

Coed dorm rooms: the next step in higher education?

by Deborah Peterson
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Coed dorm rooms are the trend du jour at a handful of East Coast colleges, and, with the typical gestation period for the migration of new ideas in the United States, it may be only a matter of time before more traditional Midwestern schools follow suit.

Swarthmore College in Swarthmore, Pa.; Haverford College in Haverford, Pa.; Wesleyan University in Middletown, Conn.; and Hampshire College in Amherst, Mass., permit men and women to room together in campus housing, according to a Knight Ridder newspaper report.

Myrt Westphal, an assistant dean and director of residential life at Swarthmore, said the college was prompted to increase its coed options in response to requests from gay and lesbian students who found it uncomfortable to live with members of the same sex.

So far, housing administrators at the universities of Illinois and Missouri and Washington University don't see coed dorm rooms on the horizon at their schools. The University of Illinois at Champaign, for example, has coed dorms but not coed floors, at its campus. The University of Missouri at Columbia has coed dorms, and some of those have coed floors. But both universities also offer all-male and all-female dorm options.

Both Webster and St. Louis universities have coed dorms and dorms with single-sex floors. At Washington Univer-

sity, all dorm buildings and bathrooms are coed, but there are no coed rooms, said Justin Carroll, assistant vice chancellor and dean of students.

"It works really well, honestly," he noted. "Women on the floor provide a kinder, gentler environment and the men act more like gentlemen because of this arrangement."

Laura Mendiola, 21, a senior at Washington U., is a resident adviser in a freshman coed dorm. She says that living with men and women on the same floor - but not in the same room - is the best of both worlds.

"I think for the most part the students are very happy with the housing situation because they get a little bit of privacy but they also get to develop sort of a brother/sister relationship with the people on their floor," said Mendiola, adding that few if any students living on the same floor actually date one another.

But before anyone thinks the Midwest is too conservative, the University of California at Berkeley, which has tried to accommodate an array of sexualities with a housing program called the "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Theme Program," does not allow men and women to live in the same rooms.

Victor Culatta, associate director for residential living at the ultra-liberal school, was surprised to hear about the Eastern schools permitting coed rooming.

"We have coed suites, coed bathrooms and also single sex," Culatta noted. "But we haven't heard anything about mixed-gender rooms."

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