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Emerson makes restrooms gender-neutral

Joins other schools after student pleas

The Boston Globe



A gender-neutral bathroom sign at Emerson College. (ARAM BOGHOSIAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE)

By Emily A. Canal, Globe Correspondent | September 1, 2007

On the inside, a set of bathrooms at Emerson College looks like standard fare. On the outside, there are newfangled signs to ease the concerns of students who prefer not to signal that they are entering a men's or women's bathroom.

The symbols are gender-neutral, a picture of a man and a woman. In response to students' pleas, Emerson has changed the signs that used to be aimed at a specific gender on 21 restrooms in campus buildings and one of the college's two dormitories.

Emerson's changes, made in preparation for the upcoming school year, mirror moves by Tufts University and the University of Vermont, part of a small but growing number of universities modifying policies and facilities on behalf of transgender students. Several colleges have amended nondiscrimination policies to include gender identity, but student groups recently began pursuing more concrete changes,

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including gender-neutral housing, locker rooms, and bathrooms.

"This will bring more equal opportunities to the students of Emerson," said Jessica Ganon, a junior at Emerson who campaigned with fellow students to get the school to provide the gender-neutral bathrooms. "I am much happier that this makes life easier for others. I felt sorry for those who felt unsure of where to go."

Two student groups, the Emerson Alliance for Gays, Lesbians and Everyone and the Student Government Association, pitched the idea of gender-neutral restrooms to school officials last spring. Individual students also sought the change.

"I am all in favor of supporting students and their expressions," said David Haden, the college's associate dean of housing and resident life. "Having gender-neutral bathrooms doesn't take anything away from anyone; it just gives students more options."

Haden added that his research showed that only a few dozen schools in the nation have gender-blind facilities.

The school does not know how many students identify themselves as transgender, an umbrella term used for someone who does not identify with the traditional male or female gender. The term, which can apply to crossdressers and transsexuals, is focused on a person's gender identity or expression and does not involve sexual orientation.

Emerson's gender-neutral restrooms were created from previous facilities reserved for students or faculty with special needs, Haden said. Those with special needs can still use the single-unit rooms. The school's Little Building dormitory now has one gender-neutral bathroom, including a bathtub and shower, on every floor. Men and women live on each of the dorm's floors and previously had access only to separate men's and women's restrooms.

Students said they wanted to make people feel more comfortable by not having to choose a gender at the bathroom door.

"A harassment experience doesn't have to be physical," said Rik Haber, a 2007 graduate of Emerson identified as gender-queer, a term for those who identify their gender outside of male or female. "It is about feeling comfortable going to the bathroom."

Haber was one of the students who campaigned for the facilities before graduating. Elizabeth Whitney, a scholar in residence at Emerson, identifies herself as femme, a term that describes gender identity outside the binary male or female. Whitney has helped students raise awareness on the gender-neutral bathrooms through advocacy and the material she taught.

"I have felt unsafe in Emerson's bathrooms because I have seen people subjected to gender-policing," Whitney said.

She and her partner, she recalled, entered a women's restroom, and her partner received odd looks from the women inside. The people in the restroom checked the sign on the door to make sure they were in a women's restroom. "We are so socialized about gender norms that some people do it without realizing they are doing it," she said of gender discrimination.

Students said they approved of the change.

"People shouldn't feel awkward about using public restrooms," said Emi Saza, a sophomore at Emerson College. "I haven't felt threatened in a bathroom, but I am glad that those students who have got their voices

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heard."

Tufts University began adding gender-neutral bathrooms in 2005, also in response to student requests. "Why not have these gender-neutral facilities that are more convenient for everybody?" said Kim Thurler, speaking for the university.

The University of Vermont set aside gender-neutral bathrooms in its new student center and, in 2003, began changing male and female bathrooms into unisex ones, using Emerson's approach: It simply changed the signs. A few years ago, Simmons College renovated one-person bathrooms around campus that accommodate any gender, but did it for convenience, a college spokeswoman said.

Cities also have begun creating public gender-neutral bathrooms. "It is extremely important to make space for all kinds of people," said Gunner Scott, who cochairs the Massachusetts Transgender Political Coalition group.

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