

An Open Letter to the Smith College School for Social Work Community

To the Smith College School for Social Work Community:

We are students who have been directly impacted by the lack of support for trans and gender-nonconforming students at Smith. We are students who have seen our peers suffer and believe that our school can do better. We are writing to ask that the Smith College School for Social Work undertake the work to make this school a truly accepting and supportive environment for trans and gender-nonconforming students.

We are asking for the SSW community to join in solidarity with trans and gender nonconforming students for:

- Increased support during field placement
- Inclusive, respectful and supportive classroom environments
- Inclusion of trans and gender nonconforming material in the curriculum
- Access to trans inclusive healthcare coverage and campus facilities

Trans and gender-nonconforming students have been meeting privately with the deans and some faculty during the first half of the summer. We would like to thank them for their willingness to listen and for the work they are already doing around issues of inaccessible gender segregated facilities, finding trans inclusive and affirming health care coverage, and allowing students to graduate with their preferred names. We believe that it is now time to open this conversation up to the whole Smith School for Social Work Community.

Smith College has a history of excluding trans and gender-nonconforming students. Trans and gender-nonconforming students are disproportionately affected by the review process during field internships, lack support from field supervisors and FFA's when facing transphobia and discrimination due to our gender identities or expression, and lack support from our classroom instructors. We are constantly misgendered, denied access to facilities, and told in big and small ways that we and our identities do not matter. This institutional violence needs to stop, and we are calling upon you to end it now.

Lack of support in field internships. Many agencies and supervisors are not adequately trained or prepared to support gender non-conforming and trans students. Students need a safe environment and support from Smith to navigate these issues. Students are blamed for wishing to be respected for who they are and how they present in the world and are being asked to leave or are choosing to leave due to a lack of support from the school. Students are afraid to speak up about discrimination because of the threat of the review process.

Solutions: Smith needs to educate agencies, supervisors, and FFA's about gender identity and how to support trans and gender-nonconforming students. The school needs to keep track of which agencies are safe for trans and gender-nonconforming students, and which agencies have not been safe or supportive. We would like the needs of trans and gender-nonconforming students to be taken into consideration when assigning field placements. Before we go out into field this September, we ask that the school hire a trans/gender-nonconforming clinician who can provide supervision and support for students on issues related to gender identity during their field placements.

Unsafe and unsupportive classrooms. Many of the faculty at Smith do not know how to educate their students about gender and gender identity, and are not able to support trans and gender-nonconforming students in the classroom. Students have been forced to come out as trans or gender non-conforming when they are not ready. Students have been left with the responsibility for educating their peers about their identities and the oppression that they experience when the instructor is unable to do so. Students have been misgendered by their instructors and by other students without recognition of the harm that this causes. This creates an environment where students feel isolated, unsafe, and erased.

Solutions: Instructors need be educated and supported in facilitating conversations about gender identity, transphobia, cissexism, and other complex and charged topics. The curriculum needs to cover the oppression faced by trans and gender-nonconforming people. Student's identities and pronouns must be respected by professors, and these professors need to help cisgender students understand and respect the identities of trans and gender-nonconforming students. We would like oppression, intersectionality, and gender identity to be included in the Orientation curriculum for new students.

Lack of transgender and gender non-conforming inclusion in the required curriculum. The Smith School for Social Work required curriculum is woefully lacking in areas of trans and gender-nonconforming cultures, histories and clinical considerations. All graduating future social workers should be competent in working with trans and gender-nonconforming people in the clinical setting and understand basic language and concepts.

Solutions: Curriculum should be revised to include transgender and gender non-conforming histories, cultures and clinical considerations, paying special attention to intersections of race, class and gender identity. Practice classes should include case material which includes transgender and gender nonconforming clients and clinicians. Practice classes should include basic transgender and gender nonconforming language and concepts, with classroom discussion dedicated to unpacking these terms, their meanings and impact. Students should be encouraged to explore gender as a construct,

their own gender narratives, and examine how personal gender identity interfaces with their clinical work.

Lack of access to health insurance and facilities. Trans students have historically been denied insurance coverage for medically necessary care, including primary care visits, mental health services, and routine blood work. There are currently trans students who are facing thousands of dollars of medical debt and ruined credit scores because they were forced to pay for healthcare out of pocket. The gym locker rooms and bathrooms have also excluded trans and gender nonconforming students due to the lack of private, gender-neutral facilities. Trans and gender-nonconforming students deserve access to healthcare and to all the facilities that the school offers.

Solutions: The administration is currently working to ensure that trans and gender-nonconforming students can access health care, bathrooms, and locker rooms. We want to thank them for the work they have done, and ask that they continue in their commitment. In particular, we would like to explore some form of debt relief for current and former students who had to pay for their medical care out of pocket. We are including issues of health insurance and facilities access in this letter to make sure the rest of the faculty is aware of these considerations.

This school is currently in a time of change. The trans and gender-nonconforming students group supports the organizing efforts of the ARCC and students of color in changing the curriculum and field internship structure to hold Smith School for Social Work accountable to the anti-racism commitment and better support students of color. We do not want our own organizing to diminish the attention on the demands and concerns raised by the ARCC and other student leadership about racism in the Smith program. To the ARCC and students of color: We are extending to you an offer of solidarity and coalition building.

As Smith reforms its curriculum and field internships, we ask that the faculty and administration maintain an intersectional understanding of oppression, and make sure that the needs of all marginalized students are addressed. We hold that different forms of oppression are both distinct and interconnected. Some of the changes demanded by the ARCC overlap with the demands of trans and gender-nonconforming students; others are distinct to each respective axis of identity. We believe that the administration and faculty can and must hold both the overlaps and the distinctions between our needs. We also want to recognize that each person holds multiple identities at once and the intersections of those identities need to be attended to.

Finally, while this letter is specific to the marginalization of students based on their status as trans and gender-nonconforming, we call upon the faculty and administration to create space to

listen to the voices of students with other marginalized identities. We want to hear how the school can better support students with disabilities, students of color, students impacted by classism, students with children, older students, queer and LGB students, and more. We stand in solidarity with other marginalized communities on campus and with those among us who hold multiple marginalized identities.

Sincerely,

The Trans and Gender-Nonconforming Student Group

July 19, 2016