

UWSA Inclusive Gym Initiative Frequently Asked Questions

This FAQ sheet was developed by the UWSA Inclusive Gym Initiative in February 2017. We hope this document will help answer common questions students may have about the initiative. The Inclusive Gym Initiative is part of a broad, ongoing conversation about inclusivity and accessibility on campus. The UWSA continues to welcome feedback on the initiative or other ways to ensure students benefit from UW and UWSA services and facilities.

How did the initiative start?

Directors on the board of the University of Winnipeg's Student Association (UWSA) started the Inclusive Gym Initiative in May 2016. The meetings were open to all UW students and advertised publicly through the UWSA's website and social media. Numerous UW students from a diverse number of university departments and personal backgrounds have worked on the gym initiative regularly since their first meeting last spring.

Who collaborated on the initiative?

UW students, community members, UW Recreation Services and UW admin. The initiative has also worked closely with Recreation Services staff at the university for many months, presenting our recommendations and collaborating on ideas to ensure as many students as possible can benefit from the university's fitness services.

How was feedback collected from UW students and community members who use the gym?

The initiative created a survey asking students and community members about their use of UW Recreation Services and whether women or non-binary people would benefit from reserved gym hours in the Bill Wedlake Fitness Centre. The survey was live between August 22 and October 21, 2016, and publicized through online and news media, the UWSA website, hallway tabling, and classroom visits throughout the entirety of its duration. A total of 756 respondents participated in the survey.

How were the initiative's recommendations developed?

The initiative's recommendations were based on the survey's data. You can read the six recommendations and survey results here (<http://theuwsa.ca/inclusive-gym-initiative/>)

Who were the recommendations presented to and how did they react?

We presented the recommendations to UW Recreation Services in Oct. 2016 and they agreed to implement five out of the six recommendations. In January 2017, the university announced they will implement the final recommendation, a pilot project launching for September 2017 offering specific gym time to women and non-binary students. As of February 2017, the UWSA continues to meet with Recreation Services staff with the common goal of improving the fitness centre's accessibility for all students.

Isn't separate gym hours for women and non-binary people a form of segregation?

Segregation is a racially charged term—we often use it to refer to the forced exclusion of Black people from spaces seen as belonging to white people under the previous Jim Crow laws in the South. While segregation may also be used to refer to the separation of people based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, racialization, or other inherent characteristics, it is critical to recognize the difference between segregation and the principle of safer spaces. While segregation is applied forcefully by a dominant group in order to further oppress a marginalized group, safer spaces are created and asked for by marginalized groups themselves.

Though no space can be guaranteed 100% safe for everybody, safer spaces are intended to operate as respectful, supportive environments for groups which typically face discrimination, harassment, and/or violence within the broader institution or society at large. We might think of safer spaces as similar to bike lanes; bike lanes were implemented with the recognition that cyclists typically feel less safe amidst drivers on busy streets, and so drivers give up some road space in the form of bike lanes for the sake of cyclists' safety.

Every UW student must pay for a gym membership as part of their tuition, yet according to our survey 52% of women respondents and 59% of non-binary respondents felt something was preventing them from feeling more safe and comfortable using the Bill Wedlake Fitness Centre. The Inclusive Gym Initiative aims to ensure equitable participation in these spaces so that all UW students feel safe and comfortable accessing our fitness facilities.

What is the Inclusive Gym Initiative doing to address men's discomforts in the gym? Why isn't the initiative advocating for men's only gym time?

The Inclusive Gym Initiative presented six central recommendations to gym management in fall 2017. The recommendations can be found in full on the UWSA's Inclusive Gym Initiative website (<http://theuwsa.ca/inclusive-gym-initiative>). One recommendation advocates for women and non-binary people's only gym times based on our survey of 756 respondents, of which 67% of all women and 64% of non-binary respondents indicated interest in reserved gym times. A common pattern which came up in women's and non-binary people's responses was that harassment and men's domination of the space made them feel uncomfortable or unsafe. Men were half as likely as

women to feel uncomfortable or unsafe using gym facilities—and less than half as likely compared to non-binary people—we are not advocating for men’s only gym time.

That said, we recognize that many men also face barriers and discomfort in the UW’s fitness facilities, related to racialization, disability, sizeism, trans identity, or a variety of other factors. For these reasons, we have included a number of recommendations which will benefit all UW students. For instance, we recommend that the gym ensure future photographs used for promotion of UW fitness facilities represent a wide range of bodies, genders, (dis)ability, and racialized backgrounds. We also suggest that the gym implement and publicize a regular, free orientation session for any students wanting to learn how to properly use equipment in the Bill Wedlake Fitness Centre, rather than teaching equipment use on an individual, ad-hoc basis.

Furthermore, we recommend that Recreation Services staff design and distribute a pamphlet highlighting the gym’s available services, including reserved gym time, the code of conduct, the location of the non-binary washroom in the RecPlex, the gym’s accessibility, etc. We would like this pamphlet to be included in first-year student orientation packages so that all students feel comfortable and knowledgeable accessing the UW’s recreation services.

Are trans women included in the recommendation for reserved gym hours for women and non-binary people?

We are advocating for reserved gym times for people who identify as cis or trans women or as non-binary. We are also recommending that Recreation Services staff implement a Code of Conduct (including an intolerance of transphobia) specifically tailored to the use of UW Recreation Services. Additionally, the initiative recommends that staff are given specific training regarding issues women, trans people, non-binary people, and people with disabilities may face when accessing the UW fitness facilities.

How would Recreation Services staff determine whether people identify as women or non-binary when using women and non-binary people’s only hours?

The Inclusive Gym Initiative does not tolerate gender policing. Numerous Canadian campuses have implemented women’s only gym hours and we have not heard of an issue of students lying about how they identify in order to access reserved gym times. We would like to see ample warning, signage, and publicizing of reserved gym hours so gym users know in advance when certain spaces may not be accessible to them. We also hope that all gym users respect the space and comfort of other gym users, even if this means a very slight reduction in available gym time or space so that all students can benefit equitably.

Why not target root issues of harassment and handle individual cases, rather than excluding men from certain spaces during certain times as a band-aid solution?

It is important to note that band-aid solutions do not necessarily prohibit long-term systemic change. Food banks are a good example of this—they operate as a short-term solution to ensure people’s basic needs are met, while many food banks simultaneously advocate for systemic, governmental changes that will eliminate the need for food banks in the future.

Our initiative’s goal acknowledges that tackling the issue of harassment on a case-by-case basis would be ideal. Unfortunately, harassment (such as inappropriate staring, for example) can often be difficult to “prove” and focusing on specific cases of harassment dismisses the issue surrounding male domination of fitness spaces. Our vision for this initiative is to ensure a safer space for women and non-binary people is accessible, while simultaneously providing opportunities for men to learn and demonstrate how they can contribute to making the gym a safer space for women, non-binary folks and each other, and potentially eliminating the need for separate gym hours altogether in the future. This initiative does not aim to “punish” men but to ensure we all feel safe and comfortable accessing the services we pay for and can benefit from.

Will the windows be covered during reserved gym times for women and non-binary people?

We believe it is critical that window coverings (such as blinds or frosted glass) are in place for these reserved hours. In addition to ensuring women and non-binary people do not feel even more on display, blinds or frosted glass provide more opportunity for people who wear religious head coverings to work out without their head coverings if they would like.

What is the initiative doing to address the gym’s change room barriers for non-binary and trans people who do not feel comfortable using “male” or “female” change rooms?

We recommend that there be increased signage publicizing the all-gender washroom on the second floor of the Axworthy Health & RecPlex. We also recommend adding signage for non-binary identified people on both the men’s and women’s change room doors in the Bill Wedlake Fitness Centre.

Is the Inclusive Gym Initiative doing anything about the gym’s small amount of space?

The gym’s lack of space and crowding was a recurring concern according to our survey. The university announced in a news release that in response to these concerns, “they are examining space allocation within all recreation facilities on campus to determine if crowding during peak hours within Bill Wedlake can be reduced.”

Because the U of W has a relatively small gym compared to many other university campuses with women’s only gym times, we are recommending using only one floor of the gym for these reserved hours and alternating the floor.

When do you envision women and non-binary people's only gym hours taking place?

The specifics of the pilot project for reserved gym hours are still being decided, including the times they will be offered. The most popular amount of time for reserved hours according to the survey is 3–4 times per week, at 2–3 hours at a time. The goal of a pilot project is to see what actually benefits students most and what adjustments need to be made if at all.

How will the gym be more accessible for disabled people/people with disabilities?

One of our recommendations is that a pamphlet be made available at the gym which outlines available services and includes clear information regarding various aspects of the fitness centre's current accessibility for people with disabilities, such as washrooms, fitness equipment, and elevators. Our intention is that an expansion of gym space and re-configuring machine placement would also create more room for mobility devices. We continue to consider and discuss tangible ways in which Recreation Services can remove barriers preventing disabled people from benefitting from these spaces and services. The UWSA Accessibility Director was also involved in the Inclusive Gym Initiative, in addition to several other UWSA directors, executives, and students.

I have another question! Who do I contact for more information about the Inclusive Gym Initiative?

We welcome more feedback on this initiative! You can get in touch with a UWSA representative or address your question here: <http://theuwsa.ca/ask-us/>