

Preferred Gender Pronouns: Tips for Faculty

(Or, How to Take Important Steps in Becoming a Trans Ally!)

What is a pronoun?

- A pronoun is a word that refers to either the people talking (like *I* or *you*) or someone or something that is being talked about (like *she*, *it*, *them*, and *this*). Gender pronouns (like *he* and *hers*) specifically refer to people that you are talking about.

What is a “preferred gender pronoun”?

- A "preferred gender pronoun" (or PGP) is the pronoun that a person chooses to use for themselves. For example: If Xena's preferred pronouns are *she*, *her*, and *hers*, you could say "Xena ate *her* food because *she* was hungry."

What are some commonly used pronouns?

- ***She, her, hers* and *he, him, his*** are the most commonly used pronouns. Some people call these "female/feminine" and "male/masculine" pronouns, but many avoid these labels because, for example, not everyone who uses *he* feels like a "male" or "masculine."
- **There are also lots of gender-neutral pronouns in use.** Here are a few you might hear:
 - ***They, them, theirs*** (Xena ate *their* food because *they* were hungry.)
This is a pretty common gender-neutral pronoun.... And yes, it *can* in fact be used in the singular.
 - ***Ze, hir*** (Xena ate *hir* food because *ze* was hungry.)
Ze is pronounced like "zee" can also be spelled *zie* or *xe*, and replaces *she/he/they*.
Hir is pronounced like "here" and replaces *her/hers/him/his/they/theirs*.
- **Just my name please!** (Xena ate Xena's food because Xena was hungry)
Some people prefer not to use pronouns at all, using their name as a pronoun instead.
- **Never, ever refer to a person as “it” or “he-she” (unless they specifically ask you to.)**
These are offensive slurs used against trans and gender non-conforming individuals.

Why is it important to respect people's PGPs?

- You can't always know what someone's PGP is by looking at them.
- Asking and correctly using someone's preferred pronoun is one of the most basic ways to show your respect for their gender identity.
- When someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, invalidated, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or, often, all of the above.)
- It is a privilege to not have to worry about which pronoun someone is going to use for you based on how they perceive your gender. If you have this privilege, yet fail to respect someone else's gender identity, it is not only disrespectful and hurtful, but also oppressive.
- Using the incorrect pronouns for someone can be a dangerous liability; outing a transperson by publicly misgendering them can lead to harassment and violence from others.

Why is it really important to respect your students' PGPs as a Faculty Member?

As a faculty member, you are often in a position of power.

- Asking your students what their preferred pronouns are and consistently using them correctly can determine within the first few minutes if they will feel respected at Hampshire College or not.
- **You will be setting an example for your class:** If you are consistent about using someone's preferred pronouns, they will follow your example.
- Many of your students will be learning about PGPs for the first time, so **this will be a learning opportunity** for them that they will keep forever.
- **Discussing and correctly using PGPs sets a tone of respect and allyship that trans and gender non-conforming students do not take for granted.** It can truly make all of the difference, especially for incoming first-year students that may feel particularly vulnerable, friendless, and scared.

How do I ask someone what their PGP is?

- Try asking: "What are your preferred pronouns?" or "Which pronouns do you like to hear?" or "Can you remind me which pronouns you like for yourself?" It can feel awkward at first, but it is not half as awkward as getting it wrong or making a hurtful assumption.
- If you are asking as part of an introduction exercise and you want to quickly explain what a PGP is, you can try something like this: "Tell us your name, where you come from, and your preferred pronoun. That means the pronoun you like to be referred to with. For example, I'm Xena, I'm from Amazon Island, and I like to be referred to with she, her, and hers pronouns. So you could say, 'she went to her car' if you were talking about me."

What if I make a mistake?

- It's okay! Everyone slips up from time to time. The best thing to do if you use the wrong pronoun for someone is to say something right away, like "Sorry, I meant *she*." If you realize your mistake after the fact, apologize in private and move on.
- A lot of the time it can be tempting to go on and on about how bad you feel that you messed up or how hard it is for you to get it right. But please, *don't!* **It is inappropriate and makes the person who was mis-gendered feel awkward and responsible for comforting you, which is absolutely not their job. It is your job to remember people's PGPs.**

Taking an active role

- In your classes, you may hear one of your students using the wrong pronoun for someone. In most cases, it is appropriate to gently correct them without further embarrassing the individual who has been mis-gendered. This means saying something like "Actually, Xena prefers the pronoun *she*," and then moving on. **If other students or faculty are consistently using the wrong pronouns for someone, do not ignore it! It is important to let your student know that you are their ally.**
- It may be appropriate to approach them and say something like "I noticed that you were getting referred to with the wrong pronoun earlier, and I know that that can be really hurtful. Would you be okay with me taking them aside and reminding them about your preferred pronoun? I want to make sure that this group is a safe space for you." Follow up if necessary, **but take your cues from the comfort level of your student. Your actions will be greatly appreciated.**