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Assistant Professor

Higher Education Administration

College of Education, Health, and Human Services

Kent State University

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Kent State University

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College of Education, Health, and Human Services

Kent State University

Graduate Faculty Representative

Todd Hawley, Ph.D.

Professor

School of Teaching, Learning and Curriculum Studies

Kent State University

KENT STATE UNIVERSITY

College of Education, Health, and Human Services

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION DEFENSE

of

Meredith A. Bielaska

For the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Higher Education Administration

**Finding Family: The Experiences of Transgender Students
On Gender-Based Membership and Resiliency in College**

May 10, 2023

10:00 a.m.

200 White Hall

Kent State University

Meredith A. Bielaska

M.S., Higher Education
Administration
Canisius College, 2009

M.F.A., Graphic Design
Rochester Institute of Technology, 2006

B.F.A., Graphic Design
Rochester Institute of Technology, 2004

Meredith began her career in Higher Education within residential life at Rider University. She later transitioned into fraternity and sorority life and student activities at Kent State University as an Assistant Director in the Center for Student Involvement. She later moved into the role of Associate Dean for Student Living and Learning and Greek Life Commons at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, and most recently served at the Assistant Dean for Student Engagement at Franklin & Marshall College. In this role, Meredith oversaw the areas of student activities, orientation, fraternity and sorority life, leadership development, and student government. She also served on many college committees and lead multiple strategic plan working groups for the institution.

Meredith has authored published works in *Perspectives*, the Magazine for the Association of Fraternity and Sorority Advisors. She also serves in a volunteer capacity for the National Panhellenic Conference and as the Chief Panhellenic Officer for Delta Phi Epsilon Sorority, Inc.

Finding Family: The Experiences of Transgender Students on Gender-Based Membership and Resiliency in College

Students seek out individualized supportive networks to navigate challenges, and they use different strategies to overcome adversity in their lives (Greene et al., 2003; Zolli & Healy, 2012). Transgender students may navigate campus in different ways, experiencing a cross-section of varying challenges and issues unique to their understanding of themselves, their identity, and the larger community (Bilodeau, 2005, 2007, 2009; Hill, 2003; Nicolazzo, 2016b). The study explores the experiences of resiliency of transgender students who have joined gender-based student organizations (i.e., fraternities and sororities). This research investigates two main research questions: (a) What is the story of resilience for transgender students who are members of gender-based organizations at colleges in the United States? and (b) To what extent does transgender students' involvement in gender-based organizations contribute to their resiliency in college?

The eight themes developed in partnership with the study participants from this narrative inquiry are (1) Self-Advocacy, (2) Emotional Well-Being, (3) Desire for Connection, (4) Acknowledgement of Individual Strengths and Limitations, (5) Positive Mindset, (6) Recognition of Challenges with Organizations, (7) Feelings of Empowerment from Participating in this Study, and (8) the Benefits of Privilege. Each theme provides opportunity for discussion, understanding resiliency, and the role college communities play in that experience from the view of transgender students. The narratives provided by participants revealed a complex interplay of multiple identities and how these intersections mediate the participants' lived experiences well beyond one singular focus. Thus, the complexities of those experiences demand complex solutions to promote and provide a welcoming college environment. Just as we have long recognized within higher education that no one program, training, or experience will have a long-lasting impact on addressing complex problems within a campus community, it will also take significant work, resources, and time to develop individualized solutions to provide support for all underrepresented students on college campuses, including those who identify as transgender.