



**ST. MARY'S**  
ACADEMY

**Gender Identity Task Force**

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*June 2017*

St. Mary's Academy, sponsored by the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary since 1859, is a Catholic high school for young women, providing a challenging college-preparatory education in a vibrant learning environment. Guided by the values and charism of the Sisters, St. Mary's Academy fosters a diverse community, educates the whole person by nurturing spirituality, encouraging creativity, promoting justice and inspiring a sense of global interdependence to prepare students for service and leadership.

Recognizing the growing fluidity of gender in today's society and the particular relevance of the issue to all-girls institutions, St. Mary's Academy president established a Gender Identity Task Force (GITF) during the 2016-17 academic year. The GITF was charged with providing recommendations to encourage kindness, respect and compassion in our community while supporting SMA's ability to continue as an all-girls school.

### **Our Findings**

In our research, hearing presentations by medical, psychological, ethical, legal and Catholic theological and pastoral care experts, talking to stakeholder groups and learning from other all-girls schools across the country, a clear path forward has emerged. This model aligns with St. Mary's Academy's Catholic mission, the values of our founders and current school practices, balancing our ability to continue as an all-girls school with our commitment to caring for the individual. This model is how we recommend St. Mary's Academy proceed, with the addition of more robust efforts in support of processes, education and communication.

### **Major Conclusions**

**It is the belief of the GITF that St. Mary's Academy continue to uphold:**

- The best interest of the school and its ability to continue its all-girls mission.
- The best interest of all SMA students to discover their full potential.
- The best interest of transgender students, who we know statistically are at a much higher risk for depression and self-harm.

**St. Mary's Academy should continue to balance the value of inclusion with that of being all-girls and a Catholic institution:**

- We agree with the recommendations of the National Coalition of Girls' Schools and the leadership of the Sisters of the Holy Names of Jesus and Mary that girls' schools work in a supportive way with

transgender male students and their families on an individually decided basis, focusing on the student's safety, academic needs and future goals.

- We do not recommend that SMA establish specific policies at this time.
- We do not believe that a student should be forced to immediately transfer to another school based solely on that student's identity as a transgender or non-binary individual.
- We believe that the presence of a relatively small number of transgender male students does not threaten SMA's status or environment as an all-girls school.

## **Recommendations**

### *Interaction with Students*

We recommend SMA implement clear guidelines detailing processes for how the school engages and supports transgender students. These guidelines will communicate the expectation that transgender male students will honor the school's mission of educating young women. The guidelines will identify which co-curricular programs the school is unable to provide to a transgender male student. The guidelines should be communicated to and clearly understood by faculty and staff.

The administration should also establish a clear protocol for receiving student requests for preferred pronouns and name changes. We recommend that we make every effort to honor students' preferred pronoun/name requests. All institutional language should remain female-focused. Teachers should continue to use female pronouns when addressing their classrooms and school functions in order to maintain institutional privileging of female voice.

As a private school, we work in partnership with parents. Except with regard to extraordinary circumstances involving potential student safety issues, parents should be notified of name and pronoun accommodations requested by their child.

Our research indicates that most transgender male students will self-select out of an all-girls school, but not always immediately. It is the task force's recommendation that St. Mary's Academy commit to meet annually with the transgender male student and the student's family to appraise whether St. Mary's continues to be the best fit for his high school education.

### *Admissions*

We recommend that all SMA admissions materials and messaging clearly and certainly communicate that St. Mary's is an all-girls school. Messaging should lead with our Catholic, all-girls mission. All materials should use girls/female/young women whenever practical, rather than "students".

We recommend that application materials include an acknowledgement of SMA as an all-girls school and related expectations of students and parents, to be signed by students and parents.

St. Mary's Academy can and will accept applicants who identify as girls via our admissions process, as our educational environment is one specifically designed for girls. This includes transgender female applicants to SMA.

If an applicant enters as a girl and later identifies as male while an SMA student, we believe the school should make every reasonable effort to support that student (please see details in the previous section) in finding the right school fit, with re-evaluation meetings with that student and the student's parents on an annual basis.

### *Education*

The Gender Identity Task Force recommends implementing a comprehensive faculty/staff development program to ensure an accurate understanding of gender identity, including knowledge of the legal, physical, medical, psychological, ethical and Catholic teaching and pastoral issues.

Regarding education and messaging, we recommend that SMA consistently and clearly state our reasoning with regard to transgender students and how it aligns with the SNJM core value to serve those who are marginalized.

We believe the school should strengthen ways gender identity is addressed and incorporated throughout the curriculum. This includes evaluating SMA's sex education approach, ensuring that information is taught in a timely way.

We recommend that SMA provide continuing education of faculty and staff on issues faced by transgender students, as part of a larger suite of subjects (e.g. teen sexuality, identifying warning signs for self-harm, medical options for gender reassignment).

We believe it is important that the school's Board of Directors and parents of current students acquire an accurate understanding of gender identity and related issues.

We think SMA should consider having a gender identity "expert" available to provide counseling and support to transgender/non-binary students (including needs in the areas of psychological and physical support) and any/all students who might have questions, concerns or anxiety.

### *Communication*

We recommend that St. Mary's Academy create a communications plan that includes strategy and tactics, including those addressed by the notes below and including timelines and methods to

disseminate findings to focus group participants and selected members of key stakeholder groups. We believe all faculty and staff, at a minimum, should be well versed in SMA practice with regard to transgender students.

It would solve a number of worries if all faculty and staff had a compact elevator speech at their disposal. This tool would hopefully eliminate interactions “in the wild” where SMA employees feel like they don’t know how to answer a particular question (e.g. “Are there boys at SMA?”).

Any messaging must respect student privacy, ensuring that only school employees who regularly work directly with a student have access to information related specifically to that student.

We find ourselves at an opportune time to reaffirm our mission as an all-girls, Catholic school.

Messaging from SMA should lean heavily on our unique role.

We recommend that, during the 2017-18 school year, the principal provide opportunities to engage students face-to-face, reaffirming the school leadership’s commitment to diversity and inclusion.

We recommend that SMA make a regular effort to stay connected to other Catholic high schools and other all-girls schools on this issue.

We advise school leadership to determine how St. Mary’s will respond when asked by other schools about the SMA’s Gender Identity Task Force work in 2017.

We suggest that, when relevant, communications should acknowledge that this subject is evolving and SMA’s role in supporting transgender male students is an ongoing discussion—educators across the country are still working to thoughtfully address issues faced by transgender students.

Finally, we recommend that St. Mary’s consider designating a spokesperson for this issue, even if school leadership does not expect an imminent need for one.

### *Facilities and Logistics*

We recommend discussing potential scenarios regarding facilities (e.g. separate or unisex restrooms, locker rooms) and potential logistical challenges regarding overnight retreats, etc. While SMA leadership might consider these questions less important than the higher level decisions on transgender students, they are the sort of issues that many, including and especially parents, tend to view more critically, and often through the lens of student safety.

### *Further Considerations and Ongoing Clarifications*

SMA leadership should regularly discuss potential scenarios related to transgender male students and the school’s limits of support for those students. For example, where does SMA draw the line when it

comes to transgender male students representing the school through student leadership, athletics and other extracurricular activities?

School leadership should consider clear language in the student handbook regarding eligibility for certain activities, e.g. “The Marian Singers are comprised of young women from grades 10-12 ...”



After months of research, conversation and consideration, the Gender Identity Task Force believes that St. Mary’s Academy leadership acted wisely in forming its interim practice for handling requests from transgender male students in the fall of 2016. It is our conclusion that the school can largely continue along this path while placing additional attention and resources toward processes, education and communication. Further, the time, energy, focus and resources spent to make the Gender Identity Task Force’s work possible are evidence of SMA leadership’s due diligence and provide the school with more clarity, confidence and credibility on transgender issues than before.

Given the larger society in which we live, all-girls schools are as important as ever. We believe that St. Mary’s Academy can and should continue to privilege female voice and provide an all-girls environment, while honoring our commitment to care for the whole person and following the lead of our students, whose support for each other inspires us all.

The last several months have served as a reminder that, by leaning on the core values of our founders and balancing the best interests of our school with the compassion and care for its students, we are never far from a right answer. This is an ongoing conversation and the beginning of a journey for St. Mary’s. We hope the GITF’s recommendations and conclusions are helpful to school leadership, and we trust St. Mary’s administrative team, faculty and staff to consider and implement processes and practices that will allow the school to always best serve its students and its unique mission.