

New procedure eases student name changes

Long-awaited increase in gender fluid housing, bathrooms and revised name-change procedure aim to foster gender inclusivity

By **Iain Carlos** - March 7, 2019

A new College procedure will allow students to more easily change how their first names appear on College records by emailing the Registrar's Office. The update aims to facilitate the name change process for students who do not identify with or wish to go by their legal name. College Registrar Ericka Peterson announced the new procedure in a Dec. 20 email to the student body. First name changes will be granted "as long as the use of this changed name is not for the purpose of misrepresentation," according to Peterson's email.

Upon request, students' preferred first names will be made visible in a wide variety of contexts, including the St. Olaf Online Directory, Moodle, student IDs and students' diplomas. Legal first names will remain, however, on legal documents, including financial aid forms and paychecks.

Prior to the implementation of this new procedure, some transgender students found the name change process challenging because it was so ambiguous. An official name change policy did not exist prior to Peterson's email, Jon Mergens, assistant director for wellness, gender and sexuality, said. Gray Quale '19 said he struggled to change his first name through the Registrar's Office in the fall of 2017.

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"Getting my name changed on SIS took about five tries, and then it still didn't go through on the Registrar's list when new rosters were printed out spring semester for professors," Quale said.

Due to Quale's legal name still appearing on rosters for that spring semester, some of his professors called that name out when classes started. Quale said he was frustrated by what he saw as an ambiguous name-change process and was unsure how to proceed. He decided to enlist the help of a professor – needing to do so, however, felt humiliating, Quale said.

"I felt like I was being reduced to a child," Quale said. "It shouldn't be that intimidating to go to the Registrar's Office and say, 'hey, can you change my name?'"

Mergens said the new procedure aims to remedy these problems.

Other frustrations

Beyond name changes, Quale – who identifies as transmasculine non-binary and presents himself masculinely – said other elements of college life are equally frustrating for transgender students. He said he doesn't feel comfortable living on the men's or women's floors of residence halls. This is due partly to his non-binary identity, Quale said, but also to feeling out of place and having had negative experiences in gendered bathrooms in the past.

"It was definitely frustrating to exist on a women's floor during the school year because I didn't feel right using the restroom at all," Quale said. "I felt like I was in there visiting, and I always tried to get in there super early in the morning or super late at night so no one would be in there."

Throughout his time living on women's floors, Quale said he has been stared at because he was one of the few trans students living in his residence hall. When using the women's bathroom, students have asked Quale why he was there – one student called him a predator.

Quale said he has also faced discrimination in bathrooms outside residence halls and on the main campus – including the men's restroom below Boe Chapel.

"Some old man called me the t-slur and told me to get out," Quale said.

Quale said he has often avoided using the bathroom entirely due to these circumstances.

Leo Matter '19, another transgender student, also emphasized his discontentment with bathrooms and gendered residence hall floors.

"It's really frustrating because students are so ready for gender-neutral housing and for gender-neutral bathrooms," Matter said. "I avoid bathrooms. It's a big deal when I use the men's bathroom, that's a good day for me."

Both Quale and Matter said they want as many campus bathrooms and residence halls as possible to be gender-neutral.

Mergens agreed that more gender-neutral bathroom options should exist on campus.

"I think that it would be a good practice to have some additional restrooms in every building that are gender inclusive," Mergens said. "We have a number of single restroom options on campus, but those are used by everybody and so those are already limited."

Mergens also noted that the current state of bathroom usage on campus can have an outing effect for some students. He is planning on having conversations with fellow staff members regarding bathroom policy this coming summer.

The College is trying to address student gender identity and comfort in the bathroom by making clear that students should use the bathroom of the gender they identify as, and that bathroom gender distinction is not biological, Associate Dean of Students for Residence Life Pamela McDowell said.

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When students don't feel comfortable with their living situation due to gender identity, these instances are handled on a case-by-case basis. Going forward, McDowell said, there will be more gender-neutral living spaces.

"I don't think we'll see all ten halls be, every floor, every room, gender inclusive," McDowell said. "I think we'll see parts of buildings definitely be gender inclusive."

Next year, the Taylor Center for Equity and Inclusion will sponsor three honor houses – the Diversity Awareness House, International House and the Gender and Sexuality House, which will be completely gender inclusive. The Gender and Sexuality House can be used as a model for creating gender inclusive spaces on campus, Mergens said.

While residence hall, bathroom and name change policies seem to be evolving, Quale will not benefit from these coming changes. He will graduate in May.

"Lack of gender-neutral housing and lack of gender-neutral toilets has been really frustrating," Quale said. "Had those been available my junior year when I first officially came out, things would have been a lot easier."

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