









Climate Case Study #9 - Resistance to They/Them Pronouns

How to foster respect and inclusion in your unit when...

A faculty member expresses acceptance of varied gender identities but then, in apparent reference to pronoun usage, says, “I just don’t know why we have to butcher the English language.”

The Climate Case Studies are organized around RISE’s [Eight Levers to Shift Climate for Respect and Inclusion](#) framework. RISE uses the eight levers above to think about the ways in which more inclusive, respectful, and civil climates might be intentionally cultivated in the higher education workplace context.

LEVER	APPROACH	WHAT IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE
<div></div> <div>ENVIRONMENT</div>	Provide physical markers that educate the community and validate the use of a range of personal pronouns.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Welcome and make space for people to signal their pronouns on name tags, nameplates, web directories, department gatherings, Zoom profiles, and email signatures.• Display a poster in a public location that gives examples of how to engage respectfully with others about their pronouns
<div></div> <div>EXPECTATIONS</div>	Link using people’s personal pronouns to the expectation that everyone in the unit will be treated with respect.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Develop shared norms at the start of the year for respectful engagement that includes the use of pronouns. Periodically remind people of these norms (beginnings of meetings, orientations, etc.).• Include honoring individuals’ pronouns as an item in your syllabi and/or unit’s code of conduct. (If you don’t have a code of conduct, consider developing one.)
<div></div> <div>INTERACTIONS</div>	Be ready to call resistant colleagues into more respectful interactions.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide strategies for becoming familiar with non-binary pronoun usage Example: practice privately or remember the ways you likely already use a singular “they” when you don’t know someone’s gender.• Carefully weigh whether following up 1:1 with a faculty member or discussing the issue in a larger group is most effective. Is an email response useful?
<div></div> <div>LANGUAGE</div>	Emphasize that language use changes across time and between cultures.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Communicate how small changes are connected to values and how they contribute to larger-scale climate shifts.• Language shifts over time; take cues from individuals and communities as to what language best describes them.
<div></div> <div>MODELING</div>	Model a sincere effort to use pronouns considerably.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Share your own pronouns.• Use the pronouns that people identify for themselves.• Correct people when they misgender a member of your community– even when that person is not present.• Apologize when you misgender someone and take the steps you need to to avoid doing so in the future.
<div></div> <div>OPPORTUNITIES</div>	Keep abreast of world/national/ local events that affect members of LGBTQIA2S+ communities and create opportunities for folks to participate in, respond to, or learn about them.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Encourage engagement in ongoing education on LGBTQIA2S+ communities (see our list of resources).• Mark Pride Month, International Pronouns Day, and the International Transgender Day of Invisibility by sharing information about their history and local events aligned with their goals.• Acknowledge that attacks on members of LGBTQIA2S+ communities– both legislative and interpersonal–causes them material harm and collaboratively identify ways that the unit can support them both in and outside of the academy.
<div></div> <div>ROUTINES & STRUCTURES</div>	Identify ways you can regularly gather information about how successful your unit is in creating an environment that is respectful of people who hold a range of gender identities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Reflect carefully on data provided to your unit from university and department climate surveys.• Provide opportunities for people who hold various gender identities to provide feedback/share concerns about climate.• Invite faculty to speak to how they positively contribute to unit climate (including efforts to create a respectful working environment) in their annual activities report.• Use all data gathered to make a plan for improvement.
<div></div> <div>TIME</div>	Develop a calendar that marks when unit leadership will recurrently message about the necessity of respecting community members’ pronouns and related issues.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Plan to message at beginnings– of the academic year, of meetings, onboardings, orientations, etc.• Plan when to send an annual message to your entire community, encouraging them to make use of relevant campus resources to educate themselves.• Plan when to message about annual events that raise awareness about/celebrate members of LGBTQIA2S+ communities.

Additional Resources:

- Spectrum Center [Consultation Opportunities](#) and [Resources on Pronouns for Faculty and Staff](#)
- General [Resource on Pronouns](#)
- [Dr. Kriby Conrod](#)
- Bradley, E. D., Schmid, M., & Lombardo, H. (2019). Personality, prescriptivism, and pronouns: Factors influencing grammaticality judgments of gender-neutral language. *English Today*, 35(4), 41-52.
- Curzan, A. (2024). *Says Who? A Kinder, Funner Usage Guide for Everyone*. Random House, New York.* Note: see especially chapter 18 on singular “they”
- Corbin, C. M. (2021). When Teachers Misgender: The Free Speech Claims of Public School Teachers. *J. Free Speech L.*, 1, 615.
- Nikzad, N., Duong, N., & Paul, S. (2024). Improving culturally safe engagement with sexual and gender minority populations. *Nature Reviews Gastroenterology & Hepatology*, 1-2.

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