



MEMORANDUM

TO: Deanna Caveny, Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs

FROM: Brian McGee, Provost *BM*

DATE: May 21, 2018

SUBJECT: Gender Binaries in the *Faculty/Administration Manual*

As you know, on March 13, 2018, the Faculty Senate endorsed a motion calling for the replacement of “binary-gendered pronouns with gender-neutral substitutes throughout the FAM.” The rationale for this debate, and the discussion surrounding it, are contained in the minutes of that Faculty Senate meeting.

As background, and as I noted during the Senate’s March meeting, a major revision of the *Faculty/Administration Manual* (hereafter, “FAM”) during 2005-2006 included the attempt to eliminate the generic “he” and “him” in favor of “she or he,” “her or his,” or other variants. Other stylistic decisions made at that time included the adoption of Associated Press style as the default source of guidance for the FAM on stylistic concerns, the elimination in the FAM of the Oxford comma, and the consistent capitalization of academic and administrative titles (e.g., “Associate Professor”).

At the heart of the Senate’s March 2018 motion is the desire for the eventual elimination of “he or she” and other variants of the gender binary and their replacement with the generic “they,” “their,” and “them,” even when *they*, for example, is used with a singular antecedent. The Senate’s motion is expressly intended to overrule the convention in English that a pronoun should agree in person and number with the word to which it refers, as the Senate appears to have agreed that this convention is “profoundly sexist.” According to the Senate, the use of singular pronouns should be replaced by a new convention in which the singular *they/them/their* is used throughout the FAM.

I believe the Senate’s request in this case for adjustments in the FAM is reasonable and appropriate. First, the use of “they” as a singular pronoun is common in everyday speech and is found in English as early as the sixteenth century CE. The argument that the singular *they* should be accepted dates to at least 1794. Arguments emphasizing the grammatical irregularity of the singular *they* are generally overblown, given this history and our actual practice as a discursive

community.¹ Second, AP style has allowed limited use of the singular *they* since March 2017.² The *Chicago Manual of Style* also permits its use, while cautioning that many readers do not know that the singular *they* is increasingly accepted.³ Third, this adjustment to what seems an inevitable change in our conventions for language use is consistent with our institutional values and our commitment to full inclusion for all members of the College community.

I now take notice of the March 2018 motion approved by the Faculty Senate. In light of that motion, I wish to provide guidance for the preparation of future versions of the FAM. In particular, and as we begin work on the 2018-2019 edition of the FAM, I offer the following observations and directives:

- The Office of the Provost will work on revisions to the *Faculty/Administration Manual* for 2018-2019 during the summer months, consistent with our normal FAM revision calendar. We anticipate the publication of the new FAM in August 2018.
- Any comprehensive revision of the administratively controlled portions of the FAM to eliminate the variants of he and she would take at least three academic years to complete. The FAM is a lengthy and complex document, and each alteration of a FAM sentence requires an assessment of how best to alter that sentence in a way that avoids an unanticipated change in meaning. For example, there are 57 uses of the “him/her” construction in the 2017-2018 version of the FAM, each of which must be separately reviewed and an optimal plan devised for its elimination.
- The incorporation of the singular *they* in the By-Laws of the Faculty will require either a lengthy series of individual amendments to the By-Laws, each of which must be approved by the Senate and the Faculty, or a universal strike-and-replace motion, which would have to give the Committee on the By-Laws and the *Faculty/Administration Manual* and the Office of the Provost some latitude in determining how best to make the necessary adjustments. The decision about when, if, and how to amend the By-Laws will be made by the Faculty Senate, subject to the review and determination of the President of the College.
- In updating and revising future editions of the FAM, the Office of the Provost will make reasonable efforts to eliminate language reinforcing the gender binary in the administrative portion of the FAM. *They/them/their* singular usage will be used when necessary.
- When appropriate, the use of the singular *they/them/their* might be avoided by revising sentences in the FAM (a) to make such sentences plural; (b) to replace the singular pronoun with an article such as *a*, *an*, or *the*; and (c) to eliminate in some other way the need for a pronoun.
- Sections of the FAM that include language reinforcing the gender binary and that are derived, or are believed to be derived, from legal or regulatory language promulgated by the State of South Carolina will be altered only after a legal review of that FAM section is conducted. At present, the South Carolina Code of Laws uses variants on “he or she” in

¹ <http://www.english.illinois.edu/-people/faculty/debaron/essays/epicene.pdf>

² Since its creation several years ago, the College of Charleston *Brand Manual* has made reference to AP style and has exhorted College of Charleston employees to use gender-neutral language. See http://marcomm.cofc.edu/brandmanual/bychapter/styleguide/sg_grammar.php

³ https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/stylebooks-single-they-ap-chicago-gender-neutral.php

its newer sections and the generic *he* in its older sections. While accepting the request of the Faculty Senate to end use of binary-gendered pronouns in the FAM, the Office of the Provost should avoid any alteration of the FAM that would bring it out of alignment with current state law or regulation.⁴

- No funds will be expended in support of this additional work of FAM revision, beyond the normal funding already allocated to support the relevant administrative and staff salaries in the Academic Affairs Division.

The Faculty Senate's motion did not address the replacement of binary-gendered pronouns in other statements of institutional policy and procedure, separate from the FAM. For our purposes in the Office of the Provost, we will begin to write and revise divisional policies in accordance with the principles described in this memorandum for the revision of the FAM. However, as a matter of administrative efficiency, divisional policies usually will not be revised solely to eliminate the use of binary-gendered pronouns. While the Office of the Provost will take notice of the advantages of the singular *they* in the development and revision of College policies, many of those policies are developed outside the Academic Affairs Division. Any changes in the College's approach to writing institutional policies will require the support of the President and other members of the Executive Team.

For the Academic Affairs Division, I encourage, but do not require, that Deans and other academic administrators avoid binary-gendered pronouns in their future development and publication of school-, program-, and office-specific policies and procedures.

Please let me know if you have questions or concerns about this memorandum. I anticipate that we will distribute this memorandum to members of the Faculty Senate prior to the Senate's meeting during September 2018. The current memorandum will also be posted at the Office of the Provost website.

cc: Glenn McConnell, President
Steve Osborne, Office of the President
Debra Hammond, Senior Executive Administrator to the President
Academic Council
Liz Jurisich, Speaker of the Faculty
Richard Nunan, Chair, Committee on the By-Laws and the FAM
Mark Berry, Executive Director, Division of Marketing and Communications

⁴ Other nation-states (e.g., Canada) have some experience with the complexities of using the singular *they* in statute construction. See, e.g., Paul Salembier's 2015 article in the *Statute Law Review* at <https://academic.oup.com/slr/article/36/2/175/1641649>, in which Salembier maintains that use of the singular *they* should be avoided in favor of other approaches to employing gender-neutral statutory language.