

University Asks Students About Race, Gender—and Sexual Orientation?

The University of Iowa has become the first public U.S. university to ask incoming students about their sexual orientation and **gender identity** so they can be connected to relevant services once enrolled, the school said on Wednesday.

University officials said in a statement that their admissions office began asking those optional questions this fall in applications for entry.

The university's decision places it in the middle of a debate in higher education over whether to put such questions to students in a bid to become more inclusive, or to avoid doing so because it could be too intrusive.

Elmhurst College in Illinois, a private liberal arts institution, last year became the first U.S. college to ask incoming students their **sexual orientation**. The much larger University of Iowa is the first public university to take that step.

"From a political and social perspective, this has been a long time coming," Georgina Dodge, University of Iowa's chief diversity officer and associate vice president, said in a statement.

The questionnaires will give the university, which enrolls more than 30,000 students, the knowledge it needs to better offer on-campus resources to gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students, Dodge said.

It will also help the university track retention rates, offer support services and gauge interest in campus programs, the

school said.

University officials said that if students do not want to out themselves on application questionnaires, they do not need to answer those optional questions.

Campus Pride, a gay and lesbian advocacy organization that has sought to persuade more colleges and universities to include sexual orientation questions on applications, confirmed that Iowa was now the second institution of higher education to take that step after Elmhurst.

Shane Windmeyer, executive director of North Carolina-based Campus Pride, said in a statement that the University of Iowa's move represents "a growing paradigm shift in higher education" to actively involve gay and lesbian students.

Gay and lesbian issues have played a large role in Iowa politics in recent years. In 2009, the state Supreme Court ruled unanimously that Iowa's marriage laws prohibiting same-sex marriage violated the state's constitution, in a ruling that cleared the way for gays and lesbians to wed in the state.

Voters responded in the 2010 elections by tossing off the bench three justices who decided the **same-sex marriage** case.

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