

All-Gender Restrooms in the Library Workplace: Necessary and Possible

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Abstract

Does your library workplace have all-gender restrooms? Why not? In 2022, a task force of four employees at the UNT Library Annex, an off-campus office for library employees at a tier one research university in Denton, Texas, recognized the need for an all-gender restroom in the workplace. The task force executed an operational plan to convert an existing restroom at the UNT Library Annex into an all-gender restroom. This article provides insight into the process, explores challenges that arose, and shares lessons learned. This article seeks to increase awareness regarding the need for an all-gender restroom in the library workplace and provide practical steps for library employees to manage an all-gender restroom addition of their own.

Introduction

It is important that library employees feel safe at their workplace and do not feel stressed or uncomfortable about their bathroom usage. Alarming statistics of health complications among transgender and gender diverse people due to restroom avoidance show the need for widespread and normalized use of all-gender restrooms (James et al. 2017). At the UNT Library Annex, a private off-campus office that is open only to employees, we formed a small task force of three library employees with assistance from the Senior Associate Dean to plan the installation of an all-gender restroom. While there were 125 existing all-gender restrooms on the UNT Denton campus, none of these were located at the Library Annex, where forty-nine employees worked at the time of implementation. We recognized the need for an accessible restroom in our office for employees of any gender to use and worked quickly to create one using minimal staff time and resources. This article shares our process, challenges faced, and the results of this process.

Literature Review

Having only binary restroom options can lead to serious health consequences for transgender individuals. The 2015 US Trans Survey—the largest survey that is dedicated to transgender lives and more broadly represents transgender and gender diverse people—found that 59% of transgender respondents avoided using the restroom and 8% had developed kidney problems or UTIs from avoiding restroom usage, 23% of transgender employees within that year faced mistreatment, and unemployment rates were three times higher for transgender people than cisgender people (James et al. 2017, 10, 15). Suicide rates are higher among transgender individuals than the general population, with indication of a relationship found between suicide rates and institutional factors such as denial of gender-appropriate restroom usage (Seelman 2016). The lack of accommodations for transgender employees may be one of the contributing factors to higher rates of unemployment. Schwartz (2018) cites that non-binary people may feel the need to avoid going out in public, drinking water, or using the restroom, which can cause urinary tract infections. Ensuring that transgender individuals have equitable access to restrooms helps prevent mental and physical health complications.

The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA 2015) published a report recommending that employees have access to all-gender restrooms with lockable single stalls or single occupancy. Additionally, Restar and Reisner (2017, 1,934) recommend that the use of all-gender restrooms should be addressed with a “direct, institutional statement on gender inclusivity” to ensure anti-discriminatory policies and affirm individuals’ identities. Further, benefits include attracting prospective employees and retaining current employees by promoting diversity and inclusion (Lobell 2019). By popular demand, libraries are integrating all-gender restrooms because they provide access for everyone, which aligns with the American Library Association’s values (Colburn 2020, 388; Schwartz 2018). Illustrating this demand, early members of the ALA Social Responsibilities Round Table—now known as the Rainbow Round Table—passed a resolution requiring a certain percentage of all-gender restrooms at conferences (Ford 2020). In addition, the University of Vermont Libraries installed an all-gender restroom in response to student protest. After it was added, there were no complaints or negative feedback from their thousands of users (Colburn 2020, 387–89). Similar to the UNT Library Annex, the University of Vermont had all-gender restrooms on campus, but none in the library. While adding all-gender restrooms to library spaces is vital, there are other considerations, such as symbols and wording on signage, that must be addressed.

The symbols on restroom signage matter. Divisive displays of gender on all-gender restroom signs that promote binary genders or, at best, imply a third gender, can be harmful and confusing. If the restroom meets accessibility standards, the signage should clearly display the International Symbol of Access (ISA) (Out & Equal Workplace Advocates 2017). Signage should be binary-free, placed near the restroom entrance, have a picture of a toilet and other fixtures inside, and exclude any jokes such as “just wash your hands” (Colburn 2020, 388). The first two images in figure 1 are examples of what not to use; they rely on gendered imagery and potentially offensive depictions of non-binary individuals. The third image is much more inclusive, with no references to gendered imagery and a clear indication of accessibility (Figure 1. Out & Equal Workplace Advocates 2017, sec. On Signage).



Figure 1. Symbols for restroom signage from Out & Equal Workplace Advocates 2017 report, “Best Practices: Restroom Access,” from section, “On Signage”.

It is also necessary to consider the wording used on all-gender restroom signage. There is no consensus on how the restrooms should be labelled but options include “restroom,” “all-gender restroom,” and “universal restroom” (Schwartz 2018; Gender and Sexuality Campus Center n.d., sec. Terminology). Remember that “gender is never neutral” so avoid terminology such as “free” or “neutral” (Schwartz 2018, sec. Sending the Right Sign: Labels). While Colburn (2020) at the University of Vermont Libraries used “gender-free” and ALA’s Rainbow Roundtable used “gender neutral” (Ford 2020) to label their all-gender restrooms, these terms are not recommended by others (Schwartz 2018; Gender and Sexuality Campus Center n.d., sec. Terminology). Accordingly, we weighed these options when entering the planning and implementation process at the Library Annex.

The Process

UNT began an initiative to offer all-gender restrooms across its Denton campus in 2014. As of 2022, there were 125 all-gender restrooms: three multi-stall restrooms—with signage to emphasize the fact that anyone can use the restroom, regardless of gender—and 122 single-

stall restrooms that are available to people of all genders. The main library on campus, Willis Library, has one all-gender restroom on the fourth floor. During this project, we communicated with the UNT Pride Alliance, who developed a complete list of the all-gender restrooms available at UNT.

The Library Annex is a remote storage facility one mile from campus that is accessible only to certain UNT employees. Collection Management is housed there, along with parts of Preservation, Campus Facilities staff, a few Digital Libraries employees, and Special Collections Processing, totaling forty-nine employees at the time of the project. The building originally had two women's restrooms with two stalls each and two men's restrooms—one with two stalls and one urinal, and another with one stall and one urinal. As the number of employees at the Library Annex has grown, so has the diversity. We noticed the need for more inclusive restroom options and formed a task force to get to work.

Once the task force was formed, we began requesting approval from the necessary parties. We first asked the Dean of Libraries, who immediately agreed, so we took steps to determine what restroom location and arrangement of stalls and urinals would work best. As previously cited, other library publications have discussed the need for and nuances of installing an all-gender restroom. However, few have detailed their installation process or addressed buildings that are not open to the public like the Library Annex. By explaining our process, we hope to make it easier for others.

We chose the men's restroom that had only one stall and one urinal. This choice was made because it maximized the number of available stalls in the building overall and because the restroom is accessible. If our office building were open to the public, it would have been necessary to choose a location that is equally accessible to employees and students (Gender and Sexuality Campus Center n.d.). It is also important to research local plumbing and fire laws or ask the institution's appropriate department to ensure that the change does not affect any safety or occupancy laws regarding the number of restrooms required per staff member. For example, if a single stall is extended from the ceiling to the floor, it must have its own fire strobe and sprinkler. Many plumbing codes do not acknowledge gender diverse individuals but do require that a specific number of restrooms be available to men and women (Schwartz 2018, sec. Higher Eds Lead the Way). When we consulted Campus Facilities about these safety and occupancy laws, they approved our plan to convert the existing men's restroom. We then ordered a sign and a lock with an occupancy indicator to prevent awkward interruptions. While we did not go into the process with an established budget, our related costs were the task force's time and labor, the lock and sign, and Campus Facilities' staff time for installing it. Since

Campus Facilities already had these resources on hand at the university, our costs were minimal.

Joel Sanders (as cited by Schwartz 2018, sec. Single or Multiuser?) recommends against single-use restrooms because they can alienate non-binary people by implying a restriction of access to community facilities. However, this recommendation should not prevent libraries from converting a single-use restroom to an all-gender restroom if it is the most viable option. In addition to our process at the Library Annex, other libraries have made this choice, for example, the University of Kansas' Anschutz Library (Schwartz 2018, sec. Single or Multiuser?).

To meet the needs of all restroom users, Schwartz (2018, sec. Products and Fixtures) recommends providing menstrual hygiene products, removing urinals if possible, and, if the restroom is accessible to the public, including a changing table. At the Library Annex, we added a chest of drawers from our University's Surplus warehouse, stocked it with menstrual products, toilet paper, and room spray. However, we were not able to remove the urinal and do not need a changing table at this time because the building is an employee-only facility. To make the restroom more welcoming, we also added some decor.

Naming the restroom is where we had some extensive discussion. We checked with the UNT Pride Alliance to see what they suggested, which was to use the term "all-gender." A literature review also indicates that the term "all-gender restroom" is a safe, clear, and inclusive term to use (Schwartz 2018; Gender and Sexuality Campus Center n.d., sec. Terminology). However, we had to use the standard sign that Campus Facilities was willing to provide, which featured a binary female and male figure and the wording "Individual Restroom." Although we were not happy with the binary representation on our sign and do not recommend using signage with gendered symbols, we did like the provided wording of "individual restroom." We still colloquially refer to the restroom as the "all-gender restroom."

One of the major steps we prioritized throughout the process was establishing guidelines for restroom use (see appendix A). Our goals for the guidelines were to outline the need for the change, create clear expectations, and prevent misunderstandings. Clarifying that the all-gender restroom is for people of all genders to use was a priority for us. We provided a background section outlining the restroom's former status and the reasons for our decision to convert it. We cited the alarming statistics from the 2015 US Trans Survey (James et al. 2017) and included that our intention to convert the restroom is in line with the university's mission of fostering a caring, inclusive community. We outlined the location of the all-gender restroom in wording and visually through our building map and explained that people of any gender or ability can use the all-gender restroom. Additionally, we took the opportunity to explain that anyone can use any

restroom at the Library Annex, as no one is permitted to query or verify an individual's gender or accessibility needs.

There were a couple of considerations that we chose to address preemptively in the guidelines: (1) why we chose the rear men's restroom to convert, and (2) what to do if the all-gender restroom is occupied and it is needed for accessibility reasons. We chose the rear men's restroom because of its size and accessibility. If the all-gender restroom is in use, we recommended that employees wait until it is unoccupied. Or, if it is an emergency, we suggested they use the women's restroom next to the all-gender restroom. It is equally accessible and contains two lockable stalls with toilets, one of which is very spacious. Having addressed these issues in the guidelines, we were able to proactively acknowledge potential concerns.

Once we converted the restroom, we emailed the guidelines to all Library Annex employees. We also saved them in the drive that Library Annex employees have access to and referenced them in our orientation document so that new and existing employees could consult them at any time. To ensure that all UNT Libraries employees knew about the all-gender restroom, we submitted a story to the Libraries' weekly newsletter *Friday Frags*. The only issue that arose involved people forgetting to secure the new door lock. We suspect this issue was due to employees who are not always in the Library Annex being unaware of the change. To combat this, we placed a sign on the door to remind people to use the new lock.

Conclusion

Although we do not have usage statistics—for privacy reasons—we can confirm anecdotally that the all-gender restroom is being used regularly. Given the small number of employees at the Library Annex and the sensitivity of the subject, we did not conduct a formal survey. However, with no negative opinions voiced, we consider the all-gender restroom a success. That said, in hindsight we would have put a note on the door from the start to make sure employees were aware of the change. We also would have communicated with Campus Facilities earlier and spent less time deciding on the restroom signage. However, we are glad that we worked with the UNT Pride Alliance to learn about the preferred terminology and existing campus resources. We recommend that institutions consult similar offices for guidance. In considering the size of the task force, we found a group of three employees worked well. The work was distributed equally, meetings were easily coordinated, and members used their strengths.

In addition to its immeasurable, affirming impact, the very existence of the all-gender restroom at the UNT Library Annex may contribute to reduced physical and mental health issues among current and future employees. Both the supporting literature and our positive experience with this process indicate that library workplaces should consider implementing an all-gender restroom in their buildings.

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Appendix A: Guidelines for Annex Employees on Accessing the All-Gender Restroom

Background

Formerly, the Library Annex provided restroom access for employees and guests who identify as women (two restrooms) and those who identify as men (two restrooms). The conversion of one of these restrooms to a single-occupancy, all-gender facility provides safe restroom access for employees and guests who are transgender and gender diverse. It also adds a more private option for everyone.

The [US Trans Survey \(2016\)](#) demonstrates evidence of fear and discomfort around gender and bathroom usage not only being psychologically distressful but also physically harmful. The survey reports that 8% of their respondents developed a kidney issue or urinary tract infection from avoiding bathroom usage, 59% of respondents avoided using a restroom out of fear of confrontation, and 23% of workers within that year faced forms of mistreatment because of their gender. In addition, the [OSHA Sanitation Standard](#) now recommends providing employee accommodation with all-gender restrooms.

In Fall 2022, a small group of Annex employees met to discuss making an all-gender restroom accessible to ... employees and guests. Our goal is to make the Annex as inclusive as possible. This goal is in line with the university's mission of fostering a caring, inclusive community and prioritizing a safe environment for all, and echoes efforts across campus to create more all-gender restrooms.

Location

The all-gender restroom is located where the rear men's restroom used to be in the back hallway of the Annex, near the water fountain. The sign next to the restroom states "Individual Restroom" in campus room marker colors and braille. It has a toilet with a stall and a urinal with a wall division. The entire restroom is single-use and lockable. It is wheelchair accessible and very spacious.

Usage

Who can use the all-gender restroom?

- People of any gender.
- People of any ability.
- Everyone.

Who can use the men's and women's restrooms?

Anyone can use any restroom, as no one is permitted to query/verify an individual's gender or accessibility needs. However, due to socialization, personal safety, and political pressures, those who identify as or are perceived as women use the women's restrooms, and those who identify as or are perceived as men use the men's restroom.

Considerations

Why was the rear men's restroom chosen to convert?

The rear men's restroom was chosen because of its size, accessibility, and equipment. It contains a full stall and urinal. The two women's restrooms do not have urinals, and a sole occupant in the front men's restroom, which has two stalls and a urinal, would take away more opportunities for simultaneous bathroom use.

The all-gender restroom is the only restroom I can use due to accessibility concerns. What do I do if it is occupied?

You could wait until it is unoccupied. Or, if it is an emergency, you can use the women's restroom next to the all-gender restroom. It is equally accessible and contains two lockable stalls with toilets, one of which is very spacious. Anyone can use any restroom; no one is permitted to query anyone's gender or accessibility needs.

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