COED ROOMING- Reasons and Responses

Last year, a group of students led by Tim Stewart-Winter ’01 and Talia Young ’01 successfully pushed for the passage of coed rooming by the College. The 2001-02 school year will be the first year that coed rooms will exist on campus. Here is a brief outline of various aspects surrounding the issue.

Reasons for Coed Rooming:
1. Mandatory same-gender rooming can make living situations on campus difficult for queer or questioning students. Colleges increasingly must recognize that what makes for compatible roommates varies with the situation. What makes the average student comfortable is not what makes everyone comfortable. Many queer students are less comfortable living with same-gender roommates than they would be with roommates of the other gender, because of factors like attraction and homophobia that complicate the usual issues of compatibility.

2. Except for their gender, Swarthmore already allows returning students to choose their own roommates freely which indicates that they trust them to make judgments about compatibility. There is no reason why gender must be a necessary restriction on those judgments. Just as a minority of women students today chooses to live on all-women’s halls, those preferring same-sex roommates constitute a minority whose needs deserve to be addressed.

3. Mandatory same-sex rooming fails to address the complexities of contemporary gender relations for it perpetuates the role of gender in segregating and limiting human experience. In previous decades, interracial rooming was forbidden in college dormitories; just as mainstream assumptions about race have been transformed, we now live in a world in which traditional assumptions about sex and gender are being reassessed.

4. Having some form of coed rooming option would fit with Swarthmore’s Quaker tradition of social conscience and social change. Unlike most colleges of its time, Swarthmore was founded as a coed institution; a progressive understanding of gender is part of Swarthmore’s history, and this has been reflected in many changes in housing policy over the years. Changes that we take granted today - such as coed dormitories and halls, no restrictions on visiting hours, and the availability of safer sex supplies - were once highly controversial.

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions
1. "Shouldn’t first-year students be placed with a roommate of the same gender?"
   Yes, the coed rooming option is only open to returning students who request it.

2. "If mixed-gender rooming is allowed, what will happen when heterosexual couples decide to live together and then break up in the middle of the semester?"
   A good way to approach this question is to consider the rarity of homosexual couples who currently decide to live together during college. Just as most homosexual couples do not now choose to room together, many straight couples will choose not to room together.
   Yes, straight couples will occasionally live together and then break up. But serious conflicts can come about between roommates no matter what their relationship is to each other. Sometimes the students are able to make the arrangement work for the remainder of the year, with the help of RAs, the Director of Residential Life, and other deans.
3. "Won't Swarthmore get a reputation for being radical, libertine, or politically correct?"
Swarthmore already has a reputation as a liberal bastion, and has for many years. Lifting the ban on coed rooming would indeed be a sign of Swarthmore's progressive values. Swarthmore, though, would not be the first college to allow coed rooming.

4. “Won’t this decision anger many alumni and parents?”
Swarthmore has faced alumni and parent opposition to past liberalizations of various policies, ranging from the admission of students of color to the funding of a queer student group. This change, too, would likely face some resistance Swarthmore’s decision would likely be praised by other alumni, including gays and lesbians.

5. “What other college have coed rooming policies?”
A number of liberal arts colleges comparable to Swarthmore, including Haverford, Hampshire, and Wesleyan, now permit some form of coed rooming. There is no evidence that these relatively new policies have had an adverse effect on the schools’ high academic reputations or admissions statistics.

Responses to the Current Policy:
1. The majority of students on campus have supported the push for coed rooming, with over 300 students signing petitions during last years housing lottery in support of coed rooming on campus.

2. A small group of very vocal alumni have reacted negatively to the article about Coed rooming in the June issue of the Swarthmore Bulletin. This hopefully can be dealt with this fall, with students contacting alumni and explaining the reasons for Coed rooming (something the article does not do).

3. The media coverage was small and for the most part not sensational. Not surprisingly, the conservative group The Family Research Council did react negativity in the August 3rd issue of their weekly newsletter: "Swarthmore’s decision is an example of political correctness run amok, and is another regrettable example of a college abandoning its Christian roots.”

Problems with the Current Policy:
The main problem with how the policy is currently stated is that the target group to be helped, queer sophomores, are ineligible of receiving the coed spaces because of the nature of the housing lottery. Very few, if any, sophomores can get the currently permitted coed room spaces (The Lodges and IJ sections of Worth).

What will be Happening this Year:
1. To grant sophomores more access to coed rooming, there will be an initiative this coming year to increase the coed spaces to include Palmer and Roberts.

2. Monitoring the three Coed groups on campus (two in the Lodges and one in Worth).

3. Outreach to Alumni