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University of Iowa Proposal on Preferred Names and Accountability for Trans Students

We are living in a moment where the life of transgender people is being threatened by every level of government using discriminatory and violent policies. Many of these, including the banning of trans people from participation in sports or use of bathrooms, extend to university spaces where the ability of trans students to successfully carry out their education is threatened. Although many of these issues lie beyond the purview of individual universities, the ability of trans students to self-select their name is a relevant issue that could stand for significant improvement. As an institution which seeks to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion, the University of Iowa should be attentive to the way that trans people are able to navigate campus spaces. Thus, I propose that the University of Iowa should pursue a multi-faceted policy which advocates:

- allowing for the use of preferred names on university documentation, diplomas, commencement programs, correspondence, etc.
- creating accountability mechanisms by defining intentional deadnaming and misgendering as an act of gendered-based harassment per the University of Iowa Anti-Harassment Policy

Here, “deadnaming” refers to the intentional use of a name which is no longer in use by the individual being referenced (an example of this being the use of a legal name over a preferred name). For trans people, being deadnamed can be a difficult and psychologically harmful situation.

I will identify two primary problem areas when it comes to the University of Iowa’s policies regarding the ability of trans students to self-select their name within university systems including the ineffectiveness of current solutions as well as a lack of enforcement mechanisms. These problem areas cannot be solved under current models and therefore require action on behalf of the university to resolve.

When it comes to current methods of selecting a preferred name through the University of Iowa online portal, there are several options presented to students. These include the option to provide a preferred name and pronouns to be view by professors, as well as the ability to control when ones preferred name should be used. This means that if a student wishes to only use their preferred name in particular settings for safety (or other) reasons, there is an ability to self-select that.

Ineffectiveness

While these options are certainly beneficial and necessary, they are woefully ineffective at resolving a much larger issue. Despite the ability to choose a name that a professor may use in class, there is still the issue of countless documents, emails, and other correspondences that

continue to deadname students. According to the university website, an ‘official name’ is determined by the student’s application and should match the name used for social security purposes. Furthermore, an official name cannot be changed without a *legal* name change, and is “currently used on transcripts, verifications, diplomas, and commencement bulletins” (“Changing University of Iowa Records”). This means that if a student is not able legally change their name, they have no option but to see and hear their deadname every time they request a transcript, have it distributed to thousands of people attending commencement ceremonies, or receive a diploma with it listed.

While the University of Iowa does have services which attempt to help students alleviate the costs of a legal name change, this support is seemingly only offered to students who have experienced “major accidents” or an “unplanned event” (“Student Support Initiatives”). For students who merely have the inability to pay for such a service outside of unplanned accidents, the question remains of whether they are eligible for assistance. Additionally, factors other than costs exist as a barrier to getting one’s name legally changed. There are safety concerns for students with unsupportive parents, especially given that a legal name change would impact things like insurance or tax documents.

These barriers should not be a barrier to respecting the dignity of trans students, yet the universities policy of using an ‘official name’ on documents turns a supposedly momentous occasion like graduation into a harmful experience. There are no larger requirements beyond the university that a legal name must be used on something like a diploma; many universities allow for the use of a preferred name. Therefore, a University of Iowa policy which allows for the self-selection of a name for these documents would be entirely feasible.

One potential argument for the official name requirement is the difficulty in using one’s diploma in the future. A preferred name that does not match one’s legal name may create confusion for employers who need to view the diploma or agencies that may use a diploma as an official document. While this certainly may pose some issues for those who wish to change their name it ultimately should be the choice of the student. Given that trans people are forced to navigate these questions every day, it is certainly true that students have the ability to make educated and informed decisions over the name that gets put on their diploma.

Enforcement

Even the limited options the university does already have for self-selecting a name online fail the test of enforcement in the status quo. I spoke to a student on campus (who wishes to remain anonymous) about their experience with using the preferred name tool through the university’s website. Having changed her preferred name and pronouns before the start of the fall semester, this student began classes expecting professors to have received her updated name. However, upon showing up to classes, “I was immediately misgendered and referred to as man for the entire class for two weeks. I didn’t feel comfortable saying something”. This included both the use of the student’s deadname as well as incorrect pronouns. Upon finally working up the courage to speak to the professor, the student was informed that the professor “already knew” that they were trans and just wanted the student to inform them.

Not only was this response unacceptable as it put the burden on the student to personally re-disclose information about their identity, but the response from the university was equal in magnitude. After speaking to the Dean's office and Iowa Title IX office about steps that can be taken towards correcting the incident, the student was informed that misgendering was technically protect as an act of "free speech" and therefore nothing could be done about the incident. After being offered the option either stay in the class or drop it and graduate late the student was also asked to provide resources for "educating" the professor on why misgendering students is bad, a responsibility that should not be placed on the student effected in the first place.

The problem with the University of Iowa policy in this instance is the way "free speech" is applied to an instance of intentional misgendering. According to Section 14.2 of the Iowa Community Policies on Anti-Harassment, "Harassment" is defined as "intentional conduct, including speech, directed toward an identifiable person or persons" that "is sufficiently severe, pervasive, and subjectively and objectively offensive that it unreasonably interferes with work or educational opportunities or benefits..." ("Operations Manual"). The instances discussed above should have certainly qualified as such given the student was not able to regularly attend class due to constant misgendering. More broadly, "Trans people continue to suffer disproportionate levels of verbal, physical and sexual assault, mental ill – health, suicide, and gender – based violence in schools, workplaces, and other domains" (Bonner-Thompson, Mearns, and Hopkins). It would be irresponsible to detach larger-scale instances of violence against trans students from the everydayness of things like misgendering as both constitute an attack on trans social life that cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is necessary to update the universities interpretation of harassment policies to account for the positioning and experience of trans students at Iowa.

While there is certainly no single solution for making campus spaces safer for trans students, it is an issue of utmost importance that requires immediate action. Every barrier that a trans student must cross in pursuing their education is one that inhibits an ability to fully engage with the opportunities offered at the University of Iowa. Therefore, I hope my recommendations are taken into consideration.

Works Cited

- Bonner-Thompson, Mearns, and Hopkins. "Transgender negotiations of precarity: Contested spaces of higher education." *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 187, Iss. 3, September 2021. p. 227-230.
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