

## **24S-29 The Rooming Choice Act**

*Sponsor:* Rep. Eric Kouskalis (Currier '07)

*Co-Sponsor:* SAC Vice Chair Ben Milder (Dunster '08)

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Mischa Feldstein (Mather '07) and Ryan Thoreson (Lowell '07) on behalf of the BGLTSA

WHEREAS the Undergraduate Council firmly believes in the right of every student to live with roommates of his or her choosing, regardless of gender, and

WHEREAS the current policy on coeducational rooming is unnecessarily restrictive, poses serious impediments upon students' right to self-determination in deciding with whom they will live in university housing and imposes burdensome and arbitrary constraints upon the formation of coeducational rooming arrangements, and

WHEREAS the current policy on coeducational rooming has led to serious inconsistencies between the undergraduate houses regarding the allowance of coeducational housing, leading to the ability of students to live with opposite-gender roommates of their choosing to be dictated by the results of the randomized Freshman Housing Lottery,

BE IT THEREFORE RESOLVED that the Undergraduate Council adopts and endorses the following position paper on the state of coeducational rooming at Harvard and the implementation of Rooming Choice;

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Undergraduate Council calls upon the Committee on House Life and the House Masters, in consultation with the Student Affairs Committee and the Office of the Dean of Harvard College, to develop a specific plan for implementing this Rooming Choice policy in all upperclass houses in a timely manner.

Student Affairs Committee: Docketed 10-0-1

Recommended 8-0-3

Executive Board: Docketed 6-0-0

**General Council: PASSED 31-1-2**



## THE STATE OF COEDUCATIONAL ROOMING AT HARVARD AND THE IMPLEMENTATION OF ROOMING CHOICE

### I. Introduction

Harvard College's current policy on co-educational rooming has been in place since 1993. The current, very limited allowance for co-ed rooming is a direct effect of student action on the issue in the early 1990s.<sup>1</sup> While the college's official policy has remained the same for over a decade, co-ed rooming has become more prevalent both within Harvard's upperclass houses and among other universities.<sup>2</sup>

The Undergraduate Council sees Harvard College's current policy on co-ed housing as outdated, inappropriate and ineffective. In practice, it has produced unfair disparities between the houses and imposed unnecessary limits on students' ability to make important decisions about their residential lives at Harvard. It is for these reasons that the Undergraduate Council is calling upon the college to make long-overdue reforms in co-ed housing policy.

### II. Recommendation

The Undergraduate Council believes that it is in the best interests of our community for a college-wide housing policy to adhere to the following principles:

1. Students themselves are the most capable of making decisions regarding who they would be comfortable living with, regardless of gender.
2. No student will live in a co-ed arrangement without her or his explicit consent.
3. College administrators and House Masters should not need to approve of co-ed rooming arrangements and should only be empowered to block such arrangements in compelling special circumstances.
4. While the unique nature of each of Harvard's houses may preclude a perfectly consistent campus-wide policy, every effort should be made to ensure a relatively uniform co-ed housing policy among them.

Recognizing the need to balance these principles and student satisfaction with the college's financial need to minimize vacancies within the upperclass houses and other logistical concerns, the Undergraduate Council proposes the following policy of Rooming Choice:

1. All students who wish to form a co-ed living arrangement must follow their house's normal lottery and rooming procedures. Preference will not be given to co-ed groups, nor will they be put at a disadvantage.
2. Students entering into a co-ed living arrangement must be able to fill all the rooms in a suite with members of their rooming group.
3. In order for a room to be co-ed, all residents must explicitly agree to the arrangement.
4. Groups who wish to enter into a co-ed room for an academic year must agree that none of the members intend to take a leave of absence or study abroad for that academic year.

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<sup>1</sup> A copy of the Civil Liberties Union of Harvard Report on Co-Educational Rooming Groups at Harvard College (1992) is available at <http://www.thirdamendment.com/groups.html>

<sup>2</sup> Lewin, Tamar. "No Big Deal, but Some Dorm Rooms Have Gone Coed." *New York Times* 5 May, 2002. <http://select.nytimes.com/search/restricted/article?res=FB081EFB34540C728DDDAC0894DA404482>

5. If a member of a co-ed suite does leave before the conclusion of the academic year, the remaining roommates may attempt to find a replacement within a reasonable amount of time. All of the existing and new roommates must explicitly agree to any roommate change.
6. The house administration will reserve the right to redistribute residents in a co-ed room with an unexpected vacancy among available spaces in single-sex suites. New residents will be housed in the remaining space of the original suite in order to render it single-sex.
7. As soon as possible before finalizing living arrangements, all members of a co-ed group must agree in writing to the terms set forth in items 3 through 6. This agreement must include a list of the specific individuals to be housed in the co-ed suite.
8. House Masters will be allowed to formulate additional policies as necessary based on the peculiarities of their houses. Such policies should not impose a substantial burden on students' ability to live in co-ed arrangements, and should be consistent with relevant policies at other houses. Students should never be asked to bear any financial costs in order to live in a co-ed arrangement, and the majority of rooms in each house should be available for co-ed housing.

The Undergraduate Council calls upon the Committee on House Life and the House Masters, in consultation with the Student Affairs Committee and the Office of the Dean of Harvard College, to develop a specific plan for implementing this Rooming Choice policy in all upperclass houses in a timely manner.

### **III. Campus Need**

#### ***a. Cost-free way to Improve Student Life***

A shared goal of the Undergraduate Council and Harvard College administration has always been to improve the quality of student life. This goal has only grown more urgent in recent years as a result of student satisfaction data. The UC sees the timely implementation of Rooming Choice as an ideal way to make major progress toward this goal. Rooming Choice will benefit the undergraduates who decide to exercise the option without negatively affecting those who continue to live in single-sex suites. Students can decide to improve their residential lives by choosing the roommates best suited to them, regardless of gender. To limit their options is, at least for some, a limit on their satisfaction while living at Harvard. Furthermore, changing the current policy would be virtually costless; Rooming Choice provides the opportunity to raise overall quality of student life without spending a dime of college funds.

#### ***b. The Value of Student Choice***

The mission of Harvard College calls upon students to "...assume responsibility for the consequences of personal actions."<sup>3</sup> The undue restrictions placed on student choice in rooming arrangements are directly contrary to some of the central tenets of the college. Allowing students maximal choice in determining their own living arrangements commensurate with the degree of freedom they will face after college or by simply living off campus should be a high priority of our institution.

The college's current policy on co-ed rooming presumes that House Masters and college administrators are more capable of setting parameters on rooming arrangements than students themselves. Neither the houses nor the college should prescribe with whom adult upperclass students may or may not live. To do so is to overreach the proper bounds of the college with regard to the personal lives and relationships of its students.

Fundamentally, students deserve the opportunity to choose their roommates. The college already acknowledges this fact by allowing students the ability to enter the housing lottery with specific individuals. However, the current gender limitations rest on outdated traditions at the college and contradict that spirit of rooming freedom. By lifting the gender restrictions the college would be returning that responsibility to its students—where it rightfully belongs and where it will serve to improve student satisfaction.

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<sup>3</sup> From the Harvard College Handbook for Students, 2005-2006, p 2

*c. An Inconsistent and Unfair Policy*

The college-wide policy on coeducational housing is explained by a one-paragraph entry in the Handbook for Students:

Harvard does not ordinarily permit co-ed rooming groups. Exceptions may be made by a House Master, in consultation with the college Housing Office, where the configuration of space ensures a large degree of privacy. To date, exceptions have been limited to suites with single bedrooms having door locks that have been installed by the University and an unoccupied common room and to suites joined by an opened fire door where the number of students assigned is equal to the number of separate bedrooms and where there exists more than one bathroom and no walk-through bathrooms. All occupants of a suite must voluntarily agree to the arrangements. House Masters are free to deny such requests and to make changes as attrition occurs.<sup>4</sup>

The current policy allows for a great deal of inconsistency in how and when co-ed housing is allowed. For students who seek the special permission needed to live in such an arrangement, their success is dependent on the architecture of their houses and the policies of their House Masters. As a result, such arrangements are much more difficult to achieve in some houses as compared to others. The ability for many students to live in the environment most comfortable for them is largely a by-product of the randomized Freshman Housing Lottery, and in the interest of fairness the college should not allow such a practice to stand.

As applied, the current co-ed housing policy suffers from serious errors of common sense. In New Quincy duplex units, for example, pairs of four-person rooms are connected by fire doors. Since these rooms have locking bedrooms and bathrooms, co-ed housing is permitted for any combination of 8 individuals. If seven females and one male apply, despite the obvious fact that use of the bathrooms will not remain sex-segregated under such living circumstances, the current policy allows such an arrangement. In some of these duplex units, a fifth single has been created out of a partitioned common room, and these rooms do not have individual locks. As a result, the proportion of males and females in a rooming group wishing to occupy these rooms must be such that one duplex unit would be all male and the other all female. Any resident of New Quincy could attest that in practice this separation by sex is nonexistent. Restrictions on co-ed housing that hinge on where door locks are available have hence become largely arbitrary.

The current co-ed housing policy also suffers from serious logical inconsistencies. According to the example in the Handbook for Students, when such arrangements are allowed by opening a fire door the standing practice is that there must be two separate bathrooms, presumably one to accommodate males and the other females. In many of these situations, individual bedroom doors do not have their own locks. However, a current arrangement of the co-ed housing allowance is quite the opposite. A male and female student share a single in-suite bathroom and bedroom doors do have individual locks. There is no logical basis for why “bathroom privacy” and “bedroom privacy” should be interchangeable, and for why a single bathroom can constitute privacy in some situations but not others.

Furthermore, such arrangements offer no appreciable difference in privacy over many alternative housing configurations. For example, under the current policy a suite including a single room housing a female and a single room housing a male with individual room door locks would be allowed. However, an identical configuration with the sole exception of a bedroom housing two females rather than one would not be allowed. In terms of maintaining privacy between members of the opposite sex these arrangements are virtually identical but are not treated as such. Also, considering how co-ed housing is successfully practiced in some New Quincy rooms, there is no real distinction regarding privacy between this arrangement and most other suites on campus that do not have locks on every door.

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<sup>4</sup> From the Harvard College Handbook for Students, 2005-2006, pp 315-6

#### ***d. Co-ed Rooming in Practice***

A substantial number of rooming situations in the residential houses are already co-ed in practice if not “officially.” It is common in some houses to find students strategically placing male and female members of a blocking group on either side of a fire door. In other rooms on campus, male and female students adjust official rooming arrangements to live together while residential tutors turn a blind eye.

The college seems to willfully ignore such situations. It is common knowledge that they exist with some frequency, but these de facto co-ed rooming arrangements continue unchecked and unpunished in the vast majority of circumstances. They also continue successfully, as official co-ed arrangements have for years at other schools, without any problems beyond the ordinary and rare roommate conflicts seen in single-sex arrangements.

Allowing such de facto situations to persist in light of a policy that clearly forbids them is dysfunctional for two reasons. First, it undermines all of the college’s housing regulations as well as the authority of those charged with enforcing them. By allowing students to frequently shirk some rules it sets the precedent that other rules can in turn be ignored. Asking house administrators to uphold rules which are in some cases impossible to enforce and which serve no functional purpose does them a great disservice. Secondly, allowing the persistence of de facto co-ed housing only serves to reinforce the serious disparities highlighted earlier in this report—some students have easy access to the opportunity while many others do not. It is unfair that the college, unofficially or not, allow these inconsistencies to persist, especially when it has been demonstrated that co-ed housing can exist successfully.

#### ***e. An Issue of Minority Rights***

The current state of co-ed housing also raises some serious considerations of minority rights within the undergraduate community. The Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transsexual and Supporters Alliance (BGLTSA) has raised serious concerns about the fairness of the current policy to transsexual and transgender students. While often accommodations can be made for these students, a college which “does not ordinarily permit co-ed rooming groups” and where House Masters “are free to deny such requests” does little to create an accommodating environment. The individualized approval and scrutiny, which are often necessary to make arrangements for co-ed housing, do little to respect the privacy of Harvard’s transsexual and transgender undergraduates; many students feel that the application process requires them to “out” themselves. These concerns alone have prompted the establishment of co-ed housing at other notable universities.<sup>5</sup> At Harvard, they have prompted several transsexual and transgender students to move off-campus.

Harvard’s outmoded rooming policy is also insensitive to the existence of same-sex relationships and sexual attractions. This has been a driving force behind change at other universities which have recently updated their housing policies. The bill passed by the University of Pennsylvania’s Undergraduate Assembly which prompted the university to implement a broad allowance of co-ed rooming stated “that the current policy of the university... has unintentional heterosexist effects.”<sup>6</sup> By restricting members of the opposite sex from living together, the college’s policy not only marginalizes homosexual relationships but it also holds heterosexual couples to a stricter standard. Homosexual couples have been allowed to make the personal decision of whether or not to live with a romantic partner for years, and this practice hasn’t had serious complications for residential life at Harvard. The Undergraduate Council believes that the college’s heterosexual couples are mature enough to make the same decision and be held to the same standard.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, Wesleyan University’s Universal Gender Neutral Housing Policy was recently implemented to comply with the university’s non-discrimination statement which was amended in 2003 to include “gender identity and expression.” [http://www.wesleyan.edu/wsa/news/housing\\_results.htm](http://www.wesleyan.edu/wsa/news/housing_results.htm)

<sup>6</sup> “Proposal for Coeducational Housing,” bill adopted by the University of Pennsylvania Undergraduate Assembly in November, 2003 available at: [http://dolphin.upenn.edu/%7Eua/0304/Proposals/Proposal\\_for\\_coeducational\\_housing.doc](http://dolphin.upenn.edu/%7Eua/0304/Proposals/Proposal_for_coeducational_housing.doc)

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Harvard College's current policy on co-ed housing is long overdue for revision. The student demand for greater freedom in rooming was substantial in 1993 and is even greater today. The policy implemented in 1993, while somewhat successful in beginning to allow students the greater freedom of choice they deserve, has had the side effect of creating serious inconsistencies between the houses. The policy as implemented also suffers from flaws in logic and common sense and imposes arbitrary barriers to what should be the right of all students.

The current policy on co-ed rooming has had one substantial benefit, however—it has proven that co-ed rooming is not only possible at Harvard College but also incredibly successful. Students are satisfied with their co-ed arrangements in whatever house they may be found—whether or not those arrangements have been “officially” sanctioned—and they do not create problems beyond the potential roommate conflicts already present in single-sex rooming arrangements. It is for this reason that the Undergraduate Council is calling upon the Harvard College Administration, Committee on House Life and the House Masters to end the college's thirteen-year limited “experiment” with co-ed housing and extend the opportunity to all undergraduates through the implementation of Rooming Choice.

#### **Acknowledgements**

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