

WORLD & NATION

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Colleges making efforts to be more trans-friendly

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The cause for transgender rights still faces a long journey, but on many college campuses, policies are changing to remove gender identity barriers from campus life.

The University of Vermont recently announced that it will become the latest among a growing number of colleges which allows students to indicate their preferred name and gender, even if these are not those legally assigned at birth, and the pronouns they wish to be addressed by.

Many transgender people face difficulty in obtaining legal documentation that accurately reflects their gender identity. The National Center for Transgender Equality claims that only 1/5 of transgender individuals in the U.S. have updated all of their records. One third have updated none at all.

Individuals who identify as neither male nor female face even more hurdles.

Fortunately, for transgender college students, many higher educational institutions have been taking steps similar to the University of Vermont. Princeton is one school that already allows students to change their gender marker in school records and to indicate a preferred name that is used on class rosters, student ID cards, school email and the university's Blackboard electronic assignment system.

The University of Maryland and The Ohio State

University have adopted policies that allow students to change their gender marker with a letter from a mental health professional. The University of Massachusetts, Amherst and the University of Michigan allow students to select a preferred name to be used on course rosters, according to the Transgender Law and Policy Institute.

Asked whether Guilford would consider similar changes to its record keeping systems, President Jane Fernandes said she has not been approached about it, but that individuals can change their name in North Carolina by filing a simple declaration of intent.

However, the Triad Gender Association claims that the process is significantly more complicated.

The application for a legal name change in Guilford County includes being fingerprinted at the Sheriff's office, an FBI background check and the filing of a fair amount of paperwork.

But Guilford has begun stepping up its response to calls for greater flexibility in gender related policies, such as housing rules. A new gender-inclusive housing policy will be adopted starting in the fall 2015 semester, allowing students to select roommates without regard to gender.

Susanna Westberg, director of residential education and housing, says that the school continues to work with transgender advocates to increase its gender inclusivity in all areas.

"This is an enormous step forward, but not an end goal," said Westberg in an email interview.

She also discussed having to work around the housing system software, which was created with only two gender options, as well as plans to expand the number of gender-neutral restrooms on campus.

"We've been in conversation with Facilities about creating more gender-inclusive bathroom facilities in the residence halls as they undergo continued renovations in the future," said Westberg.

The issue of restrooms is often particularly problematic for transgender individuals. In 2011, a transgender woman named Chrissy Lee Polis was beaten in a Baltimore McDonald's for using a women's restroom. Such violence has not been a problem for Guilford, but gender-neutral restrooms are generally considered to be an important part of a trans-friendly institution.

Fernandes noted that Guilford has 21 gender-neutral restrooms.

"We can always use more of a good thing," she said when asked if more were necessary.

Some universities, including Ohio State and American University, have policies requiring all new construction, or large renovation projects, to include at least one gender-neutral restroom, according to the Transgender Law and Policy Institute.

"I would like to see Guilford become more responsive to gender issues of all types," said Fernandes.

The sentiment seems to be shared by many of her peers among the nation's college administrations.

STUDY PHOTO OF THE WEEK ABROAD



San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, Italy

This island is home to the Church of San Giorgio Maggiore, which was designed by Palladio in 1566.

Each week, the Guilfordian will feature a picture from students' experiences abroad. Whether you have studied or are currently studying in London, Sienna, Munich or somewhere else, we would love to see photos from your trip. Please email photos to Sara Minsky at minskysj@guilford.edu with information about the subject and where & when you studied.

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Contact Parag Budhecha with any questions.
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