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Customize Your Dorm . . . and Your Roommate? Internet Lets Freshmen Meet Before They Meet

By Jura Koncius

Many incoming college freshmen about to move into their first dorm already know quite a bit about their new roommates. Although some schools still match students based on a short questionnaire about living habits (Do you smoke? Play loud music? Live like a slob?), the room assignment process is becoming increasingly sophisticated. It can involve detailed surveys of snacking practices and partying styles, online "courting" of prospective roomies, lots of time logged on Facebook and the ceaseless hovering of parents.

"The student population today is different than 10 years ago," says Bobbi Babitz, chief executive of Lifetopia, a company that provides higher-education-housing software to such schools as Harvard and Tulane. "They are active consumers and used to making their own choices."

Picky, picky, picky. Many students are concerned about who they will share a glorified closet with. You could end up with a lifelong friend (Al Gore and Tommy Lee Jones lived together at Harvard) or not. But many teens, after all, have never shared a bedroom.

"It's a big deal," says Rachel Walisko, an 18-year-old from Vienna who is about to begin her first year at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Walisko says many of her college-bound friends are spending hours connecting with roommates on Facebook. "I'm glad they asked me a lot of questions on the online housing registration form. Especially the one about 'What is my favorite kind of music?' " Walisko says. "I feel like you can tell a lot about a person by the kind of music they listen to."



Sam Ricci says it took him five minutes to answer the questions about neatness and sleeping habits that the housing office at the University of Colorado at Boulder asked him. "I was hoping the questionnaire would be longer and in-depth," says the 18-year-old from Takoma Park. He is concerned his roommate might not enjoy staying up late hanging out with friends like he does. "I think a roommate you can get along with is extremely important to having fun in college."

School strategies vary. "Some colleges feel it is important to make as good a match as possible. Other campuses feel college is a time to expand your horizons a little bit," says James Baumann, a spokesman for the Association of College and University Housing Officers. "Some campuses purposely don't match two people from the same high school together; others might put people like that together."

Five years ago, Georgetown University launched a roommate selection process called CHARMS (Campus Housing Roommate Matching System). Students are given the option of pairing themselves or being matched by university staff. After answering 20 living-preference questions, students can surf anonymous online profiles of other freshmen that match some of their criteria. Students exchange messages and decide whether this person is someone they can live with.

According to Jonalyn Ware Greene, executive director of student housing at Georgetown, 68 percent of this year's 1,580 freshmen have chosen to participate in CHARMS. Results from past years have been positive. "One of the things we have found is that it has definitely made a difference in the number of people who are standing at our door the day after move-in," Greene says.

The Washington Post

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Page 2.

Freshmen at the University of Maryland at College Park fill out a list of questions about study and lifestyle habits. Unless they request a specific person, the housing staff pairs them up, being as responsive to requests as possible. But the school encourages students to be open-minded, says Deb Grandner, director of resident life. "Philosophically, we believe that one of the goals of living in residence halls is to learn to live with others, many of whom are different from you," she says.

Yet the phone starts ringing at many university housing offices the day the roommate letters or e-mails arrive. It might be a mom who has clicked on the Facebook profile of her offspring's new roommate, complete with beach week photos, and doesn't like what she sees. "Parents are sometimes more alarmed than students with the match," says Emily Glenn, corporate librarian at the Association of College and University Housing Officers. "They tell them, 'My darling doesn't smoke; she can't room with this person.' "

Glenn says housing officials report that some parents actually fill out the housing forms, basically lying about their child's habits that they find offensive. "Some parents admit they knew they had filled out the form inaccurately, but hoped that the positive influence would make their child into the fictional person who had filled out the form," she says.

Experts say the best college living experience allows students to redefine themselves. "It isn't about who you are; it's about who you can be," Babitz says. "People are coming to college to create their own independent identity, and it shouldn't be a Facebook profile that documents how they were in high school."

No system is perfect.

"Not everyone can live together; not every roommate situation will work," Grandner says. "But most do."