

# GENDER-NEUTRAL RESTROOMS

at James Madison University

Note: All contributors to this paper have agreed to this draft of the project being published on the Whitten Maher Memorial Scholarship website. Some contributors have been anonymized, and all photographs are stock photos. The profiles beginning on page 13 are composites.



BY A. L. KENSKY

School of Media Arts and Design  
James Madison University  
February, 2021

# DESIGN QUESTION

How might we improve the experience of students trying to discover new gender-neutral restrooms to use around campus?

James Madison University has a number of "universal" restrooms, defined on the [university's website](#) as single occupancy restrooms which can be used by people of any sex or gender. Single occupancy gender-neutral restrooms like this exist around the world and on campus, but can often be difficult to locate.

As a transgender student, I have struggled to find gender-neutral restrooms around campus. I have friends who feel the same way. Because I am involved in the LGBTQ+ community at JMU, I know that this is a problem affecting many students.



# HYPOTHESIS

**Student are dissatisfied with the current resources available for finding gender-neutral restrooms at JMU.**

JMU's only official online resource for finding gender-neutral restrooms has many areas that could use improvement. In my personal experience, I have found it difficult to locate gender-neutral restrooms on my campus, and I believe others might feel the same way.

JMU's current resource consists of an alphabetical list of buildings on campus that contain universal restrooms. Some are listed as "inaccessible," some list the room number of the restrooms, and only a few give directions on how to find the restroom. On campus, very few buildings contain signs directing students to universal restrooms.

Because of the lack of information that JMU offers regarding universal restrooms on campus, students face accessibility concerns.

# APPROACH

Because restroom use can be an uncomfortable topic, this project was designed to make interviewees more comfortable sharing about personal topics.

While gender-neutral restrooms are available for anyone to use, transgender and gender non-conforming individuals tend to seek out these restrooms with greater need than their cisgender peers. Because of this, I decided to seek out primarily transgender students to interview.

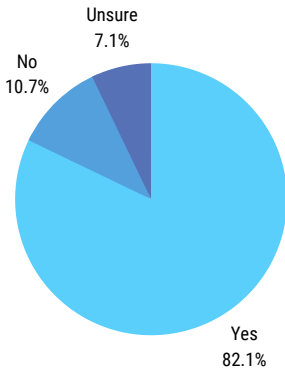
Screeners surveys were distributed through social media and to JMU organizations, including Madison Equality and SOGIE to best reach the target demographic. Out of the 28 respondents to the screener survey, only 11 were eligible to be interviewed.

To encourage more elaborate and personal answers, interviews were conducted using phone calls and Zoom. Interview questions were open-ended and designed to elicit more in-depth response from interviewees. Out of 11 eligible interviewees, 8 agreed to be interviewed, but only 7 interviews were conducted due to scheduling issues.

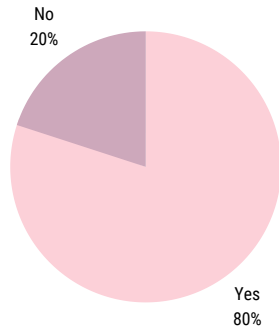
# SCREENER SURVEY

Questions aimed to assess respondents' eligibility for more in-depth interviews.

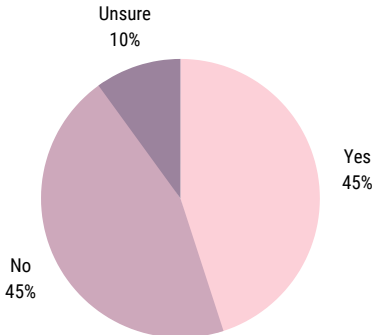
Do you consider yourself to be transgender or gender-nonconforming?



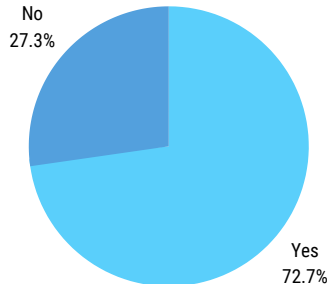
Are you currently an enrolled student at James Madison University?



Do you often use or seek out gender-neutral restrooms?



Would you be willing to participate in an interview on the topic?



# INTERVIEWS

Questions aimed to discover the habits, goals, and frustrations of users.

- What are your age, grade, major, job, and hobbies?
- Where do you live when you're in Harrisonburg?
- What places do you visit frequently in and around Harrisonburg, both on and off-campus? \_\_\_\_\_
- Walk me through your experience when looking for a gender-neutral restroom. What do you do? How do you feel?
- Tell me about a time when it went well. What contributed to the good experience?
- How about a time when it did not go well. What contributed to the negative experience? \_\_\_\_\_
- Did you know JMU has an online resource for gender-neutral restrooms?
  - If yes, what sticks out to you about it? What do you like/dislike?
  - If no, can you narrate your process as you try to find this resource?
  - Once you have found this resource, what sticks out to you about it? What do you like/dislike? \_\_\_\_\_
- Tell me about any resources you have used to find gender-neutral restrooms elsewhere.



## Dylan M. (he/him)

Dylan says he is at an in-between place where he sometimes passes for male, but sometimes doesn't. This makes using restrooms uncomfortable, and he sometimes doesn't feel safe. He wishes that JMU told us not only the room number of universal restrooms, but *where they are* in each building. He thinks restrooms should also be clearly labeled with signs posted in each building.

"I TRY TO GO FOR THE UNINHABITED CORNERS OF BUILDINGS,  
OR JUST WAIT UNTIL I GET BACK TO MY DORM."

## Jamie C. (he/him)

Jamie uses exclusively gender-neutral restrooms. He feels unsafe in men's restrooms, but doesn't want to make people in the women's restroom feel uncomfortable. He wishes that JMU gave more concise information about where universal restrooms are, and that they would put up signs in the buildings.

"IF I KNOW THAT A PLACE HAS A GENDER-NEUTRAL RESTROOM,  
I WILL DEFAULT TO GOING THERE AS A PIT STOP."

## Emma M. (she/they)

Emma is feminine presenting, but still feels uncomfortable and like she doesn't belong in gendered public restrooms. She prefers "family" or single occupancy restrooms. She says people don't acknowledge the existence of gender-neutral restrooms a lot. She thinks it would be cool if JMU had a map of universal restrooms instead of just an alphabetical list.

"I TRY NOT TO GO TO THE BATHROOM. I JUST TRY TO GO AT HOME."

## Harper C. (she/her)

Harper says she is new to the transgender community. She would feel most comfortable in the women's restroom, but avoids it out of concern for her own safety around strangers. She says signs for bathrooms around campus always lead to gendered restrooms, and never universal ones. She wishes that JMU made students more aware that this resource is available.

"I'VE BEEN GOING TO CARRIER [LIBRARY] FOR 4 YEARS, AND IT NEVER OCCURRED TO ME THAT THERE'S A GENDER-NEUTRAL BATHROOM IN THERE. I'VE LOOKED!"

## Anonymous 1 (she/her)

Anonymous is in the closet. She says she wishes she could use the women's restroom, but is forced to accept the reality that she can't and uses the men's room instead. She uses gender-neutral restrooms if they happen to be along the way.

"IF POSSIBLE I'LL USE GENDER-NEUTRAL BATHROOMS.  
BUT IT'S JUST NOT ALWAYS POSSIBLE."

## Jacob D. (he/they)

Jacob would prefer to use the men's room, but feels stressed in gendered restrooms. He uses gender-neutral restrooms when possible. He says JMU should have more universal restrooms, and that they should all be ADA compliant. He thinks a visual map with icons would help people find restrooms.

"THERE'S ACTUALLY SO FEW GENDER-NEUTRAL RESTROOMS ON CAMPUS THAT I PRETTY MUCH KNOW WHERE ALL OF THEM ARE. I DON'T EXPECT TO FIND ANY NEW ONES."

## Anonymous 2 (they/them)

Anonymous #2 is in the closet. They says they uses the men's restroom because they can blend in there, but it makes them feel dead inside. They think JMU should color-code universal restrooms signs.

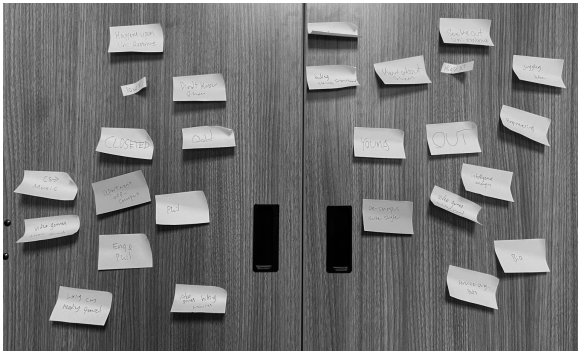
"WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO FOCUS ON SCHOOL, THE LAST THING YOU NEED IS STRESS FROM TRYING TO FIND A BATHROOM TO USE."



# ANALYSIS PROCESS

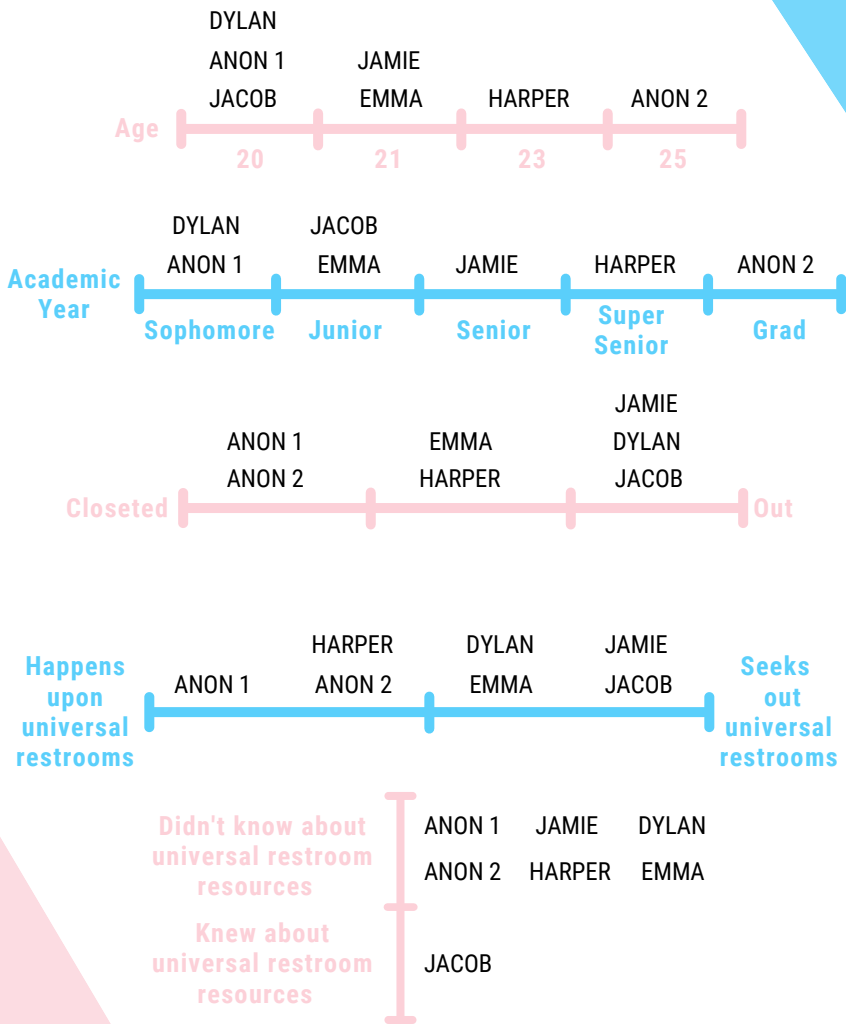
Information gathered from the interviewees was analyzed to create two separate user personas, based on patterns in the data.

Data about each user was written on sticky notes, and analyzed and rearranged until two clear groups emerged.



The first group of users includes Harper, Anon 1, and Anon 2. This group tends to be closeted. They have less experience looking for and using gender-neutral restrooms. The second group of users includes Jamie, Jacob, Dylan, and Emma. This group tends to be out of the closet. They have more experience looking for and using gender-neutral restrooms.

# DATA



The following lists show common responses to questions asked in the interviews. Responses on the left show how interviewees feel about using gendered restrooms. There is a clear tendency towards generally negative emotions. Responses on the right show locations that interviewees visit frequently on and around campus. These are places where they may be looking for restrooms to use.

### How does looking for/using restrooms make you feel?



UNCOMFORTABLE  
UNSAFE  
FRUSTRATED  
PAINED  
UNSETTLED  
UNWELCOME  
DISCOMFORTED  
ON EDGE  
STRESSED  
ANXIOUS  
AWKWARD  
NUMB



### What locations do you visit frequently?



DINING HALLS  
RESTAURANTS  
CARRIER LIBRARY  
ENGEO AND ISAT  
PHYS/CHEM  
MADISON UNION  
STORES  
ARBORETUM

# GENERAL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

## Living Arrangements

SINGLE DORM ROOM (1)  
SUITE-STYLE DORM  
HALL-STYLE DORM  
APARTMENT (3)

## Jobs

STUDENT (4)  
RESIDENT ADVISOR  
FED-EX WAREHOUSE  
FOOD LION PRODUCE

## Hobbies

MARCHING BAND (2)  
VIDEO GAMES (3)  
HIKING (2)  
PETS  
JUGGLING  
SUDOKU  
READING (2)  
NETFLIX (2)  
BAKING  
SKIING  
SNOWBOARDING  
TRAVELING  
MUSIC

## Majors

ENGINEERING  
INTELLIGENCE ANALYSIS  
PSYCHOLOGY  
PRE-MED  
PHILOSOPHY (2)  
MUSIC  
BIOLOGY  
ENGLISH

# COMPOSITE USER PROFILES

Composite user profiles were created based on the two groups the interviewees were sorted into. "Sarah" represents the first group, which tends to be closeted and has less experience seeking out gender-neutral restrooms. "Jared" represents the second group, which tends to be out of the closet and more experienced in seeking out gender-neutral restrooms. Sarah and Jared are both fictional profiles, and their pictures are stock photos.

**SARAH**



PHOTO VIA [UNSPLASH](#)

**JARED**



PHOTO VIA [GC2B](#)

# SARAH

"If there's a gender-neutral restroom I'll use it, but there just aren't that many around Harrisonburg!"



AGE: 22

GRADE: SENIOR

MAJOR: PHILOSOPHY

USERS REPRESENTED: 43%

Sarah lives in an apartment with her partner. She likes hiking, reading, and playing video games in her free time. When off campus, she goes to restaurants downtown, and to stores like Walmart. When on campus, she goes to Carrier Library to study, and the dining halls to eat. She likes to hang out on the Quad and hike in the arboretum.

Sarah is out to a few close friends, but is mostly in the closet. Because of this, she has to present as male in public. She uses a gender-neutral bathroom if she happens across one, but is often forced to use the men's room. This makes her highly uncomfortable, but she doesn't feel like she has much choice at this point in her life.

## FRUSTRATIONS

- Feels forced to use the men's restroom
- Can't find gender-neutral restrooms easily
- Lack of choices
- JMU's available information is confusing

## GOALS

- Feel validated
- Have the option to use gender-neutral restrooms
- Find gender-neutral restrooms easily
- Understand JMU's resources for gender-neutral restrooms

# JARED

"What does it say about society that gender-neutral restrooms are so inaccessible?"

AGE: 20

GRADE: JUNIOR

MAJOR: PHYSICS

USERS REPRESENTED: 57%



Jared lives on campus in a single room, with suite-style restrooms. He's in marching band and an LGBTQ+ student organization, and likes to watch Netflix in his free time. He frequently goes to the dining halls around campus. He also spends a lot of time in the science buildings on East Campus because of his major.

Jared is a prominent member and avid supporter of the transgender community at JMU. He is out to almost all of his friends and classmates. Sometimes, when he feels like he's passing as male, he uses the men's restroom. However, he often feels unsafe doing so and prefers to use a gender-neutral restroom. He knows where all the main ones are on campus, but he has trouble finding the ones that are more out of the way.

## FRUSTRATIONS

- Can't find directions to gender-neutral restrooms
- Lack of resources available about gender-neutral restrooms
- Some gender-neutral restrooms aren't "accessible"

## GOALS

- Locate gender-neutral restrooms quickly
- Worry about using the restroom less
- Increase awareness of gender-neutral restrooms

# USER STORIES

**A user story ties together the needs and goals of the user, describing what they want to accomplish by using a resource.**



1) "As a transgender student at JMU, I want to easily locate gender-neutral restrooms on campus so that I can avoid awkward and uncomfortable interactions."



2) "As a transgender student at JMU, I want to easily be able to find out which buildings on campus have accessible gender-neutral restrooms so that I can plan my bathroom breaks throughout the day."



# NARRATIVE 1

## Sarah's Story

Sarah is studying at Carrier Library when she suddenly realizes she has to go to the bathroom. She follows the signs to the nearest restroom and stops in her tracks. There is only a men's restroom and a women's restroom. Sarah is transgender but in the closet, so she is dressed and presenting as a guy. Using the men's restroom makes her uncomfortable, but using the women's restrooms in her current state seems just as terrifying. She looks around for some type of sign, or anything pointing towards a gender-neutral restroom. Nothing. She has to get back to studying, and doesn't have time to go searching for a safe restroom. She takes a deep breath, and heads into the men's room. Afterwards, she goes on her phone and Googles "JMU gender-neutral bathroom." It says there's a gender-neutral restroom in Carrier Library, but the only directions it offers is a room number.

Later on in the semester, Sarah finds herself in the same situation. She was studying for too long and forgot to go to the restroom. She follows the sign over to the men's and women's restrooms, mentally preparing herself for another uncomfortable experience. To her surprise, she sees a sign outside both the men's and women's room about universal restrooms. It explains what they are and gives directions to the closest one in the building. She's in a hurry, but the directions are clear. She makes it to the gender-neutral restroom in a short amount of time. The sign also mentions JMU's universal restroom resource. Afterwards, Sarah takes out her phone and is astonished. With just one click, she can locate the gender-neutral restroom closest to her current location. When she clicks on the restroom, she can see directions to locate the bathroom in the building. There's even an option to add universal restrooms that she's found around the city to the resource! JMU's resources are discreet, so Sarah won't be outed to anyone by using them.

# NARRATIVE 2

## Jared's Story

Jared has to walk over to Phys/Chem for his classes later. He always plans his bathroom breaks so he doesn't have to use a men's or women's restroom. He would choose the men's restroom over the women's, but he's used to getting funny looks in both, so he just uses gender-neutral restrooms. He knows there's a gender-neutral restroom in E-Hall, but he hasn't been able to find any in the science buildings. It would be a lot easier if he could just stay at Phys/Chem, but he'll have to run over to E-Hall if he wants to use the restroom in between classes. He remembers that there was some type of website about gender-neutral restrooms at JMU, and decides to look it up. It takes a few clicks, but he finds the "universal restrooms" page. The list is confusing, and he doesn't see any of the science buildings listed. He sighs. *"Maybe I just won't drink any water this morning,"* he thinks to himself.

A few weeks later, Jared sees a post on social media about JMU's new universal restroom resource. He decides to check it out, and is pleasantly surprised. There are way more gender-neutral restrooms than he knew about on campus. There's even one in the East Campus science buildings! It's a bit out of the way, but the resource makes it easy to visualize where on campus it is and offers directions on how to find it within the building. The resource also clearly states which restrooms aren't "accessible" and explains what that means. As he goes about his day, he realizes he no longer has to plan out his bathroom breaks in advance. He can just open up the resource, and it shows him the Universal Restroom that's closest to him. He can also record directions to trans-friendly restrooms on campus and around Harrisonburg. He even notices some new signs around the gendered restrooms that explain what universal restrooms are and how to find them. *"This is great for the community!"* he thinks. He makes a mental note to tell his transgender friends about these great resources.

# DESIGN REQUIREMENTS

These are features JMU's online gender-neutral restroom resource must include to meet users' needs and goals.

- The resource should be widely advertised because many students do not know that it exists.
- The resource should make it easy to locate the nearest universal restrooms because students do not have time to go searching for them.
- The resource should provide information about gender-neutral restrooms because many people are not educated about that option.
- The online resource should be paired with in-person signs because students are not used to using their phone to find restrooms.

# VALUE PROPOSITION

What would a gender-neutral restroom resource do for the JMU community?

## ACCESSIBILITY

Updating and reworking JMU's universal restroom resources will be highly beneficial to transgender students at JMU, as well as other members of the community who might use need to use universal restrooms.

## AFFORDABILITY

New universal restroom resources would not be overly expensive or difficult to create.

## ADAPTABILITY

Resources can be created so that they will be easy to update or rework if necessary in the future.

