

Gender Inclusive Bathrooms

Advocating for Gender Inclusive Bathrooms

Importance of Gender Inclusive Bathrooms

“I used to simply not go to the bathroom at all during the day. Every time I did, I felt extreme discomfort with interacting with other people or being paranoid that someone would try and look in the crack of a bathroom stall door. In my last year of undergrad, we finally got some gender inclusive bathrooms, but the year was over quickly. I am now a professional, and stuck in the same scenario. Can't I just go to the bathroom?”

What are gender inclusive bathrooms? Simply put, they are bathrooms that anyone, regardless of their gender identity, can use. Gender inclusive bathrooms benefit many of us, but can provide a crucial safe space for transgender and non-binary individuals.

Being excluded from bathrooms is something that many of us in the transgender community have faced and the reason that advocacy is and has been crucial. Based on conversations we have had with oSTEM members in a variety of academic and professional settings, bathroom access is a huge, often invisible challenge.

“Before we got neutral restrooms in my building, I used to walk to the ones in the library. That meant putting on a coat, walking down 3 floors, crossing the quad in often sub-zero temperatures, and

going up 4 floors-- and I counted myself lucky that there was a restroom so close.”

Having to work so hard to do something as routine as use a restroom can fuel anxiety and make a work or school day far less productive. While walking a bit further to a restroom may not seem like a big deal, it can add a great weight to a person's day.

“The first week I was on my campus, I was screamed at by a professor for entering a bathroom that they perceived was wrong for me. Subsequently, I spent an entire year walking across campus, regardless of where I was, to the only gender inclusive bathroom facility available.”

There are many cases of transgender (and even cisgender) people being harassed or attacked in bathrooms because they do not fit a narrow view of what a specific gender should look like. Gender inclusive bathrooms can offer privacy and safety, helping us to do our business and get back to business.

“I just plain don't use gendered restrooms in any professional context where there are cis people who knew me pre-transition. If I go in the women's, I risk freaking out strangers, and if I go in the men's, I risk freaking out colleagues who still think of me as a woman.”

Transitioning in the workplace can be a turbulent journey. Some transgender people prefer to use gender inclusive bathrooms to avoid a potential confrontation. There is a

lot of emotional energy expended during these encounters, and a gender inclusive bathroom is a solution for those who wish to use it.

“[The problem at conferences is that] restrooms are often unavailable or impossible to find. I've dealt with this in various ways, including skipping sessions to go back to my hotel room, not drinking water, or just awkwardly trying to use the men's without running into anybody I know.”

Access might be especially limited at conferences or other professional events, due to the hosting location, particularly in locations where discrimination has been legalized. Thus, pre-event planning is all the more important in order to help attendees get the most out of their experiences.

In many circumstances, gender inclusive bathrooms simply aren't available, forcing people to walk to other buildings to access bathrooms, risk their health through limiting hydration or restricting bathroom breaks for themselves, or barring attendance to entire events.

In places where they have been added, they are not always visible, so people who need them may not be able to access them. Gender inclusive bathrooms have been extremely successful when they are easy to find and access. From physical maps to phone apps, there are many ways to help people locate gender inclusive facilities.

Even outside of the trans and gender non-conforming communities there is a great need for gender inclusive bathrooms. For example, parents can often be limited to where they can take their children to the bathroom. While bathrooms are not ideal for folks who seek privacy while breast-feeding, sometimes they are the only option. People may have personal care attendants who need to enter the restroom with them but have a different gender identity than them. A gender inclusive facility often affords more space and greater privacy than a multi-stall restroom.

Additionally, in older STEM focused spaces it is still possible to find buildings with very limited women's bathrooms at all, meaning that gender inclusive bathrooms might boost facility access in general.

Unfortunately, getting your workplace or university to approve gender inclusive bathrooms can be extremely difficult. We have put together some tips and tricks for you from various groups who have gotten access on their own campuses.

Ask for Help

You shouldn't have to advocate for gender inclusive bathrooms on your own. Reaching out to different organizations and members of administration or internal organizations can help you immensely, and hopefully prevent burnout on your part. Help will look different at each place whether it is a school or campus, workplace, or other type of location. From talking with members of the community, one thing is clear - support is crucial in the long term success of the project.

You may find that the president of your school, a vice president, dean, or a friendly faculty member has some sort of interest already or can be convinced of the need. If so, successfully presenting your case to them and asking for their allyship might help your voice to carry that much more weight in your advocacy. This is a great place to ask for assistance from your LGBTQ Center or Employee Resource Group if you have one, or other Diversity focused center, where appropriate. Having more people to help you will help prevent burnout and extend the reach of your message and goals.

Enlisting student organizations (besides just your oSTEM chapter!) can also be extremely helpful. Beyond student organizations, your school's student government will have better access to administrators, which could prove valuable. Student government can also help pass resolutions that put pressure on administration to listen to concerns and respond.

Make friends with the local women-in-STEM organizations to have their input on bathroom access, especially if restroom access for women is already a problem. You can do this by reaching out directly to organization leadership or by attending meetings to make more connections.

Sometimes, it can bolster your argument if cisgender people argue on behalf of you, especially when part of your argument should be that these facilities would be used by cis people too. If you show a united front to administration, they may be more inclined to listen and work with you.



Pro tip: Bringing in various types of stakeholders can help amplify your voice and provide different perspectives.

Know the Layout and Building Codes

Make sure to know exactly what the local building code requires and what the estimated "occupancy" of the building is. You may be able to argue for gender inclusive bathrooms based on code requirements in your area, or you might find that gender inclusive bathrooms will not count toward code requirements. You can get around code arguments by pointing out that you have more gendered restrooms than needed to meet code. Be ready to talk about issues that may come along with building codes and administration as a non-expert.

For example, it has been challenging to gain gender inclusive bathrooms in Columbia's bathrooms, due to high occupancy numbers and a lack of space or resources for installation. Conversely, at Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI), their library was the first place to actually implement a gender inclusive multi-stall bathroom.

Use existing floor plans to your advantage. Know where your current bathrooms are and their size. It can also be helpful to understand the volume of traffic of a bathroom. If you have a single gendered bathroom on a floor, and certain people are expected to go elsewhere, then an argument can be made to have a gender inclusive bathroom there instead. All in all, keep in mind that having a basic understanding of the codes in place at your location, you can strengthen your argument when speaking with administration.



Pro tip: If you don't want to dig through building code, recruit an architecture student, a member of the Facilities organization, or contact your city/county planner or commissioner.

Another possibility is to consider new building sites. It can be a long term investment, but future buildings can be an easier thing to swallow for administration and facilities. It may also help to avoid any concerns over building code violations.

Gauge Campus Atmosphere

Surveying your campus population can help you to determine where there is already support for gender inclusive bathrooms. It can also help you to humanize and/or quantify the experiences of the people who are in need of these facility updates. While generating, executing, and analyzing surveys takes effort, bringing numbers to your administrators and articulating the needs of people on your campus might be exactly what you need most to win your case.

Moreover, personifying the users of your building(s) can help administrators to identify the diverse needs of the hundreds of students, staff, and faculty using it. Keeping in mind that the very brief periods between classes combined with the numbers of people moving through the bathroom on the way from one place to the next, you might win approval simply by highlighting the struggle that it is for people who need safety, who must find alternate buildings a distance away, or who have mobility challenges moving easily between floors just to go to the bathroom.

There are many ways that you can survey your campus. Some examples are:

- Speak with Student Government
- Publish an article in the school/company newspaper or in the local newspaper
- Communicate via email to the general population of the institution
- Table in a central campus/building location to speak with the population directly

Remember that universities and companies like to point to things that make them look better. So, taking a pragmatic view, presenting human interest stories to your administrators throughout your lobbying process will also be a way to highlight the good PR that will accompany the approval of your petition.



Pro tip: Try to offer multiple avenues and opportunities for people to give you their thoughts and opinions.

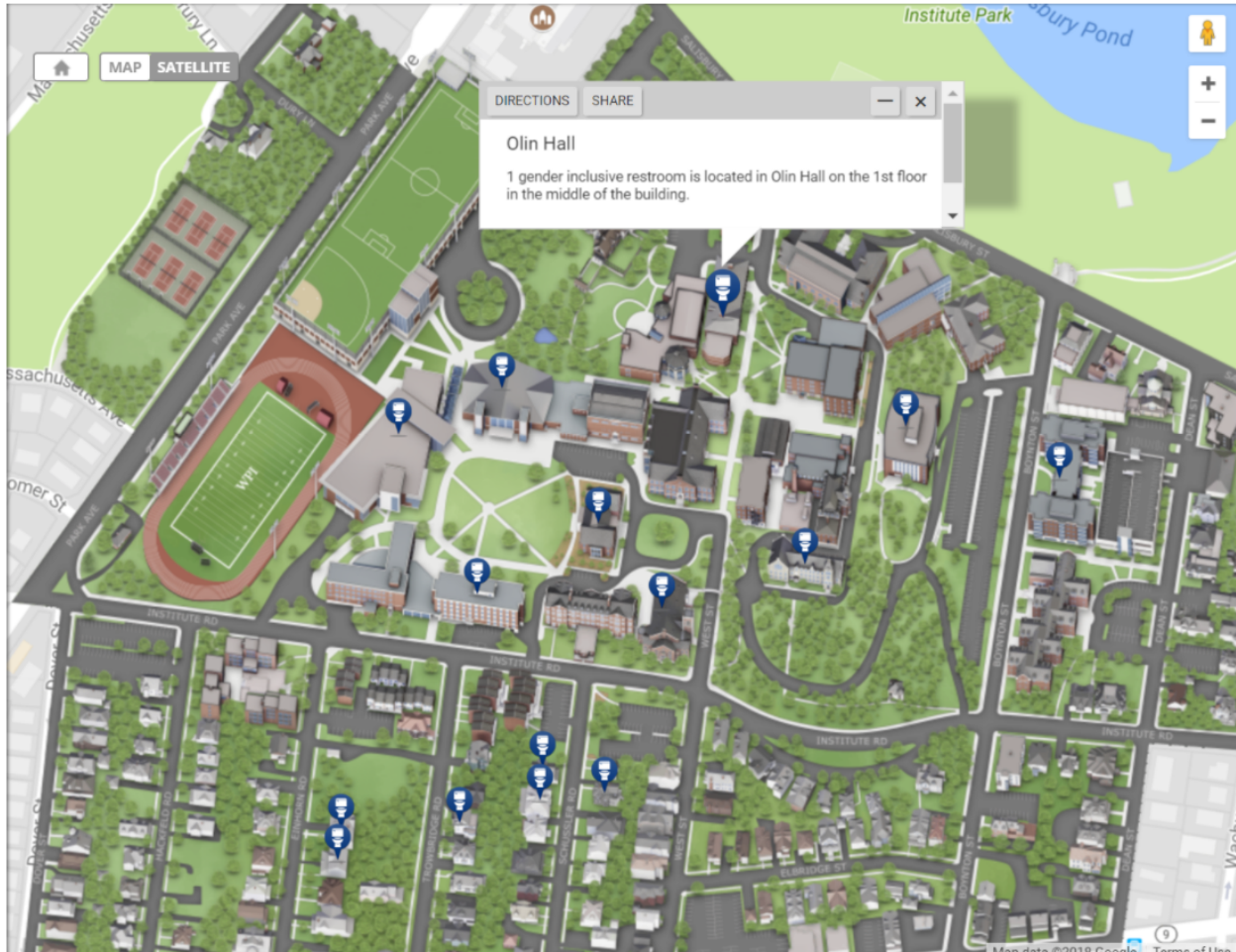
Considering Access

Be sure to implement clear signage for gender inclusive bathrooms, as well as signs near gendered bathrooms to help find other bathrooms. People found that having placards with descriptions on the importance of these bathrooms helped the greater

population accept them. Below is what Georgia Tech decided to use for their gender inclusive bathroom signage.



Make sure people can find the restrooms. Having maps and directions easily available ensures that people can access these restrooms! The below image shows a map used by Worcester Polytechnic Institute to help find specific bathrooms in various buildings.



Pro tip: Have placards with descriptions on the importance of these bathrooms can help gain the acceptance of the general population.

Implementation Outside of a College Environment

Establishing gender inclusive bathrooms during conferences or other types of large-scale events tends to be difficult. If you are not part of the planning committee, reach out and explain the need for such facilities. Most professional societies already include some type of minority or diversity committee within their organizations. Contact them directly, both to ensure that their non-discrimination policies are inclusive of gender identity and sexual orientation, and to discuss methods by which gender inclusive bathrooms can be accessed throughout their conferences.

The committee itself will likely need to work with facilities and administration at the location of the event to create signage for temporary gender inclusive bathrooms, if permanent facilities are not available.

With residence halls and dormitories, there are typically different rules that govern bathrooms. Talking with your residential services office is a good place to start to see any potential places to start with your advocacy.

In a professional setting, many considerations are similar to a campus one. At the time of writing this document (2021), many companies are considering more flexible working environments, as well as construction or demolition of various office spaces. If that is the case, you can make an argument for any new construction moving forward to include gender inclusive bathrooms.

Businesses and college campuses will both have scenarios where customers or visitors will access their buildings. Bathroom access is not just important for employees, students, and faculty, but also anyone visiting them.



Pro tip: When thinking about gender inclusive bathrooms outside of a campus environment, make sure to understand the specific rules that apply to that situation.

Common Misconceptions and Responses

Worcester Polytechnic Institute surveyed their campus before requesting the administration approve gender inclusive facilities. In doing so, they discovered many misconceptions with the perceptions of gender inclusive bathrooms. Some of the issues expressed by people on campus were safety, confusion, and taking away bathrooms from the already limited number of women's rooms. In response, the group of students working on this project addressed concerns by creating educational documentation and media to be shared across campus.

Here are some examples of common concerns / arguments against gender inclusive bathrooms, and how you can respond:

- *They could lead to harassment or inappropriate behavior*
 - Gender inclusive bathrooms have not been found to have a higher rate of assault than gender specific bathrooms. For some people, these bathrooms are

safer. We trust our community to treat each other with respect.

- *I might feel uncomfortable or exposed in multi-stall gender inclusive bathrooms*
 - Multi stalled gender inclusive bathrooms will be designed to ensure privacy: floor-to-ceiling stalls, trash receptacles within each stall, sturdy locks on all stall doors.
 - There will also still be gender specific bathrooms available for you to use.
- *I am concerned that these bathrooms will be confusing to use*
 - All bathrooms will be clearly signed and signposted. They are also just like regular multi stall bathrooms - there aren't any special rules.
- *I am concerned that these bathrooms will replace already limited women's bathrooms*
 - There will be gender specific bathrooms available, however, all gender inclusive bathrooms will have the same facilities found in women only bathrooms. The installation of gender inclusive bathrooms will not affect the ratio of men's and women's bathrooms - it should actually improve the number of facilities that women can access.
- *I don't want to use them / I don't want my child to use them*
 - There will be gender specific bathrooms to use if you prefer them. There will be easy signage to direct you to any of the available bathrooms.
- *These bathrooms will be unclean*
 - Gender inclusive bathrooms will be kept to the same standards of cleanliness as all other bathrooms, and we trust that the community will help us keep them that way.
- *I don't think these bathrooms are necessary*
 - Gender inclusive bathrooms are easier to use for people who need assistance in the bathroom, i.e. children, people with disabilities.
 - These bathrooms are safer and more comfortable to use for our LGBTQ+ community.
 - They relieve traffic.

In Conclusion

Starting this process can be daunting. Hopefully, using some of this advice, you can begin your journey to gender inclusive bathrooms.

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