

Estimating Impact of the UASU Pronoun Campaign

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Prepared for UASU Executive Committee



Overview

During 2021/22 and 2022/23, helmed by Vice Presidents (Student Life) Talia Dixon and Joannie Fogue, the UASU has run a campaign to educate instructors and students on appropriate use of gender pronouns as a marker of basic respect for human dignity. At various points the campaign has encompassed resource packs, email outreach, social media and newsletter content, and systematic class talks.

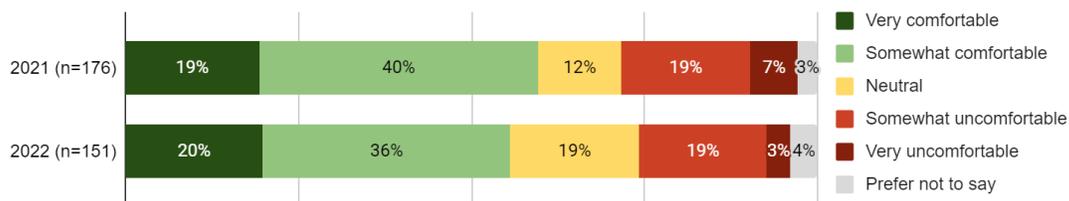
This briefing compares the results from the 2021 and 2022 UASU Annual Surveys to answer this question: *after two semesters of the pronoun campaign, are gender-minority students (e.g. non-binary, genderfluid, two-spirit, or another gender identity) and/or transgender students (these two equity-seeking groups partially overlap) any more (or less) comfortable using their actual pronouns on campus?*

The year between the two datasets (n=4032 and n=4070) saw significantly heightened discrimination against transgender people in North America, and many associated tensions — circumstances in which we could reasonably expect some students to be less comfortable using their actual pronouns on campus.

Despite this factor, we found two trends, both positive. Transgender students' likelihood of being comfortable using their actual pronouns on campus increased sharply, especially for transgender women, who had previously been by far the least likely group of transgender students to be comfortable. While gender-minority students' comfort remained essentially stable, severe discomfort decreased. While we cannot know for certain the extent to which the pronoun campaign and resulting discussions were determinative in these improvements, the correlation is heartening.

Gender Minority Students — Pronoun Usage Comfort Levels

These are the students who selected 'non-binary or another gender identity' on the surveys' basic gender question, which was separate from the question that asked whether they were transgender. As such, this group overlaps somewhat with the transgender respondents. Their results were fairly stable. 'Very uncomfortable' responses decreased notably.



Transgender Students — Pronoun Usage Comfort Levels

'Very comfortable' respondents rose from one in five transgender students to one in four. Total uncomfortable respondents (somewhat + very) fell from one in three transgender students to one in five. These are unambiguous improvements in a one-year period.



Cross-Tabulating Transgender Students by Gender Identity

Transgender students encompass a wide variety of lived experiences and identities. Although cross-tabulating further for gender makes results far less reliable due to the small numbers of students involved, we did see indications that comfort levels vary between transgender students based on their gender identity. For example, looking at the rate of total comfortable respondents (very + somewhat) in both years, we found that transgender men were very likely (~80% rising to >90%) to be comfortable, and transgender students who were also gender minorities were somewhat likely (~60% in both years) to be comfortable.

Within the limits of our data, most of the change for transgender students appeared to centre on transgender women. In 2021's data, only 22% of transgender women were comfortable using their correct pronouns on campus; in 2022's data, that rose to 78%. Remember, however, that we are talking about a very small number of students (under a dozen transgender women in each year) once cross-tabulated down this far.

Validation

Some discriminatory voices have argued, [against the weight of evidence](#), that gender diversity can become 'contagious.' If that were true, one might expect a public campaign toward 35,000 undergraduates to have moved the needle. However, our data does not indicate a shift in the diversity of students' identities. What changed was comfort levels related to how they reveal and inhabit those identities on campus.

Both surveys asked for students' actual pronouns as used with trusted family and friends. The proportions of students who use he/him/il, she/her/elle, they/them/iel, and/or other pronouns remained extremely stable between the two datasets. For example, the respondents who used they/them/iel (alone or in combination with other pronouns) made up 7.8% of the 2021 survey and 7.7% of the 2022 survey. This stability goes hand in hand with the stable/slightly reduced proportions of transgender and gender-minority students in both surveys to indicate that it is not identity that changed, it is comfort — the perceived safety and welcome of the campus environment.