



## Complacency and Controversy

Transgender Policy on Pitt's Campus

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Contributor

### Abstract

The University of Pittsburgh updated its Nondiscrimination Policy in 2008 to include “gender identity and expression.” This article looks at the transgender policies of other universities in order to evaluate whether Pitt could be doing more to be an advocate for social equality.

**Keywords:** *transgender policy, nondiscrimination, University of Pittsburgh*



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## Complacency and Controversy Transgender Policy on Pitt's Campus

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*"The University wants it to be as simple as there are boys and there are girls. They just refuse to hear me." – Alice Haas<sup>1</sup>*

The University of Pittsburgh updated its Nondiscrimination Policy in 2008 to include "gender identity and expression." This policy applies to all aspects of the University.

Until recently, transgender students could use the gendered restroom that corresponded to the sex that they identify with through an unwritten operating policy. However, on March 20, 2012, a representative of the General Counsel informed members of the Anti-Discriminatory Policy Committee that the University redefined its bathroom policy.<sup>2</sup> The new, still unwritten, policy requires students to use gendered facilities according to the sex listed on their birth certificates.<sup>3</sup>

The concerns of transgender students are not new. Universities across the nation are making progressive steps in order to instate or adapt policies to accommodate all students, regardless of gender identity or expression. These policies strive for the inclusion of transgender students through all aspects of university life. Although it appears that the University of Pittsburgh is not following this trend, public and private Pennsylvania universities have made successful modifications in bathroom and housing policies and within LGBT resources.

Pennsylvania State University works on an operating procedure that mirrors the University of Pittsburgh's former bathroom policy. This state-related university allows transgender students to use the restroom facility of the sex that they identify with. Penn State's bathroom policy has evolved to meet the needs

of students in order to create an inclusive environment. However, if transgender students feel uncomfortable using a gendered restroom, Penn State's LGBT Student Resource Center, which operates under Student Affairs, provides an extensive listing of unisex bathrooms and their locations at University Park as well as its regional campuses. No such directory exists for the University of Pittsburgh. Additionally, there are approximately four "accessible" unisex restrooms on the Oakland campus—the six and eight floors of the William Pitt Union, the fifth floor of Chevron Science Center, and the 34 floor of the Cathedral of Learning. Penn State University Park alone provides over 200 unisex bathrooms that are convenient for students.

Carnegie Mellon University implemented open housing, or gender-neutral housing, in 25 apartments on its campus in 2007, which allowed opposite sex students to share a room. The private university's administration made the move to offer this new form of housing in order to "enable students to pick roommate situations that best suit them."<sup>4</sup> The Housing and Dining Services department does not require an explanation to apply for gender-neutral housing. Co-eds can request to live in one of the 25 apartments, "or, it could be gay, lesbian or bisexual students who do not want to be forced to share a room with a same-sex student," Tim Michael, assistant vice president for campus services, explains.<sup>5</sup> CMU's gender-neutral housing provides a reasonable accommodation for transgender students and provides all students with the opportunity to choose their preferred housing arrangements.

Penn State has not implemented gender-neutral housing; however, it has provided accommodations for students who feel uncomfortable or unsafe living on a floor with gendered restrooms and showers. McElwain Hall is one of Penn State's South Hall undergraduate residency buildings. In addition to communal bathroom/shower rooms on each floor, the residence hall maintains nearly 20 gender-neutral bathrooms. Each single-occupancy bathroom has a bathroom and shower.

Both universities support LGBT resource centers through Student Affairs. CMU's resource center, SOHO, provides informational books and movies as well as a safe place to eat and study for any interested student. Volunteer counselors are also available to speak to. These students and faculty members that serve as "Safe Zone" mentors are "committed to providing a safe and affirming environment for all at Carnegie Mellon, including anyone dealing with issues of sexual orientation and gender identity."<sup>6</sup>

Penn State maintains a LGBT center through Student Affairs that arranges similar services. The implementation of a resource center through the university mitigates the burden placed on LGBT student organizations that, without it, are responsible for advocacy, counseling, programming, and resources.

Additionally, Penn State's LGBT Student Resource Center partnered in collaboration with the Calamus Foundation and the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals in 2008 to found the online resource database "LGBT Architect." The open-content library provides sample documents and publications for creating or improving LGBT policies/services applicable to and adaptable for all areas of universities and institutions.

Progressive bathroom and housing policies have enabled these universities to create safe and welcoming campuses to all of their students. These policies seek to reduce and eliminate potential threats including intimidation, harassment, and assault that transgender students may face in these environments. If Pitt wants to continue to be a 21st century university, it not only needs to be a leader in academics, technology and medicine, but it also needs to be a staunch advocate for social equality.

#### Author

*JULIE HALLINAN is a current Student Government Board member who has been spearheading the University of Pittsburgh campaign to expand transgender housing options. She is a junior majoring in political science and economics.*

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Gwenn Barney, "Rainbow Alliance to Fight Bathroom Policy," *The Pitt News*, March 23, 2012, Internet (accessed April 7, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> Em Maier and Andrew Shull, "University Defines Gendered Facilities Policy," *The Pitt News*, March 21, 2012, Internet (accessed April 7, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Bill Schackner, "CMU Allows Men, Women to Share Rooms," *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, February 27, 2007, Internet (accessed April 7, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> "LGBTQ Resources," Carnegie Mellon Student Life, Internet (accessed April 7, 2012).