

Supporting Transgender Students in the Classroom

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As the higher education community continues to work to create a more inclusive learning environment, the needs of our gender-variant students are too often overlooked. This article outlines a few ways faculty can create an atmosphere that supports trans-identified and gender-nonconforming students.

Title IX protections

Our comfort zone as academics, regardless of discipline, is often built on basic academic assumptions and research that adhere to a male-female binary, which silences and invalidates transgender, gender nonconforming, nonbinary, and intersex individuals. Recent interpretations of Title IX legislation by federal and state institutions now require us to think and act beyond our comfort zones so we can protect our students' rights.

Title IX is part of the Federal Education Amendments of 1972, and all educational institutions (K-12 and postsecondary) must comply with this law. Many people are familiar with Title IX protections against sexual harassment and sexual violence, but few people are aware that Title IX also prohibits gender-based harassment "including acts of verbal, nonverbal, or physical aggression, intimidation, or hostility based on sex or sex stereotyping, even if those acts do not involve conduct of a sexual nature" (Office of Civil Rights, 2011).

Gender diversity

As educators it is our responsibility to reflect on and challenge our gender assumptions so we can create more gender-inclusive spaces where all students are free to be who they are. As a student reminded me last semester, "We must learn to be comfortable with being uncomfortable" to create change.

Below is a list of strategies I use in my classrooms to support gender diversity. I hope they can help you shape more gender-inclusive spaces where you teach.

Set the tone

Create guidelines in your syllabus and communicate them on the first day of class:

- Syllabus: Write your name and what pronouns you use.

WGSS 1105 Gender and Sexuality in Everyday Life

Dr. Sherry Zane

She/her/hers

- In class: Introduce yourself and state what pronouns you use.

"My name is Dr. Sherry Zane, and I use "she, her, hers."

- Syllabus: Include your school's community mission and principles and connect those to written requests that students practice civility and inclusion of all perspectives, which includes students' names and correct pronouns. All students should be referred to by the names and pronouns they use (e.g., she, he, they, ze).
- Request that students contact you if they have names that differ from the roster: "If you have a name that differs from the one that appears on the roster, please inform me before the second class period so that I can use your correct name and pronouns."

- Find out where the gender-neutral bathrooms are in your building. List them in the syllabus and point out their locations during the first class.

Model desired behavior

To support our gender-variant students, we need to rethink roll call, become familiar with the importance of names and pronouns, and be willing to be advocates:

- Avoid taking attendance aloud until you have given students a chance to contact you with their correct names in case different names appear on the roster. Instead, pass out index cards, handouts, or a seating chart and ask the students to fill out name and pronoun information. You can also provide a form on your Learning Management System electronically if you do not want to do it in person.

Name on the roster:

Name you use:

Pronouns you use:

Major/minor:

Commuter: Yes or no

What are some of your favorite activities?

- If you have to take attendance verbally on the first day, use last names. Avoid making assumptions based on what the roster indicates or a student's appearance. Oftentimes, a student who uses a name that differs from the roster will contact you via email or in person to let you know. The student will not want to experience any uncomfortable situations such as being "outed" in the classroom or misgendered by the instructor or peers.
- When facilitating a group discussion, ask everyone to identify their names and pronouns when they introduce themselves. If students do not wish to use pronouns, they can simply request that people use their names in place of pronouns.
- There will be times when you hear people make name/pronoun mistakes. Please correct them in a polite manner, even if the person being referring to is not present. For example, "I believe Sam uses 'they, them, their' pronouns."

Preserve confidentiality

A student might have revealed a previous name and/or pronouns to you before changing it, or you might know what it is because you saw it on the roster. Do not reveal it to others. Comments such as "I knew Lisa when she was Dan" can be damaging to the student and also make the student vulnerable to possible ridicule.

- It is never appropriate to disclose to anyone the gender identity or sexual orientation of another person without the explicit permission of that person. If you do, it can be considered a violation of Title IX.
- Refrain from asking transgender students any questions you would not ask anyone else. For instance, you would never ask seemingly cisgender persons (people whose gender identity matches their biologically determined sex) personal questions about their anatomy.

Adopt more inclusive language

Incorporate new, more inclusive phrases to your vocabulary:

- Instead of using references to "men" and "women," try "individuals of all gender identities" or simply "people."
- Use "partner" or "significant other" instead of "boyfriend/girlfriend" or "husband/wife."
- Avoid titles such as "Mr.," "Mrs.," and "Ms."

- Instead of calling the class “guys,” use “folks,” “everyone,” “you all,” or “you.”
- Acknowledge the limits of the texts and research you use: “This study only focuses on cisgender heterosexual men and women” or “This study only focuses on cisgender women.”

Finally, if students talk to you about their gender identities, listen in a respectful and nonjudgmental way. Try not to show skepticism and/or disapproval. Instead, support the students by listening to what they have to say, especially when they may be offering constructive feedback for your classroom. It can be challenging to train ourselves to use new names and pronouns, but it is important to make a concerted effort and even make mistakes. Let students see you make mistakes, and then apologize and correct yourself. If students see that you are comfortable with being uncomfortable, they will learn to be, too!

This past year I worked with several transgender and gender non-conforming students to create an educational video meant for university instructors, administrators, and staff. It’s titled “Transcending Difference: Recognizing and Understanding Gender Diversity in the Classroom.”

References:

Dear Colleague Letter from Office of the Assistance Secretary for the Office of Civil Rights. U.S. Department of Education – April 4, 2011. http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201104_pg3.html

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