Language Matters Guide

Updated January 2024

Jobs for the Future

As we strive to achieve Jobs for the Future's vision of equitable economic advancement for all, we measure impact through the advancement of the people in our society whom the dominant culture continues to disadvantage. We know that language can perpetuate and exacerbate dominance; it also can educate, empower, and drive positive change. Since "language matters," we want to make sure that the way we use language in all forms of our work promotes equity, dignity, and an asset-based mindset.

JFF's Language Matters working group has been leading conversations to examine our use of language through an equity lens since 2020. **This guide presents our recommendations to date on how to write and speak about people in reference to race, ethnicity, skills, income, criminal records, disability, and gender identity.** In the tables that follow, we identify terms as either Preferred, Use in Certain Circumstances, or Avoid—and we explain the rationale that led to our decisions.

Please note that we intend this as a living resource that will be updated regularly. Because language is fluid, our Language Matters work is ongoing, and our recommendations will evolve. Our research includes the voices of people represented in the guide. But there is not universal agreement on which terms are equitable, and we've done our best to balance perspectives in our guidance.

We recommend keeping these key principles in mind when writing or speaking about people:

- Use "people-first" language, which emphasizes each person's humanity over any characteristic.

- Use an asset-based lens. Focus on each person's and community's strengths and potential. Avoid labeling people or groups with words that emphasize deficits or challenges.

- Identify the systems or conditions that cause inequity for the populations we're referring to.

- Avoid vague or ambiguous terms. Be as specific as possible, even if it requires using more words.

- Only mention an individual's personal or demographic characteristics when relevant to the subject discussed.

- Ask individuals how they wish to be identified and use that.

If you have any questions, please email LanguageMatters@jff.org.

Jump to Topics

Skills and Socioeconomic Status   Race and Ethnicity

Criminal Justice   Disability   Gender Identity

Skills and Socioeconomic Status

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
people from low-income backgrounds children from low-income households people in jobs that do not pay family-sustaining wages	low-income	low-income families	Do not use "low-income" as a label to describe people, because it is demeaning. Do not use as a proxy for "low-skill" because the terms have different meanings. It's OK to use "low-income" in reference to people's financial circumstances if you use a phrase like those in the Preferred list. Include a definition with the income range you're referring to. *Example: The program offers support to students from low-income backgrounds, defined as those whose household income is less than $30,000 per year.*
jobs that don't require postsecondary education or training	low-skill jobs	low-skill workers	Do not use "low-skill" to describe people, because it is demeaning. Whenever possible, avoid using "low-skill" to describe jobs. Instead, use a more specific phrase such as "jobs that don't require postsecondary education or training." It's OK to use "low-skill" to describe jobs when no other term works in the content's context.
people who work in low-wage jobs	low-wage	low-wage workers	Do not use "low-wage" to describe people, because it is demeaning. Do not use "low-wage" as a proxy for "low-skill" because the terms have different meanings. It's OK to use "low-wage" to describe job earnings. Include a definition with the wage range you're referring to.
workers without sufficient income for basic needs		poor	Avoid "poor," which stigmatizes individuals based on income. Instead use a more neutral people-first phrase, such as "workers without sufficient income for basic needs."
families without sufficient income for basic needs	poverty		Do not use "poverty" unless you're talking about populations that meet the federal government's definition of poverty, or some other technical economic definition of the term. Do not use "poverty" as a proxy for "low-income" because the terms have different meanings. Instead use a more neutral people-first phrase such as "families without sufficient income for basic needs."

Skills and Socioeconomic Status

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
	disadvantage marginalize		Do not use these terms as shorthand to describe people, such as: "disadvantaged youth" or "marginalized students." It's OK to use "disadvantage" and "marginalize" as verbs, calling out the actors and the harm: who or what disadvantaged or marginalized the group you're referring to. *Examples: workforce development systems that marginalize people of color; students who have been disadvantaged by education systems and policies*
	underrepresented		Do not use as shorthand to describe people, such as: "underrepresented students." It's OK to use "underrepresented" in people-first phrases that call out the systems that have excluded people. *Examples: students from populations that are underrepresented in higher education; workers from populations that have been explicitly or implicitly excluded from a profession*
	underserved, under-resourced		Do not use as shorthand to describe people, such as: "underserved young people." Instead use people-first language that calls out the systems that have not met people's basic needs. *Examples: groups that have been underserved by public and private institutions; communities that have not received equitable investments from the government or the private sector*
		vulnerable	Don't use "vulnerable" as a label to describe the social or economic circumstances of people or communities, because the meaning is unclear and it's likely to be perceived as condescending.
	at risk	at-risk students	Do not use "at-risk" as a label to describe people, such as "at-risk students," because it is demeaning. It's OK to use "at risk" as part of a people-first phrase. *Example: students who are at risk of falling behind their peers academically*
young people who are not working or in school	opportunity youth		Avoid "opportunity youth." It is intended to be an asset-based alternative to terms such as "at-risk youth" or "dropouts," but it's meaning would be unclear to most people. Only use "opportunity youth" in reference to a program or initiative that specifically uses this term to describe the population it serves. In such cases, define "opportunity youth" as "young people between the ages of 16 and 24 who are disconnected from school and work."

[Return to Topics List](#)

Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

Additional JFF resource: *For more in-depth guidance about using asset-based language to drive racial equity, see "The Language of Economic Equity," a guide created by JFF's Center for Racial Economic Equity.*

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
accent marks in proper names			Use relevant accent marks when spelling people's names if the individual requests them. *Example: Andrés Tapia is a member of JFF's board of directors.*
	African American		Use "African American" to describe Black people of African descent who live in the United States and identify as such. Don't use interchangeably with "Black," because the words have different meanings. Do not hyphenate "African American."
Indigenous Native American	Native	American Indian	Use either "Indigenous" or "Native American." Do not use "Native" alone unless it's the term used by an organization focused on Indigenous communities and populations. Avoid "American Indian," which is controversial. When referring to specific individuals or groups of people, ask them, or otherwise verify, how they wish to be identified and use the term they prefer.
anti-Black			Use "anti-Black" to describe systems, actions, and policies that have created or reinforced barriers for members of the Black community. Anti-Black practices can be overt (e.g., racist comments) or covertly embedded in structural and systemic racism (e.g., Eurocentric school curricula).
anti-racism, anti-racist			Use "anti-racist" or "anti-racism" when discussing actions individuals or groups are taking to combat racism.

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Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
the specific nationality, ethnicity, or heritage of the people you're writing about people of Asian heritage or descent	Asian Asian American	Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander (AA and NHPI) Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA)	People who are sometimes described as "Asian" or "Asian American" represent a wide range of countries of origin, cultures, and language groups, so it's best to be as specific as possible when identifying them demographically. Ideally, use terms that refer to nationality or country of origin (Malaysian, Malaysian American, for example). When referring to broad populations of people who are from Asia or have Asian heritage, use phrases like "people of Asian heritage or descent" or "people of Asian descent" rather than the terms in the "Use in Certain Circumstances" column. When referring to an individual, always ask the person their preference and use that. Avoid using the broad terms, often expressed as acronyms, that group people of Asian heritage or descent with people of Pacific Islander heritage or descent. Although these terms seem to be commonly used, it's inaccurate to put both of these expansive populations together in one all-encompassing category, in part because many people of Pacific Islander heritage don't identify as Asian. *Note: When citing U.S. government statistics or quoting other sources that use the terms "Asian" or "Asian American," it's accurate to use those words, but make clear that they're the terms the source used, not JFF.*
people who are . . . . . . Black . . . Latine . . . of Asian heritage or descent . . . Native American . . . of Pacific Islander heritage or descent . . . multiracial		BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, people of color)	Avoid the acronym "BIPOC" because it appears to privilege Black and Indigenous people over other people of color. Use more specific descriptive language by naming specific racial or ethnic groups.
Black		black	Use "Black" to describe individuals of African ancestral origin who identify as such. Don't use interchangeably with "African American" because the words have different meanings. Use only as an adjective (Black students) and not as a noun (Blacks). Capitalize in reference to race.

Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

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Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
people who are . . . . . . Latine . . . Native American . . . multiracial		Brown, brown	Avoid terms that are vague or unclear, such as "brown." Be specific about the race and ethnicity of the people you're referring to, such as the terms listed in the Preferred column here and elsewhere in this section.
discrimination			Use "discrimination" when discussing unequal actions toward individuals or groups based on elements of their identity. *Note: "Prejudice" and "discrimination" are often used interchangeably. One key distinction is that prejudice is based on attitudes and discrimination is based on actions.*
	diverse		Use "diverse" to describe groups of people collectively, such as candidate pools or workforces that are made up of individuals of multiple identities or from a range of backgrounds. Do not use "diverse" to refer to individuals or groups of individuals from nonwhite racial or ethnic backgrounds. Correct: *The new finance specialist is Black; we selected her from a racially diverse pool of applicants.* Incorrect: *We recruited diverse candidates for the finance job.*
enslaved, enslavement		slave, slavery	Use "enslaved" and "enslavement" in person-first constructions when discussing the previous enslavement of Black people in the United States. *Example: Descendants of enslaved individuals.* Avoid using "slave" and "slavery" when discussing the previous enslavement of Black people in the United States, as language has shifted to recognize the humanity of the formerly enslaved.
equity		equality (as an exact synonym of "equity")	Use "equity" when discussing the intentional distribution of access and resources to remove the predictability of success or failure that correlates with entrenched outcome disparities across different groups within our society. Avoid using "equality" interchangeably with "equity." "Equality" refers to efforts to treat everyone the same, regardless of individual needs.

Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

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Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
	Hispanic		Use "Hispanic" when writing about people who say they identify as Hispanic or citing U.S. government data or other sources that use the term. Otherwise, don't use "Hispanic" to generally describe the broad population of U.S. residents who are of or relate to Latin American origin or descent.
	immigration status		Avoid mentioning the immigration status of individuals or groups unless it's specifically relevant to the topic you're writing about.
implicit bias			Use "implicit bias" when discussing prejudices people have but are unaware of that may impact their judgment and understanding of, or actions toward, other people. Avoid using "implicit bias" when referring to the prejudice that people knowingly act on when interacting with or discussing people in demographic groups that are different from their own.
Latine	Latino Latina Hispanic* *See separate entry for more detailed guidance on "Hispanic."*	Latinx Latinos (unless you're referring to a group of all men)	Use "Latine" (pronounced lah-TEEN-eh) as a gender-neutral term to generally describe the broad population of U.S. residents who are of or relate to Latin American origin or descent. This is a departure from our previous guidance to use "Latinx" to describe this population. There is disagreement over "Latinx," in part because Spanish words ending in "x" are not common. Our research showed that the "e" ending of "Latine" is a more common and grammatically correct ending for Spanish words. Use more specific terms and identify people based on their country of origin whenever possible. When referring to specific individuals or groups of people, ask them, or otherwise verify, how they wish to be identified and use the term they prefer.
longstanding oppression longstanding discrimination		historic oppression historic discrimination	Use terms like "longstanding oppression" or "longstanding discrimination" to describe the systemic inequities embedded within U.S. structures that have impacted Black people and members of other demographic groups for generations. Avoid using the term "historic" (meaning "happened in the past") to describe barriers limiting advancement opportunities for Black people and members of other demographic groups that face such barriers. Many of those barriers are still present in the United States today. Consider naming where the oppression is situated (institutional, systemic, individual).

Race, Ethnicity, and National Origin

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Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
		minority	Avoid using "minority" as a synonym for nonwhite people. It's imprecise and demeaning, implying that one group of people is "less than" another. Instead use the names of the specific racial or ethnic groups you're referring to.
	Negro		Avoid using "Negro," which is commonly considered offensive today. It's OK to use it when citing historical data, quoting historical sources, analyzing the evolution of language, or naming organizations that use the term. Note the rationale for using it.
		nonwhite	Avoid referring to people as "nonwhite" because this usage implies that whiteness is the norm.
the specific nationality, ethnicity, or heritage of the people you're writing about. "people of Pacific Islander heritage or descent."	Pacific Islander	Asian American, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander (AA and NHPI) Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Asian Pacific Islander Desi American (APIDA)	When writing about people who are from or trace their heritage to one of the islands of Melanesia, Micronesia, or Polynesia in the Pacific Ocean, it's best to use terms that refer to the specific nationality or country of origin. (Samoan or Samoan American rather than Pacific Islander or Polynesian, for example). When speaking broadly about people who are from or trace their heritage to that region, say "people of Pacific Islander heritage or descent." When referring to an individual, always ask the person their preference and use that. Avoid using the broad terms, often expressed as acronyms, that group people of Pacific Islander heritage or descent with people of Asian heritage or descent. Although these terms seem to be commonly used, it's inaccurate to put both of these expansive populations together in one all-encompassing category, in part because many people of Pacific Islander heritage don't identify as Asian. *Note: "Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander" is one of the five broad categories the U.S. Census Bureau uses to collect racial and ethnic population data. It's accurate to use that term when citing U.S. government statistics or quoting other sources that use it, but it's best to include a note that says it's the source that used that term, not JFF.*

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people living in the United States		Americans	Avoid using "Americans" to refer generically to people living in the United States because it technically means people who have U.S. citizenship and many of the populations our work touches include people with a range of immigration statuses. Instead use constructions like "people living in the United States" or "people throughout the United States." And often, just "people" or "workers" or "learners" alone will work, since it's generally clear that we're talking about domestic programs and policies, etc. The terms "U.S. workers" and "U.S. learners" also work.
	people of color		Avoid using "people of color" when possible and instead use more specific descriptive language, by naming specific racial or ethnic groups. It's OK to use "people of color" when referring to all nonwhite people.
		talent deficit talent shortage	Avoid using terms like "talent deficit" and "talent shortage" to describe labor market conditions that lead employers to say there's a lack of people qualified for certain jobs from Black communities and other populations that are underrepresented in quality jobs. Such usages diminish the intellectual abilities of the members of the groups in question and ignore root causes of the issue, including inequitable access to education and training.
(to) amplify the voice(s) of		give voice to	Use "amplify the voice(s) of" when referring to efforts that provide a platform for the stories and experiences of people from populations that have been explicitly or implicitly excluded. Avoid saying that people, processes, or programs "give voice" to individuals. People have always had voices; however, systemic barriers have often muted them.
systemic racism			Use "systemic racism" when discussing the laws, regulations, and official or unofficial policies of society or specific institutions that create inequitable outcomes for members of certain racial groups. Systemic racism manifests itself in every element of U.S. society, including education, criminal justice, housing, health care, public policy, employment, and more. Avoid using the term "systemic racism" when referring to instances of racism toward a single individual.

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United States (noun) U.S. (adjective)	U.S. (as a noun)	America	Use "United States," not "America," when referring to the name of this country. Use "U.S." as a modifier to describe things that are of or based in this country. *Example: The U.S. Department of Labor oversees labor policy in the United States.* In general, don't use U.S. as the name of the country, but it's OK to use it as a noun in headlines, report titles, and chart headers etc., when it will help save space.
white		White	Use "white" to refer to people who identify as white—generally used to describe people with light skin color and who have origins in Europe. Do not use "whiteness" as the default standard race of U.S. residents. Do not capitalize when referring to race. Do not use as a noun ("whites").
		women and people of color woman or person of color	Avoid these phrases, which imply that no people of color are women or that all women are white. Be more specific. *Example: people who are underrepresented in the tech industry, including women of all racial backgrounds and Black and Latine men.*

[Return to Topics List](#)

Criminal Justice

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
fair chance hiring	second-chance hiring		JFF uses the term "fair chance hiring" to describe the general goal of initiatives and programs designed to provide equitable employment and career advancement opportunities to people with criminal records. Many individuals and organizations that are committed to the same mission use the term "second-chance hiring." We prefer "fair chance," reasoning that "second chance" implies that people with records had a first chance to pursue a career and advance economically, which may not always be the case. It's OK to use "second chance" when naming initiatives that use that term and when citing sources that use it.
person with a record people with records	person with a criminal record people with criminal records	convict criminal felon offender ex-convict ex-felon ex-offender	When referring to people who have been convicted of crimes, avoid stigmatizing terms such as "convict" and terms that can be confusing in certain contexts. Use the phrase "people with criminal records" when the preferred phrase "people with records" is unclear without additional context. Once you've established the meaning of the phrase, use "people with records."
person who is incarcerated students who are incarcerated individual who was once incarcerated people with records of incarceration		inmate prisoner ex-prisoner	Avoid terms that stigmatize individuals who are or have been incarcerated, such as "inmate." Use straightforward and factual people-first language such as "students who are incarcerated."

Criminal Justice

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
people with records of arrests, convictions, or incarceration student who is currently incarcerated workers who have been incarcerated		justice-impacted individual justice-involved individual	Avoid terms such as "justice-impacted individual" or "justice-involved individual" because they're vague and can be confusing. Use straightforward and factual people-first language such as "individual with a record" or "workers who have been incarcerated."
people reentering their communities after incarceration programs for people who are returning to their communities after incarceration	reentry reentry population reentry programs reentry services returning citizens		When referring to people who have served a prison or jail sentence and are reentering their communities, use the more specific phrases in the Preferred column on first reference. It's OK to use "reentry" or "returning citizens" on subsequent references after you've established the meaning.

[Return to Topics List](#)

Disability and Mental Health

Note about person-first language vs. identity-first language: *Many people with disabilities prefer person-first language because they don't want to be identified by their disability. However, others prefer identity-first language because they feel that their disabilities are not just aspects of themselves but something more central to who they are. (Examples: autistic, Deaf.) Use person-first language when referring to this population broadly or a disability-specific community. When referring to specific individuals, always ask how they wish to be identified and use that.*

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
person with a disability people with disabilities	disabled person disabled people	differently abled special needs	Avoid terms that are euphemisms or vague such as "differently abled" and "special needs." Use straightforward and factual people-first language, such as "people with disabilities." Only use "disabled person" or "disabled people" if an individual or group of people wishes to be identified using that identity-first term.
people without disabilities	able-bodied		Avoid terms like "able-bodied" that imply people with disabilities are "less than" people who don't have disabilities. Use straightforward and factual people-first language, such as "people without disabilities." Only use "able-bodied" when discussing government programs or policies that use the term or quoting other reference materials that use it. In those cases, make it clear that it's a term the source uses, not JFF.
people with a substance use disorder person addicted to alcohol a worker addicted to prescription drugs		addict alcoholic drug abuser drug addict	Avoid terms that stigmatize individuals for having an addiction such as "addict." Use straightforward and factual people-first language, such as "person with a substance use disorder." However, be aware that some people in recovery refer to themselves as "alcoholics" or "addicts" as part of their recovery program. Only use these terms when quoting these individuals or writing about the way they self-identify.
deaf student Deaf community people who are hard of hearing		hearing impaired	Avoid deficit-based terms such as "hearing impaired," which was conceived as a well-intentioned alternative to "deaf" but is no longer widely accepted. Generally, use "deaf," "Deaf," or "hard of hearing," as recommended by the National Association of the Deaf. But always ask individuals how they wish to be identified and use that. Be aware that many people in the Deaf community prefer the use of a lowercase "d" to refer to audiological status and the use of a capital "D" when referring to the culture and community of Deaf people.

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Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
people who have epilepsy students with autism workers who have cerebral palsy			When relevant to refer to people with a specific condition, use people-first terms such as "people who have epilepsy." However, be aware that there are individual differences within each disability. Avoid broad generalizations about any group.
a person who has Down syndrome individual with an intellectual disability someone who uses a wheelchair wheelchair user		is afflicted with suffers from victim of confined to a wheelchair wheelchair-bound handicap handicapped	Avoid deficit-based terms such as "suffers from" that imply all people with disabilities are in physical or emotional pain and "less than" other people. Use terms to describe an individual's circumstances or condition using straightforward and factual people-first language—such as "a person who has Down syndrome" or "someone who uses a wheelchair"—and do so only when it's relevant to the subject matter.
mental health condition mental health issue people with psychiatric conditions		mental illness mentally ill	Avoid terms that carry negative connotations such as "mentally ill." Use more neutral people-first language such as "person with a mental health condition."

Disability and Mental Health

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Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
	neurodiverse neurodiversity neurodivergent neurotypical		Neurodiversity is the concept that variations in brain functioning—such as autism, dyslexia, or attention-deficit / hyperactivity disorder—are not disabilities, but rather are part of normal variation within the human population. Individuals or groups that exhibit such variations are considered "neurodiverse" or "neurodivergent." The broader population is said to be "neurotypical." While use of these terms is becoming more common, to many they remain unfamiliar. Use only in cases where you're certain that they apply to the population, program, or service you're describing.
education programs for students with disabilities	special education	special needs	Avoid terms that are euphemisms such as "special needs." Only use "special education" in reference to pre-K-12 education programs defined in federal law. Use straightforward and factual people-first language such as "education programs for students with disabilities."

[Return to Topics List](#)

Gender Identity

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
cisgender			Use "cisgender" to refer to people who identify as the gender they were assigned at birth.
gender identity		gender preference	Avoid terms such as "gender preference" that imply an individual's gender is a matter of personal choice. Use "gender identity" to refer to a person's internal sense of their gender, regardless of the sex they were assigned at birth.
gender nonconforming			Use "gender nonconforming" to refer to a person whose behavior or appearance does not conform to prevailing cultural and social expectations about gender. Gender identity can align with, or be distinct from, appearance and behavior.
LGBTQ		LGBTQIA+	Use "LGBTQ" as an umbrella term to describe the group of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and/or queer. Avoid the longer acronym "LGBTQIA+," which is intended to be more expansive (including intersex, asexual, and other identities), because of broad agreement that "queer" covers identities not specifically mentioned.
nonbinary			Use "nonbinary" as an umbrella term to describe any gender identity that does not fit into the gender binary of male/female.
pronouns	gender pronouns	preferred pronouns	Avoid terms such as "preferred pronouns" that imply an individual's gender is a matter of personal choice. Instead, simply use "pronouns." When additional context is needed, such as for an audience unfamiliar with this topic, it's OK to use the term "gender pronouns" for clarity. Also, use the specific pronouns that the individuals you're referring to use. Don't make assumptions about a person's gender identity or pronouns; ask. *Note: JFF encourages staff members who are comfortable doing so to identify their pronouns in email signatures and video conferencing tools, and when introducing themselves at meetings.*
	queer		"Queer" is often used as an umbrella term to refer to people who are not heterosexual or cisgender and is acceptable for people who use it to identify themselves. Be aware that "queer" has also long been used as a slur, so be mindful of your audience and whether the term is likely to be interpreted that way.

Gender Identity

Preferred	Use in Certain Circumstances	Avoid	Guidance
they		s/he his/her	Use "they" as a singular pronoun when referring to anyone who uses they/them pronouns." Also use "they" as a singular pronoun when you do not know someone's pronouns; it's more appropriate than selecting "he" or "she" based on your assumptions. It's also preferable to use "they" to refer to unspecified members of a group or a hypothetical person. *Example: Each CEO will receive customized coaching to meet their corporate diversity goals.* *Avoid: S/he will receive customized coaching to meet his/her corporate diversity goals.*
transgender person transgender people trans person trans people		transgendered	"Transgender" and "trans" are appropriate terms to refer to people who do not identify as the sex they were assigned at birth. Avoid "transgendered," which implies that something has been done to someone, as opposed to acknowledging that they were born with that identity. It is also grammatically incorrect.

About Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future (JFF) drives transformation of the U.S. education and workforce systems to achieve equitable economic advancement for all. www.jff.org