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JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

“Simmons is aligning itself right now on the right side of history,” said Danny Boucher, a 21-year-old junior who was assigned as female at birth and now identifies as a transgender male.

By Matt Rocheleau and Katherine Landergan

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Simmons College has formally opened its doors to students who identify as transgender or what is known as gender nonconforming, becoming the third US women's college — and second in Massachusetts — to create a more inclusive admissions policy that accepts some students who were born male.

While Simmons quietly has been admitting such students for years, the small private college in the Fenway said it felt the need to clearly state its policy because societal changes are redefining how individuals, particularly young people, identify themselves. For example, some people identify as neither male nor female or as both genders.

“Traditional notions of womanhood and femaleness are being challenged, and new laws are emerging to protect transgender individuals,” Simmons president Helen Drinan wrote this week to the campus, which enrolls about 1,900 undergraduates, including a small number of transgender students.

Under the Simmons policy, the school will accept students born female, regardless of current gender identity, and also those born male who now identify themselves as female.

Undergraduate applicants are not required to provide government-issued documentation proving their gender identity.

Once enrolled, students who complete Simmons's requirements will be awarded a degree even if their gender identity has changed, said Sarah Neill, vice president for student affairs and associate provost.

The policies apply to undergraduate students, because the school's graduate programs are coeducational.

Students who have pushed for Simmons to articulate an inclusive policy praised the announcement.

“It's a relief to have those things written down and set in stone,” said Danny Boucher, a 21-year-old junior who was assigned as female at birth and now identifies as a transgender male. “Simmons is aligning itself right now on the right side of history.”

With its move, Simmons joins two other women's colleges that recently have announced policies welcoming transgender students.

While some colleges say the policy changes fit their traditions as places of tolerance and inclusion, the groundbreaking shifts have raised questions about their identities as women-only institutions.

In September, Mount Holyoke College in South Hadley formalized rules that admit all students except for those who were born male and who continue to identify with that gender. Mills College in Oakland, Calif., in May became the first women's college in the country to announce a policy allowing transgender students to enroll.

Nationwide, the more than 40 other women's colleges are being pushed to adopt similar, more inclusive admissions policies, according to Genny Beemyn, an expert on transgender policies in higher education.

"I think we're going to see more women's colleges making this change to be more inclusive to recognize students who identify as women," said Beemyn, who identifies as transgender and directs the University of Massachusetts' Stonewall Center.

"It's a matter of equality and a matter of fairness that women should be able to go to women's colleges even if that's not how they were assigned at birth," Beemyn added.

Spokeswomen for both Smith College in Northampton and Wellesley College said the schools are exploring "what it means to be a women's college" as the perception of gender evolves in society.

At Smith, students have launched online petitions and protested in recent weeks to try to pressure the college to update its policy.

In 2013, a transgender woman who was turned away by Smith posted a copy of the rejection letter online.

The letter said she was denied because her federal student aid application identified her as male, stirring debate at Smith and elsewhere about the admissions policies of women's colleges.

There are only a handful of nonreligious men's colleges in the country, specialists said. None have announced policies allowing transgender students to enroll.

But the move to more inclusive policies has not been without criticism elsewhere.

"There have been a handful of individuals who believe this is the wrong decision and is de facto coeducation or a violation of their moral, political values," Mount Holyoke president Lynn Pasquerella said in a recent interview. "Some had questions and some people have said we won't continue to give to the college, or we don't feel like we belong in this community.

"But, very few people have pushed back," she said. "Overwhelmingly, the alumnae community, the student body, the faculty, and staff have been supportive."

Pasquerella said officials at Mount Holyoke sought legal advice and found that accepting transgender and gender nonconforming students would not endanger federal funding, nor prevent the school from continuing to turn away prospective students who were born male and identify as men.

Shane Giraldo, a 20-year-old junior at Simmons who was assigned as female at birth and now identifies as

genderqueer — neither male nor female — applauded the policy overall.

Giraldo also commended Simmons for other steps to support transgender and gender nonconforming students, including offering students medical insurance with transgender health benefits and single-stall gender-neutral restrooms on campus.

“The college is addressing concerns for current students as well as applicants. It’s definitely a step in the right direction,” said Giraldo, vice president of the student-run Sexuality Women and Gender Center.

But Giraldo and other advocates said they wished Simmons had gone one step further by considering applicants who were born male but identify as neither male nor female, as Mount Holyoke’s policy allows.

Drinan, the Simmons president, said the college’s admissions policy “communicates to our community and to the external world that we strive to be a welcoming place where a range of gender identity and expression can exist.”

“This policy is consistent with the mission and history of Simmons College as an institution that fosters inclusion and welcomes diversity within our community,” she said.

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Matt Rocheleau can be reached at matthew.rocheleau@globe.com. Follow him on Twitter [@mrochele](https://twitter.com/mrochele).

Katherine Landergan can be reached at katherine.landergan1@gmail.com. Follow her on Twitter [@klandergan](https://twitter.com/klandergan).



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