

WIRED OPINION 12.17.15 07:00 AM

Trans Researchers Are Struggling to Stay in Science. That Has to Change



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—still nothing.

Then I spotted it. I'd found my first sea slug! I quickly opened up my collection bag to get out a small jar when all the little plastic containers started floating up and out of my bag towards the surface—I'd forgotten to fill them with water before the dive.

WIRED OPINION

ABOUT

Shayle Matsuda is a PhD student who studies coral reefs and climate change at the University of Hawaii. To hear more about his adventures as a trans scientist and other nerdy things follow him @wrong_whale.

But learning how to catch a sea slug wasn't my biggest challenge that day. After I finally managed to collect the slugs, I identified and preserved them in ethanol, returned to my room back at base camp, and pulled down my pants. I readied a needle, and I was just about to push it into my thigh when I heard the door open and... "Sorry!" It was my roommate—a well-established director from a different department, who had just arrived to join the expedition. I looked up, took a deep breath and said, "It's OK...we have something to talk about. I'm transgender."

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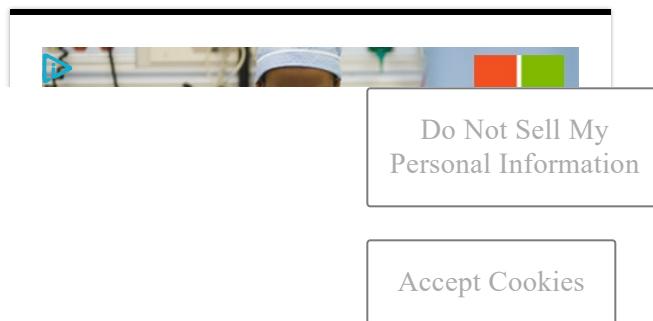
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everyone. Science prides itself on objective analysis of the world. But like it or not, identity drives what questions we ask, how we answer those questions, and how we interpret data. The best safeguard against bias is to have scientists of all backgrounds doing work—which means reshaping science to be as open as possible.

Cultural Barriers

Most people in science don't intend to make life difficult for trans researchers, but there are still many barriers, both systematic and cultural, to recruiting and sustaining the next generation of transgender scientists.

The cultural barriers are perhaps the most potent. Two months before my first testosterone injection, I handed a scholarship essay to my faculty advisor at the California Academy of Sciences that essentially served as my coming out as trans. I didn't sleep the night before. I was terrified. I paced the halls with sweaty palms waiting for him to read it.



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SCIENCE

Inside the Lab That's Making Sure Your Weed Is Safe

Like most academic and research institutions in the US, the overwhelming majority of the

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— but as I turned the corner to my advisor's office, I saw him standing there with a grin on his face. He told me that it was going to be hard, but that he had my back.

The Mind Game

Even when your colleagues are supportive, the process of coming out and beginning your social (and oftentimes hormonal and surgical) transition is physically and mentally exhausting. Every tiny obstacle—practical and psychological—that a scientist encounters during this period can impact their ability to stay in the field.

Once I chose to start my physical transition, hormones made it hard for me to focus in class, and for the first time I thought about taking time off. I battled new bouts of anger and frustration alongside the expected emotional roller coaster as I adjusted to weekly hormone injections, all the while trying to present myself as professionally as I could—and as my colleagues struggled to remember to address me with the correct pronoun. Under these conditions, my confidence withered, and for the first time I considered leaving science.

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bearing the costs of hormones, medical procedures, mandated weekly therapy sessions, legal document fees, and clothes to fit a rapidly changing body. I have trans friends who either had to postpone their surgeries until after graduation or take time off from school.

There's little the scientific community can do to change the physical and financial challenges of transitioning. But it can change the way it runs its labs and universities to ease those transitions and keep trans students invested in and focused on their work.

Reshaping the Lab

Trans men and women in all fields face employment discrimination, but what makes science so unique is that you need a doctoral degree to move forward—and in the process of getting a PhD, you rarely can work alone. Some institutions have policies that can protect against blatant discrimination, but not all. And those policies don't mean much if a campus doesn't provide gender confirming health benefits, gender neutral restrooms, training on LGBT competency, and active condemnation of transphobia.

As I began looking for PhD programs, I looked into labs and advisors all over the country doing research that interested me. Like all young scientists, I wanted a good advisor with a

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I quickly realized that my academic success hinged on there being institutional policies and LGBT resources, a campus climate that celebrated diversity, access to safe and affordable healthcare, and living in an open-minded city, so that when the unexpected comes up, like when I found out my testosterone was contaminated, I can access fast, safe and reliable resources with confidence so my research isn't compromised.

I found the PhD advisor of my dreams, and scrolled through her pages of cutting-edge coral research only to reach the fine print—her lab was full and she wasn't taking any more PhD students. But I hedged my bets and sent an email expressing interest anyway. She wrote back, asking me to answer two questions: One, why did I want to do a PhD? And two, in a perfect scenario, what did my next five years look like?

I'd thought about that second question a lot as I'd come to the realization that I'd never be happy unless I transitioned. I decided to take the risk, and told her so. A few days later we Skyped, and now I live on a little island in the middle of the Pacific.

Ignorance and prejudice is no excuse to exclude people from science. It takes direct and deliberate action—like that of my advisor—to change the status quo. This work has begun. As the general public becomes more educated about trans issues, so too does the scientific community.

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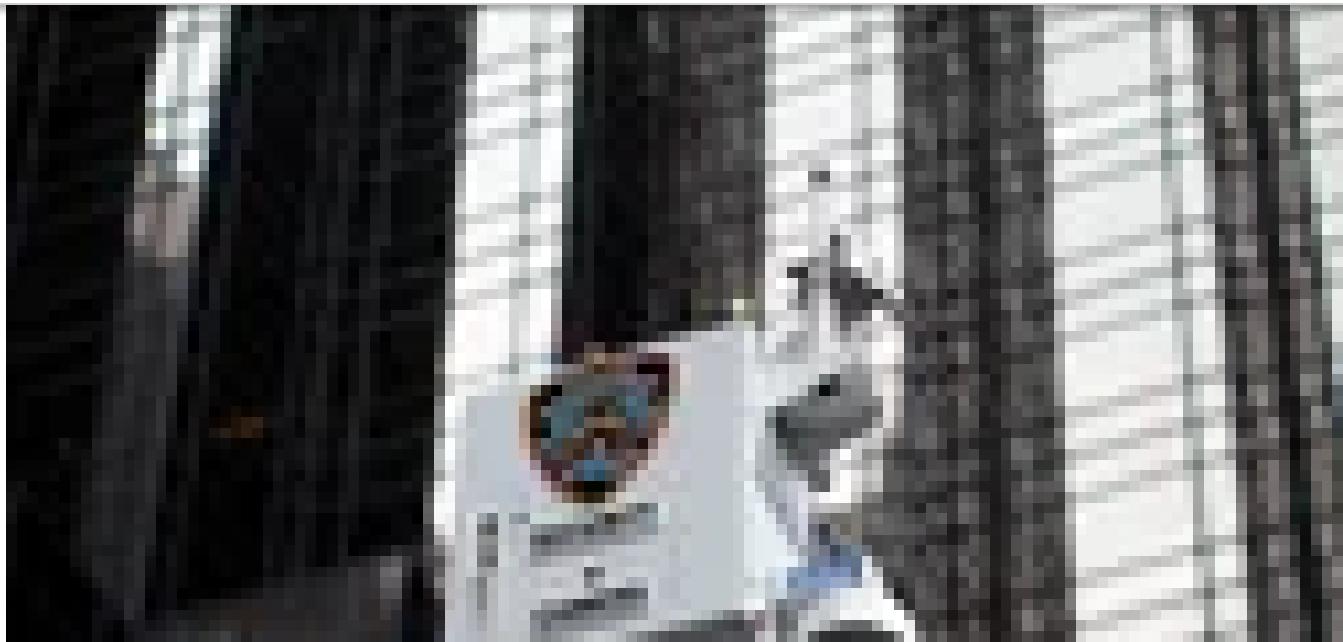
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MATT SIMON

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OPINION

The Protests Prove the Need to Regulate Surveillance Tech

JUSTIN SHERMAN



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