

Being an Ally to Transgender Students

Everyone has a gender identity and a gender experience. Most people experience their gender identity as conforming to their physical sex. That is, most people who are born with female bodies also have a feminine gender identity (e.g., “I identify as a woman” or “I like to dress in a feminine manner”), and most people who are born with male bodies have a masculine gender identity (e.g., “I identify as a man” or “I like to dress in a masculine manner”). Some individuals experience their gender identity as not conforming to their sex assigned at birth (e.g., a person who is assigned female at birth but does not have the internal sense that they are a girl/woman or a person who is assigned male at birth who does not have the internal sense that they are a boy/man). These individuals may be described as “transgender.” Broadly speaking, transgender people are individuals whose gender experience, expression, and/or identity differs from conventional expectations based on their birth sex. The word “transgender,” or “trans,” is an umbrella term, which is often used to describe a wide range of identities and experiences.

Don’t assume you can tell if someone is transgender.

Transgender and genderqueer people do not all look a certain way or come from the same background, and many may not appear “visibly trans.” Indeed, many trans people live most of their lives with very few people knowing their trans status.

Don’t make assumptions about a trans person’s sexual orientation.

Gender identity is different than sexual orientation. Sexual orientation is about to whom we are attracted. Gender identity is about how we know our own gender. Trans people can identify as gay, lesbian, straight, bisexual, asexual, queer, etc.

Be careful about confidentiality, disclosure, and “outing.”

Some trans people feel comfortable disclosing their trans status to others, and some do not. Knowing a trans person’s status is personal information and it is up to them to share it with others. Do not casually share this information, or “gossip” about a person you know or think is trans. Not only is this an invasion of privacy, it also can have negative consequences in a world that is very intolerant of gender difference—trans people can lose jobs, housing, friends, and sadly have even been killed upon revelation of their trans status.

Understand the differences between “coming out” as lesbian, bisexual, or gay (LBG) and “coming out” as trans.

Unlike “coming out” in a LBG context, where the act of disclosing one’s sexuality reveals a “truth” about that person’s sexual orientation, disclosing one’s trans status often has the opposite effect. That is, when a person “comes out” as trans, the listener often assumes the “truth” about the trans person is they are somehow more fundamentally a member of their sex assigned at birth, rather than the gender with which they are currently identifying/living. In other words, sometimes “coming out” makes it *more difficult* for a trans person’s gender to be fully recognized.

Do not tolerate anti-trans remarks or humor in public spaces.

Consider strategies to best confront anti-trans remarks or jokes in your classroom, lab, office, residential group, or organization. Seek out other allies who will support you in this effort.

If you don’t know what pronouns to use, ask.

Be polite and respectful when you ask a person which pronoun they prefer. Then use that pronoun and encourage others to do so as well.

Be patient with a person who is questioning their gender identity.

A person who is questioning their gender identity might shift back and forth as they find out what identity and/or gender presentation is best for them. They might, for example, choose a new name or pronoun,

and then decide at a later time to change the name or pronoun again. Do your best to be respectful and use the name and/or pronoun requested.

Don't try to tell a person what "category" or "identity" they fit into.

Do not apply labels or identities to a person that they have not chosen for themselves. If a person is not sure of which identity or path fits them best, give them the time and space to decide for themselves.

Don't assume what path a trans person is on regarding surgery or hormones, and don't privilege one path or another.

Affirm the many ways all of us can and do transcend gender boundaries, including the choices some of us make to use medical technology to change our bodies. Some trans people wish to be recognized as their gender of choice without surgery or hormones; some need support and advocacy to get respectful medical care, hormones, and/or surgery.

Don't ask a trans person what their "real name" is.

For some trans people, being associated with their birth name is a tremendous source of anxiety, or it is simply a part of their life they wish to leave behind. Respect the name a trans person is currently using.

Don't ask about a trans person's genitals or surgical status.

Think about it—it would not be considered appropriate to ask a non-trans person about the appearance or status of their genitalia, and it is not appropriate to ask a trans person that question either. Likewise, don't ask if a trans person has had "the surgery." If a trans person wants to talk to you about such matters, let them bring it up with you. Many people choose to not have surgery and others prefer not to speak about the surgery they have had. No one is more or less trans, nor more or less the gender they are presenting as, based on surgery.

Don't ask a trans person how they have sex.

Similar to the questions above about genitalia and surgery—it wouldn't be considered appropriate to ask a non-trans person about how they have sex, so the same courtesy should be extended to trans people.

Don't police public restrooms.

Recognize that gender variant people may not match the little signs on the restroom door—or your expectations! Encourage schools, businesses and agencies to have unisex bathroom options, and offer to accompany a trans person to the bathroom, in a "buddy system," so they are less vulnerable.

Don't just add the "T" without doing work.

"LGBT" is now a commonplace acronym that joins lesbian, bisexual, gay, and transgender under the same umbrella. To be an ally to trans people, gays, lesbians and bisexuals need to examine their own gender stereotypes, their own prejudices and fears about trans people, and be willing to defend and celebrate trans lives.

Know your own limits as an ally.

Don't be afraid to admit you don't know everything! When dealing with a trans person who may have sought you out for support or guidance, be sure to point that person to appropriate resources when you've reached the limit of your knowledge or ability to handle the situation. It is better to admit you don't know something than to provide information that may be incorrect or hurtful.

Listen to trans voices.

The best way to be an ally is to listen with an open mind to trans people themselves. They are the experts on their own lives! Talk to trans people in your community. Consult the LGBT Center to find out where to learn more about trans lives.