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At local community colleges, transgender students' names are now whatever they prefer

By Nuran Alteir

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After realizing she identified as being female, the person who was born Anthony Escobar became Athena Escobar.

But in school, Escobar had to keep using her legal first name.

"It was hard to identify myself as something I'm not," said Escobar, 21, who came out as transgender in high school. She has not undergone gender reassignment surgery or hormone therapy, though she plans to.

But Escobar, a Whittier resident who is taking prerequisites at Golden West College in Huntington Beach for an art history degree, will no longer have to use a name she doesn't identify with — at least not at school.

Students in the Coast Community College District can now declare a preferred name.

The idea, while not new, came to the Costa Mesa-based district through Sacha Moore, an English professor at Golden West College. Moore said some of her students would come up to her before class to introduce themselves and their gender identity.

"I thought, 'Oh my gosh. Every time this student walks into a new classroom with a new teacher they've got to have this conversation,'" said Moore, who recently took on the new role of district coordinator of equity, inclusion and compliance.

Over the past couple of years, universities and community colleges have implemented policies allowing students to use a preferred name.

The Coast Community College District, which includes Orange Coast, Golden West and Coastline colleges, launched the new standard with the current fall semester.

"Your name is your identity. Your name says who you are," said Dannie Ceseña, transgender services coordinator at the LGBT Center Orange County in Santa Ana.

Ceseña, who was born female but identifies as a man and went through gender reassignment, said some people refuse to use the name chosen by a transgender person.

"That name gives you all the confidence in the world, and referring to [transgender] people by their birth name takes away that confidence ... that self-esteem," Ceseña said.

That can be detrimental in a school setting, he said.

"I hear stories every week about teachers who take away that power," said Ceseña, who runs a weekly support group for transgender youths in Orange County. "That student is not going to be able to concentrate or focus in class. Their anxiety is going to rise to the point where they're going to end up flunking."

Using a preferred name isn't exclusive to transgender students, under the new standard. Those who prefer to use a nickname may make the change via their college account.

Escobar chose the name Athena after the Greek goddess of wisdom and war — someone she could look up to and draw strength from.

"I needed someone who was more of a warrior type, because I do fight a war every time I go out," Escobar said.

The preferred-name standard is "really an issue of respect and a feeling of safety," Moore said.

Some people fear their transgender identity will be revealed by using their birth name, Moore said.

Hate crimes against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community, or LGBTQ, rose in 2015, according to a study by the Orange County Human Relations Commission. Four of the 11 reported hate crimes targeted transgender people, the study said.

The preferred-name standard is just the start of creating a more inclusive environment at Coast community colleges, said Moore, who started her new position in July.

The district says it has no information on the number of transgender students attending its colleges.

But it intends to expand services and equity-minded principles through the new office of equity, inclusion and compliance, Moore said.

Ideas in the works include informational events at the colleges and reviewing hiring practices and recruitment strategies to attract a more diverse hiring pool. Priorities and implementation will be set by a districtwide governance committee.

The new principles could be accompanied by new rules or policies that would have to be approved by the district board of trustees. Moore said, for example, that she's looking at giving students more options when it comes to pronouns.

The preferred-name standard comes at a time when schools are grappling with several issues affecting transgender students.

In May, President Obama instructed public schools to allow transgender students to use the restroom that aligns with their gender identity. The decision brought an uproar from critics, continuing an ongoing national debate.

### **What does transgender mean?**

"Transgender" is an umbrella term that refers to people who identify with or express a gender identity different from their sex at birth. They often feel they've been born into the "wrong body."

When a transgender person begins to assess who he or she is, the person may first identify as gay or lesbian. According to sources interviewed for this article, it wasn't until they were exposed to someone who was transgender that they realized they identified more with the opposite sex.

Words used to refer to gender issues are sometimes used incorrectly. Here are some commonly confused terms, as defined by GLAAD and Merriam-Webster Dictionary.

- "Transsexual" is an older term that refers to a transgender person who seeks to live as a member of the opposite sex, especially by undergoing surgery and hormone therapy to obtain the necessary physical appearance.

- "Sexual orientation" refers to a person's sexual preference or identity as heterosexual, homosexual or bisexual. Transgender people may identify as any of those.

- "Transvestite," or cross-dresser, refers to a person who likes to dress like a person of the opposite sex. Such a person is not necessarily transgender or of any particular sexual orientation.

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### **Putting a name to rest**

Some people in the transgender community refer to their birth name as their dead name — a name they have put behind them and will rarely share.

Athena Escobar said she plans to legally change her first name from Anthony. But the legal process can be time-consuming and expensive.

Each municipal agency that issues identity documents has separate systems for keeping that information. There is no central database.

In California, a court order is needed for a name change, which involves several forms and a court fee of \$435. In some cases, the court will waive the fee for people who have trouble paying.

That's in addition to the steps required to change one's name and/or gender on identification documents such as a driver's license, through the Department of Motor Vehicles; Social Security card (Social Security Administration); birth certificate (California Department of Vital Records) and passport (U.S. State Department).

The Oakland-based Transgender Law Center details steps for changing one's name and gender identity in its "ID Please: A Guide to Changing California & Federal Identity Documents to Match Your Gender Identity." For more information, visit [transgenderlawcenter.org](http://transgenderlawcenter.org)



**Nuran Alteir**

Athena Escobar, 21, a student at Golden West College in Huntington Beach, was born Anthony Escobar but identifies as being a woman. The Coast Community College District now allows students to declare a preferred name for school purposes.