

Gender-Neutral Restrooms

Transgender people often feel uncomfortable and are subject to harassment and violence when using male- or female-specific campus restrooms. “Gender-neutral” bathrooms—typically single-stall, lockable restrooms available to people of all genders—provide a safe facility for transgender people. These restrooms also help families with children (such as mothers bringing sons, or fathers bringing daughters, to a restroom) and people with disabilities who need the assistance of an attendant of a different gender. Single-stall restrooms also more easily meet the accessibility regulations of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).¹

A rapidly growing number of colleges and universities are creating gender-neutral bathrooms, either through renovations or by simply changing the signs on single-stall male/female restrooms. Currently, more than 150 campuses have gender-neutral bathrooms, including Oberlin College, which has two gender-neutral bathrooms in its student union and at least one in every residence hall; the University of California, San Diego, which has changed male/female signs on 88 single-stall restrooms in campus buildings; and the New College of California, where all campus bathrooms are gender-neutral.

Many of the colleges and universities with gender-neutral bathrooms list the locations of these restrooms on their websites. See, for example:

New York University: <http://www.nyu.edu/lgbt>

Ohio University: <http://pages.ohio.edu/lgbt/resources/transrestrooms.cfm>

Tufts University: <http://ase.tufts.edu/lgbt/documents/genderNeutralRestrooms.pdf>

University of Colorado, Boulder: <http://www.colorado.edu/glbtrc/resources/restrooms.html>

Along with developing gender-neutral restrooms, some institutions, such as American University, Kent State University, Ohio State University, the University of California, Santa Barbara, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and Washington State University, have implemented or are in the process of implementing policies requiring that all extensively renovated and newly constructed buildings include at least one gender-neutral bathroom.

The University of Arizona has established a bathroom policy that affirms that individuals have the right to use the bathroom that corresponds with their gender identity. The statement is available at http://equity.arizona.edu/restroom_access.

Resources

People in Search of Safe Restrooms (PSSR): <http://www.pissr.org>

Sylvia Rivera Law Project: <http://www.srlp.org>

Transgender Law and Policy Institute: <http://www.transgenderlaw.org/college/index.htm>

Developed by Genny Beemyn

Director, The Stonewall Center, University of Massachusetts, Amherst; 413-545-4826; brettgenny@stuaf.umass.edu

¹ University of Chicago QueerAction, “Gender-Neutral Bathrooms Campaign: A QueerSafeCampus Initiative”: <http://queeraction.uchicago.edu/statement.html>

Frequently Asked Questions About Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

Taken from the University of Chicago's Gender-Neutral Bathrooms Campaign:
<http://queeraction.uchicago.edu/statement.html>

What are the problems created by only having sex-segregated bathrooms in a particular location?

Bathrooms segregated by sex are potentially unsafe and intimidating places for a variety of people.

Persons who are not easily legible as male or female often experience various forms of intimidation in these places. If a woman in a women's-only restroom is assumed to be a man, there may be real threats to her comfort and even safety. For example, one woman on our campus had security called on her while she was in the women's restroom of her workplace because a client thought she was "a man in a women's bathroom." Assault, insults, and police intervention are frequently part of the reality of sex-segregated bathrooms for butch women, transgender people, and others. Many people have had the experience of being harassed or threatened in public bathrooms; though this is not as strong of a factor on campus, it contributes to a feeling of discomfort with the single-sex bathroom setting.

Certain people feel threatened in single-sex bathrooms based on their presumed sexual orientation rather than gender identity. Students have faced gay-baiting comments in our university's sex-segregated bathrooms. Men's bathrooms may be particular sites for this sort of harassment because of their image as queer cruising grounds. Regardless of whether those making the comments intended to act on the threats made, people were made uncomfortable and felt unsafe.

Bathroom comfort issues are most acute for transgender and trans-questioning people on campus. Members of the transgender community face specific concerns and threats to safety depending on how they are read in certain situations. Choosing a sex-coded restroom is one of the most frequently reported sources of anxiety in this community: often, transgender people will go far out of their way to gain access to bathrooms that are more private or comfortable. For instance, one gender-transgressive graduate student reports waiting to go home rather than using public bathrooms on campus; this is a response to frequent hostility in that setting. Access to public single-occupancy bathrooms would be ideal for undercutting this source of intimidation, but converting existing multi-stall bathrooms to gender neutrality is an excellent, and easy, intermediate step.

It is important to realize that this is not simply a language or labeling issue: the initiative to create gender-neutral bathrooms is not driven by an avoidance of the angst of choosing an icon for one's gender identity. It is, rather, centered on the kinds of interactions that actually occur when some members of our community make either one of the available choices.

The most significant problem that arises in a gendered space is one of intimidation. When that gendered space is one like a restroom, a place that everyone should be able to go without incident and without feeling intimidated, addressing this problem becomes increasingly significant.

Will adding gender-neutral bathrooms help to alleviate these problems?

Yes! If a space is not segregated into male and female categories, it significantly reduces the possibility for gender- and sex-based intimidation toward those whose appearance and presentation does not fit within the traditional male/female paradigm.

While it is not possible to entirely remove safety risks in any space, intimidation in public bathrooms generally happens because queer and gender-transgressive people are perceived to be trespassing on others' sense of space. This would not happen in gender-neutral bathrooms, which would significantly reduce the risk involved in using the facilities.

*Ironically, many of the people who are most resistant to creating gender-neutral bathrooms on the grounds that they constitute "special rights for transsexuals" are also uncomfortable with **either** of the choices a trans person might make about use of conventional sex-segregated public bathrooms.*

It is also important to note that many people in the U.S. are questioning their sexuality and gender identity and coming out at younger ages as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender. The University must realize that many potential students and faculty are looking for a campus which is proactively supportive of queer concerns. Transgender and allied people in particular want to know how their needs will be met in terms of comfortable restroom options, because it is a real concern in many day-to-day lives.