

Gender-Neutral Housing at the University of Oklahoma

Students for a Democratic Society

GLBTF

Contents

1	Introduction	2
1.1	What is Gender-neutral Housing?	2
1.2	History	2
1.3	Rationale	3
1.4	Advantages	4
2	Gender-Neutral Housing Proposal	7
2.1	Changes to Current Housing Policy	7
2.2	Changes to Housing Contract	7
2.3	Addition to the Housing & Food Website	8
2.4	Changes to Roommate Matching Process	8
2.5	Selection and Training of Resident Advisors	9
2.6	Gender Neutral Housing Advisory Committee	9
2.7	Implementation Timeline	11
3	Common Objections	12
3.1	Visitation	12
3.2	Security	12
3.3	Parents	12
3.4	Program Abuse	13
3.5	Public Criticism	13
3.6	Legislative Response	14
4	Conclusion	15
A	Appendix	17
A.1	Gender Neutral Housing at Other Universities	17

1 Introduction

1.1 What is Gender-neutral Housing?

Gender-neutral or gender-blind housing refers to a campus housing option which matches roommates and suitemates without mandatory regard to the gender or sex of the individuals involved. It is contrasted with sex-segregated housing, which requires that individuals of the same assigned sex live in the same rooms, suites, and floors. Gender-neutral housing assignments either do not use sex or gender as selection criteria or include such criteria as merely one of many factors in determining roommate compatibility (e.g. study habits, music tastes, and sleep schedules).

1.2 History

In the last 10 years, at least 54 colleges and universities have instated a gender-neutral option in their housing policies¹. These colleges and universities have implemented the option in a variety of ways. Some colleges and universities, such as Hampshire College, allow all students regardless of year to live with any roommate they want including roommates of the opposite sex. Other colleges and universities, such as Brandeis University, only offer a gender-neutral housing option to upper-class students. Rutgers University recently added a similar option for upper-class students following the suicide of Tyler Clementi, who was a victim of bullying by a homophobic roommate. Harvard University only allows self-identified transgender students to use gender-neutral housing. In all cases, these colleges and universities have recognized that existing, sex-segregated housing options simply cannot meet the needs of all their students.

Universities throughout the U.S. are increasingly incorporating gender-neutral options into their on-campus housing choices. Many of the nation's top schools provide gender-neutral housing, including all of the Ivy League universities (Yale University was the last to adopt such a policy, which will be implemented in the fall of 2011). Furthermore, large universities that are comparable to OU in many respects are considering or have already implemented some form of gender-neutral housing. For example, the University of California at Riverside, a large public institution with a

student population of over 19,000, allows all students to request gender-neutral housing. Additionally, the University of Michigan (41,674)², Northeastern University (20,749)³, and San Diego State University (29,256)⁴ each offer some variety of gender-neutral housing, and the National Student Genderblind Campaign has documented a long list of such institutions⁵. The movement for gender-neutral housing has been escalating, and gender-neutral options appear poised to become standard for universities across the nation.

1.3 Rationale

The Oklahoma Board of Regents requires that all students live in on-campus housing for their first year and provides the option of on-campus housing for upperclass students. The University of Oklahoma has undertaken an obligation to provide safe and comfortable living spaces for all these student residents. Safe and comfortable housing creates an environment that allows students to study, learn, grow, and thrive. In service of this obligation, the University has introduced a variety of safety measures and special programs. For example, the University has created a National Merit Floor to serve the needs of its National Merit Scholars and has created quiet living floors for students whose academic success is incompatible with louder student lifestyles.

However, the current housing policy does not serve the needs of many students who do not feel safe or comfortable in sex-segregated living arrangements. The students adversely affected by mandated sex-segregation include individuals from all backgrounds and sexual orientations, but in particular, sex-segregated housing negatively impacts our gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ) student population.

Several studies provide evidence that school environments in the United States are especially hostile to GLBTQ students⁶. In the 2005 National School Climate Survey, 64.3% of GLBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and 40.7% felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender. Of the GLBTQ students surveyed, 64.1% report being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation and 45.5% report being verbally harassed because of their gender expression. In addition, 37.8% of GLBTQ students report having been physically

harassed because of their sexual orientation, 26.1% because of their gender identity.

The social stigma and social reality of being GLBTQ, especially in the state of Oklahoma, is so powerful that — absent a more accepting environment — GLBTQ individuals may be compelled to hide who they are or present themselves as a gender with which they do not identify. Students who are unable or unwilling to hide their gender identity or sexual orientation face increased levels of verbal and physical harassment. In both cases, students' comfort and safety are jeopardized and their ability to perform academically is diminished.

Providing a gender-neutral housing option can help relieve these issues and serve the needs of the GLBTQ community as well as other students who do not feel comfortable or safe in sex-segregated housing. According to the Housing & Food Services website, the organization strives to "encourage respect for different abilities, sexual orientations, and genders." Providing suites, apartment buildings, a residence hall floor, or other housing arrangements for students who wish to live in a gender-neutral housing environment promotes the development of safe spaces that are more diverse and accepting of GLBTQ lifestyles, and is thus more conducive to student happiness and academic success, as well as the fulfillment of Housing & Food Services goals. Therefore, the introduction of a gender-neutral housing option is essential for the University and Housing & Food Services to meet their obligations to the entire student body.

1.4 Advantages

The most immediate benefit to the implementation of a gender-neutral housing option is the creation of a comfortable and safe living space for existing and prospective students. Providing comfort and safety is a valuable end in itself, and is especially valuable in a university setting where a healthy living space is essential for academic and life success. While this advantage is enough reason alone to justify the creation of a gender-neutral housing option, such an option has additional, less obvious advantages as well.

First, implementing a gender-neutral housing option would demonstrate to anyone interested in the University of Oklahoma (including potential students, faculty, donors, and National

Merit Scholars) that the University has a serious commitment to diversity and the needs of its students. This may benefit the national prestige of OU and the ranking of the University by national publications. Over the past few years, OU has worked hard to dispel some of the stereotypes that people outside of Oklahoma have about the state and its institutions with the goal of developing a more positive reputation for OU as a cosmopolitan academic institution. Partly as a result of these efforts, the University has been consistently rising in rankings and has become increasingly competitive on the national level in a variety of domains. Providing housing options to benefit its students and GLBTQ community is a necessary next step to advance the University's progress. Gender-neutral housing is an opportunity to distance ourselves from stereotypes that incite violence and make the University more attractive to the national and international community.

Second, providing an environment more comfortable for the GLBTQ community will increase the University's competitiveness for top students in the country. In the past few years, the University has stepped up its efforts at recruiting top high school students with a specific focus on attracting National Merit Scholars. It is not uncommon for prospective students to contact members of OU's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, and Friends (GLBTF), a student support organization, and other students to ask about life as a GLBTQ individual at the University. As it stands, there are some positive things that can be said for OU, but many drawbacks as well. The relative lack of accommodations for GLBTQ students can and likely has led top students, including National Merit Scholars, to select universities with more hospitable or accepting environments. If OU is to continue to be competitive in its recruitment of National Merit Scholars and other top students, it must do what every Ivy League school, and many large, state schools, have already done: provide a gender-neutral housing option.

Finally, a timely and well-implemented gender-neutral housing option might prevent public embarrassment, and even potential lawsuits in the future. Currently, a large number of student organizations, faculty members, and a unanimous vote of the student congress have called for the creation of a gender-neutral housing option. Reluctance to meet the needs of students on this point might lead to a protracted and organized campaign to pressure the University to provide a

gender-neutral housing option. On an issue as serious as this, the University administration might suffer public embarrassment if it fails to meet the needs of its student population. Additionally, if something tragic should happen to a GLBTQ student in sex-segregated housing, such as Tyler Clementi's suicide at Rutgers, the previous reluctance of the University to provide safer alternatives might lead to lawsuits over the University's negligence. In contrast, implementing a gender-neutral housing option would demonstrate the University's eagerness to meet its students' needs and to protect its students.

2 Gender-Neutral Housing Proposal

We propose that the University of Oklahoma implement the following changes to current policies and procedures.

2.1 Changes to Current Housing Policy

Housing and Food Services at the University of Oklahoma will designate a subset of rooms, suites, and/or floors in all available university housing buildings and complexes that they administer as gender-neutral housing areas. These areas must be equivalent in all other respects to traditional same-sex housing. Students will answer a single question in their Housing Contract indicating their desire to live in either same-sex or gender-neutral housing. By default, students will be placed in same-sex housing.

Upon opting in to gender-neutral housing, students will be placed within the gender-neutral housing section of the building or complex they would otherwise select. Placement will be decided according to standard placement procedures (e.g., lottery) without regard to assigned sex or gender identity. However, placement will take into consideration student preferences (if indicated) and attempt to place students with room/suitemate(s) of their preferred assigned sex and/or gender identity, subject to availability.

2.2 Changes to Housing Contract

It is central to this proposal that students signing a housing contract be presented the following options.

Please indicate only one of the following options:

- ___ I wish to live with a roommate of the same gender identity.
- ___ I wish to be placed in gender-neutral housing.

2.3 Addition to the Housing & Food Website

We suggest that an explanation of gender-neutral housing be provided on the Housing & Food Services website, and that a link to that explanation be included with the above options on the housing contract.

2.4 Changes to Roommate Matching Process

We likewise propose that the following optional questions and explanations be included in the roommate matching forms and be used to match students in gender-neutral areas with roommates of their preferred assigned sex or expressed gender identity.

What is your assigned sex?: (Required)

- ___ Female
- ___ Male
- ___ Intersexed

What is your personal gender identity?: (Optional)

- ___ Woman
- ___ Man
- ___ Other gender identity (Please specify: _____)

I prefer that my room/suitemate(s') biological sex is: (Please check only one)

- ___ Female
- ___ Male
- ___ Intersexed

- ___ No Preference

I prefer that my room/suitemate(s') gender identity is: (Please check only one)

- ___ Woman
- ___ Man
- ___ No Preference
- ___ Other gender identity (Please specify: _____)

Additional Questions⁷

1. Please provide anything else you wish to share about your gender identity, gender expression, or biological sex to help us in the housing assignment process.
2. Do you have a third-person pronoun you prefer to be addressed by? If so, which one?
3. Please provide any other information that would be useful in matching you with a room/suitemate.
4. How would you describe your ideal room/suitemate?

2.5 Selection and Training of Resident Advisors

Training of Resident Advisors (RAs) will continue to be coordinated by Housing and Food, but all RAs in gender neutral housing areas will additionally be required to complete a Sooner Ally Training or equivalent training pertaining to GLBTQ issues. They should also be provided with resources and referral materials so that they may better assist students.

2.6 Gender Neutral Housing Advisory Committee

The purpose of this proposed committee is primarily to advise Housing and Food on how to properly implement a gender neutral housing program. The committee will additionally report on

progress to the President and Board of Regents. In order to fulfill these responsibilities, the committee will meet on a monthly basis, monitor and suggest improvements to the process of implementing this proposal, solicit input from all relevant stakeholders (via the representatives that comprise the committee), and develop a plan for extending gender neutral housing options to all university residential facilities, according to demand.

The committee will be comprised of representatives from the following groups:

- The authors of the proposal
- Housing and Food
- Housing Center Student Association
- Resident Students Association
- Resident Advisors
- Faculty and staff
- Undergraduate students
- Graduate students
- Alumni
- Sooner Allies
- GLBTF

Upon conclusion of the implementation process, this committee will transition to a maintenance committee that monitors the quality of the program and suggests changes or improvements as necessary.

2.7 Implementation Timeline

In time for the fall 2013 housing selection, the Housing Contract will be modified according to the addendum above. At that time, gender-neutral areas will be designated according to the number of students who request such placement.

Suggested Gender-neutral Housing Areas

- Cate Center: 8-room (16 person) sections
- Tower Residence Halls (Adams, Walker, and Couch): individual wings
- Traditions Square: individual apartments/suites

If no double room is available in the gender-neutral area in a student's building of choice, the student will be given the option of moving to a different building at the same rate as they would have paid in their building of choice. If a double room still cannot be found in a gender-neutral area, the student will be given the option of a single occupancy room at the same rate as the double room. If the number of students who request gender-neutral housing in a given building (e.g., Cate) is not sufficient to create a designated area, those students will be offered placement in a gender-neutral area in a different building at the same rate as they would have paid in their building of choice.

3 Common Objections

3.1 Visitation

The current University housing policy dictates that only residents of a floor or hallway may be beyond the security doors after visitation hours. The same rules should apply to a gender-neutral floor. If the resident advisor suspects that a person on the floor after visitation hours does not live on the floor, the resident advisor should carry out the same procedure resident advisors of sex-segregated floors do.

3.2 Security

One of the main motivations for offering a gender-neutral housing option is to provide security against verbal and physical harassment. Critics of the option speculate that a mixed-gender floor would lead to more incidents of rape and sexual harassment than sex-segregated floors. A gender-neutral floor, critics object, would remove the physical barrier between sexes which would lead to more rape and more sexual harassment. This criticism is unfounded and misguided. There is no empirical evidence to suggest that gender-neutral floors have a higher incidence of rape or sexual harassment in any of the dozens of universities that have already implemented a gender-neutral housing option. Additionally, this criticism assumes that rape and sexual harassment only occurs between males and females, discounting the male-male and female-female sexual harassment that can occur in the existing sex-segregated floors.

3.3 Parents

It is not uncommon for parents to disagree with decisions made by their adult children. The decision to live in a gender-neutral environment is no exception. However, it is not the role of Housing & Food to mediate family disputes. Parents may wish to override their student's housing decision and contact Housing & Food requesting that they do so. While the inclusion of Housing &

Food in such a dispute is regrettable, ultimately the students that attend the University of Oklahoma are adults and must be allowed to make their own decisions. Housing & Food will have to instruct parents that they cannot change the child's housing selection anymore than they can change the child's selection of major.

3.4 Program Abuse

Some might object that a gender-neutral floor will be abused. Instead of selecting a gender-neutral option for comfort or security, critics claim that some individuals will choose such an option in order to have sexual access to members of the opposite sex. Like the claim about higher incidence of rape and sexual harassment, evidence of program abuse is also lacking in the dozens of universities that have already implemented a gender-neutral housing option⁸. Additionally, this criticism relies on the assumption that existing sex-segregated floors are a significant barrier to sexual access. Students already find ways, within the boundaries of existing floor arrangements, to engage in sexual activities with same-sex and opposite-sex partners. A gender-neutral floor would neither increase nor decrease the effective amount of sexual access among the student body.

3.5 Public Criticism

It is unavoidable that some will criticize the inclusion of a gender-neutral housing option. However, the prospect of this kind of criticism should not dissuade the University from providing one. In an increasingly interconnected world, the University of Oklahoma must constantly strive for a more diverse and inclusive campus. Although some of the University's alumni and donors may be among those critical of the housing option, the likelihood of that affecting donations to the University is low. Similarly, the idea that including such an option would significantly decrease enrollment in Oklahoma's premiere public university is also far fetched. If anything, an effort to accommodate the needs of more students will increase the number of students interested in enrolling.

3.6 Legislative Response

The University of Oklahoma receives the majority of its operating funding from the Oklahoma State Legislature. Providing a gender-neutral housing option, critics claim, might upset the Legislature and result in retaliatory funding cuts. The chances of this are even more remote than the chances of decreased donations. For the State Legislature to pursue retaliatory budget cuts, they would have to be willing to cut funding to all students at the University. Additionally, because education appropriations are required to be allocated according to a set formula, punitive budget cuts would also penalize every other public university in the State of Oklahoma. As a result, it is inconceivable that the Oklahoma State Legislature would even entertain cutting the budget in response to the introduction of a gender-neutral housing option.

4 Conclusion

Gender-neutral housing is necessary for the University to meet its obligations to the student body. The most important role of the University administration is as a facilitator of the academic and life success of its students. Ensuring that every single student has access to safe and comfortable housing options is indispensable to carrying out this role. This proposal offers one way of quickly implementing a gender-neutral housing option at OU, but other models of implementation can be found from universities across the country. As members of the student body and therefore the most affected by this plan, we urge the University to implement a gender-neutral housing option as soon as possible.

Notes

¹<http://www.genderblind.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/2010CampusEqualityIndex.pdf>

²University of Michigan has 41,674 students — <http://www.housing.umich.edu/node/955>

³Northeastern University has 20,749 students — <http://www.northeastern.edu/reslife/livinglearning/fyllc/gnh.html>

⁴SDSU has 29,256 students — <http://www.sa.sdsu.edu/housing/Gender-Neutral%20Info%20Sheet.pdf>

⁵<http://www.genderblind.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/2010CampusEqualityIndex.pdf>

⁶http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/582-2.pdf

⁷Adapted from Dartmouth Application: <http://dartmouth.edu/~orl/housing/forms/GN-application.doc>

⁸Researchers at Clark found abuse rare: <http://www.clarku.edu/offices/housing/genderblind.cfm>

A Appendix

A.1 Gender Neutral Housing at Other Universities

The following is an incomplete list of colleges and universities that have implemented gender-neutral housing options for on-campus residents. The colleges and universities on the list were chosen because they have substantive online information about their programs, links to which are also provided here.

1. National Student Genderblind Campaign List of Colleges and Universities

<http://www.genderblind.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/07/2010CampusEqualityIndex.pdf>

2. Brandeis

<http://www.brandeis.edu/studentaffairs/dcl/roomselection/genderneutral.html>

3. Brown

http://reslife.brown.edu/policy/gender_neutral.html

4. Carnegie Mellon

http://www.cmu.edu/housing/roomselection/rsolutions/gender_neutral.html

5. Clark

<http://www.clarku.edu/offices/housing/genderblind.cfm>

6. Colorado College

<http://www.coloradocollege.edu/reslife/pdf/GN%20Agreement%20101.pdf>

7. Connecticut College

<http://www.conncoll.edu/campuslife/8687.htm>

<http://aspen.conncoll.edu/news/5129.cfm>

8. Dartmouth College

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/ask/categories/stulife/27.html>

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/orl/housing/forms/gn-application.doc>

50 of 3,300 students utilize gender-neutral at Dartmouth

9. Grinnell

<http://www.grinnell.edu/offices/reslife/housingproc/genderneutral>

10% of rooms are gender-neutral

10. Harvard

<http://isites.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k65178&tabgroupid=icb.tabgroup94624>

11. Haverford

<http://www.haverford.edu/housing/about/index.php>

12. Humboldt State

<http://www.humboldt.edu/housing/communities.html#gender>

13. Ithaca

http://www.ithaca.edu/reslife/gender_neutral_community.html

14. Lawrence

http://www.lawrence.edu/dept/student_dean/reslife/selection/suitesquadstripes.shtml

15. Occidental

<http://www.oxy.edu/x9421.xml>

16. Pitzer

http://www.pitzer.edu/student_life/residential_life/room_draw/index.asp

17. University of California-Riverside
<http://out.ucr.edu/campus/gnhousing.htm>
18. University of Connecticut
<http://www.rainbowcenter.uconn.edu/Future/FAQ.html#8>
19. University of Michigan
<http://www.housing.umich.edu/node/955>
20. University of Pennsylvania
<http://www.business-services.upenn.edu/housing/assignments/apply/genderneutral.html>
21. University of Southern Maine
<http://www.usm.maine.edu/reslife/GenderNeutral.htm>
22. Rutgers
<http://news.rutgers.edu/medrel/special-content/hot-topic-gender-neu-20110304>
23. Reed
http://www.reed.edu/res_life/on_campus/gender_neutral_housing.html
24. Skidmore
http://cms.skidmore.edu/thecenter/gender_neutral.cfm
25. Stanford
http://www.stanford.edu/dept/rde/shs/ugrad/res_options.htm#genneu
26. Swarthmore
<http://www.swarthmore.edu/x9564.xml>

27. Washington University (St. Louis)

<http://reslife.wustl.edu/images/stories/PDF/gender%20neutral%20housing%20agreement.pdf>

28. Willamette

<http://www.willamette.edu/dept/resservices/information/lottery/index.html>