

**The following letter was delivered to the Gender Identity Initiative (GII) steering committee on 05/10/22, with signatures from over 500 MIT students, postdocs, staff, faculty, and alums and support from multiple LGBTQ+ campus groups. These demands are specifically designed to bring the Gender Identity Initiative in better alignment with TGNC individuals' priorities and concerns. However, we note TGNC individuals face additional barriers at MIT beyond those described here, each of which must be addressed in order to build an inclusive and just community for all.**

Dear members of the Gender Identity Initiative steering committee and IS&T leadership,

We are writing to share the [following open letter](#) -- signed by more than 500 MIT community members, G@MIT, LGBT Grad, qtPhDs, Sloan Pride, and other campus organizations -- calling upon the Gender Identity Initiative (GII) and IS&T to prioritize trans students and staff at MIT by immediately rectifying its trans-exclusionary mistakes, critically reassessing its approach to gender data collection, and committing to a public timeline for future changes.

While the GII exists to create a more inclusive infrastructure for trans individuals, we have been frustrated and dismayed by the structure and implementation of the Initiative. Due to lack of trans competency in its initial leadership, the first act of the GII was to introduce a gender collection form in WebSIS with trans-exclusionary options without any clarity as to how the collected data was going to be used. Since then, trans student advocates have repeatedly asked the GII to remove the offending form and to accelerate its efforts to change MIT's systems. However, despite us raising these issues in multiple contexts over many months, the form remains online, and the timeline for progress on this and related name and gender issues is unclear.

We believe these mistakes and delays are symptomatic of insufficient understanding of trans issues among GII decision-makers, as well as de-prioritization of the trans community's needs. In light of these failures, we are writing with the following demands:

### **DEMANDS.**

**In light of these failings, we are writing with the following list of demands.**

1. **Address gaps in knowledge about trans issues within the GII steering committee** by requiring all members to receive dedicated education or training on trans issues.
2. **Remove transphobic and cisnormative language from gender collection forms,** and follow existing standards for describing gender on forms.
3. **Clarify and broadly publicize the current and intended, internal and external uses of gender and pronoun information, including:**
  - a. who will have access to this information and why

- b. exactly when and why an individual’s legal sex or legal name will be collected, used, or shared in addition to (or instead of) their self-indicated gender or name
  - c. intended information sharing with systems/processes outside of WebSIS
  - d. how updates to gender and pronoun information sharing policies will be communicated to allow opting out of any broader sharing implemented later
- If the intended use of gender and pronoun information is not yet defined, **cease collecting this information until the intended use can be defined.**

4. **Address existing issues with data requests, sharing, and privacy:**
  - a. Ensure that legal name, legal sex, and gender information is requested, displayed, and circulated only on a minimal need-to-know basis.
  - b. Ensure that chosen names are consistently used in communications with and about individuals, except when they elect to use legal names for privacy reasons.
  
5. **Institute and broadly publicize a centralized process for collecting and addressing gender and name-related complaints** with regards to MIT’s technical and HR systems. This process should address both inappropriate exposure of and unnecessary requests for legal name, legal sex, and demographic information. This should be done as soon as possible to facilitate the identification and possible resolution of these complaints.
  
6. **Cease collecting additional student information on gender and pronouns until Demands 3-5 are met** (data use is clarified, existing data sharing and privacy issues are addressed, and a process is created to collect and address complaints).
  
7. **Commit to a public timeline with milestones for these changes** and share updates with the community at regular intervals.

For each demand, we provide rationale and context for why the Gender Identity Initiative’s implementation falls short.

**TRANS-EXCLUSIONARY LANGUAGE**

**The gender options currently available on WebSIS are trans-exclusionary (Demand 1, 2).**

**Gender Identity**

**Gender Identity:**

- Female
- Male
- Trans Female/Trans Woman
- Trans Male/Trans Man
- Genderqueer/Gender Non-conforming/Gender Fluid
- Unsure/Questioning
- Prefer Not to Answer
- Another Identity

**Please specify:**

**Pronouns:**

- **The gender options imply that trans men are not men and trans women are not women** by listing "man/woman" and "trans man/trans woman" as separate options. This implicitly suggests that only cis men are truly men and that only cis women are truly women, to the exclusion of trans men and women respectively. This critique has come up repeatedly in [research on trans-inclusive population surveys](#), [university working groups on data and gender](#), as well as [mixed-methods research](#).
- **There are existing best practices for gender options on forms** (e.g. [university surveys](#) or [conference registration forms](#)). Some MIT surveys, such as the MIT Quality of Life Survey, already follow many best practices. **These include asking about trans status separate from gender, explaining how gender information will be used and shared, and asking about gender, legal sex, and trans status only when relevant.**
- While some trans individuals may prefer to identify themselves using trans-specific gender labels, many if not most prefer not to. **As such, if GII's intention is to collect demographic data on trans individuals to serve the community, the current gender options will lead to low and biased response rates, and thus fail in those goals.**

#### **ABSENCE OF TIMELINE.**

**Trans students raised this concern about trans-exclusionary language, and there is currently no plan to change or remove it in a timely manner (Demand 2, 6, 7).**

- **Student advocates raised these concerns in January**, and despite acknowledgement that the language is exclusionary, **we received no commitment to change or remove language or explanation why this feedback has not been incorporated.**
- The final choice of wording should be thoughtful and involve community feedback. However, there are several interim solutions that would be straightforward to implement. To our knowledge, these gender options were not on WebSIS prior to Dec 2021, and they currently aren't used by downstream databases. We were told that the Gender Identity Initiative has yet to determine how and where these gender options should be used. **We therefore believe that these gender options could be either:**
  - a. **removed until a respectful, appropriate alternative can be identified**
  - b. **amended according to existing best practices for data collection on gender outlined above without any major consequences.**

#### **MISGENDERING, DEADNAMING, AND VIOLATIONS OF PRIVACY.**

**Inappropriately collecting legal name, sex, gender, and pronoun information puts community members at risk of [deadnaming](#), misgendering, and outing (Demands 3, 4, 6).**

- Collecting more demographic information makes individuals more identifiable as transgender, increasing their already-present risk of outing. Trans individuals' comfort sharing gender information also often depends upon context and intended downstream

use, similar to how a person may feel comfortable being out in their living community but not in professional or academic settings. **Given the sensitive nature of trans individuals' demographic information, it is not appropriate to collect data without clarifying the purpose of collection and adequately protecting this information.**

- **Neither WebSIS nor the GII's webpage describe the intended use and protection of student demographic data**, aside from the fact that providing data is optional and currently not used outside WebSIS. WebSIS itself provides no context on its new gender and pronoun options, and the GII did not communicate these changes except via an update to the ICEO webpage. This means that **most students would learn about the new gender options via WebSIS, but would not be aware of the connection to the Gender Identity Initiative, nor have information about how their data will be used.**
- **MIT databases already share student data inappropriately and in doing so, disregard student-provided demographic information.** For example:
  - Trans students who use the administrative names report **having their legal names appear on Outlook and having their legal names circulated on department-wide mailings.**
  - **In graduate admissions, legal sex is shared outside of where it is strictly legally required, effectively outing trans students without consent.** Applicant legal sex and legal names are required fields but are not access-restricted. Instead, all faculty and staff who interview applicants are given access to applicant legal name and legal sex via an online post-interview feedback portal. This web portal lists applicants only according to their legal names and lists applicant legal sex (e.g. "M" or "F") both on overview list of all applicants and on each applicant's individual page (e.g. "Pref. Gender : F, ; (Gender: F)").
  - **Automated admissions emails, such as rejection emails, are addressed only to the student's legal name**, instead of their preferred name, effectively deadnaming students.

#### **LACK OF COMPLAINT RESOLUTION PROCESS.**

**Exposures of data can constitute harassment or violation of privacy, but the process for addressing name- and gender-related complaints is unclear or non-existent (Demand 5).**

- **While updates to MIT's information systems may address this issue in the long-term, these issues warrant more immediate attention and solutions, where available.** This is especially important, given that efforts to update MIT's information systems have been in progress for years and the GII has not committed to a timeline by which the entire effort or intermediate efforts will be complete. Even after updates are complete, information systems are not static and must be maintained by having straightforward means of flagging bugs or non-compliance with data sharing practices.

- **MIT does not have a well-documented process for addressing these instances. This places an undue burden on students to determine why the issue is occurring, identify who is able to address the issue, and follow up until the issue is resolved. This can also result in complaints going unaddressed.** The two online sources on name changes at MIT we are aware of – [Knowledge Base](#) and [LBGTQ+ Services](#) – only describe how students may indicate administrative names and detail one known issue with Zoom not updating to reflect an administrative name.
- In some cases, such as with failed Zoom or Outlook synchronization after an administrative name change, these instances can be handled by submitting an IS&T service request. **However, many other cases are not readily addressed by service requests and do not have a clear remediation process.** For example, certain processes populate name information from databases that only maintain legal names or request/share legal sex information beyond what is legally required.