

Best Practices for Gender Inclusion in Teaching

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Introduction

Penn State has [several](#) educational equity initiatives on the cutting edge of campus educational equity measures regarding gender and sexually diverse individuals, such as our [gender-inclusive housing](#); our free [Clothing Transit Center](#) through 3rd Way Collective; the expansion of the [Sexual and Gender Diversity Center](#); our ongoing development of [gender-inclusive bathrooms](#); and informed consent regarding hormone therapy in our [University Health Services](#). Most of these initiatives focus on undergraduate students (and to a lesser extent, graduate students), and - important to note - are limited in their availability, existing primarily at the University Park campus despite growing [resources](#) at our Commonwealth Campuses and World Campus. However, there are key aspects of student, faculty, and staff experiences at Penn State that could be adjusted to foster more inclusive classroom experiences, and more ethical, updated research experiences. This document illustrates why expanding diversity and inclusivity measures and taking a broad, multi-pronged approach will have [positive repercussions](#) for teaching and student success ([Staples et al., 2018](#)); research design and implementation (GenIUSS, 2014); and other Penn State initiatives ([Garvey et al., 2017](#)).

The first section discusses [changing demographics](#) across the United States regarding [sexual identity and expression](#) (to whom one is attracted and how that is expressed, e.g., [lesbian](#), [gay](#), [bisexual](#), [pansexual](#), [queer](#), [asexual](#), [straight](#)), [gender identity](#) (the gender/s with which one aligns, e.g., [transgender](#), [non-binary](#), [cisgender](#), [agender](#), [two-spirit](#), [genderqueer](#)), and [gender expression](#) (how one expresses the social/external aspects of gender, e.g., [feminine](#), [gender non-conforming](#), [masculine](#), [butch](#)); and lays out why these changing demographics matter to a large multi-campus research institution like Penn State.

The second section moves on to a key aspect of educational equity: pedagogy and classroom experiences, the core of any student experience and a vital component of faculty labor ([Ambrose et al., 2010](#)). This section outlines what teaching inclusive of gender and sexually diverse students might look like; as well as what it means to be gender and sexually diverse while teaching a class ([DeVita & Anders, 2018](#); [Wells, 2018](#)). Inclusive pedagogy involves time, labor, and being self-reflexive, so this section will also touch

upon the differences among graduate seminars, large survey classes, and World Campus classes regarding power, diversity, and participation (Alexander, 2005).

Gender and Sexual Diversity in Higher Education: The Importance of Ethical and Inclusive Pedagogy

"At a time when... scholarship and curricula in general have yet to become very inclusive of [queer and transgender] people, a growing number of mostly younger queer individuals are identifying beyond or outside of bisexual and transgender" ([Beemyn, 2015, p. 359](#)). Indeed, Beemyn's work is corroborated by a number of surveys undertaken within the past decade seeking to gain more accurate information about the estimated 1 million transgender folks living in the United States ([Meerwijk & Sevelius, 2017](#)); these surveys found transgender, genderqueer, and non-conforming populations are on the rise ([Berberick, 2018](#)). Some of this may be due to the fact that researchers are including gender and sexually diverse populations within large-scale surveys (Goodman et al., 2019); and some may be due to increased visibility of gender and sexual diversity within higher education itself (Alexander, 2005). Our colleagues, peers, and students are increasingly gender and sexually diverse, and a key part of educational equity is [having the tools to be informed](#) on acknowledging and respecting these identities in the classroom and in the lab.

Classroom dynamics are constantly evolving, as are pedagogical strategies and best practices in an increasingly globalized, digitized university. Classes—whether small seminar courses, World Campus asynchronous meetings, or large introductory surveys—make up the core of a student's experiences at Penn State. As such, professors, lecturers, adjuncts, and graduate teaching assistants experience the complexities of translating research in an understandable way while also being mindful, and respectful, of the myriad identities of those they teach ([Ambrose et al., 2010](#)). This includes thoughtfulness regarding gender and sexual diversity in both the content of one's syllabus and in interpersonal interactions in order to foster equitable and inclusive learning environments for all students. Christine Sleeter's (2010) review article on the importance of inclusive pedagogy quotes Henderson and Kesson (2004): "**what we teach... embodies what we most value in our society. The curriculum, in all its complexity, is the culture. Embedded in it are our values, our beliefs about human nature, our visions of the good life, and our hopes for the future**" (p 194., quote p. 206). Thus, all aspects of pedagogy, from language on the syllabus to what instructors deem worthy of respect in interpersonal interactions, reflect personal and institutional cultures and norms.

Pedagogy Strategies

1. **Both students and professors bring *all* of their identities with them into the classroom:**

When designing syllabi and assignments, keep in mind the diverse range of identities and perspectives inhabiting a classroom. Just as your identities are important to you, the identities of those around you are important to them and worth equal respect and consideration; these aspects of who we are are “**embodied and interpersonal in everyday life**” (Alexander, p. 47). When you tell someone your pronouns (e.g., the verbal aspects of your gender identity such as "she" or "his"), you deserve to be referred to accurately. Similarly, when someone notifies you of their pronouns, it is crucial to use these pronouns regardless of setting. This impacts how we write as well: the American Psychological Association's (APA) recently updated their style guide to include the singular "they" (e.g., they took an exam), which may change how we write assignments and syllabi—the APA has [specific examples on their blog](#).

2. **Respect those whose gender and sexual identities and expressions may be different from your own:**

If a colleague, professor, and/or student informs you their [pronouns](#) are different from what you have been using, e.g., this individual uses “she” and you have been referring to her as “he,” then it is your responsibility as an educator and/or a student to use “she” in subsequent conversations. Practicing pronouns is just like practicing the names of students you have just met: it may take a few tries, but practice does indeed make perfect! If you make a mistake, it is simplest to [apologize](#), correct yourself, and move forward (Jones, 2017).

3. **First day of class information gathering** Regardless of whether you are teaching a World Campus or in-person course, there is a simple and ethical way to be sensitive to all sexual and gender identities while being mindful of student privacy. Instructors often do surveys or otherwise collect information from students on the first day of class. Doing this in writing gives faculty information that helps them to get to know their students, get contact information that may otherwise be difficult to find, and gives a way for instructors to discretely learn important information while informing students their names and pronouns will be respected. This normalizes discussing and sharing pronouns without forcing students to declare their pronouns in front of a classroom, which can be intimidating. Instructors should consider the following questions on such a survey (and of course should add additional course-specific questions):

- ◆ Name you go by and how to say it: _____
- ◆ Penn State ID (e.g., lfs5137): _____Pronouns (e.g., [they/her/zir/him](#)): _____
- ◆ Best way to contact (e.g., phone number [optional]): _____
- ◆ Reason for taking class / any specific interests?: _____

- ◆ Anything you want me to know as we begin the semester (e.g., you have a busy schedule, ESL student, you hate chemistry, pets, etc.)?:
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Pedagogy Situations: First Day of Class

After your first class session has ended, a lingering student comes up to you and asks to speak in private. They tell you their name on Canvas is their legal name, but not the name this student uses—this student is transgender and their legal name does not reflect who they are. The student was quiet when you called their name during class out of fear of being made fun of by classmates.
What is a good way to proceed?

Before the beginning of the semester, you sent all your professors messages notifying them you use they/them pronouns. On the first day of class, you remind a professor afterwards about your pronouns, and the professor says "I don't know about this gender stuff, so I'm going to call you him. Is that all right?"
What is a good way to proceed?

Helpful tips for faculty

- Acknowledge your student's concerns and let them know you will adjust your roster to reflect the name they currently use
- It may be useful to tell your students they can [request Canvas name changes](#) even if different from their legal names

Avoid

- Minimizing the student's concerns and/or getting frustrated at them for staying quiet during class
- Calling the student by their legal name—especially in front of the class—if that is not the name they use

Helpful tips for students

- Students can anonymously [report bias](#) incidents such as the one above
- Typically, the process for discussing concerns would go as follows: bring the matter to your professor first, then speak with the undergraduate or graduate director if the professor was not responsive. If this does not resolve the issue, it may be useful to contact our [Center for Gender and Sexual Diversity](#) to talk with other students and

Avoid

- Minimizing the professor or peer's behavior as unimportant
- Internalizing that you did something wrong or that this interaction was your fault

		student affairs specialists; they can speak with the professor/department administration on your behalf	
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Conclusion

Ultimately, diversity and inclusion across the Penn State campuses should be a multi-pronged approach including student communities, policies, educational resources, and strategies for faculty, staff, and students. For all populations at Penn State—staff members, professors, adjuncts, graduate students, undergraduate students, alumni—understanding the importance of inclusive pedagogy and ethical research design regarding gender and sexually diverse populations serves dual purposes. Inclusive classroom and research design directly feeds into Penn State's existing educational equity and diversity initiatives, and it may also have a ripple effect in letting minoritized populations at Penn State know their education and research experiences are valued.

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