

Panel Explores Changing Times On Changing Campuses

by **EMILY HAYS** | Mar 11, 2020 7:36 am

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EMILY HAYS PHOTO

From left: Carolina Cudemus, John McKnight and Leslie Meyerhoff Tuesday at the Omni panel.

Wellesley College has identity in its mission statement — to provide an excellent education for women who will make a difference in the world.

But what does an all-female college do when a student's gender identity changes?

Meanwhile, do cultural houses or other distinct cultural spaces on campuses work for the many identities one student can have?

New Havener Rena Cheskis-Gold organized a panel on Tuesday to tackle these questions with representatives from colleges across the Northeast. The occasion was the final day of the [Society for College and University Planning conference](#) at New Haven's Omni Hotel.

Cheskis-Gold is the founder of Demographic Perspectives, which provides custom student climate surveys for colleges and universities.

“Think back to gorgeous, beautiful Yale that was originally built for white, upper-class men. That doesn't reflect our values now,” Cheskis-Gold said.

“Every student needs to feel a sense of belonging, in part because it makes you a better human being and in part because one of the jobs of a university is to prepare students for a global workforce.”

Cheskis-Gold explained that accessibility to college changed dramatically after World War II. Particularly in the last 20 years, the definition of what a college student looks like and needs has exploded. Colleges and universities have often scrambled to catch up.



Wellesley College Director of Planning Michelle Maheu called into the panel to describe her school's attempt to grapple with student gender identities. (She is pictured above onscreen; Cheskis-Gold is at the lectern.)

Maheu said that 0.6 percent of the U.S. population identifies as transgender. Nonbinary people, who identify as neither male nor female, are a subset of that population.

At Wellesley, that number is much, much higher. Maheu said that 7 percent of students identify as nonbinary alone.

The Massachusetts-based college has decided adapt its mission by saying that students must identify as female when they apply to Wellesley, but their gender identities may fluctuate at college.

To better serve Wellesley's trans population, the college has created a new gender, equity and inclusion-focused space within a student services building. The college has also moved therapy into the same building. This helps to meet both trans students' high demand for mental health services and the increasing rates of loneliness among young people across demographics, Maheu said.

Maheu said that the college has not resolved all of the questions presented by trans students. She said it has been tricky to find trained mental health professionals who are trans or nonbinary themselves. The college is still resolving whether to make multi-stall bathrooms non-gender, because some female students have not been comfortable with that change.

Connecticut College Dean of Equity and Inclusion John McKnight said that many colleges have cultural centers created in the late 1960s for African-American students.

"Those are great. They need to remain in place," he said.

The trouble is that the various cultural centers are often on the edge of campus and far from one another, McKnight said.

At Connecticut College, McKnight said, the cultural center was originally located across a highway from the rest of campus. It is now closer in but not quite right for student needs.



McKnight described one student who was LGBTQ and Latinx and religious and did not feel wholly comfortable in any of those designated spaces.

Connecticut College is now creating a cultural commons in the first floor of a residential hall. The idea is to locate spaces for gender, racial and religious exploration near one another while offering students some privacy. The college is about to put the request for proposals out to hire a builder.

“There is a challenge between wanting to be centrally located and be safe and protected. Students do not want to be in a fishbowl and watched by everyone else,” McKnight said.

McKnight said this feeling of safety can be particularly important when a student first arrives on campus. Eventually, the college hopes students will explore and feel comfortable outside of those spaces.

“We may think: Why are these kids always focused on identity? It’s kind of like a chicken and egg. Are they projecting into the world how they want to be seen or are they responding to how they are being seen?” McKnight said.

Apart from McKnight and Maheu, the panelists were Carolina Cudemus of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and Leslie Meyerhoff of Cornell University.

Cudemus offered insights on planning for diversity with dining, especially for students who cannot afford food or who have eating disorders. Meyerhoff described Cornell’s process of consolidating its programs to better respond to what first generation students – students whose families have not been to college – need.

It was the last formal event in the three-day conference. Remaining attendees were encouraged to tour Yale’s Science Hill or walk through the Yale British Art Gallery on their own.

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