queer researchers, teachers, and ex-collegiate athletes, our adopted educative and emic perspective serves as a benefit rather than bias. This emic perspective allows for an insider’s view of reality (Given, 2008) and thus empathetic interviewing, whereby the researcher shifts to a socially political stance to become a “partner in the study” in order to “advocate social policies and ameliorate the conditions of the interviewee” (Fontana & Frey 2008, 696). This is essential for a cis-person striving to understand and interpret the experiences of trans women. A transfeminist framework enables us to deconstruct normative discourses that reproduce the ‘natural’ sex binary in sport and informs the cultural fiction that divides transgender and cis-gender, cis-sex and trans-sex (McClearan, 2015; Klein *et al.*, 2018; Semerjian & Cohen, 2006).

#### ***Data Collection & Analysis***

The small population of “out” MTF athletes provided a unique challenge for researchers. Therefore, a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Patton, 2014) was used to identify and reach out to promising participants, achieved through media articles, social media such as LinkedIn, and cold emailing outreach packets to initiate contact with the athletes or coaches directly. Due to the small TSA population size, research parameters were broadened to include the experiences of those who chose not to pursue an NCAA career. This serves to gain insight into differences, if any, operating under the 2010 NCAA transgender policy compared to the new decentralized model adopted as of Fall 2022. Due to the importance of names in transgender identities, the researchers did not ‘rename’ participants, so pseudonyms (indicated with: A(n) in text) were utilized for anonymity. Table 1 below provides the demographic data of these six participants.

**Table 1. Participant Demographic Information**

Identifier	Age	Ethnicity	Self-identified gender	Sport(s)	NCAA Competitor?	“Out” whilst competing?	Collegiate Location
A1	23	White-American	Transgender Woman (she/her)	Swimming	Yes, graduated (Div I)	Yes	Pennsylvania
A2	31	Irish/Greek	Female (she/her)	Hockey/Lacrosse	Yes, currently (Div III)	Yes	Virginia
A3	21	Nigerian-American	Transgender Woman (she/her)	Track	No	Yes	Connecticut
A4	30	White-American	Transgender Woman (she/her)	Volleyball	Yes, graduated (Div III)	Yes	California
A5	25	White-American	Trans Woman (she/her)	Swimming	Yes, graduated (Div I)	Yes	Illinois
A6	32	Korean-American	Woman (she/her)	Rowing / Figure Skating	No (USports, Canada)	Yes	Toronto (Canada)

Semi-structured interviews were utilized in this study. This method of inquiry allows the interviewer the flexibility to follow organic lines of questioning raised by participants, a necessary means for accessing deeply personal and sensitive experiential data (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Galletta, 2013). Aspects of Participatory Action Research (PAR) were employed when constructing interview questions and topics to share power intentionally through collaboration to elicit the most accurate data about experiences the researcher may not share (Baum *et al.*, 2006). An initial interview of approximately 30 minutes was arranged to build rapport, describe the project to participants, and provide information for adjustments (Frogley *et al.*, 2018). Full follow-up interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, consisting of five lines of questioning which were shared with participants beforehand, seeking their input as per PAR approaches.

Interview data was recorded and transcribed using Otter.ai intuitive software; interview data was later cleaned by the researchers. Using NVIVO coding software, data was analyzed using hierarchical content analysis. Data was coded hierarchically using first – fifth level subcategories to establish the comparative

sociological significance and/or connective threads between participant experiences and to achieve “thematic saturation” (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; Dilley, 2004). Interpretational analysis of the raw data was used “to highlight key themes from codes and examine emergent ideas” (Frogley *et al.*, 2018, 246). Participant oriented, the interpretational approach provides researchers the “innermost deliberation of... ‘lived experiences,’” and allows participants to “express themselves and their ‘lived experience’ stories the way they see fit without any distortion and/or prosecution” (Alase, 2017, 9) which aligns with this project’s research goals.

### **Limitations**

While we see our emic perspective as a strength to this research, it could also be viewed as a limitation due to our inherent bias in support of trans inclusion. Purposive and convenience sampling methods have been “criticized for its selection bias as well as a lack of external validity, generalizability, and representativeness” (Parker *et al.*, 2019, 4). However, the purpose of qualitative, interpretational analysis is more concerned with the richness of experiences, emotions and opinions to make nuanced sociological inferences for a particular population (Alase, 2017). Due to the small available population of MTF athletes, it was justified to select accessible individuals likely to participate and to “go deep” rather than aiming for a large sample size and generalizability. Trans-athletes are the target group of this social justice research; therefore, their experiences and views are significant and make the sample size meaningful. The variation by sport, state, and university is important in building an overall picture of the US context. The blend of current and previous NCAA athletes accounts for the potential difference of experience due to policy changes.

### **Results**

14 parent codes, 105 second order codes, 51 third order codes, 31 fourth order and 3 fifth order emerged from NVIVO coding of interview data. Hierarchical coding revealed themes of: Accommodating Others, Belonging, Coach Attitude, Eligibility, Exclusion, Fairness, Gatekeeping, Gender Policing, Support System, Mental & Emotional Health, Trans-Athlete Policy, Transition, and Team Climate to be significant for interpretation. Researchers found a significant risk to transgender well-being because of existing NCAA policies, as defined by (a) the impact on their self-identity, and therefore, their emotional health, (b) the impact of social exclusion on sense of belonging.

### **Discussion**

Modeled on the multilevel work of Cunningham *et al.*, (2022), Micro, Meso and Macro levels are used to frame the impacts on TSA experiences. Cunningham *et al.*, (2022, 4) observed that macro-level factors such as sports governance and policy “have the potential to influence transgender individuals’ opportunities, experiences, and well-being, as well as the actions coaches and sport managers can take.” Findings confirm this potential: we found trans-inclusion to be a complex issue, with TSAs articulating multi-layered impacts originating from decisions made further up the organizational chain. At the macro level, TSAs have less protection to legitimize their right to participate in an equitable and safe way. As a result, we found at the meso-level, TSAs experienced increased social exclusion resulting in a reduced

sense of belonging. Finally, at the micro level, TSAs experienced attacks on self-identity, and as a result, impacted mental and emotional safety. At these levels, exclusion experienced by TSAs was of an *overt* (deliberate accusation or exclusion by policy) or *covert* (subtle, social) nature, rooted in an assumption of athletic advantage and/or an invalidation of a legitimate trans identity. These micro- and meso- impacts occurred in a climate that often purported to be inclusive. TSAs lack protection against transphobic collegiate climates. The result of TSA's liminal vulnerability is a risk to athlete wellbeing, and reduced opportunities for our participants within sport compared to cis-athletes. While TSAs are technically allowed to compete in the NCAA, the unrealistic nature and inconsistency of sport-specific policy requirements creates an 'illusion' of inclusion (CCES, 2023; Cunningham *et al.*, 2018).

### Micro-Level Impact: Self Identity & Risk to TSA Wellbeing

*"Two days in and I was already calling suicide hotlines, trying to, you know, cope and deal with this. And I already reached out to the school counselor and therapists and tried to get it all figured out... this man just made me feel like I was completely worthless."* – (A2)

#### Impact on Self Identity

All participants articulated invalidation of their authentic trans identity. TSAs did not feel accepted as 'real women,' aware they were viewed by many as threatening 'imposters' in women's spaces, as their previous history as 'men' prevented them from being legible as female (A1-5). A3 felt that cis- and trans-women were disconnected largely because "they don't see us as women; they see us as 'other'... infiltrating women's spaces." She believed this transphobia arises from cis-women's fear of regressing, as "women have already always been marginalized." Participants noted how the media clearly messaged that a muscular, strong woman was not a woman, but an imposter. This messaging serves to police women and encourage them to 'fix' their bodies to look more like a woman 'should' – for example, lifting less in the gym to reduce muscularity. Policing trans women's bodies is, necessarily, also policing cis-women's bodies, as any female-presenting person who challenges hegemonic feminine standards can be "shamed, ridiculed, or criticized" (A3). This scrutiny limits *all* women from making choices that empower them, and having equitable access in sport (Lenskyj, 2012; De La Cretaz, 2022).

Accommodating others and a desire for their social inclusion also impacted participants' sense of self. 50% of participants articulated the need to accommodate the comfort or feelings of others to feel safe or tolerated (A2, 3, 5). For example, A5 minimized her own self and experiences to "avoid some drama." She swam 'exhibition' at conference finals which means she did not score points for the team – she didn't 'count', even though she wanted that experience. A5 described this as "I twisted myself up to be a little bit more palatable... I regret that." Evidently, marginalized bodies do not exist in mainstream thought and are swept out of sight to be tolerated, rather than accepted (Cohen & Semerjian, 2008; Namaste, 2000). Similarly, A3 describes feeling anxious about standing out, knowing that successful MTF athletes were targets, as "I just wanted... to cause as little problems as possible. Caring for other people's comfortability more so than my own." She could participate but not win: "I may not put all my effort into

these races. Some people were saying I shouldn't be running; I'm cheating. The larger the margin between me and the other girls would have only [got] more people talking. [If] I slowed down, they couldn't say anything anymore" (A3).

In this way, TSAs felt like a 'problem' or a 'burden' for their teams, receiving pressure from coach actions and societal messages to minimize themselves and their talents to avoid the discomfort of others, and the potential microaggressions that could follow. In asking TSAs to be less inconvenient or visible, feelings of shame increase while feelings of self-worth decrease, as it implies that their experiences are less important than cis-athletes. In describing MTF TSAs as 'biological men', we contest their womanhood and make them feel unwelcome, even dehumanized. These invalidations of identity create risks to participants' mental and emotional safety. Consistent with research, participants experienced contrastingly *improved* well-being from affirmation of their trans identity, participation, and supportive coaches as an antidote to transphobia they experienced (Goldberg, 2018; Hargie *et al.*, 2015; CCES, 2023; Taliaferro *et al.*, 2009).

### ***Impact on Mental & Emotional Safety***

As such, TSA's reported feeling tension between their athletic and transgender identities; they could be an athlete, or transgender, but not both, which results in increased gender dysphoria (Clark & Kosciw, 2021). TSA's received subliminal messaging that they had to choose between being trans and the sport (and potential career) they love, which can place "a tremendous burden on someone's mind" (A1). A staggering, but not unexpected, Two-thirds (66%) of study participants disclosed suicide attempts and/or ideation because of exclusionary or transphobic experiences, including delaying coming out or treatment by their college's administration (A1, A2, A4, A5). This suggests that trans-inclusive policies can be a matter of life and death (Clark & Kosciw, 2021; Goldberg, 2018; CCES, 2023). A1 and A5, both successful D1 athletes (pre and post transition) felt the need to delay transitioning medically or socially due to a perceived incongruence between trans and athlete identities: "I didn't want to quit [but] I was so miserable... I finally got to the point where I'm willing to possibly give up swimming if it means I don't have to live like this anymore" (A1). Due to the risk to their athletic career and opportunities, A1 framed transition as a last resort, rather than a choice: "athletics was the last thing on my mind. That was nowhere in the picture. I was just out of other options, basically... I wasn't expecting to keep swimming." A1 only continued swimming due to the encouragement of her friends and the NCAA rules that allowed her to compete as her true self (in 2019). At D1 level there is more intense visibility, scrutiny, and competition; this makes trans identities feel less welcome. This internal tension fueled by gender norms and transgender controversy contributed to their suicidal ideation, so much so that she described finally transitioning as "survival" (A1).

Overt and covert transphobic statements and actions made participants feel unsafe. For example, A4 endured persistent invasive questions, being benched, "power trips" and the cold shoulder from her coach. As a result, A4 quit her 4-year college, leading to feelings of low self-worth, isolation, exclusion, depression and suicidal ideation. Having transitioned prior to 4-year college, she joined the team already

‘out’. She felt her coach was forced to accept her onto the team, resulting in her mistreatment, “It was very clear. He never wanted me... it felt more like I was on the team for a political move [to] try and promote the college.” Not being acknowledged or seen belittled A4, causing her to turn to suicide hotlines and counselors because it was “really upsetting that he treated me like I was... subhuman.” His actions and the exclusionary reaction from the team environment had a lasting impact, “I was a very determined person until I lost all of my support network and had my life flipped upside down from one abusive [coach]... coping with PTSD ever since” (A4).

Once she transitioned, A1 noticed her improved mental state, to the extent that it improved athletic performance, “competing afterwards [I was] in a much better mental space, much happier, much more engaged with practicing and racing [which] helped my performance... that’s one factor that is just never considered” whereas she previously reported feeling “dissociation” whilst at practice with the men’s team. Enabling athletes to transition and continue in sports authentically was resoundingly positive; all athletes confirmed markedly improved mental and emotional health post-transition and reduced body dysphoria (A1-6). When considering the participation barriers, the risks of public social exclusion, the ambiguity of policies, and the demonstrated threat to personal safety, participants argued that you cannot reasonably claim that a cis-male athlete would ‘pretend’ to be a MTF athlete. As one participant noted, “to pass yourself off as a marginalized person doesn’t gain you anything because you already have privilege” (A2). Cultivating sport as a safe space undoubtedly would avoid future athletes delaying transitioning.

### **Meso-Level Impact: Sense of Belonging & Organizational Safety**

*“If I knew when I was graduating high school that trans athletes were welcome and there’s an inclusive environment [it] probably would have sped my discovery journey and transition timeline up at least a few years.” – (A5)*

Identity affirmation is strongly correlated with a sense of belonging and safety (Turner-Little, 2023) – both of which have an impact on mental and/or emotional health of TSAs. ‘Belonging’ articulates the feeling of security, acceptance and connectedness as a member of a certain group and feeling cared about and/or valued by one’s campus community (Strayhorn, 2019) – in this case, a member and representative of their college, and as an NCAA student-athlete. Research shows institutional factors that foster transgender belonging center on consent, validation of identity, bathroom access, trans-literacy training for staff, and anti-discrimination policies (Turner-Little, 2023). Findings indicated varying levels of presence of the above factors, and that even where inclusive policy existed, transphobic microaggressions (subtle acts of intolerance or exclusion due to trans identity) prevented TSAs from feeling welcome and accepted in their institution and/or team, thereby reducing equitable access to collegiate sport compared to cis-women (A1-6). This was exacerbated where policies or legislation changed, as there was less pressure on individual institutions and competition structures to become more inclusive (Cunningham *et al.*, 2018, Cunningham *et al.*, 2022, Buzuvis, 2022). Microaggressions

experienced – which included administration creating housing or financial instability (A2), missing out on honors societies or scholarships (A2), ignoring or not playing the TSA (A4), making anonymous complaints (A1), pressuring to not disclose trans identity (A4), or pressuring them not to perform at 100% (A3, A5) – contribute to a feeling of social exclusion. Social exclusion was also seemingly used as a covert method through which unsupportive coaches or athletic departments could favor cis-athletes or minimize the visibility of TSAs. One’s identity is not separate from one’s sense of belonging (Strayhorn, 2019). Therefore, over time, consolidated microaggressions compromise the mental and emotional safety of a TSA, in direct contradiction of the supposed duty of care educational institutions have for all of their students.

A5 recounted an experience of social exclusion in which a cis-athlete was favored at a swim meet, and the impact it had. A5 explained how ‘swimming exhibition’ allowed her to participate because “a little bit less was at stake for everybody... [I] wasn’t actually taking any points away from ‘real women’” (A5). A5 was later asked to cede her spot in finals to a cis-teammate. Like the majority of collegiate and elite athletes, many TSAs have been training their whole lives to compete in their sport. She felt resentment that she was expected to give up opportunities she felt she had earned, “I have the ability to swim at the collegiate level, especially at the D1 level. Why wouldn’t I want to do it? I’ve been invested in something... competitively swimming since sixth grade. So all that work” (A5). At best, TSAs are granted tightly controlled access into NCAA sport, but still experience *de facto* exclusion, accused of ‘taking’ a cis-woman’s place.

Another athlete, A3, explained how she ultimately decided against competing at the NCAA level despite her success at state championships, due to the pressure of lawsuits brought by colleges or fellow competitors. One particular meet, she was followed around by security, assumingly for her own safety. She explained how standing against social and legislative exclusion had been exhausting and was fearful of worse repercussions or violence if she continued to run, “I just didn’t know if I could do it all over again for another four years. That was a large reason why I didn’t want to run track... There’s something worse that could happen other than those lawsuits... [it] deterred me from doing it on a larger stage.” She recalled how as a result of this exhausting scrutiny, she would sometimes “not put all my effort into these races” to win by a lesser margin to avoid backlash. These experiences illustrate how TSAs feel unwelcome and pushed out of sport; even if they participate, hostile environments are such that their experience is still exclusionary or harmful where they are unable to exist as their full selves without criticism. Consequently, TSA’s feel unable to actually *take up space* in the collegiate sport community. Currently, they are allowed, begrudgingly (in some states, and by some federations), to participate – but not to win. For D1 athletes like A1 and A5, this invalidates *both* their athletic and trans identities, for what is a competitive athlete if they cannot compete and win, and win without suspicion?

These microaggressions increased feelings of ostracization and eroded self-worth, importance, or safety cumulatively to the point where the TSA’s sense of belonging was such that they make the ‘decision’ to quit the sport or drop out of school altogether (A2, A4). A lack of coach support was cited as a major

contributor to social exclusion, leaving TSAs feeling isolated or invisible. A2 and A4 in particular were left out of lineups or otherwise erased and were not acknowledged as representative of their institution with the same ease that their cis-teammates were. For example, A2 felt that “every time I step outside the box, the school punishes me, and it's always in subtle ways.” A2 recalled when scored her first lacrosse goal, but mysteriously did not appear in one of the 300 match photographs. While she felt welcomed by her coach and team, she felt that her college “worked very hard to bury everything about me.” Active in photograph selection, the coach became complicit in this institutional positioning, instead of publicizing A2’s involvement as a key contributor to the lacrosse team. Whereas A1’s college publicly stood by her and her success, A2 was erased from the team’s win. For A2, this led to lack of belonging and feelings of shame because she did not feel like an equally visible representative of the college. Such choices build on the stigma around trans people, creating a hostile environment. These examples of overt and covert exclusive practices suggest TSAs do not experience the comfort of institutional belonging as cis-athletes may do, even if policy allows them to participate.

Contrastingly, possessing a strong support system (comprising coaches, teammates, friends, family, athletic department and university staff, 139 aggregate codes) had a significant positive impact on student-athletes’ sense of belonging and mental health (A1-6). A1 felt “extremely lucky” because she had “very supportive coaches, who were able to help and support me through the process” and “a great compliance officer who helped us [so eligibility went] pretty smoothly.” Positive and welcoming team attitude and reactions were influential for TSAs wellbeing, security, and self-esteem. A3 described having a “family relationship” with her teammates at high school, finding friendship and camaraderie. She said “We all got really close... They made me feel like one of their own... [I felt] integrated into the community that we’ve built on the track team” (A3). These relationships not only created positive memories and a sense of belonging but built resilience against external challenges to her legitimacy and right to compete (A1, A2, A5).

Finally, a lack of protection from the NCAA itself made TSAs feel like they did not belong in collegiate athletics (A1-5). A5 expressed frustration that the NCAA refused to use its leverage to secure trans inclusion, especially for sports whose governing bodies have implemented trans-exclusive changes or bans. She and others attributed the NCAA’s now relative silence on the issue to caving to the wider political pressure and a desire to prioritize profit, as “at the end of the day, the NCAA is a money-making machine... taking such a hardline [trans-inclusive] stance... would have cost them money... they just didn’t want to take that risk” (A5). Here, we see trans lives and opportunities weighed against economic value, and to be found lacking – TSAs did not feel valued nor protected by the NCAA. Unsurprisingly, TSA experiences of ‘Exclusion’ far outstripped ‘Inclusion’ (217 > 73 aggregate codes respectively), showing that current strategies for trans-inclusion are ineffective and negatively impact athlete wellbeing (Jones *et al.*, 2017; Krane & Barak, 2012; Hargie *et al.*, 2015). Consequently, the NCAA should have its own “rules and regulations accommodated to collegiate athletes” (A3) in order to work towards inclusion for all. These participants feared, but did not know, at the time of this research that the NCAA would ban



MTF transgender athletes from competition, a clear indication that the organization would in fact cave to political pressure from the federal government. It is worth noting that the NCAA lost a precedent case at the Supreme Court in 2021, with all nine justices siding against the organization in favor of college athlete compensation (Dator, 2021). Numerous current lawsuits against the NCAA have led some to question whether the organization may collapse and “reshape the college sports landscape” (Jack, 2024). These historical developments suggest that ulterior political motives trump the NCAA's care for their mission in favor of their organization's very survival.

### **Macro-Level Conclusion: An Illusion of Inclusion**

*“There was definitely a punting of responsibility... no-one really wanted to make the call... there’s a lot more uncertainty about the rules [and they’re] a lot harder on trans athletes, and in many cases would exclude a trans athlete who... is now ineligible.” – (A1)*

The inconsistent and complex nature of current policy, or a lack of policy altogether, disadvantages TSAs compared to their cis-athlete counterparts and sets a false precedent for inclusion. All participants articulated that policy lacked transparency and consistency, and did not account for the uniqueness of trans experience. Where trans-inclusion policies exist at the macro level, the real-life result may not be inclusion (CCES, 2023). Testimonies suggested that ambiguity, inconsistency, or excessive policy requirements can all contribute to instability, burden, and reduced access unique to TSAs who are trying to remain eligible (A1-6). A6 explained that “there is a layer of awareness, and... compliance that you have to deal with.”

Inconsistency left TSAs felt unprotected, firstly because it places athlete eligibility at risk. A2 explained how the NCAA “changed it at the beginning of the season. So the season literally just started for lacrosse, and we all have to be cleared... practice started Monday. On Friday, those changes came out.” Participants felt unwanted in sport, despite four athletes having supportive team climates, because “they’ll just play around with... the rules so [we can’t compete]” (A1). The burden of meeting eligibility requirements largely depended on the trans-literacy of compliance officers. Ambiguous policy made compliance more difficult, the burden falling to the athletes themselves, as A4 explained: “nobody in my university even knew about any of the rules. They didn’t even care. They didn’t want to look into it.” This suggests that compared to cis-athletes, TSAs have to be hyper aware of policy changes in order to remain eligible.

Further, all TSAs felt scrutinized by excessive requirements governing transgender participation but preferred having them than no policy protecting them at all. Participants rejected the narrative that they were a threat to cis-women’s opportunities in sport, and that trans women are ‘dominating’ college (or professional) sports. D1 swimmers A1 and A5 agreed they weren’t even close to challenging Katie Ledecky’s 500 yard-freestyle NCAA record (Buzuvis, 2022). A4 recalled a particularly dominant cis-competitor to demonstrate the nuance that biological advantage misses: “she was 6’5 and I’m 6’0. Essentially 90% of the time she touched the ball, she killed the play. That’s insane. That’s what people

think trans people are doing. But my kill ratio was garbage, I made a ton of errors... from having to learn to readapt [to my body].” Under the guise of ‘protecting the integrity’ (hegemony) of the cis-women’s category, the excessive focus on athletic advantage and feminizing HRT felt unnecessary since they did not win every game, race, or event.

Finally, despite IOC guidelines emphasizing care and bodily autonomy, overall, testimonies confirmed that an ‘illusion of inclusion,’ exists for female TSAs, and they felt disproportionately scrutinized and prohibited as a result, with significant impacts to their wellbeing (CCES, 2023). The 2022 policy “basically shuts trans women out of college athletics if they don’t realize they’re trans and begin transitioning before in high school” (A1) due to its focus on HRT; the 2025 ban effectively doubles down on this illusion by permitting “student-athletes assigned male at birth to practice with women’s teams and receive benefits like medical care” – but what is inclusion if a collegiate level athlete is prevented from competing? Participants (A1, A2, A4, A5) felt that the NCAA had shirked its responsibility to its athletes “washing their hands” (A1) of the hard decisions required to stand up for trans rights and formulate appropriate policies. Of course, the recent NCAA ban (a deviation from its earlier more inclusive position) supports participants’ fears that they do not matter and that there is no space created for them to belong in collegiate sport – this has been a progressive slide towards exclusion. Previous NCAA policy required one year of feminizing HRT, meaning transitions during college required at least one year of time out of sport (NCAA, 2011). However, sports federations were able to mandate longer periods of time than this – effectively gatekeeping access to collegiate sport. A1 explained that becoming compliant took her “one year and so I had two years of swimming eligibility left, so it’s like okay, I can still get one more year. But with the new three year [US Swimming] requirement I wouldn’t have been able to do that.” Missed time is a step towards de facto exclusion; it can translate to fewer competition opportunities, less training time, less exposure and athlete visibility for scouts and advancement in their sport. Access to HRT and trans-affirming medical care is still state dependent, rendering the mandating of participation (practice or competition) in these terms without equal access inherently exclusive. In this way, they felt stricter policies were unfit for purpose, merely serving to exclude them further from sport, and as of 2025, they were correct in their assumption. Participants acutely felt that “there isn’t really any longevity to the support in terms of mental or emotional health... [we] aren’t being treated with the same respect, just humanity.”

The goal of this research was to center the individual TSA experience, seeking to illuminate the human being in this debate about access, equity, gender, and safety. Interviews with TSAs revealed significant exclusionary impacts at the individual (micro) level, impacts which filtered down the chain from macro-level NCAA policy changes. Here, we surface not only the (perhaps unforeseen) harm done by decisions at the organizational level, but TSA testimony for equitable solutions. Not only are there now new complications that increased stress and anxiety for TSAs, but without clear and firm policy to legitimize their right to participate in NCAA sport existing transphobia is allowed to thrive and access to sport to decrease, where previously participation was possible. Historically, it is the minority who has

been pushed to adapt, rather than the dominant system – our findings suggest that is also the experience of our participants.

### Conclusions & Future Implications

***“We can’t pick and choose the bodies we are celebrating. We need to be supportive and inclusive of... all body types that may want to come and participate in sport.” (A3)***

Overall, findings support current literature and indicate that IOC principles of inclusion were not effectively applied in NCAA competition, nor were they impactful (CCES, 2023; Buzuvis, 2022). The U.S. Constitution's Equal Protection Clause prohibits the government from unjustifiably segregating or excluding based on ‘quasi-suspect’ classifications including sex (Buzuvis, 2021). However, trans rights are debated, and subject to change – in fact, banning transgender people from sports in spite of evidence that inclusion is possible renders IOC principles moot. Policy that codifies T-based science as the true and only indicator of who is eligible to be legible as a woman serves systems of sexist, racialized, and cissexist oppression, and sets a dangerous but familiar precedent for *all* women in which womanhood continues to be policed, and significant civil rights victories to be reversed (McClearan, 2015; Karkazis & Jordan-Young, 2018; De La Cretaz, 2022; Jones *et al.*, 2017). Therefore, the creation of a system that provided protected space for women to compete in sport is the same system that “necessitates their competitive inferiority” (Sullivan, 2011, 402). By interviewing six MTF TSAs from a variety of backgrounds, sports, and athletic divisions, this study provides a unique qualitative contribution to the growing body of research pertaining to the impact of macro and meso-level factors (policy and institutional bias) on individual trans athlete experiences. From the six athlete testimonies, *three* distinct conclusions can be drawn about TSA experiences:

1. **Policy implications disadvantage, rather than advantage this population.** An ‘illusion of inclusion’ exists in collegiate sport as inclusion is persistently contested; TSAs reported feeling disempowered, excluded, and at times, unsafe. TSAs felt that recent changes were developed to protect cis athletes from a manufactured trans threat. Transphobia embedded in policy, state law, or the attitudes of athletic administrators does not provide equitable access to an opportunity within collegiate sport nor a supportive environment in which to thrive, instead seeming to serve the purpose of gatekeeping. Even if a policy states on paper that a TSA can participate if they satisfy specific requirements, depending on their context, institutional support, and transition journey, they are being set up to fail. Factors not commonly experienced by cis-gender athletes, such as compliance burdens and requirement shifts, uncertainty and confusion around policy changes, excessive scrutiny, time out to transition, and in some cases, outright participation bans complicates compliance and risks NCAA eligibility. Allowing TSAs to benefit from collegiate sport opportunities equitably with their cis-gender peers would be ‘fair’ – as “every student should be able to have the full experience of attending school in America, including participating in athletics, free from discrimination” (Mervosh & Tumin, 2023). To this end, TSAs suggested a return to the

NCAA's 1 year of HRT as default for all sports, to 'include with conditions' as opposed to excluding entirely, as it was better than nothing (Buzuvis, 2022).

2. **In current conditions, TSA safety and wellbeing (particularly mental and emotional health) is at significant risk.** Macro policy decisions have micro level impacts. Even if allowed to participate, collegiate sport is hostile to TSAs, and this is felt deeply. There is no enthusiastic acceptance or welcoming of TSAs. Instead, they must fight tooth and nail to be recognized as full participants in the NCAA. Reports of social exclusion, lack of belonging, transphobic microaggressions, erasure, and tension between athletic and trans identities posed risks of gender dysphoria, depression, dropout, and even suicidality increase (Lenzi, 2018; Goldberg, 2021). TSAs argued for 'care' to be prioritized and actively cultivated by the NCAA to address student-athlete mistrust, and balance economic demands with the promotion of holistic well-being (Kleigman, 2021). The Williams Institute of UCLA advises that college campuses should "explicitly include gender identity and expression in their nondiscrimination policies" and to "improve the well-being of transgender students" (Goldberg, 2018). But the tendency to view TSAs one-dimensionally – as athletes only – eradicates their *student* identity and the subsequent measures of care they are entitled to. Viewed intersectionally, institutions should appreciate that TSAs need more, not less, support from their institutions in comparison to cis athletes.
3. **Without its own inclusive policies, the NCAA cannot properly serve its stated mission for student-athlete participation.** Despite a quasi-professional mindset, the NCAA exists as an educational governing body to promote sports participation. Given this status, and the complexity of gender identity and athletic performance, Buzuvis argues that "it makes little sense for the NCAA... to defer to lines drawn by others" (2022, 192), or to support a ban at a federal level. But rather, the NCAA "should be more inclusive than elite and Olympic sports" as professional sports "do not exist to impart life lessons or build character or develop emerging adults, or support students' academic pursuits" (2022, 192). Therefore, the NCAA should instead exercise an active and informed culture of care for its student-athletes who have different needs and contexts compared to elite athletes.

In her work, "*You can't say, You can't play*," early childhood educator Vivian Paley states that everyone who wants to play should be able to join, and that this inclusion avoids children internalizing the negative impact of exclusion, ostracism, and unwantedness. Long-term, children who are play-deprived may become pessimistic and depressed as adults (Paley, 1993). As most sports participation and competition occur through school teams or after-school enrichment programs, all educational institutions have responsibility to ensure LGBTQ+ students 'can play' and are included (Ziegler & Huntley, 2013; Lenzi, 2018; Clark & Kosciw, 2021). When trans youth participate equitably in school sports, they experience greater well-being, including increased overall health, self-confidence, sociability, belongingness, and lower rates of depression and self-harm (Clark *et al.*, 2021; Goldberg, 2021). In fact, trans youth who have a strong support system and feel a sense of belonging are 82% percent less likely to self-harm (Lenzi, 2018). As seen in the San Jose Volleyball ruling, TSAs have protections under Title IX and the

Constitution (Navarro, 2024). Therefore, we should ask how to include TSAs, rather than say they can't play.

We have a vulnerable, minority population in need of support, and for whom the risks of exclusion are high; therefore, reducing exclusion in sport is a matter of social justice (Pérez-Samaniego *et al.*, 2019). Not only do TSAs enter college with “some of the same financial, academic, and social stressors as their peers”, but they are often simultaneously forced to “defend their right to safety, privacy, and basic respect” (Turner-Little, 2023, 155). Currently, we seem currently more concerned with legislating ‘fairness’ than considering the impact on the individual. This is not wholly unsurprising, given the historic lack of care for student-athlete wellbeing more generally; suicide is now the second most common cause of death among NCAA athletes (Whelan *et al.*, 2024). It is within this context that TSAs exist: one which contests the validity of their identity, and in which they must fight for valid access to sports participation and competition. Sport is considered an important part of the student experience (Phipps, 2021). Enforcing a rigid gender binary and excusing the harm it does prevents us from imagining what more equitable collegiate sports could look like (Haraway, 2008; McClaren, 2022; Buzuvis, 2022). Whilst our TSA's are not young children, there is a definite element of ‘you can't play with us’ currently at work in collegiate sport.

Transgenderism does not exist in the vacuum of sport: TSAs are transgender, students, and young people in and outside of the locker room. It's important that collegiate stakeholders remember this as they consider their duty of care over *all* the students on their campuses. Athletic departments are responsible for the holistic well-being of the student athletes who participate in intercollegiate athletics at their respective US institutions. Regardless of macro-level policies, such as the 2022 NCAA transgender policy enactment and the most recent ban for MTF TSAs, athletic departments must create a culture of care for all participants, free of bias, discrimination and exclusion. An intentional culture of care serves to mediate the deleterious impacts of macro-level policies. Future research should focus on the meso- and micro-level strategies to *support* the emotional well-being of all student athletes, including those who identify as transgender. This work can provide a potential blueprint and reference guide for why transgender advocacy in sport is important, and a move towards generalized equitable efforts at offering genuine participation opportunities.

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