

More Than Just Bathrooms

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Many of the public battles for transgender students have centered on the bathrooms they want to use. And according to a new paper, gender-neutral restrooms are the accommodation transgender and gender-nonconforming college students want most on their campuses. But there's much more on their wish lists that would make them feel safe and comfortable.

Researchers at [Clark University](#) and the [University of Massachusetts at Amherst](#) surveyed more than 500 transgender and gender-nonconforming undergraduates and graduate students, as well as a handful of recent graduates. They wanted to know what institutions are offering those students -- what policies and accommodations are in place -- and how important they are to students. The authors created a list of 17 services and asked participants whether their campus offered them and how significant they were.

Of most import were restrooms, specifically gender-neutral bathrooms in campus buildings. Despite ranking them No. 1, a little under half of the students -- nearly 45 percent -- surveyed said that their institutions had the correct facilities.

Next on the want list was a nondiscrimination policy that protected gender identity and expression. Nearly two-thirds -- 65 percent -- indicated that their institutions had created one. And third was a university-affiliated student organization specifically for LGBTQ students; nearly all students -- 92 percent reported that their institution sponsored a group.

Proper bathroom facilities represent safety for transgender people, said Abbie Goldberg, a professor of psychology at Clark and the lead author of the paper. Bathrooms are often where transgender students are improperly called the wrong gender or bullied, she said.

She recalled one case in which she interviewed a student who had the police called while trying to use the bathroom the student felt comfortable in.

"Being gender-inclusive communicates something very clear to a student: that we recognize this is an issue," Goldberg said.

While the authors didn't gather much data from students who attended religious universities or two-year colleges, Goldberg said these types of institutions tend to lag behind in accommodations.

Part two of the study was more open-ended. The researchers simply asked how institutions could do better regarding their transgender populations.

Again, a consistent theme that emerged was that students want proper restrooms. But many also want training, particularly for professors and other staff. The authors found that some institutions offer crash courses on these issues for both students and employees, but the

participants in the survey reported that either the courses were sparsely attended or many of the same people came to them, so it was more “preaching to the choir,” researchers said.

One participant suggested that these types of lessons be mandatory. Participants had specific recommendations what should be taught, too: terminology for transgender people, including proper pronouns.

Names were a major issue as well. Often participants felt discomfort in class when professors would use not their preferred name but their legal one, which is often referred to as their “dead” name. Participants said they wished there were easier avenues to change their name with their institution -- for instance, their legal name could still be on record, if necessary, but that day to day they would be called by the name that matched their identity.

Changing the names in a university system isn’t always easy -- something that Goldberg recognized. But she said that if an institution is advertising that it’s LGBTQ inclusive, it needs to make sure that everyone, from dining services to the registrar, knows. It shouldn’t be incumbent on students to inform all of their professors that they wish to be addressed by a different name, she said.

When students felt more at ease to express themselves and their gender identity, they reported a greater sense of belonging on the campus, the study found. When they felt supported, through policy or otherwise, they also felt more at home.

“There isn’t one answer,” Goldberg said of being inclusive. “It doesn’t mean everyone should be asking for pronouns. Being gender inclusive means different things to different people.”

The paper was published last month in the *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*.