



A brief guide to Common App's name, sex, and gender questions for member institutions

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How students interact with the sex and gender questions on Common App

More and more high school and college students are coming out as trans or nonbinary today, with studies finding that almost 2% of high school students (Johns, et al., 2019) and nearly 6% of college students (American College Health Association, 2022) now identify as trans or nonbinary. To help colleges increase awareness of and provide support to this growing population, Common App added optional questions to the common portion of the application asking students' gender identities and the names and pronouns they go by, in addition to its required question asking legal sex, for the 2021–2022 application season. Of the more than 1.22 million students who applied to college for Fall 2022 using Common App, 2.2% (more than 26,300 students) reported identifying as trans or nonbinary and 3% (more than 36,800 students) indicated that they referred to themselves using pronouns beyond just “she/her” or “he/him” (Beemyn, 2022).

Because nearly half of U.S. states now allow individuals to identify as other than female or male on their birth certificates and/or driver's licenses, Common App will give students the ability to indicate their legal sex as “X or another legal sex” beginning with the 2023–2024 application season. For the current application season, Common App has added “Mx.” and “other” (with a fill-in) as honorifics, along with “Dr.,” “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” and “Ms.,” for advisors, counselors, parents, recommenders, and teachers.

Evolution of sex and gender on Common App

2016–17	Changed Sex to <i>Sex assigned at birth</i> Added optional free-text gender identity field
2017–18	Reverted to Sex Moved Sex off registration screen
2021–22	Changed Sex to <i>Legal Sex</i> Replaced Gender free-text with defined options Added optional pronouns Revised <i>Preferred name</i>
2022–23	New system-wide prefix options: <i>Mx.</i> and <i>Other</i> System-wide replacement of <i>his or her</i> with <i>their</i> Added <i>legal</i> to first-given name question
2023–24	<i>X or another legal sex</i> will be added as a legal sex option alongside female and male

Explanations of name, sex, and gender questions

To give its constituents the most up-to-date information, Common App provides the following definitions for name, sex, gender, and pronouns:

Legal first name: The first name on a person's most current birth certificate and/or driver's license or U.S. state identification. Common App requires students to indicate their "legal first/given name."

Chosen name: The first name that a trans or nonbinary person uses to refer to themselves, which may be different from their legal first name. Other appropriate terms are "lived name" and "affirmed name." To avoid confusion among students who may be unfamiliar with the term, Common App does not use "chosen name" within the application. Instead, Common App offers an optional question asking, "Would you like to share a different first name that people call you?"

Legal sex: the gender designation on a person's most current birth certificate, driver's license or U.S. state identification, and/or passport. Common App requires students to indicate their legal sex. It currently offers "male" and "female" as legal sex options but will be adding "X or another legal sex" beginning with the 2023–2024 application season.

Gender: a person's sense of themselves as female, male, or another identity. Common App offers an optional question on gender, with "female," "male," "nonbinary," and "add another gender" (with a fill-in) as options. Students can choose more than one gender.

Pronouns: words that a person uses to refer to themselves to indicate their gender identity. Common App offers an optional question on pronouns, with "he/him," "she/her," "they/them," and "add another pronoun set" (with a fill-in) as options. Students can choose more than one set of pronouns.

Recommendations for use of name, sex, and gender information

To further the pursuit of access, equity, and integrity in the college admissions process, Common App continues to listen to our student communities and evolve the application process to support the inclusion of trans and nonbinary students. Common App recognizes that words and questions on the application matter and that change is not always simple or seamless.

The purpose of this guide is to give member colleges and universities the resources they need for important campus conversations and guide the implementation of trans and nonbinary inclusive practices.

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How to refer to name and pronouns

- Avoid the use of the term "preferred name" and "preferred pronouns," as these phrases give the impression that use of a name/pronouns other than those indicated is acceptable.
- Refer to the name that a student goes by as their "chosen name," "lived name," or "affirmed name" and the pronouns they use for themselves as their "personal pronouns" in software systems, institutional language, and everyday speech.

Pre-matriculation

- In alignment with the questions asked on Common App, admissions offices should include optional questions on interest forms that ask the first name and pronouns that prospective students go by and their gender identity.
- Admissions office staff should communicate with and about prospective students using the name and pronouns that they indicate they are called by. Additionally, colleges should clearly tell prospective students how, when, and where the name and pronouns they share during the admissions process will be used in communications with them, their families, and their secondary schools.
- Admissions and other campus offices should be careful about sharing a student's chosen name and pronouns with family members, as the student may not be out to them. If speaking with a parent/guardian, see how they gender their child. If a parent/guardian uses the pronouns listed on the student's interest form and/or application, do likewise. If the parent/guardian misgenders their child, do not correct them. You can use "they/them," the student's name, and phrases like "your child" and "the student" so that you do not misgender the student, too.

Post-matriculation

- Incorporate the chosen name, pronouns, and gender indicated by matriculated students into the college's student information system.
- Have an easily accessible way for students to change the chosen name, pronouns, and gender in the student information system from what they had indicated during the admissions process or to add the information and publicize this process to incoming students.
- Have students' chosen name, rather than their legal first name, automatically appear on campus records, including course and grade rosters, email addresses, Zoom and other video platforms, directory listings, unofficial transcripts, advisee lists, and other documents.
- Have students' chosen name, rather than their legal first name, automatically appear on campus ID cards and diplomas. Some colleges indicate that their ID cards and diplomas are legal documents, so must have a student's legal name, but this is an administrative decision and not a state or federal legal requirement.

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- Have students' pronouns automatically appear on course and grade rosters, advisee lists, and in the information systems used by student services offices. If a student selects more than one set of pronouns on Common App, include at least the subjective pronouns in the student information system (e.g., if a student indicates their pronouns as "he/him," "she/her," and "they/them," have "he/she/they" in their record).
- Students' gender, rather than their legal sex, should be visible in campus information systems. Legal sex should be available only to offices that need this information, such as campus health centers.
- Students' gender should be used by campus offices that make gender distinctions, such as residence life departments in assigning housing.
- Expand the "sex" field in the student information system to be able to include the "X" option from Common App beginning in the 2023–2024 application season.

References

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