Shifting social views on gender identity are leading UW System campuses to create alternatives to facilities that traditionally were segregated by sex.

UW-Eau Claire and UW-Stout both have ongoing efforts to incorporate gender-neutral restrooms in buildings as they undergo renovations.

“The goal is to get something in every building,” said Teresa O’Halloran, UW-Eau Claire’s affirmative action officer.

The push for gender-neutral restrooms in UW-Eau Claire campus buildings can be traced back to a 2007 Student Senate resolution.

At the time, Phillips Science Hall had the only gender-neutral restrooms on campus, and the Student Senate supported incorporating them in other buildings, where possible, according to the resolution.

Nearly two-thirds of campus buildings where students attend classes or activities now have those restrooms, O’Halloran said. Both the new W.R. Davies Student Center and Centennial Hall academic building, which opened in 2012 and 2014, respectively, were planned with gender-neutral restrooms.

A couple of the exceptions that remain are Haas Fine Arts Center and McPhee Physical Education Center, which have not had a recent renovation and do not have smaller restrooms that easily could be converted to gender-neutral.

“We’re missing a few buildings, but we’re doing pretty well,” O’Halloran said.
UW-Stout

UW-Stout has been working toward similar efforts for a decade at its Menomonie campus.

“We’ve been doing gender-neutral restrooms since 2005 on campus when we do a major renovation,” said Shirley Klebesadel, UW-Stout’s physical plant director.

Several campus buildings where students congregate, sleep and learn have undergone work in that time.

Gender-neutral restrooms are available in 64 percent of university centers, such as the student center and cafeteria buildings, and 25 percent of academic buildings, Klebesadel noted.

And 28 percent of the university’s residence halls have gender-neutral restrooms, she said.

In addition to serving transgender individuals and others who may not feel comfortable using a traditional men’s or women’s restroom, Klebesadel and O’Halloran said, the gender-neutral concept fits other situations in which people would need more privacy.

“Trans people are not the only people that benefit from a gender-neutral bathroom,” O’Halloran said.

The restrooms also work well to accommodate parents accompanying their young children — namely situations in which a father escorts his daughter or a mother leads her son — which is uncomfortable when only single-gender facilities are available.

The restrooms also are often equipped for people with disabilities and have enough room to accommodate people who need a caregiver’s assistance to use the facilities.

Pilot project

While the UW-Eau Claire and UW-Stout gender-neutral restrooms are intended for single-person use, another UW System campus is experimenting with removing gender labels from a few of its larger restrooms.
UW-Stevens Point is trying a pilot project this year in three of its traditional dormitories that house underclassmen.

One restroom in each of those residence halls has been labeled as an all-gender room, meaning anyone can use it, according to a June article in the Stevens Point Journal. Aside from a new nameplate, not much changed in the restrooms from when they were formerly for just men or women, except shower stalls now have locking doors instead of plastic curtains.