

PROPOSAL TO ADD “GENDER EXPRESSION OR IDENTITY” TO MIT’S NON-DISCRIMINATION POLICY

Summary

We propose that MIT amend its non-discrimination statement to add “gender expression or identity.” This language protecting the diversity of individual gender should be added because it

- Offers needed protection for persons who tend to be discriminated against and harassed because of their behavior or appearance, protection consistent with that offered by MIT to others already recognized in MIT’s policy,
- Endorses MIT’s currently welcoming environment and creates the safety necessary for creativity,
- Will help MIT attract talented students, faculty, and staff, and
- Underscores MIT’s leadership role among major universities in providing a safe and supportive environment for students, faculty and employees.

Introduction

It is becoming widely accepted that the range of human gender expression and identity is considerably broader than what was once commonly accepted. Those whose gender expression or identity falls outside of common expectations, who may identify as transgender, experience a significant rate of adverse discrimination ranging from peer harassment, to job loss, to violent attacks. In recognition of this discrimination, a number of municipalities and employers have enacted protections for gender diversity in their non-discrimination policies. The pace of enactment of such protections is increasing, reflecting a growing consensus of both their need and their appropriateness. As an employer, a leading educational institution, and longtime champion of academic diversity, MIT should be a leader in enacting such protections.

Gender expression or identity outside common expectations may be manifested in various ways, including dress in clothes associated with the opposite gender, consistent presentation of a gender not associated with anatomy, medical and/or surgical change to anatomy and/or physiology towards the opposite gender, and a great variety of gender expressions and identities that may be combinations or variations of the preceding or entirely new ways of expressing or identifying individual gender. Persons practicing or identifying with these gender variations may or may not describe themselves as 'transgender', and it is generally advisable to respect each individual's preference with respect to choice of descriptive terms.

The reason for including both gender expression and identity under the protection of the policy is that the two are intertwined. How a person identifies or understands himself/ herself is, in a healthy person, reflected in how s/he presents outwardly. People need to be free to construct their own identity and to

present that construct to the world as they choose. People should not be discriminated against or harassed because certain of their physical characteristics do not appear to match social norms for the gender they express.

Reasoning

MIT's non-discrimination policy already goes beyond the requirements of law, extending protection to many groups and making MIT a supportive place where people can learn, work, and flourish. It is time to include transgender people in that list. They have experienced discrimination, harassment, and violence, solely because of their gender presentation, in ways similar to the treatment received by others because of their race, religion, or sexual orientation. Transgender people are similarly in need of protection to live in an environment free of anger and fear, where they can be as creative and productive as possible.

MIT is already a safer place than many others. The proposed amendment would endorse and publicize the practice current in most areas of the institute of accepting everyone, including transgender people. The amendment would make it clear to the few remaining areas of the Institute that they are out of step and would broadcast to the world that MIT is a place where no one needs to feel afraid or humiliated.

Those who would claim that this amendment is unnecessary because there are no transgender people at MIT are mistaken. Transgender expression and identity include a wide array of characteristics and behaviors that we see daily, such as men with long hair, women with very short hair, women with ties, or men with jewelry, barrettes, or skirts. In addition to those we see, many transgender people may be comfortable around their colleagues but not open to the community at large because they are uncertain what the official reaction would be. Some transgender people are living in denial, some fearfully hiding their gender expression, and some courageous few are openly expressing their gender identity. For all these people, a new prohibition against discrimination would greatly enhance their sense of safety and of collegiality.

By adopting the proposed language, MIT would be out in front of its peer institutions. While some large companies, especially in high tech fields, such as Intel, Apple, and Lucent, have policies prohibiting discrimination against transgender people, and some municipalities, including Cambridge, also do not discriminate in employment, interestingly other major research universities do not have such a policy. MIT has an opportunity at this moment to be a leader.

By being in the vanguard, MIT will attract employees and students who are transgendered or who care deeply about human rights, people who may have extraordinary talent and would be unwilling to go to a more hostile environment.

No doubt there are people who do not agree with this policy and would criticize MIT for adopting it. MIT will decide, of course, based on what is right, not what is

popular. By adopting the new language, MIT would create a buzz of discussion and have the opportunity to educate people who do not understand gender issues. By creating opportunities for education, MIT would be fulfilling its core mission.

Respectfully Submitted by

The LGBT Issues Group (web.mit.edu/lbgt/ig/)

Endorsed by

Undergraduate LGBT Community

MIT Rainbow Coffeehouse

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgenderers at MIT (GaMIT)

SloanLGBT

QWiLLTS (Queer Women Looking for Life in Tech School)

BGALA (Bisexual, Gay and Lesbian Alumni/ae)

MIT Program in Women's Studies

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