

Not letting students choose their roommates can make college a drag

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When colleges and universities assign roommates instead of letting students pick and choose their own, the idea is often to increase the

chance that students will live with someone from a [different racial or ethnic background](#). It's also to help them create a [more diverse network of friends](#).

A [growing number of colleges and universities](#) – from [Duke University](#) to [Colgate University](#) to [Vanderbilt University](#) – have adopted this approach in recent years.

On the surface, campus housing policies that may force students to get out of their comfort zones and share living space with someone they might not otherwise may seem like a good idea. That is especially the case when you consider that experiences with people from diverse backgrounds have been shown to [enhance critical thinking and problem-solving skills](#). They have also been shown to [increase empathy and knowledge](#) about people from different backgrounds and [reduce anxiety](#) about interacting with peers of another race, ethnicity or religion.

But as [researchers](#) who examine what makes it easier or harder for students to get through [college](#), we have discovered that not letting students choose their [roommates](#) doesn't really achieve the desired effect. We found that not only is this approach an [ineffective way](#) to promote interaction between students from different backgrounds—whether it be political, economic or otherwise—but it may also be making the overall college experience worse for students of color.

Interactions stay the same

In our research, which involved 14,401 students at 76 colleges and universities, we found that first-year students who were assigned a roommate by their college did not interact with students from a different background any more than those who chose their own roommates. When we ran these results separately by [racial groups](#), we found the same result

within each group.

We also looked at the relationship between roommate assignment methods and whether students saw their schools as more supportive—something that has been shown to be a [strong indicator](#) that students will actually finish their degrees.

Overall, we didn't find evidence that students see their schools as more or less supportive based on how they assign roommates. However, a different picture emerged when we broke down the data across racial groups.

Specifically, we found that Asian, Black and multiracial students saw their schools as being more supportive if they were allowed to choose their own roommates. There was no such difference among white, Latino or international students.

What this means is that when colleges restrict roommate choice, it seems to lead some students of color to see their colleges as being less supportive. So this may end up being an unintended negative consequence that makes it a little harder for students of color to get through school.

Counterspaces and norms

Why do these students of color view their colleges more positively when they're not assigned random roommates? It could be that there's a certain safety and solace associated with having a residence hall room that serves as sort of a "counterspace"—that is, an area that culturally feels more like the community the [student](#) is from. People, including college students, tend to [form friendships with people like themselves](#).

We did not observe a similar relationship for [white students](#), most likely

because their institutions reflect their norms and they had a greater chance of being assigned a white roommate, since white students are the majority at most of the schools we examined. The lack of a difference for Latinos is not as clear. Latino college students are [less likely to live on campus](#).

While our results highlight the importance of allowing students of color to choose their own first-year roommates, our data show that only about a quarter did so compared with 40% of white students.

It is unclear why students of color choose roommates less often, but it could be due to the segregated nature of high schools and different patterns of college enrollment, differences in knowledge about going to college, or the digital divide. Closing this gap could be a pathway to help students of color see college as a more supportive environment.

Possible explanations

Why might restrictive roommate policies have a negative effect on students of color?

First, such roommate policies place an undue burden on students of color to [teach their own humanity](#) to their white peers. What this ultimately means is while these policies are meant to encourage positive interactions between people from different backgrounds, if they end up tasking students of color with helping white students gain racial knowledge and empathy, the policies might actually end up deepening inequality, not lessening it.

This approach is dramatically different from, say, employing professionals who are trained to facilitate [dialogue between different groups](#).

Further, students of color tend to benefit from having spaces where they feel safe and free from the emotional burden of microaggressions and other forms of racism. Emerging research has shown that [counterspaces](#) – that is, things and places like campus cultural centers, identity-based organizations or ethnic studies departments—help students of color succeed.

What this means for colleges

Since restricting roommate choice may impose an additional burden for students of color—and since the restrictions don't really lead students to befriend anyone they wouldn't interact with otherwise—colleges don't appear to have a strong case for these kinds of policies.

There is, however, a strong basis for colleges to help students of color find and choose their roommates before classes begin. Roommate searches could be embedded into the admissions process or spring or summer orientations.

Colleges may also want to consider easing the roommate application deadlines to give students time to find a roommate match. Another option is for colleges to include roommate finder services, such as [Roomsync](#) or [My College Roomie](#), as part of their housing application process. Currently, only about two out of every five schools offer a [roommate finder service](#). There are also multiple companies that offer private roommate finder services, like [roomsurf.com](#) and [roomie](#), for incoming students for a fee.

Alternatively, colleges can use incoming class social media groups to help students meet one another before arriving on campus, although many students already do this on their own.

Implications for students

After deciding upon a college, students should begin looking for a roommate with whom they feel comfortable. One way to get started is asking high school classmates who will attend the same college.

Students can find other potential roommates living farther away through social media, as many colleges have set up groups for incoming first-year students. Students can also meet potential roommates at campus visit days. Many institutions have an internal roommate-matching profile service designed to help connect students.

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