Living with the Opposite Sex

Unique Housing Options Allow for This in a Whole, New Way

There's no question that roommate conflicts are one of the biggest problems residence life staff face. Whether roommates are assigned to one another or living together voluntarily, living in close quarters often poses a challenge. To help alleviate some of these problems, a few schools around the country are experimenting with more liberal housing options for their residents—options such as allowing members of the opposite-sex to room together. At Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, for instance, students are offered the chance to request such housing after their first year at school. While placement isn't guaranteed and depends on students' lottery numbers, about 5 percent of the resident population will have the opportunity to be the test subjects of this housing arrangement, which has only been in operation at the college since the beginning of the 2001 fall semester.

So far, though, the system seems to be working well. Myrt Westphal, assistant dean at Swarthmore, describes the setup as a suite of four single rooms sharing a bathroom. This bathroom has a sign that students turn to indicate whether the person inside is male or female. There are also other bathrooms in the building students can use, outside of the suite. "This started as a request from the queer community, to make housing comfortable and accessible for their population," Westphal explains. She adds that she hasn't faced parental objections as of yet, but feels that it's up to students to inform their parents of their housing preferences and placements on their own.

Opposite-Sex Suitmates at Bennington College (VT)

Students at Bennington College in Vermont are also offered the chance to request an opposite-sex suitmate. While each student has his or her own single in the suite, usually composed of about four to five rooms, all students share the suite's one bathroom. According to Kryssy Wright, an office assistant and student at the college, the practice works surprisingly well at Bennington. "The only issues we usually have are between people who don't get along in general; we rarely see any conflicts dealing with the co-ed factor," she says. Wright adds that students are never assigned opposite-sex suitmates, and can't even request one until after their first term. If a problem does arise, changes can be made after two weeks. Wright also notes that she has never been aware of any parents objecting to the option.

What's Happening at Haverford College (PA)?

At Haverford College in Pennsylvania, this option is also available to students living in suites, as well as those in hall groups and apartments. According to Robin Doan, Director of student housing at the college, the co-ed apartments make up over one-third of housing and initially caused the most debate. That's because if a co-ed group of three students were to apply for one of these apartments, according to Doan, "No one does bed checks" to see which two students are sharing the double-occupancy bedroom. She adds that some parents have called about these issues, but are told that students are responsible for letting them know their housing arrangements. "And students are only placed in these setups after completing a special application process and taking part in a draw," she explains. She also says that these options must take into consideration "gay students’ concerns in terms of their housing."

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Hampshire College’s (MA) Long-time Option

At Hampshire College in Massachusetts, there’s a similar co-ed housing system in place. According to Housing Coordinator Linda Mollison, while rooms are mostly filled with same-sex students, opposite-sex roommates, including heterosexual couples, are allowed in some doubles. She notes, however, that they have had some problems with this policy. “If there’s an apartment of about five or six people in it, a couple involved in one of the rooms can impact everyone if their relationship goes bad, so it’s a little difficult,” she explains, adding that in a case like that, one of the partners usually asks to be moved. “We handle it as we would with any other roommate conflict, though,” she says.

There are some parents who have problems with the shared bathroom issue, however, according to Mollison. “Students will sign up for this housing, then come back in to change it because their parents disagree,” she says. Yet the option has been offered at the school “for a long time,” says Mollison, who has been at the college for 20 years and directly involved in housing for the past 14 years. “It’s been allowed since day one.”

Communal Co-ed Bathrooms at Oberlin College (OH)

Things work a little differently at Oberlin College. There, while no opposite-sex students are allowed to share one room, they do have the option of voting on having the communal floor bathrooms be co-ed, either for the whole year or half a semester. Ehrail Adams, Area Coordinator, says, “Our policy is that if one person objects to co-ed facilities, then they become same-sex facilities.” Any conflicts are handled internally and usually deal with more minor issues, such as toilet seats being left up. If anything more serious develops, Adams says that residents can always talk to the floor request that they “have a revote anonymously.”

Co-ed Housing a 30-Year Mainstay

Most of these and other schools across the country have allowed general co-ed housing for more than 30 years. Adams says Oberlin “claims to have been one of the first to have co-ed residence halls in the seventies.” Just as the majority of schools soon followed suit back then, perhaps one day the majority of schools will allow for co-ed residence hall bathrooms, suites, apartments, and even double rooms. And perhaps it’s a discussion whose time has come on your home campus.

by Becky Anne Falto, a freelance writer with experience in residence life

New Resources from PCC

Below is a list of new resources you may find helpful on your campus. To view samples and get more information, please visit our website at www.Paper-Clip.com.

- Brochures
- The Total Student Athlete
- The Well Student
- Safety on Campus
- Manuals, Binders & More
- Town Gown Solutions
- Programming Themes Binder
- The Alcohol Resource Box
- Newsletters
- College Smarts
- The Social Norms Report

Books

- The Red Tent by Anita Diamant
- Ice Bound: A Doctor’s Incredible Battle for Survival at the South Pole by Dr. Jerri Nielsen
- It’s Not About the Bike: My Journey Back to Life by Lance Armstrong
- Spirit Moves: The Story of Six Generations of Native Women by Loree Boyd
- Harry Potter series by J. K. Rowling

The Experts

be an effective tool and it makes the later evaluation process go much more smoothly. In early November we distribute evaluations to students to evaluate their RAs and after Thanksgiving they get the results and are evaluated formally by their HD. We complete this process prior to holiday break so that RAs can reflect on the semester and prepare for the new year/semester. The evaluations are completed during regular one-on-one supervision meetings.”

Lori Lambert, Associate Director of Residence Life, Xavier University (OH)

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