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CTE real-world project 2022–23

**Creating Safe Spaces for Nonbinary Students in CTE Classrooms**

**Introduction**

Fostering safe spaces for nonbinary and LGBTQIA+ people is a growing concern, and little research has been presented within the realm of Career Technical Education (CTE) programs. Data on nonbinary students are not collected consistently from postsecondary institutions that offer CTE programs, and most data are determined by self-report. Every student deserves to learn in an environment that is welcoming, safe, and productive.

Institutions are charged with providing access to CTE programs (Advance CTE, 2021). Being inclusive and providing a safe place for everyone to learn is tantamount to success. Using preferred pronouns with nonbinary students is a respectful way to create an inclusive learning environment and provide access to programs that, traditionally, have not been accessible to or comfortable for nonbinary students.

Best practices should be compiled and shared to support students in the classroom and provide inclusive programs in which they can persist and complete. Resources and examples have been included in this document. The resources here should not be considered exhaustive. Educators are encouraged to create safe and brave spaces to learn more about this topic, explore feelings through first-person accounts, and discuss with colleagues and their institutions the supports that are needed.

**Setting the stage**

Teachers at one particular institution requested information on how to discuss this subject. It seems fitting to start by listing some definitions and resources to build understanding on this topic. These resources are included to help states develop trainings and introductions of their own. It should go without saying that trans and nonbinary students are in every state of the United States and that this topic is applicable to all types of education and settings. Unfortunately, CTE programs, and CTE spaces in general, have been recognized as a cisgender and White space where education and understanding of inclusion is greatly needed.

A few general resources:

[Genny Beeman](#), and [The Stonewall Center](#) at the University of Massachusetts National Center for Transgender Equality, has built a history and legacy of understanding in the area of transgender and nonbinary research and practices on college campuses (University of Massachusetts, 2022). Their work has steadily grown over more than a decade and was on the forefront of serving trans and nonbinary students in practice primarily on college campuses. Their information is applicable to all areas of education regardless of whether it is a K–12 or technical college setting.

The Human Rights Campaign (2022) offers a few definitions that will be helpful here:

> Transgender, or trans, is an umbrella term for people whose gender identity is different from the sex assigned to them at birth. . . . Cisgender, or cis, generally refers to people whose gender identity or expression aligns with traits typically associated with the sex assigned to them at birth. . . . Non-binary is an identity embraced by some people who do not identify exclusively as a man or a woman. Non-binary people may identify as being both a man and a woman, somewhere in between or as falling completely outside of these categories. While many also identify as transgender, not all non-binary people do. Non-binary can also be used

as an umbrella term encompassing identities such as agender, bigender, genderqueer or gender fluid.

It is helpful to delineate between sex and gender and to understand the difference. In this context sex means the biological classification assigned to someone based on physical traits when they are born. It is commonly expressed as "male" or "female." Gender is different and is an identity that is formed after birth and throughout the lifespan. This identity is commonly expressed as "boy" or "girl." We see examples of gender, and the binary, by popular colors assigned to one or the other gender. This is seen in action as "blue is for boys," "pink is for girls," and/or "yellow is for when we don't know what the baby is yet." As with any identities, there are variations. Some are listed previously as agender, bigender, genderqueer, or gender fluid. A discussion of this would require more space, time, and effort than required for this piece.

## Pronouns

No introduction to this topic would be complete if pronouns were omitted. The most common pronouns are included here. This list is not exhaustive. No disrespect is intended by leaving out other pronouns in use.

He/Him/His
She/Her/Hers
They/Them/Theirs
Ze/Zim

More on pronouns can be found in various academic and nonacademic sources. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (2022) has a webpage dedicated to pronouns, and the National Center for Transgender Equality (2022) has frequently asked questions that can be very helpful for compiling information and understanding more on this topic. For an interesting nonacademic read, please consider an article on Them. Them is a web-based magazine and features articles on LGBTQIA+ topics (Devin-Norelle, 2022).

## Project purpose

The purpose of this project is to provide teachers and classroom professionals with resources to make their CTE classroom more inclusive and to support trans and nonbinary students in CTE programs. Assistance with being more inclusionary and examples of how to have discussions related to students self-disclosing as trans or nonbinary were requested by teachers in the College of Health Sciences and Administration in a technical college in Denver, Colorado.

## Background (history of the inequitable practice and the population being examined)

In recent years trans and nonbinary students have become more prevalent in the world of education and have been gaining visibility in the United States. K–12 institutions have provided supports, verbiage, language, and methodology with the purpose of being inclusive to this growing demographic. Workplaces have followed the lead of colleges and universities to create groups, clubs, organizations, and places for individuals to provide a safe and welcoming space.

The reporting of data on this issue has been slow going in technical schools and CTE programs in community colleges across the land. In Colorado, Denver Public Schools (DPS) collects data on those who do not wish to select male or female, and they are given alternative options to

choose from. In the Colorado Community College System, a similar method of selection is in the works, but there is no timeline for when it will be implemented. Most postsecondary institutions still have a system that is primarily binary for gender in the aspects of application and self-reporting. This type of system leaves nonbinary students' identity invisible in totality until they are forced to out themselves in the classroom.

Outing themselves in a classroom can open the door for bullying, abuse, and other harmful interactions. Teachers are blindsided with awkward conversation and without guidance about to handle the situation. It has been reported that trans and nonbinary individuals suffer from more instances of bullying in school and are more prone to attempting suicide (Kosciw et al., 2012). The Trevor Project has also published data from its national survey showing that 45% of all LGBTQIA+ youth have seriously considered suicide in the past year (The Trevor Project, 2022).

We know that teachers play a vital role in the development and lives of their students. Teachers in CTE fields often have a deeper connection to their classes due to the smaller class size, the hands-on teaching and learning, and their passion for the industry from many years in the field. Students deserve a welcoming environment in which to learn, and teachers deserve the know-how to support their students. From a human perspective, The Trevor Project published data from another survey that showed that nonbinary youth who had one adult who accepted their gender identity had the chance of attempting suicide reduced by 33% as compared to their peers who did not have at least one adult who showed acceptance (Weaver, 2021). At the risk of oversimplification, a teacher is in the position to be the adult that accepts the nonbinary student's identity through providing an inclusive classroom experience.

Organized professional development at the postsecondary level regarding support for trans and nonbinary students is limited at best. In Colorado, specifically, each community college sets aside time every semester to have a professional development day. Public school systems in the K–12 realm consistently schedule and offer professional development opportunities to their teachers and staff. DPS offers professional development geared toward LGBTQIA+ support and inclusion. It would be safe to assume that other districts around the state and in other states offer the same opportunity to their teachers and staff. Unfortunately identifying and evaluating professional development opportunities in other states and other districts was far too broad a scope for this project. Here we will stay within the realm of DPS and the Colorado Community College System.

Emily Griffith Technical College (EGTC) is in a unique position for a project such as this. EGTC and its sister institution, Pickens Technical College, have one foot in the Colorado Community College System and one foot in their public school system. Some funding sources are commingled—each receives funding through traditional public school avenues, and some resources come through the Colorado Community College System. This commingling leads to data reporting that can be an eclectic conglomeration of both systems or could mean that data that are not traditionally reported in one system may be reported in another. Either way we know that funding drives what data are collected and reported, and since trans and nonbinary identity of students is not connected to a funding source these data are often overlooked.

## Method of the evaluation

There were several avenues of evaluation used in this project. First, we looked internally to identify if nonbinary students were identified through the application process. Second, we evaluated syllabi in several health-related programs, including the master template used in all

colleges and classes, to identify supports and inclusionary language. Lastly, interviews were conducted with teachers to obtain a deeper understanding of what supports and examples they needed to deploy in the classroom. A superficial examination of the language and images on the college's website was also conducted to gain an understanding of what the potential student sees when researching EGTC. It was quickly noted that a formal process for evaluation was not going to be possible at the time of the writing due to coronavirus measures in place. All images used included people wearing masks and personal protective equipment. This meant all clothing, facial hair, features, and any personal items denoting fashion or gender could not be seen. Although this is a good measure of nonbinary and gender-neutral imagery, it would be dishonest to evaluate the marketing and any perceived assumptions based on the images used at this time. The purpose of investigating the images used in online marketing was to identify if traditionally gender binary images were used across the college and could possibly set some assumptions about the learning environment. Further investigation would need to be done to understand what kind of images are being used in marketing CTE programs and if those images set some sort of perceived standard of gender inclusivity and expression in the classroom.

## Summary of findings

It should be made clear that the problem here is *not* pronouns. This is an introduction to how to support trans and nonbinary students. Much more needs to be investigated and done in this area. As far as education is concerned, this issue is not political. These students exist and attend institutions of education. They are often forced to out themselves or be outed by faculty and staff who are charged with their support and service. Unfortunately, we live in a world that has politicized this issue and "belief" in one's right to exist. As far as I am concerned, the pragmatic reality is trans and nonbinary students exist, are in our institutions of higher education, and are not being supported. Teachers are crying out for help in understanding how to support their students. It is alarming how much vitriol, misinformation, and violence is targeted toward these two groups, and it needs to stop. Violence was the impetus for the Stonewall riots; the Pulse night club shooting in Florida; and recently in Colorado Springs, Colorado, at the Club Q shooting that left five dead.

EGTC is in downtown Denver, Colorado. The college serves approximately 5,000 students in total with the College of Health Sciences and Administration serving approximately 1,500 students. Of those almost 1,500 students, two selected "other" or "prefer not to answer" on the initial application. Teachers in eight of the 11 programs offered identified nonbinary students or requested assistance and coaching on how to support and have conversations related to trans and nonbinary students. Two teachers voiced concern about preparing their nonbinary students for the workplace and wondered how they would be accepted at the work or clinical site.

An interesting report was released by Unidos US. More and more institutions are trying to court students of color into their programs, and CTE is no exception. Many students of color are already in CTE programs, and institutions with CTE programs are often minority-majority serving institutions. Other institutions are trying to grow their Latinx population to obtain their designation as a Hispanic-Serving Institution and the federal money granted by this designation. Unidos US (2021) reports that 57% of Latinx LGBTQIA+ students feel unsafe in school because of their gender expression and 35% are likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe. As we identify areas of needs for inclusion and support, it should go without saying that people of color

should be part of this process. We have data from this report that show intersecting identities are experiencing negative effects through gender identity. We know how hard it is to help students persist through programs, and there is much research on how people of color need support in programs. This report by Unidos US provides definitive proof that support is required. If students miss class due to safety concerns, how can we expect them to complete and find a good job with a good wage?

## Images and student application process:

Unfortunately, the review process of images was ultimately inconclusive. These images were taken while coronavirus protocols were in place, so many faces were covered by masks and other protective equipment. Those that showed individual faces could have been perceived as being in the gender binary. A few men showed facial hair, and women wore traditional makeup and hairstyles that were either short or pulled back in a ponytail or bun.

It was noticed that the images that we used to promote health programs promoted the perceived stereotypes that anecdotally linger in the conversation of CTE programs. All of the health CTE programs reviewed, through pictures and through enrollment data, contained a participant population that was predominantly female. At EGTC, the enrollment of male students across all health programs is less than 10%. Further investigation is needed to find the root cause for any gender disparity in enrollment in health programs at EGTC and other institutions across the state.

## Syllabus review:

A syllabus is the contract between the student and the teacher. It serves as the first contact the student has with the class they will be attending. Verbiage in the syllabus establishes the tone of the course and perception of the teacher and learning environment. The syllabus template that was given to all teachers at the institution was reviewed for inclusionary language. This template is provided to all faculty as a starting point to create the syllabus for their specific class. This template has been vetted by the institution, refined, and edited for clarity by upper administration and peers.

It should be noted that the syllabus did not include the institution's nondiscrimination policy that includes gender identity. All education institutions should work to include gender identity in their nondiscrimination statements. An extra step of posting the nondiscrimination statement in the classrooms should also be performed. At the time of writing this report, EGTC posts its mission statement in every classroom in accordance with the rules of its accrediting body. Posting the nondiscrimination policy in the class or syllabus would bring it to light as a reminder of inclusion in the classroom.

## Professional development and community support:

An LGBTQIA+ professional development course was created, and offered, by our partners in DPS. After having postsecondary teachers review the course to provide an opinion about whether it should be offered to all teachers in the College of Health, it was determined that this professional development session was obviously geared toward a K–12 audience and left many lingering questions on how to approach adults and how to provide an inclusive postsecondary classroom. The researcher is grateful to our DPS partners and colleagues in the department that creates professional development courses. They provided immense insight into the process philosophy and practice of creating professional development courses for the district.

They also extended an invitation and expressed a willingness to collaborate on future professional development sessions geared toward postsecondary teacher and student support. Concurrently with the start of this investigation a grant was secured to bring in a consultant to provide general diversity and inclusion training for the College of Health. In preparation for that training the researcher was involved with all meetings and the development of said training with the consultant. Due to time constraints with the grant and professional development sessions the consultant could not focus on trans and nonbinary inclusion in the classroom specifically. They did touch on several points of interest such as unconscious bias, an overview of gender identity, and LGBTQIA+ identity. The observation of that session assisted the researcher in identifying what needed to be included in a training specific to nonbinary classroom inclusion and how it would fit into a bigger professional development schedule.

### Teacher interviews and requests:

Teachers advocated for themselves and asked for coaching and best practices to help in the classroom with nonbinary students. The investigator was the supervisor responsible for the teachers in the health college and used one on ones, observations, and informal conversations to understand each teacher's perspective, experience, and need.

The following sample quotes show the varied perceptions and attitudes to providing an inclusive classroom for nonbinary students. These quotes came from teachers in the Medical Assistant, Pharmacy Technician, Dental Assisting, and Certified Nursing Assistant programs, respectively. At the time of this investigation, all teachers identified as cisgendered.

"I had no idea. No one ever mentions it, and at the same time the clinics don't really care. They think that is something that is not part of work. But you're right, we need to talk about it. How do I address it? Ask everyone?"

"It's not something I thought about at the start of class. We're so busy talking about getting the semester started, I didn't think about preferred names or pronouns."

"I don't think anyone has ever asked me or if I asked anyone else. When you have an online class, it's hard because everything is loaded already. If they don't tell me, I won't know. I'm going to have to start asking all my students from now on."

"This *is* important. I have a preferred name. It's just my middle name, but still I don't like being deadnamed. I let everyone know if they have a preferred name to let me know and if they have a preferred pronoun to let me know that too. If they don't tell me or correct me, I go by the name printed or the pronoun they present."

These comments range from no awareness on the issue to some awareness of preferred names being part of the supports for a nonbinary student. All were lacking in the nuanced understanding of how to approach, support, and have discourse with a nonbinary student about being gender nonbinary.

Coaching provided to the teachers was individualized with focused role play. Unfortunately, the researcher separated with EGTC in the summer and could not continue coaching the teachers for the upcoming 2022–23 academic year. Before the separation, all the

teachers mentioned they felt their knowledge on the subject and their ability to support and converse with gender nonbinary students had increased. They also expressed a feeling of being better able to support nonbinary students in their classroom. Lastly, the teachers expressed relief in knowing more about the gender nonbinary perspective and how to approach conversations on the topic.

Although we cannot document change through surveys of students at this time, it is heartwarming to know that a group of teachers who never really thought about this issue are now able to anticipate needs, can create a more inclusive classroom, and are not intimidated by a conversation based on gender identity.

## Recommendations and resources

The primary recommendation from this project is a simple one. Postsecondary institutions need to offer more specific training for teachers and staff to communicate, support, and be inclusive to their trans and nonbinary students.

Community college systems should take a page from the K–12 system and start to offer professional development in a more cohesive and systematic way. In Colorado, each community college sets aside time for PD Day, but Indiana has taken this approach a step farther. Indiana has an organized office for professional development and offers its own training (beyond onboarding) that helps teachers and staff support students. Although this might be a large step for some systems in different states, it could easily be adapted to what is currently in place. For example, since time is already earmarked for PD Day in Colorado, the Colorado Community College System could create one or two training sessions that would be offered at every institution on their specific PD Day. We would advocate for an inclusive training session for trans and nonbinary students but understand the current political climate may not be conducive for such a specific training. The Community College of Aurora in Colorado provides inclusive excellence training for its staff. Training such as this should be expanded to include academic faculty and offered to all Colorado Community College System schools during their PD Days.

## Use steering committees to further understanding

Institutions with CTE programs are familiar with having steering committees for their programs. These committees should discuss the supports in place for trans, nonbinary, and all LGBTQIA+ individuals and should be encouraged to provide educational institutions with these materials for recruitment purposes. An inclusive poster in the classroom or in the job center would be a primary visual for the aspiring worker to have a sense of belonging and hope that there is a place of work that welcomes them.

Human resources recruiters and industry experts should be proactive about mentioning trans and nonbinary supports at their workplace. Is there an affinity group one could join? Does the company participate in local pride events? If so, how? Does health care coverage have specific coverage for hormone therapy, mental health, or other services that would be beneficial to this group? If so, what and how much is the coverage?

## For the teachers:

The following is a list of resources to look over and use in the classroom. Many of these are geared toward K–12 and young learners and would need to be adapted to the postsecondary classroom. It is recommended that teachers make connections in the community to help bring awareness and understanding to their classrooms. Teachers could use an LGBTQIA+ center on

campus or reach out to a community center focused on trans and nonbinary support. For example, we have The Center in Denver, Colorado.

Learning for Justice (2016) has an older toolkit called "Being there for nonbinary youth" that can help dispel some rumors and create conversations with binary folks. The information contained in the toolkit would need to be adjusted to working with adults, but it is a good starting point.

GLSEN (2022b) offers general resources for educators. Its website offers lesson plans, professional development, inclusive curriculum, and other resources. Many other national organizations such as The Equality Project also provide resources for educators. The following are a few things postsecondary teachers could use in the field and are intended as examples. Since these examples are in the public domain, teachers are encouraged to modify the resources as they see fit and augment them for the specific students they teach. These examples are not intended as any sort of panacea, and it should be understood since this is a sensitive—and personal—subject, an educator must approach any conversation with grace and understanding. These examples are provided to start a conversation or help the educator think about this topic through the student's lens.

Sample survey:

At the beginning of class, have something like the following survey ready to hand out to all the new students. This survey would be a great icebreaker that can be disseminated and filled out while the students are settling into their seats. The teacher should introduce themselves and provide their pronouns to the group. That author has used their name in all examples to play the teacher. Any student names are fictitious.

Teacher: "Hello class! My name is Carlos Lopez, and I'll be your teacher/professor/guide for this class. This is Introduction to College Success, and I'm happy to have you all here and excited for the journey we will be taking together. My preferred pronouns are they/him. I understand it may take some a little time to get used to using 'they,' and I understand if you slip and use a different pronoun. I would prefer if you called me by my last name without a salutation when addressing me, but if you need to use my first name to get my attention, that is okay. In front of you is a small survey to help me get to know you a little before we start. It'll give others time to come in and settle in. Please fill out these questions honestly, and I will do my best to use your preferred name and pronouns. The other information helps me understand how I can help motivate and encourage you."

The paper at each station should contain at least three questions:
- What is your name used to register for classes?
- What is your preferred name?
- What are the last four digits of your student ID number?

Any additional questions can be used to get to know your class better. Examples of additional questions to ask are: What can I do to motivate you during a tough time? What learning style do you like the most?

This survey will be used by the teacher to compare to the roster. If the institution does not have a preferred name policy or cannot report a preferred name on the roster, this survey is a

great resource to avoid "deadnaming" or outing any student from the start. The student ID is another piece of information to identify the person on the roster and be able to make a note to oneself. One could easily ask for the last few digits of the student ID to maintain Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act compliance and protect the student's information, or this field could be eliminated completely. It is included here as an example.

Lastly, postsecondary institutions would benefit from training their teachers to include gender identity in their inclusive pedagogy strategy. Multiple available resources outline how to practice inclusive pedagogy. GLSEN (2022a) has its own guide to inclusive pedagogy, and the link can be found in the references page at the end of this document. In our experience, nonbinary gender identity is often overlooked when discussing inclusive pedagogical practice. As one could not omit the discussion of mixed-race students in inclusive pedagogy, one cannot omit nonbinary gender identity in the discussion of gender inclusivity, but the former seems to be overlooked in practice. General resources that can help with inclusive pedagogy are numerous, but North Carolina State University has an interesting read on why teachers should make their classrooms inclusive (Bowen, 2021).

**Federal recommendation:**
Under Perkins V, protected classes were expanded. Gender identity was not included in the list of protected statuses (Carl D. Perkins Vocational and Applied Technology Education Act). Although it would literally take an act of Congress to include gender identity in the list of protected statuses, it would be a worthwhile endeavor for nonbinary students. It is greatly hoped that gender identity will be included in the next revision, but it cannot be advocated as the primary reason to invest the resources to revise the Perkins grant system. It is reassuring that the federal government is asking sites to record their gender data starting this year. It is hoped for better systems to report nonbinary participant numbers.

**Barriers and further research:**
Misunderstanding of this issue and misinformation will be major barriers in supporting nonbinary students. The current U.S. political climate shows a division on this topic. Many continue to use sex and gender interchangeably and believe gender identity is static and assigned at birth through classification from sexual organs. This barrier will be difficult to overcome and will take time. Professional development of educators can help, but individual belief systems are slow to change. Seeing as this topic has permeated the national political conversation, it will continue to be used as a wedge issue. Administrators, state and local leaders, and others in education may not be willing to support strategies and practices aimed at supporting nonbinary students due to political pressure administered from those who are not sympathetic to the nonbinary student's position.

Data reporting will continue to be an issue in this area. All data are gathered through self-report. As stated previously, no primary funding source requires gender identity to be recorded. It stands to reason that a vulnerable population will have reservations about identifying themselves as it may put them in harm's way or "out" them. Asking folks what their gender identity is may be something that can be done in the classroom, or some other safe environment, but to identify oneself as being "outside the norm" would be akin to putting a target on one's back. As we are looking specifically in the realm of CTE, certain programs would seem to lend

themselves to being more, or less, friendly to a nonbinary person. Health or cosmetology programs, for example, are more humanistic in nature and would have greater tolerance for those challenging the traditional gender binary. Construction programs, on the other hand, may not be so accepting and may be more traditionally gender-binary affirming in nature. More research needs to be conducted to understand any gender bias or disparity in CTE programs and to understand how these programs, in general, perceive gender.

Lastly, through this experience, an interesting phenomenon was noticed. In discussions with steering committee members and employers, many hiring agencies and human resources representatives were quick to mention their supports for LGBTQIA+ and nonbinary workers. Some mentioned how they were working with health insurance companies to provide plans that were more supportive of those who required hormone therapy and how they worked with employees to find parental leave if there was a newborn in the family. What was shocking is that it did not seem the educational institution(s) are as supportive. Many universities and community colleges may have an LGBTQIA+ center on campus, but do students use it regularly? Do faculty consult with them on how to support their students or create an inclusive environment in the classroom? This is one area, maybe one of others, where the hiring institution is more advanced with attracting and retaining people through inclusivity. We are left wondering if education will catch up in this aspect in the near future.

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