An Autoethnographical Study: Being Transgender in a Business Built on Gendered Roles

UROP Individual Proposal
[Redacted]
[Redacted]
Being transgender can be a harrowing experience, feeling like one is stuck in a body that doesn’t match their self-perception. It is difficult to figure out where one belongs in a society where it seems everyone else is happy with how they were born. Often, transgender people feel alone and out of place, depressed and dysphoric, all the while wishing that they could be who they are. I have experienced all these feelings, though it took me a great deal of time to realize where those feelings were coming from. It’s scary to have these feelings and not understand their origins. It can make you feel like an alien in the skin of a human. Even here at UCI, where people are accepting and welcoming, I find myself unsure of what to do or who to talk to about my struggles.

As a Music Theatre Bachelor of Fine Arts student, this struggle is even more clearly defined: I know who I want to be, and often work to be, in society, but trying to play roles that match me in theatre is difficult because they do not match the voice I was born with. As I am currently going through the process of a hormonal transition, I hope that soon enough my voice will be able to fit those roles; however, going through such a transition, which will change my voice drastically over the course of the next year, I will have to almost entirely retrain my voice.

While accepting, UCI is sorely lacking in resources to help Music Theatre, Drama, and Music students who may be dealing with this problem. UCI also lacks resources to help students who may be transgender women who can’t change their voices beyond voice training. As our world continues to grow more hospitable for transgender individuals, our universities - particularly our performing arts programs - need to develop more welcoming protocols as well.

I am proposing to use myself as a case study in what transgender singers might need to help their voices match their perceived role in society. The voice can alter how others see you not just in person, but over the phone as well. The human voice has certain pitches that are recognized to be female, male, and androgynous, so a transgender person can still be easily misgendered without being seen; this can affect one’s gender dysphoria, making them see themselves as someone who will never be seen as their true self. By participating in voice training, one can work to make their voice match how one sees themselves, allowing them to pursue true happiness.

Further, I want to research how going through a hormonal transition and the subsequent voice change can alter not just one’s role in the theatrical world, but also one’s role in society. As I pursue a hormonal transition, I will lose my ability to sing as I do now, which is a frightening thought because I have always defined myself as a singer. I want to discover the new truths about my voice as I work it back to strength in a new singing role, and I want to discover what kind of person I am in society as I am forced to move beyond who I am as just a performer. With the funding for this proposal, I will have the ability to pursue vocal training, which can be expensive,
as well as to connect with niche experts who study and work with transgender and nonbinary theatre performers; in using myself as a case study, I will be able to help the university discover what resources are necessary to help future student vocalists who may need the support to become their true selves.

**Purpose**

**Positive Impacts for Students in Need**

While we do have the LGBTRC on campus, it can be nerve-racking to go there for such a personal and emotional purpose as transgender voice issues. While many might think it fairly simple, as performers we get very attached to who we are as performers, often thinking of ourselves as a full-body instrument rather than a person; this makes it especially intimidating to seek help. This case study could provide information that allows UCI’s Claire Trevor School of the Arts to anticipate the future needs of transgender performers so that such a sensitive issue can be taken care of in a way that allows student to feel comfortable and supported by their faculty. It is more important now than even to provide resources for students in need, as everyone deserves to feel as though they can succeed in their desired career path. Learning what resources are necessary for transgender singers will help all of us feel better prepared to go out into the world of show business.

**Gaining Information for UCI Drama and Music Programs**

As mentioned, this case study allows UCI to discover what resources could be needed for students as they explore their gender identity. Drama and Music are two areas where gender roles are unfortunately very prominent, with vocal roles determining the gender of the character and what gender identity and expression someone should have to play that role. In a business where creativity reigns supreme, it can feel very limiting to be placed in roles that match your voice when your gender identity doesn’t match, and it will almost always be one’s voice being more important than gender identity. This case study could allow UCI to gain information on how being placed in certain vocal roles affects one’s perceived gender in society as well as how altering one’s voice to match gender identity could do the same. As well as having vocal resources in place for transgender performers, UCI could help to determine better language and parameters for roles in performance that allows students to pursue the roles they feel suit them best, regardless of the presumed gender role of the character; the language used for students in productions and vocal classes may also end up having an impact on students’ mental states and perceived selves, making it all the more important to discover how faculty’s perception of students’ gender with relation to the voice can change how a student feels about their role in a larger society.

**Objective**
When students’ lives and careers are at stake, it is important for UCI to provide help to students who are going through immense struggle. It is difficult to know what steps to take when one first realizes they are transgender, especially when one’s future career is so based on whether gender identity and expression match the desired theatrical roles. It is daunting to wade through medical websites and expensive to talk with doctors or therapists about how the voice could change one’s self perception or where to go to get that training. UCI needs to know what students require so the university can commit to helping students succeed in their chosen path, with ways to reach out to experts so that students might feel more secure in their present and future selves.

**Intended Outcomes**

My hope is that this case study will begin to shed light on new resources UCI could provide to students as well as training relevant faculty on transgender issues in the arts so students can be supported in whatever ways they need. Currently there is one faculty member that I know of within Claire Trevor School of the Arts who is knowledgeable in transgender issues: Crystal Barron, an adjunct lecturer who provides vocal lessons to Music Theatre BFA students. It is wonderful to have her help in vocal work, and she will be working closely with me for this case study, but UCI should really have resources more available to students at different stages of vocal work as well as having resources for Music students pursuing voice. I hope that exploring how crucial the voice is to gender perception and identity will persuade UCI, and specifically Claire Trevor School of the Arts, to have someone on hand at all times who has knowledge of transgender vocal woes and further resources should a particular student need even more support. Whether this means a new expert faculty member or simply training existing faculty on how to help, students should have someone on hand to help them discover what their voice means to them as both a performer and a person.

**Responsibilities**

**Myself**

My responsibility will be to work on voice training and keeping my voice healthy as I go through formal training, taking daily notes on how my voice feels, how I feel, and how I see myself on any given day. I will be taking this data and making it into a spreadsheet to explore over the course of months how my vocal changes interact with my view of myself in a very gendered society. I will also be responsible for tracking the resources I used, which resources felt the most useful for my purposes, and what resources I wish I could have explored that were not available to me. I will be working with [Redacted] to explore how the new vocal parts I can explore as my voice shifts alters how I see myself as a performer, which will likely go along with how I start to be perceived in the world. I will keep notes on my interactions with the world as well as
notes on my vocal training, and I will analyze what my case study could mean for the future of transgender UCI performance students.

**Faculty Members(s)**

[Redacted] having taken an intensive to learn about transgender voice training, will be working with me to connect with experts in transgender vocal work from The Voice Lab in Chicago, who have already indicated their interest in working with me. [Redacted] will help me gather information on their programs, meeting with them over Zoom with me, to explore what resources they have that could be helpful for UCI voice students; [Redacted] will also help me explore local resources that could be available for students to utilize. [Redacted] will also be working with me on training my voice safely as I go through my hormonal transition to explore how my view of myself changes as my voice goes through a period of inability to sing and then recovers.

[Redacted], being in charge of the UCI BFA Music Theatre program, will be working with me to ensure my voice is being trained healthily and in a way that lines up with my future career goals. [Redacted], alongside [Redacted] will be helping me find resources both for my personal use and for the university to have on hand for students who may need them. As someone committed to her students, [Redacted] will be learning with me how to traverse a hormonal transition in a business where many people begin building their image from a young age; in a world where more people every day discover they are transgender, it is imperative we learn how to build a voice and person in a shorter timeframe as a person comes into their own true self.

**Approach/Timeline**

I recently began my hormonal transition, so this study will begin in Winter 2023, after some of the effects of testosterone have begun affecting my voice and body. The focus will be on voice training with [Redacted], one of the UCI Musical Theatre Faculty, with an emphasis on vocal health. We will be meeting with vocal experts from The Voice Lab in Chicago to learn about resources they offer online as well as things transgender singers might need to help their voice along their journey. The goal is to discover both local and online resources for future transgender singers, so I and [Redacted] will be doing research on local community resources for transgender people that UCI could highlight for those in need. I will also be doing my own personal research into adjacent studies that have been done on transgender people that highlight their struggles and needs; I plan to use this research to show UCI what new help should be offered to students who hope to transition, especially those in performing majors.
January
Vocal changes start taking place. Lose high notes, vocal fatigue from edma. Begin a vocal video or audio project where I read the same couple of lines from a book or passage every day to observe changes.

February
Vocal range limits, vocal instability, and pitch matching issues begin. Begin taking notes with a spreadsheet on vocal health and changes. Meet online with vocal experts from The Voice Lab to learn about available resources offered as well as to learn what vocal training should be done to keep the voice healthy as it transitions.

March-April
New York Satellite Program - take a break from vocal training for brief travel and training in New York City. Continue taking notes on vocal changes while away.

May-July
Voice begins to stabilize, and range begins to build back up. Do vocal exercises to build range. Meet again with experts from The Voice Lab to learn about how to build a singing voice after transition.

July-September
Voice continues to stabilize. Start retraining the voice in a new vocal part with an emphasis on continuing to strengthen the new lower voice.
### UROP Proposal Budget

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Budget</th>
<th>Explanation or Justification for Expense</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meeting with Voice Experts</td>
<td>$200</td>
<td>[Redacted] and I plan to meet with vocal experts from The Voice Lab, who [Redacted] met with when she did her summer intensive. They will have recommendations on how to train my voice as it changes, and can help point toward what resources might be required for transgender students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice training with [Redacted]</td>
<td>$700</td>
<td>[Redacted], the vocal faculty member for the UCI BFA in Music Theatre, took an intensive this last summer to learn how to work with transgender and nonbinary singers. She works with me during the school year, and I trust her to work with me as my voice changes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Online voice training resources</td>
<td>$100</td>
<td>While [Redacted] is knowledgeable, there will likely be other resources recommended by experts at The Voice Lab to better help my voice stay healthy while it drops.</td>
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