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Room and coed board

By Peter Funt | November 30, 2009

WITH CRUNCH time approaching for millions of students to complete college applications, there is a relatively new wild card issue for families to consider when it comes to campus lifestyle. In the space of a few years, three dozen major schools have adopted dormitory policies allowing roommates to be of the opposite sex.

Massachusetts is in the vanguard of this shift, with new coed rooming protocols in place at Harvard, Brandeis, Clark, and Wheaton College. The unconventional Hampshire College in Amherst appears to have the longest-running coed rooming policy, established when the school opened in 1970 - and unique among US colleges for several decades.

To some parents the new approach amounts to nothing more than a license to shack up. To participating students, however, it is often a welcome opportunity to find comfortable living arrangements in what is now referred to as "gender-neutral housing."

What may surprise parents who are taken aback by the notion of students of the opposite sex sharing a dorm room is that the movement to amend housing practices is being driven almost entirely by gay and lesbian students and their campus supporters. As stated in the Brandeis housing policy: "Gender-neutral housing provides housing options for students who may identify as transgender or are questioning their gender identity or do not wish to prescribe to gender classifications."

The prevailing view on progressive campuses is that gender identity - the sense of being male or female - is more important in rooming decisions than distinctions based on biological sex. In other words, a gay male, who may be uncomfortable rooming with a straight male, might find greater compatibility with a willing female roommate. Proponents of gender-neutral housing also point out that under former policies, gay and lesbian couples have always been allowed to share a room - as part of what could be called the campus equivalent of "don't ask, don't tell."

Left largely unaddressed by revamped policies is the matter of how many straight couples wind up sharing campus rooms once given the option. Clark University's housing policy notes that "in colleges that were researched, straight couples electing to live in gender-neutral housing were rare; the fact is that couples (gay or straight) know the difficulties of living together and seldom elect to do so."

Certainly all reasonable administrators hope to avoid situations like the publicized one at Stanford this year in which a female student "missed a meeting" regarding housing and found herself assigned a male roommate against her wishes. Also problematic are letters to parents like the one from the University of Chicago advising that, while some males and females may be rooming together, the school has no plans to advise their parents of such arrangements.

Not all schools are on board. Rutgers University in New Jersey is conducting a limited test in one building, amid debate in the student newspaper about risks of increased pregnancies and disease among students. Tufts, meanwhile, responded to concerns over increased sex in dorm rooms by issuing a directive to students: "You may not engage in sexual activity while your roommate is present in the room."

At Wheaton, where my daughter is a junior, students worked for more than a year to craft a persuasive argument in favor of gender-neutral housing, which was finally accepted by the administration this month. The student advocates concluded that it was consistent with the school's "innovative spirit" to make policies under which "all students should be comfortable in their rooming situations."

There is bound to be a significant amount of nervous twitching among parents as gender-neutral policies are

adopted by more schools. Some will probably be dismissive, if not ignorant, of the broader socialization process their children are experiencing by attending college and living away from home.

In truth, parents who equate the act of choosing a roommate with the decision about whether to be sexually active, are simply out of touch - certainly by today's rapidly evolving standards on campus.

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