

**Specimens and Spectrums: Transgender and Nonbinary Museum Staff and
Volunteers Experiences**

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Abstract

An emerging body of research highlights the importance of trans inclusion in the workplace. Museums are uniquely situated as both outreach and in-reach organizations to encourage trans inclusion. As places for introspection, education, and connection, they have the potential to inspire shifts in opinion if they take a stance with trans staff, along with their trans attendees. This qualitative research study examines how trans and gender nonconforming staff at museums experience feelings of inclusion and to what institutional supports they attribute their inclusion. This phenomenology analyzes the interview responses of fourteen trans and nonbinary museum staff and/or volunteers across the United States.

Introduction

Problem

Employment discrimination against transgender professionals is rampant. More than 80% of transgender employees in the US report harassment or other forms of discrimination at work (Sears et al., 2024). Transgender employees span the US workforce, including the arts and cultural sector. In 2019, the American Alliance of Museums created a series of guides for Trans professionals, their institutions, and coworkers (Kennedy & Woten, 2019). Beyond this toolkit, there is very little literature on the experiences of transgender and nonbinary museum staff experiences. In the current political climate, as the rights of trans people are especially under attack, museums are in a position as both community-building spaces and knowledge-holding/educational institutions to act as influential locations of resistance to growing fascism and support these marginalized communities. An emerging body of research highlights the importance of trans inclusion in the workplace (Ruggs, Hebl, Martinez, & Law, 2015) in leading to more fulfilling lives and effective careers for trans and nonbinary staff.

However, when it comes to fostering warm feelings of inclusion, the focus is often on visitor experience, and not for a lack of cause. Visitors are the intended audience of the museum, and their reviews can make or break the impression of a museum. However, visitors are not the only people who stand to benefit from inclusion initiatives (Robenalt, 2024). Staff and volunteers' emotional and social feelings in the day-to-day cultivate a supportive institutional atmosphere. As inclusion work is supportive not only for visitors, but staff themselves (Taylor, 2017), as inclusive behavior displayed by staff can leave lasting impressions on visitors (Theriault & Ljungren, 2022). This is essential research not only for visitors, staff, and

volunteers, but also for museum leaders and board members who are investing in inclusion currently (Chordiya & Sabharwal, 2024). The inclusion initiative isn't complete until everyone is included. This article describes a research study that examined how trans and gender nonconforming staff at museums across the United States experience feelings of inclusion.

Trans Inclusion in the Workplace

The concept of workplace inclusion will be defined through a few criteria: internal support systems and inclusive internal policies which may result in reports of emotional and psychological fulfillment and safety. Having formal policies around gender inclusion reduces perceptions of discrimination (Ruggs, Hebl, Martinez, & Law, 2015), however even if a policy is formalized—which is often not the case—such policies need to be communicated in ways that do not require the employee outing themselves. Transitioning and being out in public requires a daily vulnerability that can make it hard to exist in the outside world, however, when people remain in the closet, they often feel as if they are living a double life. This double life can make it harder to engage as workers, and leave a toll on their personal time (Thoroughwood, Sawyer, & Webster, 2020). Even from a non-emotional and un-affectionate standpoint, if workplaces want their employees to be most effective, providing support will allow them to bring their whole selves and focus to work. While trans human resources and workplace experiences are gaining in research, it is still a niche field of study.

Interpersonal Support for Transgender Employees

Misgendering and deadnaming are directly correlated with feelings of exclusion in the workplace (Fletcher & Swierczynski, 2025; Woods & Smith, 2024). Habitual misgendering can lead to burnout and reduced occupational and personal efficacy, as the repeated emotional labor

of either correcting others, or grinning and bearing it, has a profound negative impact on trans and nonbinary staff (Corby et al., 2025). One of the best ways to support trans co-workers and employees is to take care to address them with their chosen names and pronouns.

Support from allied (non-LGBTQ+ identified people who take care to educate themselves and support LGBTQ+) co-workers is instrumental in fostering positive feelings of inclusion. A transnational survey of working professionals found that, contrary to popular belief, support from non-LGBTQ+ coworkers was more indicative of inclusion than that from other LGBTQ+ staff (Schönauer et al., 2025). This is linked to perceptions of comprehensive identity support, as workers reported that allyship contributed to a positive organizational climate. Similarly, positive coworker reactions to the transition can be associated with resilience following negative and potentially traumatic experiences (Fletcher & Swierczynski, 2025; Ruggs et al., 2015). The kindness of one ally can produce many, as modeling behavior can help normalize supportive behavior in the workplace (Ruggs et al., 2015). Not only can trans allies model trans-informed co-worker relationships, but other co-workers with marginalized identities—such as people of color, women, and disabled people—are well-positioned to support their trans co-workers who may be experiencing discrimination (Ruggs et al., 2015). Thusly, non-trans staff across positionalities, as members of a majority group or not, are instrumental in not only supporting their trans co-worker, but also creating a trans positive workplace.

Organizational Support for Transgender Employees

Organizational supports are often more concretely defined than the more amorphous realm of social supports. Organizational policies and practices are most commonly codified in records, making them a more straightforward item of study. There is a breadth of policies that

can address feelings of inclusion for trans staff. However, the greatest struggle is that many policies either do not account for or intentionally exclude gender variance from their processes in favor of binary gendered policies. For example, parental leave may be written in HR documents as maternity and paternity leave, which often have uneven applications of time off. Additionally, they may neglect to make accommodation for parents who are adopting or building their family through a surrogate. Rigid structures like these do not account for employees who do not simply fall into a mother and father binary.

Trans people who reported that their workplace had formal antidiscrimination policies and provided trans-specific support were more likely to report lower levels of perceived discrimination (Ruggs et al., 2015). Having canonized positions on discrimination, and explicitly outlining organizational resources for trans staff, models to not only trans employees but also non-trans workers the position the institution is taking on trans inclusion, from the inside out. This is true even for policies that might not be immediately considered as being about trans support. For example, nonbinary staff who work in places with restrictive uniform policies or professionalism standards—such as expectations around vocal tone and posture—were more likely to report not only a discrepancy in their more colorful or expansive identity and how they present themselves at work, but also fear of repercussions from their employer or co-workers (Fletcher & Swierczynski, 2025). This disconnect may lead to higher rates of gender dysphoria or disengagement from work (Fletcher & Swierczynski, 2025). While museums have historically positioned themselves as ivory towers, expanding restrictions on how workers show up can be one step forward in reinventing these institutions for the modern age.

Misgendering once again is relevant, as trans and nonbinary staff and applicants who receive emails with their deadname are considerably more likely to report feeling othered

(Woods & Smith, 2024). Institutions can rework how their employee records are stored and utilize to redress how names are approached in communication. Museums are uniquely positioned as everyday information managers to create more trans-informed data pathways for communication that include names or other identity-related information.

Trans Inclusion in Museums

Museums are uniquely situated as both outreach and in-reach organizations to encourage trans inclusion. As places for introspection, education, and connection, they have the potential to inspire shifts in opinion if they take a stance with trans staff, along with their trans attendees.

One of the first things to note here is that the museum field lacks staff diversity. In art museums, a 2022 Mellon Foundation report found that less than 1% of staff are nonbinary, while about 40% are male and 60% are female (Sweeney et al., 2022). Data was not reported on transgender individuals who identify as male or female, so focus will be placed on nonbinary staff here as communities typically under the transgender umbrella. Nonbinary staff comprised less than 1% of all museum roles (collections, communications, administration, public engagement, and building operations), except in public engagement, where the figure rose to 2%. This lack of diversity is partly due to hiring decisions made based on culture fit, or the idea that the most successful candidate is one whose values, behaviors, and work styles best align with the company's core principles, environment, and team dynamics. Culture-fit decisions can be influenced by implicit bias. As managers attempt to hire folks who would best mesh with their team, they are most often attracted to applicants who are most similar to people already on their team, including traits such as race, age, ability, or gender (Breaking the Stereotype, n.d.). This can be especially damaging to transgender and nonbinary applicants and staff who have

intersectional identities and therefore experience multiply marginalizing positionalities (Cho et al., 2013). In the same 2022 Mellon Foundation report, people of color comprised 36% of staff and only 27% of Intellectual Leadership Roles. There is a lack of research on employment statistics of trans and nonbinary people of color, however, both demographics are shown to separately be underrepresented in the museum field.

Within the hiring process, another complicated shift that museums are making is toward asking for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) skills or knowledge in job descriptions for applicants (Krueger, 2019). While this practice can control for reactionary views, it is often vague and can further pigeonhole marginalized applicants into the role of an advocate. EDI is, funnily enough, a diverse subject, so job postings would be better served by finding more specific, achievable lines for the resume, such as “diversity training on gender identity.”

However, hiring a diverse staff is not the only step forward. Ng et al. (2017) caution that as museums move toward more multicultural hiring initiatives, the issue is much more systemic and not so easily remedied. Leadership must also be reinvented, as staff led by privileged leaders and decision-makers can lead to tokenization. This is especially true because leadership may see a discrepancy between the representation of their staff and their attendees and attempt to remedy it without fully understanding the often top-down nature of inclusion.

Another major issue in the move toward trans inclusion is recovering from disenfranchisement. As marginalized groups have repeatedly been left out of the story, there can be great distrust for the ability of institutions to not only meet their needs but respectfully tell their stories (Hawkins et al., 2017). While there is a growing presence of trans professionals in

the information and curatorial fields, their ties to institutions that may not be fully aligned with said staff can make a program's overall actions hard to trust.

A more broad institutional challenge is that museums are often associated with another institution, such as a university, national park, or other governing body. In that way, the institution may not have complete autonomy over its systems. However, there are ways to get around such concerns. For instance, museums at academic institutions may initially need to consider the feeder data for legal names. Those museums can develop procedures and systems that account for preferred names (Currier & White, 2019). Similarly, attendees of campus museums may be linked to a student ID. However, museums can maintain internal records that account for attendees' preferred names when emailing or printing out tickets. As an institution moves beyond general training, time should be spent preparing staff to implement gender-inclusive practices in their departments (Krueger, 2019). This may range from addressing attendees with gender neutral language to reconsidering how trans and gender nonconforming subjects are taxonomized in databases.

Study Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to examine how trans and gender nonconforming staff at museums across the United States experience feelings of inclusion. The study was guided by 4 key research questions:

1. How do trans museum staff communicate about their identities at work?
2. How do trans museum staff describe their feelings of inclusion at their workplaces?
3. How do trans museum staff describe their feelings of exclusion at their workplaces?

4. What are the material and psychological supports and structures that trans staff attribute to their feelings of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace?

Answers to these questions provide much-needed insight into how museums can better support trans staff.

Methods

Study Design

This study is a phenomenology as it is rooted in the first-person and lived experience of the participants in a way to craft a greater understanding of social phenomena (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Sampling Strategy

Participants were recruited through convenience sampling via email lists and recruitment posters as well as snowball sampling via post interview referrals. Participants were recruited largely through digital means such as email lists, linked in posts, and company slack channels. Incentives were used, consisting of \$25 gift cards to compensate for the hour of time they are spending.

Participants

Eligible participants are adult trans and nonbinary who are staff or volunteers at museums within the United States. People who have never worked or volunteered at museums will not be included, nor will minors or those who identify as cisgender.

Fourteen participants were interviewed in person or over Zoom. Participants represented institutions across the United States such as the Klondike Gold Rush National Historical Park, Seattle Unit, The Museum of Flight, The Burke Museum of National History and Culture, The Ricard Morse Collections and Archives at Hale library at Kansas State, Historic Costume and Textile Museum at Kansas state, The National Geographic Society Museum of Exploration, The KID Museum Bethesda Metro Center, The Field Museum, The Seattle Art Museum, The Pacific Science Center, The Museum of History & Industry, and the Texas Science and Natural History Museum.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were conducted in person and over Zoom following the instrument linked in the appendix. With consent, interviews were recorded to allow for more accurate analysis. Interviews were conducted throughout the first half of 2026.

Data Analysis Procedures

The interview recordings were transcribed through the Zoom native captioning service. Participant answers were then grouped by question and detached from participant's demographic data unless mentioned in the response. Responses were minimally cleaned, albeit non-relevant filler words and to remove identifying information. From there, responses were scanned for themes and distilled into a few narratives for each response.

Results

1) How do trans museum staff communicate about their identities at work?

Many trans and non-binary staff said they are out at their museums and archives. While there were a few individuals who said they have not come out or discussed their identity, staff tended to be out at their museums as trans and/or nonbinary. Interviewee M confirmed, “Definitely. All my information is posted with my pronouns.”

However, some trans and nonbinary museum staff chose to stay in the closet, for a multitude of reasons. The most common response was that they were not out in their personal life, so being out at work was too complicated. Interviewee B remarked, “I’m not even really that open to that many people. The only people who I would say actually kind of get it are my friends who are also trans.” Other trans museum staff said they are out, but do not always feel comfortable asserting their identity either because of hesitancy in correcting pronoun usage or having separate pronouns at work than in their minds eye. Often times, younger nonbinary-identified staff reported that while they were out, they often did not correct misgendering in conversations at work. Interviewee A reflected:

“I think I could be more open. I am a trans person who has not done a lot of medical transitioning. And so I am very aware that the way that I present myself to a lot of people views as feminine. And so I try to have a lot of grace with that. I’m trained as a teacher. I take a lot of things as learning moments.”

Other trans staff tried using they/them pronouns as a first step toward a more binary trans identity:

“I’m pretty vague with my identity at work, I guess. I have the real pronouns and the work pronouns. And the work pronouns are they/any/all because there’s the transgender fear of imposing one’s identity on others.”

Trans museum staff had mixed feeling about whether being out in their workplace was helpful or harmful. Many staff felt that being out in their museum workplace has improved their experience. They described how important it was to be themselves in all facets of their lives, and how it allowed them to create better relationships with queer and trans visitors and clients.

Interviewee N discussed one of their favorite moments:

“Like I mentioned, I'm the museum's event person... When I came onto the team, I was like, “We're doing weddings.” And there have been multiple couples that I've given site visits with that are also queer couples that have told me that me being the person giving them the site visit and being openly queer has helped them make the decision to have their event here.”

For some, being out as trans has not only closed the door on past relationships but opened new ones at work. Others were concerned that they are a liability for their institution during politically turbulent times. When coming out, people were often advised that relationships will change. In the case of Interviewee C, co-workers began to approach them differently:

“Older members of the staff that I used to have conversations with are now more reluctant to engage in conversations with me. But I have better relationships with the younger members of the staff who actually see it as something positive.”

Even amidst community support, trans museum staff who work within institutions that have more hostile overarching organizations may be concerned that they are a liability for their museum. Interviewee E confessed: “Being out and identifiable as trans, can get the [institution] in financial trouble, and now it's kind of up to them to be like, oh, is it worth the risk?”

Additionally, some staff felt that their specific gender presentation led to them having a more mixed bag of positive and negative experiences. For interviewee H, the positive effects of being out are often counteracted by others reactions to their gender,

“I feel like it's pretty neutral, because it's like I feel like my existence as a somewhat... as a mostly out trans woman is also very neutral especially the transgender part of my identity.”

2) How do trans museum staff describe their feelings of inclusion at their workplaces?

a) Contexts in which trans museum staff felt comfortable

Trans and nonbinary staff described a range of contexts in which they feel most comfortable at work, including private spaces; interactions with queer and trans coworkers; interactions with supportive supervisors and co-workers; and HR policies or institution wide practices.

Private spaces. Trans and nonbinary museum staff and volunteers described being most comfortable in private and/or predictable locations in their workplace such as their own desks, a particular office, or the museum prior to opening. Having predictable coworkers was also highlighted, as coworkers they were familiar with caused less discomfort.

Interactions with queer and trans co-workers. Trans and nonbinary museum staff said they felt most comfortable with other trans and nonbinary staff, as well as with queer staff. Camaraderie with trans and nonbinary coworkers came up often, in addition to greater trust with

queer co-workers. Queer and trans managers and supervisors were especially important, as trans and nonbinary employees indicated a greater willingness to have authentic interactions.

Interactions with supportive supervisors and co-workers. Trans and nonbinary museum staff found great comfort in supervisors and co-workers who took a vested interest in their well-being. Supervisory and co-worker support ranged from hosting welcoming one-on-ones to advocating for others' pronouns. Pronouns were an especially relevant item, as actions taken to prevent misgendering or ensure that people are not outed were mentioned often in interviews. Ensuring that pronouns are correct often demonstrated to trans and nonbinary employees that their experiences are valued, especially in cases where they are being referred to with pronouns allies are were not aware of.

Trans and nonbinary museum staff's agency regarding handling their pronouns was especially valuable to participants. Interviewee M discussed a supportive interaction with their manager: "One thing I do appreciate from my manager is being asked the degree to which she should correct other people if I am misgendered." In the case that misgendering does occur, managerial staff who understand the harm trans and nonbinary people experience are vital to engendering a feeling of safety in the workplace. Interviewee G was once misgendered repeatedly by another staff member, and their manager was immediately responsive:

"They switched me immediately [from that shift], and they were like, "I'm really sorry that you had to deal with that. Are you feeling okay? Do you want to keep working?" And I was like, "No, I feel like it's not like super dysregulated me. It's just like super annoying, and I don't want to be around it."

HR policies or institution wide practices. Trans museum staff often felt supported when they had access to queer and trans specific resources and their organization took care to create a queer and trans positive culture. Setting a professional expectation that pronouns are stated in meetings and email signatures eased the burden on trans employees to facilitate these conversations. Interviewee K highlighted the importance of a clearly supportive institutional culture: “There's a culture at the museum I work at whenever we're meeting new people or those introductions of introducing ourselves with our pronouns, and I've always felt very supported that way. I think knowing that there is also an equity team where I work and an LGBTQIA plus affinity group.”

b) People who made trans museum staff feel comfortable

People who engendered comfort for trans staff ranged from other queer and trans colleagues, familiar people and allies, specific ages of coworkers, and people at the same hierarchical level.

Other queer and trans colleagues. Many participants reflected on the value of having queer and trans co-workers they could relate to and let their guard down with. They often reported excitement or a sense of peace when in the same space as other trans staff and volunteers. Interviewee D shared, “They’re here and there, but when they’re here I get excited.” Their presence felt supportive even across different departments. Interviewee A highlighted how even though they do not work in the same department, running into each other on lunch is restorative even without speaking.

Additionally, signals such as they/them pronouns in email signatures were also linked to feelings of comfort as discussed by Interviewee L: “It feels like a good signal to me like, ‘Oh

you're an open person.” Lesbian identifying staff also described a specific comfort with other lesbian people regardless of their identity as a cis or trans person, as remarked by Interviewee H: “I do feel most comfortable like with other women like sapphic and lesbian women both cis and trans.”

Familiar people and allies. Co-workers with whom trans and nonbinary staff have an established relationship with engendered feelings of comfort. Additionally, the comfort was also associated with participant’s museum departments or other departments that were highly associated. Interviewee J discussed their own department’s bonds: “There's a small group of us mostly in the education and public programs department, who have just really gotten to know each other over the years.” Familiar people were especially important to trans and nonbinary staff when they were outspoken allies. Interviewee F highlighted their favorite past co-workers: “Staff members who made it rather clear that that not just gender identity, but all LGBTQIA+ kind of rights were top of mind in thinking about museums and visitors.”

Coworkers in specific age groups. There was also a greater comfortability with younger co-workers. Participants linked their comfort to the idea that younger people are more queer and trans positive. For instance, Interviewee C said, “The younger museum staff actually are... so unguarded in their conversations with me, it seems like everybody else is walking on eggshells or tiptoeing.” However, elder co-workers who had relationships with either younger people or trans people also inspired comfort. Elder co-workers with grandchildren were highlighted as more understanding by participants like Interviewee B: “People who have like grandkids kind of know more how to talk to people my age.” Similarly, elder co-workers with trans family members had more common ground with trans participants, such as Interviewee E: “He had a

trans daughter, so he was always really kind and open to me, and we would frequently talk about how horrible things were... larger administration things.”

People at the same hierarchical level. Finally, the hierarchy structure of a given institution also influenced comfort levels for trans and nonbinary staff. Most participants highlighted co-workers at the same level or below themselves. Interviewee K stated, “Working with my immediate coworkers, knowing that we're on kind of the same institutional rung, so to speak, I feel most comfortable with them.” Interviewee N reflected on how they feel most comfortable with, “my kind of direct peers, and then also like my own employees. I feel comfortable with them to a point where I'm like I want to be friends with them outside of work.” This response highlights that comfortability is not only lateral but extends to people below respondents on the museum hierarchy. However, this comfortability was highlighted as not necessarily related to a trans identity. Interviewee G explained, “Just because of power structures, I always feel the most comfortable with people at my level, but I don't think that really has anything to do with me being trans or not.”

3) How do trans museum staff describe their feelings of exclusion at their workplaces?

a) Contexts in which trans staff felt othered

Trans and nonbinary museum staff described feeling othered in large meetings, historically white and/or male departments or programming, and when they are misgendered.

In large meetings. Many trans and nonbinary staff reported feeling out of place in large and high stress meetings, especially with unfamiliar stakeholders or topics. The stress of the

unknown and high tensions often overlapped with a heightened awareness about how others perceived participants:

“If there are meetings, or if we're talking to people who are outside... I'm trans, the people who know me, you know, use my pronouns. They know it's [pronouns] but I also know that externally, a lot of people who see me kind of... class me as a woman.” (Interviewee E)

On top of that, when members of the museum misgendered trans and nonbinary employees with unfamiliar people, it added additional stress given how hard it is to correct superiors in the presence of others:

“There are times when I'm in facilities-related meetings, where we have meetings with not just my supervisor, but my supervisor's supervisor... And so when my supervisor is talking about me and the projects that I'm doing to these other people, and she frequently misgenders me, it's like... I always feel awkward stepping in to correct somebody, but especially when it's like all of the people who have a power position above me stepping in to be like, “Let me interrupt this conversation you're having about our work so that I can correct your language about something personal.” It just feels small in comparison to whatever we're doing.” (Interviewee A)

In historically white and/or male departments or programming. Some trans and nonbinary museum staff described being marginalized as trans and nonbinary people, and also having intersectional identities that effected their experience of the workplace. Misogyny also impacted trans and nonbinary employees, both inside the museum and out on field digs, as

reflected by Interviewee I: “I think the misogyny would creep in towards me and other trans and queer people on the team under assumptions that we don't know what we're doing, or we're less experienced, even though, like, we're objectively not.” This misogyny was also present in historically male dominated departments, which had direct repercussions on trans and nonbinary staff's career progression, such as with Interviewee L:

“There were always moments where it felt like as I identified as queer, non-binary or like presented as generally more feminine, I wasn't included in decision-making or it was more difficult for me to kind of like get a foot into the door of like getting a promotion. Someone had to very strongly advocate for me, rather than my work being the reason.”

Racism also impacted trans and nonbinary employees experiences of their workplaces. As historically white dominated and centered spaces, museums and their programming are not always locations where diverse populations are seen. This effected the staff who hope to connect with attendees like them. Interviewee M discussed their experiences putting on programming:

“Sometimes the audiences for those things will vary based on topic. We've done some things on motorcycles lately, which have been very fun. But certainly, the audience that comes is a lot of, you know, older white folks. And... it does feel a little bit like how would these people respond to me if I was more openly... It's not something I really actively think about, but I do notice when I do feel more included and seen in an audience.”

When misgendered. Misgendering made trans and nonbinary museum staff feel othered, even while many of them recognized that it is not always intentional. Multiple interviewees

discussed that being misgendered is not always the most harmful piece of an interaction, but rather how the other person reacts to being corrected. Interviewee D corrected a fellow volunteer and was met with, “Are you sure you told me?” When interviewee F corrected a supervisor, the response was, “I’m such a bad person for that. Here, slap me on the hand. No, do it. Do it.” Interviewee J reflected on this defensiveness and victimhood mindset in the face of being corrected as, “The act murder of trying to do repair.”

Participants also highlighted that using they/them for people who do not identify with those pronouns is still misgendering. This was most often discussed by trans feminine interviewees, such as Interviewee H:

“Something that I really hate that people do, especially cis people and straight people, is acting like they don’t understand they/them pronouns, but then when they speak to a trans woman, suddenly understanding they/them pronouns.”

Misgendering can affect trans and nonbinary staff even when it is not directed toward them. Interviewee F reflected on how their executive director misgendered their wife:

“She knew that I was married, and I had always referred to my wife by she, her. I don’t think she was aware that my wife is a trans woman. But the first time that she was able to actually join me a gala that, as my plus one, many people brought partners and spouses. But I have been fully consistent about [her pronouns] the whole time, and the next day just walking by my office, the founder stopped in, knocked on my door, and went, “It was so lovely to meet your… spouse… partner. I don’t know what you call yourselves.” I’ve been married and saying wife.”

b) People who made trans staff feel out of place

Responses were mixed when trans staff were asked about people who made them feel out of place. Some said no one made them feel that way, while others pointed to senior staff, other departments or staff, and the public.

No one or no one anymore. In some workplaces, there were no specific people or demographics who made trans and nonbinary staff feel out of place. This was highlighted by multiple participant responses. However, in almost all answers, there was a temporal qualifier, such as in Interviewee G and Interviewee H's responses, "not currently" and "not presently." This was especially relevant with Interviewee C, who had reported earlier that they had faced harassment and were forced into a situation where they had to come out to expose the harassment. While they had positive reports on inclusion at present, Interviewee C recognized this person in their response: "Not anymore. Most of them have gone, which is good. [The person] was fired for other reasons other than that, but hey, I'll take it."

Senior staff. Senior staff made some trans and nonbinary staff feel uncomfortable. Some highlighted socio-economic differences with senior staff, while others pointed to specific moments of transphobia such as repeated misgendering. The distance between senior staff and participants who were lower on the institutional hierarchy was not always attributed to a trans or nonbinary identity, especially in Interviewee M's response, "I don't feel necessarily out of place based on my identity, but I certainly noticed general power dynamics within the institution that exists—mostly for class reasons."

Finally, some of the discomfort came down to participants' own levels of confidence. Interviewee I frankly admitted, "It's a very introverted volunteer. I'm often very intimidated by

Principal Investigators and staff.” In these cases, feeling intimidated was associated with feeling out of place. Similarly, Interviewee L reflected, “I think there are people I’m intimidated by often because they’re just so competent and confident.”

Other departments or staff. Departments and staff with major value mismatches from trans and nonbinary staff created a less than supportive environment. Participants indicated that department purpose had impacts on the cultures developed within those departments, which created contrasts in cultural competency. Interviewee J discusses this mismatch:

“There is a disconnect between, like, people who...work in certain departments...

But it's like people on the finance team are not being hired for their like competency competencies in like DEAI and creating a welcoming environment.

They're being hired because they can crunch the numbers.”

Beyond departmental mismatches, sometimes the values of individual people caused friction. However, it is worth noting that in participant responses, there was a notable understanding of the different histories and positions their coworkers approach the workplace with. Interviewee E discussed religious co-workers: “Some of the other [staff] or volunteers came from very religious backgrounds and they were always... nice, but it was not a secret how they felt about things, or where they stood religiously.” Sometimes, the worldview difference was more extreme, as reflected in Interviewee N’s response:

“I was kind of trying to allude to the fact that like everyone in this building is kind of like cool and supportive, except for one person. And everybody kind of knows that about this person. But it's also kind of in a way that we understand that she's just kind of insane. And so... We don't find it necessary to like have a sit-down

conversation with her, because some of the things that she believes are kind of outside the scope of reality.”

The public. The unpredictable and variable nature of perception leads to discomfort with visitors. Participants reflected on uncomfortable interactions with guests of their institutions, especially in regards to being clocked. In this context clocking is a slang term for the action of discovering or deciding that the person you are interacting with is trans. Interviewee C discussed how these visitor reactions affect them:

“I have a pretty feminine appearance at work, and some of them clock me, like, right away, and they immediately start acting uncomfortable around me. But especially if they ask me my name, I tell them, ‘Hey, my name's [Chosen name].’ It's funny. Their face, almost universally, they have this little grimace. That can add up over a day, you know?”

Working with the public exposed trans and nonbinary staff to more potentially harmful interactions. However, participants recognized this as a hazard of the job, such as in Interviewee K’s response: “Sometimes interactions with visitors can leave me feeling that way, but that I feel comes with working any kind of public-facing job, unfortunately.”

4) What are the material and psychological supports and structures that trans staff attribute to their feelings of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace?

a) Institutional supports and structures

On the subject of institution-backed material supports, 3 themes emerged, including processes for chosen names, name changes, and pronouns; pride-related activities and merchandise; and time and leave systems.

Processes for chosen names, name changes, and pronouns. When reflecting on institutional supports, support for preferred names and pronouns was the most common. This ranged from usage on badges, to pronoun pins, to updating names in the institution's time tracking software. Name changes were even relevant in collections databases, as Interviewee E recalled:

“Like, pronouns and name, mainly. We had to, like, log if we're doing stuff in the past perfect, collections database. I have my proper name in there, [Chosen Name], and everything.”

Even when chosen names were not the participant's legal name, many institutions have systems in place that prioritize their chosen name. Interviewee N reflected,

“There are systems to get your preferred name changed on, like, all official paperwork. And so my full name is now non-existent in university records, it's just [Chosen Name]. And like earlier today, I was sitting with my director trying to find me in a system, and I wasn't coming up.”

All trans staff indicated a familiarity with the ability to use name change processes even if not all of them had chosen to utilize it. Sometimes, the process was so smooth it surprised staff like Interviewee I, “Getting my badge changed was... shockingly easy.” Interviewee D reflected on how their volunteer manager even initiated the badge change process:

“Yeah, I don't know enough about the other stuff, I think for pronouns and stuff--I haven't changed my name, but at least for like pronouns on my badge [my manager] caught it before I even like knew... she did [it].”

Pride-related activities and merchandise. Opinions on institutional stances on pride-related items and activities were mixed. Some endorsed taking a vocal stance while others had concerns about the consumerist nature of pride merchandise. When it came to pronoun pins, Interviewee H stated, “We had pronoun pins and stuff, but... bare minimum.” Interviewee B similarly attributed pronoun pins to a more hollow effort: “There is kind of just like a corporate pride kind of thing. We have pride pins that we sell, but there's not really much beyond that.” However, reflections on pride parades were uniformly positive. Interviewee C reflected on past participation:

“Well, the only kind of official thing I can think of is, in the past, our museum has basically always sent a contingent to the Pride Parade. Which is pretty cool. I don't think they've done it the last couple years, though I'll have to ask why that stopped, but it might be because of the current administration, I don't know.”

Community groups and affinity groups were also mentioned. While they may not be incredibly active, responses indicated that people appreciated that they existed at all. For instance, Interviewee K mentioned:

“We also have an LGBTQIA+ affinity group, that's the word for it, that meets semi-regularly. I believe. I just learned there's been more directly sponsored by the museum and by our HR departments and beyond just employee-led stuff.”

Time and leave systems. Being able to take off leave to access gender affirming care was highlighted in addition to leave policies that move away from gendered perceptions of parenthood. In the case of time off to access gender affirming care, this was especially relevant for individuals who accessed or investigated accessing top surgery, also known as a double mastectomy, which is a gender affirming procedure that removes breast tissue for a more masculine appearance. The recovery period varies, but as a major surgery, requires considerable time away from work. Trans people notice support even when it is not aimed at themselves, as Interviewee J reflects, “I know at least two colleagues who have been able to take pretty significant time off for top surgery, up to six or eight weeks of recovery.” Just attending consultations for surgery can take time from work, as discussed by Interviewee K:

“I have had supervisors who have been really excited about me requesting time off to go on consultations for medical procedures like top surgery, and while I never had to take much more time off because I didn't... proceed further after those consultations. There was a lot of support and, like, enthusiasm which I appreciated.”

Some even highlighted Employee Assistance Programs at their institutions as an additional support on top of standard leave policies, such as Interviewee G:

“There's an employee assistance program that you can apply to, where they can help you financially. And my manager has been super flexible with like, “I think this year I'm gonna have top surgery,” and he's like, “yeah, just let me know, and I'll give you whatever time off that you need,” like... I still have a job, super appreciate knowing that.”

When discussing parental leave, Interviewee F reflected on their involvement in changing the wording of that policy at a past institution:

“We got the maternity leave language changed and the policies on parental leave changed because it had previously been framed as the birth mother will have more time off. I think you got like a week of paid leave as the father. And if you adopt it or otherwise, surrogacy, anything like that, too bad... So seeing the language taken away, the gendered language in that also removed to just be birthing parent was a little more than I expected and was refreshing.”

b) American Alliance of Museums guidebooks

The American Alliance of Museums has multiple guidebooks for trans staff, allied coworkers, and institutions that address best practices for trans inclusion. Staff in this study were asked if they were aware of these guidebooks, and if they had used them. Generally, the AAM guidebooks were not well known. Participants indicated that they were not aware of their existence. This was the majority opinion. Interviewee stated, “Not at all. Didn’t know those existed,” which was echoed by interviewee M, “Not at all.” A couple of professionals in managerial roles with a career history in museums were familiar with the guidebooks, as well as with the AAM and other pieces that had been produced.

Trans staff said that while they had not used AAM’s scripts for coming out as trans in the workplace, they believed that they would have been supported by the guidebooks in some way. Overwhelmingly there was excitement and curiosity when considering the guidebooks. While some entrants feel lucky to have desperately needed it, there was still a desire to learn more. Some entrants indicated that it would be useful not only for their own usage but as a tool to train

their coworkers and supervisors. Interviewee B hoped it could be added to volunteer training documents, “I do think that that would be helpful, and it would be great if that was included in training documents. Really nice.” In a similar vein, Interviewee E wished that coworkers had been introduced to these documents before they were hired: “It might have been helpful to have my coworkers or whatever briefed on or, like, more aware of things, generally.”

Others felt that the guidebooks were not supportive. These trans staff considered themselves self-assured and confident or already had personal processes in place to support their happiness at work. Interviewee A reflected on their openness, “No, personally, because I think I’m pretty open about my identity on a person-to-person basis.”

Discussion

This study interviewed fourteen museum staff and volunteers who identify as trans and/or nonbinary to address four questions:

1. How do trans museum staff communicate about their identities at work?
2. How do trans museum staff describe their feelings of inclusion at their workplaces?
3. How do trans museum staff describe their feelings of exclusion at their workplaces?
4. What are the material and psychological supports and structures that trans staff attribute to their feelings of inclusion and exclusion in the workplace?

Throughout these interviews, the results have shown that the experiences of trans and nonbinary museum staff and volunteers echo the research that has already been done into workplace inclusion for trans and nonbinary staff outside the field. This work ties workplace inclusion into the more specific museum niche.

Communicating Identities

Through the course of this research, the interviews that I conducted confirmed the widely accepted idea that misgendering and deadnaming has negative impacts on trans and nonbinary workers. Current literature indicates that being misgendered in the workplace negatively impacts feeling of inclusion (Fletcher & Swierczynski, 2025; Woods & Smith, 2024), which many interviewees confirmed. Many interviewees reported that they felt most othered when misgendered at work. This was not only due to the act of misgendering, but also the sometimes-intense responses other coworkers had to being corrected. This is consistent with the work of Corby et al. (2025), it was stressed that habitual misgendering was also linked to feelings of resignation, disappointment, or burn-out. Some participants indicated that they felt stressed when repeatedly correcting others or when they had to manage the feelings of the person they were correcting.

Conversely, when participants' chosen name and pronouns were respected, they often reported feeling included. Badges and interpersonal relationships were highlighted as meaningful places to be gendered correctly. Data systems were also highlighted. Participants appreciated having chosen names populate on collections management systems. This follows the research of Currier & White (2019), which specifically highlighted the importance of trans-inclusive data equity in metadata and other collections systems.

Feeling included

The value of supportive co-workers cannot be understated. Many participants linked feelings of inclusion to supportive staff experiences. In Fletcher & Swierczynski's (2025) results, they discovered that participants reported higher resilience in traumatic workplace scenarios

when they had supportive colleagues. Allied co-workers were valued by participants, following Schönauer et al.'s (2025) results, which demonstrated that participants valued ally support—even over support from fellow queer and trans co-workers. However, in this research emphasis was instead placed on fellow queer and trans co-worker support rather than that of allied co-workers.

Finally, trans and nonbinary staff and volunteers reported that museum attendees who are also trans and/or nonbinary showed heightened engagement and/or enthusiasm when interacting. This supports assertions that positive staff modeling improves the psychological safety of marginalized attendees (Theriault & Ljungren, 2022).

Leadership, policies, and supports

Not only did participants who lacked institutional support but also those who felt bolstered by their museum highlighted the importance of supportive workplaces. These interviews echoed how vital it is for institutions to codify their support for trans and nonbinary staff and volunteers, consistent with current workplace inclusion research (Ruggs et al., 2015) in this museum context.

Not only do trans and nonbinary museum staff and volunteers feel supported by material commitments such as preferred name support and accepting leave policies, they also are bolstered by trans and nonbinary leadership. Multiple respondents specified the value in having a trans and/or nonbinary manager or leader. Representation in leadership was often associated with institutional commitment, which is consistent with the writing of Ng et al. (2017). Additionally, regarding the already existing American Alliance of Museums guides for Trans professionals, their institutions, and coworkers (Kennedy & Woten, 2019), respondents generally were unaware of their existence.

Limitations

This study was conducted during a period of political turmoil in the United States that is disproportionately attacking trans and nonbinary people. As such, trans and nonbinary people may have been far less likely to disclose their identities or participate in trans and nonbinary related research. While all responses have been rigorously anonymized—which was disclosed in recruitment—participants may still have feared being outed or retaliated against by their employer.

Additionally, recruitment was conducted digitally with connections in Washington state and Texas state. While people from other locations did respond, there is a higher percentage of Washington and Texas based residents than any other location. In a similar vein, the interviews with people not in Washington or Texas were uniformly conducted over Zoom as opposed to in person.

Implications

Implications for Research

As one of the first studies in the specific overlap between trans and nonbinary workplace inclusion and museums, this research shows that museums are just as relevant locations for inclusion-based research when it comes to trans and nonbinary workplace experiences. Future research could build on this work by magnifying the scope. More participants, greater location diversity, and alternative study designs could further explore the trans and nonbinary staff and volunteers feelings of inclusion in museums.

Implications for Museum Practice

Any museum that wishes to further support—or even begin supporting—their trans and nonbinary staff and volunteers will find this research to be relevant. Throughout these interviews, participants gave clear and actionable responses regarding improvements institutions can make to support trans and nonbinary staff and volunteers. Such items were correct naming in institutional records and communications, considering gender affirming care consults and surgery in leave systems, and participating in pride related activities or programming.

This research also shows that anyone in a museum can be a supportive influence for trans and nonbinary museum staff and volunteers. Respondents uniformly demonstrated that vocal support from others within their institution was deeply valuable. Regardless of identity, supportive leaders, co-workers, and attendees contribute to feelings of inclusion for trans and nonbinary museum staff.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

Question	Follow-Up	Probe	Purpose
Where and when do you feel most comfortable at work?	Tell me about a time you felt comfortable or supported at work?	Are there people you more specifically feel comfortable with?	Inclusion
When and where do you feel othered or out of place at work?	Tell me about a time you felt othered or out of place at work?	Are there people who make you feel out of place?	Exclusion
Are you open about your identity[ies] at work?	What experiences or information informed your choice?	Do you feel it has helped or hurt your experience of your workplace?	Inclusion/ Exclusion
Do you feel like there are other queer and trans people at [museum]?	Is there a sense of community among queer and trans people at []? Why do you think that is?	How does that make you feel?	Inclusion
How has the museum attempted to support trans employees? Name change processes, insurance, PTO for surgery, community groups, etc.?	How did that make you feel?	What support do you wish the museum provided?	Material and Psychological Supports
The American Alliance of Museums has multiple guidebooks for trans staff, allied coworkers, and institutions that address best practices for trans inclusion. Have you heard of or encountered these documents before?	Included within those documents are scripts for coming out as trans in the workplace. Do you feel this would have supported your experience?	Do you believe your institution has utilized any of those?	Material and Psychological Supports

Demographic Data

Question
What is your name?
What is your role at the museum?
What is your museum? Or past museums you discussed?
What age are you?
How would you describe your gender?
How would you describe your sexual orientation?
How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
Do you identify as disabled, mentally ill, and/or neurodivergent?
Do you have colleagues or friends who are also trans or gender non-conforming museum professionals/volunteers?