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Social pressures ease as coeducational living finds home

by Jan Messier
and Tom Bassols

"To stay in or get in a coed dorm, I would go through hell or pay an extra \$100 per semester."

This remark was made by a 21-year-old student who moved to York Hall last fall especially to meet women.

Most residents in the seven coed dorms on campus feel that living in a coed hall is socially beneficial, enjoyable and educational.

Even introverts, whose only contact with the opposite sex was in class and dining halls, find many changes in their social life in coed dorms.

One shy, quiet male student said, "Guys and girls go to Pat's and Gambino's together on Thursday nights more often. Coed living breaks down the barriers between men and women. Some guys and girls date but usually a brother-sister-type relationship develops, and everyone just has a good time. It breaks down the idea of viewing members of the opposite sex as 'sex objects'."

Another student said it has helped him meet women outside the dating situation. He added, "The girls are fantastic when it comes to typing and sewing and doing small jobs for the guys."

From the female viewpoint, reaction is equally enthusiastic. A junior living in York said she has been "pleasantly surprised" with life in a coed dorm.

"I am more at ease with guys," she said. "You have a whole bunch of brothers to identify with. You develop a broad outlook as you can see the male side of things. You are on the go a lot more—visiting and going to parties. Guys show a real definite purpose and this has rubbed off on some of the girls."

University policy stipulates that coeducational living requires that sections be separated by fire doors. Because of this, most contact takes place in the lounges, which are used for studying as well as socializing.

The dorms on the Hilltop Complex, all coed, are divided into four sections: the west and south wings house males, and east and north wings females. On each floor all sections are brought together by a central study lounge.

York Hall, in its first year of coeducation, is a T-shaped building in which sections also intersect at a central lounge.

Stodder, Chadbourne and Estabrooke Halls are divided by fire doors but have no connecting lounges. All dormitories have parietal policies although no section

doors are ever locked. This makes enforcement an impossibility. Easy access to other sections of their dormitory allows residents to have closer contact with the opposite sex, enabling a feeling of freer social and academic mixing.

A recent study conducted at UMO on coeducational living substantiates student sentiment. According to Dwight Rideout, associate dean of student affairs, the research indicates that coed living has brought about more social interaction between the two sexes.

One female resident of a coed dorm said that previously going out with a guy was as a date only and considered special. This year, she says, in a coed dorm it is easier for men and women to go out together. "We eat, study, go to parties and go out together," she said.

Another point brought out by Rideout's study indicated, on the whole, that residents in a coed hall have a high academic average compared to students living in a single-sex dorm.

This was evidenced by the male student whose grade point rose by 1.2, attributing it to living in a coed dorm. Another said he studied more in the coed dorm because of the competition—he didn't want the women to earn higher grades.

More social drinking and less drinking to the point of inebriation are other results of coed living, according to the study. One male R.A. said men's parties are less rowdy when women are present.

A recent R.A. in-service module on coed life-styles, R.A.'s discussed the advantages and disadvantages of living with members of the opposite sex. They agreed it is more educational to live with members of the opposite sex. They believe men and women have a different outlook on life and the educational process continues when the two live together.

Of the 14 attending the module session, those living in a coed hall agreed with Rideout's conclusion that the social life has improved for students in the dorms. They termed it "more relating than dating"—an improvement over the past where little intermingling took place in the cafeteria when the dorms were single-sex.

They also reinforced findings from the study which indicate that property damage is less evident in coed dorms. The head resident of Oxford Hall said damage in his dorm is less this year than it was a year ago when the dorm was all-male.

The study shows that damages incurred are not as extensive as those found in

all-male residences. Women do not commit the same sort of damage, and the men respect the dorm knowing that the women do. Many of the R.A.'s felt that because of this, less discipline is needed in a coed dorm.

A 22-year-old R.A. said putting the two sexes under the same roof is "an improvement as it keeps vulgarity and rowdiness to a minimum. Coed dorms came about because of student pressure, but it is a justified pressure. Coed halls are more humane, decent and realistic. College is a place of higher learning to prepare you for the outside world—and you don't go out into an all-male world," he said.

Before moving into a coed dorm, one student felt a coed situation was intriguing and maybe even risqué because he had never had the chance to share living facilities with women. He finds that after living there much of the glamor is lost. "It is 100 per cent different; the atmosphere is more toned down," he said.

Most of the R.A.'s indicated they were very lenient on parietals. They said it is almost impossible to prevent members of the two sexes from visiting each other when they live on the same floor.

The head residents and area coordinators at the module also said they noticed an improvement in students' course grades. The area coordinator of the Hilltop Complex, Beulah Grant, said that in the dorm in which she resides, Somerset, only one person of 300 flunked out last semester.

While the situation seems ideal to many students, putting both sexes under the same roof requires some adjustment. In York, a female R.A. said some women resented having men in their dorm.

At first, she said, the men were loud and obnoxious, abusing and embarrassing the girls. Now, she feels, both sexes have adjusted to each other. Men now accept women as people and not just as females, she says.

Coed living isn't unique to UMO. Stanford University, which has had coed halls since 1967, has also conducted research on this life-style. Studies found students in coed residences participate less in formal, one-to-one dating and more in informal group activity.

It also revealed students in a coed situation spend as much time studying as do those in single-sex residences, but they study more with members of the opposite sex.

Another point brought out at Stanford which substantiates the UMO study was

that manners and appearances improve in a coed hall. The noise level is lower and destruction is less.

Dr. Joseph Katz of Stanford says, "They find that you cannot treat the people you live with merely as sex objects."

Another educator from Harvard interprets coed living "as simply a lack of excitement and the reluctance to exploit sexually a person who has become a regular companion."

Administrators, too, support coed living here. Barbara Ellison and Donna Hitchens, assistant directors of residential life, believe the ultimate goal and purpose of housing both sexes under the same roof is not just to get the two together. They see it as "an alternate life-style from the traditional one-sex hall" providing a more natural living situation.

They feel this situation should allow people to get to know members of the opposite sex without "the games and role-playing" that they say is usually prevalent.

Instead, they believe, it should encourage social contacts and experiences outside the traditional dating relationship.

They say coed living creates more interest in dorm government and dorm functions. Both Ellison and Hitchens feel that "people seem to get to know more people who live in the same building." They do not see any problems unique to a coed dorm as long as people who are assigned to coed halls want to live there.

Before a dorm can go coed, certain procedures must be followed by the office of residential life. A dorm survey to get resident consensus is the first step. The percentages of those returning the following year and those preferring to live in a coed hall must be tabulated.

This is followed by an estimate of the cost involved in switching to a coed dorm and a study of the space allocation for males and females. Next, approval must be given by both the office of residential life and the president.

The university's trustees approves neither alternate-room nor alternate-floor coed housing. They approve coed dormitories which provide separate living quarters, including separate halls, entrance and exit facilities and separate bathrooms. All other areas, such as lounges, recreational areas, study areas, dining areas and relaxation areas are open to all residents in coed dorms.