

2018 Womyn's Centre Name Change Report

Table of Contents

Table of Contents	1
Notes from the Coordinators	2
Our New Name	4
Alternative Suggestions	6
Survey Findings	8
Moving Forward	10
Acknowledgments	11

Notes from the Coordinators

I have always felt that there was innate value in spaces created for and by women. Existing in a society that creates systemic barriers to the elevation, empowerment and autonomy of oneself can be incredibly daunting, particularly when those systems of power are reflected in academic settings. Spaces that seek to prioritize the voices and experiences of gender minorities are instrumental in alleviating the pressure and isolation that this brings.

However, the complexity of identity has always made it difficult for marginalized individuals to truly feel at peace in these spaces. Particularly when their construction often ignores the overlapping priorities and experiences that come from race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, religion, ability, etc. I have personally experienced the disillusionment that one feels from having an inclusive space ignore, silence or erase parts of who I am. Which is why I could not actively support or contribute to the exclusion of trans women and non-binary individuals from the space I occupied professionally. In the months that I have worked in the centre I have been exposed to an incredibly vibrant and supportive community of deeply passionate and compassionate individuals. We truly could not have had such an incredible year without our volunteers or any of the people that attended our events.

But this is not the height of inclusion or access. The Womyn's Centre could never truly be accommodating, open or safe if trans women stopped at the door and never entered. We could never fulfill our mandate if the people we endeavor to help most didn't feel welcome or valid. I am so grateful to have Holly as a co-coordinator, she was equally passionate about the necessity of this change from the very beginning. Her drive for just and safe spaces was instrumental in our success. For some, the name change will mean very little and their relationship with the space will continue as it always has. But for others this change will mean the destruction of a barrier. These are the people that I will continue to advocate for.

- Harar Hall

Changing the name was one of the first items Harar and I discussed when we were hired last summer. I was excited to begin my journey as a service centre coordinator, but I struggled with being associated, both personally and professionally, with the spelling of 'womyn'. My feminism is one that is always and will always be inclusive of trans women and non-binary people, and from the beginning I intended to centre this value in my work. I was glad to realize we were on the same page about creating a space that is inclusive, and moving away from the spelling of 'womyn' that has been used to exclude certain people and push a cissexist agenda. I am an adamant supporter of making women's spaces inclusive to trans women, who are often excluded from so many spaces, not only in

society at large but particularly in academia. We also value making our spaces accessible to trans men, trans masculine people, non-binary people, and myriad of gender identities that may face discrimination in the binaristic world we live in. We endeavor to provide our services in a way that is inclusive to all who may access them.

Throughout this process, we also wanted to honour the perspectives of Black women and women of colour, without whom this centre would not exist. I am eternally grateful to past women students who created this centre and the community it supports, and to Harar for holding me accountable to this important perspective. Our goal has been to name the centre in a way that honours its history, while also paving way for a more inclusive future.

It is my hope that the new name encompasses what the centre is, and should be, to all women, women-aligned, non-binary, and gender-nonconforming students. This is your space, and we hope the new name makes you feel not only safe, but welcomed, valued, and more important than any words could ever describe.

- Holly Smith

Our New Name

Womxn's Learning, Advocacy and Support Centre

How did we choose the name?

On Womxn:

The letter X and its placement is both broad and specific. X is known to be associated with representing anything, it is recognizable something that is able to change and adapt in math as a variable. This use of X as an open variable is also seen in linguistics. Assistant professor of linguistics Lal Zimman from UC Santa Barbara cites the history of the X as a “stand in” in places where there can be no one true answer in reference to Malcolm X’s name. The X is also seen to carry this meaning in words such as Lantinx and folx as umbrella terms to include identities that may not conform to the binary. The placement of X in Womxn is not our own creation. This spelling has been associated with various feminist spaces such as The Indigenous Womxn’s March in Portland, Oregon and the Womxn’s March in Seattle, Washington; both of whom explain their way of using the X as a way to include marginalized gender identities. Carleton would not be the first to have a service centre spell Womxn with an X as Windsor University spells it same way for their Womxn Centre. Windsor previously spelled Womyn with a Y and explained that their switch to the X was made to promote gender inclusivity in including students who did not adhere to the binary in a way that they did not believe that Womyn spelled with a Y can do.

We want to continue understanding X as a symbol of variability. We recognize that womanhood and gender are inherently fluid concepts that encapsulate a myriad of definitions, identities and experiences. Understanding the X as representative of this variability allows us to celebrate the many ways that individuals interact with women.

On Learning, Advocacy and Support:

These three words encapsulate what we do in this centre through our programming, or services and our existence. By including these words in our branding we hope to impart a very clear message on our focus on consistently creating a space for learning, advocacy and support. We believe that accessing the space for learning, advocacy or support is just as legitimate as accessing the space based on identity and we want to ensure that everyone that needs those critical services gets them.

Gendered Spaces

We've had a lot of productive conversations about the way that individuals interact with gender in this space. We have endeavored to prioritize those who are often shut out of these conversations. However, we wanted to ensure that in changing the name we did not perpetuate the erasure of a women's space or advocate for further erasure of these spaces. The centre is a unique space both in the context of a university campus and a patriarchal society. So many women find the centre to be one of the only spaces where they can escape from the patriarchal attitudes and practices that seek to silence, diminish, violate or erase women and fem-aligned folks. We want the centre to continue allowing women to feel safe and heard on campus and in society.

Why are you changing it?

We have changed the name to ensure that all Womxn and gender minorities alike feel comfortable in accessing the space and using the services that the centre provides. Womyn as spelled with a Y was found to not align with the centre's values. This spelling is associated with second wave feminists who sought to separate the identity of women from men. Overtime, the spelling with a Y was associated with and in spaces that fought to exclude trans people as their definition of Womyn only included cis women. This is seen in Womyn-born-Womyn movements that claimed feminism and female empowerment while clearly discriminating trans women by completely excluding them from the narrative of womanhood. Michigan Womyn Festival was a music festival that, prior to being shut down in 2015, worked to only allow cis women to enter while simultaneously claiming that "all women" need a music festival for themselves due to rampant discrimination not only at music festivals, but the public sphere in general. It is apparent that current name and spelling of Womyn does not encourage inclusivity and therefore does not apply to the centre due to its transphobic history.

Alternative Suggestions

Found in research:

- Women
- Women*
- Wom*n
- Womxn

Found in survey and town halls:

- The affirmation and intersection centre
- Feminist and intersectional
- Womxn-aligned service centre
- Wom'n centre
- Marginalized genders centre
- FREE (Feminist Resources Education and Empowerment)

Essentially, the general consensus found in the comments of the survey was that people wanted the name to better encompass the centre and explain its services. Through the town halls it became much clearer that there was a need for greater awareness around the services offered by the centre. Both the idea of an acronym and a subscript were posited as ways we could further explain our services through our name.

Why not an acronym?

A lot of the discussions we had around the name change focused on accessibility. Was the name accessible, was the space accessible, was the community accessible? If not, how could we remedy that?

The concept of an acronym for the centre arose very early on in our town halls and was an idea that we incorporated into all of our discussions moving forward. Many people felt that the acronym removed the issue of spelling women at all and removed the space from being gendered. Others argued that an acronym was easier for people to accept than a different spelling of the word women.

Ultimately our choice not to use an acronym came down to three issues: efficacy, accessibility and longevity. In terms of efficacy, we wanted to have an acronym that incorporated words that encapsulated the goals and projects that the centre championed. However it was incredibly difficult to boil this down to a catchy and well branded acronym. In terms of accessibility we found that an acronym did not remove the initial concern of having to explain our name to students, in fact it made this issue much worse. By taking out the familiarity of a word that people often immediately identified with we would make the centre less accessible to those

seeking spaces that were not dominated by or centering male voices. Finally on the topic of longevity, we wanted to ensure that the name of the centre would be one that fostered a sense of community and support for its users for years to come. To do this we wanted to ensure that we used words in our subscript that we could see continuing to have positive and uplifting meanings for years to come.

Feminist Space

We went back and forth a lot on the inclusion of feminism, feminist and intersectional feminist as terms to include in the centre's name. Though many of the individuals who occupy the centre self identify as feminists, not all of them do. While we did not prioritize the opinions of those who concretely disagreed with the aims and goals of feminism there were valid critiques that cast doubt on the idea.

Many women of colour do not subscribe to feminism as an ideology or a movement because of the ways that feminism has historically and presently contributed to the erasure or silencing of women of colour's experiences, identities and opinions. Many black women and Indigenous women in particular subscribe to womanism as opposed to feminism. These critiques are valid and we ultimately could not continue a pattern of silencing black women in feminist spaces by making it inaccessible to women who feel that feminism does not include or accept them.

Intersectional feminism is an analytical framework coined by Kimberle Crenshaw to critique systems of power that work in tandem to enact and perpetuate oppression against individuals within society. This framework has been instrumental in furthering feminist discourse and critique, however it is not meant to explain people's identities nor is it used to identify spaces. While we regularly celebrate the work of Crenshaw in the centre we would prefer not to misrepresent her intentions in the creation of this analytical framework. Ultimately, we wanted to the name to speak to the goals of feminism without alienating those who have valid reasons for not identifying with the movement.

Survey Findings

The survey asked if the participants felt comfortable using the centre, their understanding of the spelling of 'Womyn', and opinions on what the centre should be named. To get a better understanding of where the participant was coming from, the survey asked open ended questions about gender identity, additional aspects of their identity, kind of program and their student status.

The majority of people surveyed were full time undergraduate students, they made up 90.6% and 95.3% of the people surveyed respectively. 9.3% self identified as non-binary/genderqueer/genderfluid while 2.3% were trans women/femme and 1.6% were trans men. The overwhelming majority of individuals identified as cis-gender or did not create a distinction in their identification as trans or cis. 41% Identified themselves as queer or part of the LGBTQ+ community while 17% identified as straight. 16% of people surveyed identified as Indigenous, Black or a Person of Colour while 24% identified as Caucasian or White. The other 60% of individuals chose not to disclose aspects of their race or ethnicity.

What did Carleton University students think the Y meant?

It should be noted that a substantial portion of the individuals surveyed were completely fine with keeping the name the same. However of those people, many of them also thought the spelling of Womyn was intended to be inclusionary to trans folks. It's for this reason that we spent a substantial amount of our time during the town halls on education. We wanted everyone to enter the discussion with a baseline of knowledge and empathy.

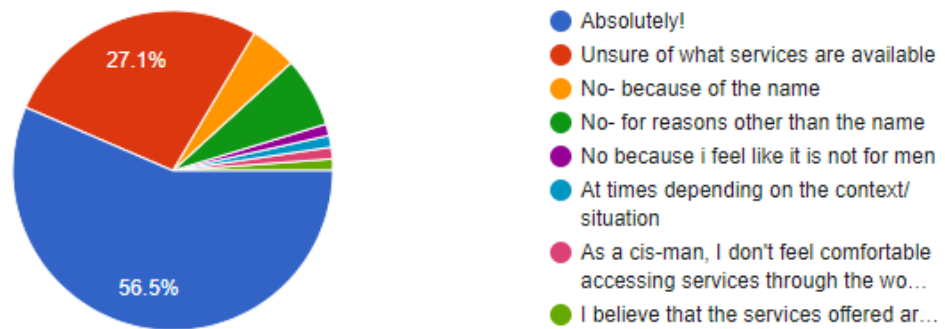
There was a lot of misconceptions or lack of knowledge when it came to understanding the spelling of Womyn or Womxn. Most people seemed to assume that the alternate spelling was due to wanting to move away from an intertwined identity with men in which men were the default.

Accessibility

We were happy to find that of the individuals who responded to the survey the majority were comfortable accessing the services we offered. However a trend that we found throughout the survey results was a general sense of uncertainty when it came to who was able to access the centre and what services we offer.

Do you feel comfortable accessing services at the Womyn's Centre?

85 responses



Moving Forward

2018-2019 Academic Year

When the Womxn's Learning, Advocacy and Support Centre opens its doors in the fall semester it will be a space designed to allow for greater functionality, greater support and greater event programming. We are incredibly excited to build upon the events that we started last year such as Survivors Speak and the Fem(me) Film Fest, while remaining dedicated to projects like Sexual Assault Awareness Week, International Women's Week and 10 of Activism to End Gendered Violence. We want to preserve the sense of community and discussion that we get from our Self Care Nights and Fem(me) Talks. But more than anything, we hope to introduce new ideas into the centre's upcoming event calendar. We look forward to a great year!

Awareness Campaign

We will be entering into the next academic year with two exciting awareness campaigns. The first will be focused on creating greater awareness around the existence of the centre and all of the services we offer. The second will be a campus wide campaign that will focus on creating greater awareness around sexual, menstrual and reproductive health services that are offered for students. We want every student to be aware of the financial and interpersonal resources that are available to them, whether they regularly visit the centre or not.

Continuing the Conversation

Our round tables and surveys have shown us the importance of having conversations with students. We want these conversations around the growth, improvement and accessibility of the centre to be ongoing. To continue this line of dialogue with the University community we will have both a digital and physical suggestion box where students can let us know if they have ideas for programming, learning, advocacy or support.

Acknowledgments

Carleton University Student Association - CUSA

We are incredibly thankful to have had the unrelentless support of the CUSA Executive and Staff, particularly our direct supervisors Adil Tahseen and Vice President Student Services Alexis Oundo, throughout this entire process. Their willingness to support such a large shift has made the name change easy and exciting. We'd also like to thank our fellow CUSA Service Centres for collaborating with us on Town Halls.

Town Hall Facilitators

We have endeavored to reach out to a myriad of community leaders and service centre coordinators in the process of our name change. We were cognizant of the ways that different individuals were better suited towards conducting a fruitful and productive conversation. We want to thank Fae Johnstone, Summer-Harmony Twenish, Joanna Zebib, Selali A-W and Winta T-Michael for allowing these dialogues to occur.

Special Acknowledgment: Winta T-Michael

This was a project that required an incredible amount of time, research and dedication to complete. It would not have been possible without the work of Winta who spent a large amount of her time researching best practices for names, etymology, and women's movements, while facilitating Town Halls and putting in time into brainstorming, analyzing data and even compiling this report. We are so lucky to have such strong support and dedication.

Communications Team

The CUSA communications team created an incredible information campaign around the name change and continues to help as we move forward on our branding and space remodeling. They have been instrumental in translating the mandate and spirit of the centre into visual and spatial representations. We can't wait to share our new space and logo with you!

Volunteers and Participants

Finally, we want to thank all of you. You are the ones who attended the Town Halls, filled out the survey, shared information, corrected misinformation and continue to make the centre a welcoming and safe(r) space. We could not have changed the name without your support.