

Gender Expansive Guidelines for the University Classroom

Brief Description

Guidelines to cultivate an inclusive learning environment that center care and prevent harm for gender expansive students.

Introduction

Northwestern University is committed to the [Principles of Inclusive Teaching](#), which emphasize that consideration of students' identities is important both for their learning and for the cultivation of a welcoming course climate. These guidelines for the university classroom are motivated by the [GQNBT Task Force Report](#) and the [Student-Led Survey Report](#) and intended to empower instructors to develop safer, affirming, and inclusive learning environments for gender expansive students.

Many gender-queer, non-binary, and transgender (GQNBT) experience subtle to severe discrimination and denial of human dignity in educational environments ([APA, 2015](#); [Agénor et al., 2022](#)). The indignities can include not using a person's preferred name or pronouns, endorsing a culture of gender normative and binary ideas and behaviors, and denying one's bodily autonomy ([Nadal, Skolink & Wong, 2012](#); [UN IESOGI, 2021](#)). According to minority stress theory ([Meyer, 1995](#); [Rood et al., 2016](#)), these experiences can negatively affect the health and well-being of gender expansive people. Furthermore, gender expansive students with multiple oppressed identities may experience greater stress and restricted access to resources, which can negatively impact school persistence ([APA, 2015](#); [Barrita et al., 2023](#); [Crenshaw, 1991](#)). It is also important to recognize the resilience of individuals in gender expansive communities, as reflected in their higher rates of help-seeking behaviors compared to their cisgendered peers ([Marx, Maffini & Peña, 2022](#)). Other resilient communities from which gender expansive students can come from include Black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC), LGBTQ+, disabled, first-generation, and otherwise historically minoritized communities and, subsequently, they do not have one-dimensional, monolithic, or similar experiences.

The Gender Expansive Guidelines feature strategies across three themes: honor students' names and pronouns, model gender inclusion, and educate beyond the [gender binary](#). Some of these strategies may be valuable for personal reflection while others can be incorporated into an instructor's facilitation. In applying these guidelines, consider your instructional context and classroom characteristics. The evidence-based strategies presented in this resource are intended to benefit all students, with a particularly equitable impact on gender expansive students.

Honor Students' Names and Pronouns

How can you honor student names and pronouns in ways that facilitate gender expansive students' autonomy around disclosure? There are several ways you can learn about your students before and during class, including:

- Refer to the student roster that is available in the Canvas learning management system in which Northwestern students can now [update their names and pronouns](#) (that is, how one should refer to the student in the third person). Ask students to ensure their Canvas names accurately reflect the names and pronouns they want to go by in class. You can demonstrate how to make name or pronouns updates in Canvas by including instructions in Canvas or on the syllabus. Remember to check Canvas periodically for any name or pronoun changes and let students know that you are paying attention.
- Before or on the first day of class, learn about your students by distributing a survey to gather information about your students' needs and learning goals, including an option to share the name and pronouns they would like to go by. If you need a place to start, check out the ["Who's in class?"](#) information form ([Addy, Mitchell & Dube, 2021](#)). Add a note on the survey letting students know that, if their name or pronouns change during the quarter, they are welcome to reach out and let you know.
- Be aware that one's context might influence students' decisions about pronoun usage. As one of our student consultants noted, it may be important to "establish different boundaries in public versus private for students who may not be fully out in regard to things like name changes." Therefore, you should let the other person lead when it pertains to the use of their names and pronouns, especially in public spaces.
- In larger classes, normalize the practice for students to re-introduce their names and, optionally, pronouns every time they speak. Explain that you will model this by beginning every class by re-introducing your names and pronouns. Facilitate community building activities throughout the quarter for re-introduction opportunities, such as giving directions for introductions as part of the assignment instructions for group work and group projects.
- Avoid deadnaming, which is referring to someone by a name that they do not or no longer use. Deadnaming is especially harmful for the mental health of gender expansive people, because doing so (intentionally or unintentionally) can activate distress related to gender dysphoria and trauma ([Russell et al., 2018](#)).
- If you make a mistake (e.g., [misgendering](#) and deadnaming), take responsibility by acknowledging your mistake, make a point to apologize ([McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022](#)) as close to the time of the occurrence as you can, and correct yourself ([Spade, 2011](#)). Reflect on what you can do to ensure that this does not happen again. For example, you may want to make an intentional effort to not repeat your mistake by practicing speaking about that person using their correct name and pronouns to yourself until it becomes familiar ([Harbin, 2016](#)).

Model Gender Inclusion

How can you model gender inclusion in ways that support gender expansive students? There are a few techniques you can use to cultivate a welcoming classroom, including:

- When discussing content by or about gender expansive experiences, avoid tokenizing gender expansive students—that is, do not expect one person to speak on behalf of an entire community. Acknowledge gender expansive students' perspectives in classroom activities and discussion and invite *all* students to participate in critical thinking exercises and thought partnership about experiences.
- Pay attention to gender diversity (or lack thereof) and barriers to engagement in your courses. Notice which students across gender identities are drawn to or are consistently present in the space and why. When possible, routinely modify the composition of students to increase gender diversity for small group discussion and group projects.
- Avoid making assumptions about students' pronouns or gender identity based on their name or gender expression. Until you successfully learn a students' pronouns, refer to a student by their name or try to use non-gendered pronouns like 'they/them' or '[ze/zir](#).' If a student asks for a recommendation or reference, ask how they would like to be referred to in their letter.
- Recognize that gender expansive students are members of resilient communities ([Nicolazzo, 2017](#)). Be careful not to exclusively discuss issues related to gender expansive identities from a deficit, victimhood, or dehumanizing mindset. Find ways to recognize the resilience of gender expansive people as creative, strong, and thriving.
- Establish group agreements or guidelines that outline expectations and norms for how to engage in class discussion to meet course learning objectives and outcomes, including how to acknowledge and address mistakes or microaggressions related to misgendering. Depending on your instructional context and capacity, you can co-create a list of participatory habits with your students that honor their values and goals for learning, including how the class wants to account for potential name and pronoun changes, as well as a space for conversation on how you and the students want to give and receive feedback regarding correcting and being corrected when it comes to names and pronouns.
- Consider whether your classroom is held in buildings with or without readily accessible bathrooms for students of all gender identities. Identify and share where the nearest all-gender or non-gendered bathrooms are in relation to the classroom ([Evanston campus](#), [Chicago campus](#)). Add this information to your syllabi and mention it on the first day of class. The map for the Evanston campus now has a filter for all-gender bathrooms. If an all-gender or non-gendered bathroom is not easily accessible, then reach out to your program director/departmental chair and/or dean to raise awareness about this issue.
- If you are comfortable and confident, communicate your pronouns first. Update your email signature and instructional technology profiles (e.g., Canvas and Zoom) to include your pronouns. Introduce yourself with your pronouns to students in and outside of class (e.g., office hours, co-curricular events). Include your pronouns and information about why pronouns matter on your syllabus ([Searle Center's DEI Syllabus Statements](#); [Zane, 2016](#)). This is an opportunity to proactively explain why gender inclusion is part of cultivating a welcoming classroom climate. According to a Northwestern student consultant, when a professor shares their pronouns while introducing themselves, it is a "small thing, but it makes a difference." They added, "it makes the space feel immediately safer, and it's an intentional effort to make it an inclusive space."

Educate Beyond the Binary

How can you incorporate theories and practices that acknowledge *and* challenge the primacy of the gender binary? There are some things you can do encourage students to recognize *and* reckon with the assumption of the gender binary in your course and disciplinary discourse, including:

- Acknowledge and inquire when the gender binary is assumed in your course. In assignments, provide feedback to students whose research or writing reinforces the gender binary (e.g., ‘male’ and ‘female’ or ‘men’ and ‘women’ as variables) and give examples of how the student might change or revise their statements to be more gender inclusive.
- Substitute common gender binary language in English and other languages for more gender expansive, gender inclusive, or [gender-neutral](#) language. Instead of referring to the class or groups as “you guys” or “ladies and gentlemen,” call groups of students by “you all (or y’all)” or “everyone.” Note that there can be a range of (dis)comfort, (in)experience, and (un)familiarity with gender expansive, gender inclusive, or gender neutral language among students.
- Find opportunities to use gender inclusive language or provide gender expansive examples for activities and assignments. Invite guest speakers who can present gender expansive issues and topics related to your course content.
- Review your course and curricular content for [gender binary essentialism](#), [trans erasure](#), and conflating sexual orientation with gender identity. Revise and update assigned readings or case studies to include gender expansive experiences, perspectives, or references. Notice the representation of scholarship by gender expansive researchers, theorists, or practitioners in your course materials. Research and assign readings by gender expansive scholars on topics beyond gender expansive identities.
- Interrogate your own language, biases, assumptions, and privileges related to gender. Identify how they show up in your teaching and impact students’ learning. Pay attention to gender-based microaggressions—everyday comments and actions that can reinforce harmful beliefs and negative power dynamics. Examples of common gender microaggressions include: relegating women and femme graduate teaching assistants to notetaking or secondary roles, consistently viewing men as more competent leaders or class contributors, saying phrases like “I’m sorry, you don’t look like a [gender identity]” or “If you’re not a [gender identity], then what are you?” or asking invasive questions regarding physical anatomy or characteristics.
- Avoid [conflating sexual orientation with gender identity](#) or flattening the complex experiences that exist with gender expansive communities.
- In your and your students’ research, address any conceptual and methodological barriers that could impede your ability to accurately capture gender expansive experiences and perspectives. Taking gender categories into account enriches your understanding of the phenomena of interest.
- Recognize when you are holding hesitation, resistance, or confusion around adapting ideas and practices around gender expansive inclusion. Assess your affective reactions to attitudinal change by noticing the characterization of inclusive practices as “extra” or “excessive” effort ([McEntarfer & Iovannone, 2022](#)) (e.g., “That sounds made up,” or “There are too many gender identities and pronouns to keep straight these days—I can’t keep up”).

Conclusion

Evidence-based strategies can be used to cultivate an inclusive learning environment that centers care and prevents harm for gender expansive students. As you apply these approaches to honoring students' names and pronouns, modeling gender inclusion, and educating beyond the gender binary, we offer the following recommended readings to continue your learning. Please also refer to Northwestern University's Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion for additional information, resources, and updates on [gender inclusive initiatives](#).

Recommended Reading

Arao, B., & Clemens, K. (2013). "From safe spaces to brave spaces. In L. M. Landreman (Ed.) *The art of effective facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators* (pp. 135-150). Sterling: Stylus Publishing.

Edwards, J., & Baines, S. (2022). Queering our pedagogy: Engaging anti-oppressive practices as learners and teachers. *The Oxford Handbook of Queer and Trans Music Therapy*.

Goldberg, A. E., Kuvalanka, K., & dickey, I. (2019). Transgender graduate students' experiences in higher education: A mixed-methods exploratory study. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 12(1), 38-51.

Grant, J. M., Mottet, L. A., Tanis, J., Harrison, J., Herman, J. L., & Keisling, M. (2011). *Injustice at Every Turn: A Report of the National Transgender Discrimination Survey*. Washington: National Center for Transgender Equality and National Gay and Lesbian Task Force.

Hunter, J., Butler, C., & Cooper, K. (2021). Gender minority stress in trans and gender diverse adolescents and young people. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 26(4), 1182-1195.

Kean, E. (2021). Advancing a critical trans framework for education. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 51(2), 261-286.

Knutson, D., Matsuno, E., Goldbach, C., Hashtpari, H., & Smith, N. G. (2022). Advocating for transgender and nonbinary affirmative spaces in graduate education. *Higher Education*, 83(2), 461-479.

Acknowledgments

These guidelines were created by peer benchmarking and literature review conducted by the authors and reviewed by educational developers at the Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching and Advisory Board Members, including Eli Kean, Jennifer Keys, Joan Johnson, Lauri Dietz, Michelle Manno, Qiu Fogarty, and Sarah Brown. We interviewed and compensated three student consultants at Northwestern University for feedback informed by their lived experiences. For the protection of their privacy, they are referred to in the document as “student consultants.”

How to Cite This Guide

Sandoval-Lee, E. Y. & Veronica Y. Womack. “Gender Expansive Guidelines for the University Classroom.” *Searle Center for Advancing Learning and Teaching Guide*. Northwestern University. © 2024. Licensed under [Creative Commons](#) Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International.

We are here for you. As you engage in ongoing reflection about ways to enhance teaching and deepen student learning, The Searle Center offers thought partnership and support. Check our [calendar of events](#) or [schedule a consultation](#).