

New submission from ARC Award Final Report

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Name of Researcher

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Project Title

Public-Private Places: Exploring All-Gender Washroom Use at Langara College

Term of Project

Summer 2019-Summer 2022

Please introduce yourself – include pertinent background information relating to the topic of your research project.

As a rhetoric scholar, my research examines the use of language to engage individuals in various kinds of work on behalf of institutions. For example, my doctoral research explored the use of messaging during and after the global H1N1 influenza pandemic to encourage the assumption of personal responsibility for public health. With this project, I have focused less on the messaging used within postsecondary to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and more on the extent to which regular users of all-gender washrooms understand these facilities as supporting EDI. Through surveys, interviews, and focus groups, I learned that while regular users frequently describe all-gender washrooms as vehicles for promoting EDI, privacy is a commonly-reported reason for preferring them to binary-gendered, multi-stall washrooms. Such a finding has fascinating implications both for the promotion of EDI within public institutions such as colleges and universities and for more recent efforts to ensure health and safety in public settings amid COVID-19.

Please discuss your educational background and your work experience that led you to taking on this research project. If possible, include a quote that helps define your interest in this project.

I took on this project because, despite having completed my doctoral research independently, I had frequent opportunities throughout my graduate training to conduct both applied and collaborative research. For example, from 2016-2018, I supported a CIHR-funded study to document the history of measles vaccination campaigns across Canada as part of the broad-based project, "Mapping Vaccine Hesitancy." I took on this study of all-gender washrooms at Langara because it seemed to me a prime opportunity to contribute to scholarship on gender diversity and inclusivity while potentially generating knowledge to improve on-campus experiences for 2SLGBTQI+ Langarans and visiting guests.

Please summarize your project in plain language that others not in your field could understand.

This study has explored the value of all-gender washrooms, as "public-private" spaces, to the promotion—and expansion—of equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) at snəwəyɛł lələm Langara College. It also has a secondary aim: to identify the benefits of private spaces like single-stall washrooms in public settings such as a fast-growing post-

secondary campus. Such insight has become potentially more relevant as public health constraints under COVID-19 have radically altered access to and uses of public facilities such as restrooms.

Identify the project goals and objectives. Explain how the results may be used to solve a problem or inform further research in the field.

This study sought to (1) gain insight into common reasons for using or preferring all-gender washrooms in public settings, (2) identify how, according to regular users, all-gender washrooms support equity, diversity, and inclusion within public postsecondary education, and (3) explore other advantages for including all-gender facilities within postsecondary education.

Initially, this project took inspiration from a desire to understand whether and to what extent all-gender washrooms have improved the participation of trans and gender-nonconforming people in public postsecondary education. After all, such facilities became far more common after Bill C-16's amendment in 2016 to extend protections to people on the basis of gender identity or expression.

A broader goal included a keen interest in the value of privacy in public settings. Langara College is still in the midst of a crisis of limited space and, as demonstrated by the 2017 Transportation Survey, many students (quite a few of them international students) still commute more than an hour each way to attend classes. It seemed wise to explore whether and in what ways access to privacy might benefit such Langarans as well.

This latter objective has only become more pronounced in the wake of COVID-19's outbreak. It's perhaps worth mentioning that conducting this study during COVID-19 posed obstacles mainly to the timely completion of interviews and focus groups (campus closed just as the survey concluded),

Briefly explain the steps taken (methods used) to conduct the research, and describe the key findings.

Research Methodology: A Cross-Campus Survey of Regular Users

Bill C-16 aims to support the active participation of transgender and gender-diverse people in public settings—including postsecondary education. To better understand the ways that Langara's all-gender washrooms enact this commitment, this study draws on testimony from Langara community members. Study interactions included a cross-campus survey, a focus group composed of survey respondents who expressed an interest in further participation, and a series of interviews with community members. Conducted between Spring 2020-Spring 2021, interactions with study participants invited them to

1. elaborate on their understanding of the need for all-gender washrooms, and
2. comment on the ways that these facilities support equity, diversity, and inclusion.

While interviews and focus groups have been used to deepen insight into these issues, research findings on all-gender washrooms and EDI at Langara derive primarily from the cross-campus survey conducted in early 2020.

To recruit survey respondents, a SWAP student, Mal Grace Fojas (they/them), posted (and reposted) advertisements in each of Langara's 12 all-gender washrooms. Between January-March 2020, over a hundred (124) participants used a weblink to access and complete a 17-question survey. Of these respondents, over 80% reported coming to campus more than three times a week; nearly 50% also reported using an all-gender washroom more than three times a week. In addition to commenting on the necessity of all-gender washrooms at a public postsecondary institution, survey participants evaluated their use of all-gender washrooms in terms of their affordances for (1) safety, (2) security, (3) privacy, (4) convenience, (5) cleanliness, (6) accessibility, (7) personal hygiene, (8) amenities (e.g., baby change table), (9) identity (e.g., prefer a non-gendered washroom to a gendered one), and (10) other (please specify). These terms have been used, as tags, to encode and interpret responses to the survey's three qualitative questions.

Survey Findings:

Survey findings demonstrate a divide not among, but within respondents. When asked to comment on the “reason for making all-gender washrooms available at Langara,” responses draw primarily on a rhetoric of EDI to underscore the value of these facilities as safe, accessible spaces on campus, particularly for trans and GNC people. However, when invited to identify their own most important reasons for regularly using all-gender washrooms, most respondents highlighted reasons unrelated to EDI.

The three most common reasons for accessing all-gender washrooms on campus, for example, include

privacy (> 80%),
convenience (> 50%),
and cleanliness (> 50%).

Additionally, respondents report, as the three least common reasons for accessing all-gender washrooms,

amenities (> 70%),
identity (> 50%),
and security (~ 40%).

Survey findings highlight an interesting tension related to this study’s conception of all-gender washrooms as “public-private places.” Whereas regular users regard all-gender washrooms as essential to the enactment of EDI within a public postsecondary institution, privacy—as distinct from safety, or security—predominates as a reason for preferring all-gender washrooms over their binary-gendered counterparts. This valuing of privacy in public has implications for ongoing efforts to support the active participation of trans and gender-nonconforming people in education and other public settings. The valuing of privacy in a public setting reported by survey respondents also has implications for more recent, COVID-related efforts to protect health and safety within postsecondary institutions.

Limitations

While only regular users completed the cross-campus survey, the valuing of privacy in all-gender washrooms—particularly over affordances such as “identity” or “security”—might be attributed in part to the predominantly (~85%) cisgender identity of survey respondents. A different perspective on the need for all-gender washrooms on campus might have arisen from a survey directed at only those groups whose identities are enfranchised in Bill C-16.

Who was involved in this project (eg. faculty, students, community partners)? How did their involvement contribute to the project’s success? Were there any challenges to overcome?

My SWAP student aide, Mary (Mal) Fojas, contributed significantly to this project’s success by conducting literature review and overseeing outreach activities. I also received invaluable input and support at various stages from Applied Research Chair Kelly Sveinson, Qualitative Research Consultant Jenny Francis, ARC Manager Seetha Kumaran, and members of the Langara Research Ethics Board. Lastly, this project benefitted enormously from the research participants who generously shared their insights about all-gender washroom use and EDI at Langara. I am also grateful to Caroline Ross (Photography), Courtenay Dobbie (Studio 58), and Linda Pitt (Studio 58), who have reached out to support the promotion of all-gender washrooms, and to Darren Bernhaerdts (Arts) and Alena Buis (Creative Arts and Industries) for seeking to make all-gender washroom expansion an Academic Plan Action Item. I’m sure I also owe thanks to Marg Heldman and Julio Longo (and I’m truly sorry for anyone I might have missed).

In addition to being delayed by COVID-19, I sometimes had difficulties accessing support with budgetary matters. The still recent hiring of Seetha Kumaran has, I’m sure, reduced the likelihood of being delayed by such difficulties in future research projects.

Please share any personal stories that made this research experience memorable/valuable.

I so enjoyed sharing my research findings at this year's in-person Applied Research Day, during which several colleagues disclosed having either students or loved ones who depend on all-gender washroom use because of gender identity. I have also been heartened to have far more conversations about gender inclusivity and diversity at Langara since starting this project.

What are the next steps for this project and for you as a researcher?

Next steps include using my Fall 2022 NID to prepare two in-progress academic manuscripts for submission to academic journals. I also hope to identify and apply to one or more academic conferences at which to present my findings and also apply for ARC funding either to facilitate conference travel or to secure teaching release so I can apply for a College and Community Social Innovation Fund grant in 2023, ideally on the topic of this research project.

Langara Institutional Repository Consent

By submitting, I consent to uploading my ARC Fund final report to the Langara Institutional Repository (The LaIR).