

# Trans-Inclusive College Records

## *Meeting the Needs of an Increasingly Diverse US Student Population*

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**Abstract** This article focuses on one area in which most US colleges and universities fail to meet the needs of trans students: the ability to use a name and gender other than the name and gender assigned to them at birth and to indicate their personal pronouns on campus records and documents. After explaining why name, gender, and pronoun processes are needed, we present cases studies of how aspects of these processes were carried out at the University of Michigan and the University of Vermont, two of the first schools to make these changes. By describing the means by which these institutions did so, we hope to encourage more colleges and universities to develop similar policies and procedures.

**Keywords** campus policies, college information systems, trans data collection, trans students, trans-supportive colleges

Colleges and universities in the United States largely remain entrenched in a gender binary and, as a result, fail to provide equitable access, creating an uncomfortable if not a hostile environment for students who identify as gender nonconforming. Trans students face discrimination in campus housing, bathrooms, locker rooms, and athletics, which are commonly divided into “female” and “male”; are invisible in most college curricula; and lack access to supportive health care and counseling services (Beemyn 2005; Beemyn, Curtis, et al. 2005; Bilodeau 2009; Goodrich 2012; McKinney 2005). A growing body of literature (Beemyn, Domingue, et al. 2005; Hobson 2014; Singh, Meng, and Hansen 2013) offers recommendations and best practices for addressing the needs of and improving the campus climate for trans students, but relatively few colleges and universities have implemented any of these policies (Beemyn 2015).

In this article, we focus on one area in which most US colleges and universities fail to meet the needs of trans students: the ability to use a name and gender other than the name and gender assigned to them at birth and to indicate their personal pronouns on campus records and documents. These changes are

lawful in all states and have been made easier to implement at most colleges as a result of the pioneering work of the University of Vermont, the University of Michigan, and other schools that have modified the most commonly used student information system software (Beemyn 2015). By not offering this option when it is readily available, colleges and universities violate the privacy of trans students; publicly out them, thereby exposing them to possible violence and harassment; and create a situation in which the institution will inadvertently discriminate against them in gender-segregated environments like housing, bathrooms and locker rooms, and athletic settings. By explaining why name, gender, and pronoun processes are needed and how these changes can be accomplished, we hope to encourage more colleges and universities to develop such policies.

### **The Importance of a Trans-Inclusive Records Process**

While more trans students are coming out before or when they enter college, many who want to change their first names legally are not in a position to do so. They may be financially dependent on a parent(s) who is opposed to the change, or they may be financially independent and cannot afford the cost of the legal process, which can be as much as a couple of hundred dollars. Newly out students may not be ready to take the major step of a legal name change, even if they are publicly presenting as a gender other than their gender assigned at birth. Thus, from a practical standpoint, it is a valuable service for colleges and universities to offer trans students the ability to use a first name other than their legal first name on campus records and documents, including course and grade rosters, advisee lists, directory listings, e-mail addresses, and unofficial transcripts. Such an option also helps students who are known by a nickname and international students who wish to anglicize their first names.

Giving students the ability to change the gender marker on campus records is similarly an important accommodation, even though they are largely limited at this point to switching from one binary gender category to the other. Trans people cannot change the gender on their birth certificates in many states without evidence of gender-affirming surgery, and in some states, they also cannot change their driver's licenses without such proof (Lambda Legal 2015; National Center for Transgender Equality 2013). However, physicians in the United States generally do not perform gender-affirming surgeries on individuals under eighteen years of age, making it impossible for traditionally aged college students to change their gender marker before entering college. The surgeries are not covered under most private or student health insurance, thus few students will be able to do so during college without parental financial support. Furthermore, many students who present as a gender different from their assigned gender have no interest in surgery; they do not feel that they have to change their bodies in

prescribed ways to identify and present as their true selves. Others are not ready to make such a life-changing decision in their late teens or early twenties (Rankin and Beemyn 2012). Colleges and universities should not police students' gender by requiring major, expensive surgeries that they may not want or be ready for, in order to make a relatively simple informational change to their campus records.

While changing the name and gender marker on students' records, or giving them the ability to indicate the pronouns they use for themselves, may seem like small matters from the perspective of the institution, the value to students can be immeasurable. It is insulting and hateful to dismiss a trans person's identity by not referring to them as how they see themselves. For students who are not known publicly as trans, a mismatch between their birth and chosen name or between their assigned pronouns and the ones they actually use can also lead to their being outed, such as when their instructors call roll in class, when they apply for a job and have to submit a transcript, whenever they have to present their campus identification, and every time someone looks them up in the institution's online directory. In short, trans people who are not read as trans and who are not out are at constant risk of having their identity disclosed should their assigned name appear, which makes them targets for discrimination. Given the high rates of harassment and violence against gender-nonconforming people (Grant, Mottet, and Tanis 2011; Stotzer 2009), colleges and universities should not ignore the perilous positions in which they place their trans students.

Having a student's gender marker match how they present is likewise important for preventing harassment and discrimination and for avoiding possible legal action. Because college officials use gender in assigning campus housing, determining which bathrooms and locker rooms students are permitted to use, and deciding on which sports team students can compete, a gender marker that does not correspond to how a student identifies might mean that their institution will place them in unfair, uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous situations. Moreover, denying a student access to facilities consistent with their gender identity is considered a violation of Titles IV and IX by the US Departments of Justice and Education, and such complaints of discrimination are subject to investigation by the government's Office of Civil Rights ("Resolution Agreement" 2013; US Department of Education 2014). While litigation involving the rights of trans students has been limited to date, colleges and universities that fail to address the needs of their trans students today are increasingly likely to find themselves facing lawsuits in the future (Hunt and Pérez-Peña 2014).

### **Student Information Systems**

College information systems that communicate with federal and state agencies, such as with the Internal Revenue Service and the Social Security Administration,

are required to use a student’s legal name and the gender on their birth certificates to prevent record mismatches, so a different name and gender cannot be used on financial aid and campus employment records. A student’s legal name is also required on official transcripts because they are considered legal documents (some colleges insist that student identification cards and diplomas are also legal documents and thus require a student’s legal name, but this is typically a campus practice, rather than a legal need). Colleges and universities are free to let a student be known by a different gender and first name, as well as to include their pronouns, on records that are internal to a given campus. But changing information systems to allow students to indicate their chosen name and the pronouns they use is not simple. The assumptions that an individual goes by their birth name, that gender is a binary, and that an individual’s pronouns correspond to their assigned gender are woven into the fabric of existing information systems, which means not only having to make wholesale changes to software but also having to educate the software managers and programmers about the need for these changes (Johnson 2015; Ingraham, Pratt, and Gorton 2015).

Complicating matters, colleges and universities rely on multiple information systems for data collection, management, and communication within and between individual offices and departments. These systems often do not collect, code, or share information in the same way. The diagram below illustrates the Banner “preferred name” interface at the University of Vermont (UVM). Although

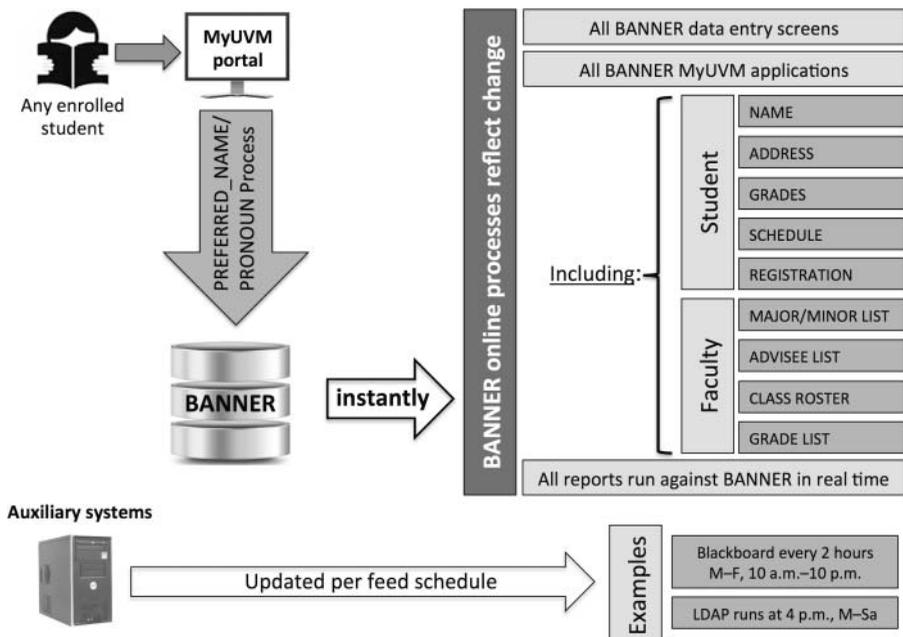


Figure 1. University of Vermont Pronoun and Preferred Name Field Process Flow.

the UVM's information system is less complex than systems at some larger campuses, changing its software still required significant planning and coding in order to ensure compliance with the Family Educational and Rights Privacy Act (FERPA) regulations and to avoid disruptions in data transfer between existing systems.

The intricacy of campus information systems makes modifying software complicated; even a seemingly small change to the main database requires adjustments to virtually all other systems. While providing chosen name and pronoun options throughout a college's information systems is very achievable, doing so requires an investment of time upfront, followed by periodic checking and testing, and the periodic retraining of administrative staff.

### **A Note on the Inappropriateness of the Term *Preferred Name***

The term *preferred name* became associated with creating a trans-inclusive name option on records in part because it is the designation of a field within the Banner student information database. The "preferred name" field was used at the University of Vermont to give students the option to specify a first name other than their legal name (see the section on Banner below). Since then, *preferred* has been widely adopted among trans advocates in higher education to describe the chosen first name of students, as well as the pronouns that students use to refer to themselves.

While the word *preferred* can be accurate for students who seek to change their name in information systems because they go by a nickname, this usage when applied to trans students often feels trivializing. It is the name and pronouns that they use, not their "preferred" ones; using any other name or pronouns is inappropriate, just as it would be for nontrans students. While it is understandable how the term *preferred* took hold, the higher education community needs to replace it with other language, like "chosen" first name. Pronouns require no modifier; they are simply the pronouns someone uses for themselves.

### *Case Study 1: PeopleSoft at the University of Michigan*

The University of Michigan is credited with being the first college to enable students to use a chosen name on all nonofficial campus records and documents. The issue arose in 2003 at a Trans Town Hall meeting sponsored by the Task Force on the Campus Climate for Transgender, Bisexual, Lesbian, and Gay (TBLG) Faculty, Staff, and Students, a group formed by the provost to examine the environment for LGBTQ people at the University of Michigan. Trans students and staff told the task force that "changing one's name at the University is very hard" and is especially a hindrance for individuals who are not openly trans, who constantly face being outed because their "old names" often remain on records and documents, even when they have legally changed them. In response, the task force included a recommendation in its final report in April 2004 that a

subcommittee for name changes be created to identify the scope of the problem and how it might be addressed (Task Force on the Campus Climate 2004). The subcommittee was subsequently formed, and its report, submitted in September 2005, recommended that Wolverine Access, the university's online administrative system, be upgraded to allow students and staff to input a "preferred name" that would appear in the University of Michigan online directory (TBLG Subcommittee for Name Changes 2005). This recommendation was accepted, and the change went into effect in April 2007. The following year, the university broadened the use of an individual's chosen name to all records in PeopleSoft, except where a legal name was required, such as on payroll records, license certifications for faculty and staff, and student transcripts (Frank 2007).

*Case Study 2: The Banner System at the University of Vermont*

In 2003, a graduate student who documented the difficulties experienced by trans students prompted UVM to establish a manual workaround to allow trans students to have their chosen first names appear on their campus ID cards and class rosters. In 2005, UVM updated its nondiscrimination policy to include "gender identity and expression," created trans-inclusive policies in housing and campus health care, and began a trans awareness training program that resulted in more than sixty presentations being given to students, staff, and faculty. In addition, since 2003, a student-led group has organized an annual daylong conference on trans topics for members of the campus community and other area colleges. All these steps helped prepare the university to support the records change project.

The version of the Banner system used by the University of Vermont includes a field for an "alternate first name." However, the field, which Banner calls a "preferred name," is essentially a nonfunctional placeholder; it is not included among the data elements readily available to be used within any of the vendor's template reports or within the user-built custom reports. At UVM, the goal was to make the existing "preferred name" field functional within and across the University's various systems in order to give students the ability to self-manage, via a Web interface, the way their first name is represented within all campus records.

The registrar assembled a task force for the project that included himself, a trans student leader, a faculty member who is a strong trans ally, the director of the campus LGBTQA center, system programmers, and a Web designer. To enable chosen names to appear on any documentation within UVM, programmers wrote a database procedure that says, "If preferred name exists, use it; otherwise, use first name." Students' chosen first names automatically appear on all reports generated directly from Banner, including their ID card and their entry in the university's online directory, unless they choose not to be listed. Students are also given the option of generating a new campus e-mail address based on the first name they have entered.

The task force decided early in the project to modify an additional field in order to give students the ability to specify the pronouns they want to appear, along with their name, on class rosters and advisee lists. Programmers and staff from the registrar's office worked steadily over a period of four months to get the front end of these changes ready to go live in January 2009. Prior to implementation, a series of trainings on the changes were provided to the managers of each of the various systems that interact with Banner.

Since UVM's "preferred name" option became available, it has been a popular option with both trans and nontrans students. In the first year, 527 of the university's approximately 10,000 students opted for a first name other than their legal name (in many cases, they entered a nickname or a shortened form of their name). About 500 students now choose this option each year. The 2,822 "preferred names" currently in the system represent a little over 28 percent of currently enrolled students. The university has been praised in the national press for its pioneering work on a trans-supportive name-change process, and a number of other colleges that use Banner have utilized UVM's code, which the university's registrar made available through the Banner online code repository.

Despite the success of the project, and the pride and goodwill it generated across campus, the work to make all of UVM's information systems represent students' names accurately and consistently is ongoing. In the past year alone, three separate offices have identified instances in which students' legal names were being displayed, either instead of or in addition to students' "preferred names." In one case, a student reported being outed by a campus office that publicly displayed their legal first name. The office concerned had worked earnestly on systems problems in the past, and staff members were convinced that they had resolved the issue. But in implementing some new Web interfaces for students, the programmer responsible for the work, who was unfamiliar with the "preferred name" field, failed to have this field appear instead of the "legal name" field. Looking into the issue, the office discovered a second systems problem. Two other offices have also had problems: one because of a massive systems overhaul by new programmers who were likewise unfamiliar with the "preferred name" field, and the other because of staff turnover at its reception desk. The point of these stories is not to suggest that this work is impossible to achieve but to demonstrate the complexity of making changes to information systems and the need for diligence and commitment.

In 2009, the University of Vermont also gave students the ability to designate the pronouns they use for themselves—*she*, *he*, *ze* (or to choose "name only" or "none")—via the same Web portal they use to specify their first name, becoming the first college in the country to offer students this opportunity. In response to student feedback, UVM recently added *they* as an additional pronoun

option. These pronouns, like chosen first names, are available for use by any campus subsystem. At a minimum, they appear automatically on course rosters, major and minor lists, and advisee lists. The appearance of pronouns, including less familiar gender-inclusive ones, has prompted surprisingly little controversy among UVM faculty. New faculty are alerted during their campus orientation to expect the appearance of pronouns on their class rosters, and since the change, there have been only a handful of reports of pushback by a faculty member. While UVM's pronoun options fall short of the fifty-six choices currently available to Facebook users (Oremus 2014), the presence of options beyond *she/he* is important for the full inclusion of students who identify outside a gender binary.

### Conclusion

Since the University of Michigan pioneered the ability to use a chosen name in PeopleSoft and the University of Vermont did the same in Banner, more than 130 colleges and universities have changed their policies and information systems to enable students to use a chosen name on campus records and documents (Beemyn 2015). Many more institutions will undoubtedly make this change in the next few years, as trans students advocate for their schools to follow suit and as more schools recognize the importance and feasibility of making this option available. But less than half of the colleges and universities with a name change process also provide a means for trans students to easily change the gender marker on campus records from M to F or F to M, and no school gives students the ability to identify officially outside a gender binary. Moreover, while it has been more than five years since the University of Vermont modified its software to enable students to indicate the pronouns they use for themselves, only one other school (Hampshire College) is known to have a similar process (Beemyn 2015). Non-binary trans students continue to be ignored, and their needs remain unaddressed. For colleges and universities to be fully trans-inclusive, they have to recognize and support all gender-nonconforming students.

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