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Two Sides of a Coin: Individual and Institutional Support for Non-Cisgender LIS Professionals in Academic Institutions

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My library and information science (LIS) career began ten years ago when a change of major and a minor existential crisis led me to take a student job in the library. Coincidentally, that was only a few months before I also began questioning my own gender identity. The juxtaposition of these two timelines means that, for me, the bureaucracy of transitioning and gender-related policies is inextricably linked with my development as an LIS professional.

During my first few years working in the library, I was transitioning in my personal life, but not in my professional life. It was not until I started graduate school that I felt ready to begin transitioning in my professional life as well. By that time, I had changed my name and pronouns, but none of my legal documentation had been updated to match, and my school did not have a system for recording anything other than students’ legal names.

The first week of graduate school was my first introduction to transition-related bureaucratic headaches and the corresponding stress of having to explain my gender identity to strangers. For my in-person classes, I spoke to my professors before classes began and asked them to update their class lists accordingly. For my online courses, it was more
complicated since the learning management system pulled student profile information, including display name, directly from the registrar’s database. If I wanted to be addressed correctly, my only option was to out myself to all of my classmates at the start of the semester and hope that they remembered despite the course site displaying the wrong information. None of my classmates were actively malicious, but they still only called me by the correct name about half the time.

Before the start of my second semester, the registrar announced the introduction of a preferred name field. I immediately rushed to update my information, but the excitement I had felt quickly died as the page errored every time I tried to save. When I reported the issue, I naively assumed it would be resolved within a few days. Instead, I was informed that the registrar was already aware of the problem, but since it was not one of their priorities, they had no estimated timeline for a fix. In the meantime, they recommended I continue speaking to my professors individually.

Unfortunately, the professor for my online course that semester was less than understanding. According to him, remembering anything other than what he received from the registrar and the course site was too confusing, and he refused to even try. Since the registrar had added the new preferred name field option, he felt it was no longer his responsibility, and if it mattered that much to me, I should convince the registrar to fix the problem.

I spent the first two weeks of classes circling from the registrar to the professor and back with no progress on either front. Finally, I turned to the school’s IT department in frustration and asked if they could possibly help. Officially, the answer was no, but unofficially, the answer was yes, since the person I spoke to was sympathetic and had the necessary credentials to quietly go into the back end of the system and make the change manually. The good news was that my name finally displayed correctly. The bad news was that the change was overwritten every time the system updated against the registrar’s records, so I had to reach out to IT every couple of months and ask for it to be corrected again. As
of the time I legally changed my name six months later, the preferred name field still had not been fixed.

This example is only one of many I could have chosen. It is a moment that is memorable, not for its exceptionality, but for its familiarity. I could have just as easily shared the story of the library head who never once got my pronouns correct in nearly five years of working together, or the scramble to make it back from break on time because the nearest gender-neutral bathroom was halfway across campus.

I am not alone in my experiences. According to a recent survey conducted by my current institution, 80% of staff overall felt that they belonged at said institution, but the number dropped to 61% for genderqueer and nonbinary staff.¹ Similar trends held across all of the questions asked—only 34% of genderqueer and nonbinary staff believed the institution would respond appropriately to reports of discrimination or harassment.² Extensive research has shown the need for academic institutions to create more inclusive policies to support transgender students, but as this survey and other studies show, universities still lag in implementing the necessary changes.³

In a perfect world, the situations I encountered would be non-issues. In a perfect world, neither individuals nor institutional structures would present roadblocks to non-cisgender individuals. In a perfect world, my

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¹. The options for gender identity given in the survey were: male, female, transgender, genderqueer or nonbinary, another identity, prefer not to say, and unsure.


professor would have respected my name and pronouns, and the registrar’s system would have allowed me to enter them.

As we all know, the world we live in is far from perfect. Within this flawed system, non-cisgender individuals rely on both individual and institutional actions to help break down the roadblocks that create unsupportive and unwelcoming environments. When both pieces exist, then one can temper problems caused by the other. Robust systems that support self-identification can push back against individual resistance, and individuals can help find workarounds for structural limitations.

For non-cisgender library students and staff, every issue we encounter is another roadblock that costs us time and energy we could be spending elsewhere. When we lack support from our institutions and colleagues, then we face those barriers alone, and one person can only do so much. When our institutions and our colleagues respect our identities and our needs, then there are fewer roadblocks in our path, and when they do arise, we are not navigating them alone. Instead of spending our time and energy fighting the structures we are working in, we can devote that space to the LIS work that brought many of us to this profession in the first place.

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About the Author

Kai Fay (he/him or they/them) is a queer, trans, autistic librarian at a large academic research institution. They started working in libraries as an undergraduate student worker in 2010. After completing their MSLIS degree in 2016, they started in their current position preparing physical library materials for digitization. Their other main areas of interest are trauma-aware pedagogy and the intersections between cultural heritage and book history. They lead regular workshops on those topics for groups ranging from kindergarteners to college undergraduates and educators.