
The Language of Identity

Using inclusive terminology at Rowan University

If you see anything that needs to be updated or new terms that you would like added to this document, please contact us at dei@rowan.edu.

Why talk about words?

“Because language is evolving, speaking in a respectful way about groups in the United States can be as unnatural as learning to drive a standard shift car with a clutch. At first it feels cumbersome and exhausting in the amount of mental energy it takes to think about each motion needed to prevent the car from jerking and stalling. After years of driving a stick shift, this effort becomes almost invisible. No one was born knowing how to drive and no one was born knowing how to name every group and the process for figuring it out. Therefore, any blame or guilt associated with not knowing needs to be avoided. We learned to speak in the context of a society that has been divided for a very long time. To break divisions and create a more harmonious future, we are being asked to unlearn and relearn all the time. It is work for all of us, but with time, the process will feel as natural as driving a standard shift car: we will feel more at ease trying new terms, asking questions comfortably, and not letting mistakes interfere with our willingness to build relationships across differences.

“Using words that describe groups more accurately is a part of the process of having an understanding of the overall dynamics of a dominator society with a history of racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, adultism, etc. and exploring together what to do about that society.

“All language evolves. Language changes with time to reflect society, and the language of diversity must also evolve. Therefore, the language of diversity is dynamic - it changes as groups who have been excluded learn to reject rejection and act from an empowered place of self-determination.

“One must also be mindful that people of any group do not think or feel the same way about identity words. There is a variety of preferences and opinions about words and the meanings that they hold.

“Only by honest association, sincere inquiry, and a willingness to take risks will we be able to transcend the historical oppression imbedded in our language. It is important in this process to acknowledge that the cumbersome changes are not the fault of the group doing the renaming, but instead the result of centuries of domination with all of its assumptions about the right of some to define others. Recognizing evolution of the language of diversity as natural and the outcome of a divided society leads us to regularly seek new knowledge about members of other groups, be aggressive listeners, act on our good intentions, and be willing to change our language accordingly.”

Castania, Kathy. *Diversity: The Evolving Language of Diversity*. Cornell Cooperative Extension, 2003.

Begin with the basics

Bias – A bias is a preference for or against something or someone whether conscious or unconscious.

Diversity – Variety in group presence and interactions based on a broad spectrum of demographic, cultural, personal experiences and philosophical differences.

Equity – The guarantee of fair treatment, access, opportunity, and advancement for everyone, while identifying and eliminating barriers that prevent full participation of some groups.

First Generation Student – A post-secondary student whose parents never enrolled in or completed college.

Inclusion – The intentional action of including groups in society who may otherwise be vulnerable, excluded or marginalized.

Minoritized/ Marginalized – When underrepresented groups are made to feel “less than.”

Privilege – Refers to certain social advantages, benefits, or degrees of prestige and respect that an individual has by virtue of belonging to certain social identity groups. Within American and other Western societies, these privileged social identities – of people who have historically occupied positions of dominance over others – includes whites, males, heterosexuals, Christians, and the wealthy, among others.

Underrepresented – Refers to groups of people who traditionally and currently are represented in lower proportional numbers than those groups of higher proportional numbers (i.e., the number of women in STEM fields, the number of minorities on campus, etc.).

Ability

Ableism – Discrimination or prejudice, whether intentional or unintentional, against persons with disabilities.

Accommodation – An accommodation is a modification, whether in the classroom or in the workplace, that ensures that a person with a disability can complete required tasks and functions as those without disabilities.

Accessible – Accessible spaces and programs are made to be inclusive, and generally don't require accommodations. Accessibility is not only in response to disability.

Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)– Federal civil rights law designed to ensure that persons with disabilities are fully included in society and protected from discrimination.

Identity first Language (IFL) - *Identity first language*, such as saying “disabled person” emphasizes the disability as an identity. IFL came from a countermovement in response to person first language by some disabled people who recognize their disability as part of who they are, not something to distance themselves from. Some disabled people prefer IFL.

Invisible Disability - Disabilities that are not immediately apparent. They can be physical, mental or neurological conditions that limit a person's daily functions. They are also sometimes referred to as *hidden disabilities*.

Mobility Aid - A device that assists a person to move around. They can include wheelchairs, walkers, crutches, canes, braces, and other similar devices.

Neurodiversity – Neurodiversity acknowledges the full range of naturally occurring variations in cognition, learning, behavior, and socialization that exists within the population. It equally values those with neurological traits which are more common

(neurotypical) alongside those with neurological differences like autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or other diagnoses (neurodivergent).

Person first Language (PFL) – *Person first language*, such as saying “person with a disability,” emphasizes that the person is more important than the disability. PFL was developed as a way of showing respect. Some people with disabilities prefer PFL.

Person on the Autism Spectrum/ Autistic person – Refers to a person who identifies as having a form of autism or Asperger’s. Some persons on the spectrum prefer to say “Autistic Person.”

Person with a Cognitive or Intellectual Disability/ Cognitively or Intellectually Disabled person – Refers to persons with various disabilities affecting the brain. This broad category includes, for example, persons with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and persons with Dyslexia. Many of these disabilities are also referred to as “learning disabilities.”

Person with a Hearing Disability/ Hearing-Impaired or Deaf person – Refers to a person who has a disability affecting hearing. Some persons with hearing disabilities, particularly those who speak sign language, prefer the term “Deaf Person” and view their disability as a cultural identity.

Person with a Physical Disability/ Physically Disabled person – General term which refers to persons with various disabilities affecting functions of the body.

Person with a Psychiatric Disability – Refers to a person with a disability that involves emotional and/or psychological issues. Examples include persons with anxiety disorders and persons with depression.

Person with a Vision Disability/ Vision-Impaired or Blind person – Refers to a person with low vision or a person who is Blind.

Many persons who are Blind see their disability as a cultural identity and thus prefer to call themselves “Blind.”

Universal Design - refers to the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability.

Wheelchair user – Refers to a person who uses a wheelchair for mobility. Use this term rather than saying a person is “wheelchair-bound” or “confined to a wheelchair.”

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act – Federal civil rights law which ensures that persons with disabilities have equal access to education.

Faith and Religion

Affirming Congregation – Congregations which welcome LGBTQIA+ people.

Agnostic – A person who holds the belief that a greater entity, or existence of deities, is unknown or unknowable.

Anti-Semitism – Hatred or fear of Jewish people.

Atheist – A person who believes that there are no deities.

Halal – Refers to food that is compliant with Islamic law.

Hijab – Various types of cloth head coverings sometimes worn by Muslim women in public.

Interfaith – Involving people of different faiths.

Islamophobia – Fear, hatred of, or prejudice against the Islamic religion or Muslims generally.

Kosher – Food made and eaten in compliance with Jewish law.

Gender and Sexuality

Asexual - Someone who experiences little to no sexual attraction.

Bisexual - A person whose emotional, sexual, or romantic attractions are to people of their gender or other gender identities.

Black Feminism - Black feminist consciousness is the recognition that African American women are status deprived because they face discrimination as a result of the intersection of race and gender. Black Feminists advocate for Black women who bear the burden of prejudice that challenge people of color, in addition to the various forms of subjugation that hinder women.

Cisgender – Someone whose sex assigned at birth aligns with their gender identity.

Feminism – Generally seen as the advocacy of the social, political and economic equality of all genders. There are many types of feminism.

Gay – Used to describe people whose enduring attractions are to people of the same gender. Sometimes lesbian is the preferred term for women. The term “homosexual” is outdated, derogatory, and offensive, and should not be used.

Gender Expression – The physical manifestation of gender through clothing, hairstyle, voice, body shape, etc.

Gender Fluid - A person whose identity shifts or fluctuates, including shifting between more than one gender and shifting between having a gender and not having one.

Gender Identity – Gender is the internal sense of being a woman, man, neither, both or another gender. Everyone has a gender identity.

Gender Neutral/Inclusive – Spaces and language that do not describe a specific gender. For example, gender neutral

bathrooms can be used by anyone regardless of gender.

Genderqueer – Someone whose gender identity or expression is neither man nor woman, is between, beyond or some combination of genders.

Heterosexism – A form of bias and discrimination that favors people who are exclusively romantically and/or sexually attracted to people of the opposite sex/gender.

Intersex – General term used for someone who is born with a variation in their anatomy, chromosomes or hormones that doesn't fit the typical definitions of female or male. *Hermaphrodite* is offensive and should not be used as a synonym.

Lesbian - A woman whose emotional, sexual, or romantic attractions are primarily to other women.

LGBTQIA+ Acronym – Stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual +.

Misgendering - Labeling others as a gender that does not correctly reflect the gender with which they identify, including using pronouns that do not align with their gender.

Misogyny & Trans-Misogyny – Misogyny is a general hatred and hostility towards women. Trans-misogyny is the same hatred but targeted at trans-feminine people.

Non-Binary – Identities that are not defined along the male/female binary. Non-binary people may feel that they exist as both, neither or a mix of identities.

Pronouns – Gendered pronouns include she/her and he/him. Gender-neutral pronouns include the singular they/them and ze/hir. Many other pronouns exist as well. If unsure of someone's pronouns, simply ask, “What are your pronouns?” One can create a more inclusive space within a group by introducing

themselves with their own pronouns. Avoid using the term “preferred pronouns,” as a person’s pronouns are not optional.

Queer – Reclaimed term used to self-identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community. Not everyone uses this term as it can be used as a slur. Consider context before using this term. Queer may also be a distinct identity for someone whose sexual orientation or gender identity is not adequately represented by other terms.

Romantic Attraction – Emotional connection to another individual that often involves desire to be in a romantic relationship. Sexual attraction is not a requirement.

Sex Assigned at Birth - A classification of female, male, or intersex based off of anatomy, chromosomes and hormones. Sex does not define gender. Only a few countries offer a birth certificate sex marker other than male/female. In the U.S., Colorado is the only state to do so.

Sexism - A system of beliefs or attitudes which relegates women to limited roles and/or options because of their sex. It centers on the idea that women are inferior to men.

Sexuality – Previously called “sexual orientation,” sexuality is the direction of one’s erotic attraction. It is also inappropriate to use the term “sexual preference.”

Title IX – Protects people from sex-based discrimination in educational programs or activities which received federal financial assistance. <https://www.justice.gov/crt/title-ix>

Transgender – Someone who does not identify as the gender that aligns with the sex they were assigned at birth. *Transvestite*, *transsexual*, and *transgendered* are offensive and should not be used as synonyms.

Two Spirit – A unique Native American identity embodying traits of both masculinity and

femininity or of another gender than what they were assigned.

Race, Ethnicity and National Origin

Anti-blackness - Racism specifically against Black people and is rooted in U.S. settler colonialism and themes of labor, ownership, and the institutionalization of Black suffering. Anti-blackness can be displayed by people who are white as well as by people from other underrepresented backgrounds.

Asian – Culture, people and customs related to the continent of Asia. Be aware of the differences in areas, such as South Asia (India, Pakistan, etc.) and East Asia (China, Japan, etc.). *Oriental* is offensive and should not be used as a synonym.

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and people of color. This term acknowledges how violence against Black and Indigenous people is foundational to the U.S., as the founding and expansion of this country relied on slavery and genocide. This term also blurs the differences between the two groups it is meant to center, as belonging as a “member” of each group is and historically has been different – with the one-drop rule of antebellum and Jim Crow South assigning anyone with as much as “one drop” of Black heritage to automatically be considered Black, but requiring those of Indigenous heritage to prove they have “enough” Indigenous heritage to belong to the group.

Black & African-American – *Black* refers to people of the African diaspora, which includes those in the Americas, the Caribbean and Europe. *African-American* refers to Americans of African descent. Some prefer one term over the other.

Chicano - A chosen identity of some Mexican Americans in the United States. Variations of the term include Chicax, Xicana/o and Xicanx, which replace the “ch” with the letter “x” as a

way of symbolically emphasizing Indigenous ancestry while rejecting Western colonization. *Chicano* or *Xicano* are sometimes used interchangeably with *Mexican-American* and both names exist as chosen identities within the Mexican-American community in the United States.

Citizen - A legally recognized subject or national of a state, commonwealth, or other polity, either native or naturalized, having certain rights, privileges, or duties.

Colorblind – This term originated from civil rights legislation, but is currently used by those who oppose race-conscious policies, like affirmative action, to argue that race does not/should not matter in decision making. It is also used to mean that one does not “see” race, but is disempowering for people whose racial identity is an important part of who they are. This term is inappropriate to use.

Cultural Appropriation – Taking and benefiting from the expression, ideas, artifacts, etc. of another culture without permission, often done by the dominant culture. This is not *cultural exchange*, which requires mutual consent and respect.

Desi - An evolving term used to describe the people, cultures, and products of the Indian subcontinent and their diaspora to describe their unique experiences and to address colorism within the Asian community.

Hispanic - A person who lives in or comes from a Spanish speaking country or whose ancestors came from a Spanish speaking country.

Immigrant – Person who moves to another country, usually for permanent residence. They may or may not be citizens. *Alien* and *foreigner* are offensive and should not be used as synonyms.

Institutional Racism - the ways in which the structures, systems, policies, and procedures

of institutions are founded upon and then promote, reproduce, and perpetuate advantages for the dominant group and the oppression of disadvantaged and underrepresented groups.

International – The appropriate term to use for students who obtain a non-immigrant visa such as a student visa or an exchange visitor visa.

Latino/a/x – A person of Latin American descent. *Latino (males)*, *Latina (females)*, and *Latinx (gender neutral)* are recommended, but individuals may have a preference.

Multiracial – Representing various races or a person whose parents are of different races or ethnicities.

Native American – A member of any of the first groups of people living in the Americas. When in doubt, ask what identity label someone prefers (Native American, American Indian, First Nation, Indigenous person, or a specific tribal affiliation). *Indian* is offensive and should not be used as a synonym unless someone has told you that is how they identify.

People or Person of Color – Umbrella term for anyone who is non-White. *Colored* is offensive and should not be used as a synonym. *Ethnic* and *urban* also have negative undertones and are not synonymous.

Racism – Prejudice, discrimination or antagonism directed toward someone of a different race based on the belief that one’s own race is superior. Racism involves one group having the power to carry out systematic discrimination through the institutional policies and practices of society and by shaping the cultural beliefs and values that support those racist policies and practices.

Refugee - A person forced to flee their country because of violence or persecution. *Alien* and *foreigner* are offensive and should not be used as synonyms.

Reverse Racism – Reverse racism does not exist. It is a myth that tries to ignore the power and privilege between the groups involved. Racism is based on the ability for one group to have the power to dehumanize, limit, and harm people from a different group. It is also based on the ability to stay safe from harm due to racial privilege. The group that holds that power and privilege cannot experience racism.

Title VI - Prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, or national origin in any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance.

<https://www.justice.gov/crt/fcs/TitleVI>

Xenophobia – Fear or hatred of strangers or foreigners.

Socio-economic Status

Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) – Form used by millions of students for financial assistance.

Minimum Wage – The least amount of money per hour that workers can be paid by law.

Socio-Economic Status (SES) – A place within the social hierarchy based on factors, like education, income and occupations.

Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program – Commonly known as food stamps, SNAP is a federal program that assists low-income people in buying food. *WIC* refers to the special supplemental program for Women, Infants and Children and is also part of the USDA Food and Nutrition Service.

Safety Issues

Clery Act – The federal law that requires colleges and universities to disclose information about crime on and around campus.

Consent – A mutual and enthusiastic agreement between sexual partners. Partners

can revoke consent at any time. Consent cannot be legally given while intoxicated.

Crisis Hotline – A number to call when in crisis run by trained volunteers. Some lines serve specific groups, like transgender people, rape survivors, veterans, etc.

Green Dot – Any behavior, choice, word, or attitude that promotes safety and communicates intolerance for rape, sexual assault, relationship violence, child abuse and stalking. Learn more at <https://sites.rowan.edu/sexualviolenceresponse/green-dot.html>

Rape – According to the U.S. Department of Justice, “penetration, no matter how slight, of the vagina or anus with any body part or object, or oral penetration by a sex organ of another person, without the consent of the victim.”

Rape Culture – A culture in which sexual assault is common and maintained by attitudes about sexuality and violence.

Sexual Assault – Unwanted sexual contact or threat.

Survivor vs. Victim – Debated terms focused on how to identify those who experience crime, usually sexual assault. Some use survivor as a way to empower those who have lived through an experience, while others believe it should be a chosen title.

Victim Blaming – When a victim is held responsible, even partially, for a crime. Make sure to affirm survivors and avoid blaming statements, like “why didn’t you fight back?”

Other Related Terms

Affirmative Action – An action or policy that considers attributes of historically marginalized individuals such as race, color, religion, sexual orientation, or national origin, especially in relation to employment and education (generally used in context with race).

Ageism and Adulthood – Ageism is discrimination and prejudice, particularly experienced by elders, that includes being treated with disrespect and being made to feel unemployable and useless. Adulthood is prejudice and accompanying discrimination over young people.

Ally – Someone from one identity group that actively supports members of another group.

Brave Space – A space where those who enter have the courage to face danger or threats to their perceptions. This environment aims to challenge implicit and explicit ways that privilege and marginalization play out for different identities. In this space, individuals are willing to take risks and be vulnerable by engaging in painful or difficult experiences, including changing how they understand and engage with the world, and redefining their preconceptions of “expertise” and negotiating power. These spaces provide support for the destabilization that occurs during these experiences.

Gaslighting - Tactics used to cause the targeted individual or group to question their own feelings, instincts, memory, and/or reality, which gives the speaker power over the targeted individual or group.

Identity - Qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person who they are.

Heterogeneity - Difference or diversity in kind from other things.

Intersectionality – A concept describing the interconnection of oppressive institutions and identities.

Macroaggression - Large-scale or overt aggression toward those of a certain race, culture, gender, etc.

Microaggression – Brief and commonplace verbal, nonverbal and environmental insults

against someone based on their identity. They do not have to be intentional.

Non-traditional Student – Someone who is not a full-time, straight out of high school, college student. They may be part-time, returning, commuting and/or online students. They may also be veterans, have dependents, working full-time, or do not have a high school diploma.

Oppression – Use of power to privilege one group over another.

Prejudice vs. Discrimination – An unfair feeling or dislike for another group is prejudice. Prejudice leads to discrimination, the unfair treatment of someone.

Safe Space – Area or forum where underrepresented groups can feel comfortable and supported and does not tolerate harassment or hate speech. Safe spaces are culturally responsive, relevant and sustaining.

Social Justice – Promoting a just society by valuing diversity and equal access for all social groups.

Stereotypes – A generalized idea applied to all people in a group, regardless of individual differences. Some may seem positive (i.e. Asian people are good at math), but still have a negative impact on the individual.

Tokenism – Making symbolic and minimal gestures in offering opportunities to underrepresented groups.

Trigger Warning/ Content Warning - A statement providing notice that the content following the warning contains writing, video, audio, etc. that could potentially be distressing for some people who previously experienced related trauma. These warnings give each person the chance to avoid content that could negatively affect their health.

Campus Resources

ASCEND – Camden

<https://sites.rowan.edu/ascend/about/camden-eof.html>

ASCEND – Glassboro

<https://sites.rowan.edu/ascend/index.html>

Counseling & Psychological Services

<https://sites.rowan.edu/wellness/counseling/index.html>

Disability Resources

<https://sites.rowan.edu/disabilityresources/index.html>

Division of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

[rowan.edu/dei](https://sites.rowan.edu/dei)

Faculty Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

<https://sites.rowan.edu/academic-affairs/facultycenter/index.html>

Office of Student Equity and Compliance

<https://sites.rowan.edu/diversity-equity-inclusion/departments/osec/index.html>

The SHOP Food Pantry and Resource Center

<https://sites.rowan.edu/theshop/index.html>

Social Justice, Inclusion, and Conflict Resolution (SJICR)

<https://sites.rowan.edu/sjicr/index.html>