

How to be a trans ally in academia today (opinion)

Chelsea Thompto

In the wake of the election, during which [hundreds of millions](#) of dollars were spent on anti-trans ads and in which one party chose to vilify trans people as a central part of its message, transgender and nonbinary students, faculty and staff have been left to process what their futures will look like in a less welcoming and more politicized world.

While there are many uncertainties in terms of law and policy, those who consider themselves allies to trans and nonbinary people should view this as a moment to reaffirm their support for their trans employees, coworkers, students and peers and take proactive steps toward clarifying policies and procedures that support trans life and work.

Before I continue, I want to roll back the clock 15 years to 2009, when I first came out as transgender while an undergraduate student at the University of Iowa. While this process was by no means a walk in the park, looking back, I did benefit from one key cultural difference: Transgender identity had not yet been crafted into the political wedge issue it would become.

I found that most of the opposition I faced was due to ignorance rather than malice. Within that context, allyship meant something different than it does now. While at that time it largely meant acknowledging and validating my identity, helping me access care and resources, and helping navigate transphobic behavior, in 2025 it must mean something different, something more.

Trans people around the U.S. are facing uncertain futures and are having to ask tough questions about their safety and livelihoods. Questions like: Will I still have access to health care under this new administration? Am I safe in my classroom given how much time and money has been spent on vilifying me? Do I need to consider moving out of the state or country to ensure my safety?

It is hard to articulate the profound fear and uncertainty trans people will be faced with in the coming years, and asking these questions is a terrifying but necessary part of understanding how much we can rely on the world around us for support, both in terms of our work and more fundamentally our livelihoods.

Within this context, allyship must become more active. It is not enough to be vaguely empathetic to the plight of trans people, it is not enough to hire some DEI folks and task them with the work, and it is not enough to “remain neutral” in the face of such direct and vitriolic attacks. So, what I offer below are guidelines for trans allyship in an attainably ideal world.

General Allyship

- **Listen to trans and nonbinary people.** Full stop. If folks are coming to you with their questions, fears and concerns, that means they view you as a safe person to confide in. Do not violate that trust. When we speak within the institution, we are inherently putting ourselves at risk. Respect that vulnerability and listen to what we have to say.
- **Advocate for us when we are not in the room.** There are many spaces in academia where policies and agendas are made without trans people being present. If you find yourself in one of these spaces, be an advocate for trans people in that room. It might make you uncomfortable, but being a good ally requires discomfort.
- **Do not fall prey to “both sides” logic.** Many arguments position trans and nonbinary people on one side of a debate where the opposite side is our eradication from public life. This structure only empowers and platforms those who wish to do trans people immense harm. Trans and nonbinary people exist—we are not a debate, and you do not need to hear the “other side” when it only offers harm.

For Senior Administrators

- **If you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.** To be an ally is to make the plight of another group your problem. If you believe that your unit/department shouldn't concern itself with trans issues, understand that trans and nonbinary people face a myriad of challenges in academia and that advocacy and allyship are required across all aspects of academic life to help mitigate these challenges.
- **Do not ask us to do more service.** When trans and nonbinary people advocate for themselves, they do so by sacrificing time and energy that could otherwise be spent on their work. If we come to you with questions or concerns, it is not appropriate to ask us to do more labor (in the form of further advocacy, committee work, etc.) in order to have equal access to the resources and security the university provides. We need voices outside of our community to join us to effectively advocate for our rights.
- **Be responsible for your own education.** The labor of educating administrators on trans and nonbinary issues should not fall on trans and nonbinary faculty and staff unless they are explicitly hired and paid for that work. There are many high-quality resources available from groups such as [Advocates for Trans Equality](#) and the [Human Rights Campaign](#); the [Trans Legislation Tracker](#) is another helpful resource. Take the time to educate yourself on the issues in general and on the specific laws and policies in your state that impact trans and nonbinary students, faculty and staff.
- **Champion our work.** Uplift and support the work of trans and nonbinary faculty, staff and students. Engage with our scholarly and creative production and appreciate the value of our diverse viewpoints.
- **Draft proactive policy.** Look at the policies on the books at your institution and consider where it would be possible for you to strengthen and clarify your practices to better support trans and gender-nonconforming people. Some things to consider include: Does your campus's policy on discrimination specifically include gender identity and expression; for campuses that provide health care and/or housing, are these services gender-inclusive; does your campus have gender-neutral or gender-inclusive bathrooms and are they well-documented and accessible; and finally, does your campus properly train its faculty and staff on gender-inclusive language and behavior? Do not wait to respond to negative policy: Act with courage to signal your institution's commitment to equity.

For Faculty and Staff

- **Do not shy away from trans and nonbinary topics in the classroom.** Depending on your discipline, this may be more or less of an issue. But even if the topic comes up in an informal way, be prepared to speak on it rather than brush it to the side. And if you have trans and nonbinary students in your classes who want to include their identity in an aspect of their coursework, strive to make your classroom a safe and brave space for these conversations.
- **Stand with your trans and nonbinary colleagues and students.** Show your support in material and visible ways. Draft proactive policies and public statements affirming your support for trans and nonbinary students, faculty and staff. Think creatively about how you can support us in navigating the daily challenges (accessing health care and bathroom facilities, staying safe in our communities, etc.) of living under increasingly hostile circumstances. Understand that trans and nonbinary people are doing a lot of work behind the scenes right now to ensure their safety: What can you be doing to support them directly and indirectly?

Trans and nonbinary people face an uncertain future on so many fronts; you have the ability to help make sure that academia isn't part of that uncertainty. We do not need your vague empathy or hollow platitudes: We need your material and active support. Be an ally and convince others to be as well.

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