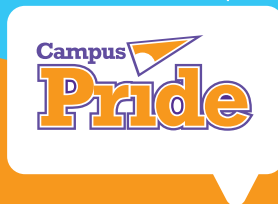




# ***THE CHANGING NATURE OF GENDER IN THE 21ST CENTURY***

***HOW TRANS AND NONBINARY STUDENTS  
APPLYING TO COLLEGE TODAY SELF-IDENTIFY***



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## Introduction

The last decade has seen a generational shift in how gender is lived and viewed. Refuting the common assumption that gender can be reduced to female and male, many members of Gen Z identify as nonbinary and use pronouns other than “he/him” or “she/her.” This report analyzed data from the Common App, the online admissions form used by more than 1,000 colleges and universities in the U.S., to consider how college students today are identifying their gender and pronouns.<sup>1</sup> More than 1.22 million students filled out the Common App to attend college in Fall 2022, and this was the first year that the form gave students the option to indicate their gender and pronouns. A detailed breakdown of the data from the Common App is available on my website: [www.gennyb.com/research/2022-common-app](http://www.gennyb.com/research/2022-common-app).

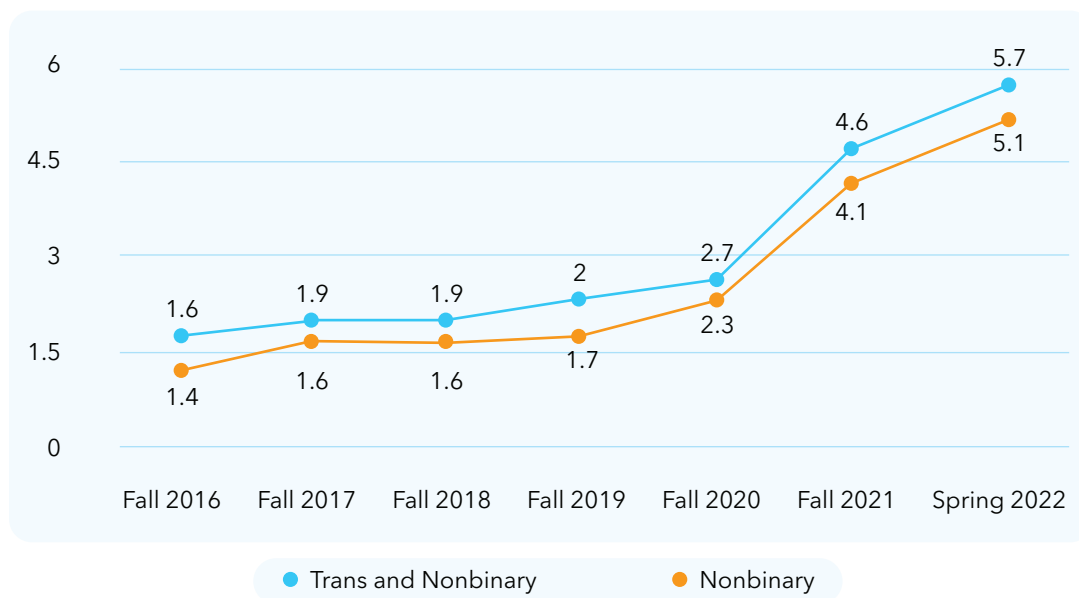




## The Rapidly Growing Number of Trans and Nonbinary Students

While this is the first year that the Common App has asked gender identity, other forms and surveys have been doing so for much longer, and these sources show that the number of students openly identifying as trans and nonbinary has been quickly increasing. For example, among the nearly 27,700 undergraduate students who completed the American College Health Association's National College Health Assessment (NCHA) in Fall 2016, the percent who identified as trans or nonbinary was 1.6% (ACHA 2016). Five years later, in Fall 2021, this figure had risen to 4.6% (ACHA 2021). This past spring, when more than 54,000 undergraduates filled out the assessment, it was 5.7% (ACHA 2022). Almost all of this increase has come in less than three years (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Percent of Self-Identified Trans and Nonbinary Students on the NCHA, 2016-2022**



Source: American College Health Association: <https://www.acha.org/NCHA>

Much of the growth in the trans and nonbinary student population results from young people identifying as nonbinary. On the National College Health Assessment, the vast majority of undergraduate students who have indicated that they are trans or nonbinary since 2016 identified as nonbinary itself or as a specific nonbinary identity, such as genderfluid or genderqueer (Figure 1). Among the trans and nonbinary students who completed the Spring 2022 NCHA, 89.5% reported identifying as nonbinary (ACHA 2022).

<sup>1</sup> I tremendously thank the leadership of the Common App for allowing me to analyze their data.

## Students' Overall Gender Responses

The Common App's new question on gender identity gives students the options of identifying as female, male, nonbinary, or to add another gender, with a fill-in box provided. Students could choose more than one response by making multiple selections (although the question did not explicitly indicate that they could do so). Of the more than 1.22 million students who filled out the application for Fall 2022 college admission, 2.2% (more than 26,300 students) identified as trans or nonbinary (Table 1), and of these students, 83.3% indicated a nonbinary identity (Figure 2).

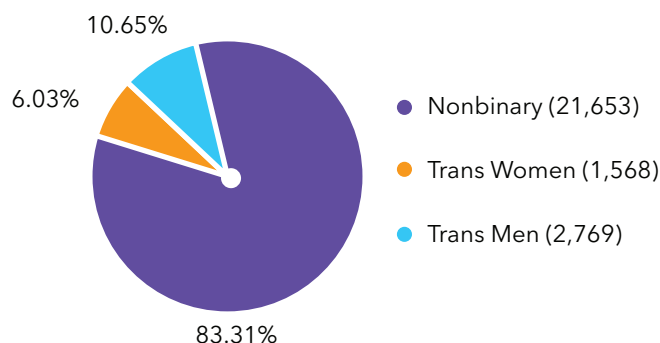
**Table 1: Trans and Nonbinary Students**

	n	%
Trans men*	2,395	0.20%
Trans women*	1,432	0.12%
Nonbinary	13,114	1.07%
Another gender#	2,364	0.19%
More than one response#	7,021	0.57%
<b>Total</b>	<b>26,326</b>	<b>2.15%</b>

\* Trans men students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as female and their gender identity as male, and trans women students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender identity as female.

# These figures were adjusted to remove inappropriate, unclear, and non-disclosing responses.

**Figure 2: Trans Men, Trans Women, and Nonbinary Students\* (n = 25,990)**



\*These figures were calculated by recategorizing the "another gender" and the more than one responses into nonbinary, trans women, trans men, and unclear groups.



While a similar percent of the students who indicated that they were trans or nonbinary on the NCHA and the Common App reported a nonbinary identity (89.5% vs. 83.3%), the percent of students identifying as trans or nonbinary overall was significantly less on the Common App (5.7% vs. 2.2%). This difference seemingly has to do with the Common App being a college admissions form that is filled out primarily by 17- and 18-year-olds. It is likely that some students are reluctant to indicate that they are trans or nonbinary when they are applying to college, fearing that this information could be used against them, such as to deny them admission or financial aid, or be disclosed to their families. Because students often complete their college applications with a parent(s), they are also unlikely to state that they are trans or nonbinary on the Common App if they are not out to their families. In addition, some students do not recognize that they are nonbinary until they reach college and meet nonbinary students, so would not have indicated that they are trans or nonbinary on the Common App. In a national study I conducted on nonbinary college students (Beemyn 2019), the average age at which the nonbinary gender participants began to use their current gender identity label was 19 years old—in other words, about a year after they started college. Some had identified as nonbinary before then and used a different term for their gender identity, but most had previously not considered themselves to be nonbinary.

Along with most of the students who indicated being trans or nonbinary on the Common App identifying as nonbinary, most of the nonbinary students were assigned female at birth (AFAB). Overall, about 56% of the students who completed the Common App reported that their legal sex was female, but among the students who chose “nonbinary” or “another gender,” it was 80% and nearly 83%, respectively.<sup>2</sup> This high percentage of AFAB individuals is in keeping with previous research involving nonbinary people. In both my research on nonbinary college students (Beemyn 2019) and in the study I did with Sue Rankin (Beemyn and Rankin 2011), 87% of the nonbinary participants had been assigned female at birth. In the U.S. Transgender Survey (James et. al 2016), the largest survey conducted to date of trans people in the United States, with more than 27,000 respondents, 35% of the sample described themselves as nonbinary, 80% of whom were assigned female at birth.

The far fewer assigned male at birth (AMAB) than AFAB individuals who identified as nonbinary on the Common App and in many studies likely reflects the narrower gender roles available to AMAB individuals in the dominant society. Someone who is expected to be male often encounters harassment and violence, particularly from men, if they act or present in any way that can be read as feminine, whereas AFAB individuals have some cultural space growing up to be gender nonconforming. AFAB individuals can be considered “tomboys,” even if they do not embrace that label for themselves, and receive affirmation from the patriarchal society for behaving in a manner that is perceived as emulating men (Craig and LaCroix 2011). Although AFAB individuals are often pressured to act more feminine by adolescence, there remains greater latitude for them to present in more traditionally masculine ways than for AMAB individuals to express themselves in more traditionally feminine ways.



<sup>2</sup>“Legal sex” can be different from “sex assigned at birth,” given that individuals can change the gender marker on legal documents like birth certificates and driver’s licenses. But this is unlikely to be the case for most of the nonbinary students here because, until recently, most states only allowed legal documents to be changed within a gender binary (i.e., M to F, or F to M). A nonbinary person would seemingly not change their legal sex from one binary option to the other. In the last few years, more than 20 states have changed their laws to add an “X” gender marker on legal documents for nonbinary individuals (Movement Advancement Project 2022), and the Common App will begin allowing students to indicate their legal sex as “X” in 2023.

## Students' Specific Gender Responses

On the Common App, 3,521 students wrote in a gender by using the “add another gender” option by itself or in combination with one of the gender choices provided.<sup>3</sup> These students offered about 130 different genders; the most frequent responses were genderfluid (41.5%), genderqueer (9.8%), trans man (9.0%), agender (8.4%), and demigirl (5.1%). Because most of the “another gender” respondents had been assigned female at birth, far fewer identified as a trans woman (2.5%) or demiboy (1.4%).

The tremendous number of gender identities given by the students is reflective of how the vocabulary to describe gender has grown substantially in the last decade, as young people develop new terms to describe the nuances of their gender and are able to share these identities widely through social media and online communities. For example, several students identified as genderfae, individuals whose gender is fluid between female and nonbinary genders, or as genderfaun, individuals whose gender is fluid between male and nonbinary genders. Although gender labels like genderfae and genderfaun were used by only a few of the students, the terms are nevertheless extremely valuable, as having a name for one's gender offers validation for that identity and provides a sense of community, enabling a person to feel that they are not alone in their gender experience.

Some of the nonbinary students, though, did not have a ready name for their gender identity. Instead, they combined various, more common terms to describe how they view their gender, such as a person who referred to themselves as “mostly female but uses any pronouns and prefers androgyny,” and another person whose gender was “in between male and nonbinary.” A few students just provided what was seemingly their first names—an indication that there was not a good label for their gender identities, that they were simply themselves.

## Race and First-Generation Status

In considering the race of the students who completed the Common App, the students who indicated that they were an American Indian or an Alaska Native or who identified as two or more races were more likely than the applicants of other races to describe themselves as trans or nonbinary. At the same time, the students who reported that they were Asian American, or Black or African American, were less likely than the applicants of other races to state that they were trans or nonbinary (Table 2). The greater percent of out biracial and multiracial respondents compared to Asian American and African American respondents was also reflected on the U.S. Transgender Survey (James et. al 2016), where biracial/multiracial individuals were a significantly higher percent of the trans people who took the survey than Asian American and African American individuals (5.5% vs. 2.6% and 2.9%, respectively).

Overall, the students of color were less likely than the white students to identify as trans or nonbinary (2.18% vs. 2.42%), but were slightly more likely than the sample overall (2.18% vs. 2.15%), because far fewer international students (referred to on the Common App as “nonresident alien” students) indicated being trans or nonbinary (1.04%) than the racial groups residing in the U.S. Some of this difference is because a greater number of international students than U.S. students apparently misunderstood the gender identity question and provided inappropriate responses, such as giving their sexual orientation. The extent of these inaccuracies demonstrates the challenge that students whose first language is not English can face in filling out a college application.

<sup>3</sup> This figure does not include inappropriate, unclear, and non-disclosing responses.

**Table 2: Trans and Nonbinary (NB) Identities by Racial Group**

	Total	NB	Trans Man#	Trans Woman#	Another Gender*	Multiple Responses*
Entire Sample	2.15%	1.07%	0.20%	0.12%	0.19%	0.56%
Am Indian or Alaska Native	3.0%	1.78%	0.26%	0.11%	0.26%	0.59%
Asian	1.56%	0.78%	0.12%	0.07%	0.12%	0.47%
Black or African American	1.76%	0.86%	0.14%	0.10%	0.11%	0.55%
Latinx	2.53%	1.27%	0.21%	0.13%	0.24%	0.67%
Native Hawaiian & other PI	2.15%	1.22%	0.06%	0.12%	0.23%	0.52%
Two or More Races	3.25%	1.55%	0.32%	0.16%	0.25%	0.96%
White	2.42%	1.22%	0.26%	0.14%	0.19%	0.60%
Nonresident Alien	1.04%	0.45%	0.09%	0.09%	0.07%	0.35%

#Trans men students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as female and their gender identity as male or who wrote in trans male/man, and trans women students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender identity as female or who wrote in trans female/woman.

\*These figures were adjusted to remove inappropriate responses.



About a third of the students who completed the Common App were first-generation students, which the Common App defines as students whose parents have not received a bachelor's degree. Of the students who identified as nonbinary, trans men, trans women, or another gender, a slightly higher percent were first-generation students compared to the sample overall (Table 3).

**Table 3: Gender Identity by First-Generation Status**

	% Who Were First Gen Students
Entire sample	33.36%
Nonbinary	34.51%
Trans men#	37.41%
Trans women#	37.64%
Another gender	36.25%

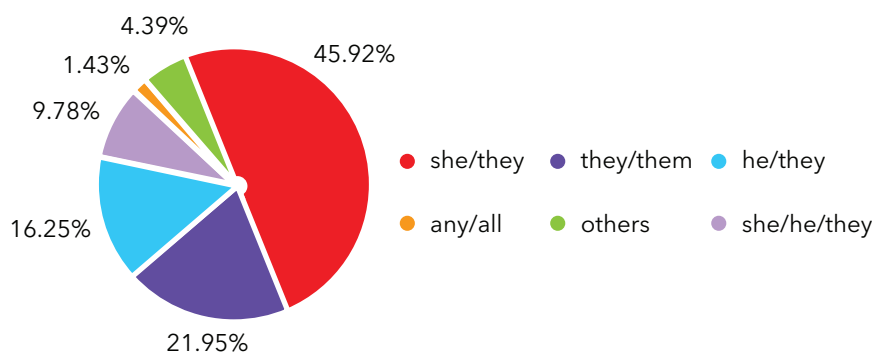
#Trans men students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as female and their gender identity as male or who wrote in trans male/man, and trans women students were individuals who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender identity as female or who wrote in trans female/woman.



## Students' Overall Pronoun Responses

Students who used the Common App to apply to college for this fall were the first group to be given the option to share their pronouns, and they could indicate that they went by “he/him,” “she/her,” “they/them,” and/or another pronoun set, which they could specify through a fill-in box. Adding together the students who reported that they use “they/them” pronouns, another pronoun set, or multiple sets of pronouns, just over 3% of the students who filled out the Common App (36,841 individuals) referred to themselves using pronouns beyond just “she/her” or “he/him.” The most common pronouns used by these students were “she/they” (i.e., “she/her” and “they/them,” 45.9%), “they/them” (22.0%), and “he/they” (i.e., “he/him” and “they/them,” 16.3%). A fuller breakdown of the data can be found in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Most Common Pronoun Responses Among All Students Who Indicated an Option Other Than Just “She/Her” and “He/Him”\* (n = 36,841)**



\* These figure were adjusted to remove unclear, inappropriate, and non-disclosing responses.

One of the main takeaways from the pronoun data is the ubiquitous use of “they/them” among nonbinary students today. Adding together the students who went by “they/them” only and those who used “they/them” as one of their pronoun sets, more than 96.5% of the students who went by more than just “she/her” or “he/him” wanted to be referred to at least some of the time by “they/them.” The widespread usage of “they/them” may be because many nonbinary students recognize the difficulty of getting the dominant society to use pronouns that may not be well-known even in trans communities. Indeed, just 19 of the students reported going only by neopronouns or new pronouns<sup>4</sup>, like “xe/xem,” “ze/zir,” and “ze/hir.”

Another main takeaway—somewhat contrary to the first—is the extent to which the nonbinary students indicated using many different pronouns. Even though few went just by neopronouns, most used multiple sets of pronouns for themselves (more than 75%), and these pronoun sets sometimes included neopronouns. The students provided about 75 different neopronouns, resulting in their use of about 145 different pronoun sets. Some of these neopronouns were nounself pronouns—that is, pronouns created from the name of an object, figure, animal, or concept which reflects something about the person or their gender. Unlike many other neopronouns, nounself pronouns are often playful and their use is mostly limited to social media and gaming platforms. The two most popular nounself pronouns reported by the students were “fae/faer” from “fairy” and “bun/buns” from “bunny.”

<sup>4</sup>The term “neopronouns” is actually a misnomer because some of these pronouns were first proposed a century or more ago (Baron 2020).

## Race and International Status

The pronouns indicated by the students varied to a degree by race. Among the students who indicated that their gender was nonbinary, the American Indian students were much more likely to go by “they/them” only than students of other races (although the sample size was small), and the Black or African American students were more likely to use “she/they,” which may reflect the fact that more Black women than Black men overall filled out the Common App (Table 4). But considering all the nonbinary students who use “they/them” as a pronoun set, about equal percentages of all races (92-96%) use “they/them” at least part of the time.

The greatest racial difference in pronoun use among the nonbinary respondents was between U.S. and international (“nonresident alien”) students. The international students were significantly more likely than their U.S. peers to continue to go by the pronouns assigned to them at birth (i.e., “she/her” or “he/him”), and if they used “they/them” pronouns, they often did so in conjunction with their assigned pronouns. As a group, the nonbinary international students were far less likely to use only “they/them” pronouns than nonbinary students overall (38.3% vs. 50.4%) (Table 4).

**Table 4: Pronouns Given by Nonbinary Students of Different Races and by Nonbinary International Students**

	All* (12,732)	American Indian (47)	Asian (882)	Black (1,155)	Latinx (2,404)	Nonresident Alien (530)	Two or More Races (850)	White (6,864)
<b>They/them</b>	50.38%	63.83%	45.24%	44.50%	50.48%	38.30%	46.71%	53.29%
<b>She/they</b>	19.44%	14.89%	18.71%	24.33%	20.08%	16.60%	20.82%	18.65%
<b>He/they</b>	11.11%	10.64%	10.88%	11.17%	10.40%	15.09%	11.06%	11.09%
<b>She/he/they</b>	10.83%	2.13%	14.97%	11.08%	11.35%	10.38%	13.06%	9.94%
<b>Any or all</b>	1.50%	4.26%	2.61%	1.13%	1.66%	1.13%	1.88%	1.31%
<b>“They” totals</b>	<b>93.26%</b>	<b>95.75%</b>	<b>92.41%</b>	<b>92.21%</b>	<b>93.97%</b>	<b>81.50%</b>	<b>93.53%</b>	<b>94.28%</b>
<b>He/him</b>	2.09%	2.13%	3.06%	2.25%	1.37%	8.87%	1.76%	1.70%
<b>She/her</b>	1.70%	2.13%	1.93%	2.60%	1.95%	5.47%	1.76%	1.14%
<b>She/he</b>	0.76%	0	0.68%	0.78%	0.87%	1.89%	0.82%	0.61%
<b>Other pronouns</b>	2.14%	0	1.93%	2.16%	1.83%	2.26%	2.12%	2.27%

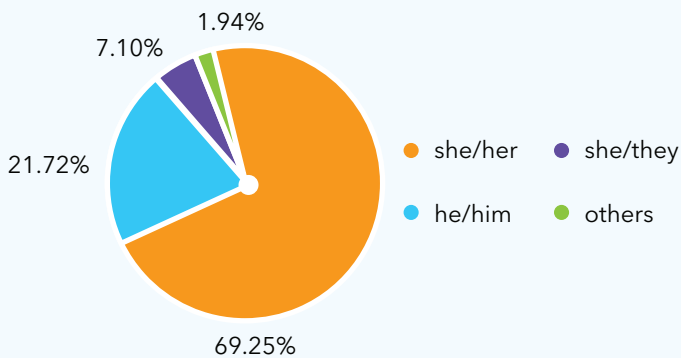
## Pronouns vs. Gender Identity

With slightly more than 3% of the students who filled out the Common App indicating that they used pronouns beyond “she/her” and “he/him” and 2.2% identifying as trans or nonbinary, that means that more than 10,500 students identified as female or male but did not just go by “she/her” or “he/him,” respectively. There are several possible explanations for this disparity. Some students may be exploring their gender identity and trying out new pronouns for themselves before identifying as trans or nonbinary. Other students may be cis but use nonbinary pronouns, along with the pronouns typically associated with individuals of their assigned sex, in solidarity with trans people or to challenge the gender binary.

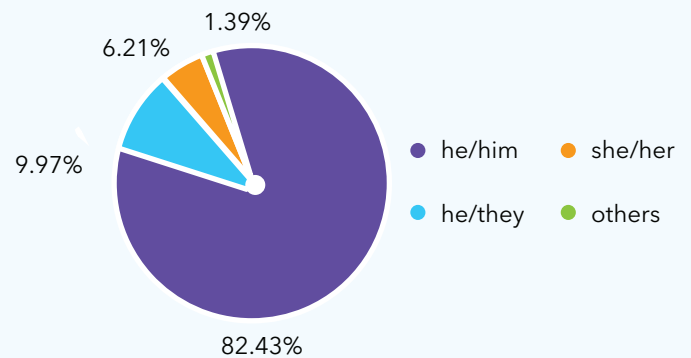
Another likely source of the difference is that some of the students who marked “female” or “male” identify as trans women or trans men and use both binary and nonbinary pronouns for themselves. Because the Common App does not ask a question on whether students identify as trans, the only way to estimate the number of trans women and trans men is to tabulate the students who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender identity as female and vice-versa. But this method cannot account for students who have changed their legal sex to reflect their gender identity by changing the gender marker on their legal documents or who simply indicate that their legal sex reflects their gender identity, regardless of what their legal records might indicate.

At the same time, some of the trans women and trans men did not use the pronouns that are typically associated with individuals of their gender identity. Among the trans women (i.e., students who indicated their legal sex as male and their gender as female), 21.7% went only by “he/him” pronouns, and among the trans men (i.e., students who indicated their legal sex as female and their gender as male), 6.2% went only by “she/her” pronouns (Figures 4 and 5). Presumably, these students were not out and had not undertaken steps to medically transition, such as beginning hormone replacement therapy or having top surgery. The fact that the trans women were seemingly three times less likely to be out than the trans men is reflected in other research (Beemyn and Rankin 2011; Tatum, et al. 2020), which has found that trans women, on average, begin transitioning later than trans men—a difference which may be because of the societal prevalence of transmisogyny (that is, the intersections of trans-hatred and misogyny; Serano 2007) and the often greater negative consequences for individuals assigned male at birth who violate gender norms.

**Figure 4: Pronouns Given by Trans Women (i.e., Students Who Indicated Their Legal Sex as Male and Their Gender as Female) (n = 1,395\*)**



**Figure 5: Pronouns Given by Trans Men (i.e., Students Who Indicated Their Legal Sex as Female and Their Gender as Male) (n = 2,368\*)**



\* These figure were adjusted to remove blank responses.



## Future Trends

The number of trans youth, especially nonbinary young people, will almost certainly continue to increase, as nonbinary people become more visible and gain greater acceptance in society, so that nonbinary youth have a wider range of images and role models and have less fears of experiencing negative consequences if they come out. The growing number of young trans people, in turn, will undoubtedly result in the further proliferation of gender labels and pronouns, as members of Gen Z create more and more nuanced terms to describe how their gender differs from their peers and from the gender identities of previous generations. But despite the wide variety of ways that nonbinary young people are naming their genders, most seem likely to continue to go by “they/them,” at least some of the time, because of the difficulty of getting the dominant society to acknowledge and respect neopronouns. Sadly, even trans students today who go by “they/them” report often being misgendered and having other people refuse to treat “they/them” as legitimate third-person singular pronouns (Beemyn 2019; Whitley 2022). But, hopefully, with more and more trans and nonbinary young people coming out and educating others, these students will gain greater acceptance, no matter how they name their gender or what pronouns they use.

## Recommendations for Colleges

Colleges that use the Common App now have information about how many of their incoming students identify their gender and pronouns, as well as the first names they go by. For colleges that do not give students the ability to easily change their names and gender markers on their campus records and to have their pronouns on course rosters and in other administrative systems, the data from the Common App is the first time that they are gaining this information about any of their students. Other colleges have information about the chosen names, gender identities, and pronouns of some of their returning students, but not of their incoming students before they arrive on campus and not to the extent enabled by the Common App.

Regardless of the degree to which colleges currently recognize the identities of their trans students, institutions need to use the data from the Common App to populate students' campus records. For some colleges, this will mean having to create chosen name, gender, and pronoun fields in their student information systems. For colleges that already provide these options, this may mean having to expand the number of records on which chosen names and pronouns appear. The goal for all colleges should be that no student is misnamed or misgendered by the institution in areas within its control, including mail, email, and in-person communications; course rosters and advisee lists; housing assignments; online directories; ID cards; and diplomas. Where legal name is required, such as for campus employment and financial aid paperwork, colleges should explain this to students and still use students' chosen names where they can, such as in hiring and financial aid award letters.

For a variety of reasons, trans students do not always indicate the names and pronouns that they go by and their gender identities on the Common App. And some trans students do not recognize their trans identities or come out until after they enter college or subsequently change how they identify themselves as trans. Colleges therefore need to have a simple process for students to add or change their names, pronouns, and gender markers on campus records.

This report has focused on the Common App and the approximately one-fourth of colleges that use it. Most other colleges use their own admissions application. If they do, like the Common App, they should be asking optional questions on the names and pronouns that students go by and their gender identities and then incorporating this information into students' campus records.



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## **CAMPUS PRIDE TRANS POLICY CLEARINGHOUSE**

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## **CAMPUS PRIDE Q RESEARCH INSTITUTE**

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This report is produced by Campus Pride and written by **Dr. Genny Beemyn**, the coordinator of Campus Pride's Trans Policy Clearinghouse and Director of the UMass Amherst Stonewall Center.

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### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Genny Beemyn** is a trans educator, author, speaker, and consultant. They have been the director of the UMass Amherst Stonewall Center since 2006 and the coordinator of Campus Pride's Trans Policy Clearinghouse since 2012.

Genny is also the co-editor of the recently published *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Trans Studies* and an associate editor of the forthcoming 2nd edition of *The SAGE Encyclopedia of LGBTQ Studies*.



### **ABOUT CAMPUS PRIDE**

Since 2001, Campus Pride has been the leading national organization building future LGBTQ and ally leaders as well as creating safer communities at colleges and universities. The Campus Pride Index annually helps 80,000 people find LGBTQ-inclusive colleges and universities. In addition, the organization has specifically tailored programs and resources to support LGBTQ youth and campus communities.

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