

MU to Re-install Gender-Neutral Bathrooms

All-inclusive 'Potty in Peace' initiative providing safe facilities to students

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Although Manchester's campus greeted the new academic year in September by introducing gender-neutral bathrooms, anonymous complaints in April 2015 filed under the concept of gender equality led to a short-lived debate about whether or not the bathrooms would be suitable for Manchester University's campus.

The design and implementation for the bathrooms began in 2014, with cohesive decision-making on the part of the President's Cabinet, the Office of Student Development, and Physical Plant, which met due to "Operation Potty in Peace," an initiative created by current alum Darcy Robins and Student Development and Operations staff. From there, plans were drawn up to place bathrooms around campus.

"First, the residence hall lobby bath-

rooms were changed, and then the women's bathroom on the second floor of the Academic building and third floor of the Science Center were converted to gender neutral," said Haley Steinhilber, sophomore, and secretary for United Sexualities. "The locations were picked based on whether the location had a high population of students and didn't require too much construction and inconvenience."

The logic behind their creation was to allow non-gender-conforming students to feel comfortable, safe and free of harassment in bathrooms free of gender labels. Hence, the bathrooms shattered social boundaries regarding gender and provided a neutral space for all faculty, staff and students in Manchester's buildings.

"This is inclusive and a respectful approach that is congruent with the mission and values of Manchester University," said Professor Barb Burdge of

the Department of Sociology and Social Work.

However, last month an anonymous complaint was sent to the Education Office of Civil Rights regarding the overall ratio of men's restrooms to women's. The complaint accused Manchester of having fewer gender-specific restrooms for women than men. That lack of equality brought in Title IX of the Higher Education Amendments of 1972, which prohibits sexual discrimination within governmentally assisted educational institutions or programs and it also restricts discrimination based on gender identity and stereotypical concepts of masculinity or femininity.

"Further, Manchester University policy explicitly prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity or expression," said Whitney Caudill, the vice president for University Engagement and the coordinator for Title IX.

Since the filing last month, the primary complaint was dropped and the file has been closed, but questions still remain on how to handle the situation and prevent possible protests in the future. Recently, Burdge has heard more questions than complaints.

"More often, I have heard from students and faculty who weren't complaining, but simply asking questions," Burdge said. "These folks were not necessarily opposed to all-gender facilities; they just didn't understand what they were for or why they were needed."

The university administration, however, has decided that gender-neutral bathrooms are still a necessity for non-binary



SIGN OF CHANGE Manchester is in the process of reinstalling gender neutral bathrooms on campus after a setback via the Title IX Higher Education Amendments. While the initial complaint regarding inequality in the number of men's and women's bathrooms has been dropped, the university is investigating how to best incorporate all-inclusive bathrooms in order for every student, faculty and staff member to feel comfortable and safe on campus.

Photo by Emily Barrand

members of campus that do not feel comfortable in gender specific bathrooms, but all that remains is where and when to replace them in the campus community.

"The University is now investigating the best way to reinstall and introduce gender-neutral bathrooms in academic buildings," Caudill said. "That process should be com-

plete and in place by the fall semester."

But amidst all the debates and questioning, Burdge sees an opportunity to educate the campus community about the complexities of gender, and the social stipulations attached to it.

"I love getting those questions because they create the opportunity for real dialogue and learn-

ing about gender," Burdge said.

Since the complaint was withdrawn, Manchester University is not required to respond to the charges and no further investigation by the Education Office of Civil Rights.



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