

MINNEAPOLIS

He, she or ze? Pronouns could pose trouble under University of Minnesota campus policy

Draft policy would punish those who ignore personal pronoun preferences.

By Maura Lerner (<http://www.startribune.com/maura-lerner/10645281/>) Star Tribune | JULY 14, 2018 – 11:11PM

Using the wrong pronoun could turn into a firing offense at the University of Minnesota.

The U is considering a new “gender identity” policy (<https://www.documentcloud.org/documents/4598811-Updated-Draft-Gender-Identity-Policy.html>) that would assure transgender men and women, as well as others, the right to use whatever pronoun they wish on campus — whether it’s he, she, “ze” or something else.

And everyone from professors to classmates would be expected to call them by the right words or risk potential disciplinary action, up to firing or expulsion.

The pronoun rule is just one of the proposed changes in a draft U policy that, advocates say, would bar harassment and discrimination against transgender and “gender nonconforming” individuals. It’s designed, in part, to combat an indignity known as misgendering — when someone is called by a name or personal pronoun they no longer use.

So far, the proposal has attracted relatively little attention on campus. But some faculty and students are raising concerns that the U, for all its good intentions, is trying to police what people say.

“To me, it’s a bridge too far to cross for a person to tell me I have to say something ... and if I don’t, I can be punished,” said sophomore Michael Geiger, a marketing major from New Prague, who is one of the campus leaders of Students for a Conservative Voice. “There’s a difference between creating a healthy environment and trying to legislate insensitivity out of the U.”

University officials insist that the policy, which has been described as one of the most ambitious of its kind in the country, is still a work in progress and will likely undergo revisions before it’s approved.

But an early draft, which began circulating on campus this year, “just set off the free speech alarms immediately,” said Joseph Konstan, a computer science professor and chair of the Faculty Consultative Committee.

“I don’t think it’s a controversial idea that people should be addressed as they prefer to be addressed,” he said. “Where it becomes controversial is where you move from being about good behavior ... into a disciplinary matter.”

Locker rooms and roommates

The pronoun rule isn’t the only potentially contentious issue in the proposed policy. Among other things, it would also give individuals the right to access men’s or women’s locker rooms, recreational activities and housing based on their self-identified gender, rather than their biology. Konstan said he’s heard concerns about how that might affect roommate assignments, for example.

“Being welcoming and respectful to everyone is a wonderful goal,” he said. But “do we allow a student to say we won’t room with somebody who was born with a different gender?”

University officials say that many of the details have yet to be worked out.

“The intent is to be able to create more access and an inclusive environment for all of our community members regardless of their gender identity,” said Gabrielle Mead, assistant director of the U’s Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action office, which would oversee the new policy. But since the proposal is still in draft form, she said, “I don’t think I’m prepared to talk about the specifics of what would be permitted and not at this stage.”

Some are cheering the proposal as a welcome change.

“I’m proud of the university for taking steps like this,” said Melissa Harl Sellew, an associate professor of classical and Near Eastern studies, who is transgender. “It’s a good step in the direction of just normalizing someone like me.” Sellew, who has taught at the U since 1984, said that her colleagues have treated her “splendidly” since her gender transition in 2016.

But she said pronoun use can be an especially sensitive subject for transgender men and women, as well as those who reject traditional gender labels.

“I have friends who really want me to refer to them as ‘they’ because they don’t strongly feel male or female,” she said. “They tell you it’s really affirming when you’re called by the correct pronouns, and it’s really saddening when you’re not.”

Pronouns have become a hot topic on college campuses in recent years, as schools have become attuned to the ever-changing labels in the LGBTQ community. In some classes and student gatherings, it’s become routine to ask individuals to introduce themselves by name and pronoun.

Just last month, the U officially gave students a list of pronouns and gender options on its online registration website, MyU. If they choose, they can identify themselves as male, female, agender, gender nonconforming, genderqueer, nonbinary or two spirit, or



(http://stmedia.startribune.com/images/ows_150983056117092.jpg)
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Students on the University of Minnesota
Personal Preference

At the University of Minnesota, students are invited to choose from a list of personal pronouns and gender identities on the MyU website.

Personal pronoun

- He/him/his
- None
- Prefer not to specify
- She/her/hers
- They/them/theirs
- Ze/Zir/Zirs

Gender identity

- Agender
- Enter your own
- Gender nonconforming
- Genderqueer
- Man
- Nonbinary
- Prefer not to specify
- Two spirit
- Woman

skip the gender question entirely. Pronoun options include he, she, ze, the singular "they," none and "prefer not to specify."

Request for respect

Ahmad Qais Munhazim, a graduate student who helped draft the new policy, said that "misgendering" happens all too often, and that this is a way to educate people to get the pronouns right.

"We are literally requesting of people to be respectful of people's very basic identities," said Munhazim, who previously led the U's Gender and Sexuality Center for Queer and Trans Life. "When you introduce any change in the language, there's always a pushback at the very beginning until they get used to it."

Jessica Schalz, another campus advocate, said that students who have switched gender identities often lack the "leveraging power" to challenge professors who call them by their old names or pronouns. "So I am absolutely thrilled to see this as an administrative policy," she said. "This [is] something we can take back and show our professors."

But Jane Kirtley, a U professor of media ethics and law, sees the pronoun rule as a risky proposition. "Suppose you slip up and just accidentally use the wrong one. Is that harassment or discrimination?" she asked. "Does everybody get one free pass and after that, it's harassment?"

Personally, she said, "I don't have an issue calling a student by a name that she or he or ze prefers." But "looking at the proposal policy with a lawyer's eyes, I am concerned ... I frankly do not see how they could enforce something like this."

Sellew, though, says she doubts anyone would be punished for a mere slip of the tongue. "Heavens no," she said. "I don't [think] you're going to get fired the first time you call Melissa 'he.' Maybe the 40th time, if you're doing it loudly and publicly and brazenly, you might get in trouble. I hope so."

Mead, whose office would be charged with enforcing the policy, declined to speculate on what might trigger disciplinary action against a student or employee, except to say it would "really depend on the circumstances."

For now, she said, the U plans to seek additional feedback this fall, including a 30-day public comment period, before any policy is approved.

"We want to make sure that we are getting all of those different perspectives," she said. "We're not going to push it through if we still have some big issues to work through."

Rilyn Eischens, a graduate of the University of Minnesota journalism school, contributed to this report.

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