

MAGNA CHARTA OBSERVATORY

2024 Student's Essay Competition

"What would you change about your higher education experience or environment to make it more inclusive for all who have the ability to benefit from it?"

Ignacy Maliszewski
Uniwersytet SWPS Warszawa
Poland

Is "better" enough?

Tears of joy, embraces, and heartfelt congratulations from family and friends – these are just snippets of the moment future students open their college acceptance letters. However, for some of us, these positive emotions are swiftly overshadowed by the reality of the academic world. Despite significant strides towards creating an open, diverse, and safe environment for students, there is still a long way to go to achieve true inclusivity.

Adam, an ambitious young man and my dearest friend, excelled in his high school exams, gaining admission to his dream major program. Nevertheless, his ambitions were crushed by one sentence from a school administrator. *"We've never had a student like you before"*. — This wasn't praise for his achievements. — *"If you want to be called a male name, then change it legally"*.

In Poland, transgender individuals face a bureaucratic nightmare to change their names, requiring them to sue their parents for "incorrectly assigning their gender at birth". This emotionally draining and costly process often takes years, involving potential objections from prosecutors and numerous medical evaluations. Adam's deadname remained on the public student list and his university email address, forcing him into repeated, humiliating disclosures of his identity. Some professors refused to use his chosen name, and soon, transphobic threats from fellow students followed. Feeling unsafe, Adam didn't take his first finals and eventually dropped out.

For Adam and Iwo

A year later, I found myself in Adam's position. Despite assurances of the university's supportive environment, I encountered similar resistance — *"We've never had a student like you before"*. Numb, I clutched a letter from my psychologist, stressing that not using my

preferred name could severely impact my mental health and ability to study. I didn't give up. Persistent advocacy and the intervention of a sympathetic official led to the inclusion of my chosen name in the university's system. Now, partially thanks to these efforts, future transgender students at my university have their preferred names recognized automatically.

Reflecting on this journey, I can't help but wonder — *what if someone else were in my place?* I managed to push through, but what if another student had quit like Adam? Or worse? 40% of transgender individuals attempt suicide due to discrimination and lack of support. Over the years, I've encountered many brilliant transgender students whose contributions to academia are invaluable. Their silenced voices would have impoverished the scientific community.

Universities must implement policies for seamless name changes in records and mandatory training for faculty and staff on transgender issues and safety. By valuing and affirming every student's identity, we not only create a safer, more inclusive educational environment but also ensure that the vital contributions of all students are not lost. True inclusivity extends beyond policy. It requires making every student feel seen, respected, and safe to pursue their dreams.

On November 7, 2022, my world was shaken by a message — *"Iwo is gone"*. An outstanding student and admired colleague, Iwo had been awarded the highest honors at our university. His decision to end his life was a tragic wake-up call. The university had neglected student mental health, and no one noticed his struggles or knew where to seek help for him. His death deprived us of an irreplaceable voice in academia, erasing his unique perspective and potential contributions. Luckily, we still have some of his works preserved in our prosocial projects and psychoeducational campaigns. In response, the university introduced free psychological counseling, support groups and a program for reporting concerning mental health signs among peers. Had these measures existed earlier, perhaps Iwo would still be with us.

To cultivate a genuinely inclusive environment, institutions must prioritize mental health, making support systems both visible and accessible to all students. Expanding the availability of psychological counselors and therapists who provide reliable support is essential. Equally important are workshops on mental health that educate the academic community about recognizing symptoms and adopting effective coping strategies and interventions. Additionally, mentoring programs where senior students or staff members guide newcomers through academic and personal challenges can profoundly impact students' well-being.

Introducing flexible deadlines for assignments and exams, particularly for students struggling with health issues, is another important step. Professors must show understanding and compassion towards students who fall behind due to mental health challenges. Being fair sometimes means treating each student individually, considering their current capabilities and life circumstances. This is not a "one size fits all" solution — every situation requires a



personalized approach.

Recollecting these difficult events, I do not intend to defame or blame any university institution. I am immensely grateful to my university for the efforts it puts into the well-being of its students and its remarkable quality of education. I am pleased that every situation has been met with an appropriate response and positive change. The memory of these events should remind us why changes are essential and why we strive to improve diversity and inclusion.

The solutions and scenarios I presented are but a mere drop in the vast ocean of student needs. We must also address socioeconomic, racial and ethnic inequalities, and the needs of disabled and neurodiverse students. Regrettably, these topics exceed the imposed word limit. The experiences I shared are those that have most profoundly marked my personal academic journey. Our current situation is significantly better than what students faced a decade ago. However, "better" does not equate to "perfect". We should always strive to be and do better for our peers and ourselves. Systemic change could save lives and foster an environment where every student can thrive.