

Gender Identity and Pronoun Policies:  
An Implementation Proposal for Nicholls State University

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**Introduction:**

As gender identity becomes intensely debated and as more non-binary students are being identified as such on campus, the question arises as to how these students should be recognized and addressed. One specific accommodation is the implementation of flexible pronoun policies, which allow students to designate their preferred pronoun for use mainly in classroom settings. Universities across the United States have already implemented such policies on their own campuses, and the question is whether a policy should be implemented specifically at Nicholls State University (NSU).

First, the social construction of gender and its differentiation from biological sex must be inspected. Second, an analysis of language practices and their correlation with gender identity acquisition should also be conducted. Next, it should be determined if NSU students, the users of such a policy, would approve of the implementation of a policy at NSU. Finally, if the implementation of a pronoun policy was approved, what are some methods that might make for a smooth transition? A survey of a random sample of NSU students has been conducted and will be analyzed to gauge attitudes toward a possible policy and to measure awareness of non-binary identities. Survey results and current university policies will be used to propose the implementation of a flexible pronoun policy at Nicholls State University.

**Gender as a Social Force:**

Sex and gender are often used interchangeably, but as West and Zimmerman (1987) conclude, “Sex, we told students, was what was ascribed to biology: anatomy, hormones, and physiology. Gender, we said, was an achieved status: that which is constructed through psychological, cultural, and social means” (p. 125). Through biological standards, people receive sex identification—male or female—depending on whether the genitalia present is a vagina and ovaries for females or a penis and testes for males. In some cases, some intersex individuals can be born possessing aspects of both male and female genitalia (Fausto-Sterling 1993). Once a biological sex is determined, gender ensues through socialization.

Once a child’s sex is determined, people will act accordingly with agreed-upon social standards and treat them differently based on this male or female identification. Individuals are not born knowing what actions make them male or female, but instead they must learn how to be men and women (Lorber 1994; West and Zimmerman 1987). Through gendering children from birth, gender markers and roles develop. Traditionally, in Western societies, little girls are treated like “ladies” and are taught that they must act congruently with standards of femininity: wearing dresses and makeup, having long hair, being submissive to their husbands, and nurturing children. Young boys are treated as “men” and are taught masculinity: power, strength, logic, and emotional suppression. Through social interaction, individuals learn the “proper” way to act based upon their sex identification. As West and Zimmerman (1987) suggest, “Doing gender involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine ‘natures’” (126), and these social standards reify the dichotomy of gender.

The dichotomy of gender and heteronormativity reinforce that behavior must be “done” one way or the other without crossing over between the two. If men and women show social traits

of the opposite gender, they are commonly associated with that opposite gender, but their sex clearly does not change. If women show assertive behavior or refuse to wear makeup and typical women's clothing, they are believed to be "doing masculinity" and possessing male qualities. An effeminate male who likes to wear dresses is considered to show womanly traits and is viewed as feminine. People's social actions must fit into one or the other sex category, so when individuals show traits of the opposite gender, a particular ambiguity develops (Lorber 1994; West and Zimmerman 1987).

What if a person relates to or portrays qualities which pertain to both genders, or the gender opposite from their biological sex? This is where non-binary, or transgender, identities lie.

Transgender is a broad umbrella term which encompasses variations of gender nonconformist identity (Lorber 1994; Lucal, Schilt, Wentling, and Windsor 2008). The University of California, Santa Barbara (2016) has compiled a list of most gender identities. The list is composed of: *Cisgender*, or gender normative, refers to people whose gender identity coincides with their assigned sex at birth.

*Transgender* refers to individuals whose gender identity is opposite their biological birth sex.

Transgender has traditionally been used to refer to this identity, but it has come to be used as an umbrella term for all gender nonconformists.

*Genderqueer/Genderfluid* are interchangeable terms referring to those who do not abide by one particular binary gender role. Instead, they will express aspects of both, varying extensively, and may still technically identify as male, female, both, or neither.

*Agender* individuals identify as neither male nor female. Some do this in rejection of the binary gender system.

*Pangender* describes those who do not identify with any gender category, or they fit into many. Pangender can sometimes be contradictory since it categorizes people by not fitting them into a category.

The non-binary gender identities mentioned above create an ambiguity which disturbs the tradition of dichotomous gender (Lorber 1994; West and Zimmerman 1987). The disruption of gender normative behavior produces a sort of fear of ambiguity. People may experience an uncomfortable feeling when they cannot categorize someone. In West and Zimmerman's (1987) example, a sales clerk in unisex work clothing is encountered. There is no clear indication of facial hair or breasts, and no other physical qualities which can undoubtedly identify the clerk as male or female. The clerk does not act in any particularly masculine or feminine manner, so from the observed information, there is no way of categorizing the clerk as male or female without knowing genital anatomy. The ambiguity of the clerk causes the customer to go through all physical and social gender markers in order to categorize him or her. When the customer cannot categorize the clerk to one sex, the customer has the desire to inquire about the ambiguity but does not do so at risk of embarrassing the clerk. Instead of accepting ambiguity, people have an inadvertent need to categorize the sex of those around us, and "we presume that others are displaying it for us, in as decisive a fashion as they can" (West and Zimmerman 1987, p.134).

Returning to the aforementioned concept of genital anatomy identifying sex, I would like to explore Goffman's theory of "gender display" (1976). Like the sales clerk, our genitalia are covered by clothing in social settings. When other anatomical sex markers are not present, genitalia is the only sure way to determine sex. Through other physical and social "displays" of gender, individuals are able to portray what others are supposed to perceive about their gender.

People employ particular clothing styles and mannerisms which allow others to interpret their gender display as being male or female.

If people cannot always determine whether someone is male or female through social observation, how can biological sex and gender be directly correlated? The genitalia a person possesses cannot be determined if it cannot directly be seen. Instead, people rely on socially learned concepts and interactions to determine whether someone is male or female. People are taught which behaviors and physical traits are considered masculine and feminine and apply them accordingly. Such social interactions are what encompass gender as a sociologically constructed action (Lorber 1994; West and Zimmerman 1987).

### **Background to Language and Gender Theory:**

Language is a tool used in nearly all social interactions and is a necessity in communicative practices. Without language, socialization would be nearly impossible and relating to others would come with immense difficulty. As cultural differences vary across societies, language does as well. The language which an individual employs reflects the culture in which the individual resides, or “those aspects of a culture that are important for members of a society are correspondingly highlighted in the vocabulary” (Saltzmann, Standlaw, Adachi, 2014, p. 315). If language and culture vary across the globe, then the way gender is reflected in language must also vary with the cultural expectations of gender.

While not as direct as other languages, and as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) argue, English does employ some morphological and lexical practices which assist in gendering the language. Suffixes such as *-ess* and *-ette* added on to typically male terms—bachelor, waiter, host, steward—denote female identity in such roles. Gender in English lexicon can include pairing sex with a particular noun when the noun is typically associated with one sex and not the other. Male

stripper and lady doctor are examples of pairing sex references with common nouns because the common noun is typically associated with the opposite sex stated. English language also utilizes *he* and *man* as generic terms which denote multiple gender or no known gender. Some use *he/she*, *(s)he*, or *him or her*, but the terms are lengthy and can look awkward in writing, so many feminist scholars call for the incorporation of gender neutral pronouns as generic terms (Bing, Bergvall, 1996). While the masculine generic terms are understood as referring to either sex, any particular feminine terms can only refer to females. By allowing maleness to be standard and ambiguous language, masculine generic nouns and pronouns used in English reify androcentrism and patriarchal power in our society.

Unlike English, many European languages—French, German, Spanish, Italian—use *grammatical gender* to assign gender to both animate and inanimate objects (Saltzmann, Standlaw, Adachi, 2014). European languages utilize masculine and feminine forms of definite and indefinite articles which in turn make the noun it is paired with masculine or feminine. For example, French uses *le* and *la* as masculine and feminine definite articles, and it uses *un* and *une* as masculine and feminine indefinite articles. Through this, *la/une piscine* (the/a swimming pool) is now a feminine noun, and *le/un livre* (the/a book) becomes a masculine noun. As Saltzmann, Standlaw, and Adachi (2014) would argue, grammatical gender does not necessarily suggest the French associate books with having masculine characteristics, nor do they associate swimming pools as having feminine characteristics, however, the gender of the words may influence the way you think about them.

The *Sapir-Whorf hypothesis* suggests that the language a person speaks directly correlates with the way a person thinks about the world around them (Saltzmann, Standlaw, Adachi, 2014). Studies conducted by Boriditsky (2003) suggest that native language does affect the way people

think about objects and others. The studies show that speakers of languages utilizing grammatical gender tend to associate nouns with having traditionally masculine or feminine qualities depending on the grammatical gender of the noun. While elegant and aesthetic adjectives were used to describe feminine nouns, more rough and rugged adjectives were used to describe masculine nouns.

As European languages utilize grammatical gender, some other languages, like Japanese, enforce differentiation between male and female speech entirely. For example, the language differs in how genders use the first person pronoun (“I”/ “me”). While both genders utilize *watashi* (“I”/ “me”) in the formal social setting, only men use one form, *ore*, and only women use *atashi*. The difference here is that men can use *ore* in most social situations involving all genders, while women can only use *atashi* in social settings consisting of women, and any use of it outside of social groups could result in social stigma. While there are other formal forms of first-person pronouns used by both genders, only men have other formal forms of first person pronouns particular to them. Any formal pronoun used by women can also be used by men, so women do not have any formal pronoun particular to them. Formality standardization in the Japanese language has allotted women limited ways of expressing themselves and gives men better opportunity to more clearly communicate.

However, while that makes Japanese seem more repressive, the language also has some third-person pronouns that can be considered gender neutral. *Ano hito* (that person) is used as a pronoun to refer to individuals of any gender. The term is also used by both men and women in Japanese. As *subculture theory* would suggest, language differences amongst Japanese males and females reflect the cultural differences among same-gender socialization, and the male dominant language practices reflect patriarchal power over language, as *dominance theory* would suggest

(Satzmann, Standlaw, Adachi, 2014). This male dominance in language can assist in reinforcing androcentrism in Japanese language and culture.

Not only do language practices vary interculturally (as between English and Japanese), but they can also vary intraculturally as well. Using Tannen's "genderlects," Saltzman, Standlaw, and Adachi (2014) argue that "each gender has different means of accomplishing conversational goals, and perhaps ultimate ends as well" (p. 357). This reasoning is typically used to refer to language variations between traditional men and women, but what it does not include, however, is differences among both gender and cultural identity. If the boundaries are so dichotomous and natural, as Bing and Bergvall (1996) argue, it is peculiar "that so much energy is expended to reinforce them and to render visible large numbers of people, including homosexuals, bisexuals, eunuchs, hermaphrodites, transvestites, transsexuals, transgendered, and intersexed individuals" (p. 499). If biological sex was the determining factor, then why would such diversity across gender and sexuality exist? Not only do gender and sexuality influence cultural identity acquisition, but race, religious affiliation, and social class are other factors which have an impact on identity. With such diverse combination possibilities in identity, language used by individuals will vary intraculturally. Gender polarization fails to incorporate and accept diversity, and dichotomous language only reifies such biological determinism (Bing, Bergvall, 1996). In order to move past gender dichotomy in language, it is essential to incorporate language, like pronouns, which reflect inclusiveness and diversity acceptance. Incorporation of gender-neutral pronouns is not an attempt to eliminate binary pronouns. Instead, gender-neutral pronouns offer opportunities to include in linguistic socialization those from all gender identities.

The incorporation of gender neutral-language begins at the micro-level, or in "communities of practice," as used by Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992, p. 489); "The community of practice



takes us away from the community defined by a location or by a population. Instead, it focuses on a community defined by social engagement” (p. 490), and members of one community of practice are also members of other communities of practice. In other words, communities of practice are communities in which every member has at least one thing in common: their affiliation with the community as a common goal. A workplace, sports team, religious institution, or educational institution are all examples of communities of practice. Each member is also affiliated with other practice communities causing overlap between communities. If particular language practices are adopted in one community, then affiliates will take such practices with them into other communities, which can eventually lead to the language practices being incorporated into other communities. As practices spread across communities of practice, there is a potential to affect the larger community and allow practices to be incorporated into whole populations. If Nicholls State University (NSU) can be considered a community of practice, and it were to incorporate practices such as gender neutral-language usage in the classroom, then practices could eventually spread through student interactions with the whole NSU community, other practice communities, to the regional community, and also to other universities across the state of Louisiana.

If gender categorization is socially constructed and language is something widely used in most social interactions, then, according to Cahill, “language practices may also implicitly transmit an understanding of the life-long character of sex identification to children” (1986, p.307).

### **Alternate Language Practices:**

With the role language practices play in determining identity, it can be understood why someone might find it offensive or oppressive when they are identified as something they do not identify with. Other than second person pronouns (you) and proper nouns, people are often referred to using third person pronouns (he, she, they). Not everyone feels that they fit into the

social and psychological categories of male and female, so referring to them by a binary gender pronoun can be interpreted as disrespectful toward their unique personal identities (University of Ohio). The plural “they” is widely accepted as a singular gender-neutral pronoun (Oxford Dictionary), but can sometimes be misleading due to the plurality of the word. Grammarians and scholars have developed other gender-neutral pronouns which are becoming more accepted in language. *Figure 2* offers examples of gender neutral pronouns and was made through referencing pronoun guides created by the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Further examples and pronunciations can be found on the university’s *LGBT Resource Center* website. Incorporation of gender-neutral pronouns in language allows for an inclusive environment for individuals of all gender identities.

**Figure 2:** Gender Neutral Pronouns

<b>He/She</b>	<b>Him/Her</b>	<b>His/Her</b>	<b>His/Hers</b>	<b>Himself/Herself</b>
zie	zim	Zir	zis	zieself
sie	sie	Hir	hirs	hirsself

### **Transgender Identities in Education:**

According to the United States Department of Justice, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits any form of sex-based discrimination at federally-funded educational institutions. Gender identity is not explicitly protected under Title IX, but the question as to whether it should be included under sex discrimination laws is increasingly being debated. As Meadow (2010) argues,

As the state grapples with whether to premise legal gender recognition on biological sex as benign fact or on the complex nature of the social, psychological, and biological makeup of

the individual, the logics it employs ossify outdated concepts of ideal “men” and “women” and of normative masculinity, femininity, and sexuality ( p. 815).

Essentially, the laws dictate what constitutes sex discrimination based upon heteronormativity and sex stereotypes that determine what is conceived as masculine and feminine behavior. It can then be concluded, therefore, that discrimination against transgender students who do not conform to the socially agreed-upon standards of their biological sex is sex discrimination on the basis of social gender identity. Using biological sex as a premise, the state undermines the great diversity of gender identity. Institutional failure to accommodate non-binary students with something like a flexible pronoun policy does not necessarily constitute discrimination, but it can serve as a force which causes transgender students to feel retained and oppressed by social heteronormativity.

When transgender students feel comfortable in their academic environment, they are able to better utilize their abilities, but as Weinberg (2009) concludes, “Classrooms, however, like the culture at large, often inadvertently marginalize or exclude a sizable, and frequently invisible minority” ( p. 50). If institutions are dedicated to assisting all students in their personal and academic careers, then transgender students cannot be pushed to the side. Transgender college students often experience discrimination and social stratification in university settings, so it is essential that higher education professionals better understand the experiences of transgender students (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, and Tubbs, 2005). Also, transgender students bring in the same money to universities as cisgender students, money which aids the university in maintaining a state of functionality. Despite this, however, college campuses offer minute opportunities to make the presence and needs of transgender students known. The distinct identities and experiences of transgender students can become better understood through “creating and widely advertising transgender-focused educational programs” (Beemyn, Curtis, Davis, and Tubbs, 2005, p. 51).

Transgender students have unique perspectives to offer, and queer theory, or the group of theories which analyze identities that challenge normative social constructions of sexuality and gender, “might contribute to addressing larger questions in higher education” (Renn, 2010, p. 132). If the diversity among gender and sexuality is accepted and understood, then universities can potentially further understand the experiences and needs of individual students without homogenizing them.

### **Current U.S. University Pronoun Policies:**

Many universities across the United States have implemented policies which accommodate the identities and needs of non-binary students. Approximately fifty U.S. universities allow students to change their preferred pronoun in the university system, and about one-hundred fifty universities allow students to change both their preferred name and pronoun in the university system. Flexible pronoun policies like these are university-sanctioned policies which allow students to designate the pronoun with which they identify. Such pronouns are used primarily for use on class rosters, in-class interactions, and social settings.

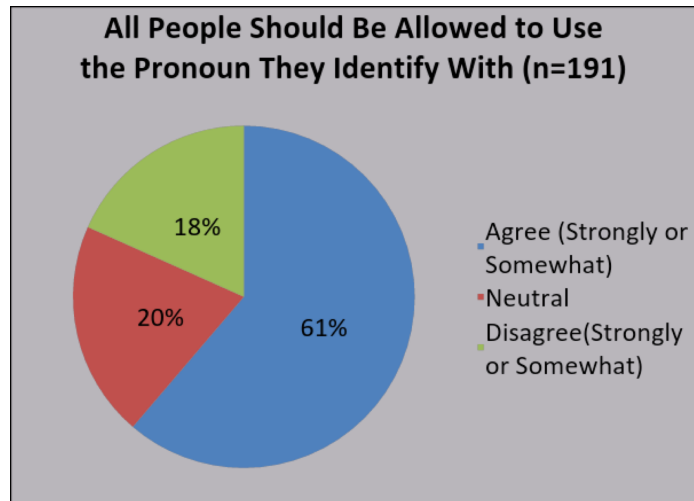
According to Michigan State Provost, Martha Pollack says (2016), “The move is another way the university is fostering an environment of inclusiveness.” Michigan implemented their policy in September 2016. On their website, Ohio State claims that “when someone is referred to with the wrong pronoun, it can make them feel disrespected, dismissed, alienated, or dysphoric (or, often, all of the above),” and they go on to say, “Discussing and correctly using preferred gender pronouns sets a tone of respect and allyship that trans and gender non-conforming students do not take for granted.” The University of Colorado, Boulder, does not have a distinct policy, but rather “suggests that instructors and professors state that they will accommodate these requests” by stating in class syllabi. Professors’ willingness to help students is the first step to making non-binary students more comfortable in their environment. Louisiana’s own Tulane University allows

students to change their first name and pronoun “provided that the request is sincere and is not for the purpose of misrepresentation.” Policies across the country differ with implementation, but all policies are attempts to foster environments of gender diversity acceptance. Such environments allow students to feel included and comfortable in their academic endeavors.

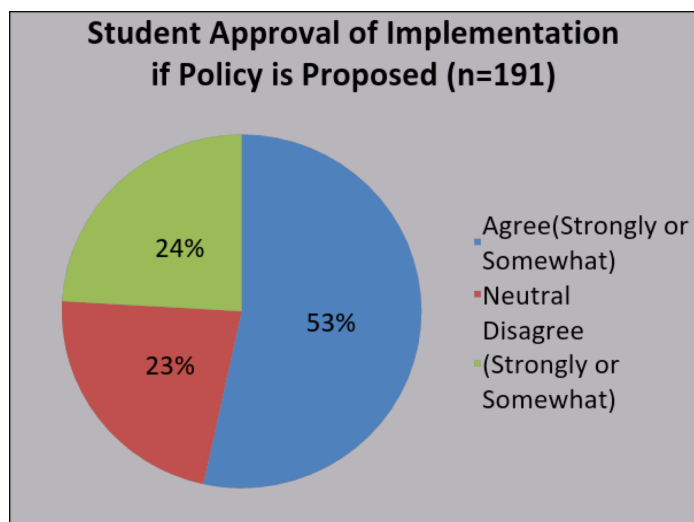
### **Exploring Interest in Gender Pronouns at Nicholls:**

An anonymous and voluntary online survey of a random sample (n=191) of Nicholls students age 18 and older was conducted. Demographic questions included age group (18-20, 21-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60 and older), gender (Male, Female, Non-binary choices), Nicholls class status, and religious affiliation. Other questions included scalar questions (Strongly Agree, Somewhat Agree, Neither Agree Nor Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Strongly Disagree). Scalar questions were analyzed to gauge student attitudes toward general pronoun usage for non-binary people, pronoun policies at universities, and possible pronoun policies specifically implemented at Nicholls, and they also assisted in gauging awareness of non-binary identities. The survey also contained an open response question at the end where students could express any comments, concerns, or ideas about a potential policy.

Shown in *Figure 3*, of the 191 students (159 females, 29 males, 3 non-binary) surveyed, 117 (61%) agreed that all people should be able to use the pronoun they identify with, and, as *Figure 4* shows, 102 (53%) agreed with the implementation of a flexible pronoun policy at Nicholls. Since 61 percent of students agreed that everyone should be able to use the pronoun they identify with and 53 percent of students agreed that a flexible pronoun policy should be implemented at NSU, it may mean that students agree with preferred pronoun usage but do not necessarily believe that a policy is needed at NSU. It can, however, be concluded that the majority of students surveyed are in agreement with the implementation of a policy at NSU.

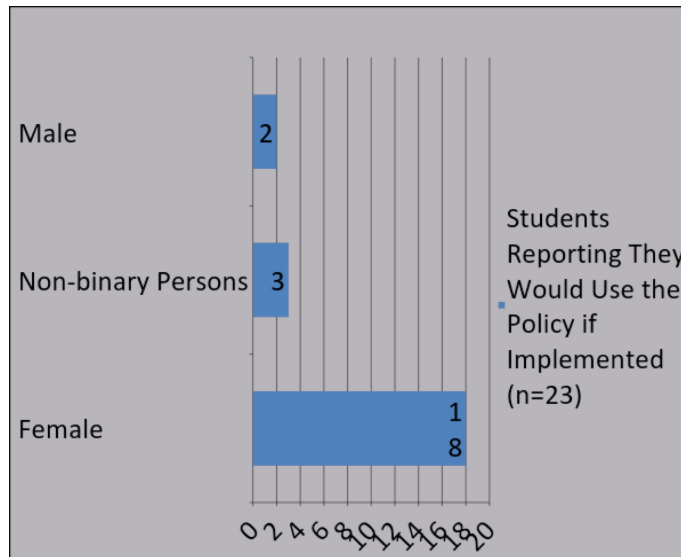


**Figure 3:** Student Approval of General Pronoun Usage



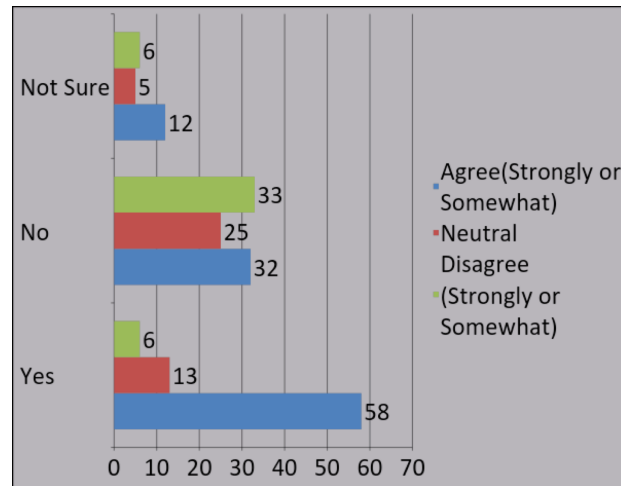
**Figure 4:** Student Approval of a Policy at NSU

*Figure 5* depicts the amount of surveyed students who reported that they would utilize the policy to change their pronoun in the NSU system. Since 23 (12.04%) of students reported they would take advantage of the policy, it is clear that there is a population of students in need of the policy.



**Figure 5:** Students Who Would Utilize the Policy

In the survey, students were asked if they have ever met a transgender person. Responses to this question were cross-tabulated with students' approval of the implementation of the policy at NSU. *Figure 6* reflects these results. Of students reporting not having met a transgender person, the number of students in approval or disapproval are nearly the exact same. Of students who reported having already met a transgender person, only 6 students disagreed with a policy at NSU, and 58 students agreed with the policy at NSU. Such a large difference in approval among this group of students may reflect a greater acceptance for non-binary identities when students are more aware of non-binary experiences and identities. Educating students on diverse gender identities could be the first step in helping them better accept non-binary gender.



**Figure 6:** Student Approval Based Upon Having Met A Transgender Person

As a random sample, only 191, or 3.4 percent of the NSU student population, responded to the survey. Also, the much greater number in female respondents compared to other genders may also skew result accuracy. A greater amount female responses may reflect the traditional greater willingness of women to help others. The survey was both anonymous and voluntary, so there was no way to control the amount or gender of respondents. Also, students' knowledge of words, including transgender and non-binary, may also have affected the way in which they chose their responses. One way to have made the survey a better reflection of opinions of the entire NSU population would have been to include faculty as possible survey respondents. The survey does represent a random sample of NSU students, and it is a representation of student attitudes toward a flexible pronoun policy at Nicholls State University.

### **Summary and Conclusion:**

Gender is a social phenomenon which is constantly learned, done, challenged, and displayed through the socialization of people (Lorber, 1994; West and Zimmerman, 1987). In western society, gender is mostly dominated by heteronormativity, sex stereotypes, and



androcentrism. Gender identities and roles vary across cultures internationally, and the language practices within each culture also affect identity. The correlation between language and cultural identity is not static and is always changing with changing cultures and other social interactions.

Dichotomous language, like that of English, reinforces biological determinism and allows for the rejection of diversity. Rejection of diversity can alienate a great number of individuals who do not necessarily conform to societal standards. An easy step to include diversity in language would be to incorporate gender-neutral terms, especially pronouns, in daily language practices. Transgender people, and transgender students in particular, often face stratification in society and are often alienated based upon their gender identity or sexual orientation. Social identity is a multi-faceted construction incorporating many identity aspects, so gender identity or sexual identity alone cannot be solely relied on to define a person (Bing and Bergvall, 1996).

Universities across the country have implemented policies which allow students to designate their preferred pronoun for use mainly in the classroom setting. Such policies are attempts by universities to build inclusive environments for all students. Flexible pronoun policies also allow for greater appreciation of diversity amongst students. If NSU were to implement a pronoun policy, an example could be set for other universities in the state of Louisiana.

The majority of students agree with the implementation of a policy. The first step of implementation would be faculty and administration willingness to accommodate transgender students. Syllabi and e-mails to students expressing this willingness is a facile way to make students aware. A tab on the student profile section of the BANNER system could allow students to enter their preferred pronoun and even possibly their preferred first name. Other universities have done this already on their campuses. Also, educational programs about gender identities could help raise awareness and understanding about non-binary students. Many college students do

not receive any type of education pertaining to the social construct of gender and gender identities. The results of the survey reflect more acceptance of non-binary identities when there is more awareness. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992) would claim, Nicholls is a community of practice. Here, people all share at least one thing in common, and that is affiliation with Nicholls. Members of the Nicholls community are all also members of various other communities of practice outside of Nicholls. If non-binary identity acceptance and gender-neutral language usage were to begin at Nicholls, it would eventually spread to other communities of practice, which will eventually impact the collective community. The expansion of non-binary gender identity acceptance in the whole community can start at Nicholls.

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