

With June marking LGBT Pride Month, one university is paying particular attention to the T in LGBT. The University of Arizona is planning to host an international transgender studies conference this fall and launch a transgender studies master's program as early as fall 2017.

The university's efforts -- many of which fall under its Transgender Studies Initiative - come as transgender people have become more visible in society and transgender issues have attracted more national attention.



Faculty in the Transgender Studies Initiative at Arizona

Yet Arizona began prioritizing transgender issues before they claimed the recent national spotlight. In 2013, the university launched its Transgender Studies Initiative and engaged in cluster hiring of faculty members in transgender studies. Since 2014, the university has hosted one of the few peer-reviewed journals on interdisciplinary transgender studies in the world.

As a subfield of LGBT studies, transgender studies examines sex and gender as they relate to cultural representations, political movements and lived experiences of gender-nonconforming individuals. **Many scholars** in gender studies or women's studies programs focus on transgender issues -- even without the organizational structure that exists at Arizona. In January, the University of Victoria in Canada announced the establishment of what it says is **the world's first endowed chair in transgender studies**.

At Arizona, one person has been a driving force behind many of the efforts related to transgender studies. Susan Stryker, director of the Institute for LGBT Studies and associate professor of gender and women's studies at Arizona, proposed the Transgender Studies Initiative and co-founded the journal.

"I've been working on this issue since the early 1990s," Stryker said. "I have far more work on my plate right now than I feel I can actually do well. It's like wanting to have an appetizer, main course and dessert, and they bring it all at once ... But however successful or unsuccessful the Arizona Transgender Studies Initiative turns out to be, what we've done has helped change the perception of transgender studies throughout the academy."

Conference and Master's Program

In September, scholars from around the globe will converge on Arizona's campus for **"Trans*studies: An International Transdisciplinary Conference on Gender, Embodiment and Sexuality."** Nearly 400 people submitted proposals for the four-day conference, and around 200 people indicated that they will actually attend, said Eric Plemons, assistant professor of anthropology in the Transgender Studies Initiative at Arizona.

"The idea for the conference is that it will attract people both within the academy and outside of it who are doing trans studies," Plemons said. "We purposely made the call for panels and papers very broad. It included typical scholars, activists and performers. The only thing we didn't want to do was overrepresent the perspective of medical practitioners, since there are already conferences that do that."

The keynote speakers will be Mauro Cabral, co-director of Global Action for Trans* Equality and a leading international transgender human rights activist, and Sandy Stone, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin and a founder of the academic discipline of transgender studies. "For the keynotes, we tried to think about representing a variety of viewpoints," Plemons said.

Besides the keynote speeches, the conference will also feature a host of art exhibits, presentations, breakout sessions and performances. "There are some really interesting trans performance artists working in Latin America and Spain, and we're going to be able to bring a number of those people," Stryker said.

Funding for the conference came from an anonymous source, who is also helping to fund faculty research in the Transgender Studies Initiative, Stryker said. Another institution will hopefully volunteer to hold the conference next year, with funds coming from participants paying dues, she said.

In addition to the conference, another future undertaking within the Transgender Studies Initiative will be the creation of a master's program in transgender studies, Stryker said, adding that Arizona will likely offer a certificate program until the master's program has been fully developed.

"There are all kinds of bureaucratic details to be worked out," Stryker said. "It's just the slowness of getting the paperwork all lined up, getting the job descriptions sorted out, developing the curriculum and finding a director of graduate studies. Hopefully we can get the paperwork done over the summer and be admitting as soon as 2017."

Cluster Hiring

In 2013, Arizona administrators asked Stryker -- who was considering accepting an endowed professorship at another university -- what they could do to keep her. "I said I wanted something more interesting than money or prestige," Stryker said. "I said the thing I would really like to do was start a program in transgender studies."

Administrators responded by agreeing to engage in **cluster hiring** -- or hiring of multiple scholars who share interdisciplinary research interests -- of four faculty members as part of a new Transgender Studies Initiative. Using existing funds from a strategic hiring pool, Arizona successfully filled three of the four positions that year, Stryker said. The new hires were placed in the departments of anthropology, religious studies and gender and women's studies, she said.

Plemons said he was eager to apply for a spot in the Transgender Studies Initiative while serving as a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Michigan. "The fact that there was going to be an institutionalized space for doing research on trans issues was exciting to me," he said. "Because there hadn't been an institutionalized space previously, it struck me that this was an opportunity to shape something."

As a medical anthropologist, Plemons said he is interested in developing courses that examine transgender issues through the lens of surgical practices and gendered bodies. His course Sex, Gender, Science, Medicine explores how sex and gender have become objects of medical study. He is also designing a course that will survey surgical practices including sex reassignment surgery.

The cluster hiring effectively brought three scholars to campus who engage with transgender studies through different yet complementary perspectives, Plemons said. "One of the reasons the three of us were an attractive group as a cluster hire is because we have such divergent specialties," he said. "There's the medicine person, the aesthetics person and the religion person."