

Selene Colburn

# Beyond the bathroom wars

## Increasing gender-free restroom access in libraries

In May 2016, protesters affiliated with the student organization Justice for Queer and Trans Students occupied the University of Vermont's (UVM) Dean of Libraries' office to demand that the David W. Howe Memorial Library (then known as the Bailey/Howe Library) immediately convert select gender-segregated restrooms—meaning those labeled for use for only men or only women—to gender-free restrooms<sup>1</sup> to accommodate the needs of trans and gender non-conforming students<sup>2</sup> during spring finals week. The protest followed the delivery of a petition with more than 1,000 signatures seeking change, as well as ongoing conversations between the libraries and student activists. Student organizer Lindsey “Z.” McCarron told *The Vermont Cynic*, “This is an immediate and real need that is affecting people’s health and safety every day.”<sup>3</sup>

At the time, the four-story Howe Library was home to one single-occupancy, gender-free restroom on its ground floor. Students had a hard time locating it, and outdated signage created additional confusion about who could use it. Though this facility had been among the earliest gender-free restrooms on campus, students argued that the library, and many of its campus peers, had failed to keep up with university demands and best practices.

These protests occurred against a backdrop of national debate and legislation, occasionally dubbed the “bathroom wars,” that sought to govern how trans Americans

could access restrooms. In March 2016, the North Carolina legislature passed the Public Facilities Privacy & Security Act. This legislation required individuals to use restrooms or changing facilities in state buildings that corresponded to their sex at birth and prevented municipalities from enacting local antidiscrimination ordinances. The act increased national, media, and activist attention on the issue of restroom access for trans people.

Since 2013, legislation has been introduced in at least 24 states to enact similar limits on restroom access, though no comparable bills have passed into law.<sup>4</sup> Some states and municipalities have worked to increase gender-free restroom access or to protect the rights of trans restroom users.

### Why gender-free restrooms matter

Gender-free restrooms can be beneficial for many library patrons, including users who need assistance in bathrooms (e.g., small children, elders, or individuals with disabilities) and have caretakers of a different gender. Gender-free restrooms may also reduce overall lines.<sup>5</sup>

For trans or gender nonconforming patrons, access to a gender-free restroom

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is not just a matter of convenience, but a crucial health and safety issue. Individuals may spend long periods of their day without access to a restroom they can use free of fear, harassment, or even physical assault. This can lead to urinary tract infections, constipation, and complications in the form of more serious health issues. Individuals may refrain from drinking fluids throughout the day and may even sustain injuries from attacks. Some people avoid going out in public due to a lack of safe restroom facilities.<sup>6</sup>

A recent study found that trans college and university student respondents who were denied access to restrooms or housing in a college setting because of their gender expression, were at greater risk for suicidality, even after controlling for other factors.<sup>7</sup>

Forcing users to choose a bathroom based on gender also can be an unwelcome form of outing. Finally, patrons may have a hard time studying or finding information if they are distracted by the need to use a bathroom or if they have to leave a campus library to find a safe restroom.

The act of creating access to gender-free restrooms aligns with value statements for the library profession, including ALA's "Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sex, Gender Identity, Gender Expression or Sexual Orientation" statement that says, "library services, materials, and programs [must] be available to all members of the community the library serves, without regard to sex, gender identity, gender expression, or sexual orientation."<sup>8</sup>

## Building better bathrooms

Student protests at UVM quickly led to the formation of a Gender-Inclusive Restroom Task Force comprised of university students, administrators, faculty, and staff who worked intensively during the summer of 2016 to develop campus-wide recommendations.<sup>9</sup> Plans to expand gender-free restroom access in the Howe Library and other facilities continued simultaneously, with student input.

Converting a restroom from singled-gendered to gender-free can be as simple

as making an inexpensive change in signage. Several issues and considerations frequently arise in such transitions.

### *Signage and language*

There are huge variations in labeling gender-free restrooms. Pictograms on signs range from depictions of multiple individuals (in attempts to represent various genders), to symbols, to images of toilets.

Language on signage might read "all-gender," "gender-free," "gender-inclusive," "gender-neutral," or "uni-sex," or they might include playful interpretations, such as "everybody" or "just wash your hands." Student activists at UVM had a clear request that aligned with what advocates around the country increasingly see as best practice:<sup>10</sup> call the restroom a restroom and depict what a user can expect to find inside (toilets, urinals, changing tables, accessibility features, etc.). This approach avoids the potential for reinforcing a binary understanding of gender, which might continue to feel exclusionary to library users who identify as genderless or nonbinary. As one member of UVM's taskforce observed,



Gender-free restroom signage from at the Howe Library. Courtesy of Matt Heywood/Image Farm.

there should be no question that restrooms are intended for humans.

### *Single-stall and multi-stall access*

Student activists at UVM were clear that they wanted both single-stall and multi-stall restroom conversions. While the concept of multi-stall, gender-free restrooms exists in other parts of the world and has been adapted in the United States, this request produced some discomfort. Some employees raised concerns about both safety and privacy. Activists noted that there was no evidence that safety would be compromised and lots of evidence that safety would increase, particularly for students most at risk. They argued that multi-stall, gender-free restrooms could normalize the peaceful co-existence of a diverse range of gender expressions and provide additional sets of eyes on any concerning behaviors that might arise.

The library addressed privacy concerns by adding additional hardware to partitions between stalls in gender-free, multi-stall restrooms. Some task force members observed that this privacy enhancement would benefit users of all multi-stall restrooms, not just those defined as gender-free, and that heightened privacy is not an inherent need for gender-free restrooms.

### *Internal training and concerns*

The Howe Library engaged staff from the UVM Prism Center (formerly the LBTQA Center) for relevant cultural competency training and pragmatic discussion with library faculty and staff about upcoming changes. Additionally, the library provided in-depth talking points and background information so workers were prepared to handle any incidents or complaints. This helped to build internal buy-in and confidence. Libraries without access to a campus LGBTQ+ Center could partner with institutional diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives or local community organizations.

While expanding gender-free restroom access is an important and useful step,

UVM believes that limiting anyone's restroom access *only* to include gender-free restrooms should be avoided. The library provided this guidance: "All students who identify as male or female are welcome to use the corresponding restroom and should not be asked to re-locate to a single-use or [gender-free] restroom."

### *Additional renovation considerations*

External laws and regulations may determine what a library is able to accomplish. Significant renovations will likely require a library to bring its restroom up to current Americans with Disabilities Act standards, if this is not already the case. Local legislation, ordinances, and building and plumbing codes may apply. Some states and municipalities adopt versions of the International Plumbing Code that require bathroom fixtures be counted by gender. Libraries should check local ordinances and work proactively to resolve issues with the appropriate oversight bodies and institutional departments.

### **"A Genuine Success Story"**

In fall 2016, the Howe Library opened four new gender-free restrooms on its second and third floors, including two multi-stall restrooms, each of which can accommodate two users at a time. An additional single-occupancy, gender-free restroom was created as part of renovations to the library's first floor in 2017. Howe Library is now home to six gender-free restrooms, accommodating eight simultaneous users, with access on each of the library's four floors.

Library staff report that, with thousands of visitors a day, they've received zero complaints and some praise for the restrooms. Circulation Director Angus Roberston said, "Our experience with the opening of the gender-neutral restrooms has been entirely positive, and I consider it a genuine success story."<sup>11</sup>

McCarron, one of the lead student organizers, said, "While there is still more work to do, the changes in the library have made a difference for students. It was meaning-

ful to see that our efforts could produce change.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout this work, the UVM Libraries have been indebted to students for leading the way and for their thorough and persistent advocacy for best practices.

## Notes

1. I use the term *gender-free restroom* over a number of alternatives, because it describes a relationship to restrooms that does not rely on a particular understanding of gender. I’m indebted to staff at Outright Vermont for their perspective on best practices.

2. Throughout this article I use the term *trans*, rather than *transgender*, in hopes of employing the most inclusive and encompassing language available. For definitions and discussion of the terms *trans*, *transgender*, and *gender non-conforming*, see GLAAD, “GLAAD Media Reference Guide – Transgender,” accessed September 27, 2019, <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>.

3. “Bathroom Laws Ignite Activism,” *The Vermont Cynic*, May 7, 2016, <https://vtcynic.com/culture/life/bathroom-laws-ignite-activism/>.

4. Joellen Kralik, “‘Bathroom Bill’ Legislative Tracking,” National Conference of State Legislatures, July 28, 2017, <http://www.ncsl.org/research/education/-bathroom-bill-legislative-tracking635951130.aspx>. See also, Diana Ali, “The Rise and Fall of the Bathroom Bill: State Legislation Affecting Trans and Non-binary People,” April 2, 2019, NASPA Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education <https://www.naspa.org/rpi/posts/the-rise-and-fall-of-the-bathroom-bill-state-legislation-affecting-trans-ge>.

5. Ghent University-based “queueing theorists” found that bathroom wait times are significantly longer for women and could potentially be reduced from six minutes to a minute and a half by transitioning to gender-free restrooms. Ghent University, “No more queueing at the ladies’ room: How transgender-friendliness may help in battling female-unfriendly toilet culture,” *ScienceDaily*, July 14, 2017, <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/07/170714142749.htm>.

6. Mark A. Schuster, Sari L. Reisner, and Sarah E. Onorato, “Beyond Bathrooms – Meeting the Health Needs of Transgender People,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 375 (July 2016):101-103, <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp1605912>; Jeff Brady, “When a Transgender Person Uses a Public Restroom, Who is at Risk?,” National Public Radio, May 15, 2016, [www.npr.org/2016/05/15/477954537/when-a-transgender-person-uses-a-public-bathroom-who-is-at-risk](http://www.npr.org/2016/05/15/477954537/when-a-transgender-person-uses-a-public-bathroom-who-is-at-risk); and Jody Herman, “Gendered Restrooms and Minority Stress: The Public Regulation of Gender and its Impact on Transgender People’s Lives,” The Williams Institute, UCLA School of Law, June 2013, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/research/transgender-issues/herman-jpmss-june-2013/>.

7. Kristie L. Seelman, “Transgender Adults’ Access to College Bathrooms and Housing and the Relationship to Suicidality,” *Journal of Homosexuality* 63, no. 10 (2016): 1378-1399, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1157998>.

8. “Core Values of Librarianship,” ALA, adopted January 2019, <http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/corevalues> and “Access to Library Resources and Services Regardless of Sex, Gender Identity, Gender Expression or Sexual Orientation,” ALA, adopted June 30, 1993, last amended July 2, 2008, [www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/accesslgbt](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/intfreedom/librarybill/interpretations/accesslgbt).

9. Dot Brauer et al., *Gender-Inclusive Restroom Task Force Report: Findings and Recommendations* (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont, 2016), <https://www.uvm.edu/sites/default/files/media/GIRReport.pdf>.

10. For a deeply funny and highly sensible take on this, see Sam Killermann, “Solution for the ‘Confusing’ Gender Neutral Toilet Sign Issue,” *It’s Pronounced Metrosexual*, accessed September 27, 2019, <https://www.itspronouncedmetrosexual.com/2014/04/gender-neutral-bathroom-sign/>.

11. Angus Robertson, email communication to the author, June 12, 2019.

12. Lindsey “Z.” McCarron, text communication to the author, September, 20, 2019. ❧