



Online roommate matching clicks with students

By Eileen Fischer

Katie Anninos' friends are jealous. The 18-year-old freshman from Dresher, Pa., is starting classes at Sacred Heart University in Fairfield and over the summer she personally chose her dormmate online. None of her college-bound high school pals had the same advantage, she said.

I have tons of friends and when I told them about the program they were really jealous," Anninos said. "I think it's a lot more personal and a better way" of matching up roommates.

The "program" Anninos mentions is Sacred Heart's roommateclick.com, a first-time option for the school's 928 freshmen. The university contracted with Lifetopia Corp., a rooming and housing network based in New York, to link students to roommateclick.com, through the school's Web site, where only the school's freshmen have access.

Sacred Heart is one of 12 universities in the country using the service to match students with roommates, said Joel Quintong, director of residential life at Sacred Heart. Students post their profiles and pictures, answer a questionnaire and search the site for compatible roommates. Once two people agree to be roommates, they contact the university about their choice, said Quintong, and the match is done.



Katie Anninos, 18, left, of Dresher, Pa., and Stephanie Khoury, 18, of Washington Township, N.J., chose each other as Sacred Heart University dormmates through the Web site roommateclick.com.

"We were really pleased with the turnout," said Quintong of the 590 profiles posted. "It's so second nature to students to have this kind of environment to view and choose their roommate; it's almost expected, in a way.

"We understand millennial students like options and like more control over the educational experience," he continued. "If a student can pick a roommate, they're going to take great care finding someone who they think they'll mesh with." Sarel Doglu, chief technology officer at Lifetopia, said the company started in 1995 as a commercial Web site to help people find roommates in major cities. About three years ago, the company began approaching universities about its services. "It's an easy solution for them," he said in a phone interview. "We do all the work for them posting links and banners on their housing section to let roommates find their [school] account."

Doglu said the company recently surveyed Sacred Heart users and found 50 percent of the freshman class tried the site and 87 percent were happy using it. Follow-ups will be done in March to see how well the roommates are getting along. It's a far cry from the "random act of housing" Quintong said has been most colleges' methodology. For some time, Sacred Heart has been sending out a blue questionnaire with 11 questions that primarily asks about a student's studying and sleeping habits, he said, and if they are smokers or non-smokers (that seems to be a big concern). Then, as best as they can, the university matches freshmen as roomies.

Sacred Heart senior Caitlin Saporito, 21, of Bristol, was randomly matched with two roommates her freshman year, she said, and it worked out fine. In fact, one of the women is still one of her roommates.

"All three of us got along fine," she said. "I was a little nervous, but there were enough questions that they had the ability to match people up [well].

"I'm the type of person who can adjust pretty well. Even if we hadn't gotten along, I didn't have to spend all my time with a roommate," she said.

The schools we talked to for this article all use questionnaires similar to Sacred Heart's, but not everyone returns them, said Jason Downer, associate director of resident life at Fairfield University.

This year, 80 out of 900 forms were missing. "We don't know their preferences," he said. "They want to leave it up to chance, we leave it up to chance."

At the University of Connecticut, Pamela Schipani, director of housing services, said she was excited about a new set of questions the school was using for the first time, borrowed from the University of Mississippi. UConn has nearly 4,000 new students this year, she said. While students can also request their own choice of roommate, Schipani said that's not always a good idea. "If you have a best friend from high school, don't do that," she said. If it doesn't work out, "not only do you lose a roommate, you lose a best friend.

"We do a pretty good job," matching roommates, she said.

And, when UConn tried a policy of not allowing kids to pick their own roomie, "We got such an outcry, especially from parents," she said. In a student population of around 11,300, about 500 had room changes, she said, and it wasn't just because of conflicts.

Good communication is key to getting along, said 19-year-old Diane Pauley, of Fairfield, a sophomore at UConn who had a random roommate her freshman year.

"I would say that it was a learning experience," she wrote in an e-mail. "It is difficult being confined to a small area and having to share that area with another individual.

"You have to learn to share space, compromise and learn to communicate openly with the other person."

Surprisingly, Schipani said she recently attended a conference for university housing officers and heard some say they don't send out questionnaires nor do they allow students to pick their own roommates.

At Yale, John Meeske, associate dean for physical resources and planning, said the university takes great pains to make sure there's a certain randomness to pairing up its 1,300 entering students. This is the second year Yale has had its questionnaire online instead of in paper form, he said. "Deans go through great lengths to read these things through," he said. "Hopefully, we won't put people in the same room who are total opposites, but we look for diversity. We think students gain from learning from [other] students.

"Most arrangements are amicable. There can be some problems we try to get roommates to first work it out," he said.

Meeske said he is aware of companies that offer matching services, but he doubts Yale would go that route.

"I have concerns. [We] deliberately want diverse environments," he said.

Anninos said she started using roommateclick.com in mid-June and contacted four or five people after reviewing their profiles. She said she was looking for someone who was outgoing and had the same study and sleeping habits she had.

"I like to be real quiet for studying and to myself," she said. And as for sleeping? "I go to bed late and wake up late. My earliest class is at 11 a.m., so that works out real well."

She did find a match — Stephanie Khoury, 18, from Washington Township, N.J. — who actually contacted her, she said. They started talking and texting, she said, and found out they had a lot in common, including a love of shopping and cheering on their school's sports teams. Before the Fourth of July, they knew they'd be roomies, she said.

"My parents were happy I found a roommate so quickly and that made me more happy," she said. "I'm not as nervous."