

Gender & Sexuality Studies Advisory Board Response to GQNBT Task Force Report September 21, 2020

The GSS Advisory Board, collectively and member by member, has spent significant time reading, pondering, and discussing the [Gender Queer, Non-Binary, and Trans \(GQNBT\) Task Force Report](#) published in September 2019, following a year-long, collaborative effort among Northwestern staff, faculty, and students. Before outlining concrete responses that GSS plans to pursue in 2020-21, we want to express our gratitude to GSS faculty and Advisory Board members Sekile Nzinga and Héctor Carrillo, who jointly led this Task Force, and to the many GSS-affiliated students, professors, and staff members who made this transformative project such a priority across the 2018-19 school year. In so doing, they modeled the kind of ethically guided, ambitiously scaled, community-wide push that is necessary to generate real coalition and to launch measurable, progressive change—both on the specific issues that this report addresses and on a wide range of other, urgent fronts that matter deeply to everyone in GSS.

GSS plans to work in sync with trans and gender non-conforming leaders, and with allies at all levels of the campus, to realize the recommendations and potentials of this Report and to honor the frank dialogues and inclusive process that produced it.¹ Whether through conscious avoidance, fatigue, or the diffuse, distraction-prone baseline of working within large institutions, task forces and their recommendations often fall by the wayside. Despite the painful, seemingly infinite crises of our present moment, we must *all* ensure this fate does not befall the GQNBT Task Force’s labor or its report... or, for that matter, prior Task Force reports that align with GSS’s wider mission, including the [African American/Black Student Experience Report](#) from 2016, containing [14 urgent recommendations](#), most of which remain unfulfilled.

Having pledged such solidarity and long-term dedication, this document turns now to actions that GSS can lead or make internally. Discussions will continue about how to enact, expand, or modify these plans. Some levels of detail are harder to specify now than they may become later, as we dig into logistics and confer with needed collaborators. We have also transparently indicated areas where we feel constrained from doing as much as we’d like. Still, here are some projects already in discussion or underway.

¹ The report discourages wider use of the acronym “GQNBT” (Gender Queer, Non-Binary, and Trans), a label imposed on this Task Force that did not resonate for most members. Except when citing the report, we follow its lead by favoring the terms *trans* and *gender non-conforming*, which in turn encompass other labels and identities.

Areas Where the Task Force Report Explicitly Names GSS as an “Action Leader”

1. Task Force Recommendation 7: Strengthening Community, Connection, and Collaboration

The task force recommends that Northwestern University cultivate a campus community that fosters a sense of community and connection for trans and gender non-conforming faculty, staff, and students. (p.18)²

GSS eagerly accepts our named role in fulfilling this goal. We appreciate being cited as an existing ally later in the document: e.g., in the “Expanding Health Services and Supporting-Well Being” section (p.35), under the “Increasing University Resources” banner (p.40), and in a longer section devoted to “Strengthening Community, Connection, and Collaboration” (p.50). That said, we have received urgent requests from students and other community members in recent years to educate ourselves further, engage in more listening and concrete response, and take further steps to earn our status as allies.

Task Force Action Item 7.1: “*Cultivate a climate of belonging and inclusion for gender-diverse people.*” (p.18)

Desired Outcome 7.1b: “*Map, assess, strengthen, and amplify current spaces on campus, including exploring those marked as gender binary, where trans and gender non-conforming people are feeling safe and connected, in order to further build community.*” (p.18)

- A. **Signage:** In the spirit of Action Item 2 (p.10) under Recommendation 3 (“Ensuring Gender-Inclusive Facilities”), GSS will ensure that its Program office and, at minimum, those of its Director and Associate Director are marked as safe spaces for all trans and gender non-conforming students, faculty, staff, and visitors, and for supportive discussion of issues related to those identities. We will be thoughtful about how to mark these spaces amidst a current lack of standardized signage across NU, as also indicated under Action Item 2. We volunteer ourselves as consulting partners in designing standardized signage.
- B. **Website Resources:** GSS will aggregate and maintain a list on our website of campus-based spaces and resources of particular value to trans and gender non-conforming folks and groups, and of Evanston- and Chicago-area resources that exist in support of such people and movements. We will seek campus partners, possibly in NUIT or the Library, who can help us design and maintain a visually appealing and information-rich page.
- C. **Meeting Space:** GSS gladly offers our seminar room, Kresge 1-525, as a possible venue for discussions, reading or study groups, organizing sessions, or other formal or informal events centering the needs of trans and gender non-conforming people and allies. At moments when physical meetings are impossible or ill-advised, we remain happy to help facilitate online sessions with the same goals, with the best security we can manage.

² Page numbers refer to those printed in the footer of the actual document, which do not match those displayed near the top of Adobe Reader (i.e., “22/82”), where many readers will encounter this document.

D. Community Collaborations: GSS faculty and affiliates will ramp up existing efforts to advertise and solicit collaborative conversations and workshops with trans and gender non-conforming people at Northwestern, as well as their allies. The first such event, in Fall 2020, will invite GSS-affiliated graduate and undergraduate students, staff, and faculty to discuss the Task Force Report itself as well as this official response, and to brainstorm actionable ideas for future events, campaigns, curricular additions, etc. Staff, students, faculty, and other campus colleagues not affiliated with GSS will also be invited to such events, except when they are designed specifically to solicit impressions and/or to debate changes that pertain most directly to GSS students, staff, and faculty.

Task Force Action Item 7.3: “Allocate funds to ensure programming for trans and gender non-conforming students, faculty, and staff, and their allies, so that they have resources necessary to foster community and connection.” (p.19)

This item requires some transparency and modesty on the part of GSS because, as a Program, our annual programming budget and other financial streams are notably lesser than those of Departments. We allocate funds carefully each quarter across a wide range of campus-based events and affinity groups that center gender, sexuality, and their convergences with other concepts, experiences, and forms of power, including race, ethnicity, class, and (dis)ability. We also, at this moment, must honor the directive to reduce discretionary spending from an already very limited budget, a move that will directly affect GSS funds for programming and support in the upcoming academic year.

Rather than offer these facts as alibis for retreat, however, we signal them as contexts in which we must take up this important action item creatively and resourcefully, within whatever structural and exceptional constraints exist on our budget and decision-making.

Desired Outcome 7.3b: “Allocate an annual affinity-based operational budget that would ensure outreach efforts and programming to foster community and connection would be sustainable and would engage faculty, staff, and students.” (p.19)

A. Co-Sponsorships: GSS will continue to invite co-sponsorship requests for events, yearly colloquia, performances, etc., that center trans and gender non-conforming identities, participants, themes, or scholarship, whether held in person or online. In the climate of heightened support fostered by the Task Force Report, even as it coincides with forced spending cuts, GSS decision-makers will take particular note of requests that foreground these ideas and identities, and their intersecting attentions to sexuality, race, class, and other vectors of power and experience. We will do our best to support such proposals.

B. Programming and Hosted Events: In tandem with the section above on “Community Collaborations,” GSS will remain cognizant—especially in the wake of the Task Force Report—of the need to design, host, and fund our own events, distinct from co-sponsored functions, that explicitly take up topics and experiences relevant to trans and gender non-conforming people. We see the need for events that place these topics unambiguously at their center *as well as* the need for trans and gender non-conforming lenses, identities, and experiences to influence other discussions and events in meaningful ways.

Areas Where GSS Has Self-Identified as a Potential Action Leader and Collective Ally

While we have tried to be meticulous about offering plans and ideas where the Task Force solicited our involvement and/or designated us as existing partners, we see our role as needing to expand well beyond these specific areas. The proposals below incorporate some that were already under discussion before the Task Force convened (often in response to recent, productive challenges from our own students) and others more explicitly inspired by its report.

- A. **Designated Program Officer:** The GSS Program will designate one faculty member to serve each year as a “point person” on intellectual, pedagogical, and communal issues related to trans and gender non-conforming people. The need for such an officer is especially key as the Task Force Report continues to circulate and as pressure to enact its recommendations remains high. This new position also recognizes the previously unmet needs and absent conversations even within our own Program related to trans and gender non-conforming ideas, experiences, and identities. This faculty member will play a key internal role, making themselves available to consult with other faculty about (for example) adjusting or expanding syllabi to manifest more engagement with trans and gender non-conforming ideas and materials, and coordinating relevant events. The GSS website and other student-facing materials will name this officer to students, who can seek them out singly or in groups for conversations. These can include voicing favorable or unfavorable impressions of how trans and gender non-conforming voices, texts, concepts, and experiences currently appear (or do not) in GSS-sponsored courses and events; floating new ideas for events or courses; and asking questions or making suggestions about how the Program can best be an ally on these issues.

Externally to the program, this faculty member will prioritize availability to collaborate with other campus colleagues working to implement Task Force recommendations or to seek related changes. Ideally, they will amplify relationships with the Gender & Sexuality Resource Center (GSRC), the Women’s Center, Campus Inclusion and Community (CIC), Multicultural Student Affairs (MSA), the Institute for Sexual and Gender Minority Health (ISGMH), and other campus offices and affiliated personnel that represent crucial resources for trans and gender non-conforming students, staff, and faculty.

By no means should the creation of this designated office imply that *only* this faculty member will take up the kinds of work described above. GSS pledges the opposite to be true. We also hope for a future when a wide range of gender identities and communities feel so integrated into Program and campus culture that no such point person needs to be singled out. Noting, however, abundant evidence in the Task Force Report and elsewhere that such a time remains far off, we see great benefits to innovating and filling this role.

- B. **Nomenclature:** In accordance with the very first footnote in the GQNBT Task Force Report, GSS accepts the recommendations for “trans and gender non-conforming” and “all-gender” as the nomenclature that staff, students, and faculty should use most broadly. Our research and teaching in gender and sexuality perpetually demonstrate the likelihood, even the inevitability of labels and associated politics and preferences shifting in the

future. GSS pledges to remain attentive to those future shifts, to maintain evolving best practices, and to affirm other terms with which our students and colleagues identify.

- C. **Respecting and Affirming Names and Identities:** We echo the Task Force’s top-listed “Priority Recommendation” (p.2) regarding a one-stop identity-management system that allows students, staff, and faculty to indicate and update accurate names and pronouns. GSS volunteers its consulting participation in the creation of such an efficient, affirming, and easy-to-use system, including through the appointed officer described above. Amid the absence of such a system, GSS officers will encourage faculty, staff, and students to invite and employ each other’s correct pronouns; to indicate our own pronouns as well; and to respect those who wish not to state their pronouns publicly. Even within trans and gender non-conforming communities, no consensus exists for how (or whether) they should always be solicited. GSS faculty will actively seek input, share best practices, and explore different models for collecting and offering pronouns; all such models have vital but complicated politics and are themselves subject to debate and change over time. Allowing for elasticity and variable preferences must not equate, however, to disrespect or failures of affirmation, especially when they persist despite stated desires.
- D. **Curricular Expansions:** Fulfilling Recommendation 2 in the Task Force Report (“Creating a Gender-Inclusive Learning and Working Environment,” pp.7ff), also means developing more courses centering trans and gender non-conforming scholars, materials, vocabularies, and experiences. We will also ensure their wider incorporation in classes that shine less overt spotlights in those areas. Partly in response to GSS student activism that preceded and coincided with the Task Force, we have built a 2020-21 curriculum that includes more trans-centered courses than in any prior year, including two 200-level and two 300-level courses explicitly devoted to these areas. (Three of these are first-time offerings.) At least four other courses include multiple weeks’ worth of trans and gender non-conforming texts and discussions. Furthermore, starting in Winter 2021, GSS will add a page to its website that emphasizes their content, materials, and teaching methods. This page will also indicate elements of other year-round courses that enfold more trans and gender non-conforming materials than may be obvious from CAESAR descriptions. We will encourage faculty whose syllabi do not stress these materials (much as ratios of explicitly feminist, queer, masculinity-focused, race-specific, and class-specific readings vary from class to class) to be prepared to offer transparent, nuanced rationales for those relative absences. We also encourage these colleagues to invite intellectual exchange and suggested readings from those directions, in sync with the course’s topics and concerns.
- E. **Future Hiring:** At yearly moments when WCAS solicits GSS’s goals for future faculty hiring, and at other strategic moments across the year, we will reiterate extant requests for new faculty lines that stress trans and gender non-conforming histories, identities, and scholarship, as filtered through a range of disciplines. Many faculty are already boosting parts of our scholarly agendas and teaching portfolios that stress trans and gender non-conforming communities and topics. Still, neither our classrooms nor our research culture nor our social community can achieve full, necessary transformation without recruiting, supporting, and retaining colleagues whose interests center in this area. Here, too, our capacities as a Program are more limited than those of Departments, since we have fewer

faculty lines and typically need to join with other units to conceive, fill, and support them. Thus, our already-active campaign to hire in trans studies, for example, is simultaneously a campaign for discipline-specific autonomy over our own hiring. In continuing to make the case for this type of hire, we stress that multiple hires in trans studies and closely related areas are preferable to one; that fluency in these literatures and experiences is an asset in *any* hire, whether or not framed around that field; and that, while scholars' own identities must never be presumed as coterminous with their objects of study, our campus stands in deep need of hiring and retaining more trans and gender non-conforming faculty *regardless of their field or discipline*. GSS pledges itself to all such efforts, including by making available our own core or affiliate faculty whenever possible as external members of hiring committees in other units.

- F. **Reading/Working Groups:** The Ad Board continues to discuss best strategies for adding new reading and working groups that might bring faculty, graduate students, staff, and well-equipped undergraduates together in collaborative discussion of key field trends and urgent issues in the world. These include, of course, topics related to trans and gender non-conforming people, communities, and ideas. We take it as incumbent upon ourselves to pay such targeted attentions not just when the stated concern of a reading or working group involves trans or gender non-conforming people; abiding recognition of trans and gender non-conforming people and ideas must be seen as crucial to every facet and fold of our fields. We continue to seek new partners, resources, and available energies to convene and sustain such groups. We have heard requests from graduate students who wish to play a role in co-designing or even co-facilitating such exchanges. We will therefore include them as valuable partners in pursuing and meeting these goals.
- G. **Facilities, Including Bathrooms:** Regarding Recommendation 3 (“Expanding Gender-Inclusive Facilities,” pp.9ff), GSS has little role in making decisions regarding campus facilities, including bathrooms. Still, we note with deep dismay how slow progress has been at NU regarding all-gender bathrooms—sometimes due to active resistance. Serving as we do in so many other units spread across the campus, our faculty, students, and staff have seen with our own eyes (not just through our studies) how hidden, distant, and unequal these basic provisions remain for trans and gender non-conforming residents, students, employees, and visitors of the campus. We hereby mark our solidarity with ongoing efforts to proliferate such facilities and to aid such efforts as best we can.

As we pursue the goals outlined in this document, the GSS Advisory Board remains cognizant of how much more learning and planning we still have to do around the issues and needs outlined in the Task Force Report. We recognize that, as diverse in expertise, identities, experience, and campus role as GSS faculty, staff, and students remain, we will need to explore even greater diversities of outreach and collaboration to enact Task Force recommendations to the degrees and ranges they require. We are aware, finally, that on such an active campus, where everyone's energies are perpetually over-extended, documents as vital as the Task Force Report are liable to go unnoticed or under-read even by the very people who could bring the most training and conviction to realizing its goals, and even by the people who have the most power to turn its recommendations into realities. So we will continue to circulate the Report widely, including on our website and to our students, while also laboring toward its fulfillment.