

Faculty, staff, and teaching assistants are all responsible for creating welcoming and inclusive environments in campus spaces.

These tips may be helpful in ensuring that your classroom or office is a welcoming place for trans and gender non-conforming students, and ensuring that unintentional exclusionary practices are reduced and eliminated, allowing students to perform at their full potential. This reaffirms institutional commitment not to discriminate by gender identity or expression.

Classroom Guidelines & Staff Standards

Set a tone in your space of respect and critical inquiry. At the beginning of each semester, when establishing the guidelines for class or staff, include something like: "It is important that this classroom be a respectful environment where everyone can participate comfortably. One part of this is that everyone should be referred to by their chosen name, the correct pronunciation of their name, and their chosen pronoun (like she, ze, he, or they)."

Doing this sets a tone for challenging assumptions about people's bodies, their identities and the ways they present themselves in terms of gender, and also race, ethnicity, class, disability, sexual orientation, and country of origin. This can also encourage critical engagement with the authors and subjects of texts and ideas in our classes and programming.

Previous Names

If a student has a previous name and/or pronoun that you are aware of because you knew them before they changed it, or because it is on the roster/records, do not use it or reveal it to others. Well-meaning comments like "I knew Gina when she was Bill," even if meant to be supportive, reveal what might feel like personal information to the student, and unnecessarily draw attention to their trans identity.

Roll Call/Appointment Call

Avoid calling the roll or otherwise reading student names aloud until you have given students a chance to state what they prefer to be called, in case the roster or appointment record represents a prior name.

Names & Pronouns

Allow students to choose what name and pronoun they use. Avoid making assumptions based on the class roster, student record, or the student's appearance. A great way to accomplish this in classrooms is to pass around a seating chart sign-in sheet and ask them to indicate these two items in writing, and then use them when you call on students or refer to them in class. In offices, include "preferred name" and "pronouns" fields on sign-in forms.

Modeling Behavior

When facilitating a group discussion or meeting, ask people to identify their pronouns when they go around and do introductions. This will allow everyone in the room the chance to self-identify and to get each other's pronouns right the first time. It will also reduce the burden on anyone whose pronoun is often misidentified and may help them access the discussion more easily because they do not have to fear an embarrassing mistake made by another student or staff. Model this by saying, "In our introductions, please state your name and pronouns. I'll start: my name is Simon and I use he and him pronouns."

Address Mistakes

If you make a mistake about someone's pronoun, correct yourself. Going on as if it did not happen is actually less respectful than making the correction. This also saves the person who was misidentified from having to correct an incorrect pronoun before it is planted in the minds of those who heard the mistake. As authority figures, especially, it is essential that you model respectful behavior.

Correct Others

Whether in office hours, when speaking with students in groups, or when speaking with faculty and staff, when someone else makes a pronoun mistake, correct them. It is polite to provide a brief correction, whether or not the person whose pronoun was misused is present. Allowing the mistake to go uncorrected ensures future uncomfortable interactions for the person who is being misidentified. For example, if a colleague uses the incorrect pronoun for a student, simply respond saying “I believe Gina uses she and her pronouns.”

Respect Boundaries

Avoid asking personal questions of trans people that you would not ask of others. Because of the sensationalist media coverage of trans people’s lives, there is often an assumption that personal questions are appropriate. Never ask about a trans person’s body or medical care, their old name, why or how they know they are trans, their sexual orientation or practices, their family’s reaction to their gender identity, or any other questions that are irrelevant to your relationship with them unless they invite you to do so or voluntarily share the information.

Pronouns

If you aren’t sure of a person’s pronoun (and there isn’t someone around to let you know), ask, or refer to them by their name only—making a pronoun assumption is the worst option. One way to be respectful is to share your own first. “I use the pronouns he/him/his. I want to make sure I address you correctly. What pronouns do you use?” Another way is to ask, “How would you like to be addressed?” This may be challenging at first, but a person who often experiences being addressed incorrectly may see it as a sign of respect and that you are interested in getting it right.

Reflecting Language

Using language that reflects respect for students’ self-identity – using their chosen name and pronoun, not assuming the gender identity of students, pronouncing names correctly, etc. – communicates that you are invested in creating and maintaining a classroom welcoming to all students.

Forms and Paperwork

If you have students sign up for appointments, fill out paperwork, or otherwise provide any demographic data, provide fields for write-in preferred name, gender, and pronouns. This can go in a file so future advisors, health care providers, and other staff can use correct language. It is appropriate to periodically ask, “Is there anything you would like to update in your file/in your paperwork?” This normalizes the process of changing names and pronouns.

Taking it Further

If you want to take your awareness of these issues further, here are some additional ideas to consider.

Educate yourself about trans history, trans law, and trans resistance. There are wonderful resources on the Internet, in addition to many articles and books.

Attend trainings, speakers, and other opportunities for allies to build skills and competencies around trans issues.

Explore where and when you have absorbed messages and assumptions about gender roles. Critical reflection can help expose transphobic systems and help deepen a commitment to gender self-determination for all people and to creating learning environments that invite gender non-conforming people to fully participate.

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