# Chapter 2. Teacher as Ally: Supporting LGBTQ Student Writers in the First-Year Composition Classroom

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## Reflect Before Reading

*Consider the ways that your class activities and writing assignments ask students to share personal information. Students may be asked to write about personal matters in narratives of significant or challenging life experiences or in essays where they put their own histories into conversation with those of authors read in class. In designing these activities and assignments, what thought do you give to how such work challenges LGBTQIA students who are asked to reveal private information in their writing? What options do you provide for students who may not want to write about personal matters?*

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> I believe all LGBT writers confront [inhibition] in their writing and in writing workshops, and at times compromise. However, it is the act of compromising that is lethal to the writer. It stunts our growth and maturity as writers.
>
> —*student (qtd. in Malinowitz 3)*

As James Paul Gee describes "Discourses," he distinguishes between primary Discourses, those we use in our everyday being, and specialist Discourses, those we use as we move among different settings (56-57). The college writing classroom requires students to develop a new specialist Discourse, that of college student writer, leading composition classrooms to be unsettling places for many students. This is especially true for students who are juggling multiple specialist discourses, such as those who are not only new college students entering the academic discourse community but also those who are trying to come into their own as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ) individuals in an academic setting that may be only marginally safe for them.

As educators, we know the importance of students feeling safe, confident, and competent as learners. Thus, creating a safe environment for student learning and

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success is a significant part of our charge as instructors. Susan Rankin et al. found that LGBTQ students frequently feel uncomfortable in the college classroom, particularly in courses where personal information is frequently exchanged, as it is in many first-year composition classes (12). Whether straight or LGBTQ, ally teachers can play an important role in creating safer FYC classrooms.

In my own qualitative study of 30 LGBTQ college students, conducted through interviews and focus groups, participants describe concerns about their safety and identity in their campus experiences in general and their specific concerns as LGBTQ student writers in composition courses.[1] They also express worry about classroom dynamics, including interactions with both classmates and faculty; curriculum and course materials; assignments; and assessment. Equally important, however, these students also provide strategies for ally faculty to use in their classrooms to create an optimal learning environment for all student writers.

This chapter describes these students' concerns and their strategies for ensuring LGBTQ students' safety on campus and in FYC courses, including ideas about inclusive and equitable curricula and required texts. First, though, it's important to understand the threat to safety that many LGBTQ college students face and to understand the FYC course as a site of power.

## Identity and Safety on Campus

Identifying as any element of LGBTQ can be difficult, even emotionally and physically unsafe, for students on college campuses. Kristen A. Renn writes that "policies and practices to protect the rights and safety of LGBT people in higher education have emerged" (132), but it is clear that much work remains in this area. Further, Renn notes that while LGBTQ students now have more protections on campus than they used to, colleges and universities have generally avoided "queering" higher education in ways that continue to leave LGBTQ students feeling that they are outsiders (132).

As Andrew J. Rihn and Jay D. Sloan write, while some may see LGBTQ campus concerns as mere marginalization, suicides of gay students show that bullying on campuses is truly a life and death issue for some students. Indeed, the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs has stated that the traditional college years are the time of greatest homophobic violence, as approximately 35 percent of physical homophobic attacks are carried out by adults 19 to 29 years old, and a similar percentage of the victims of this violence are that age as well (*Hate* 35-36). Rankin et al. report that LGBTQ students are more likely than other students to fear for their physical safety and to feel the need to avoid disclosing their sexual identity because of intimidation and possible negative consequences (37).

These campus-wide concerns may seem separate from the composition class-

1. See Furrow for full study results. The present chapter presents a selection of results that are of most interest to FYC teachers aiming to support LGBTQ students.

room, but students are clear that what occurs in classrooms may have an impact on their safety on the broader campus. One student, Lincoln (all student names are pseudonyms), shared in an interview that he was physically threatened in a campus parking lot after his gender identity was exposed in class.

Another student said that he wrote about "the bathroom issue" that transgender students are likely to face:

> After writing about the bathroom issue and making myself vulnerable in my paper about the issue that all FTMs [female-to-male transgendered individuals] face in the men's room, and my prof doing that, it sort of felt uneasy as well as unsafe more so for the bathroom, not so much for the classroom itself. For me personally, safety is as simple as acknowledging my gender correctly. (Jared)

In Jared's case, his composition teacher asking him about this issue in class made him feel even more unsafe using the campus restrooms.

## Writing Classrooms as Sites of Power

Beyond the intimidation and threats of physical violence that our LGBTQ students experience on campus, they may also experience the classroom as a place that reinforces the heteronormative power structure they witness outside the classroom. Lisa Delpit writes that power is always at work in classrooms, that there is a "culture of power," whose rules reflect those of the culture that has the power, that being told explicitly those rules makes acquiring power easier, and that the power is least recognized by those who have it and most recognized by those who lack it (568).

LGBTQ students recognize the rules about power because they are the same rules they see and experience in their daily lives on and off campus. They know that they can more easily acquire or maintain power by "passing" as heterosexual, either by disguising their gender or sexual identity and relationships or by remaining silent. They recognize that this power is also afforded their professors and classmates who may be LGBTQ but choose not to disclose this facet of their identity.

The anonymity, or lack thereof, provided in different sizes and styles of classrooms also relates directly to one's ability to pass and, therefore, to have power comparable to others in the classroom. A large lecture hall class, in which students are rarely required to interact with each other or with the instructor, provides a haven that is not afforded in a small class where students regularly interact with each other and the instructor.

FYC classes are traditionally limited in size, and instructors tend to encourage interaction, including the sharing of written pieces. In this environment, LGBTQ students must decide how much they are willing to share, and they must exercise caution if they do not want to come out. For example, three of my study partici-

pants said they had chosen to "pass" in their college composition classes, but they would have come out if there had been a good reason to do so. Another student, Jared, regretted that the choice to be out was largely out of his control because his transition from female to male was not physically and legally complete:

> I had to be [out]. Since my insurance is under my dad's, I can't legally change my name yet. So I have to email every professor before the class starts so they don't use my current legal name. In addition to that, many teachers refer to me as female anyway, because I still don't look completely male yet. So, I find myself having to correct them. One Linguistics teacher knew my name was Jared, but continually (without apologizing) referred to me as female. I basically have to come out to each and every professor, just because of the [legal] name problem I have. As for the class students, part of the problem comes up with not passing as male, so I have to come out that way again.

These power inequities that manifest themselves in the FYC classroom may marginalize LGBTQ students, resulting in silencing, more colloquially known as "being in the closet." As William Leap notes, "If the closet is part of gay culture, then the closet, too, has a language—a language that privileges silence over speech, restraint over expression, concealment over cooperation, safety over risk" (268).

Safety in the classroom, both psychological and physical, is clearly necessary for our LGBTQ students to even begin the process of learning. Hilda F. Besner and Charlotte I. Spungin note that any expression of homophobia in the classroom, whether by faculty or by classmates, can frighten LGBTQ students and make them feel "rejected and unsafe" (104). Sondra, one of my student respondents, had this experience: "One professor told me, 'You're not special because you're gay,' and I never really knew what to think about that."

Further, students who feel they must be silent, or otherwise conceal their identities, in the classroom to be physically and emotionally safe have to expend effort that could otherwise be dedicated to learning. Also, their learning may be compromised or undermined; for example, Lila shared this about her feelings of success in her composition classes:

> Often the things that made me uncomfortable as a woman also made me feel uncomfortable as an LGBT student. I did not feel comfortable in most of my classes. I am an excellent writer, and in many of my writing classes I was 'successful' in academic terms [received A grades]. However, I did not feel successful in terms of having my thoughts respected in the same way as other students.

Clearly, a classroom setting where students feel accepted and safe sets a better stage for the learning we want to see take place.

## Classroom Dynamics: Interactions with Faculty and Students

Concerns for LGBTQ students in the FYC classroom begin with the fact that they may be the only LGBTQ student, or one of only a few, in the class. Even if other students, or the instructor, are LGBTQ, they may not "come out" in the classroom, or they may have different relationships with this identity. For example, a lesbian professor may not fully understand the physical vulnerability of a transgender male student. This can be a concern for three reasons: the student may feel alone, without support; he may find that his perspectives are not represented by others or by the curriculum; and he may find himself called upon to represent "the LGBTQ perspective." One student in Neil Simpkins' research said, "When I chose to write on queer or trans topics, I was often called upon by professors in the classroom space to 'explain' how transgender identity worked, perhaps because I had opened myself as willing to discuss my identity in my writing." This additional responsibility placed on the student may be taken by some as a challenge and opportunity; for others, though, it may seem a burden. To be seen as a token capable of, and expected to, represent a population greater than oneself, especially a population as broad as the various identities that make up the LGBTQ community, adds a significant responsibility beyond that of most students in the classroom. Further, it demonstrates how power works in this type of classroom, in which an instructor, even with good intentions, has the power to ask a student to do something that might be uncomfortable for him or her, something that is not expected of other students. Another student, Michael, describes the responsibility he felt to be out in the classroom as "a little burdensome." Others describe the risk of feeling "tokenized," while some feel that they were able to be clear in the classroom and in their writing that their experiences were theirs alone and could not be generalized to a singular "gay experience."

Clearly, sharing identity and understanding the potential for negative repercussions are also concerns for LGBTQ students. In a heteronormative environment, it is a risk for a student to come out in the classroom. Yet, if they do not, they silence themselves in ways that can be detrimental to their self-esteem and to their academic success.

Lincoln and Michael, for example, found themselves wanting to confront "the straight assumption" in the classroom to correct the perception that anyone who did not come out as LGBTQ must be heterosexual. Lincoln wrote about sexual identity. He stated that his teacher graded only the grammar and made no comments on the content. He remarked that he felt the instructor "intentionally overlooked" the content, choosing to act as though it didn't exist. Michael wrote a paper about whether sexuality is genetic. In peer review, his peer editor didn't understand the topic. Michael's instructor and classmates both said his essay felt too forced, and Michael's response was, "Maybe this was true, but fighting against the status quo does take more." While both students tried to use their writing to

educate others about LGBTQ issues, neither felt successful in his attempt.

Some students see their composition classroom as an opportunity to educate their instructors and classmates about LGBTQ issues. This may happen even if the instructor and some classmates do come out as LGBTQ, but it seems even more likely to occur when a student feels that he or she is the singular voice for such concerns. Lila says that her comfort level as well as her sense of responsibility led her to come out in a class: "I had a writing instructor . . . come to a one-on-one meeting and tell me, 'I can't believe I just wasted a whole day at work in diversity training.' He was not high on my list of instructors to be open with. But when HIV+ people were attacked (as a generic group) in a class, I felt compelled to speak up." For Lila, it seems that a sense of social responsibility played a significant role in choosing to come out. She didn't feel that speaking to the instructor individually would make a difference since he did not seem interested in diversity. However, with the verbal attack on HIV+ people (often associated with gay men), she felt she could not stay silent in the classroom.

## Curriculum and Course Materials

The curriculum and course materials, of course, play an important role in student success in the classroom. Often, though, LGBTQ students do not see themselves represented in these essential elements. In one study, LGBTQ students were less likely than other students to agree that their institution's general education requirements and curriculum represented the contributions of LGBTQ people (Rankin et al. 155). This omission of LGBTQ role models in the curriculum results in a silence, possible feelings of exclusion, and damage to self-esteem (Hudson 2).

Textbooks, for example, send important messages through what they do and do not contain. As Michael Apple notes, both textbooks and curriculum represent not "neutral knowledge" but what society sees as "legitimate" or "official" knowledge (4). They demonstrate to students what academe sees as content worthy of study.

Martha Marinara et al. examined 290 composition textbooks for their inclusion of LGBTQ content. They found specific LGBTQ content in only 73 of these textbooks, and they noted that much of this content was focused arguments for and against gay marriage (276-77). Because of this lack of complete and authentic LGBTQ representation in composition readers, LGBTQ individuals find the textual representation in their composition classes to be focused on a singular experience that does not accurately represent the complexity and individuality of their lives. Hudson writes, "This reliance on gay marriage as a vehicle for LGBTQ inclusion in readers can actually be dehumanizing" because, as Marinara et al. note, individuals are positioned "not as full citizens in a democracy and members of families with rich and diverse experiences, but primarily as a minority group that the majority can consider only in arguments about 'rights,' a minority group that must be rescued by the straight majority to succeed" (279).

While the students I interviewed did not share their concerns about textbooks and other required readings, they did describe a lack of inclusion of LGBTQ perspectives in the overall curriculum. Helen said, "My freshman writing teacher didn't seem to think of LGBT students at all. She never included it in issues of diversity." Bruce had a similar experience: "I don't remember LGBT issues ever coming up in the classroom. I don't remember anyone ever talking about it." For these two students, then, an important aspect of their identity was never addressed, even though, for Helen, other elements relating to diversity were included in the curriculum.

## Assignments and Assessment

As in curriculum and in classroom interactions, LGBTQ students also often find themselves under-represented in composition assignments. One student noted, "LGBTQ topics were rarely listed on my writing assignments" (Simpkins). Alternatively, though, they may feel pressured to disclose information about themselves for assignments. Composition instructors often tell students to "write about what they know," but Marinara et al. remind us that this directive may not feel entirely safe or comfortable for LGBTQ students:

> For LGBT/queer students, putting the responsibility on them to articulate themselves in classroom spaces may be the act of preventing such articulations from emerging. Indeed, at least for this group of students, writing about their experiences of difference, where their difference is still taboo and circumscribed by fear and discourses of legality, potentially puts LGBT students in a difficult position. (273)

Students are very aware of the interactions between their identities as individuals and their identities as student writers. Choosing whether to write about LGBT issues may be an easy decision for some; for others, it may be much more difficult.

LGBTQ students often struggle with how much to disclose, not only in the classroom, but also in their writing. This is particularly significant because instructors often encourage them to write about personal experiences, often in the genres of description and narration. Harriet Malinowitz describes writing prompts that require students "to do such things as to reflect upon the 'self,' to narrate personal events, to interpret texts in ways that reveal the subjectivity of the writer, and to write research papers on topics that are 'of interest to them'" (24). Each of these seems to call upon students to write about topics that disclose aspects of their identity they might otherwise not choose to share.

The students I interviewed shared their feelings about being directed or asked to write about personal experiences, and some of these responses do indicate feelings of discomfiture that this type of assignment can elicit. While Jared asserted that "speaking about being lesbian and transgender since I was 16" resulted in

feeling "comfortable" with this kind of writing, other students conveyed feelings of nervousness and even fear. Referring to an autobiographical writing assignment, Erica stated: "I started with two major struggles—sexuality and religion. I was a little nervous . . . because of the content." Lila said that "I generally did not feel comfortable sharing my personal experiences." Finally, Sophia remarked, "I was afraid to write too close, too deep down. I didn't want to expose myself. Straight students don't expose themselves. . . . It shouldn't be a problem, but it is." These responses to writing expectations suggest a need for caution when requiring students to write about personal experiences that may lead to more self-disclosure than the student is comfortable with.

Often, the instructor is not the only one reading the assignment, as students frequently participate in peer review or take their papers to a writing center. One student expressed an interesting concern with peer review: "In my undergraduate classes, peer review was sometimes a challenge, too, since other students would have trouble criticizing my work because they thought they would be criticizing my identity" (Simpkins).

As challenging as sharing one's writing with a classmate in peer review or in a writing center can be, many students find reading their writing aloud in class to be the most difficult type of sharing. In my study, several students shared concerns about reading a paper aloud in class.

David said that he would not write a paper about his LGBT identity because "I wouldn't have felt comfortable sharing it with strangers. I wait to share new things." Referring to being required to read drafts aloud, Lincoln noted that he had to be "careful" about what he wrote about. Sophia focused on her peers in her composition course, stating that they are "sometimes squeamish if you write about LGBT issues. . . . They only want to hear about gay people in a theoretical way, not gay people actually doing anything."

Beyond the concerns expressed by students in general, LGBTQ students find they have to be careful about how much, and with what tone, they write about LGBTQ issues if they are going to be required to read these papers aloud in class. It is apparent that not only topic choice, but also audience, which isn't always revealed ahead of time, plays a role in LGBTQ students' feelings of safety regarding writing in the first-year writing classroom.

With the concerns of LGBTQ writing students in mind, it makes sense now to turn to the role of the FYC instructor. My study participants shared many ideas for ways that composition instructors can work to address their concerns. The overarching element of this work is that of considering oneself an ally to one's LGBTQ students.

## Being an Ally

The field of composition has often worked proactively to create equity for students. How can we, as composition instructors, whether straight or LGBTQ our-

selves, best do this to meet the needs of our LGBTQ students? We can do this by disrupting the silence, using our own voices to speak up for those who may feel they cannot speak up for themselves, and by intentionally making ourselves the allies of our LGBTQ students. I share ten ways to begin this work.

## Begin by Understanding the Importance of LGBTQ Issues for All Our Students.

In a class of 20 to 25 students, it is safe to assume that one or more students identify as LGBTQ or eventually will, one or more students have a parent or parents who are LGBTQ, and many others have close family members or friends who are LGBTQ. For these students, LGBTQ issues are everyday issues. For other students, they will likely find themselves in personal and professional relationships with people who identify as LGBTQ, and thus they will benefit from a greater awareness of LGBTQ realities, interests, and concerns.

## Learn About the Current Situation for LGBTQ Individuals, Especially Those in Our Classrooms.

We must consider and re-consider what we think, know, and believe about LGBTQ individuals. Nancy J. Evans writes, "Individuals must also come to an awareness of the myths and stereotypes they themselves hold about lesbian, gay, and bisexual people" (84), and Vernon A. Wall and Evans elaborate on ways to do this:

> First, gather as much information as you can. Increase your knowledge about the topic of homosexuality. Second, examine your values and beliefs. Knowing where you stand on specific issues and having a willingness to be "stretched" can be extremely beneficial. Third, remember that each gay and lesbian student is an individual, each with different experiences and each at his or her own level of development. (35)

Some schools have resources such as diversity workshops to help teachers learn more about the academic needs of LGBTQ students.

## Consider Learning More and Trying to Eliminate any Internalized Homophobia.

All teachers, and even teachers who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, may want to consider learning more and trying to eliminate any internalized homophobia. For example, being a gay man does not necessarily mean that one understands the unique situations and experiences of lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning individuals. These teachers may also want to learn more about LGBTQ student concerns on campus and in the classroom.

It is also important to remember that every act of personal writing is potentially an act of self-disclosure and of risk for LGBTQ students. These students "must constantly assess the consequences of being out and negotiate the terms of disclosure, often necessitating elaborate monitoring of what is said and even thought, a particular complication is woven into their processes of construing and constructing knowledge" (Malinowitz 22). Students want to know what is expected of them in terms of topic choice and self-disclosure. They want to know who will be reading their assignment and how it will be graded.

Teachers must also stay aware of the school and community environment for LGBTQ students. As adults working on campus in a professional capacity, we may not be entirely aware of what is happening for LGBTQ students in cafeterias and dormitories, for example. Conversing with students and reading the campus newspaper can demonstrate how students are regarding the campus climate. Furthermore, when a state legislature is having a vote regarding gay rights, or considering the possibility of gay marriage or civil union legislation, LGBTQ students and students with LGBTQ family members are likely to be emotionally affected.

## Actively Demonstrate that You Are an Ally.

The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network's most recent study shows that high school teachers who identify as allies of their LGBTQ students create safe academic environments and demonstrate understanding of the concerns of their LGBTQ students. One can also provide visual cues. Wear an ally logo, carry an ally pin, or display something else that identifies you as an ally, such as a "Safe Space" sticker, at your desk or elsewhere in your classroom. Finally, if you are LGBTQ yourself, choosing to be "out" in the classroom is a personal decision that you may wish to consider.

## Use Inclusive Language.

Show a sensitivity to gender issues in general by using and encouraging the use of gender-neutral language. When discussing LGBTQ issues, do so without essentializing LGBTQ people. Include sexual orientation and gender identity in broader conversations without making them seem marginalized as "other."

## Set Up the Classroom as a Safe Environment.

Students need to know their instructor is on their side, and they need to hear that what they say and experience is valid. If your curriculum requires personal sharing, either in small groups, workshops, peer review groups, or large-group discussions, teach students to participate equitably within these settings. Establish guidelines, such as "Everyone must be listened to; we can disagree but stay

respectful." In this way, students know that an expectation has been set for what they say to be respected.

### Confront Homophobia in the Classroom.

LGBTQ students need to know that the teacher will intervene quickly and constructively if the environment begins to become less safe. Negative comments should be addressed, and the teacher should be clear that such comments should not be used to silence others. It may help to remind students that we all have different backgrounds and experiences, even if the classroom looks homogenous. Topics being discussed should be kept separate from individuals, so that controversial topics can be discussed without being perceived as a personal attack. Planning ahead and directing discussion carefully can also minimize conflict. Know ahead of time what you will say if a student makes a general comment like "That's so gay!" or if a student confronts another student about what is being shared.

### Include LGBTQ Issues in the Curriculum as Appropriate.

In the composition curriculum, it is feasible for many of us to include LGBTQ issues in a variety of ways. Normalcy of LGBTQ identities can be modeled by including them on a regular basis in curriculum and discussions. It is important that students have the opportunity to see LGBTQ people living normal, successful day-to-day lives. If you want to use your classroom to begin to create social change, you can consider ways to do this that support marginalized students without jeopardizing the safety of the non-marginalized students. For example, don't introduce LGBTQ issues as topics of controversy. If you say, "This might be controversial," you add to the air of controversy, not of normalcy. Textbooks should be chosen with these concerns in mind as well.

### Create, Use, and Assess Writing Assignments with LGBTQ Students in Mind.

Some students may feel additional pressure because of the subjective nature of evaluating writing. That is, they may be concerned that if they write something with which the teacher does not agree, particularly about their LGBTQ identity, they may be penalized in the grading process. Malinowitz describes an approach one may consider:

> Think of how [LGBT writers] are told to be aware of issues of audience, subject, and purpose, and to claim textual authority. Then consider the convoluted dimensions these rhetorical issues take on when lesbian and gay writers inevitably have to choose between risking a stance from an outlaw discourse or

> entering into the familiarly dominant discourse of heterosexuality. (24)

Assignments should be explained clearly and should include how the writing will be evaluated so that students can make an informed decision to choose a topic that does or does not require disclosure of their sexual identities. Broadly interpretable prompts allow all students to write about a topic they feel they can write well about or wish to explore in writing. Multiple drafts allow students to revise if they discover they have not written appropriately to the assignment. In terms of evaluation, students want to know that teachers will read their paper with an open mind. Some students may be concerned because of the subjective nature of evaluating writing and fear that if the teacher's beliefs are different from their own, they will be penalized.

Some assignments may make students uncomfortable if they require students to put part of themselves aside, or if students have to struggle with whether or not they must put part of themselves aside. For example, an assignment might ask students to write about success. This topic may seem innocuous, but an LGBTQ student, particularly one struggling with coming out issues, may have difficulty as they consider all the ramifications of what it means to be successful and LGBTQ-identified in a largely heterosexist society.

### Be Proactive in Educating Others and Broadening Perspectives for Colleagues and Students.

There are many ways to demonstrate one's support for LGBTQ students and colleagues outside the classroom. Take the initiative to share your own experiences in addressing these issues with others. Ask your school to provide professional development about LGBTQ issues. Support Safe Space Training for teachers and staff. Help students form a Gay Straight Alliance. Read relevant articles in professional journals, and attend relevant sessions at professional conferences.

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## Questions for Reflection and Discussion After Chapter 2

1. How might you incorporate LGBTQIA-related content into reading material or options for writing assignments in your courses?

2. Where and how is safety for LGBTQIA students a topic of discussion on your campus and in your department? What resources exist on your campus to support students and educate faculty? Have you taken advantage of any of these available resources? If so, how have they helped you understand and support your LGBTQIA students?

## Writing Activity After Chapter 2

Choose one of the following lines of dialogue and imagine a student has just said it in the middle of class. Write the scene that follows, describing your response to the comment and the dialogue that follows among you, the speaker, and other students. Student comments:

> "That's so gay." (Said in a derogatory manner.)
>
> "The story doesn't say if the spouse is a woman, but she has to be a woman, because the narrator is a man."
>
> "I want to do my research project on transgender bathroom legislation."
>
> "Are you a guy?" (Upon meeting a classmate with a gender-neutral name.)
>
> "It's stupid that the college lets us list preferred pronouns in our accounts now. Why would anyone care about that?"

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