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Making students feel at home: the first year of flexible housing

For the first time in Virginia Tech history, Housing and Residence Life has offered a gender-neutral housing option, allowing students of different genders to room together.

The flexible housing option is currently available in two co-ed dorms: Pritchard Hall and New Hall West, both of which have full gender-neutral bathrooms either in the room or hall. On-campus students 18 years and older and of all academic years are invited to apply, free from judgment.

“We were very happy to be able to offer a housing option that does not focus on the gender designation,” said Eleanor Finger, the director of Housing and Residence Life. “It’s been wonderful because people want to live together for a variety of reasons, which could include gender identity, but sometimes it’s siblings or friends.”

The program became possible after the Resident Hall Federation voted [unanimously](#) to approve a resolution for flexible housing on Feb. 24, 2014.

The flexible housing option does not question reason on its application, but students who are in relationships are discouraged from applying. Based on the number of students who signed up, only three rooms on campus are considered part of the program.

“We really try to discourage partners and people in relationships from pursuing it,” Finger said. “If we even knew, we don’t ask, but we say sometimes relationships don’t always end up staying for the long term, so housing can be complicated when that’s the case.”

Paul Faust, a junior chemical engineering major, and Raelynn Scherer, a senior biochemistry major, share a room in New Hall West.

“All of my friends are guys. I get along better with guys, generally speaking. I have, like, two female friends,” Scherer said. “I just get along better with guys.”



Both have known each other since they were freshmen, became friends sophomore year and are very close but completely platonic. Both prefer to interact with people of the opposite gender.

“I really don’t like hanging out with guys,” Faust said. “I’d rather hang out with a girl because it’s more interesting to me, just because of the social dynamics of what women tend to talk about socially, as opposed to what men talk about socially. Guys don’t have that, ‘let’s talk about social upbringing,’ where women do, so it’s a lot easier for me to be living with Raelynn, who’s got that, instead of with a dude, who I cannot connect with emotionally.”

Faust was previously a cadet his freshman year and a Resident Advisor in Pritchard Hall for two years. Both have only lived on-campus with people of the same gender during their time at Virginia Tech.

“We live in the 21st century. No one is really going to be upset that these two are rooming together,” Faust said. “You know who’s going to be upset by it? Parents and old people. That’s it.”



Both Faust and his girlfriend, who is also a student, are comfortable with the understanding. Faust gets along better with his mom than his dad, and Scherer was born into a family as the first and only girl.

“I only have uncles and all my cousins are boys,” Scherer said. “It was my mom and a boatload of men, so I grew up watching football and playing sports and doing guy things, so I just get along with guys a lot better than girls. I don’t have that ‘girly connection’ to girls that girls have.”

After being denied from Virginia Tech’s buyout deal with Foxridge Apartments because they were of different genders, they turned to the flexible housing program. Both have received support from friends, family and the community.

“When I told my mom, she said ‘Go ahead, it’s probably better for you anyway,’” Scherer said.

Scherer’s hair on the floor and using more toilet paper are the only challenges they have encountered as a result of different genders. Otherwise, they are like any other friends who simply share a room. Coming into college, Scherer would have taken advantage of the program had it been available.

“Aw heck yeah,” Scherer said. “I feel like girls overreact a lot, and there’s a list of 400,000 things that could be going wrong. If you see a guy crying, sh-- is going

down – like there’s actually something wrong and you need to fix it. Guys are just a lot easier to deal with.”

The program aims to accommodate all students, from siblings to students who prefer to interact with the opposite gender and those who do not identify with traditional gender binary.

“The main thing people were coming back at us (during the process) with was if boyfriends and girlfriends live together, and that wasn’t our intent at all,” said Jackie Fisher, the vice president of membership and legislation of the Residence Hall Federation (RHF) last year. “The goal wasn’t to let just anyone live together; it was to make sure that if someone was really close to their brother, they have that option.”

The Residence Hall Federation is the main programming and governing body for the on-campus community.

“This pilot holds promise for increasing inclusion in student housing, and we look forward to following its progress,” said David Travis, the interim vice provost for inclusion and diversity, in a statement to the Collegiate Times. “We hope that students considering the flexible housing environment have the support they need as they reflect on this decision.”

While there are not yet concrete plans to expand the program for next year, the University has received positive reception and will continue to strive to accommodate students.

“The community members have just been very receptive,” Finger said. “We’ve got bed space for both of these options, and we really like the way the housing options differ.”

Plans were started by the RHF in the 2013-2014 academic year and were submitted to Housing and Residence Life. The multistep process included the creation of the Committee on Gender-Neutral Housing.

“It’s been such a pleasure working with RHF and to see student leaders recognize that we had a gap,” Finger said. “To see student leaders recognize that we had a gap and their own leadership helped us be better in what we can provide for our students.”

While many students have not yet participated in the program, the option continues to make itself available to interested students.

“The University has been striving towards more inclusivity lately, and we realized that by forcing people to live with people who are of their biological gender isn’t

the most inclusive thing because there are a lot of people who aren't necessarily comfortable with that," Fisher said. "We want to make sure that everybody here is able to succeed, and without ensuring that everyone is here living comfortably, we can't make sure that they succeed academically."

The goal of the program is to make all students feel welcome and included, regarding gender an arbitrary divider between students.

"Men and women who are either related or they're friends or if students don't identify with the traditional continuum of gender, they have a space that allows for them to be who they are with a wonderful, caring community where they can be engaged in everything that goes on in our residence halls," Finger said. "I think it speaks to our emphasis on providing diverse housing options to meet the needs of our really diverse students."

Kylie Gilbert, a Virginia Tech graduate and former president of the committee, was passionate about the cause and began the movement two years ago.

"She was the one who started the movement and it was super important to her," Fisher said. "She was in tears the day it passed."

After brainstorming and finalizing language, the reality of this year's pilot program is an idea-turned-reality. Virginia Tech adds itself, along with another Virginia school, George Mason University since last fall, to the expanding list of schools that offer a gender-neutral housing option.

"It's just another normal part of our residential community: we value diversity. We really want students to have a sense of belonging and care and to love where they live," Finger said. "This is yet another way to offer a living experience where students can learn and engage and not have gender impacting their decisions in that space."

So far, the program has allowed for students to room together more comfortably without any problems.

"This is just a long time coming," Faust said. "It's been a really great experience – all you have to do is change in the bathroom, that's about it."

