

A Proposal for the Expansion of Gender Neutral Housing



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Introduction

THROUGHOUT THE LAST YEAR AND HALF, THE YALE COLLEGE COUNCIL HAS ADVOCATED FOR THE EXPANSION OF GENDER-NEUTRAL HOUSING. THIS REPORT IS THE CULMINATING RESULT OF EXTENSIVE RESEARCH, INTERVIEWS, AND SURVEY RESULTS CONDUCTED DURING THIS TIME. AFTER REVIEWING THE DATA COLLECTED DURING THE 2010-2011 GENDER-NEUTRAL HOUSING PILOT YEAR, THE RESULTS OF THE NOVEMBER 2011 SURVEYS, THE RESPONSES TO THE INTERVIEWS, AND THE INFORMATION GATHERED DURING ADDITIONAL RESEARCH, THE YALE COLLEGE COUNCIL RECOMMENDS THE EXPANSION OF THE GENDER-NEUTRAL HOUSING OPTION TO THE UPCOMING JUNIOR CLASS.

History of Gender Neutral Housing at Yale

In February 2010, the Officers of the University and Dean of Yale College approved a gender-neutral housing option for the Class of 2011. Seniors were given the option of living in the same suite as individuals of the opposite sex. During the 2010-2011 school year, thirty-nine students chose to live in gender-neutral suites. The following colleges had at least one gender-neutral suite: Berkeley, Branford, Calhoun, Ezra Stiles, Jonathan Edwards, Morse, Pierson, Saybrook. No students opted to live in gender-neutral housing in Davenport, Silliman, Timothy Dwight, or Trumbull colleges.

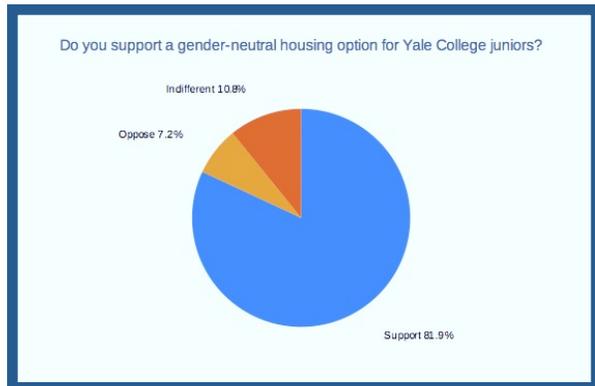
Gender-neutral housing is currently in its second year as a housing option for seniors living on campus. This year, twenty-nine seniors live in gender-neutral suites. We believe that this minor decrease in number was due to the fact that the policy was not publicized at all in its second year, whereas it received substantial media attention in its first; residential colleges did not re-emphasize to students that gender-neutral

housing was an option this year. The students currently living in gender-neutral housing reside in Branford, Calhoun, Ezra Stiles, Jonathan Edwards, Morse, and Saybrook colleges. The other six colleges currently have no gender-neutral suites.

In November 2011, the Yale College Council sent out a survey concerning gender-neutral housing to the Class of 2014 and the Class of 2013. The lists of questions are listed at the end of this report. Both classes responded overwhelmingly in favor of expanding gender-neutral housing to include juniors. All statistics for this report come from this survey. Additionally, members of the Yale College Council conducted interviews with at least two members from every gender-neutral suite for the past two years. All individuals gave positive feedback about the gender-neutral housing option and most believe that their experiences in a gender-neutral suite have enhanced their time at Yale. Finally, we solicited feedback from Assistant Dean of Student Affairs and DUS of Women's Gender & Sexuality Studies, Melanie Boyd. Her response is provided in full in Appendix 1.

Student Choice: A Policy Students Want

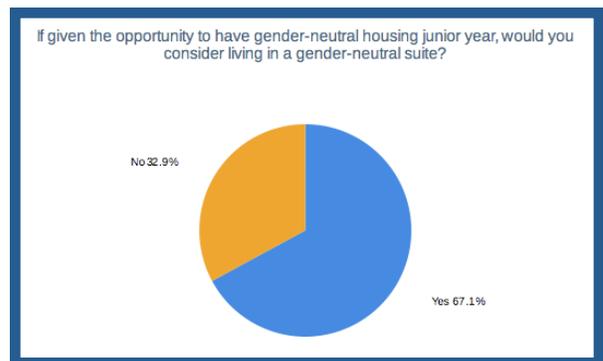
At Yale, our friends come from all different walks of life; some grew up in other states, some are of other races, some are studying a different major – most visibly, some are of another gender. Gender-neutral housing recognizes that student friendships extend beyond individuals of the same gender. At the heart of gender-neutral housing is the idea that students ought to live with whomever they want – and this is a policy that students want to see in effect. The policy has near universal support, with 92.7% of the class of 2014 in support or indifferent to the expansion of gender-neutral housing to the junior class.



As such, there is no doubt that many sophomores would want to take advantage of this change in policy next year. In fact, a survey of current sophomores reveals that 67.1% said that they would consider living in a gender-neutral suite next year should the option be offered to juniors.

According to Yale seniors currently living in gender-neutral housing, the desire to live with one's friends was the primary drive for

the decision to live in a gender-neutral suite. As one female student explained, "The people I wanted to live with the most and my best friends in [my college] include two boys and two girls. That was the biggest factor." Additionally, students often mentioned that this helped them live with suitemates who had the most similar living styles.



Reviews from students currently living in gender-neutral housing were entirely positive. No individuals that we interviewed regretted the decision; in fact, they frequently mentioned that the policy enabled them to have the best living situations possible. One female student said, "This is the happiest I've ever been in a suite." A male student explained, "This is my best housing experience by far, especially because of the guy/girl balance." Another female student stated that she wanted to let others know that she "can't think of one drawback. Only positives."

In fact, the desire to live with one's friends of other genders has sometimes caused students to live off-campus. In the survey sent out to all juniors, one junior wrote, "Due to the lack of gender-neutral housing on campus, I decided this year to move off-

campus. I wanted to live with one of my best friends who happens to be female and leaving the residential college system was the only way to do it.” In fact, of the current sophomore class, *27.4% said that having gender-neutral housing would make them more likely to stay on-campus next year.* Students ought to be able to live on-campus without having a factor as easily amenable as a gender-based housing policy compel them to move off-campus.

Gender, Sexuality, and Gender-Neutral Housing

While gender-neutral housing helps all students by expanding their choices in living scenarios, it can have particular benefits for queer and gender-queer¹ students. These benefits are seen in four clear ways.

First, gender-neutral housing normalizes heterosexuality. Gender-based housing suggests that men and women must not be allowed to live with one another because it may enable men and women in relationships to live together. Implicit in this notion is that homosexuality is nonexistent. This does not reflect the diversity of sexual orientations within our Yale community and alienates those who do not identify as heterosexuals. Non-straight individuals may prefer gender-neutral housing environments. As one junior explains, “Many of my LGBTQ friends moved off campus because the housing options available to them were far too narrow; the

presumption of heterosexuality also made the official housing process seem unwelcoming and unfriendly.” Such a policy change would be a sign from the University that the needs of queer communities are recognized and that Yale is actively interested in providing a positive, affirming environment.

Second, gender-neutral housing suggests that individuals ought to primarily socialize with individuals of the same gender by preventing students of different genders from experiencing the close bond formed by living with another individual. This can make students feel ostracized. As a student currently living in a gender-neutral off-campus housing unit explains, “It’s like Yale, in some ways, has become the group of kids on the playground poking their finger at me for still wanting to hang out with girls. Gender norms have never been something that I’ve felt comfortable with, and I’d think that Yale would more quickly and whole-heartedly embrace any opportunity to erase some of those categories in order to become a more accepting, nurturing environment for all students—even the guys who just get along better with girls.” By not making same-sex socialization the norm, Yale can deconstruct the expectations that masculinity requires one to be friends with only men and femininity requires friendships with only women, embracing all friendships.

Third, gender-based housing creates unique difficulties for gender-queer individuals. A gender-based housing requires students to identify as either male

¹ Gender-queer individuals are people who do not identify as either male or female.

or female; living in a suite designated as either a “men’s suite” or a women’s suite” may be harmful to these individuals on a social and psychological level.

Fourth, this policy harms trans students in several ways. While transpeople identify as either male or female, it creates difficulties for students who are transitioning. “Transitioning” is when individuals go through the process of changing their sex. College years are a common time for individuals to transition; in fact, a number of people have transitioned as undergraduates at Yale. According to one student, transitioning students have moved off campus while in the process of transitioning. These students found it too difficult to live in a suite of males one year and a suite of females the next year (or vice versa). It is an issue of safety for such students, since the housing process proactively stigmatizes individuals by forcing them through the public declaration of gender status through the transitioning process.

As one trans student said, “I identify as male and had no problem living in an all-male suite, but, in choosing to matriculate here, Yale's housing policy gave me pause because it signaled a backwards attitude about gender. I've since talked to prospective students who are trans and gender-queer, and housing policies are a big obstacle to selling Yale as a safe environment, even if an individual's housing preference is not an issue.”

It is important to note, however, that

while gender-neutral housing does have major impacts for queer students, non-queer students are actively using the policy. While some suites interviewed had at least one member who identified as queer, more students interviewed identified as heterosexual.

Deconstruction of Gender Boundaries

Gender-neutral housing can be a first step in decreasing the notion that men and women have morally relevant distinctions between them that merit separate treatment. In a world in which women make 77 cents for each dollar men make, such a notion is important to deconstruct. Gender-neutral housing helps us understand that while there may be differences, these differences are important to acknowledge but not important enough to merit disparate treatment. Since living in a suite is a learning experience, gender-neutral housing can help us understand what it may mean to live the life of someone else.

Gender-Neutral Housing and Sexual Climate

Drawing upon interviews with students currently living in gender-neutral housing, we find gender-neutral housing can help form safer environments for students. This is done in several ways:

First, gender-neutral housing can create a healthier sexual climate in which students feel more comfortable. As a female in a gender-neutral suite explained that there

was “no male or female dominance in this suite. When we have parties here, it’s not a bunch of girls coming to a guy’s suite or guys coming to a girl’s suite. It’s always a bunch of people, and [with] much more balance, I feel less vulnerable.” Further, such a gender balance decreases threatening sexual discussion. One male suitemate in a gender-neutral suite explained, “Sexual climate is much more prevalent in a suite of six guys. When you live with guys, the way you talk about girls is much more likely to have an intense culture than when you live with boys and girls.”

Second, gender-neutral housing can desexualize the suite by making suites spaces in which the norm is not to find only one sex. A common communication issue between individuals is the assumption of consent predicated on someone “going home” with someone else. Part of this is based on the notion that one would not take someone else home without the expectation of a sexual act. Gender-neutral housing deconstructs this by creating a model through which the suite can be a co-educational space in which individuals of other genders socialize in non-sexual ways, decreasing the likelihood for nonconsensual sex based on the assumption of “going back with someone” as a signal for sexual behavior.

Third, gender-neutral housing increases an understanding of the ways in which others experience their relationships. With this understanding, miscommunication between individuals becomes less likely and sexual acts are more likely to be consensual. As one

female suitemate says, “I feel like it increases respect and understanding just about how the other gender sees things. We’ve definitely talked about relationships, dating, and hooking up.” Her male suitemate responded with, “I will stick up for her and defend her in front of my male friends.” These relationships decrease the likelihood that individuals will sexually demean others and instill a sense of respect that one seeks to pass onto others.

Finally, many women reported feeling less vulnerable having men in their suite. A common response from female suitemates was that by living with men who they completely trusted, they knew that if they ever were in a difficult situation, they had someone from whom they felt comfortable seeking assistance. One female said, “I feel less vulnerable. I know that where I go back to there are boys who have my best interest at heart. If I bring anyone back [and feel uncomfortable], the boys can kick them out, which is really comforting.” Since women often said that gender-neutral housing enabled them to live with those they most trust, they ended up living in a suite situation in which they felt the safest.

Implementation

The Yale College Council believes that implementing a gender-neutral housing policy for the junior class would be feasible for the upcoming school year. While some junior housing involves double-occupancy rooms within suites and students would still be unable to share a room with someone of a different gender, we are confident that this

would not create difficulties in the housing process. In housing draws, there is always the risk that certain configurations will be oversubscribed and that individuals will need to reorganize their suites. Students who elect gender-neutral housing will need to realize that this risk may be greater in the housing process.

While some suites would be designated as potentially gender-neutral due to their configuration of single- and double-occupancy rooms, all would have access to these suites in the interest of fairness. Should a gender-neutral group of students be unable to obtain one of these configured suites, they would need to reconfigure their group. Even in the configuration process, students would likely still have access to gender-neutral housing in the annex housing for those whom the housing draw is unable to accommodate. Swing Space and McClellan, two common locations for junior annexing, consist of mostly singles within suites. Additionally, some colleges offer standalone singles to juniors, and this may be an option for those whom the housing draw cannot accommodate.

Conclusion

The past year and a half of gender-neutral housing for seniors at Yale has yielded an array of positive experiences for the individuals who have elected to live in mixed gender suites. They related that the experience has enhanced their time at Yale and has allowed them to live in suites with their closest friends and the individuals with whom they feel most comfortable. There is

a demonstrated student interest in the gender-neutral housing option as well as a strong base of support amongst a diverse collection of students. We can expect that a fair number of students in the rising junior class would make use of gender-neutral housing.

Gender-neutral housing is particularly important because of the way in which it addresses issues related to gender and sex. The expansion of gender-neutral housing would benefit individuals who do not find the options provided by gender-based housing appealing. Often, non-straight individuals who do not feel comfortable living in gender-based housing are forced to live in an undesirable arrangement on campus or to move off campus. A gender-based housing process also creates a series of difficulties with regard to identification for students who place themselves outside the realms of heteronormativity. Gender-queer students and trans students in the process of transitioning may not identify as male or female, which naturally results in various problems during the housing process. Gender-neutral housing would help alleviate these problems by creating an environment in which students are not forced to live in undesirable suite arrangements or choose ill-fitting labels. Additionally, gender-neutral housing would also contribute to a healthier sexual climate for students living in mixed gender suites. Gender-neutral living arrangements often *decrease* feelings of vulnerability and *increase* understanding between the sexes.

The implementation of gender-neutral

housing is achievable within the current residential college and annexation systems. Students would be made aware of the inherent risk of not finding a suite with a suitable configuration within their respective residential college, in which case they could (a) reconfigure, (b) elect annexation to Swing Space or McClellan, (c) live in stand alone singles.

Gender-neutral housing amongst the senior class has been a proven success, and many

students are pleased that they have had the opportunity to live in a comfortable environment with their closest friends. The rising junior class would appreciate the chance to capitalize on their Yale experience in a similar manner. Gender-neutral housing is a desired and feasible policy that would only enhance the climate on campus. We urge Yale to continue important steps toward improvement and extend gender-neutral housing to the juniors of Yale College.

December 17, 2011

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Dear Joseph and Isabel,

I am writing, as you requested, to share my thoughts on gender-neutral housing and its potential impact on campus rates of sexual misconduct, especially sexual assault. To the best of my knowledge, there are no research findings that directly address this issue. Considering the larger body of research on sexual violence, though, I would not expect that mixed-gender suites would introduce any significant new risk factors. If anything, I would expect mixed-gender rooming arrangements to work *against* the dynamics of assault, by giving students an additional opportunity to develop meaningful mutual relationships with people of different genders.

It is perhaps worth trying to parse out why someone might feel (as a few of your survey respondents do) that mixed-gender housing would increase the risk of harassment and/or sexual assault. I believe this stems from a misunderstanding of the nature of sexual misconduct. It is not, in general, a mere act of opportunity or response to provocation. I.e., simply having “access” to another student is not enough prompt an act of misconduct; the potential offender would need to be willing to be disrespectful or violent toward his or her suitemate, and there would need to be enough of a power dynamic (long-running or instantiated in the moment) to enable those inclinations to be acted upon. Of course, there are students who are willing to commit such acts, but it is not clear to me that their ability to do so would be increased by a mixed-gender housing arrangement. The assault of a suitemate would be a very risky act, legally as well as disciplinarily; what we know of sexual offenders suggests that they are more likely to seek out other, less risky targets.

The data does not yet exist to tell us this, but it seems very likely that mixed gender housing will turn out to be a positive factor in curbing sexual misconduct. The majority of sexual offenses are committed by men against women, with male alliances often protecting the offender. Mixed-gender housing will provide a rich new opportunity for men and women to cultivate close relationships of respect and mutuality. Even the violence committed against and by lgbtq students might be reduced: it appears correlated to homophobia, heterosexism, and social ‘outsider’ status, all of which might be reduced by the more flexible housing arrangements that would be made possible.

In short, I have no objection to the proposal that gender-neutral housing become a more widely available option. While there may be individual incidents of misconduct that are enabled by mixed-gender living arrangements, I don't believe this would represent a new threat. Indeed, I would expect the overall result to be positive.

Sincerely,



Melanie Boyd
Assistant Dean of Student Affairs, Yale College
Special Advisor to the Dean on Gender Issues
Lecturer, Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Appendix 2: Gender-Neutral Housing Across Peer Institutions

Yale is the last university in the Ivy League to restrict gender-neutral housing to the senior class. Its seven other peer institutions have varied policies concerning gender-neutral housing, but all make it available to at least the junior and senior classes.

- Sophomores, juniors, and seniors at Brown University can live in mixed gender suites and the university has set aside a number of residence halls in which all suites are gender-neutral housing optional.
- Columbia University has designated six residence halls gender-neutral.
- At Cornell University, upperclassmen living on West Campus can live in gender-neutral suites.
- Dartmouth College has named the floor of one residence hall gender-neutral and also has gender-neutral suites and apartments available during the housing draw.
- Harvard University addresses gender-neutral housing on a case-by-case basis, under specific circumstances.
- Princeton University has made the option available in one residence hall to rising juniors and seniors.
- The University of Pennsylvania has the most progressive gender-neutral housing policy in the Ivy League. Any individual over the age of 18 may elect to live in a mixed gender suite. Beginning in the fall of 2012, freshmen entering the university may request gender-neutral housing. Freshmen under the age of 18 would need parental consent to pursue this housing option.

Appendix 2: November 2011 Survey Questions

The Class of 2014 was asked the following questions:

- (1) Do you support a gender-neutral housing option for Yale College juniors?
- (2) If given the opportunity to have gender-neutral housing junior year, would you consider living in a gender-neutral suite?
- (3) Do you want gender-neutral housing as an option in the upcoming housing draw?
- (4) Would having the option of gender-neutral housing affect your decision to move off campus?
- (5) Do you know anyone living in a gender-neutral suite?

The Class of 2013 was asked a similar set of questions:

- (1) Do you support a gender-neutral housing option?
- (2) In the upcoming housing draw, would you consider living in a gender-neutral suite?
- (3) If you moved off campus, did the lack of gender-neutral housing in your junior year affect your decision to move off campus?
- (4) Do you know anyone living in a gender-neutral suite?