



ALL-GENDER RESTROOMS: EMBRACING CHANGE IN THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Amanda Vigneau, Shepley Bulfinch Architects
Chris Hillebrand, Shepley Bulfinch Architects
Joel Pettigrew, Shepley Bulfinch Architects

As architects and designers, we face design challenges that are rooted in the built condition. In our collaboration with student activities professionals, the effective use of space to service, engage, and welcome the campus community is at the forefront of design and planning discussions. We must consider the social implications of our physical designs that evolve as social and cultural norms change. One such topic of extended conversation is the all-gender restroom which has been a topic of conversation in the projects we are designing over the last decade. This piece will help bridge the gap between student affairs practitioners and architectural designers with information and understanding of how code influences the design of all gender restrooms, so that campus communities are better prepared to advocate for their needs in building all gender restrooms.

INTRODUCTION

As institutions are increasingly moving towards all-gender restrooms, it is vital to understand the why. Public restrooms have a vast history, including when and how restrooms became separated by the sexes, race, and current social, cultural, and political debates around LGBTQ rights. All-gender restrooms are no longer a discussion or experimental idea within the institution but a response to establishing social and cultural norms for future generations. According to a 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey Report, “59% of participants [16,351 respondents] have avoided bathrooms in the last year because they feared confrontations in public restrooms at work, school, or other places” (James et al., 2016).

Public restroom facilities are a necessary part of the buildings we create, providing privacy for a universal part of the human experience. The de-gendering of restrooms has been at the forefront of architectural discourse around accessibility and inclusion for all because they are used by all. The traditional men’s and women’s rooms provide a choice, a threshold to cross, a decision to make in a basic human function that very publicly puts on display your choice of entry and, therefore, how you identify. That understanding of a person’s vulnerability and privacy in this choice has been taken up by architects and designers as we have been trained and practice in empathy and accessibility to all.

As practice and conversations around all-gender restrooms become the norm, architects have implemented design plans and pushed the understanding of building codes that make it easier for institutions to follow suit, designing spaces that are inclusive of all student identities. This article will discuss how student life professionals and campus leadership can advocate and plan for all-gender restrooms with an understanding of the design and code implications they come with. By aligning these fields with common language and understanding of code, we expect this article to offer student life professionals tools to come to the drawing board with when considering new spaces or renovations in their campus buildings. We will discuss the general building code considerations and local jurisdiction approvals needed to install all-gender restrooms, knowing that every state and city

has different requirements. And finally, we will review several case studies of projects that we have designed to illustrate the options available that may fit best with a particular space or campus strategy.

Gender identity and inclusion on campus

Students, staff, faculty, and other campus community members may spend the entirety of their day on campus. Gendered restrooms present a choice for some that could lead to fear of harassment or even physical assault. According to a recent study, over half of transgender graduate student respondents shared concerns that “if their gender identity were revealed to other students and professors, that they would no longer be emotionally or physically safe on campus,” noting other surveys where 25% of transgender, nonbinary, and gender non-conforming (TNG) students were “denied access to restrooms or other facilities in school (Monheim, Ratcliff, 2021).” Additionally, in a further study asking TNG students to create a wish list with gender-inclusive policies and practices they wished to be implemented at their institution, the addition of accessible and visible all-gender restrooms was the most requested change (Goldberg et al., 2018).

In recent years, the legislative battle around gender identity has taken many forms and has led to a state of inconsistency in design and policy. Recent legislative action muddying policy waters includes a 2016 act in North Carolina called the “Public Facilities Privacy and Security Act,” which required individuals to use restrooms or changing facilities in state buildings that corresponded to their sex at birth (Colburn, 2020). More recently, in 2021, the United States Supreme Court held a lower court’s decision in favor of Virginia transgender student Gavin Grimm, who had sued the Gloucester County School Board for not letting him use the bathroom that corresponded with his gender identity before graduating in 2017 (Reuters, 2021).

An all-gender restroom is a restroom designed inclusively for all. Through thoughtful design, we have responded to our clients asking for neutrality in a space that everyone uses to understand the tremendous impact on a person feeling welcomed and included by their institutions. Incorporating this type of facility into a design is hard to envision without an existing standard, and while some projects have the luxury of building from scratch, the existing conditions faced in renovation projects can mean limited design opportunities. As building codes and state and federal regulations evolve around the topic of all-gender restrooms, it is important to remain informed and flexible. While there is not a one-size-fits-all solution, we have outlined recommendations around how to approach the conversion of existing facilities and the design of new all-gender restrooms.

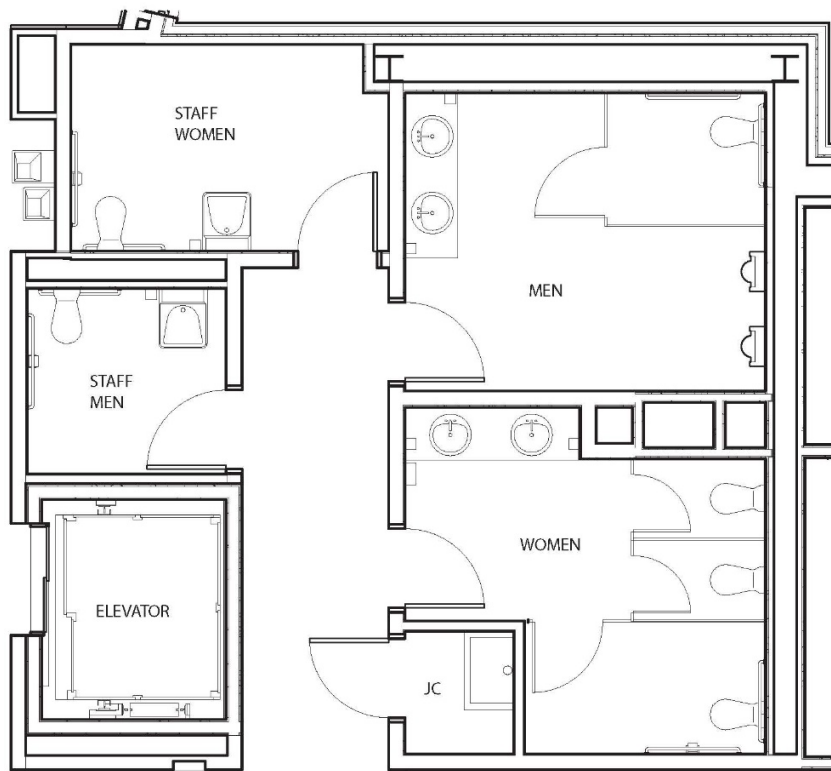
Considerations

When designing all-gender restrooms, we need to consider the institutional values and why they are being installed. Is the institution mandating a policy for all construction projects on campus, and what is that policy? Is this specific project requiring all-gender restrooms based on stakeholder and user feedback? Is it a notional idea to study for feasibility reasons or to get leadership buy-in on an approach? Is it a full-building approach, or is it adding some all-gender single-user restrooms adjacent to gendered restrooms? Student life professionals are tasked with ensuring the health and well-being of their student and campus community, and the values and priorities of your department should be matched with these design considerations.

The approach will vary according to the type of project in which all gender restrooms will be installed. A building renovation is very different than new construction and requires careful planning to maximize the impact these restrooms can make. A student center is different than a classroom building, which is different than an office administration building – the scale of all-gender restrooms will shift based on the adjacent programs and anticipated traffic. Finally, we need to consider the local building jurisdiction and the building codes being applied to the project. Once these elements are understood, usually through a series of workshops to understand the possibilities, we can begin to incorporate a working design solution into our project. Some of these solutions include but are not limited to the following concepts.

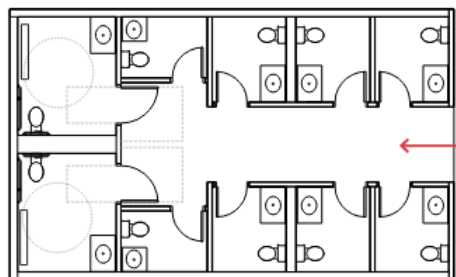
Multi-stall Gendered Restrooms with Adjacent All Gender Single User Restrooms

- A more conservative approach and solution to avoid code variance processes
- Potentially a more cost-effective approach to renovation projects



A Series of All Gender Single User Restrooms

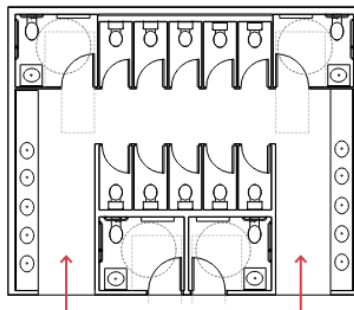
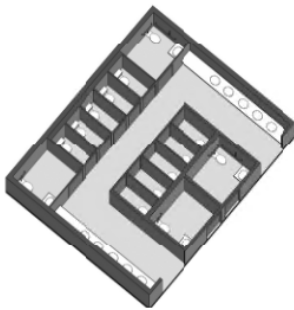
- No multi-stall gendered restrooms, but all single-user restrooms, each with their own sink
- Potentially cost-prohibitive and uses a lot of floor space



INDIVIDUAL UNISEX RESTROOMS WITH SINKS

Multi-stall All Gender Restroom with Adjacent All Gender Single User Restrooms

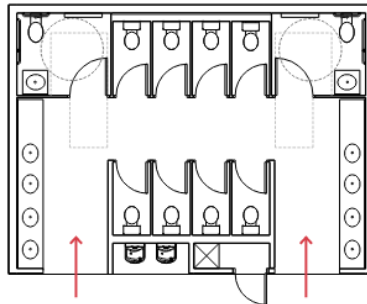
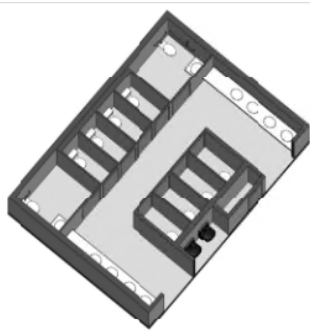
- Allows users to choose between using the multi-stall all-gender restroom or the single-user all-gender restroom(s).
- Potentially the most flexible option giving different levels of privacy choice



FULL HEIGHT STALLS, ADA ROOMS, SHARED SINKS

Multi-stall All Gender Restrooms Only

- A more definitive approach that gives all users the same experience
- A multitude of layout options would allow for features from the approaches above to be incorporated



FULL HEIGHT STALLS, ADA ROOMS, SHARED SINKS

When evaluating your potential layout options for a specific project, the following items need to be kept in mind.

Privacy. Both visual and acoustic privacy should be considered when designing restrooms. Selecting a lock that visually communicates occupancy status prevents potentially uncomfortable interactions. Consider stalls that extend floor-to-ceiling with minimal gaps between panel parts or full-built partitions to ensure better acoustic privacy if the budget allows.

Safety. It is important to create a space that feels safe for all parties, including those who may not yet be comfortable with the idea of an all-gender restroom. Airport restroom entries, for example, are specifically designed to ensure that if a disturbance happens, those outside can hear.

Comfort. While the factors that produce a sense of comfort are unique to everyone, we can make design decisions that aim to improve comfort levels on a broad level. Installing mirrors in individual stalls can increase user comfort by allowing a space to groom in private.

Engagement. Inclusion is about universal acceptance and understanding, so one of the best strategies for implementing inclusive design is to bring many voices to the table. We recommend involving stakeholders and users through a variety of engagement strategies, including staff who will be responsible for the maintenance and cleaning of these spaces in the future.

Words matter. The language used regarding all-gender restrooms is as important as the architectural changes themselves. Words and identity graphics typically shown with gendered restrooms can create an environment that excludes, so we recommend using neutral signage.

Based on the potential layout options and factors described above, we can begin creating specific layout options for a project which may include:

- Laying out toilet stalls and studying full-height partitions between them as either actual walls or solid panels.
- Determining how many accessible stalls are needed and where to best locate them.
- Studying the different widths of stalls to allow for all body types to feel comfortable.
- Studying where sinks and mirrors should be located to avoid unwanted sight lines and maximize flow for high-traffic spaces such as outside a union ballroom or dining hall.
- Studying entrance and exit options to maximize safety and comfort for all users. Knowing institutional restroom accessory standards can allow us to begin to lay out those features so that they not only fit but are located correctly to allow the restroom to function properly (e.g., “Where is the soap dispenser in relation to the sink, and the hand drying station once your hands are wet?”).

Implementation

There are many facets to the building code that determine how a building is allowed to be constructed. The materials used to build a building impact its size and life safety requirements (e.g., sprinklers and emergency exits). How the building is used in conjunction with how it is built will also impact life safety requirements and determine a building’s occupancy. For instance, a convocation center would be calculated to hold far more occupants than an office building. The occupant load is used to calculate the quantity and size of emergency egress routes out of the building as well as the number of toilet fixtures needed. Current building codes calculate fixture counts differently between men and women - until 1990, codes did not even include considerations for accessibility. In general, both restrooms will have the same number of sinks, but men’s rooms require fewer toilets. When determining the number of fixtures within an all-gendered restroom, the initial approach is to use the building’s occupancy load to calculate the number of toilet and sink fixtures per floor and total the women’s and men’s rooms to size a single all-gendered restroom.

There is a lot of variation in the building code used across the country, which is being interpreted differently by local and state officials. This is important for student life professionals to understand as they explore opportunities with their colleagues in campus facilities. The buildings’ location and local building code will help guide design decisions and best practices. The International Building Code (IBC) is widely followed within the United States, with modifications being made at the state and local levels. The IBC is revised every three years, and most building jurisdictions take time to review and determine what changes they want to adopt and which they want to remove or modify. Student affairs professionals need to understand that this variation and adoption of codes may make the path to design decisions differ based on where you are located. Using a local architect, or one with a code consultant familiar with the local area, can enhance your approach to designing all-gender restrooms and avoid wasting time on a design that may not be accepted by local inspectors. While the IBC determines general building codes, it is used in conjunction with the International Plumbing Code (IPC), which is used to determine specific plumbing code requirements. The 2021 IPC has included parameters for all-gender restrooms that local officials may now reference to help them interpret how they may be installed.

In designing an all-gender restroom, here are some important changes to the 2021 IPC to be aware of:

- The allowance for all-gender multi-stall restroom.
 - Previously there were no provisions for multi-stalled facilities.
- Removal of binary language, signage, and designation for single-user restrooms.
 - Previously all restrooms required a gender designation, even for single-user stalls.
- Required occupancy indicator on doors of single-user restrooms.
 - Previously single-user restroom doors could obviously be locked but did not require an indicator to let others know it was occupied.
 - This does not apply to stalls within a multi-stall facility but is considered best practice and recommended.

- A provision that was NOT approved in the 2021 IPC was the requirement for full-height partitions between stalls.
 - ▶ Some local jurisdictions, however, have included specific dimensions for toilet partitions in all-gender restrooms
- If urinals are installed, they must be in a stall and cannot be used to replace toilet fixtures

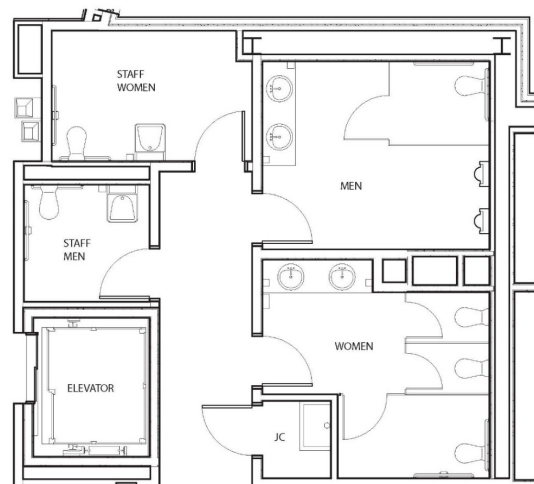
Once the local building code parameters are confirmed, and the design team understands the local jurisdiction's stance on all-gender restrooms, we can begin to design the layout and details with the project stakeholders. Items to consider for a multi-stall, all-gender restrooms typically include:

- Restroom entrances: is there a door, multiple doors, or an open "airport" entrance? Is there an entrance at all, or simply stalls offset from the corridor?
- Sink and mirror locations: is the grooming area within the multi-stall area or separated? Do the mirrors provide unwanted sightlines from people at the sinks or outside the restroom?
- Full-height partitions: It is typical that all stall partitions go floor to ceiling for comfort, privacy, and security? This requires that all stalls be treated as individual rooms, which require their own ventilation, lighting, and fire alarm, adding cost to the project.
- Stall partition material: are the walls normal stud walls or panels? The stud walls take up more room but provide more privacy and a place to install accessories more easily. Panels take up less space but provide less privacy.
- Stall doors: do stall doors go from floor to ceiling or is there a gap at the bottom or top? This tends to be a security topic. Are there occupancy indicators as part of the door hardware?
- Urinals: do you want urinal stalls in addition to the toilet fixtures required? In the interest of privacy and comfort, you may need to install urinals within their own stall with specialty signage to indicate the fixture type.
- Future flexibility: this may become a moot point, but we have been asked to design a layout that provides the flexibility to convert an all-gender multi-stall restroom back to a gendered multi-stall facility for various reasons, but as all gender restroom considerations are put into the code; and become more common, there should be less concern for this flexibility.

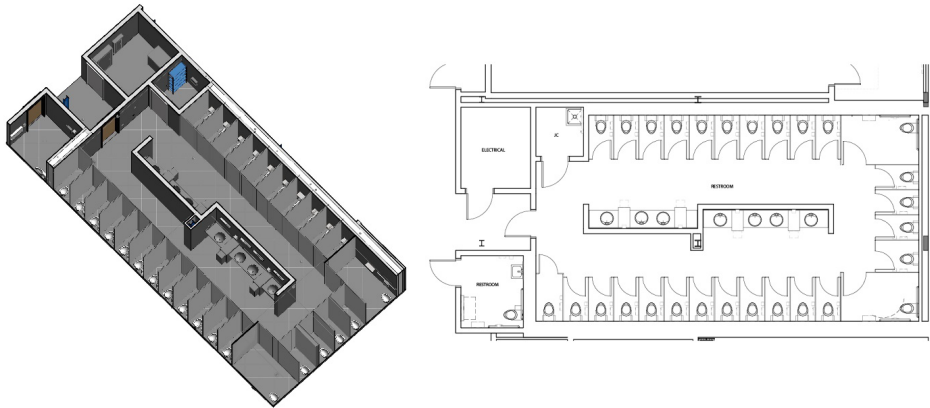
CASE STUDIES

Through a variety of higher education projects, we have worked with our institutional partners to provide all-gender design solutions that support their values and student programming.

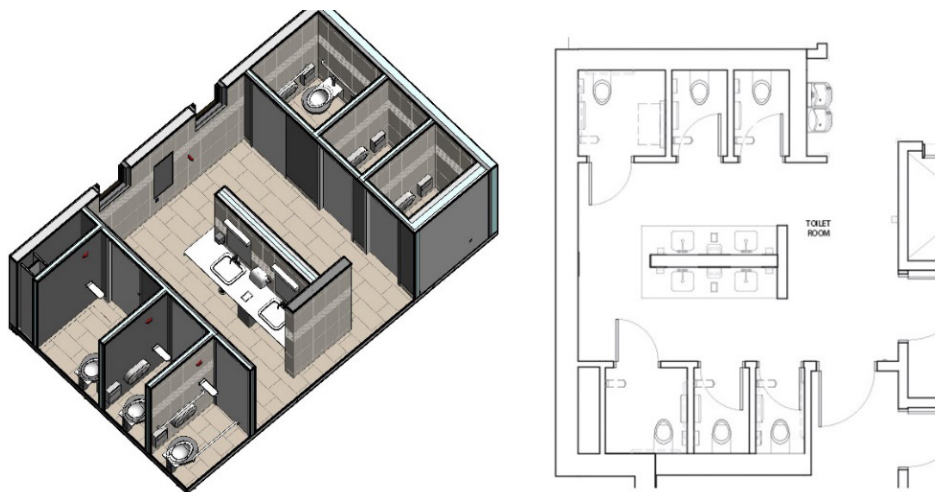
2015 – Addition to a Community College Building in the Boston, Massachusetts area. Five years ago, this community college recognized that it needed to accommodate restrooms for non-binary students, but at the time, the state of Massachusetts required that all restrooms be designated by gender. As a state project already delayed from the previous recession, time and budget were of the essence, and working through a code variance process was going to take too much time. It was determined the best way to reach the college's goals would be to proceed with gendered multi-stall restrooms that would meet the required fixture count, but immediately adjacent, there would be two single-user restrooms. These individual restrooms were still required to be binary despite being in addition to the required number of fixtures. To avoid any building inspector push back, signage was installed labeling the two extra rooms men's and women's, but once the occupancy was granted, that signage was replaced with non-binary signage that remains today. Seven years later, the code is changing, as we indicated earlier, offering us milestones upon which to build and learn.



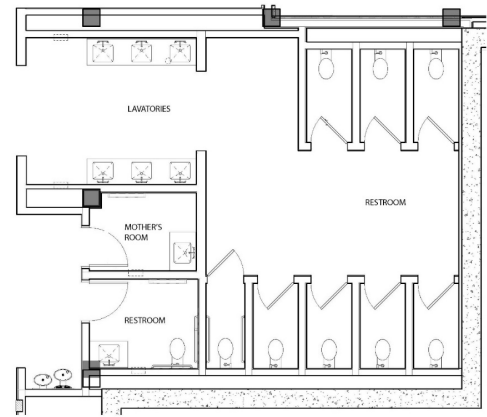
2019 – Full Renovation of a Student Union at a public university in Western Massachusetts. During early stakeholder meetings with the university, including their student government leaders, it was determined that all-gender restrooms were desired for the renovated building, which was being stripped down to its structure and exterior walls. While the current student body was asking for this layout, the campus leaders knew the building was still going to be used for alumni and other conferencing events with older attendees who may not feel comfortable using all-gender, multi-stalled restrooms. Since the building was primarily used for assembly, it required a large number of toilet fixtures, so a multi-stall facility was unavoidable. To accommodate both scenarios, the university requested that the layout of the multi-stall all-gender facility be laid out in a way that could be reverted to a binary multi-stall facility should they need to for whatever reason. Additionally, adjacent non-binary single-user restrooms were installed across the hall to accommodate anyone not comfortable with an all-gender multi-stall facility. The state of Massachusetts still had not revised their building code, so we pursued a variance that was easier to achieve at this time. Focusing on a flexible layout to revert to a binary layout did not allow for an optimal layout, with two entrance doors and long and narrow halls with toilet stall doors on one side. This made the space “tighter” as the institution also opted for full-height panels to add privacy, as discussed earlier.



2020 – Renovation and addition to an academic and innovation building at a private university in Maryland. The renovation and addition to an existing academic building positioned it to become a new gateway to the edge of campus, pushing cross disciplinary work and collaboration at the institution. The university introduced all-gender restrooms to the project early in the design process following success at another on-campus renovation. Pending amendments to the city of Baltimore building code allowed the university to move forward with open entry restrooms, lined by individual hard wall construction toilet compartments, with full wood doors, occupancy latches, and a central sink core. Throughout design, the openness to the adjacent core space, as well as individual privacy, were balanced with the use of single-user rooms in lieu of toilet partitions.



2021 - New Student Center Building at a private university in Baltimore, Maryland. The inclusion of all-gender multi-stall restrooms was a foregone conclusion on this project, with the priority centered on finding the best possible layout for the institution's values. We presented a multitude of layout options with multiple variations on each one until the right option was collaboratively identified. This resulted in a non-door open airport entrance which led to a sink area before continuing into the multi-stall toilet area with a wide circulation space between stalls on either side. Stalls are separated with stud partitions, vary in width, and include accessible single-user stalls with a sink and baby changing station. Outside the open entrance of each multi-stall facility is a non-binary single-stall restroom for those who may feel uncomfortable with the multi-stall layout.



CONCLUSION

As institutions continue to modernize their facilities to ensure their campus communities are supported, empowered, and welcomed, meeting the basic needs of their users in an inclusive way is vital to that growth. All-gender restrooms can take several different forms, fitting the values and infrastructure of their specific institution. Each option comes with specific constraints and technical considerations – whether building codes have caught up to the needs of a community or not. While we are not asking student life professionals to become experts in code, being prepared to ask these questions and know what obstacles may be in play will help in advocating for these spaces as plans come together.

REFERENCES

- Budge, S. L., Domínguez, S., & Goldberg, A. E. (2020). Minority stress in nonbinary students in Higher Education: The role of campus climate and belongingness. *Psychology of Sexual Orientation and Gender Diversity, 7*(2), 222–229. <https://doi.org/10.1037/sgd0000360>.
- Monheim, C. L., & Ratcliff, J. J. (2021). Perceived social norms and acceptance of transgender students in gendered restrooms. *Journal of LGBT Youth, 1*–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2021.1928583>.
- Colburn, S. (2020). Beyond the bathroom wars: Increasing gender-free restroom access in libraries. *College & Research Libraries News, 81*(8), 387. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.81.8.387>.
- Couillard, E., & Higbee, J. (2018). Expanding the scope of universal design: Implications for gender identity and sexual orientation. *Education Sciences, 8*(3), 147. <https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci8030147>.
- Goldberg, A. E., Beemyn, G., & Smith, J. Z. (2018). What is needed, what is valued: Trans students' perspectives on trans-inclusive policies and practices in higher education. *Journal of Educational & Psychological Consultation, 29*(1), 27–67. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10474412.2018.1480376>.
- Goldberg, A. E., Kuvalanka, K. A., & Black, K. (2019). Trans students who leave college: An exploratory study of their experiences of gender minority stress. *Journal of College Student Development, 60*(4), 381–400. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2019.0036>.
- Goldberg, A. E., Kuvalanka, K., & Dickey, L. (2019). Transgender graduate students' experiences in higher education: A mixed-methods exploratory study. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 12*(1), 38–51. <https://doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000074>.
- James, S. E., Herman, J. L., Rankin, S., Keisling, M., Mottet, L., & Anafi, M. (2016, December). The Report of the 2015 U.S. Transgender Survey. Retrieved February 10, 2023, from <https://transequality.org/sites/default/files/docs/usts/USTS-Full-Report-Dec17.pdf>.
- Hurley, L. (2021, June 28). Transgender student wins as U.S. Supreme Court rebuffs bathroom appeal. Reuters. Retrieved February 10, 2023, from <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/us-supreme-court-declines-hear-transgender-school-bathroom-case-2021-06-28/>.